

Ablɔɔ

African Political History, from Below and from Within

In the year 2010, a former teacher and member of parliament, Kosi Kedem, published a petition to the Ghana Constitutional Review Commission.¹ This petition analysed the mechanisms by which the former United Nations trust territory of British Togoland had been integrated with the neighbouring British colony of the Gold Coast and deemed a part of Ghana at Independence in 1957. Kedem concluded that the process of integration was deeply flawed, and he demanded negotiations over the terms by which British Togoland could remain in a union with the republic of Ghana in the twenty-first century. He thereby took up the central issue of a political movement which, from the late 1940s, had insisted that British Togoland had a political status quite distinct from that of the Gold Coast, to its west, and was thereby entitled to a form of Independence which would allow for its unification with French Togoland, to its east, in a single African state.

In his associated publications Kedem argued that this movement, the Togoland Congress, had a legitimate cause, but had fallen foul of the British government, which was fully committed to the integration of its trust territory with the Gold Coast.² Commenting on the role that the British administration was allowed to play in organising the popular consultation recommended by the United Nations and in interpreting its results, Kedem likened the plebiscite of 1956 to a judicial case between a hawk and a chicken: ‘how [can] the hawk [Britain] . . . objectively and

¹ Kosi Kedem, 2010 *Constitutional Review and the Rectification of the Ghana-British Togoland Union* (Accra, 2010).

² Kosi Kedem, *How Britain Subverted and Betrayed British Togoland* (Accra, 2007).

sincerely preside over a case involving the chicken [Togoland]. It cannot happen! What justice or fairness would the chicken expect?’³ Kedem concluded that, in allowing the integration of British Togoland with the Gold Coast, the United Nations had failed in its duty to the peoples of the trust territory, who had been denied their right to self-government. In Kedem’s eyes, this failure was compounded by the treatment of Togoland Congress activists at the hands of the Ghanaian state after 1957. His publications and petitions therefore aimed to salvage truth and dignity for the ‘men, women and the freedom fighters who were exiled, lost their lives and property, [and were] detained, imprisoned and suffered serious violation of their human rights during the struggle’ that became known as *Ablɔde* (‘freedom’ in the Ewe language).⁴ After a decade of research and campaigning, Kedem had forced open a controversial issue that historians of modern Ghana had considered to be dead.

Kedem’s writings reflect his concern for the memory of *Ablɔde* activists, and can be read as attempts ‘to give back to men of the past the unpredictability of the future and the dignity of acting in the face of uncertainty’.⁵ He was challenging the ‘construction of ignorance’ and practices of ‘sanctioned forgetting’, which have threatened to edit the *Ablɔde* movement out of Ghana’s national history.⁶ Such editing makes Ghana’s national borders appear far more certain than they ever really were, and thereby obscures not only the agency of the individuals who sought to challenge them, but also the political and diplomatic work which had to be undertaken by former colonial powers and by new African national governments in order to achieve and maintain what now looks like the status quo.

This book is about the people who directed and participated in *Ablɔde* from the late 1940s through to the present day. It explains who these people were, why they opposed the integration of British Togoland with the Gold Coast, and why they sought to preserve the possibility of a joint Independence with French Togoland. It also considers why they failed, and details the consequences of this failure for their families, livelihoods, and future political activity. It is a study of political activism, starting in

³ Kedem, *2010 Constitutional Review*, 12–13.

⁴ Kosi Kedem, *British Togoland: An Orphan or the Death of a Nation* (Accra, 2005), iii.

⁵ Reinhard Bendix, *Force, Fate and Freedom: On Historical Sociology* (Berkeley CA, 1984), 48.

⁶ These phrases are used by Jean Allman, who argues for an ‘agnotological approach’ in her quest to understand why the key female activist Hannah Kudjoe ‘got forgotten’ in Ghana’s national history. ‘The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism and the Tyrannies of History’, *Journal of Women’s History* 21 (3) (2009), 13–35.

the small towns and villages of southern British Togoland, and following individuals and networks through space and time. It maps the movements and connections of activists across borders in West Africa and beyond, shedding light upon their reorientation towards surprising new political projects in the post-Independence period.

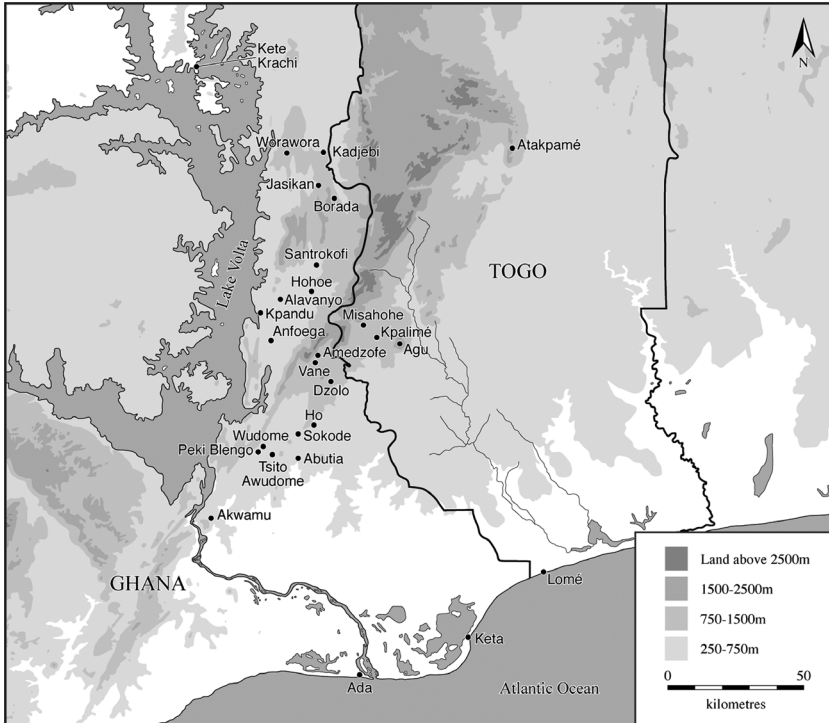
On the most optimistic reading, this is a book about possibilities – it recovers alternative imaginings of nationhood and the creative labour of political struggle.⁷ On the most pessimistic reading, it is the tale of a nation that never was, a historical sideshow to the main event. In writing about Ablɔɖe, I have sought to tell readers, whether of optimistic or pessimistic dispositions, one part of a larger story about the contingencies of decolonisation in Africa. The achievement of Independence and the subsequent consolidation of national territories become more remarkable when the full plethora of competing visions of nationhood is really understood; the dynamics of citizenship and the control of dissent in post-colonial nations are more comprehensible when the persistence of alternative political projects is revealed.

LOCATING ABLɔɖE

The Ablɔɖe movement grew up in the southern section of British Togoland, where Ewe is spoken by the majority, as a first, second, or occasionally a third language. Ablɔɖe had small clusters of supporters in the savannahs of northern British Togoland, but it was always stronger in the southern section, through the cocoa-growing areas of Buem (where Akan is widely spoken), in a series of mountain communities (some with their own distinct languages), and in the larger commercial and administrative centres of Kpandu, Hohoe, and Ho (where Ewe is spoken as a first language). The strength of Ablɔɖe in Ewe-speaking areas, however, does not mean that the movement should be interpreted as a form of Ewe nationalism, for the Ewe-speaking peoples experienced diverse historical trajectories and developed a range of political projects in the era of decolonisation.

The basic linguistic similarities between the Ewe-speaking peoples can be attributed to a common origin in Ketu (now in the republic of Benin) and a shared experience of seventeenth-century migration from Notsé

⁷ In this sense it is consistent with Frederick Cooper's concern to avoid determinism and examine paths not taken. See 'Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective', *Journal of African History* 49 (2) (2008), 167–96.



MAP 1: Physical Map of the Region

into the coastal and inland areas that now form the south-eastern quarter of Ghana and the southern quarter of Togo.⁸ The inland areas include a forested mountain range, running NNE-SSW, from the settlements of Peki, in modern-day Ghana, into central Togo. (See Map 1.) These mountains accommodated many waves of migrants, and thus became home to a complex mosaic of small Ewe-speaking settlements interspersed with other distinct language groups.⁹ Ewe-speaking settlements are also

⁸ For a discussion of evidence drawn from oral history, archaeology, and historical linguistics, see Nicoué Gayibor (dir.), *Le Peuplement du Togo: état actuel des connaissances historiques* (Lomé, 1997).

⁹ For an analysis of the linguistic diversity of the inland mountainous area, see Mary Kropp Dakubu and K. C. Ford, 'The Central Togo Languages', in *The Languages of Ghana*, ed. Mary Kropp Dakubu (London, 1988), 119–54. For historical context, see Paul Nugent, 'A Few Lesser Peoples': the Central Togo Minorities and their Ewe Neighbours', in *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention*, ed. Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent (London, 2000), 162–82; Paul Nugent, 'A Regional Melting Pot: The Ewe and their Neighbours in the Ghana-Togo Borderlands', in *The Ewe of Togo and Benin*, ed. Benjamin Lawrance

to be found on the flatter land to the sides of this mountain range, but as one moves south towards the coastal strip, the ecological characteristics are quite different. The southern and south-easterly areas of Ewe-speaking settlement lie in the Benin Gap – a savannah corridor which interrupts the belt of forest that otherwise stretches across West Africa. The Ewe-speaking migrants who settled on the coastal strip, ‘between the sea and the lagoon’, reoriented their livelihoods from farming towards lagoon fishing and then sea fishing.¹⁰ Further inland, farming, along with hunting and river fishing, remained the dominant livelihoods.

To the Europeans who came to trade on the coast, the Ewe-speaking towns and villages were the ‘upper Slave Coast’.¹¹ But whilst the settlements close to the coast coalesced into a state known as Anlo, Europeans remained unclear as to the nature of the Ewe-speaking interior, which they referred to as Krepe and regarded as a source of ivory and enslaved labour.¹² This perception of Krepe was also taken up by historians of the militarised expansionist states to the west, notably J. K. Fynn, who portrayed Krepe as a ‘less sophisticated’ region, which was plundered by its neighbours.¹³ After 1730, the kingdom of Akwamu gradually established its suzerainty over Krepe with the aim of extracting ivory and enslaved labour and controlling the trade routes up the river Volta

(Accra, 2005), 29–43; and Wilson Yayoh, ‘Krepi States in the 18th and 19th Centuries’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 6 (2002), 67–81. Adangme-speaking clusters in the present-day Ghana-Togo border area resulted from an exodus of Adangme-speakers from Accra in the aftermath of its invasion by Akwamu in 1680, as demonstrated by R. G. S. Sprigge, ‘Eweland’s Adangbe: An Inquiry into an Oral Tradition’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* X (1969) 87–128; and M. B. K. Darkoh, ‘Note on the Peopling of the Forest Hills of the Volta Region of Ghana’, *Ghana Notes and Queries* 11 (1970), 8–13.

¹⁰ On the distinctive ecology of the coastal strip, see Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Between the Sea and the Lagoon: An Eco-Social History of the Anlo of Southeastern Ghana, c.1850 to Recent Times* (Athens OH, 2001).

¹¹ Hence the title of Sandra Greene’s first book, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* (Portsmouth NH, 1996). There is a substantial literature on the Slave Coast, including Robin Law’s authoritative *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550–1750* (Oxford, 1991).

¹² In 1764, the Governor of Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast tried to persuade the London Committee of Merchants that they should establish a fort close to the mouth of the river Volta in order to secure a regular supply of ‘the very best slaves ... called Crippes’. Cited in J. K. Fynn, *Asante and its Neighbours 1700–1807* (London, 1971), 127. The term ‘Anlo’ was often rendered as ‘Awuna’ by early European visitors, but was transcribed as *Ahlo* in the ‘standard’ Ewe which emerged from missionary endeavours in the later nineteenth century. ‘Krepe’ was sometimes rendered as ‘Crippe’ or ‘Krepi’ by Europeans.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22–3.

to the market centres of the northern savannah zone.¹⁴ As the value of these trade routes became apparent, coastal Anlo and inland Akwamu were drawn into alliances with each other and with the militarised expansionist Asante empire, making Krepe a kind of frontier between Asante (to its west) and Dahomey (to its east).¹⁵ (See Map 2.)

The peoples of Krepe sought to shake off the suzerainty of Akwamu, and mounted a successful rebellion in 1833. However, as European traders on the central Fante-speaking Gold Coast gradually shifted away from the transportation of slaves into the Atlantic, and as conflicts between Asante and its southerly neighbours disrupted trade between the Asante interior and the Fante coastline, the river Volta and the Anlo coastline to its east became critical alternative routes for imports and exports, including firearms and slaves.¹⁶ Thus in 1869, Asante invaded Krepe and temporarily reimposed control before European powers began exerting a greater presence in the region.¹⁷

When the Germans and British drew the border between their respective colonies of Togo and the Gold Coast at the end of the nineteenth century, their maps separated the speakers of Ewe in Anlo, and as far inland as Peki, from the speakers of Ewe further north-east, due east and south-east.¹⁸ But this colonial border did not carve up a kingdom or an empire, because the linkages between the speakers of Ewe did not take the form of a large-scale centralised territorial kingship, and the inland Ewe-speakers lived in close proximity with numerous other small groups who were linguistically distinct and politically independent. The border

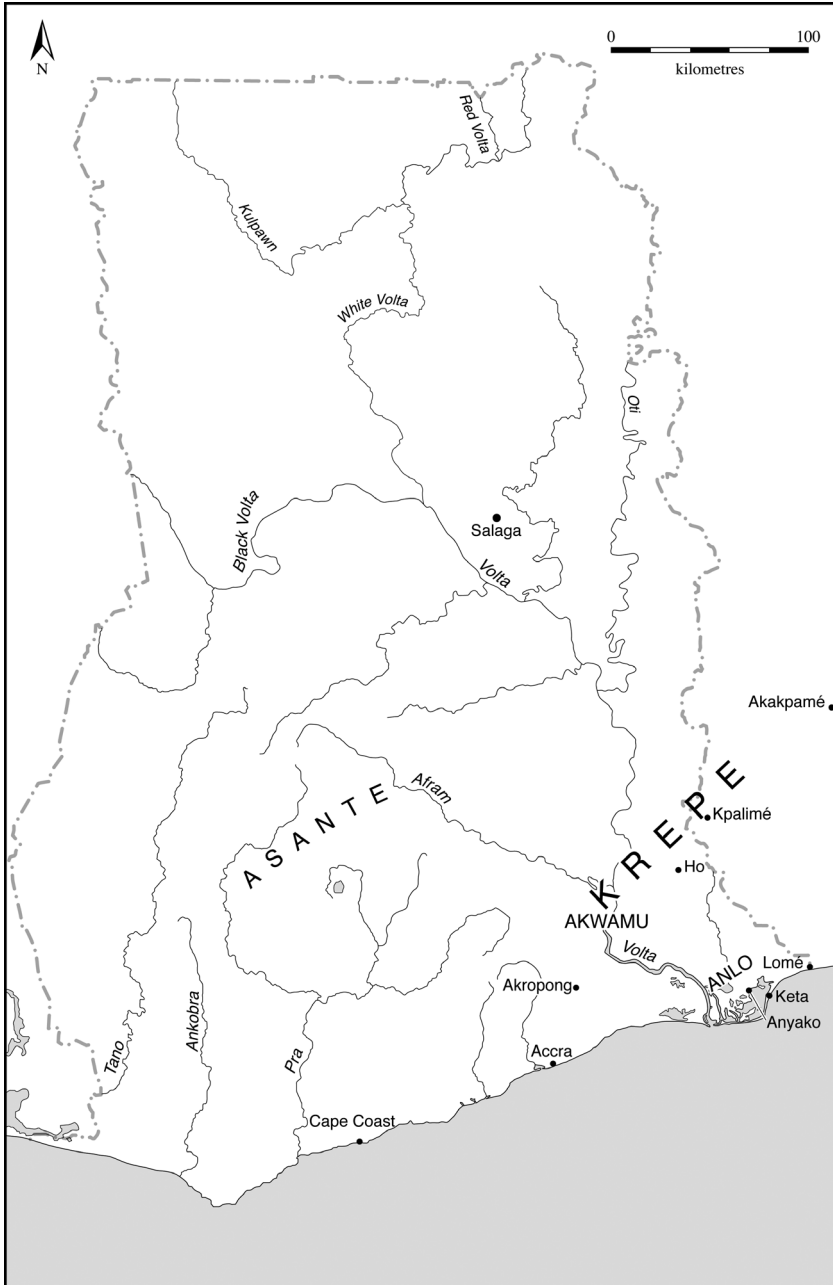
¹⁴ D. E. K. Amenumey, *The Ewe in Pre-Colonial Times: A Political History with Special Emphasis on the Anlo, Ge and Krepi* (Accra, 1986), 69. The river Volta connected the Atlantic coast to markets at Kete Krachi and Salaga.

¹⁵ On Anlo-Akwamu relations, see R. A. Kea, 'Akwamu – Anlo relations, c. 1750–1813', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 10 (1969), 29–63. On the Asante empire, see T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge, 1995); and Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge, 1975).

¹⁶ On Anlo's post-abolition slave exporting boom and its social effects, see Sandra Greene, 'Modern "Trokosi" and the 1807 Abolition in Ghana: Connecting Past and Present', *William and Mary Quarterly* LXVI (4) (2009), 959–74. On Asante and other commercial interests in the region see Marion Johnson, 'M. Bonnat on the Volta', *Ghana Notes and Queries* X (1968) 4–17; and 'Asante East of the Volta', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 8 (1965), 33–59.

¹⁷ Lynne Brydon, 'Constructing Avatime: Questions of History and Identity in a West African Polity, c. 1690s to the Twentieth Century', *Journal of African History* 49 (1) (2008), 23–42.

¹⁸ Peki was part of the 'Krepe interior', and led rebellions against Akwamu overlords in 1833. Peki was also involved in resistance to the Asante invasion of Krepi in 1869.



MAP 2: Pre-colonial States

between the British Gold Coast and German Togo cut across other types of ritual and material connections and exchanges, although, as Paul Nugent has argued, it was gradually transformed into a source of economic opportunity as well as constituting a barrier or an inconvenience.¹⁹ In August 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, the British advanced upon German Togo from their base in the Gold Coast colony to the west. Meanwhile the French advanced from their base in Dahomey to the east. When they converged, German Togo was divided into two spheres: British and French Togoland. (See Map 3.)

At the end of the war the border was redrawn, and as the two Togolands became mandated territories of the League of Nations, the British and the French were compelled to administer them under a measure of international supervision.²⁰ As Susan Pedersen has recently argued, ‘one of the most innovative aspects of the mandates system . . . was that it included the right of petition’, and thereby created channels through which inhabitants of mandated territories could engage in ‘claim-making, international lobbying and political mobilisation’.²¹ Petitioning was a ‘varied and complex practice’, and the issues varied between the mandates.²² One issue of lasting significance for the two Togolands was the extent to which mandated territories should be administered as separate entities, and the extent to which they could be incorporated into ‘administrative unions’ with the neighbouring British colony of the Gold Coast and French colony of Dahomey.

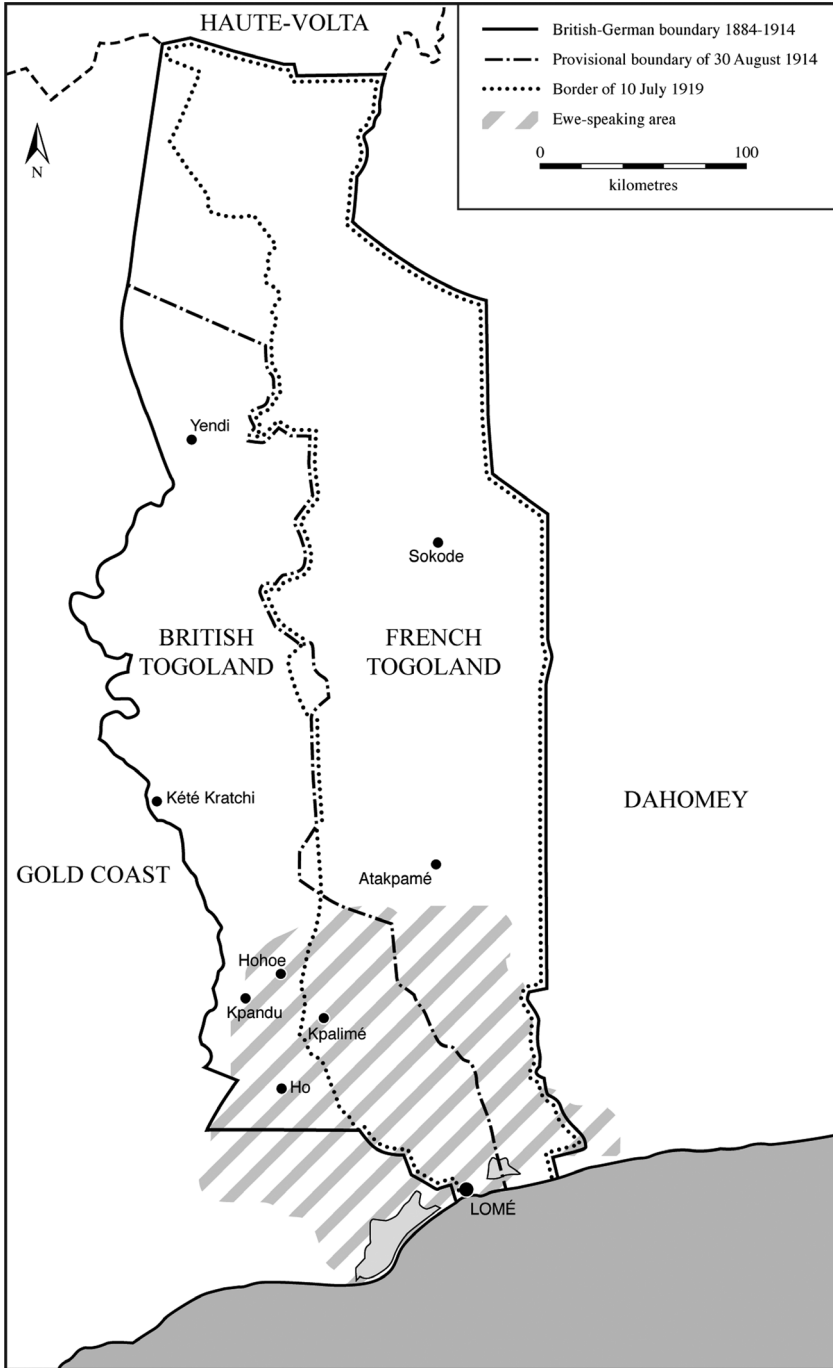
With the formation of the United Nations at the end of the Second World War, a new trusteeship system determined the framework within which the former mandated territories (now trust territories) could be administered. By article 76 of the United Nations Charter, the trusteeship

¹⁹ Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914* (Athens OH, 2002). On the nature of spiritual and ritual relations between the Ewe-speaking peoples, and their metamorphosis under the influence of missionary Christianity and colonial rule, see Sandra Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington IN, 2002).

²⁰ For a study of international supervision of mandated territories in Africa, see Michael Callahan, *Mandates and Empire: The League of Nations and Africa 1914–1931* (Brighton, 1999). Susan Pedersen’s book on the mandates system was in preparation when my own book went into production.

²¹ Susan Pedersen, ‘Samoa on the World Stage: Petitions and Peoples before the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40 (2) (2012), 231–61 at 231.

²² *Ibid.*, 239.



MAP 3: Changing Borders

system set out to ‘promote the political, economic, social, and educational advancement of the inhabitants of the trust territories, and their progressive development towards self-government or independence as may be appropriate to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples and the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned, and as may be provided by the terms of each trusteeship agreement’.²³ In some respects, the degree of supervision over the administering authorities intensified, as international missions now visited the trust territories to make their own observations, and petitioners from the trust territories increasingly took up the opportunity to appear directly before United Nations bodies in New York.²⁴ This reduced the reliance of the United Nations on information provided by administering authorities, and increased the opportunities for Africans within the two Togolands (and indeed in Tanganyika and the Cameroons) to frame their claims within the broader principles of the trusteeship system and to present those claims to an international audience.²⁵

The trusteeship agreements for individual territories, however, were drafted by the administering authorities, and whilst the General Assembly of the United Nations would only approve agreements that seemed consistent with article 76 of the charter, the administering authorities took the opportunity to set the terms of implementation. The agreement that was approved for British Togoland in 1946 was deliberately drafted so as to allow for an administrative union between the trust territory and the neighbouring British colony of the Gold Coast.²⁶ Initially, the British government justified administrative union on the grounds of necessity – the small size of the trust territory made an entirely separate structure of

²³ Charter of the United Nations, chapter XII, article 76, available at: www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter12.shtml [last accessed 2 July 2014].

²⁴ Petitioners targeted both the Trusteeship Council and the Fourth Committee of the General Assembly.

²⁵ The representations of Togoland, and Ewe-speakers from the Gold Coast, are given detailed treatment in D. E. K. Amenumey, *The Ewe Unification Movement: A Political History* (Accra, 1989). For the Cameroon trust territories, see Meredith Terretta, *Petitioning for our Rights, Fighting for our Nation: The History of the Democratic Union of Cameroonian Women 1946–1960* (Oxford, 2013). For Tanganyika, see Ullrich Lohrmann, *Voices from Tanganyika: Great Britain, the United Nations and the Decolonization of a Trust Territory, 1946–1961* (Münster, 2007).

²⁶ This is explained in further detail in Chapter 3, but the key documents and clauses are effectively summarised in ‘Report of the Trusteeship Council on administrative unions affecting Trust Territories and on the status of the Cameroons and Togoland under French administration arising out of their membership in the French Union’, (New York, 1952), 4–6 and 23–6.

administration impractical.²⁷ However, once the British were faced with a wave of anti-colonial protest in the neighbouring colony of the Gold Coast, where they responded by moving towards self-government, they were also able to justify the relationship between the trust territory and the colony on the grounds that it was politically progressive.

This is the context in which the particular goals of the Ablɔɔɛ movement were shaped. The position of the British government appeared consistent with the principles of the United Nations Charter in the sense that the trust territory could advance towards self-government through its relationship with the Gold Coast. Inhabitants of the trust territory, however, debated long and hard over whether this form of self-government could really deliver the kind of ‘freedom’ they wanted. Ablɔɔɛ activists marshalled impressive evidence that the relationship between British Togoland and the Gold Coast effectively subordinated the interests of the former to the latter, and compromised the political, economic, social, and educational advancement of the trust territory *as a distinct entity* in ways which contravened a series of United Nations resolutions.²⁸ Activists mobilised considerable support, particularly in the southern section of the trust territory, where Ewe was the majority (but by no means the only) language. They set out to highlight and protect the special status of British Togoland, and held out for a separate constitutional arrangement that would keep open the possibility of reunification with French Togoland and a joint Togoland Independence. Had they succeeded, they would, in effect, have created an independent African state with the same borders as that of the former German colony of Togo. On the face of it, then, Ablɔɔɛ, or ‘Togoland reunification’, was a peculiar political project.

COLONIALISMS AND NATIONALISMS: THE PECULIAR PROBLEM OF TOGOLAND REUNIFICATION

The demand for the reunification of the two Togolands sits uneasily at the edge of a substantial literature on decolonisation in Africa because it has resisted categorisation as an ethno-nationalist project without gaining full acceptance as a form of anti-colonial territorial nationalism. By no stretch of invention, imagination, or cultural work could the peoples living

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁸ These included General Assembly resolution 224 (III) of 18 Nov 1948 and Trusteeship Council resolution 81 (IV) of 27 Jan 1949.

within the borders of the two Togolands be conceived of as a single 'ethnic' group, and not even the strongest advocates of Togoland reunification made a sustained effort to argue this case. The northern sections contained but a tiny handful of Ewe-speaking migrants. The peoples of the northern savannahs of British Togoland have usually been categorised not as a single group of 'non Ewes', but rather as a series of mutually antagonistic groups, who divided according to their degree of adherence to, assimilation with, or resistance against, centralised territorial kingship.²⁹ The differences between the so-called decentralised peoples, the factions within and rivalries between the major centralised states, and the complex interactions of the former with the latter, all point to high levels of linguistic diversity and political contestation within the northern section.

Even in the southern section of British Togoland, those who spoke Ewe as a first language were interspersed with those who spoke it only as a second or third language, and in some cases, not at all. As Nugent's recent comparative study also suggests, there is little evidence that the people who spoke variants of the Ewe language actually thought of themselves as 'the Ewe' or identified themselves as such in juxtaposition to their neighbours during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁰ The emergence of 'the Ewe', then, is a phenomenon of the later nineteenth century, associated with missionary Christianity. Certainly, there were some vocal advocates of Ewe political and cultural unity during the twentieth century, but we have no reason to assume that ethnic nationalism had an automatic appeal or a primary claim on the political allegiances of all the various speakers of Ewe who lived in the two Togolands.³¹

The demand for Togoland reunification had as its final objective an independent and multi-ethnic state. In this sense, it is best described as a form of territorial nationalism. The latter term, however, has usually

²⁹ For a critical commentary on the distinction between centralised (Dagomba/Nanumba) and non-centralised (Konkomba) peoples in northern British Togoland, and a re-evaluation of their relations, see Benjamin Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Ghana: The Konkomba Struggle for Political Equality* (New York, 2010).

³⁰ Paul Nugent, 'Putting the History Back into Ethnicity: Enslavement, Religion, and Cultural Brokerage in the Construction of Mandinka/Jola and Ewe/Agotime Identities in West Africa, c.1650–1930', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (4) (2008), 920–48.

³¹ This is where Nugent parted company with D. E. K. Amenumey, who had suggested that Togoland reunification cut across a primordial Ewe identity and had thus undermined demands for Ewe political unity. Cf Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens and Amenumey, The Ewe Unification Movement*.

been set in juxtaposition to ethnic nationalism in circumstances where a political movement which aimed to take over the *whole* territory encompassed within a colonial border found itself operating in opposition to political movements *inside* those borders which preferred to mobilise specific groups on the basis of shared ethnicity.³² Togoland reunificationism was 'territorial' in the sense that it was not based on ethnic exclusivity, but even its advocates were sensitive to the accusation that they could not be considered fully 'anti-colonial' if they were aiming to separate off a portion of British-administered territory in order to re-establish the physical borders of a former German colony.³³

The apparent peculiarity of the Togoland reunificationist project has attracted a series of scholars who have seen in it the possibility of an intriguing case study for a larger theory or research question. James Coleman assessed the role of international supervision in Independence settlements in the trust territories of Togoland and Cameroon; Claude Welch traced the challenges of ethnic and territorial nationalism to visions of pan-African unity; D. E. K. Amenumey examined how the possibilities for ethnic nationalism among the Ewe were squeezed by territorial nationalism on the Gold Coast and in the two Togolands; and David Brown analysed the struggle of the Ghanaian political 'centre' to control its Togoland 'periphery'.³⁴ More recently, Paul Nugent demonstrated that even those colonial borders which appeared to ignore linguistic and physical boundaries could provide opportunities to those who lived in their vicinities. He thus concluded that it is through people's agency that the Ghana-Togo border has cohered in the post-colonial era. This agency

³² In Ghana, the classic example is the struggle between the National Liberation Movement and the Convention People's Party. The former was confined to Asante and sought some form of autonomy for Asante, whilst the latter claimed that it could mobilise people of every region and ethnic group within the borders of the Gold Coast/Ghana. See Jean Allman, *The Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana* (Madison WI, 1993).

³³ Frederick Cooper pinpoints the different possibilities of territorial, regional, and ethnic nationalisms during the period of decolonisation. See his 'Alternatives to Nationalism: the political imagination of elites in French West Africa, 1945–1960', in *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jost Dülffer and Marc Frey (Basingstoke, 2011), 110–37.

³⁴ James Coleman, 'Togoland', *International Conciliation* 509 (1956), 2–91; Claude Welch, *Dream of Unity: Pan-Africanism and Political Unification in West Africa* (Ithaca NY, 1966); Amenumey, *The Ewe Unification Movement*; David Brown, 'Politics in the Kpandu Area of Ghana, 1925 to 1969: A Study of the Influence of Central Government and National Politics upon a Local Factional Competition' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977).

consisted in the capacity of individuals and groups to connect national customs regimes, national political parties, and the opportunities of national citizenship to tangible localised interests in land, commerce, chieftaincy, and elected local government. For Nugent, it is these localised interests, and not primordialist ethnic identities, which explain why people in British Togoland gradually embraced, or at least reconciled themselves to, citizenship in an independent Ghana.³⁵

Nugent's explanation of the outcome of the struggles over the future of British Togoland focussed attention on the numerous disputes which emerged in the face of economic change (particularly cocoa cash cropping) and colonial interventions in local power structures. The evidence for such disputes is particularly substantial for the inter-war period, when British administrators desperately sought to create order amongst the 'veritable hotch potch of tribes' whom they encountered in Togoland, and indeed elsewhere.³⁶ In their efforts to build structures of indirect rule, administrators set about navigating between forms of authority which appeared to be 'traditional' (in the sense of corresponding to particular understandings and representations of a pre-colonial past), whilst also creating opportunities for colonial subjects to practise techniques of 'modern' government. In a wider interpretative frame, these efforts appear familiar: they were, at least in part, attempts to categorise and thus to render governable subjects whom colonial administrators could neither fully understand nor subject to the more expensive and coercive regimes of direct rule and intensive infrastructural development. But of course across the empire such attempts were underscored by more specific agendas and they encountered particular local challenges.

In the northern section of British Togoland, attempts to govern via indirect rule entailed the resolution of disputes within the large centralised kingdoms, as well as the establishment of new means of control over the historically decentralised peoples who did not have 'chiefs'.³⁷ British

³⁵ Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens*.

³⁶ This phrase is cited in Benjamin Lawrance, 'Bankoe v. Dome: Traditions and Petitions in the Ho-Asogli Amalgamation, British Mandated Togoland, 1919–39', *Journal of African History* 46 (2005), 243–67 at 261, fn 98. It is drawn from PRAAD, Accra, ADM 39/1/227 and 670, Notes of 17 March 1930.

³⁷ The British-German border, for example, had divided the eastern Dagomba capital of Yendi from western Dagomba and thus from the colonial administrative centre at Tamale. Much time was spent during the 1930s in trying to identify and render functional a constitution which would reunite the Dagomba. See Martin Staniland, *The Lions of Dagbon: Political Change in Northern Ghana* (Cambridge, 1975). For the treatment of decentralised groups such as the Konkomba, see Talton, *Politics of Social Change*.

attempts to introduce indirect rule in southern Togoland during the 1930s confronted a rather different obstacle: the various Ewe-speakers and the non-Ewe minorities were not, strictly speaking, acephalous and could not therefore simply be placed under a larger neighbouring kingdom or have their own chiefs invented for them. Chieftaincy had been practised in the southern section, but mostly on a very small territorial scale. Whilst British administrators may have believed that grouping numerous small independent units into larger ‘amalgamated states’ would ultimately lead to more effective local administration, it in fact provoked a proliferation of disputes over the relative seniority of previously independent chiefs, and it divided chiefs who were willing to amalgamate from subjects who were not, and vice versa.³⁸

Each of these disputes was usually connected to a range of other issues relating to the value, availability, and allocation of land; the administration of justice in tribunals with all its problematic reference to ‘native custom’; and the powers of chiefs to raise revenues in the form of fees and fines. Administrators deployed, in rough chronological order, strategies of persuasion, coercion, negotiation, and ultimately compromise, all of which generated an enormous volume of records. These are susceptible to analysis in the mode deployed by Ann Stoler for the Dutch East Indies – records fashioned ‘grids of intelligibility’ from ‘uncertain knowledge’ and were thus ‘artifices of a colonial state declared to be in efficient operation’.³⁹ If the colonial state in British Africa was a ‘thin white line’ rather than a ‘frame of steel’, it is possible that in this context too, record keeping was a kind of psychological crutch, literally papering over small cracks and gaping holes in colonial understandings of their subjects, allowing administrators to create a feeling of order where there was none (or at least no order that they were able to discern and willing to endorse), and thereby permitting moments of confidence in the effectiveness and legitimacy of their own power.⁴⁰

My interests here, however, lie less with the epistemic anxieties of colonial rule, and more with the implications of colonial record keeping for the study of African political history. In his efforts to track down and

³⁸ For a recent and detailed study of these disputes, see Wilson Yayoh, ‘Local Government in Ewedome, British Trust Territory of Togoland (Ghana), 1920s–1970s’ (PhD thesis, SOAS, London, 2010).

³⁹ Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton NJ, 2009), 1–2.

⁴⁰ Anthony Kirk-Greene, ‘The Thin White Line: The Size of the British Colonial Service in Africa’, *African Affairs* 79 (314) (1980), 25–44.

interpret the fragmentary evidence of an explosive and wide-ranging Christian revival movement, Derek Peterson concluded that 'East Africa's historians have been seduced by the logic of the archivist, the administrator, the census taker. The administrative grid structures the way we write history', and thereby renders some pasts more easily recoverable than others.⁴¹ This is also a wider problem in African Studies. Historians can and do disagree over how consistent, considered, or coercive colonial administrators might have been; how far their projects were shaped by African intermediaries; and whether, through indirect rule, they established a powerful legacy of 'decentralised despotisms' (and thereby stunted the prospects for democracy in independent Africa), or simply built mutable political frameworks within which Africans were able to assert a range of social, economic, and cultural interests.⁴² Wherever one comes down in these debates, the fact remains that in much of British colonial Africa, and in British Togoland in particular, an important consequence of indirect rule was an overwhelming administrative focus on disputes around the individual chiefs and the chieftaincy structures with which the colonial state sought to work. The resolution of such disputes was the day-by-day task of the district commissioner, and hence these disputes dominate his files, up until – and in some cases beyond – the shift towards elected local government during the 1950s. Africans appear in the record insofar as they respond to, or obstruct, the structures (or the last-resort and ad hoc compromises) that administrators tried to build.

Many useful histories have been written 'from below', by reading between the lines and against the grain of the detailed and voluminous records of district commissioners. In the case of Ghana, there are also impressive attempts to exploit alternative series of public records (particularly those of courts, boundary commissions, land registries, and customs services) in order to understand what was at stake in the numerous disputes with which district commissioners were endlessly concerned, and to identify how such disputes were connected to broader socio-economic changes. These records, particularly when set alongside those of missionary societies and African churches, have shed light on a range of

⁴¹ Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, 2012), 26.

⁴² Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Osborn and Richard Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison WI, 2006); Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton NJ, 1996); and a review of the latter by John Lonsdale, *Journal of African History* 38 (3) (1997), 520–2.

struggles in rural areas, between genders and generations, indigènes and migrants, chiefs and commoners, local intelligentsias and their illiterate compatriots.⁴³ They also point to the key role of local political activists as points of articulation between such local struggles and the wider agendas of mass nationalist movements.

PARTY, PERSON, AND PLACE IN AFRICAN POLITICAL HISTORY

The seminal studies of mass nationalism in sub-Saharan Africa highlighted the role of intermediary figures who were capable of bridging a perceived gap between the particular localised concerns of the rural majority and the wider vision of independent nationhood which was articulated in the towns. The connection between rural-urban migration and the emergence of new political ideas and forms of mobilisation was spelled out by Thomas Hodgkin, who compared the African mass nationalist movements of the 1940s and 1950s, and particularly the rise of the Convention People's Party in the Gold Coast, to the Chartist movement in nineteenth-century Britain.⁴⁴ In his pioneering study of African political parties, which was based on his tours of the continent and his many encounters with anti-colonial nationalists, Hodgkin insisted on the town as the site of innovation. He directed students of African politics towards

the new “proto-industrial” towns – products of the economic revolution which Europe has brought to Africa. For it is above all in these new urban societies that the characteristic institutions and ideas of African nationalism are born and grow to maturity; and from these centres that they spread to, and influence “the bush.”⁴⁵

The task of the anti-colonial nationalist movements, then, was to harness rural voters to agendas and ideas that were conceived in the urban environment. The centrality of towns was explained in terms of a series of connections between formal schooling, rural-urban migration, and new forms of political engagement. Hodgkin thus suggested that mass nationalism depended not only on urban activists harnessing rural voters,

⁴³ For example, Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power and the Past in Asante, 1896–1996* (Oxford, 2000); Jean Allman and Victoria Tashjian, *'I Will Not Eat Stone': A Women's History of Colonial Asante* (Portsmouth NH, 2000); Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester NY, 2005); Carola Lentz, *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana* (Edinburgh, 2006).

⁴⁴ Thomas Hodgkin, *Freedom for the Gold Coast?* (London, 1951).

⁴⁵ Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (London, 1956), 18.

but, in a series of prior steps, the extension of urban political activity from a tiny and highly educated elite at the start of the twentieth century, to the youth leagues and congresses of the 1930s, and finally to a considerably larger and rowdier contingent of disgruntled primary-school leavers at the end of the Second World War.

Studies of Ghana have been at the forefront of the scholarly literature on Africa's modern political history due to the country's early achievement of Independence in 1957, the dramatic rise and fall of its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, and its long experience of military and single-party rule up to 1992. Dennis Austin's pioneering *Politics in Ghana* (1964) followed Hodgkin's basic explanatory framework and applied it in a country-specific context.⁴⁶ In particular, Austin suggested that whilst African politics in the first half of the twentieth century could be read as a struggle between the chiefs and the intelligentsia for influence over colonial policy, the emergence of a critical mass of primary-school leavers in the urban centres was decisive in enabling the organisation of widespread anti-colonial sentiment after the Second World War.⁴⁷ In addition to the chiefs and intelligentsia, then, Austin added a third category of political actor, whom he considered most critical. This was the 'young man' who, by virtue of his status as a 'commoner', had been marginalised from the structures of indirect rule through which the British governed the Gold Coast and their other African colonies. Lacking a voice in a native authority system that was dominated by chiefs and their councils of elders, these commoners took their primary-school certificates to the towns. Here, however, they confronted intense competition for white collar jobs in European trading companies and in the civil service, and were often excluded from such employment by their lack of secondary-school certificates. This, according to Austin, was the socio-economic backbone of support for Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP).

Despite his personal contact with many CPP activists, Austin did not set out to write a book about the CPP *per se*. He was equally concerned to trace connections between the dramatic events unfolding in Ghana's political centre (the capital city of Accra) and the kinds of issues that agitated the rural majority. It was these connections, he suggested, which explained how the CPP, unlike its predecessors, had become a 'mass'

⁴⁶ Dennis Austin, *Politics in Ghana 1946–1960* (London, 1964).

⁴⁷ Austin's work extended that of David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism 1850–1928* (Oxford, 1963).

rather than an 'elite' party, and thereby rewrote the rules by which its opponents had to play. One of the ways in which Austin explored these connections was by weaving through his Ghana-wide narrative a richly detailed case study of a single town, Bekwai, in the cocoa-producing region of Asante. The local case study quickly caught on, and became a standard method for researching twentieth-century African politics 'from below'. By imposing a tighter geographical frame, researchers hoped to 'drill down' to specific issues that agitated people in rural localities, and to identify the type of individual who was capable of channelling aggrieved rural voters towards a larger political party.⁴⁸

The implication of such local case studies in British Togoland is that the commitment of most rural Africans to political parties was tenuous: encouraged by local activists, they looked beyond their hometown primarily to secure resources that would increase the likelihood of a favourable outcome in local problems or disputes. When local activists backed the right party, and could secure such outcomes in return for rural votes, they were deemed successful; when activists backed the wrong party, and failed to secure favourable outcomes in return for rural votes, the progress of their hometown was retarded, and they were castigated as failures. In both of the key local case studies of politics in British Togoland, the nature of the political party and its ideological position were deemed less important to rural voters than its capacity to deliver solutions to specific local problems and to resolve the many local disputes which had arisen from the misguided implementation of indirect rule.

If the rise of mass nationalist parties provided one framework for the study of local activists, the *Invention of Tradition* marked a starting point for alternative approaches.⁴⁹ The difficulties and disappointments of the first generation of African nationalist leaders prompted scholars to go beyond the accusations of 'tribalism' that had been levied at political opponents, and to explore how alternative imaginings of the past were mobilised in the struggles of the present and shaped ongoing debates

⁴⁸ Doctoral research in particular has often assumed the form of a local case study which can be related to wider trends or to analytical frameworks. This is the approach adopted in Brown, 'Politics in the Kpandu Area of Ghana' and in Paul Nugent, 'National Integration and the Vicissitudes of State Power in Ghana: The Political Incorporation of Likpe, a Border Community, 1945–1986' (PhD thesis, SOAS, London, 1991).

⁴⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

about identity and citizenship.⁵⁰ The analytical lens thus widened beyond the explicitly political work of harnessing rural voters to parties, and encompassed a wider range of processes by which ethnic identities were constructed within the framework of the colonial state and reworked according to the opportunities presented by its demise. In these analyses, formal schooling was important not simply because it gave rise to rural-urban migration and thus to new forms of political mobilisation, but because it enabled individuals to view themselves and their societies from diverse perspectives, to explore the means by which particular elements of the past could be used to confer legitimacy on competing versions of the present and future, and to deploy the tool of literacy in ‘meaning making’ activities.⁵¹ The scope of studies of intermediary figures thus widened beyond the specific tasks associated with party-political mobilisation to include the processes of research, reflection, and persuasion in which diverse individuals invested much effort.⁵²

For Derek Peterson, ‘the architects of eastern Africa’s ethnic patriotisms’ were hardly politicians at all: ‘they were not involved in the anti-colonial struggle for political self-government. Neither were they engaged in the effort to build nations. They were driven by the urgent need to find institutions that would protect civic virtues and define honourable conduct.’⁵³ In this analysis, urbanisation was not, as Hodgkin claimed, the *sine qua non* of mass anti-colonial nationalism. Rather, it produced cohorts of marginal men who sought social capital by disciplining women and resisting the shame that prostitution brought upon their group. In this context, histories were constructed in order to define what was normative and honourable for that group: ‘in their textual work, patriots were creating a patrimony.’⁵⁴ For Peterson, then, ethnic nationalism was, fundamentally, a product of patriarchal struggle, not party politics.

The *dramatis personae* in this book sit uneasily between such scholarly frameworks. Firstly, Ablode leaders and activists spent much of their time

⁵⁰ Of particular importance were the two-volume study by Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992) and Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, 1989).

⁵¹ For a classic study, see Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison WI, 1990). For a more recent intervention, see Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, eds., *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens OH, 2009).

⁵² For a recent example, see Carola Lentz, ‘SWDK Gandah (1927–2001): Intellectual and Historian from Northern Ghana’, *Africa* 82 (3) (2012), 343–55.

⁵³ Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 16. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

in rural settings, and this is where most of their political ideas and initiatives developed. Their interest in ending colonial rule and in competing visions of Independence was not necessarily dependent on, or sparked by, an urban experience which enabled or compelled them to set localised issues in a wider political framework. In contrast to the model set up by Hodgkin, the lives of pioneering political figures in southern British Togoland did not revolve around rural-urban labour migration. Nor, however, do these figures match up neatly with the ‘ethnic patriots’ described by Peterson for eastern Africa, or indeed with ‘the first Yoruba’ whom John Peel describes as ‘Christian evangelists [who] were, unavoidably, ethnic missionaries too’.⁵⁵ Many Ablɔɔɛ leaders, activists, and supporters were trained in missionary or church schools. They took with them the tool of mother-tongue literacy and the capacity to select from historical experience in order to formulate narratives which directed their readers and interlocutors towards collective action in political and social projects. But what is interesting about the Togoland case is that those individuals who were the most intensively exposed to German Protestant ideals of the Ewe as a *volk* – and who might therefore appear particularly well-equipped for what Peel calls ‘the cultural work’ of ‘ethnogenesis’ – did *not* always put the tool of mother-tongue literacy to work in the construction of an ethnic Ewe identity.⁵⁶ They were not particularly interested in policing the boundaries of ‘Ewe-ness’, nor did they affiliate themselves *en masse* to demands for an Ewe homeland. In their hands, mother-tongue literacy was also deployed to construct transnational networks, to advocate for a multi-ethnic nation-state, and to debate varieties of citizenship that seemed plausible in the ‘the possibilities of the post-war moment’.⁵⁷

BEYOND IDENTITY: BIOGRAPHY, TIN TRUNKS, AND CREATIVE WORK

In 1999 and 2000, I began to seek out individuals who had been active in the Ablɔɔɛ movement from the later 1940s. I wanted to know who had joined and why, what their ‘activism’ had actually entailed, how they

⁵⁵ John Peel, ‘The Cultural Work of Yoruba Ethnogenesis’, in *History and Ethnicity*, ed. Elizabeth Tonkin, Maryon McDonald, and Malcolm Chapman (London, 1989), 198–215 at 201.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Peel’s argument about missionary Christianity and ethnogenesis is developed in greater detail in *Religious Encounter and the Making of Yoruba* (Bloomington IN, 2000).

⁵⁷ Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge, 2002), 38.

sought to persuade others, why they were unable to achieve their objectives, and how they experienced and adapted to political failure through the second half of the twentieth century. In short, I wanted to write the history of a political movement ‘from within’. This was not unprecedented, but whilst the anti-colonial nationalist struggle has been documented and analysed in almost every African country, there are relatively few book-length studies which attempt to ‘get inside’ African political movements, particularly those that found themselves on the losing side, for whom freedom was to produce bitter fruit. The most-studied movements tend to be those which fought liberation struggles against settler regimes in southern Africa and those which remained at the forefront of national politics for prolonged periods (such as the Tanzania African National Union).⁵⁸ For Kenya, Daniel Branch has demonstrated how much can be gained by studying the people who were ‘loyal’ in the face of the Mau Mau insurgency.⁵⁹ More recently, for Niger and Cameroon respectively, Klaas van Walraven and Meredith Terretta have sought to place the rise and fall of left-wing anti-colonial movements into a broader African context, highlighting the work undertaken by the French in order to ensure the success of more acceptable African politicians.⁶⁰ For Ghana, on the other hand, there has been no major study of any political movement since Jean Allman’s *Quills of the Porcupine*.⁶¹ It is also striking that two of the studies most explicitly concerned with grassroots activism in other parts of late colonial Africa make a determined effort to recover the experiences of women, and bring social and gender history approaches to bear on the study of politics.⁶²

Given that many of the individuals whom I interviewed had spent periods in preventive detention or political exile, experienced punitive transfers or dismissals from formal employment, or witnessed ‘destoolments’

⁵⁸ Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Portsmouth NH, 1997); Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor, ‘War Stories: Guerrilla Narratives of Zimbabwe’s Liberation War’, *History Workshop* 57 (1) (2004); Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile 1960–1990* (London, 2012).

⁵⁹ Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge, 2009).

⁶⁰ Klaas van Walraven, *The Yearning for Relief: A History of the Sawaba Movement in Niger* (Leiden, 2013); Meredith Terretta, *Nation of Outlaws, State of Violence: Nationalism, Grassfields Tradition, and State-Building in Cameroon* (Athens OH, 2013).

⁶¹ Allman, *Quills of the Porcupine*.

⁶² Elizabeth Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939–1958* (Portsmouth NH, 2005); Geiger, *TANU Women*.

of chiefs on the losing side of a political divide, it is unsurprising that some of them had developed a deep suspicion of ‘politics’ and recalled their periods of activism with bitter regret.⁶³ Some of the people from whom I had the most to learn had little reason to revisit difficult periods of their lives, or to provide detailed accounts of their political activities to a ‘stranger with big eyes’.⁶⁴ Whilst it was always clear that I had come to them because of my interest in a particular political movement, my visits, correspondence, and conversations increasingly revolved around biography. Rather than devising closed questions that aimed to establish whether factor A or factor B was more important in determining an individual’s party affiliation, I talked to people about the course of their lives – where they were born, what their parents did, whether and where they had been to school, how they earned a living, whom they had married, where they had travelled, and when and why. In generating these biographical accounts, individual activists plotted their movements through the border area, into other parts of what are now the republics of Ghana and Togo, and, in some cases, across continents. They pinpointed the times and places in which they formed relationships with other activists, and recalled some of the social and economic interactions around which a particular political project would ultimately coalesce. When individuals had already passed away, I was often able to talk with their relatives or colleagues, and the biographies contained within their funeral pamphlets helped me to reconstruct some of the major events and relationships in their lives.⁶⁵

This biographical approach exposed the limitations of analyses which treat political activists either as ethnic nationalists or as points of articulation between highly localised rural grievances and the mass anti-colonial parties that grew up in the towns. My point is not that political activists never served these functions, for earlier studies demonstrate that they sometimes did. But a biographical starting point for research

⁶³ In southern Ghana, among the Ewe-, Ga-, and Akan-speaking peoples, chiefs sit on stools, and thus the process of a removing an individual from his chiefly office is described as ‘destoolment’. In northern Ghana, chiefs sit on skins, and are therefore ‘deskinning’ rather than ‘destooled’.

⁶⁴ This is an approximation of *Amedzro ŋku gã me nya xɔdome o* (usually translated as ‘a stranger with big eyes can never see all the corners of the town’).

⁶⁵ For an intriguing study of the origins and popularisation of obituaries in Ghana, and an example of ways in which such texts promoted particular political projects, see T. C. McCaskie, ‘Writing, Reading and Printing Death: Obituaries and Commemoration in Asante’, in *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington IN, 2006), 341–84.

on political activism points to the need to widen the lens beyond local-national and ethnic-national dichotomies, and to heed the possibilities implied in Frederick Cooper's argument: 'Politics takes doing; it implies persuading people to think of linkages they may not have perceived before.'⁶⁶ The Ablɔ̀de movement was something *more than* an agglomeration of parochial disputes. In order for activists to build a movement at all, they needed to develop and disseminate ideas that were capable of bringing different and potentially antagonistic individuals and groups together. If some of this work was directed at connecting a vision of territorial nationalism to tangible localised interests, other elements sought to widen, not narrow, the horizon. Ablɔ̀de therefore led individuals across colonial borders and, in some cases, took them as far as New York, Berlin, Warsaw, and London, where they forged surprising new relationships in their articulation of a distinctive vision of freedom.

Interviews, then, were important in revealing the physical and intellectual range of political activists, and highlighting the need for further research that would connect 'the political cultures of particular locales to territorial and transregional political currents', and thereby consider the local, territorial, and global 'in the same analytical plane'.⁶⁷ Rather than plugging the gaps in, or layering new perspectives upon, narratives constructed largely on the back of the district commissioners' files in the national archives, interviews with elderly activists (or their surviving relatives) directed me to an alternative form of archive which contained the evidentiary fragments of their persuasive work. Although a few of the people I interviewed held very explicit opinions on contemporary politics, and therefore tended to recount their earlier activities as a prelude to or an explanation for their present positions, many others were unaccustomed to speaking to strangers about their political pasts and, unlike Peterson's East African revivalists, they had no practised genre of testimony to fall back upon. In the course of tentative or exploratory conversations, however, elderly activists (or their surviving relatives) recovered other texts. From a series of 'tin trunks' I was shown maps, newspaper cuttings, United Nations documentation, local histories, obituaries, poems, fiction, and, most importantly, political pamphlets.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Cooper, *Africa since 1940*, 48. ⁶⁷ Terretta, *Nation of Outlaws*, 20–1.

⁶⁸ Karin Barber, 'Introduction: Africa's Hidden Innovators' in *Africa's Hidden Histories*, ed. Barber, 1–24, explains that the rapid spread of primary schooling in the first half of the twentieth century gave rise to new forms of self-representation and subjectivity, and argues that the texts stored by individuals in their tin trunks can shed new light on social and cultural history.

Recent explorations of writing in colonial contexts have emphasised how critical it was to the exercise of state power. For Sean Hawkins, ‘more than steamboats, quinine, breechloading rifles, machine guns or any other material instruments commonly associated with conquest, writing made colonialism possible.’⁶⁹ It was a technology of control which categorised people, extracting them from a world of their own experience, locating them in ‘the world on paper’, and thereby enabling their appropriation as the subjects of bureaucratic regimes. Whilst Ann Stoler sees the colonial archive as both ‘a corpus of writing’ (created out of the particular conventions of record keeping) and as ‘a force field that animates political energies and expertise’, ultimately she too is concerned with how the archive ‘inscribes the authority of the colonial state and the analytic energies mobilised to make its assertions’.⁷⁰

Cooper’s premise that ‘politics takes doing’ invites alternative perspectives which allow for the critical role of writing in the work of persuasion. This is particularly valid for regions where the rapid spread of primary schooling had given rise to substantial new African readerships by the middle of the twentieth century, creating further opportunities for activists to make use of writing in a range of political and social projects. The political pamphlets that I was handed are not simply pieces of evidence which recorded at first hand what their authors thought at a given point in time about particular issues of the day. They *can* be set in juxtaposition to texts produced by colonial administrators, in order to identify specific areas of contention, but this is hardly the limit of their use as evidence. These texts were also the outcomes of a traceable sequence of local and transnational relationships and encounters – between school pupil and teacher, author and printer, buyer and seller, political ally and opponent; they were material objects which circulated through space and time, and amongst networks of people who engaged in impromptu translation and debate; they became personal valuables, deemed worthy of preservation and inclusion within the larger documentary record of an individual author’s or reader’s life. Inside tin trunks, then, are individual cross sections of the kind of shifting literary landscape identified by Pier Larson in his work on Madagascar.⁷¹ The same trunk

⁶⁹ Sean Hawkins, *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana: The Encounter Between the LoDagaa and ‘The World on Paper’, 1892–1991* (Toronto, 2002), 3.

⁷⁰ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 22.

⁷¹ Pier Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2009).

might contain texts written in different languages and genres for different purposes, and such texts could also be read in different modes – publicly, for the purposes of dissemination, translation, or debate; or privately, for the purposes of increasing knowledge, stimulating reflection, or improving the individual self.

In viewing texts from tin trunks as evidence of persuasive work, and as elements in a varied literary landscape, it becomes apparent that Ablɔ̀de activists did not simply address themselves to ‘the’ Ewe-speaking readership that was formed through missionary Christianity and formal schooling. The history of pre-colonial warfare in the region, the experience of a three-way (German, British, and French) colonisation, the peculiarities of local administration under international trusteeship, and the existence of numerous linguistic minorities through the areas in which Ewe was the majority or vehicular language, meant that political activists could not rely on potential voters to ‘self identify’ in obvious, neat, or mutually exclusive categories. Whilst the production of texts in Ewe, and the informal translation of English or French texts into Ewe, was a key feature of the persuasive work of political activists, it was also part of what Larson describes as a ‘bundle of associated [literary] practices with varied social and political implications, involving fractured and often contending publics’.⁷² This perspective allows us to understand how, in spite of their exposure to German missionary understandings of the Ewe as a *volk*, and even when they were writing in standard Ewe, Ablɔ̀de authors could also display scepticism of ‘Ewe-ness’ as a basis of nationhood and work to summon a more diverse and multi-lingual constituency of ‘Togoland’ into being.⁷³ History was pressed into service, and as Ablɔ̀de authors articulated the protective and developmental benefits of a sovereign Togoland state, they also alluded to earlier experiences of invasion and raiding by neighbouring groups.

Ablɔ̀de authors were aware that they were operating in a crowded field populated by writers of other English, French, and Ewe-language texts, who invoked different aspects of history, and thereby sought to persuade the same readers to adhere to alternative political projects, including some which prioritised unity amongst all the Ewe-speaking peoples of

⁷² Pier Larson, ‘Literacy and Power in Madagascar’, 2 (emphasis original), paper presented at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, 12 Aug 2013, available at: <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/seminar/Larson2013.pdf> [last accessed 13 Aug 2014].

⁷³ This point about the ways in which texts can summon new constituencies is well made in Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, ‘Homespun Historiography and the Academic Profession’, in *Recasting the Past*, ed. Peterson and Macola, 1–30.

the Gold Coast and the two Togoland trust territories.⁷⁴ Given this work of persuasion in a crowded field, authors of propaganda would often take on and criticise quotable excerpts from the work of a competitor, and refer readers back to ‘arbiter’ texts, such as the United Nations Charter or even the Bible, in a bid to set the parameters of debate.⁷⁵ English, French, and Ewe-language writings, in conjunction with the numerous political chants and songs which former activists allowed me to record, were the print and oral forms through which rural Africans built new constituencies, debated the role of the state, and mobilised support behind particular political projects.⁷⁶

The dissemination, reception, and impact of competing political propaganda were shaped not only by the force of argumentative content, or by the choice of language, but also by relationships of trust and respect between leaders and their supporters. This may explain why texts were retained by activists in processes of self-archiving, and why some of the activists who spent most of the time with me expressed the hope that I would use what they told me to produce a kind of potted biography that they might later instruct their relatives to incorporate in their funeral pamphlets.⁷⁷ When propaganda texts (oral and written) are read in the light of biographical information about individual authors and activists, they offer intriguing opportunities to explore the practices of ‘spokesmanship’ in specific historical circumstances. The gendered implication of this term is not accidental, for as we shall see, women were ‘foot soldiers’ more frequently than they were ‘spokespersons’.

Ablode leaders in southern British Togoland regarded themselves very explicitly as an indigenous intelligentsia, quite distinct from the graduate lawyers, doctors, newspaper owners, and wealthy merchants of the

⁷⁴ The most important texts which advocated a pan-Ewe approach were: *The Ewe Newsletter*, which envisaged an Ewe homeland, first under British rule and then as an independent state; and *Ewe Kɔnuwo* (Ewe Customs) by S. J. Obianim, which advocated Ewe unity within the framework of an emergent Ghana. The latter was adopted as a reader in church schools in British Togoland during the 1950s.

⁷⁵ My reading of political propaganda as a specific genre within a ‘textual economy’ has been influenced by Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2007). Any errors, however, are my own responsibility.

⁷⁶ For some examples of these sources, and my preliminary analysis of their significance, see Kate Skinner, ‘Reading, Writing and Rallies: The Politics of “Freedom” in Southern British Togoland 1953–1956’, *Journal of African History* 48 (1) (2007), 123–47. A more detailed examination is provided in Chapter 5 of this book.

⁷⁷ I wrote an outline of such a text for M. K. Asase, of Ho-Dome, whom we shall encounter in Chapters 5 and 6.

coastal urban centres of the Gold Coast. This coastal/inland distinction is not entirely peculiar to British Togoland and the Gold Coast. For Nigeria, Philip Zachernuk has argued that while the terms ‘elite’ and ‘intelligentsia’ are often conflated in depictions of the early African nationalists and pan-Africanists of the nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth century, ‘the intelligentsia’ was much larger, more geographically dispersed and internally differentiated, and even rather amorphous. Two further observations from his Nigerian case study seem applicable to British Togoland: the rapid expansion of schooling during the first half of the twentieth century created a ‘thin but well-distributed’ layer of literates through the southern hinterland, ‘reaching beyond the larger cities and by no means disconnected from village life’; ‘leading provincial figures were . . . more likely to be clerks, clergymen and teachers than doctors and lawyers, but this did not prevent them from entering national forums in their own right’.⁷⁸ Able leaders knew that they lacked the higher academic qualifications and more substantial financial resources of their urban coastal counterparts, but they nonetheless regarded themselves as more authentic and legitimate spokesmen for the people of the trust territory. What, then, was the basis of this claim?

The ability to work across local and colonial languages, and in written and oral forms, became a prerequisite to political spokespersonship – not least for the obvious reason that all the major national and international forums in which British Togolandians sought to present their case were dominated by English and (to a lesser degree) French. But if facility in English and a high level of literacy became a necessary condition of spokespersonship, it was by no means sufficient. Authors of texts always insisted that literacy and multi-lingualism were not purely technical skills: they also conferred responsibilities and, more specifically, the duty to challenge the esoteric bases of power and thereby enlighten a wider readership as to the means of its deception and oppression.⁷⁹ Whilst texts could and did travel between anonymous and potentially interchangeable readers, the authorial voice frequently asserted its own honesty, consistency, and prior record, drawing unfavourable comparisons with more

⁷⁸ Philip Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas* (Charlottesville VA, 2000), 128 and 130–1.

⁷⁹ Peterson also argues that eastern Africa’s ethnic patriots went about their writing with ‘a sense of duty’ and ‘an obligation to create useable knowledge’. In his case, however, he indicates that these efforts were aimed at creating patrimony. *Ethnic Patriotism*, 22 and 23.

wilful and unpredictable opponents who were bringing comparable skills of literacy and translation to bear upon competing political projects.

Political pamphlets often circulated and were purchased at rallies, where this emphasis on personal trust and reliability was further reinforced in leaders' appearances before their supporters and their exposure to public scrutiny. In this sense, texts do not only record the ideas that spokesmen sought to disseminate. They also tell us about the self-understandings of Ablɔɔɛ leaders, the intermediary work of grassroots activists, and the basis on which they sought to forge new relationships with potential supporters who could be either familiar or unknown. The production of English, French, and local-language texts, and their impromptu translation and discussion in social spaces, was a key element in the creative labour undertaken by political activists, who carried out their work of persuasion along and across the oral and literate spheres, and were, above all else, skilled multi-lingual communicators.⁸⁰

'THE FRUITS OF FREEDOM'

Despite these significant investments of creative labour, the Ablɔɔɛ movement failed to achieve its objectives. The mounting sense of internal division and external interference was depicted by a local author-activist, G. K. Tsekpo, in his political pamphlet, *Togo Nukae Hiawo?* (Togo, what do you need?) (See illustration on this book's front cover.) Tsekpo envisaged freedom as a tree that bore fruit. Rather than helping each other to climb that tree and harvest the fruit, however, people within the trust territory were struggling against one another, according to the designs of the colonial powers (represented as onlookers in suits). The rapid pace of political change on the Gold Coast forced a 'solution' to the Togoland problem. In British Togoland, a plebiscite was organised by the administering authority under United Nations supervision in May 1956. As we shall see, the problematic process of voter registration, and disagreements over the interpretation of the results, have remained sources of grievance for Ablɔɔɛ activists and their descendants into the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the United Nations accepted the

⁸⁰ My interest in 'creative labour' and the work of political persuasion is influenced by Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth NH, 2004). The circumstances of the Kikuyu and the Togoland, however, were rather different, and this is reflected in the different orientations of the primary texts considered in our respective studies.

plebiscite as a basis for termination of the trusteeship agreement over British Togoland, and the trust territory thereby achieved Independence as part of Ghana in March 1957. The southern section of British Togoland is still part of the Volta Region of Ghana, whilst the northern section became part of Ghana's Northern Region. French Togoland achieved a separate Independence from France in 1960, and the Ghana-Togo border today remains essentially the same as that agreed by the British and the French in 1922.

When Paul Nugent conducted field work at the end of the 1980s, he concluded that the border had, in spite of its colonial origins, cohered remarkably well.⁸¹ The Independence settlement was not the kind of 'freedom' that Ablɔde activists had demanded, but nonetheless it had gradually yielded fruit. In the former British Togoland, the descendants of those who had struggled for Ablɔde now appeared to consider themselves 'model Ghanaians', and indeed even amongst the older generation, Nugent detected little interest in secession from Ghana or reunification with the francophone republic of Togo.⁸² Some former activists expressed similar sentiments when I began my own field work ten years later. According to E. K. Datsa in Amezofe-Avetime in 1999, Togoland reunificationism was 'an old man's issue'. People did not concern themselves with it, because they would rather get on 'with the opportunities that were open to them', particularly through formal education and public sector employment in Ghana.⁸³ I, like Nugent, began to think that the issue was dead.

Then, in December 2000, presidential and legislative elections ushered in a new political era. President Jerry Rawlings' long tenure of power in Ghana was brought to an end as John Agyekum Kufuor led the New Patriotic Party into government. Elderly Ablɔde activists, often supported by children or younger siblings, voiced longstanding grievances at the National Reconciliation Commission in 2004. It is against this backdrop that the former teacher and member of parliament, Kosi Kedem, petitioned the Ghana Constitutional Review Commission on the manner in which the former British Togoland had been integrated into Ghana and demanded negotiations on the terms by which a union could be

⁸¹ This is the main argument of his PhD thesis, 'National Integration and the Vicissitudes of State Power', and it is developed in *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens*, on the basis of a series of further local case studies and an investigation into the specific opportunities that were provided by the border in the form of contraband trade.

⁸² Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens*, 218.

⁸³ Interview with E. K. Datsa, Avetime-Amezofe, 3 June 1999.

maintained. The resurrection of the Togoland question in post-Rawlings Ghana prompted me to return to the material I had gathered and to reconsider the apparent demise of the Togoland question during the long periods of single-party and military rule on both sides of the border, when 'freedom' had yielded bitter fruit.

The preventive detention and political exile experienced by Ablɔɔɛ activists in the 1960s reoriented their networks and their activities. Those who crossed from Ghana into the republic of Togo as political refugees became embroiled, first in that country's Independence settlement, and later in its domestic politics. Ewe-language print played a critical role in maintaining the 'loss' of British Togoland to Ghana as a key issue in the political life of the new francophone republic of Togo, whilst those who were taken into preventive detention within Ghana formed new relationships with individuals in the Ghana-wide opposition to Kwame Nkrumah. Following a spate of secessionist activity during the mid-1970s, Togoland reunification became a less explicit priority, and in Rawlings' Ghana, it receded from view. Since the year 2000, however, significant changes in the political environment in Ghana reveal that some of the organisational and ideological aspects of Ablɔɔɛ were never fully 'neutralised', but rather became embedded, and left their traces, in alternative political projects.

The format of this book is broadly chronological. This is, in some sense, an artificial and post-facto construction because, for the reasons outlined above, what I have learned about Ablɔɔɛ was shaped by the circumstances of the present, and by what former activists were willing to share with me. What I present here, then, is not *the* history of Ablɔɔɛ, but *one* history, written from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century. It is organised around three sets of questions. Chapters 2 and 3 ask why teachers played such a central role in the politics of southern British Togoland. How did teachers come to conceive of themselves as a cohort and why did they believe they had a right, or even a duty, to speak on behalf of others? How did their experiences of formal schooling shape their understandings of citizenship, and how did they achieve recognition from those around them? Chapter 4 investigates the arguments that were made by Ablɔɔɛ leaders and activists during the mid-1950s to persuade voters against the integration of British Togoland with the Gold Coast and in favour of the reunification of the two trust territories of British and French Togoland. How were these arguments articulated in speech and in print? What might oral and written texts tell us about the nature of political activism and the engagement of leaders with potential

supporters? Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are concerned with the post-Independence period and 'the fruits of freedom'. They ask how the Togoland question continued to influence the politics of both Ghana and Togo after the defeat of the reunificationists in 1956 and 1957, and what the acknowledgement of political failure meant for individuals who had invested so much effort in establishing their right and duty to speak for others.

The people with whom this book is concerned were born after colonial conquest, struggled as adults for a particular version of Independence, and were forced in their later lives to accommodate themselves to political failure. When I began researching Ablaḍe, it was still possible to talk to many grassroots political activists, to hear their chants and songs, read their pamphlets, and ask about their lives. This 'Independence generation' has since passed away, and the possibilities for understanding their experiences have narrowed. By telling their stories here, I am responding to the interest they expressed in documenting and memorialising their own lives. I did not presume that I could provide their descendants with a usable past, and whether I have done so is not for me to judge.⁸⁴ None of these individuals needed me to create a legacy for them. Traces of their experiences, and of the choices that they made, are already embedded in popular histories that circulate close to home and in far-flung places, influencing younger generations in unpredictable ways.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Stephen Ellis, 'Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa', *Journal of African History* 43 (1) (2002), 1–26.

⁸⁵ Some of these unpredictable influences are identified in Kate Skinner, 'Local Historians and Strangers with Big Eyes: The Politics of Ewe History in Ghana and its Global Diaspora', *History in Africa* 37 (2010), 125–58.