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SPATIAL APPROACHES TO THE HISTORY OF CHILD LABOUR IN COLONIAL GHANA

This article uses spatial analysis to explore the nature of child labour in colonial Ghana (the Gold Coast). Spatial analysis of traditional archival sources and secondary literature demonstrates that our historical knowledge of child labour is narrowly focused on the colony's most 'colonial' spaces and institutions. This article uses a novel set of sources – primarily autobiographies and probation records – to begin filling in the epistemological void surrounding the use of child labour in the domestic economy. Spatial analysis of these sources reveals that children were vital economic actors at scales ranging from the hearth and the household, to the town and the region. Child labour was used within the household to produce directly and to increase the mobility of more productive adults. Child labour was also key to the articulation of the household to wider economic spaces. The colonial period saw dramatic spatial changes in the use of child labour. Children began to work in new places, in new ways and at a greater distance from their natal household – these processes shed light on how the socio-economic and geo-political reshaping of West Africa impacted upon the everyday lives of individual children.

INTRODUCTION

Child labour has been a central concern of the historiography of western childhood and of the growing corpus of research on African societies – but spatial analysis of the phenomena has been cursory. The most common questions that scholars have addressed are: how, and under what conditions, was child labour used, what made child labour's use acceptable (or otherwise) and who profited by it? And yet the resultant empirical findings have suggested just how *spatial* historical changes in western child labour have been. Think, for example, of the radically different workplace milieus of the family farm and the factory floor, of urban streets and rural lanes, and of private versus common land; and think, too, of how important the delineation and transformation of public space were to the economies carved out by

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gutter-snipes, mudlarks and newspaper boys in the juvenile underworld – and to the attempts by urban reformers to sweep such children from view. But in most historical studies of child labour, space is an implicit, largely unproblematised background for change rather than the analytical locus.

This article poses a novel set of questions that analyse child labour in colonial Ghana in an explicitly spatial register.² Where, in absolute and relative terms, was child labour used? How did the physical, social and conceptual qualities of space affect the use of child labour, and vice versa? And what can the spatial analysis of child labour tell us about the broader history of childhood? This exploratory article cannot provide definitive answers to those questions but enough empirical and methodological conclusions are possible to suggest that spatial analyses – from the micro level of the household to the macro level of the region – add valuable insights to the historical study of childhood.

Part one of this paper looks at micro-histories of space in colonial Ghana. I first argue that child labour, while initially restricted to the household, took place on a wider scale and in an increasingly public *milieu* as children got older – and that the regulation of child mobility this required was in fact a key function of child labour. And, second, I suggest that a careful analysis of the labour undertaken in public spaces by older children illuminates some fundamental themes addressed by the historiography of Western childhood – notably the putative division of children and adults into separate social worlds, and the roles that children played in linking the household to wider social and economic structures.³ Part two of the essay looks at how ‘regions’ shaped and were shaped by child labour in the form of apprenticeships and seasonal migration. A region is defined in this paper, following Howard (2001: 51), as a ‘zone of interaction’: an impermanent, but conceptually useful, delineation of space, defined by human activity rather than, say, geography or political decree. In particular, I will argue that regions overlapped and interacted, and that forms of child labour were strongly influenced by their distinct historical dynamics, often thriving at their interfaces.

² In this article, as in most legal contexts in the Gold Coast, a ‘child’ is defined as a person under sixteen years old.

³ Perhaps because the historical study of African childhood is so new, scholars discussing children have rarely engaged with the themes and methodological insights of the extensive literature on Western childhood.

Spatiality in the historiography of child labour

Spatial analysis goes to the core of one of the foundational questions in the historiography of childhood because mapping the physical spaces occupied by children at a certain historical conjuncture can help historians determine what – if anything – that society considered a ‘child’ to be. Phillipe Ariés (1962: 128) famously argued that childhood in medieval Europe was not comprehensively demarcated from adulthood, concluding that ‘as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker he belonged to adult society’. There is an implicit spatiality in Ariés’ argument and evidence: in the medieval period, there was no childhood because of the physical proximity of adults and children during work, leisure and education; and, conversely, childhood was discovered in the post-medieval period as children were quarantined from the adult world inside educational institutions and private households (Ariès 1962: 411-13). However, it can be argued that one of the reasons that Ariés findings have been subject to radical revision is that he did not attend to the complexities of space in his sources, conflating, for example, the physical proximity of adults and children in pictorial records with their belonging to a single social world (c.f. Ariès 1962:128).

The spatial characteristics of historical source materials have also had a profound – if rarely acknowledged – effect on the historiography of child labour. Although child labour is the most comprehensively studied sub-discipline of the nascent historiography of childhood in Africa (Grier 2004), it has been subject to uneven attention, focusing overwhelmingly on what Diptee and Klein (2010) have termed the ‘colonial encounter’. Most research has concentrated on the contribution of African children to the accumulation of land and capital by Europeans (Grier 2006; Simelane 1998; Akurang-Parry 2002), an approach that is less relevant (though still important) for a non-settler colony like the Gold Coast. Colonial exploitation has also overshadowed the alternatives to working for Europeans; with a few valuable exceptions (c.f. Mandala 1990), the roles of children in subsistence agriculture, in the household economy and in ‘African’ firms and commerce are largely unknown. This imbalance stems in large part from the spatial bias of colonial archives. Colonial knowledge focused on those spaces which were subject to either greater government control or greater metropolitan oversight – mines, expatriate firms, plantations,

transport hubs and, to a lesser extent, highways and cities – and, as such, it is these sites that are the subject of most archival series on child labour.

The glaring omission from the archival map is the household, which the evidence suggests was the overwhelming locus of child labour in the Gold Coast, but which the colonial government had little control over and therefore produced little knowledge about.⁴ Until this empirical blind spot is cleared up, it is difficult for historians to judge the extent or importance of child labour to colonial economies. This article draws on two types of historical sources, neither concerned directly with child labour, but both of which help to fill in the archival blanks surrounding the hearth, household and hometown. The first genre is autobiographies of colonial childhood (Kyei 2001; Gandah 2004) which place the household at the centre of childhood experience. The second set of sources used in this article are probation reports produced by the Department of Social Welfare in 1950s Accra, which represented the first systematic intrusion into, and thus documentation of, children's home lives by the colonial state.⁵

Being sensitive to the spatial imbalance of historical sources is not, however, the same as spatial analysis of the evidence they contain, although the latter too is worthwhile for historians of child labour. Research into migration by children and youth, for example, has produced some fascinating work (c.f. Beinart 1991; Rich 2010), although it has been understood more as a social than a spatial phenomenon. More generally, Howard and Shain (2005: 12) have argued that by concentrating on lived interactions, spatial analysis allows historians to 'reject a static role-oriented social history'; this is particularly important when studying children in order to avoid a static and ahistorical model of what childhood is rather than critically analyse the actual lived experiences of children. A key aim of this article is therefore to historicise childhood in the Gold Coast by examining how and where children lived and worked.

⁴ See, for example, the Colonial Office file, *Employment of Children in Industry and Other Occupations*, 1939, CO 859/11/6, National Archives, UK [NAUK], which concluded that child labour in industrial concerns (particularly mines) was regulated and minimal, but that child labour in family concerns (particularly agriculture) was endemic and thus impossible to regulate for practical reasons.

⁵ The department was set up between 1943 and 1946, tasked (among other things) with the reform and supervision of juvenile offenders by Welfare Officers. The reports these officials produced are contained in *Juvenile Court, Accra*, 1946, SCT 17/5/299, National Archives of Ghana [NAG]. *Juvenile Court, Accra*, 1952-4, SCT 17/5/300, NAG. *Juvenile Court, Accra*, 1954-56, SCT 17/5/301, NAG. *Juvenile Court, Accra*, 1956-57, SCT 17/5/302, NAG.

Hearth, Household, Hometown

The examination of the life and family history of one individual demonstrates how historians can use spatial analysis to gain new insights into the history of childhood and child labour. Thomas Ernest Kyei's (2001) autobiographical account of his early childhood constitutes a rich historical source for this purpose. Kyei was born in 1908 and lived in a small town in the Ashanti Region of the Gold Coast. His birth and childhood coincided with a tumultuous historical period: shortly after the imposition of British rule and at the beginning of the cocoa boom that made the Gold Coast the world's largest cocoa exporter by 1911 and led to enormous social change (Southall 1978: 183). Kyei's perceptive memoir of that time is uniquely detailed and certainly a rich enough source to enable spatial analysis – both small- and large-scale – of child labour, particularly in conjunction with probation reports that allow comparison with a broader group of children.

The most fundamental spatial aspect that emerges from Kyei's memoir is that the scale on which colonial-era childhoods need to be understood generally expands as children get older and take on new labour roles. This is not surprising if we consider that children become physically stronger and more independent as they get older. Indeed, for all that childhood is a social construct, and notwithstanding historians' desire to restore agency to their subjects, it should not be forgotten that the biological constraints of childhood are hard or even impossible to overcome. Infancy *was* in fact a very dependent and static period of childhood, spent – to quote Kyei's autobiography (2001: 64) – 'puking and mewling in the nurse's arms'. Here, if children moved through regions, it was with – and not away from – adults. Very young children were, moreover, a literal burden on the mobility of their families, particularly in the early colonial period. When Kyei was around five years old, and his brother was still an infant, the family moved from one village in Ashanti Region to another. The journey through the forest was made more arduous because the adults had to care for their children: this included the cautious, torturous fording of a river and carrying both children over 'boggy mire and on difficult patches'. (Kyei 2001: 2-4) The mobility of the family as a *unit* was boosted in the colonial period by the arrival of the railways, the extension of the road network and the proliferation of cars and lorries, and these factors were reflected in novel forms of migration and land tenure

(Sutton 1983). However young children were, of course, appended to a household rather than being independent travellers.

The end of infancy – marked by weaning and learning to walk – was therefore a crucial social and spatial transition in a child's life. And as those older children move out of the immediate orbit of their parent or carer and into the household, historians need to analyse their childhood experiences on a wider scale. The household was in fact the locus of child labour – and children were crucial to its physical coherence and integrity. From a very young age, children were expected to help with household chores like cooking, cleaning and carrying. Intra-sibling care was extremely important, particularly in restricting the mobility of younger children, thereby increasing the mobility of adults. Older children were required to supervise the chores of their siblings inside the compound and to stop much younger children from wandering away into trouble (Kaye 1962: 194-99). One of Kyei's earliest memories (Kyei 2001: 1) was of keeping the flies away from his infant brother – and on another occasion tending the fire – while his mother went to build a farm. Supervising young children could also run in parallel with other labour or leisure tasks.⁶ The key point to note is that when children cared for children, this increased the mobility of more productive adult labour. The localised use of child labour was therefore integral to the creation of much wider economic spaces, in this case the village-agricultural complex.

Indeed, the next possible expansion of analytical scale comes from those forms of child labour that centred on the household but inserted children into larger economic spaces, primarily the village or town. Children in general performed such labour further from the household as they got older. Herding, for example, could be a local task for young children (ensuring that the family goats did not devour others' property) or a distant one for older children (taking animals out to pasture for extended periods) (Gandah 2004: 21-5). Trading further from home was also a marker of maturity for rural children (Kaye 1962: 197). Indeed, commerce – particularly urban street trading – was the most public, documented and, to both colonial officials and their historians (c.f. Aderinto 2007), disconcerting form of extra-household child labour. Although petty commerce was most striking in urban areas, it

⁶ There is evidence of this from the Basel Mission archives in, for example, photographs of children with younger siblings tied to their backs also holding toys or tools. *African Children*, 1928, D-30.64.086, Basel Mission Picture Archive.

was important even for the children of subsistence farmers. Kyei's grandmother, for example, sent him into the village 'crying aloud, advertising' a prospective exchange of vegetables for salt (Kyei 2001: 25). The most profound colonial-era change in commerce for children was probably spatial: the replacement of urban for village streets, the invention of new marketplaces like the cinema, racecourse or lorry park, and the distancing of the workplace from the home due, first, to the use of bicycles and public transport and, second, to the proliferation of lighter, cheaper consumer goods that children were easily able to carry and sell.⁷

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of extra-household child labour is that children often worked at the nexus of *private* production and *public* space. This could mean labour that facilitated production within the household: drawing water from shared facilities, gathering firewood, delivering messages, or collecting or making payments on behalf of adults. Or it could mean production conducted in public space, the benefits of which flowed back to the household: street commerce, hunting and foraging, tending animals on communal land or guarding external premises or property. It is important to note that, *pace* Ariés, public space was not the same as *adult* space: the co-workers and competitors of child labourers were often other children.

The interpenetration of child labour and public space had two contradictory effects. Public child labour could potentially be cohesive, acting as a form of socialisation into the community; but, simultaneously, the use of public space by working children heightened the potential for competition, tension and division, and placed greater scrutiny on their honesty and propriety. The socialising side of child labour included, for example, communal tasks in cash crop agriculture, such as the village-wide splitting of cocoa pods, remembered by Kyei (2001: 26-7) as 'a grand occasion of reciprocal service'. Sam Jonah, who grew up in the late colonial period (Taylor 2006: 24-5), had to fetch water from communal facilities not just for his family but also for 'elderly or respected' local residents. Herding and hunting were often done in groups (Gandah 2004: 21-5; Kyei 2001: 181-2), allowing children to blur the line between play and work and to forge friendships and rivalries among themselves in common spaces free from adult authority.

⁷ For examples see the following probation reports: Y.C., 5/20/1954, F.A., 10/29/1953, A.L.A., 28/8/1952, SCT 17/5/300.

But set against the socialising aspect of child labour was the fact that its interpenetration with public space made it potentially competitive and divisive. Children tending livestock, for example, faced harsh punishments if the animals grazed on forbidden areas. But such tension was particularly evident in the cities, where denser populations made children an even more visible part of public economic life and heightened competition for scarce resources and markets. Criminal proceedings from Accra are a useful source of evidence for this phenomenon. In 1955, for example, an eight year old girl was charged with assault after having attacked two older girls who had occupied her orange vendor's stall and told her that the Ga (Accra's major ethnic group) were 'prostitutes and other abusive words'.⁸ Other children seemed confused by notions of private property in public space, assuming that damaged, broken or apparently ownerless items could be taken for their own use.⁹ Children were also caught up in conflicts over the meaning and decorum of public space. In 1952, a police search of the railway station led to eighteen alleged child porters being charged with loitering on railway premises, and the language of the subsequent trial suggests that the crackdown was motivated by the competitive, chaotic and vaguely threatening nature of the portage business and the desire to bar it from respectable commercial spaces.¹⁰

Spatial analysis of the 'household' itself reveals further insights into how childhood was changing in the twentieth century. Here, the most important aspect of the 'household' in colonial Ghana is that it was not singular, permanent or always kin-based. Polygamy, complex kin networks and migration created dispersed, multi-nodal households: child labour was part of the web that held the disparate 'household' together and this had a profound effect on the topography of childhood in the Gold Coast. At the local level, households could be polygamous and not always contiguous, so that children's domestic labour could spill outside the physical confines of the home. When Kyei (Kyei 2001: 54) undertook chores for his father, for example, he moved between separate buildings, in separate districts of Agogo, occupied by his mother, his father and his father's other wife – another reason why child labour was often public and visible in the Gold Coast. Matriliney also meant that the primary focus of children's labour might change during childhood: shifting, for

⁸ Case 12300, SCT 17/5/301.

⁹ For example, T.T., 15/11/1952, SCT 17/5/300.

¹⁰ Case 6005, SCT 17/5/300.

example, to serve the interests of a maternal uncle rather than those of the father (Allman and Tashjian 2000: 85-125). This form of meta-household was thus central to the distinctive, shifting topology of child labour in the Gold Coast.

But the meta-household existed on a much larger scale than the village – and the circulation of children between its various nodes remained crucial in binding it together as a viable economic unit. It is in this context, therefore, that the analytical scale can expand again: to the level of the ‘region’. Children’s usefulness to the meta-household stemmed largely from their inherent physical and social vulnerability: even if child labour was less productive than that of adults, it remained cheap, biddable and geographically flexible. This flexibility meant that children were sent to fill temporary or permanent gaps in household labour power caused, for example, by death, illness or absenteeism. Conversely, the care of children was often out-sourced if similar misfortunes made parental custody impossible. Children might also be moved around as pawns (Grier 1989), acting as a security on a debt, a practice that was declining in the twentieth century. Or children could move to a separate node of the household for training, reflecting the scarcity and, above all, the geographic unevenness of apprenticeships and schools. As a result, children often lived away from their natal households as pawns, apprentices or junior relations – most often, but not exclusively, with non-nuclear kin. These extended households became more widely dispersed in the twentieth century as new transport technology, urbanisation and the creation of a colony-wide market in labour facilitated intra-household interaction at greater distances.¹¹ Part two of this paper returns to the issue of how colonial history affected the topology of households and the circulation of child labour.

Kyei’s autobiography suggests that one further expansion of analytical scale is possible: his life was profoundly impacted by the emergence of cocoa as a cash crop in the Gold Coast. The export boom changed the focus of agricultural tasks undertaken by children in the forest ecological zone where cocoa cultivation was possible. But the labour of children also helped to transform the cocoa belt into a unitary economic region, focused on a single cash crop and linked to global commodity markets. Porterage connected the region to the narrow arteries of

¹¹ For examples of these phenomena, see K.K., 27/5/1954, N.A.T., 6/5/1954, A.A., 11/9/1952, O.F., 4/12/1954, SCT 17/5/300.

mechanised transport that took goods to the coast for export. Kyei, for example, helped his grandmother transport her cocoa crop to Asokore, where he gained an idea of the topology of trading routes – railways and shipping – that linked Ashanti to global markets (Kyei 2001: 28-9). Indeed children also served – as porters, hawkers and hangers-on – in those transport hubs outside the cocoa belt that facilitated commodity flows to and from the Atlantic economy. And child labour’s connection to international commerce was two-way: colonial children were workers but they were also *consumers*, and their patterns of consumption changed profoundly in the twentieth century. While delivering cocoa to Asokore, Kyei (2001: 29) also ‘overheard [that] all the good things in the shops...such as cloths, cutlasses, enamel basins, sardines, sewing machines, sugar, talc powder, pomade, felt hats...came from the place Aburokyire, the country of the “White-man”’. Restricted as it was to the cocoa belt, Kyei’s trip to Asokore was in one sense very local, but his experience had a wider significance, involving both the commercial and cognitive creation of a region, and of the place of the colony within it.

Colonialism and Regions

Studying the life of an individual is particularly insightful but it requires types of historical sources that are largely unavailable for most of pre-twentieth century West Africa. Spatial analysis of child labour in the nineteenth century (and before) necessarily takes place on a more collective level; but the focus on larger, more impersonal structures – such as the physical shape of an empire – can still be revealing. The second section of this article will examine how the colonial coastal presence and eventual colonial rule over West Africa impacted upon the construction of historical regions and the articulation of child labour to those regions.

Nineteenth century patterns of apprenticeship on the Gold Coast demonstrate how the topography of colonialism in turn affected the topography of child labour. In the early nineteenth century the structure of apprenticeships in coastal areas changed as the influence of colonialism and trade reconfigured West Africa as a region. Apprenticeships probably changed primarily on the Atlantic littoral, where European powers had long established factories. Europeans had little territorial control beyond the walls of their forts but the factories themselves were important and influential trading posts, dealing first in slaves and then in increasingly valuable quantities of so-called ‘legitimate’ products: palm oil, groundnuts, rubber and so on (Law 1995).

These factories created a demand for craftsmen in new or previously marginal trades like barrel-making, masonry and bricklaying (Quartey-Papafio 1914: 9). The growth of demand and opportunity led to an improvement in the conditions and rewards of apprenticeship, previously likened (Quartey-Papafio 1914: 10) to 'perpetual servitude'. It also meant that boys were less compelled to follow their fathers into a particular trade, as was 'traditionally' the case (Acquah 1958: 74).

Finally – and most relevantly for the spatial analysis of child labour – there was a dramatic increase in the immediate and future mobility of apprentices. Transport technology and trading routes inserted apprentices into a labour market that spanned the European coastal presence eastwards as far as Congo. And in fact making trips to work in *other* European factories in Cameroon, Congo and particularly Nigeria became an important part of apprenticeship in the Gold Coast and a way of fulfilling – and ending – the obligations of an apprentice to his master (Quartey-Papafio 1914: 20-22). So this is one aspect of child labour that can only be understood on a regional scale – but it is a region not recognised in official geo-political spatial demarcations, stretching the length of the West African coastline but hardly penetrating the interior.

The dynamics of child labour for the small group of apprentices on the coastal strip were dependent upon – but very different from – the dynamics of unfree labour in the West African interior.¹² This was because the 'legitimate' products driving coastal commerce were increasingly being produced by slaves redirected from closed trans-Atlantic routes to the domestic market. Child labour *was* certainly circulating through the interior, but those children experienced a very different kind of mobility from coastal apprentices because many moved along slave routes and did so as slaves. Indeed, it was not until the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century that apprentices in the interior began to experience a similar mobility to their coastal counterparts as a combination of colonial rule, the abolition of domestic slavery, urbanisation and economic specialization inserted them into an increasingly unitary colonial economy and labour market. But the creation of colonial states also changed the nature of that mobility for all apprentices, which became increasingly about moving from a village to a town or between towns within a particular colonial territory than about moving between colonial outposts along the Atlantic littoral.¹³ The spatial

¹² For details of the dynamics of slavery in the West African interior see Lovejoy 1983: 60-63 & 159-83.

¹³ *Contracts of Apprenticeships*, 1943, CO 859/59/5, NAUK.

analysis of child labour, then, benefits from a large-scale regional context. But the case of apprenticeships suggests that such 'regions' are not fixed: they can be changed by shifts in technology, commerce or the relations of production.

The period of formal colonial rule over 20th century West Africa created a new set of regions that would affect childhood and child labour. These regions were political constructions that formalised the often arbitrary boundaries between colonial states and split West Africa after World War One into two distinct imperial and linguistic zones, English and French. The importance of these delineations is well-documented and undeniable, particularly for the meta-narratives of colonial and post-colonial West African history.

However, at the level of the individual and of the everyday, the analytical division of West Africa into *discrete* regions breaks down (Nugent & Asiwaju 1996). Archival evidence similarly suggests that we cannot just consider children within a particular colonial boundary or imperial sphere: their lives crossed *between* regions and were influenced by the distinct historical dynamics *of* those regions. There are many examples of these processes at work in the lives of children in the Gold Coast: children who smuggled goods across colonial borders, children who stayed behind in the Gold Coast when their migrant parents returned home, children who came from French territories to get an English-language education, and girls sent as housemaids and potential brides to households across an Anglo-French border that split ethnic groups between two imperial jurisdictions.¹⁴ The most dramatic manifestation of the permeability of imperial regions was the phenomenon of seasonal migration to the Gold Coast – chronicled most famously by Jean Rouch (1956; 1967) – by inhabitants of French colonies in the northern Savannah in order to raise money to pay for French colonial taxes. Children were part of this migratory pattern as dependents of adult households but also sent as individuals, migrating, living and working independently in Accra to raise tax money on behalf of their families. This was not a luxurious life but by living in cramped, unhygienic accommodation and eating cheap, starchy foods, migrant children were able not just to survive but to save money to pay taxes on their return home.¹⁵ Colonial Welfare Officers did not approve of this kind of child migration but administrative repatriation

¹⁴B.B., 6/11/1952, S.Z., 22/1/1953, SCT 17/5/300, NAG; *Domestic Slavery - Slave Dealing*, 1937, NRG 8/2/205, National Archives of Ghana, Tamale [NAGT].

¹⁵H.A., 20/8/1953, L.Z., 29/10/1953, SCT 17/5/300, NAG.

was a costly and time-consuming process because they wanted to deliver children into suitable, verified adult care – their normal response was thus to ameliorate the child's living conditions in Accra rather than have them repatriated. It was partly, therefore, young migrants social status as *children* that made it possible for them to move between French and British imperial spheres and facilitate a zone of interaction between the two.

CONCLUSION

It is easy for historians to replicate the dominant western image of contemporary African childhood: the victim of war, poverty, economic exploitation or natural catastrophe, hand out-stretched, waiting for the next delivery of aid. The suffering is all too real, but the iconography tells us little about how African childhood works or has worked in the past. The spatial analysis of childhood and child labour in fact paints a very different picture. Children were not static, helpless or bounded to the local, reliant on the generosity and mobility of others. Nor were children insular or tied solely to the family, the household or the village. Instead, children emerge as historical agents, certainly affected, but never subsumed, by overarching social and economic trends. Further, child labour took place on a much wider geographic scale than we might expect: the economic lives of children propelled them visibly into local, regional and international spheres of production and consumption.

If topological approaches are helpful, the analytical scale and shape that historians adopt requires careful consideration. The 'region' is never constant: Scholars always need to be aware that their chosen fields of inquiry, such as ecology, commerce, geography and politics, are made obvious only by arbitrary historical conjunctures. And, as such, the historical dynamics of child labour in West Africa are only comprehensible if we incorporate a temporal analysis of the creation, destruction and reconfiguration of the economic spaces in which children worked.

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