

BOOK REVIEW

Nicoué Lodjou Gayibor (ed.). *Les Ewe (Togo, Ghana, Bénin), Histoire et Civilisation. Volumes 1 and 2.* Lomé: Presses de l'Université de Lomé, 2021. 691 pp. Chronology. Glossary. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Index. Contributors. Bibliography. No Price Reported. Paper. ISBN: 2-91 6789-37-5.

After publishing his *Histoire des Togolais* in four volumes, along with several other major publications, Professor Nicoué Lodjou Gayibor has dedicated his latest research endeavors to the editing and writing of a history of The Ewe in Ghana, Togo, and Benin, combining his efforts with those of twelve other contributors. *Les Ewe (Togo, Ghana, Bénin), Histoire et Civilisation* offers an encyclopedic collection of knowledge about the Ewes in the Ajatado region (the southern section of present-day Togo, Ghana, and Benin), with a multidisciplinary perspective combining archaeology, history, onomastics, anthropology, and geography. *Les Ewe* is composed of two volumes, in which the center of gravity is located in the detailed and nuanced pre-colonial history of this people. Based on oral tradition, archival work, and archaeological findings, as well as a comprehensive review of secondary literature, *Les Ewe* is an essential synthesis of the present knowledge about the political history and the social, economic, and material culture of the Ewe-speaking peoples.

The first part is dedicated to the archaeology and history of the Ewe people, and a second much shorter part examines its material culture. The latter is partially based on the invaluable work of Pastor Jakob Spieth, who provided priceless descriptions of Ewe life and events at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

Although the literature on the Ewe-speaking people is already quite substantial, *Les Ewe* makes a further contribution to the scholarship by explicitly addressing the tensions between history and oral tradition. First, the origins of the Ewes have no connection with the Biblical sites that Christian missionaries inserted into their oral tradition; their connection is rather with the different groups (among them the Yorubas) who migrated to Tado and then to previously inhabited settlements that would later become Notsé. Second, King Agokoli, who is usually depicted in oral tradition as cruel and tyrannical, has now been rehabilitated, with the support of traditional chiefs, since 2014. By tackling these inaccuracies, *Les Ewe* aims to deconstruct

the work of the Christian missionaries in the modification and spread of oral tradition which was also vigorously relayed and reinforced by Ewe nationalists in the 1940s and 1950s. Third, the authors dispute the fact that the autonomous character of the different Ewe-speaking polities (called *Dukowo*) after the migration from Notsé was due to their rejection of the so-called political centralization of Notsé.

Les Ewe illustrates the tension at the heart of the history of the autonomous *Dukowo* after their migration from Notsé on the one hand, and the military union (against neighboring groups in the precolonial period) or political unity (during colonization) when facing a common enemy, on the other hand. Yet the migration from Notsé constitutes the basis of a unifying historical narrative that is maintained even though it contradicts contemporary borders.

Given the exhaustive objective of *Les Ewe*, it is unfortunate that Ghanaian historians of the Ewe were not included in this project. Yet the effort to cover the different sections of the Ewe-speaking regions, including Ghana, remains valuable and comparatively useful. A more substantial postcolonial history of the Ewe would have nicely complemented the study. Finally, to the border specialist interested in the relation of the Ewe with international borders, the analysis has not taken full account of the detailed microstudies that may have brought a more nuanced understanding of both the border and the way Ewe borderlanders have dealt with it.

However, the explicit focus and goal of this beautiful work is mainly to resolve historical issues with respect to the pre-colonial history of the Ewe that has been at odds with oral tradition for decades and to bring together a more historically accurate version of the history of the Ewe, backed up by the data presented in this work. *Les Ewe* tackles sensitive historical questions originating from the region under study, to contradict and then reconcile oral tradition with the work of the historian. In this respect, *Les Ewe* succeeds in recounting the vicissitudes of the migration, the dispersal of the autonomous polities which developed different local identities notably influenced by geography, and the union of the Ewe-speaking people beyond their borders to forge a common identity in the twentieth century.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.35

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