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SPECIAL ISSUE: NEIGHBOURHOODS AND THE COLONIAL CITY, 1870–1940

'In the neighbourhood': social solidarity and the politics of urban governance in colonial Accra

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Abstract

This article argues that the infrastructural and regulatory politics of Accra's town council in the early twentieth century highlight competing and transforming understandings of 'neighbour' and 'neighbourhood'. British officials and their elite African allies on the town council championed new forms of physical, social and economic infrastructure, which they touted as 'modern' improvements that would bring Accra in line with other major cities and improve life for its inhabitants. Accra residents did not reject all reform or innovation, but they did insist that urban development take place on their terms and in ways that would support their interests, informed by indigenous notions of civic virtue, social responsibility, moral community and spatial organization.

In 1894, the British colonial government in the Gold Coast passed the Town Councils Ordinance (TCO). The realization of several decades of attempts to craft a new form of municipal governance, the TCO represented a new vision for the city that was comprised of valued, assessable property, divided into quarters or administrative 'neighbourhoods' and administered by a group of newly elected and appointed officials who used property taxes to fund the development of the town and organize its operations. While officials ultimately intended to institute town councils in other urbanizing areas in the Gold Coast, its original target and concentrated focus was Accra, a city that had a long history of urban settlement, cosmopolitanism and European interaction and influence but which had only recently become the capital of the Gold Coast Colony in 1877. Unlike other colonial capitals across the continent, British officials attempting to develop Accra into a modern colonial capital were forced to contend with well-established urban cultures, political institutions and social mores among indigenous Ga peoples.

On the one hand, British officials openly admitted that in passing the TCO, government sought to pass off the financial and logistical responsibility for the management of Accra to another entity and to place the financial burden of urban development on urban residents. Officials also lauded the Accra Town Council (ATC) as a step toward democratic self-government, allowing the town's residents

to 'practise' self-rule along European/colonial models as a necessary step toward eventual independence.[1] However, I argue, in remaking the expectations for governance and maintenance, the ATC – as articulated through the regulations of the Town Councils Ordinance – also represented a radically new form of spatial governance and bureaucracy in the old Ga town, which sought to reframe the rights and obligations of urban residents as Westernized 'neighbours' rather than Ga citizens – a form of moral reframing of urban residence through the politics of regulation.

Accra residents had mixed reactions to the town council. While the initial protest and refusal to pay rates ultimately abated under the threat of prosecution, imprisonment and dispossession, many urban residents continued to question the authority of the council and assert their rights as ratepayers and protests were often rekindled when changes or reforms to the ordinance were proposed that would increase taxation or expand the authority of the council. As I have discussed elsewhere, the minutes of the Accra Town Council are certainly an extension of the colonial archives, but they also provide an unprecedented, if fragmentary, window into the politics of urban governance.[2] As those minutes make clear, throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, Accra residents petitioned for infrastructure and investment, protested perceived government over-reach, lobbied their elected representatives, refused to acknowledge what they considered unjust regulations and, sometimes, sabotaged infrastructure that did not meet the needs and demands of their communities. Appointed British officials on the town council often dismissed these protests as a reflection of some form of political or social disorder or technological backwardness that only further justified the need for intervention and reform. However, African elected representatives to the town council often highlighted the greater ambiguity and complexity of the situation.[3] As members of a Western-educated and often wealthy elite class, these representatives sought to balance their philosophical embrace of some of the underlying tenets of colonial regulation and reform while also representing the real social, cultural, political and financial interests of themselves and their constituents. Residents, likewise, sought to balance their desire for investment and infrastructural improvements with the need to protect their individual and communal well-being and autonomy in the face of increasing colonial intrusion into

[1]While this was an argument frequently made by British officials, African residents and prominent citizens also made this argument in making claims to representation, opportunity and investment within the colonial state. See for example, The National Archives (UK) (TNA), Colonial Office files (CO) 96/740/1, 1937 Municipal Affairs: A Petition by the Ratepayers of Accra regarding the Appointment of Mr. D. McDougall as Town Clerk; J.A.B. Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples, British and Native: With the Requirements Necessary for Establishing that Self-Government Recommended by the Committee of the House of Commons, 1865; and a Vindication of the African Race* (London, 1868), 137.

[2]J. Hart, *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra* (Bloomington, 2024), 25–9.

[3]The membership of the town council varied considerably across the period in question, depending on election and appointment. The 'official' or appointed members (who were largely British government officials) were in a slight majority, while the minority were comprised of elected African representatives who constituted the 'unofficial' membership. While there was always the possibility that one of these elected representatives would be a non-Ga person, given high rates of migration into Accra and its cosmopolitan ethnic make-up, available records show an overwhelming Ga dominance of elected positions. However, as some of the discussion below indicates, what it means to be 'Ga' was, itself, a highly cosmopolitan construction that had changed, and continued to change, over time in response to migration, economic realities and political alliances.

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the daily lives and socio-political structures that defined the Ga town. The unevenness with which development proposals and investments were received by residents throughout the town – articulated both directly and through their elected representatives – constituted a sophisticated local politics of urban development and belonging.

This article argues that the infrastructural and regulatory politics of Accra's town council in the early twentieth century highlight competing and transforming understandings of 'neighbour', 'neighbourliness' and 'neighbourhood'. As a Ga town whose urban character predated its status as a colonial city and was firmly rooted in the spatial, spiritual and political values of the Ga state, early twentieth-century Accra provides a telling site through which to explore the socio-cultural politics of space in colonial cities. This rootedness challenges widespread scholarly assumptions about the primacy of migrants in shaping life in West African towns.[4] Migrants played an important role in Accra's history well before the consolidation of colonial rule, and Ga political and cultural systems have adapted over the course of centuries to incorporate the diverse communities in ways that privileged cosmopolitanism while also remaining firmly grounded in Ga socio-cultural values and political systems. Unlike cities that were created through colonial intervention, however, Ga people maintained a fair degree of control over the shape of the city even as colonial power expanded through the first half of the twentieth century, and this foundation provided a powerful alternative to British plans. While Accra's relative autonomy and the persistent economic and political power of its people are relatively exceptional within African urban history, that uniqueness can also help us more clearly see both the power and limitations of colonial rule at work through the politics and processes of urban governance. While the new town council system sought to segregate functional uses and control social and economic space in the city to render it governable, assessing property and organizing the infrastructure of the city as a 'modern' space, Accra's long history of urban settlement meant that these new bureaucratic and infrastructural 'neighbourhoods' (or 'quarters') represented overlapping and often conflicting political and socio-cultural interests. The quarter was a form of familial organization, a spiritual ground and a political structure, and its bureaucratic form (that is, 'the neighbourhood') was connected to both indigenous political/sacral power and the new town council. Houses, likewise, were spaces of physical, social and material values as well as sites of deep spiritual and cultural significance; streets were both residential and commercial.[5]

Accra residents persistently complained and obstructed town council plans and undermined the council's authority in ways that defied easy categorization. In their protests, residents often used the quarter – both as a connection to political and

[4]See, for example, M. Peil, *Cities and Suburbs: Urban Life in West Africa* (Ibadan, 1981).

[5]E. Seworder, 'The urban culture of the "model" Christian settlement at Abokobi, Ghana, 1854–1929', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 81 (2022), 197–212; E. Sewordor, '"The humble petition of Johana Nyewuame Bekrah": becoming/being Gã, straddling "spaces", and negotiating boundaries in the Gold Coast Christian "model town" (Abokobi), ca. 1860–1980', *Journal of West African History*, 6 (2020), 1–27; H. von Hesse, '"Wɔmiŋya Adabraka wɔyamɔ gbɛ" ("We're going to Adabraka to secure space"): Ga architectural and urban authenticity and colonial urban planning in Accra, c. 1877–1908', in N.Y.B. Sapong and J.O. Pohl (eds.), *Replenishing History: New Directions to Historical Research in the 21st Century in Ghana* (Banbury, 2014), 118; H. von Hesse, 'Materiality and real estate: evolving cultural practices of security on the urban Gold Coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', University of Wisconsin–Madison Ph.D. thesis, 2021; J. Hart, *Ghana on the Go: African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation* (Bloomington, 2016); Hart, *Making an African City.*

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bureaucratic power and as a form of community organizing – to navigate the shifting politics of the town, advocate for their own interests and make claims on the state as citizens, even as they questioned the more bureaucratic functions embedded in British administrative and spatial imagination of the 'neighbourhood'. While people did not often explicitly use the word 'neighbour', the social solidarity of the neighbourhood provided a powerful form of organization that resonated in both local politics and the new forms of colonial urban governance. While British officials and their elite African allies on the town council championed new forms of physical, social and economic infrastructure, which they touted as 'modern' improvements that would bring Accra in line with other major cities and improve life for its inhabitants, residents in different quarters of the town often had vastly different responses to these developments.[6] Accra residents did not reject all reform or innovation, or all conceptions of 'neighbourliness', but they did insist that urban development take place on their terms and in ways that would support their interests, informed by indigenous notions of civic virtue, social responsibility, moral community and spatial organization. People who belonged to a neighbourhood were property owners/tenants, rulers/subjects, family members, ritual participants, economic agents and patrons/clients. In seeking to organize the town around these new 'neighbourhoods' that were defined by questions of racial segregation, ownership, value, taxation, elections, regulation and infrastructural maintenance, British officials and their allies misunderstood the fundamentally social and cultural meaning of belonging in Accra and overestimated their own power in shaping what neighbourhoods should look like and what neighbourly sociality and responsibility might mean. Far from homogenizing the city's urban residents into one coherent political entity with easily legible and governable neighbourhoods that could be 'responsible for the maintenance of the town' as colonial technocratic processes and solutions assumed, the 'neighbourhood' politics that emerged in response to colonial urban governance in Accra highlighted the heterogeneity of urban interest and investment and articulated an alternative vision for the city that was simultaneously rooted in Ga values and adapting to the changing realities of the twentieth century.

What it means to be a neighbour, I argue, is a highly contested issue, particularly in this period of significant social and cultural change, marked not only by conflicts and contestations between the Ga state and the colonial government, but also articulated through different expectations and experiences based on gender, class and family. As I have argued elsewhere, the creation of the Accra Town Council in 1894 and the four decades of urban governance that followed marked a period of significant consolidation of power within various arms of the colonial state.[7] While it is tempting to see the unfolding of new forms of regulatory oversight and spatial control as evidence of Accra's transformation from a Ga town to a British colonial capital, in reality this period, when viewed through the politics of urban governance and the competing perspectives of diverse urban residents and government officials, challenges conventional scholarly assumptions about the power of the 'bifurcated state'.[8] In the midst of

[6]To learn more about the nineteenth-century precursors to this relationship, see H. von Hesse, 'More than an intermediary: James Bannerman and colonial space-making on the nineteenth-century Gold Coast', *African Studies Review* (2024), 1–20.

[7]Hart, *Making an African City*.

[8]M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 2018), 18.

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significant historic transformations in the social, cultural, economic and political landscape of the city, the empire and the world, this politics of urban regulation and space represent a form of continuity in contestation. The sections that follow explore the emerging tensions between and shifting historical understandings of three key questions at the core of colonial urban governance and the emerging politics of colonial urban life. First, what are people supposed to do? Second, what are people willing to do? Third, what are people able to do? 'People' here is intentionally vague, reflecting the complex spatial politics that defined Accra in the first half of the twentieth century. As we will see, residents, representatives and colonial officials invoked competing understandings of these questions, articulated through distinct cultural and spatial frameworks. The first two sections explore competing understandings of what people are supposed to do. The first section explores Ga notions of neighbourliness through culturally grounded conceptions of 'civic virtue' and social responsibility, which were rooted in widely shared understandings about family, spirituality, reciprocity and morality. The second section details the ways in which British officials sought to reframe notions of responsibility in the town through the introduction of new regulations and systems of valuation, taxation and representation. The third section explores what people were willing and able to do, highlighting the various ways in which Accra residents and their elected representatives asserted their rights to the city by mobilizing culturally heterogeneous conceptions of 'neighbour' and 'neighbourliness, articulated through both Ga cultural expectations of civic virtue and moral community as well as colonial bureaucratic logics of the administrative 'neighbourhood'.

Accra as a moral community: authority and civic virtue in the Ga town

The small seaside towns (*nshonamaji*) that made up colonial Accra had their origins in the fifteenth century as fishing villages and spiritual sites within a larger centralized Ga state that was headquartered in Ayawaso. When the Ga were defeated by the Akwamu in 1677, refugees fled to the seaside towns, seeking the protection of the cannons of European forts that dotted the coast and were connected in various ways to the Ga settlements.[9] John Parker notes that within Ga epistemology, 'the south connotes the sea, the great sea god Nai, civilization, and urban culture' whereas 'the north represents land, lesser deities, and rustic culture located in an essentially untamed and hazardous nature'.[10] Settlement in the town, in other words, implied a significant degree of responsibility for residents, who were obligated to defend their community from the 'bush' – protection from the spiritual, natural/physical and political world outside of the boundaries of the town. This deep sense of obligation is also echoed in the word for town itself; *man* is often translated as 'town', but, as Parker notes, it can also mean 'people', 'nation' or 'state'. The physical space of the town, the political organization of the Ga state, the spiritual welfare of the nation and the social organization of its people were all intimately interwoven in Accra.[11] Undoubtedly, Ga people were dispersed well beyond the boundaries of Accra; however, beginning in the late sixteenth century the town transformed into a new

[9]J. Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Portsmouth, NH, 2000), 6–7.
[10]*Ibid.*
[11]*Ibid.*

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and increasingly powerful centre of Ga social, political and spiritual organization that obligated its residents (*manbii*) to fulfil specific responsibilities that differed from their compatriots in the 'bush'.[12]

Ga proverbs and songs reinforce the idea that the town was something more than a place where one lived. Proverbs like 'Gbo hinmeii kpleikplei, si enaa man mlinii' (The eyes of a stranger may be very large, but he does not see the inner things of the town) highlight the importance and complexity of local knowledge of unique social and political dynamics that were core to understandings of urban belonging.[13] This idea of social ownership of the town also resonated in spiritual settings:

> Woman moomo, woman
> Womantiase wo ye mli
> Jen boa de aye mli
> Woman moomo, woman
>
> It is our town long ago, it is our town
> We are in the heart of our town
> We have been in it since the world was created
> It is our town from long ago, it is our town[14]

Social, political and spiritual ownership of the town (and attendant responsibilities) distinguished residents/denizens from strangers. These core responsibilities and expectations provided an important anchor for an urban area that was characterized by both intense political competition and ongoing cultural innovation, influenced by the Ga's middleman trade status, their coastal location and their connection to European forts.[15] The town attracted both migrants and potential invaders, who were often successfully incorporated into the social and political life of the town as part of a highly cosmopolitan Ga state.[16]

Strangers 'became Ga' by working within the complex hierarchies of authority that constituted the Ga state where the political authority of the chiefs (*mantse*) were both enhanced and checked by miliary organizations (*asafo*) – organizations of men initiated within 'age grades' who were responsible for protecting their respective quarters (*akutsei*) in times of war and peace as an 'expression of "commoner" interests, ready to defend the rights of the ordinary *manbii* (townspeople) and keep in check the prerogatives of the chiefs'.[17] As Parker notes, 'This balance of power in the body politic was commonly expressed by the *asafobii* as "the Chiefs are the head and we are the legs of the town".'[18] Authority was also held by the *wulomei* (priests) of

[12]*Ibid.*

[13]Ga proverb from J. Zimmerman, *A Grammatical Sketch of the Akra or Ga Language*, vol. I (Stuttgart, 1858), 158; cited in Parker, *Making the Town*, 1; S. Balakrishnan, 'Building the ancestral public: cemeteries and the necropolitics of property in colonial Ghana', *Journal of Social History*, 55 (2022), 1–25.

[14]Song from a Kpele religious cult, M. Kilson, *Kpele lala: Ga Religious Songs and Symbols* (Cambridge, 1971), 239; cited in Parker, *Making the Town*, 1.

[15]Parker, *Making the Town*, 1.

[16]*Ibid.*, 4, 17.

[17]*Ibid.*, 19; N. Sackeyfio-Lenoch, *The Politics of Chieftaincy: Authority and Property in Colonial Ghana, 1920–1950* (Rochester, NY, 2014), 29.

[18]Parker, *Making the Town*, 19.

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the town who were responsible for the maintenance of shrines, served as intermediaries with various gods and protected the spiritual welfare of the town and its inhabitants.[19] Ritual, social and political authority often combined in the management of the town. Quarters often had their own shrines, and waterways like lagoons often constituted sacred spaces that required strict ritual obligations and protection.[20] Co-ordination of *mantse*, *asafo* and *wulomei* was often particularly necessary to achieve successful social and political change; dissent between these different sources of authority could likewise disrupt or complicate change and lead to conflict.

Strangers who sought to settle within the town had to negotiate these complex dynamics. However, the opportunity to acquire wealth through trade in the coastal town created new kinds of avenues to power and authority for both strangers and those Ga (that is, women and former slaves) who found themselves outside of the traditional hierarchies of authority. Wealth allowed outsiders to claim authority and political power – and even to found their own stools or *oblempon* (rich man's stool) – within the town.[21] However, wealth also imposed its own expectations and responsibilities on individuals. Wealthy individuals acquired status and authority by using their wealth to support their lower-class family and neighbours, investing in infrastructure and providing a social and economic safety net for often large retinues of dependants. In order to maintain that status, wealthy elites had to avoid becoming indebted in any way to lower-status peoples, placing enormous pressure on them to maintain wealth.[22] Often associated with the literate elite, this new class of wealthy leaders both competed with and reinforced the *mantsemei*, whose ascribed status simultaneously made them more secure and more vulnerable in the midst of a rapidly changing Accra.[23]

Obligations for ordinary townspeople were organized around their residence in one of the *akutsei* (quarters). 'Neighbours' were simultaneously *akutsonyo* (someone from the neighbourhood) and *omanfo* (citizens). While *akutsonyo* may seem to imply the importance of mere location of residence in defining neighbourliness or neighbourly belonging, in practice, residence in an *akutso* was traditionally defined by an individual's family relations (*weku*). Neighbours had a mutual familiarity connected to kinship as well as a political responsibility as *omanfo*, but kinship also helped to define some of the social and cultural obligations that *akutsonyo* might have to the *akutsei* and to each other.[24] Patrilineages (represented by the *mantse*) controlled land rights in their quarter and had priests or priestesses who 'mediate relations with the ancestors and the family gods'.[25] Families, furthermore, often buried their dead within the house in order to protect the body from grave robbers and to ensure that their ancestors could be properly cared for through ritual obligations, alongside other household shrines.[26]

[19]*Ibid.*

[20]*Ibid.*, 20.

[21]*Ibid.*, 10–16.

[22]Kilson, *Kpele lala*, 267–8.

[23]Parker, *Making the Town*, 67–8.

[24]I am indebted to Trix Mensah, Aisha Nelson, Harry Odamtten and Jacob Tetteh Ashong for their help in clarifying these terms in both their contemporary and historical uses. Sackeyfio-Lenoch, *The Politics of Chieftaincy*, 158.

[25]C. Robertson, *Sharing the Same Bowl: A Socioeconomic History of Women and Class in Accra, Ghana* (Ann Arbor, 1990), 46–7, 48–51.

[26]J. Parker, *In My Time of Dying: History of Death and the Dead in West Africa* (Princeton, 2021), 87; Parker, *Making the Town*, 25–7; S. Balakrishnan, 'Archives in stone: cemeteries, burial and urban ownership in late colonial Ghana', *Journal of Urban History* (2024), 1–16; Balakrishnan, 'Building the ancestral public';

What might be considered 'neighbourliness' was understood among Ga people as a form of 'civic virtue' that was incredibly complex, particularly in the context of the shifting terrain of political, social and cultural authority of Accra's urban space. Expectations for individuals within the *akutsei* varied by gender – a difference that was reinforced through the gendered ordering of space which separated men's and women's residences.[27] Women's obligations were generally tied to the domestic realm – cooking, cleaning, caring for children within and around the compound. However, this separation also gave women considerable social and economic autonomy and facilitated the creation of female-centred networks that extended beyond the *we* (family), which proved to be incredibly powerful in moments of political conflict.[28] While British officials and town council members often referred to the grand 'storeyed buildings' of Accra's male, merchant elite, a huge proportion of trade in Accra was dominated by women who worked with European firms to obtain goods on credit for resale, relying on dependants to complete domestic responsibilities while they built their commercial enterprises. While many of these women traders engaged in petty trading or the sale of cooked food or locally distilled spirits, the most successful traders of cloth and other imported goods often made incredible amounts of money, which enabled them to wield significant influence within their family and community. Regardless of their level of wealth, the work of women constituted an important but often unrecognized economic contribution to their households, their families and their communities.[29] Often deeply suspicious of men both within and outside of their families, women often focused on protecting themselves and their networks while actively questioning men for not fulfilling their duties.[30]

The obligations of men were often more formal and prescribed. While men of means were expected to provide social and financial support for extended families, other individuals were responsible for participating in smaller forms of reciprocity and general expressions of 'civic virtue' in order to maintain the health and wealth of the *akutsei*[31] – an expression of 'masculinity and male civic virtue' shaped by both men and women. Parker argues that, in the midst of the political and economic conflicts that increased through the growth in trading economies in southern Ghana in the 1860s, male civic virtue increasingly came to be defined through military prowess.[32] Strangers acquired citizenship through their participation in *asafo* companies – 'to fight in defence of the town was a vital element in the process of becoming Ga'.[33] 'Civic virtue' exhibited through military service in the 1860s highlighted a shared understanding of Accra as a 'moral community'.

S. Balakrishnan, 'Placing and spacing the dead in colonial Accra', The Metropole: The Official Blog of the Urban History Association, 25 Nov. 2019 https://themetropole.blog/2019/11/25/placing-and-spacing-the-dead-in-colonial-accra/, accessed 27 Aug. 2024.

[27]Parker, *Making the Town*, 25–7.

[28]*Ibid.*, 25–7.

[29]For more on the role of women in trade in colonial Accra, see Robertson, *Sharing the Same Bowl*; Parker, *Making the Town*; and B. Murillo, *Market Encounters: Consumer Cultures in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Athens, OH, 2017).

[30]Parker, *Making the Town*, 52.

[31]Robertson, *Sharing the Same Bowl*, 51–4, 218.

[32]Parker, *Making the Town*, 52–3.

[33]*Ibid.*, 48–50.

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Particularly as the economic and political fortunes of the Ga state shifted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Ga leaders had to negotiate the increasing intrusion of British colonial power on their authority as political and military leaders, 'virtue' was defined just as much by the redistribution of wealth, the representation of the *interests* of the *manbii* and the preservation of Ga autonomy and authority as it was by military distinction. The growth of *oblempon* (rich man's) stools exemplifies this shift – individuals who were able to distinguish themselves through their role as independent entrepreneurs could compete with the traditional *mantsemei* for authority in the public sphere even if their power was fought for through trade rather than military battle.[34] However, as Parker argues, the massive transformations wrought by the consolidation of British colonial power in 1874 and the establishment of Accra as the new British colonial capital in 1877 'began to refashion male civic virtue' and made the work of 'defending that moral community…a more complex affair'.[35] As these changes alienated large groups of urban residents, *asafo* companies, women traders, neighbourhood associations and other forms of social organization and representation began to push back in new ways, often undermining the authority of both traditional and colonial 'big men' in order to reassert and preserve the interests of their neighbourhoods and networks.

Accra as a modern town: colonial governance and spatial order

Ga understanding of civic virtue was undoubtedly shaped, among other things, by their long interaction with European forts and commercial interests. The consolidation of British colonial rule in 1874 and Accra's new status as a colonial capital intensified this interaction as British officials sought to expand their authority in the town and reshape the new capital city into a vision of 'ordered modernity'.[36] The Town Councils Ordinance was the most recent in a series of moves to expand legal jurisdiction over coastal towns and undermine the power of local chiefs and other authorities. When Governor Ussher told Ga *mantse* Taki Tawia that he doubted 'whether a chief of your character is the proper person to represent the natives of the headquarters of the Gold Coast', he signalled a shift not only in British understandings and expectations of governance in the town but also the very character of the town itself.[37] Neighbours were not members of family lineages or chiefly dependants; they were tax-paying citizens who voted for elected representatives within a new, increasingly technocratic system of urban governance. Writing to Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain in 1900, Governor Frederick Hodgson reported on the activities of the Accra Town Council, noting that 'the Council is now firmly established and is undertaking its responsibilities with care and efficiency'.[38] This seemed like an enormous achievement and demonstration of colonial authority given the widespread protests and active refusals to participate in tax collection and municipal elections only a few years before.

The council, which was comprised of both 'official' (that is, appointed British officials) and 'unofficial' (that is, elected African representatives) members, constituted

[34]*Ibid.*
[35]*Ibid.*, 71.
[36]Hart, *Making an African City*.
[37]Quoted in Parker, *Making the Town*, 103.
[38]TNA/CO 96/362, 1900 Gold Coast Dispatches.

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an early model of limited democratic governance. Unlike colonial towns like Nairobi or Johannesburg, which were built and grew through the presence of European colonialism, and which could be marked as separate from the towns and villages of African states within the system of indirect rule, Accra had its own well-established urban culture and socio-political organization which required more complex negotiation. The laws the town council passed to support its work represented an attempt to undermine the power of chiefs and empower the Western-educated elites of the town who were seen to be more sympathetic to British logics and practices. By creating a new structure of urban governance in which residents elected representatives from each of the quarters of the town to serve on the council, British officials sought to redirect residents away from the chiefs and the *asafo* and toward these new representatives of authority.[39] While elected African representatives were members of the council, they sat in the minority; a majority of appointed British colonial officers often voted as a block to dictate the council's agenda and shape the patterns of urban regulation and development.

In redefining structures of authority in the town, colonial officials also sought to reshape expectations and responsibilities for its citizens, articulated through British understandings of 'neighbourliness'. Representation in this new political structure required taxation – all property owners were expected to pay taxes or 'rates' on their property in order to help fund the activities of the council and contribute to the overall maintenance of the town. These ratepayers then constituted the body of eligible voters who would elect representatives. These representatives served as conduits for residents in different town quarters to express grievances, request action and represent their interests in discussions and debates within the town council. The ability to participate in the governance of the town and the responsibility for maintaining the welfare of the town was redefined through the new structures of ownership and value, taxation and representation. This new system was less a 'moral community' that defined belonging and 'civic virtue' in the Ga town than a series of regulations and rules designed to reorganize the town into a 'modern' capital by bringing order to its residents, informed by technocratic expertise and backed by the power of the courts.

Residences and commercial properties were the primary targets of assessment and taxation. In defining what was not taxed, colonial officials articulated a new understanding of 'public goods' that sometimes overlapped but often contradicted indigenous Ga expectations of virtuous and responsible urban life. Sites of public worship, medical facilities, schools, burial grounds and 'premises declared by order of the Governor to be exempted from assessment' were all exempt from taxation.[40] Importantly, chiefs' compounds and family homes were subject to assessment, which created widespread outrage and resentment when the ordinance was introduced. Chiefs initially refused to pay rates and were at risk of being thrown in jail until wealthy ratepayers volunteered to pay off their debts. Family homes also posed challenges, as they were collectively owned and there was often no clear line of responsibility for maintenance. Both of these types of properties were also imbued with spiritual significance, which further blurred colonial categories set out in the ordinance. Furthermore, rates assessed on property did not account for the wealth of

[39] *Ibid.*
[40] TNA/CO 1018/15, Town Councils (no date specified).

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its residents. Merchants who had built grand houses at the height of their wealth in trade could no longer afford the taxes and upkeep of those houses once trade declined and African intermediaries were pushed increasingly out of the market. Chiefs who were responsible for maintaining large compounds for the community were unable to afford taxes and maintenance when new colonial legislation undercut their ability to collect revenue through local courts and other fees.

In instituting property taxes, colonial officials sought to make the townspeople financially responsible for the maintenance of the town and the expansion of its new, 'modern' infrastructure. In 1929, £1,511 was collected annually on property with a combined rateable value (of government and non-government property in Accra, Sabon Zongo and Labadi) of £30,224.[41] By 1935, the rateable value had increased by £3,883 from the year before, as infrastructural development and population growth placed pressure on available housing and land and increased property values.[42] And yet, even as property values – and thus taxes – increased throughout the 1920s and 1930s, rates proved to be insufficient to finance the growth and maintenance of the town with the new models of technocratic colonialism. In the 1932–33 estimates, rates constituted just over a third of all town council revenue, a pattern that remained remarkably consistent throughout the first half of the twentieth century.[43] The remainder of the council's revenue was generated through a variety of licences, fees and the fares of the municipal bus service.

The town council's sense of its own responsibilities is represented in both its ordinances and in the list of its expenditures. Heavy investment in infrastructural development and the spatial reconfiguration of the town were part of a larger vision of 'ordered modernity' that would bring Accra in line with expectations for what a modern colonial capital should look like. One could glimpse these visions come to life in model communities, like Osu Salem or Adabraka, within Accra.[44] The large, European-style stone houses and the grid-like patterns of their streets represented an ideal of urban residence that was physically and culturally separate from the Ga settlements in the *akutsei*. These new settlements also followed colonial sanitation and public health expectations, with broader streets, airy courtyards and large verandas set away from commercial activities, markets or slaughterhouses that were often interspersed within, between or alongside residential areas in the old Ga town.[45] The persistent power of Ga spatial cultures and social structures, however, often prevented colonial officials from achieving this degree of change on a large scale.

Major crises – epidemics and earthquakes – did create some openings, which British officials and technocratic experts used to decongest the city centre and build new 'neighbourhoods' designed around prevailing Western planning models.[46]

[41]National Archives of Ghana, Accra (NAG), Colonial Secretary's Office files (CSO) 20/1/1, 1930–31 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council.

[42]NAG/CSO 20/1/3, 1932–36 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council.

[43]*Ibid.*

[44]A. Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham, NC, 2014), 100–1; Seworder, 'The urban culture'; Sewordor, '"The humble petition of Johana Nyewuame Bekrah"'; Hesse, '"Wɔmiŋya Adabraka Wɔyamɔ Gbɛ" ("We're Going to Adabraka to Secure Space")', 118.

[45]W.-A. Bin-Kasim, 'Sanitary segregation: cleansing Accra and Nairobi, 1908–1963', Washington University Ph.D. thesis, 2019, 32–124.

[46]W.-A. Bin-Kasim, 'Politics of disaster: earthquake, rehousing, and confronting colonial rule in Accra (Gold Coast/Ghana), 1939–45', *Journal of African History*, 64 (2023), 1–14.

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These new neighbourhoods often did not operate in the same way as the old Ga quarters.[47] In neighbourhoods like Adabraka, individuals were often united more by their class status than their ethnic or family affiliation. In others like Victoriaborg and Ridge, British officials sought to enforce some degree of racial segregation through idealized communities for European residents, located outside of the old Ga town and designed according to principles that were thought to preserve 'health'. Particularly as the city grew, communities like Nima or Sabon Zongo also served as a home for diverse collections of 'outsiders'.[48] In planning these new extensions of the town, British officials presented visions of 'neighbourliness' that differed from Ga understandings of moral community and civic virtue.

'Managing their own affairs': social solidarity in and through the neighbourhood

W.H. Adams, the president of the Accra Town Council at the turn of the century, wrote to the colonial secretary in 1900 and echoed Hodgson's optimism about the council's activities. The short report he included on the activities of the council was 'on the whole a favourable one, good work having been done in the face of many difficulties'.[49] The small size of the municipal buildings and their distance from town discouraged townspeople to attend the council's meeting, but their monthly proceedings had been published regularly in the *Gold Coast Express* which 'proved an excellent move' as a way to enhance public understanding and public support for the new council structure:

> The people are beginning to understand the idea of the Council. They are favourable to the idea and appreciate managing their own affairs. Apart from having to pay monies to the Council for the upkeep of the Town (and payment of money is disagreeable to many people) they strongly support the Council. That the African believes if you tax his property it implies that the property is yours I do not believe. I have seen no sign of any such belief but he has never been accustomed to pay money to any one except in the case of slaves.[50]

For Adams, taxation was merely something to which people had to adjust. In some ways, this discontent, he acknowledged, was a product of shifting economic circumstances. The wealth of the old merchant families, who had dominated Accra only a decade before, had diminished significantly as prices dropped, competition increased and European firms began more directly controlling trade rather than relying on African intermediaries. While this had inevitable consequences for these elite families themselves, lower profits also made it difficult to support large numbers of dependants – sometimes as many as three or four hundred – who were forced instead to 'eke out a precarious livelihood by farming, fishing and petty trading'.[51]

Adams' explanation of residents' ongoing opposition to the council echoed that of many British officials in the first half of the twentieth century:

[47]TNA/CO 96/803/4, 1945–48 Town and Country Planning Legislation (Gold Coast).
[48]Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra*, 67.
[49]TNA/CO 96/362, 1900 Gold Coast Dispatches.
[50]*Ibid.*
[51]*Ibid.*

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> To these [poor] people the idea of paying money for the upkeep of roads, lighting, sanitary arrangements, etc, none of which they particularly cared about, came as an absurdity and it is these people that the Council has the difficulty with. The better class of people freely understand and think the idea of the Council a right one. Another difficulty is with the Kings and Chiefs who are in Accra a relic of barbarism that cannot much longer survive. These men have no money; their only means of living is from their Court fees and fines and now these are superseded by the English courts. These men do not like the Council and use every effort to get it abolished. If the Government tells them to do anything the reply is the tax must be first abolished.[52]

This contrast between the urban poor, 'the better class of people' and the 'Kings and Chiefs' certainly highlighted some of the very real fracture lines within the changing social landscape of the city. However, in assuming that poor residents did not care about infrastructure and thought urban development was an absurdity and in diminishing the ongoing resistance by the chiefs as evidence of 'barbarism', Adams severely underestimated and oversimplified the politics at work.[53] The protests, disagreements and demands levied by Accra residents against the council were motivated not by an outright resistance to the notion of urban development or technological innovation but rather by a keen awareness of the fundamental hypocrisies and contradictions that underlay shifting politics in the colonial city and threatened to undermine the interests of its residents. Colonial officials who demanded that residents pay for the maintenance of the town ignored the fact that they had, in fact, been doing that all along, even if the organization and appearance of that town differed from European visions. Ga Manche Taki Tawia had argued in 1915 that the townspeople 'got on very well without the municipality'.[54]

Early Ga scepticism about the motivations and intentions of the council proved prescient over the ensuing decades as British colonial officials sought to use law to expand their political authority and reshape the town in their own image.[55] As a petition from Accra ratepayers noted in 1937, 'While the principle embodied in that Ordinance was welcomed by the great majority of the people, the machinery was too elaborate, and the taxes incorporated, especially those affecting the transfer of lands, were too much at variance with the habits and customs of the people to make the Ordinance acceptable to them.'[56] They were 'firmly convinced, after the experience of recent years, of the utter futility of sending representatives to an institution under the absolute control of one Government official who rules it with the aid of a permanent official majority and often in total disregard of the…interests of the African people

[52]*Ibid.*

[53]Parker notes that the position of the chiefs was far more complicated and represented the difficult position they found themselves in, navigating their responsibilities to their people, to the colonial state and to the wealthy educated elites. Parker, *Making the Town*, 141.

[54]Quoted in *ibid.*, 145.

[55]*Ibid.*, 81.

[56]TNA/CO 96/740/1, 1937 Municipal Affairs: A Petition by the Ratepayers of Accra regarding the Appointment of Mr. D. McDougall as Town Clerk. In 1915, Governor Clifford made a similar argument about the early failures of the council, saying that it had failed because former Governor Maxwell had forced '"upon a fiercely unwilling population a form of local government which they recognized as a mockery of self government", imposing a direct tax "which could only produce an utterly insignificant revenue"' (Parker, *Making the Town*, 145).

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who contribute the revenue'.[57] Observing ongoing patterns of investment that privileged expatriate residential and commercial interests, Accra residents worked both within and outside of the council to assert their own rights to and visions for the city's future.[58]

As the city expanded outside of the traditional Ga *akutsei* and into new communities that more clearly followed the modern planning dictates espoused by the colonial state, Ga traditional leaders were less able to maintain their control over the distribution of land, the incorporation of strangers or the development of the town. But Ga socio-cultural formations and notions of civic virtue also did not completely disappear from conversations about urban life. Instead, they were an important part of an increasingly diverse constellation of perspectives about the future of the city. 'Accra residents' increasingly encompassed the old Ga *akutsei*, the new suburban communities and the voluntary associations of migrants and middle-class urbanites within the changing colonial town.[59] Even if these new groups did not necessarily embrace the responsibilities and expectations that had long incorporated strangers into Ga culture and society, they did strongly advocate for and defend their rights to the city in ways that resonated strongly with notions of 'civic virtue'. Their resistance was not homogeneous; neighbourhoods within the city reacted differently to proposed changes and demanded different kinds of investments and infrastructures. However, in advocating for both representation and a return on their investment of taxes, these new neighbours did form a new kind of 'moral community' in the colonial city that articulated an alternative, and far more complicated, vision of urban development that was rooted in dynamic and often conflicting forms of social solidarity.

Elected town council representatives found themselves in a difficult position within this new urban political arena. As representatives of their respective quarters, they were responsible for speaking up and advocating for the interests of their neighbours and neighbourhoods.[60] While they often agreed with the council's broader goal to 'modernize' the cultural life, infrastructural systems and spatial organization of the town, they regularly found themselves in conflict with 'official' town council members when they questioned the means through which new policies and practices were implemented and advocated for greater investment for their neighbourhoods. Roads were a frequent target of complaints. Kojo Thompson brought up the poor condition of Boundary Road consistently for three years, arguing that government could at least complete and maintain the road after Councillor Dr Reindorf had built it out of his own funds. Councillors argued that these kinds of infrastructural failures were both dangerous and disgraceful and called on their fellow council members to protest.[61] Because roads often had implications for multiple neighbourhoods, African representatives often banded together to advocate for

[57]TNA/CO 96/740/1, 1937 Municipal Affairs: A Petition by the Ratepayers of Accra regarding the Appointment of Mr. D. McDougall as Town Clerk.

[58]Sackeyfio-Lenoch, *The Politics of Chieftaincy*, 128; Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra*, 65–6.

[59]TNA/CO 96/362, 1900 Gold Coast Dispatches; Parker, *Making the Town*, 136–7, 200–4; E. Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (Portsmouth, NH, 1996), 49; Robertson notes that these changes were also gendered (*Sharing the Same Bowl*, 56–7).

[60]TNA/CO 96/362, 1900 Gold Coast Dispatches.

[61]NAG/CSO 20/1/3, 1932–36 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council.

investment, as in their call for the construction of a cemetery road, which Councillor de Graft Johnson argued 'was of interest to every one'.[62] However, roads that were in a poor state in newer neighbourhoods like Adabraka, which had 'many valuable houses', generated dedicated attention given the importance the council placed on property taxes and the new vision of urban life that the neighbourhood supposedly represented.[63]

While British officials often pointed to ongoing financial limitations and more pressing priorities in response to demands for things like road construction and maintenance, African elected representatives felt the pressure of these needs more immediately and intensely. As Councillor Akilagpa Sawyerr noted in discussions about the cemetery road,

> The members of the Council were in agreement that a short and direct road to the new Cemetery was a necessity, and it only remained to recommend same to Government as to keep the matter in view. The feeling of the community on the matter was very strong indeed. European members of the Council could not know how much elected members were worried by the people with this question.[64]

Elected representatives received similar complaints in response to regulations that sought to restrict African practices within the town. Proposals to regulate the sale of palm wine, for example, generated a number of objections from African councillors and led to calls to 'ascertain the views of the people, through the Chiefs'.[65] Ratepayers complained to Kojo Thompson about the inconveniences they suffered when a water pipe was closed near Mr Hansen Sackey's place on the Nsawam Road.[66] Akilagpa Sawyerr received a petition from residents about the condition of Korley Dudor during the rains.[67] Kitson Mills and Kojo Thompson reported complaints about the aggressive actions of sanitary inspectors,[68] and Kitson Mills, de Graft Johnson and Akilagpa Sawyerr demanded urgent investments in a new sewerage system to replace the overtaxed and unpleasant system of latrines that currently served the most congested parts of the town.[69] In many of these cases, councillors and the people they represented used the language of taxation and invoked the rights of taxpayers in making demands for investment and services in their neighbourhoods.[70] One councillor even went so far as to accuse the council of 'defrauding the taxpayers' in the press.[71] In other cases, councillors served as intermediaries and translators, arguing for a period of free access to new markets in expanding neighbourhoods or reduced fees on new bus routes in order to encourage use and enable the council to generate a return on their infrastructural investments.[72]

[62] *Ibid.* A similar sort of solidarity could be seen around arguments for the provision of seats at bus stations and along public bus lines.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] NAG/CSO 20/1/1, 1930–31 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council.
[66] NAG/CSO 20/1/3, 1932–36 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council.
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] *Ibid.*
[69] *Ibid.*
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] *Ibid.*
[72] *Ibid.*; NAG/CSO20/1/1, 1930–31 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council.

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While ratepayers had some degree of direct, elected representation on the council, large swaths of Accra's population – and those most often subject to the council's regulations – were unlikely to own property and thus had no direct voice in government.[73] Market women, people working in slaughterhouses, cattle kraals, fish curing sites and palm oil production and sales locations figured in discussions and did often make themselves heard but rarely had the same kinds of power and official outlets through which they could advocate for their interests. However, as Sackeyfio-Lenoch notes, 'Ga actors used petitions and the written word to communicate their ideas and grievances in specific ways, while drawing on oral traditions and aspects of the past to negotiate their contemporary circumstances' – a practice documented well back into the 1870s.[74] The town council itself had often been the target of these petitions, which were sometimes accompanied by public protests. Women, in particular, would often use these collective strategies to express their discontent – a representation of the high level of suspicion they held for elite men and the degree to which they did not feel represented in government. In 1896, women from across the town gathered for a demonstration outside of the seat of government at Christiansborg Castle and sent a petition to Secretary of the State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain complaining that 'municipal taxation would "only aggravate the already hard lot of women" and the "poorer classes" in general…adding that the council would inevitably "fall into the hands of the so-called educated classes"'. If 'our chiefs and headmen and the general male population had become innervated and demoralized', women – as they had many times before – would step in to defend the rights of the people and shame their leaders for their lack of action.[75] Women also marched on the castle to protest their forced removal from the old Salaga Market in the 1920s, and the *asafoatsemei* organized popular protest in alliance with market women to oppose further expansion of taxation in the revised Municipal Corporations Ordinance and protest the complicity of the chiefs in 1924.[76]

While these protests and acts of civil disobedience were often criticized by colonial officials as further evidence of the 'uncivilized' state of the town and the 'barbarism' of its residents, for Accra residents protests and petitions constituted expressions and actions of civic virtue, pursued in order to protect the town and its people from invasion and threat. In adopting the language and attempting to work within the new structures of colonial urban governance, they sought to make more powerful arguments to protect their interests and maintain their autonomy and authority in shaping the future of the town.[77] However, these petitions and protests also evidence competing conceptions of neighbourliness and neighbourhood interest at work in twentieth-century Accra. While ratepayers, who were organized into their own association, often worked within the bureaucratic and representative structures of the town council in negotiating building permits, regulations and demolition notices,[78] many other city residents embraced more direct action to express their

[73]As the city expanded and new neighbourhoods were incorporated, voting rights were not always extended as quickly as taxation, as in Labadi (NAG/CSO20/1/1, 1930–31 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council).

[74]Sackeyfio-Lenoch, *The Politics of Chieftaincy*, 96–7.

[75]Quoted in Parker, *Making the Town*, 144.

[76]*Ibid.*, 222–3.

[77]Sackeyfio-Lenoch, *The Politics of Chieftaincy*, 97–8.

[78]NAG/CSO20/1/3, 1932–36 Minutes of Meetings, Accra Town Council.

disapproval or demand action. Much like their neighbours in the old town quarters, when the residents of Labadi were incorporated into Accra as ratepayers in 1936, they refused to pay their rates and destroyed public infrastructure in protest of what they felt was insufficient investment. Having asked repeatedly for an electric light system, the council – invoking concerns about the cost of such an investment – installed several oil lamps instead. However, this experiment proved to be 'an entire failure' when the people of Labadi 'broke the first two standards that were in the course of erection, and smashed the third after it had been erected'. The La Manche explained that 'the people wanted only electric light' and when they had seen that the council was installing oil lamps 'the young irresponsible folks were infuriated, and some of them protested against the erection of the standards by breaking them'.[79]

In this case, destruction produced results, and the governor approved the extension of electricity supply to Labadi in the estimates for the following year.[80] Many other protests and petitions went unanswered. That does not mean that they were ineffective or insignificant, however. Local responses to colonial investment and regulation have long been classified as a sort of homogeneous 'resistance'. However, this article argues that, in reading the protests and petitions of urban residents and the actions of their representatives on the town council within the context of competing understandings of 'neighbour', 'neighbourliness' and 'neighbourhood', we better understand these complaints as part of a complex urban politics of belonging and governance in colonial cities.

Conclusion

The rapid urbanization, economic change and technological/infrastructural advancement in twentieth-century Accra introduced new kinds of pressures, provided new kinds of resources and generated new kinds of divisions between residents of the town who all sought to claim their rights to belong to and in the growing city. Historical divisions based on class, gender and socio-political status, which had long structured Ga understandings of civic virtue, now competed alongside new middle-class sensibilities, migrant cultures and European modernist impulses. As a pre-colonial city-state transformed into a colonial capital with a degree of self-government, Accra was exceptional in various ways compared to other British colonial cities. However, these kinds of contestations played out in urban settings across the continent as African urban residents sought to balance the need to navigate new structures and norms of colonial governance and respect local social and cultural mores. They were, in other words, attempting to figure out how to be both citizens and neighbours; colonial subjects and African community members.

These changes certainly had significant consequences for how power was allocated within Accra – decentring traditional Ga authority structures in favour of new bureaucratic systems, laws and regulations. 'New' neighbourhoods built according to European models had less grounding in the 'moral community' of the family and the Ga nation-state than the old Ga *akutsei*. And yet, in mobilizing their communities to advocate for their own best interests and demanding adequate representation and investment from the Accra Town Council in exchange for their taxes, this diverse

[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *Ibid.*

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group of residents embodied 'civic virtue' in a way that resonated strongly with the older Ga notions of belonging and responsibility. While their position within the community and the relative authority that they held within Accra differed significantly from the strangers who worked to incorporate themselves into the 'Ga town' that John Parker and Ato Quayson describe in the nineteenth century, these new twentieth-century neighbours built on long-standing traditions of cosmopolitanism and civic virtue to craft a new sense of moral community that allowed them to more effectively navigate the realities of life in a colonial capital city. In the process, they persistently defied colonial expectations and stereotypes about barbarism or incivility to seize a prominent role in shaping the future of their town.

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