

**Zeitschrift:** Regio Basiliensis : Basler Zeitschrift für Geographie

**Herausgeber:** Geographisch-Ethnologische Gesellschaft Basel ; Geographisches Institut der Universität Basel

**Band:** 22 (1981)

**Heft:** 2-3

**Artikel:** West African boundaries and the cultural landscape

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1088863>

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# West African boundaries and the cultural landscape

RONALD J. HARRISON CHURCH

The usual definition of West Africa is used here, namely those countries lying south of North African lands and eastward to Niger and Nigeria. They are the eight successor states of former French West Africa, plus Togo; the four ex-British West African countries; Guinea-Bissau (ex Portuguese Guinea), and Liberia, 15 states in all. Western Sahara, formerly Spanish Sahara, is not included. By «boundaries» is understood international boundaries.

In West Africa cultural landscapes are greatly influenced by natural ones, with their differences and contrasts expressed in east-west zones of varied climates (especially in the amount of rainfall, length of rainy season and so of possible cultivation and type of crops), vegetation (forest or varied savannas), and in lesser zonal arrangements of geology, soils, relief and incidence of tsetse. This last largely determines whether cattle can be kept. That the north is largely Islamic also affects the economy, particularly in the greater consumption of mutton, and the minimal participation of women in trade and agriculture, unlike the situation in the south.

The Conference of Berlin of 1884–85 and its declaration of the need for effective occupancy as a pre-requisite to sovereign claims led to the «Scramble for Africa», and as acutely so in West Africa as anywhere. Explorers had made known to Europe such major waterways as the Senegal, Gambia and Niger by 1830, and they often became the goals of French and British troops and boundary making. Each colonial power sought maximum penetration from the coast for the greatest strategic, political and economic advantage and variety, both actual and potential.

Language groups are smaller than the large natural zones already mentioned, whilst the ethnic ones are smaller still<sup>1</sup>, very diverse and often fragmented, so that they present a mosaic rather than a pattern. Alien colonial boundaries were established across language and ethnic groups, usually without much thought for them. Major African Kingdoms such as Mossi, Asante, Dahomey, Benin and the Hausa-Borno emirates of northern Nigeria and their towns were goals. Even specific peoples were sought, such as the Kru for their ability to work on ships. They were partitioned among the British in south-eastern Sierra Leone, Liberia and the French in south-western Ivory Coast.

Boundaries were drawn not only with imprecise data and maps but with urgency in the face of international rivalry. So astronomical and mathematical

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boundaries are common, especially in arid areas. Otherwise rivers<sup>2</sup> are commonly used, but usually without precise indication as to season, thalweg, median or conventional line.

The break-up of the Federation of French West Africa into eight sovereign states, three of them landlocked<sup>3</sup> (Mali, Upper Volta and Niger) had momentous results. Previously boundaries had been between one French colony and one or more others, and no international agreements describe them. Most were defined by decrees, often merely specifying rivers without reference to season or type of boundary line therein.

Thus problems have arisen between Senegal and Mauritania, whose common boundary is almost all along the north or right bank of the Senegal River. There may be sense in this in that Senegalese people farm both banks. However, no reference was made to whether it was the north bank in the dry or flood season (the difference is 10–20 kilometres), and all the river is Senegalese. With colonial rule on both banks, this did not matter, but in independence formal permission has been given by Senegal to Mauritania allowing the latter free use of the river.

Rather similar is the lack of precision along the river Beli, where for some 160 kilometres it forms the boundary between Mali and Upper Volta. This river also floods widely, and then the flood recedes into many channels. Mali claimed an area up to the most southerly penetration of flood water used by their Tuareg nomad pastoralists, whilst the Upper Volta bases its claim upon French official maps of the Institut Géographique National and the boundary marked thereon. Warlike action occurred in and after December 1974 until mediation was agreed (*Brownlie* 1979, p. 427–430).

The Benin-Niger boundary lies along the Mékrou and Niger rivers but without their division or the allocation of islands. Immediately after independence there were abortive discussions and disputes among fishermen on Lété island in the Niger River about 38 kilometres upstream from Gaya and south of Dosso until it was declared common property of the two states in 1965 (*Brownlie*, 1979, p. 162–163).

Similar uncertainties prevail concerning the location of the boundary along the Mékrou and Pendjari rivers between Benin and the Upper Volta, the Falémé River between Mali and Senegal (in which there are also unallocated islands), and the Great Scarcies section of the Guinea-Sierra Leone boundary, where Beacon No. 1 is on the right bank but Beacon No. 23 is on the left one (*Brownlie*, 1979, p. 348). However, no disputes have arisen in these cases. Nevertheless, river boundaries urgently need clarification as to season and line.

The easterly portion of the Niger-Nigeria border is the thalweg of the Komadugu Yobe over 270 kilometres, until it flows into Lake Chad. Like the Rio Grande on the USA-Mexico border, this river has frequent changes of course, and so of the thalweg and border. Agreements on this were made in 1910, depending upon direction of change of flow (*Brownlie* 1979, p. 464, 467–468). However, fixed permanent markers may become necessary if oil were located in the area, which is quite possible.

The creation of fairly precise boundaries led in some cases to demarcation, albeit in rudimentary fashion by modern standards. Thus that between the then British Gold Coast (now Ghana) and the then French territory of Sene-gambia and Niger, later the French Sudan and later still the Upper Volta, was agreed between 1898 and 1904. It was marked by 1906 often on trees «with the letters F and E with a chisel and tar» (*Brownlie* 1979, p. 291). Thus it is not surprising that such demarcation was later found inadequate, especially in well peopled areas, and particularly when a Ghanaian primary school was built a few metres within the Upper Volta.

The 1904 treaty on this boundary is notable for including provision for compensation by France and Britain to two chiefs because of the passage through their lands of the boundary, the rights of trans-border passage by villagers to traditional «arable and pasture lands, springs and watering places which they have heretofore used», and the right of villagers dissatisfied with their situation to emigrate to the other country within one year (*Brownlie* 1979, p. 285). This legal option was much used, whilst seasonal and longer migration by men into the Gold Coast was also substantial under colonial rule to escape French conscription and for greater work opportunities. Since independence this route has diminished in favour of better opportunities in the Ivory Coast.

It is, however, where a boundary divides an ethnic group, so as to put a people within two or more countries, that complaints have arisen. In West Africa the most famous case is that of the former boundary between the British Gold Coast and German Togo (Fig. 1). This divided the Mamprusi (Kusasi), Dagomba and Gonja people of the north almost exactly between the two colonial administrations. The Dagomba capital at Yendi became German, and their chief had to delegate authority over his people in British territory to a sub-chief at Savelugu. By contrast, in the south the same boundary put about four-fifths of the Ewe people under German administration, leaving one-fifth of them under Britain, east of the Volta River, and somewhat isolated by it from the rest of the then Gold Coast.

With the division of German Togo into British and French mandates after World War I, the Mamprusi, Dagomba and Gonja were united under British administration; but in the south the Ewe were further divided, both nationally and numerically, as to the Ewe of the Gold Coast were added those in the British Mandate of Togoland, others being in the French mandate. The boundary was stated in 1947 to cut through 3 small towns, 3 districts, 13 farms, and separated 532 farmers from their farms<sup>4</sup>. The Germans had built the Lomé-Palimé railway to serve cocoa and coffee lands in areas that were now in the British mandate, whilst the railway was in the French one. Until the advent of roads, truck transport and the Adomi bridge across the Volta in 1957, the railway remained the best outlet for cocoa, and attracted most legal and much smuggled cocoa from British Togoland. Customs and currency controls along this new boundary as well as different prices for cocoa have been other irritants. Much cocoa is still smuggled across when prices favour it.

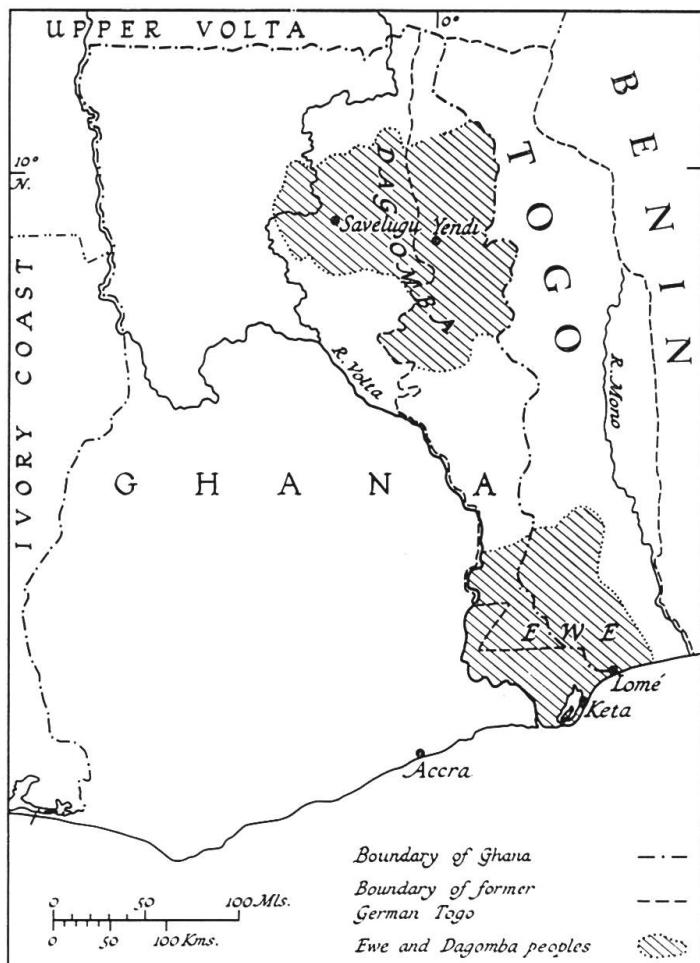


Fig. 1  
Ghana and Togo, with their past  
and present boundaries, and the  
Dagomba and Ewe peoples

There were protests, but Ewe leaders could not make personal appearances until after World War II, when the United Nations Trusteeship Council took over supervision from the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations. Because of this improvement, rising nationalism, growing sympathy with colonial peoples, their greater education and resources, rapid air travel and, above all, the dynamic personality of an Ewe leader, Dr. Sylvanus Olympio, much was heard of the issue of Ewe unity<sup>5</sup>, which also broadened into another for the reunification of Togo, still a recurrent issue.

Because British Togoland was landlocked, and the fact that both the provisions of the mandate and trusteeship accorded with British colonial principles, British Togoland was administered as part of the then Gold Coast. When the latter was nearing independence in the mid-fifties, Africa's first plebiscite was held there in 1956 to determine the wishes of its peoples. Voters were asked to opt either for integration with the Gold Coast at independence, or for separation and continued trusteeship, pending determination of its future, which could have involved possible unification with French Togo at its later independence.

Nearly 82% of the registered voters exercised their vote. In the Mamprusi, Dagomba and Gonja districts of the north 49 119 voted for integration and 12 707

against. In the central districts of Buem and Krachi 28 178 voted for integration and 18 775 against; whilst in the southern, Ewe and associated peoples' district of Kpandu 8581 were for integration but 17 029 against, and in that of Ho 7217 for integration but 18 981 against. In the British Trusteeship as a whole, 58% voted to join an independent Gold Coast, but in Kpandu and Ho there was a majority of 70% for continuing the trusteeship. However, as the decision was to be taken for the territory as a whole, in which the votes were 93 055 for integration and 67 492 against, all the British Trusteeship of Togoland was integrated with the newly independent Gold Coast in May 1957.

Meanwhile in October 1956 a referendum in French Togoland asked whether voters approved the end of trusteeship and the establishment of an autonomous republic within the then French Union, or disapproved of this. Over 70% voted in favour, but just as it was the Ewe in British Togoland who voted against integration with the Gold Coast so in French Togoland they were again the opposition, in both cases because they aimed at Ewe unity. Yet this would require the creation of a mini-state that neither independent Ghana nor independent Togo have ever contemplated.

Instead, what has been sought has been either the unification of Togo with Ghana, the aim of Dr Nkrumah; or of the former trusteeships and mandates to reconstitute Togo as it was under the Germans, a solution which would redivide the northern peoples without uniting all Ewe. Such reunification was urged in Togo Ministry of Information advertisements in *The Times* on January 13, 1976, and January 28, 1977, which soured relations still further with Ghana.

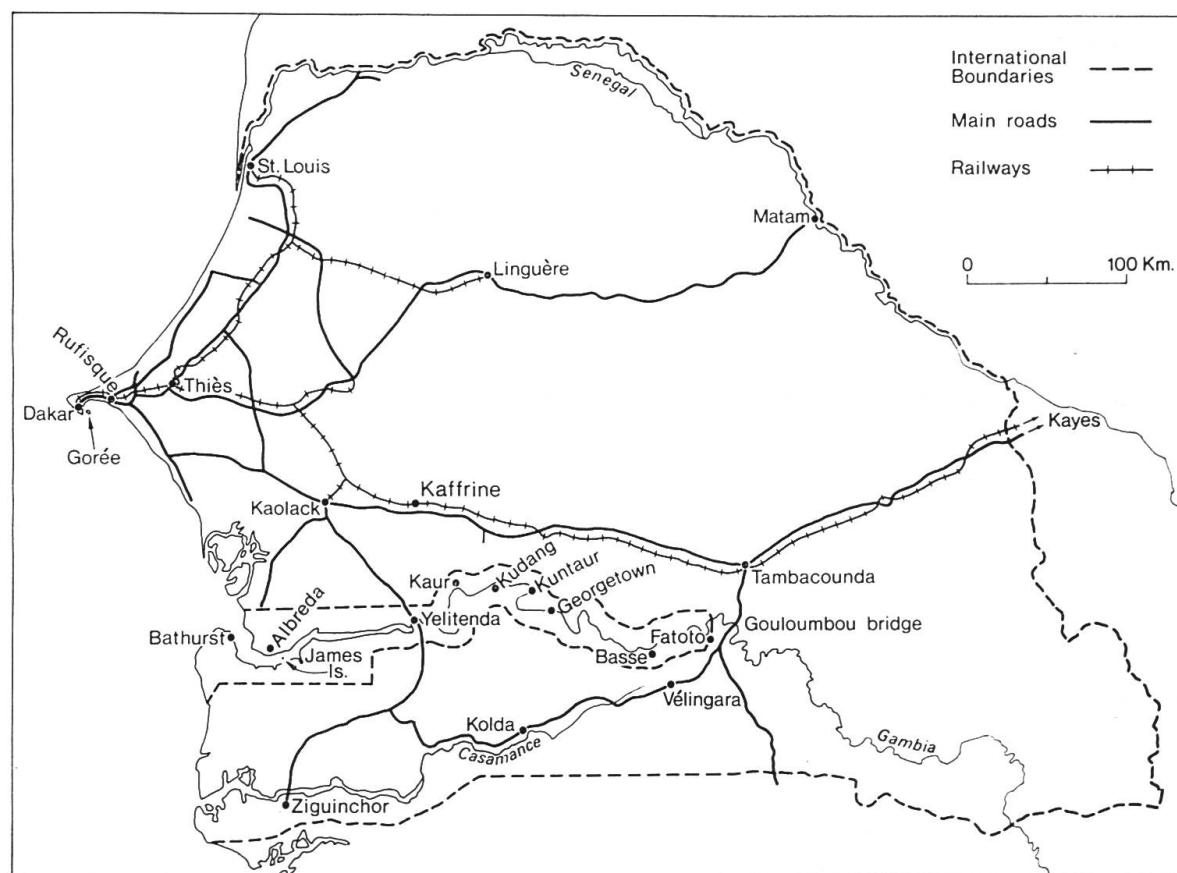
It has been argued by Hodder (1968) and others, that Ewe unity is largely the result of European ideas, but that is true of almost all nationalisms in the once-colonial Americas, Asia and Pacific, as well as in Africa. His plea (p. 281) for a more open boundary and easy trans-border movement is echoed almost by all, and easy movement across such borders as the Norwegian-Swedish and Canadian-American ones for their citizens are excellent exemplars. But this simplicity works only if countries are of nearly equal economic standing, have comparable social systems, are democracies and friendly to each other. The USA-Mexico boundary is totally different from the USA-Canada one because the first reason at least is not satisfied, the Finnish-USSR boundary does not meet the second and third criteria, and in West Africa the Guinea (ex-French) – Ivory Coast and Ghana-Togo boundaries not the fourth one.

African boundaries have become far more divisive since independence, mainly because of strong nationalism, more centralised government – even in ex-British countries –, and the very contrasted political and economic policies of states. Thus, as just mentioned, Marxist Guinea is adjacent to laissez-faire capitalism in the Ivory Coast, and most neighbours are not very friendly. Economies and markets have become national rather than open, as they were in French West Africa at least, and economic opportunities reduced. Is it these matters rather than the actual boundaries which are the real problems?

The real problems are also the differing external links of states, and that three-quarters of the area and one-third of the people have French as their official language, whilst one-quarter the area but two-thirds the people have English. Francophone and anglophone constitutional, administrative, legal and other institutions and practice are radically different. The francophone countries are highly centralised, whilst the anglophone ones were very decentralised as colonies, although less so in independence. Chiefs had great powers in local administration and law in British colonies, which they have often lost in independence. There was conscription in French colonies, none in British ones. Taxation was indirect, mainly on goods, in French colonies; direct, and mainly on incomes and profits in British territories. There was great emphasis on the French language in French colonies, far less on English in the British ones, but more on major African languages, whilst financial links are very different. It is these and other differences which make boundaries so significant, impede trade and cooperation, and prevent, for example, easy integration of the Gambia and Senegal (Figure 2).

The Gambia, 11 295 square kilometres, a land area of about one-quarter that of Switzerland, and the smallest state in mainland Africa, is a relic of British trading rights on the Gambia River secured in 1588 from a claimant to the

Fig. 2 Senegal and Gambia



Portuguese throne. The river is one of the very few in Africa which can be entered from the sea and navigated by ocean vessels for nearly 300 kilometres, whilst river boats can go on another 170 kilometres to near the eastern border. If the French had possessed this fine waterway, they would almost certainly have used it, rather than the much inferior Senegal River, as the means of penetrating West Africa. Instead of Dakar, another site, albeit much poorer, might have developed at first on the Gambia River, and a shorter, more direct railway built to the Niger River.

On the other hand, Senegalese groundnut cultivation might have developed much less without first the St. Louis to Dakar railway, opened 1885 to replace St. Louis by Dakar as a port, and which led to much cultivation of groundnuts along its route. The western end of the Dakar-Niger railway would have been unnecessary west of about Kaffrine, but it too encouraged groundnut cultivation. Against this, a much shorter line to Bamako and Koulikoro, in what was the French Sudan and is now Mali, might have been of much greater help to that very poor country, and still could be.

An excellent waterway has been separated from its natural hinterland, and the river has deteriorated because there is too little traffic to justify dredging it and providing training works. Fewer than 20 vessels use it each year to export the groundnut crop, which comprises over 90% of Gambia's exports.

Gambia is surrounded by Senegal, except for a short sea coast, and Gambian boundaries are almost entirely astronomical or mathematical ones. The province of Casamance is virtually separated from the rest of Senegal, except east of the Gambia, an isolation alleviated since 1957 by the Trans-Gambian Highway from Dakar to Ziguinchor, for which only the ferry was provided by British funds. The peoples on both sides of the boundaries are the same, and until 1976 many villages were divided; some and many farms still are.

Gambian territory along the river varies from 11–20 kilometres in width on each bank, and between the river and the Senegal boundary there are usually only two or three villages. The historical footholds on the river were the only ones in West Africa not to have developed substantially inland, for the British believed the hinterland was so dry as to be useless. During the Scramble for Africa, the French offered territory elsewhere in West Africa, Asia and the Pacific in exchange for the Gambia, but Gambian and British people protested and prevented such an exchange.

Trans-boundary movement by local people is normally permitted, but there is a huge problem of smuggled imports, particularly into Senegal, and of groundnuts for export via the country currently offering the best price or quickest payment. The Gambia has a one-crop economy, alleviated slightly by tourism near Banjul, although this may not survive the attempted political coup of July–August 1981.

Although the Gambia is a virtual enclave, no advantage of this has been taken. It could have built groundnut-oil factories to attract Senegalese groundnuts, and it is not too late to establish tanneries to attract Senegalese hides and skins. Banjul could have developed a free port, like Monrovia (Liberia), but Senegal

would not now permit that, especially as her troops saved the Jawara government in 1981. Gambia might still develop tax-free facilities for company registration, a flag of convenience, a lottery and frequent stamp issues. Closer political and economic association with Senegal is inevitable since the events of 1981 but, whilst the Gambia river would then be available to cheapen transport in the hinterland, either the parallel Senegalese railway would suffer or the river would be even less used.

Looking at the map persuades most people that political integration or federation with Senegal is the answer<sup>6</sup>. Moreover there are close trans-border family links, Islam is dominant in both countries, and peoples, tribal institutions and agriculture are identical. But the contrasted colonial policies and societies of France and Britain have left very different imprints on the two countries. In Senegal there is the legacy of Catholicism, and the former president, Senghor, is catholic; whilst in the Gambia there is a overlap of the Church of England and Wesleyan Methodism. Administration is centralised in Senegal and chiefs have no specific power, as they have in the Gambia. Senegal taxation is largely indirect, mainly taxes on imports, and the cost of living is high; whilst in the Gambia imports are less taxed, far more varied in origin, and the cost of living is lower. Although prices offered for groundnuts have often been lower in the Gambia, substantial quantities of Senegalese groundnuts from areas near the border go into the Gambia for sale against immediate cash, which is used to buy cheaper imports for smuggling back into Senegal.

Association, federation and still less integration with Senegal have never been major issues within the Gambia. The chiefs would lose their powers, most civil servants their jobs, and there would be no voice vote at the United Nations with which to make known its views and needs, and seek aid. The cost of living would rise, the variety of goods decline, and the profits of smuggling end. There would certainly be unemployment in Banjul, which cannot compete with Dakar as a port, airport, fishing, tourist and industrial centre, and if the river were even less used, as it might well be, up-country landing stages would also be affected.

Whilst Senegal would like to be rid of the encumbering enclave and the severe smuggling, it is fearful of entering into another federal arrangement, the only one that the Gambia could contemplate. This is because of its unhappy memories of the break up in 1959 of the 8 member Federation of French West Africa, with its federal capital in Dakar, and of the Mali Federation between Senegal and the present Mali in 1960. But with the new president of Senegal, Gambian government dependence upon Senegalese troops to put down the attempted coup of 1981, and economic discontent in the Gambia, closer association with Senegal seems more possible.

Meanwhile the aim of wider West African cooperation is expressed in the Communauté Economique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEAO) which associates most ex-French West African states, and the all-embracing Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Neither organisation has achieved very substantial results, nor is likely to do so given national feelings, and separate eco-

nomic ties, particularly of most francophone countries with France. More successful is the association of five contiguous francophone states in the Benin-Sahel Entente. But the original four, Ivory Coast and Upper Volta, Benin and Niger, were, in the pairs, already closely associated by transit trade and migrant labour, and with Togo not very much more has been achieved through the Entente, except some joint applications for aid. Rather more successful have been the Liptako-Gourma Integrated Development Authority grouping Mali, Upper Volta and Niger for the development of that region, the Nigeria-Niger Joint Commission for Cooperation, and the Senegal-Gambia Permanent Secretariat.

The more geographical commissions concerned with the development of Lake Chad, and the rivers Niger, Senegal, Gambia, Mano and Mono have a background of solid research and technical suggestions, but there has been little tangible evidence to suggest boundaries are being weakened by really effective trans-border cooperation of major proportions.

What is much more evident is the emergence of frontier zones, either sides of many boundaries, in which there is a great deal of so-called «unofficial» trade or smuggling. These zones flourish on different prices and speed of payment for groundnuts, as described earlier for the Gambia and Senegal, and which also prevail either side of the Niger-Nigeria border. Hides and skins and imported goods also figure in the trades. Then there is much movement of cocoa either way across the Ivory Coast-Ghana, Ghana-Togo and Benin-Nigeria borders, and the smuggling of diamonds from Sierra Leone to Liberia and by air to Zaïre.

The Gambia and Togo are major importers of goods such as whisky and cigarettes that are mainly destined for smuggling into Senegal and Ghana respectively. An entertaining doctoral thesis could be written about markets near boundaries. Perhaps «unofficial» trade and these border markets are the truly African response to European-created boundaries.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Map in *Harrison Church* (1976) p. 7

<sup>2</sup> See map of types of international boundary in *Barbour and Prothero*, 1961, p. 306

<sup>3</sup> See *Hilling, D.* (1968): Politics and Transportation: The problems of West Africa's Land-locked States in *Fisher* (1968)

<sup>4</sup> All Ewe Petition to United Nations (1947) U.N.T./A.C.

<sup>5</sup> The Report of First Visiting Mission to Togoland under French Trusteeship and to Togoland under British Trusteeship, United Nations, 1950, reported that the Ewe had a «popular nationalistic movement», and that it was «a deeply rooted force»

<sup>6</sup> See *Van Mook et al.* (1964) and *Bridges, R. C.* (1974) in Bibliography

#### LES FRONTIÈRES COLONIALES DE L'AFRIQUE OCCIDENTALE ET LEURS EFFETS SUR LE PAYSAGE HUMANISÉ

Il est question dans ce travail des frontières coloniales de l'Afrique occidentale, que les Européens tracèrent sans tenir compte de l'environnement naturel et des données culturelles. Il y est question aussi de l'absence d'une définition précise des frontières formées par les rivières. Les frontières Sénégal-Mauritanie, Mali-Haute-Volta et Bénin-Nigéria, ainsi que d'autres fron-

tières sujettes à contestation, fournissent l'exemple des problèmes qui ont surgi de ce manque de précision. Ensuite, l'auteur porte son attention sur les très longues difficultés suscitées par la frontière Ghana-Togo et sur les effets passés et présents de celle-ci sur plusieurs peuples et sur les relations entre les deux pays. Il cite aussi la Gambie, semi-enclave très différente du Sénégal qui l'entoure. Une interférence serait difficile.

Depuis que les anciennes colonies ont accédé à l'indépendance, leurs frontières sont devenues des frontières entre Etats et divisent plus qu'autrefois. On peut arguer que ce sont moins les frontières que les attitudes contrastantes, la politique et les relations extérieures des voisins qui engendrent la plupart des problèmes. De nombreux organismes internationaux ont été créés, mais leur utilité est minime du fait que l'unité est aussi difficile en Afrique qu'en Europe.

#### KOLONIALE GRENZEN UND KULTURLANDSCHAFT IN WESTAFRIKA

Die Arbeit behandelt das Problem der kolonialen Grenzen in Westafrika, die ohne Rücksicht auf den Naturraum und auf die kulturellen Gegebenheiten gezogen worden waren. Besonders gilt die Aufmerksamkeit den Flussgrenzen, da ihr Verlauf nie genau festgelegt wurde. Beispiele dafür sind die Grenzen Senegal-Mauretanien, Mali-Obervolta und Benin-Niger sowie einige andere mögliche Konfliktgrenzen. Zwei detaillierte Betrachtungen gelten den langjährigen Schwierigkeiten an der Grenze Ghana-Togo (mit ihren früheren und gegenwärtigen Auswirkungen auf die Völker und die Beziehungen der beiden Staaten) und der Halbenklave Gambie, die sich scharf vom umgebenden Senegal abhebt. Eine Integration wäre in diesem Falle problematisch.

Afrikanische Grenzen haben mit der Unabhängigkeit der ehemaligen Kolonien internationalen Status erhalten und sind zu schärferen Trennungslinien geworden als vorher. Doch dürften die zwischenstaatlichen Probleme nicht so sehr auf die Grenzen zurückzuführen sein als vielmehr auf gegensätzliche Einstellungen, Politik und Aussenbeziehungen der Nachbarn. Zahlreiche internationale Organisationen sind geschlaffen worden, doch ist ihre Wirksamkeit bescheiden, weil die Afrikaner bei den Einigungsbestrebungen den gleichen Schwierigkeiten begegnen wie die Europäer.

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