

BOOK REVIEW

Kate Skinner. *The Fruits of Freedom in British Togoland: Literacy, Politics, and Nationalism, 1914-2014*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xv + 258 pp. List of Maps. List of Figures. Note on Orthography. Bibliography. Index. \$108.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781107074637.

In *The Fruits of Freedom in British Togoland*, Kate Skinner offers a history of Ablode (freedom in the Ewe language), the predominantly Ewe movement to unite former British and French Togoland, that has continued from the 1940s to the present. The May 1956 plebiscite that Britain organized on the question of whether or not to integrate the British Mandate Territory of Trans-Volta Togoland, which many Ablode activists christened Western Togoland, into the Gold Coast Colony was a watershed in their crusade. A majority voted yes, which ensured that British Togoland would be part of an independent Ghana, as the Gold Coast was quickly moving toward independence. But for many of the Togolandese who voted no, as Skinner compellingly argues, Ghana's independence simply traded British colonial authority over Togoland for domination by Ghana and, therefore, represented a new iteration of subjugation rather than liberation.

For this illuminating and cogent book, Skinner conducted research at archives and libraries in Ghana and Britain, complemented by an impressive collection of oral interviews in those countries as well as in Togo. The fruit of her labor is a model political history that reaches beyond the nation-state to include political activists, teachers, and missionaries on the margins of Ghana's political scene to define liberation, independence, and sovereignty. Her innovative approach underscores the limitations of nation-state-centered analyses, which include scholars' preoccupation with what they categorize as civilian or military rule, multi- or single-party, and their tendency to "extrapolate from these labels the level of 'democracy' pertaining in the country since Independence" (209).

Skinner acknowledges that, although constraining analytically, these frameworks resonate with the broad strokes of Ghana's political history and culture. But she shows through her study of Ablode that they fail to "explore the rhetorical, performative, and political, which was required to establish the two main party traditions out of a much messier reality, to build

the connections of each main party tradition with its distinctive ethno-regional support base, and to marginalize movements that could not be 're-homed' with the new order" (210).

Skinner's alternative approach to Ghana's post-independence political history chronicles the fortunes of the approximately 42 percent of the population during the plebiscite, mostly Ewe in the southern portion of the territory, that voted to remain a Trust Territory and await the fate of French Togoland, whose politically dominant ethnic group was also Ewe. Many of the no-voters unsuccessfully challenged the plebiscite's legitimacy by citing Article 76 of the UN Charter, which expressly states that the objective of the trusteeship system was to guide the inhabitants of the territories toward self-government or independence.

Just as Skinner adroitly reconsiders previously entrenched political paradigms, she upholds others. She remains, for example, confined to the southern portion of former British Togoland for her study. Tapping the rich history of activism and movements aimed to secure rights and self-determination in the northern sphere, which became the eastern third of northern Ghana, would have enhanced and brought greater originality and dynamism to her book. Incorporating the north would have helped to shed light on what constrained the spread of Ablode there and perhaps serve as a corrective to scholars' neglect of that region. This broader scope would have also produced a more substantial analysis of Ewe activists' quest for liberation through irredentism, in contrast to the Nanumba, Dagomba, and Konkomba pursuit of the same through Nkrumah's political project.

While the book steers clear of portraying Ablode as an ethnic-based movement, presumably because there was some non-Ewe participation, Skinner's evidence indicates that it was propelled by the Ewe community's evolving politicization and Ewe activists' aspirations for ethnic cohesion within a single nation-state. The fact that activists continue to pursue the goals of Ablode makes the movement a wellspring of data for understanding political processes and movements that have either failed or remain on the political margins of a society. Skinner shows that even in defeat, social and political movements have the capacity to endure.

Recent events in Ghana bear this out. Togoland unification is a less prominent and less urgent cause than it was in the 1950s, but it refuses to die. News reports in Ghana and Togo of Ablode activism over the past sixty years buttress Skinner's argument that scholars' teleological narratives of national liberation have perpetuated erroneous histories of success. History is replete with unfilled quests for liberation and electoral wins. Skinner's investment in the idea that the struggle for independence is still ongoing for many groups is extremely instructive, particularly as more scholars probe how the entanglement of Western governments and financial institutions

within African countries has influenced those countries' sovereignty, democracy, and self-determination.

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For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Ouane, Adama, and Yvette Amon-Tanoh. 1990. "Literacy in French-Speaking Africa: A Situational Analysis." *African Studies Review* 33 (3): 21–38. doi: [10.2307/524184](https://doi.org/10.2307/524184)
- Laumann, Dennis. 2003. "A Historiography of German Togoland, or The Rise and Fall of a 'Model Colony.'" *History in Africa* 30: 195–211. doi: [10.1017/S0361541300003211](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0361541300003211)
- Lawrance, Benjamin N. 2003. "La Révolte Des Femmes: Economic Upheaval and the Gender of Political Authority in Lomé, Togo, 1931–33." *African Studies Review* 46 (1): 43–67. doi: [10.2307/1514980](https://doi.org/10.2307/1514980)