

## 'Ethnic Identity' as an Anti-colonial Weapon? Ewe Mobilisation from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1960s

### The Ewe: A Case of Aggressive Solidarity

Unlike for Wolof-speakers or Temne-speakers, the ethnic identity of 'the Ewe' was an issue of public and even international debate from the 1940s. Their spokesmen won some fame as the first case of an African political movement attempting to use the stage of the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> The Ewe unity movement seemed to be an institution with ancient roots, defined through identification with a common ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> However, for the Ewe-speakers like for the Wolof and Temne, the interrelations of the different layers of identifications are complex and it is crucial to understand how they 'sold' themselves to European residents and colonisers over the decades.

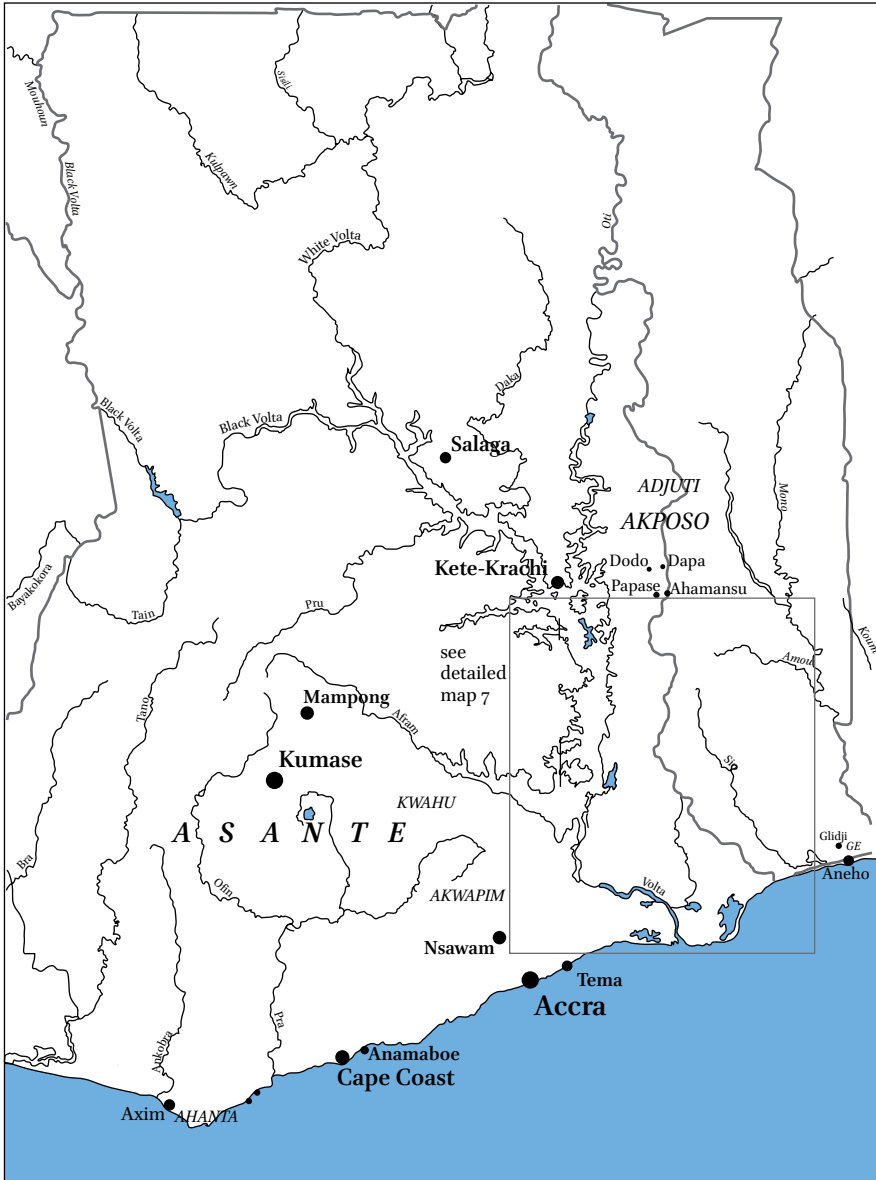
The relation between Ewe identification and Avatime identification is reminiscent of the complex relationship between the categories of 'Wolof' and 'Sereer' in coastal Senegambia. Today, the Avatime speak both the Central Togo minority language of the same name and Ewe. Their historical vision regards the Avatime as second-comers in an area having been inhabited by a quasi-mythical older population, the so-called 'Bayas', and as having arrived before any Ewe-speakers. However, the more significant event in this respect is the Asante invasion of the late 1860s.<sup>3</sup> During these struggles, the Avatime presented their relationship to other Ewe-speakers as a military

---

1 The broad context appears in Welch, Claude E., *Dream of Unity: Pan-Africanism and Political Unification in West Africa* (Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 42–73.

2 This was first formulated by Amenumey, D.E.K., 'The pre-1947 background to the Ewe unification question: a preliminary sketch', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 10, 1969, 65–85, 65–6, 71.

3 Brydon, Lynne, 'Rice, Yams and Chiefs in Avatime: Speculations on the Development of a Social Order', *Africa* 51(2), 1981, 659–77, 659–60; Brydon, Lynne, '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, 32–4.



MAP 6 Gold coast (Ghana) and Togo

brotherhood. A century later, the ruling family of Fume describe themselves as victims of the 'anti-Ewe policy' of the Nkrumah regime at the end of the 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

4 Interview with Kwame Asiah, Regent of Fume on behalf of his brother, Fia Togbe Adzesi Iv, Fume, 17 August 2007.