

UNITED NATIONS COLONIAL COMPLICITY IN DECOLONIZATION REFERENDA: UN-SUPERVISION OF THE 1956 REFERENDUM IN WESTERN TOGOLAND

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Abstract: The 2018 New Regions Referendum and 2020 general elections prompted “Western Togoland” secessionists to launch violent attacks in September 2020. While not credited as electoral violence, the events in Ghana have sparked a debate on the interplay between secessionism and elections, particularly on the historical implications of the 1956 referendum in British Togoland – the first independence referendum under UN-supervision. This article suggests that the 2018 New Regions Referendum parallels the 1956 UN-supervised British Togoland Referendum, which perpetuated secessionist conflict by the territorial division of Togoland. From a historicised statebuilding perspective, the paper concludes that the UN, through its supervision of the 1956 referendum, was unwittingly complicit in the realisation of French and British visions for the postcolonial order.

Keywords: Ghana; Western Togoland; United Nations; referendum; decolonisation

Introduction

On 6 March 2017, during Ghana’s 60-year Independence celebrations, Ghanaian police forces arrested Charles Kwame Kudzordzi, the then 78-year-old founder of the so-called *Homeland Study Group Foundation* (HSGF). Since 1994, after the return to constitutional rule,



Kudzordzi and the HSGF have been campaigning for the separation of Ghana's Volta Region and parts of the Northern and Upper East Region to form the state of "Western Togoland", which the HSGF claimed existed before Ghana's independence in 1957 (Osei, 2017). The group was arrested for wearing T-shirts with the inscription "9 May 2017 is OUR DAY Western Togoland" (Kafui Kanyi, 2017). The date is symbolic: 9 May 1956 was the day of the very first independence referendum under supervision of the United Nations (UN), which sealed the integration of the UN Trusteeship Territory of British (Western) Togoland into the colony of the British Gold Coast. The two amalgamated territories subsequently gained independence as Ghana in 1957. Contrary to historical evidence, the HSGF claims that although the 1956 referendum in British Togoland was rigged (Kudzordzi, 2018a), it was still bound to a moratorium, which required an approval of the "union" between Ghana and Western (British) Togoland within 50 years; otherwise, the union would be void (Amenumey, 2016; Kudzordzi, 2018b). Until then, the people of Western Togoland would merely remain so-called "plebiscite citizens in Ghana" (Dzamboe, 2016).

With T-shirts reading "Independence for Western Togoland – No Division of Volta", the HSGF protested in 2018 against the *New Regions Referendum* (Nyabor, 2019), which resulted in a split of the Volta Region, creating a new region in the north. The government-appointed *Commission of Inquiry into the Creation of New Regions* argued that the regional reorganization was "for enhanced socio-economic development and not based on ethnic, cultural and religious issues" (2018: xxiv); yet, the supported and proposed regional line fell on an almost perfect parallel to where it separated the Guans in the North from the Ewes in the South. The HSGF regarded the consultation as a weaponisation against the traditional inhabitants of the region, especially the Ewes, who have seen the borders around them constantly change over the last century due to foreign interests (Dzigbodi-Adjimah, 2017). In a 2018 petition calling upon UN Secretary-General Guterres to intervene, the US-based *Association of Volta Youth* linked the referendum to that of 1956 as "yet another fraudulent plebiscite" (Association of Volta Youth, 2018). After having declared the "independence of Western Togoland" in November 2019 (Aklama, 2019), Ghanaian security agencies launched a nation-wide manhunt for Kudzordzi and HSGF (Gomda, 2019). Ex-President Rawlings and the oppositional National Democratic Congress (NDC) condemned the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) for deploying military and security agencies in the region, causing hostility and intimidation among the people ahead of the December 2020 parliamentary elections (Amoakwa, 2020). At the beginning of voter registration, secessionists embarked on a No-Vote-campaign (*Ghana Vanguard*, 2020) to express their disavowal of the "model democracy Ghana". On 25 September 2020, events came thick and fast: militants of the "Western Togoland Restoration Front" (WTRF) stormed two police stations, kidnapped three officers, and stole two vehicles as well

as ten machine guns from the armoury. During an exchange of gunfire, a member of the secessionist group was killed (*Ghana Web*, 2020). An executive of the WTRF explained the attacks happened “because of the removal of most of the names from the voter register” (Anku, 2020).

The recent events in Ghana have triggered a debate on the interplay between secessionism and elections, which is taken as an opportunity to examine the first independence referendum under UN supervision from a historicising statebuilding perspective. While Ghanaian historians are “alarmed by the bogus and unsubstantiated claims about the scope and import of the plebiscite” (Amenumey, 2016), stressing “the legality of the integration of British Togoland into Ghana” (Asamoah, 2014: 23), notions of the UN’s colonial complicity have been expressed: “in the face of UN that annexation of Western Togoland by Ghana for the purposes of expansionism or preponderance have been allowed, questioned the sacredness of the UN trust”¹ (Mifetu, 2019). This paper argues that the UN, through its supervision of the 1956 referendum, was unwittingly complicit in the realisation of French and British visions for the postcolonial order of the territory, leading to the perpetuation of secessionist conflict (Distler and Heise, 2021). To this end, the role of UN election observation in the decolonisation process and the relevant literature on the 1956 Togoland referenda will be discussed in the following. The empirical section traces the resistance of France and Britain to the courting for a simultaneous referendum on reunification in the two Trust Territories until both authorities agreed on conditions for holding two separate UN-supervised referenda that would legitimise steering the fate of the two territories in different directions, thus securing colonial visions for the postcolonial order. The paper concludes that the 2018 *New Regions Referendum* revived the legacy of the 1956 British Togoland Referendum, aggravating the colonial continuity caused by the territorial partition of Togoland. The historic analysis draws on research of digitised documents from UN digital libraries, the United Nations Archive (UN ARMS), the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Ho and Accra, the British National Archives (TNA) in London, the Archives nationales d’outremer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence and documents in the private possession of Kudzordzi.

Literature Review on the 1956 Togoland Referenda

The 1956 referendum in British Togoland set a precedent as the very first independence referendum under UN-supervision. Its role has been subject to much scholarly discussion (Amenumey, 1989: 248–278;

1 Not to be mistaken with the UN Trusteeship System.

Bulgarelli, 2018; Coleman, 1956: 68–80; Digre, 2004, 2006; Nugent, 2002: 189–197; 2019: 374–375; Skinner, 2015: 152–166; Thullen, 1964: 159–162; Welch, 1967: 115–126) on the rise and fall of Western Togoland and Ewe nationalism, which in the absence of a pre-colonial Ewe or Togolese identity are commonly considered to have emerged as constructed nationalisms. Among these works, Nugent (2002, 2019) prominently highlights that local issues outweighed the Ewe and Togoland identity in the 1956 referendum, virtually foreshadowing the inevitable end of Ewe unification and Western Togoland secessionism. In doing so, he echoes Brown, who emphasises the region’s ethnic heterogeneity (1983) and attests the demise of the National Liberation Movement of Western Togoland (Tolimo) in the late 1970s (1980). While concurring with the insufficient nationalist mobilisation in the run-up of the 1956 referendum, Skinner (2015) overall challenges the supposed end of the Ewe and Western Togoland movements. Bulgarelli (2018) reiterates Skinner’s assessment by relating the polarisation of competing ethnic and territorial nationalisms of the 1956 and 2018 referenda, yet, like Nugent, counts on the unifying potential of a Voltarian identity under Ghanaian citizenship.

While these works have already discussed these nationalist affiliations around the referendum in detail, only a handful have considered the referendum or the UN-supervision in their own right (Amenumey, 1975; Digre, 2004, 2006) or in the larger colonial context (Keese, 2011). While Amenumey (1975), decrying the composition of the French voters register, the discriminatory indigénat code or double electoral college for the early territorial elections, holds that “from Togo and the example of what was happening in the French West African colonies there is little doubt that systematic rigging was being practiced” (1975: 53), Keese (2011) argues that, apart from a few isolated instances, there could be no question of systematic electoral manipulation in either French West Africa or Togo. Rather France, in an effort to hold on to her overseas territories, was forced by national and international public opinion to comply “with the rules of the democratic game” (Keese, 2011: 331). Digre, comparing on the one hand the British and French Togoland referenda with each other (2004) and with the Cameroon referendum of 1961 on the other hand (2006), points out the different imperial strategies in relation to UN oversight, but, nevertheless, favours UN oversight because it generally produced peaceful results.

Bringing both strands of literature together, this article argues that the framework of UN-supervision left the question of Togoland unification unanswered, thereby perpetuating potential for secessionist conflict.

Decolonisation Referenda under UN-Supervision

Electoral supervision (although not a new feature of world politics)² remained unusual until after World War II. Mainly prompted by decolonisation, it was the UN that made increasingly use of electoral supervision after the General Assembly stipulated in 1952 that the wishes of dependent people shall be “ascertained through plebiscites or other recognised democratic means, preferably under the auspices of the United Nations” (United Nations General Assembly, 1952). Within this framework, the UN had sent approximately 30 visiting missions³ to either *supervise* or *observe* so-called electoral “acts of self-determination” (United Nations, 1983: 1), that is, referenda or elections that would decide on the independence of territories once under colonial rule. While *electoral observation* meant UN missions simply observing each stage of a vote, usually resulting in a public declaration by the Secretary-General on the conduct of the election, *electoral supervision* meant UN missions had to approve each stage of the electoral process to certify the overall credibility of the ballot. Since each requires a mandate from a principal UN organ, both *supervision* and *observation* were and still are rare.

Even though of all colonial territories only 11 were under UN trusteeship, these territories accounted for half of these missions as they could only be invited at the request of the Administering Authority⁴, if the latter was of the opinion that “the people had reached a sufficiently advanced stage to be able to make known their wishes” (TCOR, 1956a: 94). Not the UN but “the Administering Authority, either alone or in consultation with the territorial authorities, has been responsible for all aspects of organization and conduct of popular consultations” (United Nations, 1983: 5), such as regulations, ballot wording, voter registration, political education programme, calendar, etc., and thus exercised control over the terms of the vote, such as what issue to vote on, when and how. UN bodies could merely “draw attention” to certain aspects or irregularities, or, as the most serious rebuke, not recognise a vote. Although UN-supervision of an electoral “act of self-determination” was usually a condition for the termination of a trusteeship agreement, an Administering Authority was free to ignore such reprimands and (as will be shown in the case of the 1956 referendum in French Togoland) organise a referendum on its own terms.⁵

2 The first was the 1857 plebiscite in Moldavia and Wallachia (current Romania), monitored by most of the major European powers.

3 Calculation based on un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/c24/visiting-missions and United Nations (1983), Annex I (pp. 37–39).

4 “Administering Authority” was a UN Charter euphemism for the ruling colonial power represented at the UN Trusteeship Council.

5 “[M]ost of the ethno-national referendums in the post-Second World War Era were held to legitimise the process of decolonisation, and the majority of

Case analysis: Plea for a plebiscite

During the Scramble for Africa, most of the Ewe-speaking populations fell under the protectorate of German Togoland. In absence of a coherent pre-colonial Ewe identity, German colonialists popularised the Protestant idea of an *Ewe-Volk* (Amenumey, 1989: 28–29; Skinner, 2015: 38). After the defeat of Germany in World War I, the eastern two-thirds of Togoland became a French mandated territory and the remaining western third of Togoland became British mandated territory⁶. France wanted to keep French Togoland as an autonomous state in the French Union, whilst Britain wanted to keep British Togoland within the Commonwealth by integrating it into the Gold Coast. While the new colonial demarcation reunited the Dagomba and the Mamprusi in the north under British rule, in the south it cut through the Ewe territory, which was subsequently divided between the British Gold Coast, British Togoland, and French Togoland.

After World War II, the division led to the formation of a unification movement. Spearheaded by Sylvanus Olympio, the movement appealed to the UN Trusteeship Council in 1947 for the unification of “Eweland” under a preferably British administration. Advocating that the Ewe “belong more to the U.N. than to FRANCE”⁷, Olympio suggested to the Council that the request “should be settled by a plebiscite; by a majority, the people would select the Administering Power they wanted [...]. There is no doubt that certain elements prefer the British and other elements prefer the French” (TCOR, 1947: 338). While non-administering Council members were open to Olympio’s proposal, the Administering Authorities were worried about setting a delicate precedent. Olympio’s proposals ultimately threatened French intends to integrate the territory into the French Union. Despite several attempts, the British were not able to make any “progress at all with the French on the issue of consultation of the people of the Trust Territory”⁸. Instead, both powers worked together to depoliticise and to portray the movement as a mere appeal to the economic hardships

these referendums were held in former French colonies” (Qvortrup, 2012: 144). The most extensive one was the 1958 French constitutional referendum, held throughout the French Union, in which each of the twenty French colonies, except French Guinea (Schmidt, 2009), voted to become member-states of the newly established French Community. Classified as “Associated Territories”, the Trusteeship Territories of French Togoland and French Cameroon were not formerly part of the French Union and hence exempt from the consultation.

6 British Togoland was in an administrative union with the Gold Coast and was thus administered from Accra.

7 ANOM, 1AFFPOL/3297/1, Reinseignement (N° 576), 6 January 1948: 1.

8 PRAAD (Ho), VRG-AD-1028, No title (31614/7A, Secret), 22 March 1950, A.B. Cohen to C. Arden-Clarke: 1.

caused by the border, rather than a nationalist movement with political ambitions. However, Olympio's party, the *Comité de l'Unité Togolaise* (CUT), had already won the elections to the French National Assembly and all eligible seats in French Togoland's Representative Assembly. In part therefore, the 1949 UN Visiting Mission, which was tasked to investigate the Ewe question, confirmed the Ewe's political and nationalist consciousness and recommended measures favouring unification. Consequently, the French authorities went over to ostracize the CUT and support pro-French parties such as the *Parti Togolais du Progrès* (PTP) or the *Union des Chefs et des Populations du Nord* (UCPN). From 1951 on, French decrees put hindrances to public reunions and rallies (Amenumey, 1975: 50–51) and expanded the voting register to ensure that supporters of the CUT did not appear on the list (Thullen, 1964: 181; Welch, 1967: 111–112). Following a series of petitions in which the CUT complained about these practices, the General Assembly even impressed upon France “the necessity of conducting elections in a democratic manner that will ensure a true representation of the people” and ordered an investigation on the methods of election complained about by the CUT⁹. Yet, as the results stood, the CUT boycotted all representative elections from 1951 until 1955. Cornered by its own boycott, the CUT lost out to the pro-French PTP. The resulting lack of political representation drastically reduced the legitimacy and credibility of the CUT in the eyes of the UN. Olympio tried to convince the UN General Assembly of “manipulation of elections by methods familiar to everyone who knew the ways of France in Africa” (GAOR, 1952: 360). The British Council representative argued that the unificationists in both territories “refused to participate in the elections since no doubt they had no confidence that they would have a majority. Instead of appealing to the people they appeal to the United Nations”¹⁰. Against this background, the movement had to make a decisive change: In alliance with the Togoland Congress from British Togoland, the demand for Ewe unification was abandoned. Headed by Senyo G. Antor and Olympio, the demand was now unification of French and British Togoland, followed by complete independence. In 1951, the demand for a plebiscite was repeated before the UN Trusteeship Council: “the *unification of Togoland* would be a step towards the greater unity of Africa. The problem of the future fate of the unified territory and its external relations *should be the subject of a plebiscite*” (my emphasis, GAOR, 1951: 196).

9 A/RES/441(V).

10 PRAAD (Accra), ADM 39/1/106, Draft Speech by Sir Alan Burns on Ewe and Togoland Unification Question in the Fourth Committee on 11th December, 1952.

French & British arrangements for the 1956 Togoland referenda

The 1948 Accra riots and the subsequent Coussey Report forced the British government to make gradual constitutional concessions that heralded the imminent independence of the Gold Coast. After Kwame Nkrumah won the 1951 General Election from his prison cell, the British included him in the plan to integrate British Togoland into the soon to be independent Gold Coast.¹¹ Fuelled by the Cold War's ubiquitous anti-imperial liberation rhetoric, less than a year later Nkrumah declared his intention to "liberate" French Togoland once the Gold Coast was independent along with British Togoland (Luchoire, 1957: 79). Threatened by both Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism and the unificationists' modified demand for a plebiscite, the French and British agreed on a common strategy before the UN. A "Most Secret" action plan stated: "Undoubtedly the safest and best way of persuading UNO is to arrange for UNO to be bombarded by a broadside of petitions which demand the integration of British Togoland into the Gold Coast [...] a plebiscite, however, would not be acceptable" (Antor, 1954: 11). Yet, this "Most Secret" plan was stolen from Nkrumah's office¹² and fell into the hands of Antor, who – to the embarrassment of the British authorities – disclosed it to the UN (GAOR, 1953: 323). Now it was set in stone that without a referendum the UN would never agree to the integration of British Togoland into the Gold Coast.

A line of conflict formed between Nkrumah's Conventions People's Party (CPP), which demanded the *integration* of British Togoland into the Gold Coast, and the Togoland Congress, who wanted *unification* of British and French Togoland in their former borders under German rule (Nugent, 2002: 183–197; Skinner, 2015: 149–154). While the north of British Togoland (mainly, yet only sparsely populated by Dagomba and Mamprusi) clearly favoured integration into the Gold Coast for the sake of their territorial unity, the south, densely populated by Ewe but ethnically far more heterogeneous, was more in favour of a reunification of French and British Togoland. The British knew how to make ends meet. Due to the administrative union with the Gold Coast, British Togoland participated in the 1954 Gold Coast General Election, which was the "first real trial of strength between Government Party and the all-Ewe-Movement"¹³. The election functioned as "a species of plebiscite of integration

11 Kudzordzi (private possession), Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies (C.54) 169), Cabinet Meeting, 19 May 1954: 2.

12 TNA, FCO 141/4999, Telegram (Pol. F.21/1), 10 August 1953, P.M. Kirby Green to Chairman L.I.C.

13 Kudzordzi (private possession), Cabinet: Togoland under United Kingdom Trusteeship (C.54 169), 19 May 1954: 2.

versus unification”¹⁴. Based on the voting pattern, the British were now able to predict that a majority of British Togolanders, taken as a whole, would prefer integration into the Gold Coast (Coleman, 1956: 77). For many, the promise of early independence seemed to have a greater appeal than the uncertainty of either Ewe or Togoland reunification.

The time was ripe: Shortly after the 1954 Gold Coast General Elections, the British government announced the termination of the trusteeship agreement due to the imminent independence of the Gold Coast. The proposal was met with mixed feelings in the General Assembly: While many committee members welcomed the soon-to-be first independence of a former colony in Africa, the Haitian representative cautioned that once the integration of Togoland under British administration in the Gold Coast became an accomplished fact, France would probably “seek to induce the other part of Togoland to join the French Union, by offering it self-government. [...] the elimination of Togoland under British administration would herald the end of Togoland as a whole and also that of the International Trusteeship System, the purposes of which would have been betrayed” (GAOR, 1954: 318). Unificationists saw the British memorandum as an affirmation of the “Most Secret” document and insisted on a simultaneous plebiscite (Amenuney, 1989: 240; GAOR, 1954: 365).

Subsequently, the UN Trusteeship Council dispatched a Visiting Mission tasked to make recommendations for the future of British Togoland. The mission endorsed a plebiscite as “the most democratic, direct and specific method of ascertaining the true wishes of the people”, yet, also proposed that four separate voting districts should be considered where the “future of each of these four units should be determined by the majority vote in each case” (TCOR, 1955: 15–16). The French authorities informed the Visiting Mission that they intended to hold a consultation in a few years to clarify the termination of trusteeship and Togoland’s potential incorporation into the French Union (TCOR, 1955: 17).

In November 1955, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Alan Lennox-Boyd and the French Overseas Minister, Henri Teitgen convened a meeting on the Visiting Mission’s proposals and discussed how the plebiscite in British Togoland could be favourable for both powers. Teitgen maintained that the procedure in British Togoland should be an exception and not a “dangerous” and “regrettable”¹⁵ precedent for all remaining trust territories, stressing “the powers of the UNO [...] do not give it any right to organize a plebiscite in a territory under trusteeship, regardless whosoever it is, but just to supervise it”¹⁶.

14 PRAAD (Accra), RG 3/5/2073, the Economist: The future of Togoland, 20 November 1954: 2.

15 ANOM, 1AFFPOL/3340/1, Note (without number), without date: 2.

16 ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2182/2, Procès-Verbal (without number), 14 November 1955: 1.

Furthermore, Teitgen was against the establishment of the four voting districts that the visiting mission had recommended because they would “prejudge the results of the vote” and lead to the “balkanization of Africa”¹⁷. They eventually agreed to hold two separate referenda in British and French Togoland, whereas the latter would decide upon French Togoland’s permanent inclusion into the French Union. The French were under time pressure: announcing the French referendum too early would risk the UN linking the future of British and French Togoland; announcing it too late would risk linking it with the Gold Coast’s near independence, which would lead to a young independent African state, whose anticolonial voice would have great weight in the UN. To thwart demands for equal treatment of both territories, the French would not announce their plebiscite before the British referendum was over. Teitgen solicited the assurance from his British counterpart “that the questions asked during the plebiscite in British Togoland did not refer, even indirectly, to the fate of French Togoland”¹⁸. A possible reference to Togoland reunification or independence outside the Commonwealth or the French Union were to be rejected at all costs.

In the upcoming sessions before the Trusteeship Council and the General Assembly, the British and French tried to assert their terms of the vote (Thullen, 1964: 160–161; Welch, 1967: 120). Olympio protested that he “knew no reason why the plebiscite could not be held in 1957 in both Togolands” (GAOR, 1955: 352). He held “[i]f there was any difference between the two plebiscites proposed by the Mission, it was only a difference in timing” (GAOR, 1955: 349). The French on the other hand argued that due to the state of development of French Togoland, a plebiscite in the foreseeable future parallel to that of British Togoland was not possible (TCOR, 1956a: 60, 75, 94). Since for many anti-colonial states the early sealing of the first independence of an African colony trumped the unification of Togoland, the General Assembly was divided and amendments favouring the pro-unification position were defeated, albeit narrowly (Amenumey, 1989: 257–258).

Ultimately, the questions were formulated in such a way that France and Britain could hope for a confirmation of their agenda. The people in British Togoland could vote for

“[T]he union [integration]¹⁹ of Togoland under British Administration with an independent Gold Coast”, or

17 Ibid.

18 Original: “il searait d’autre part préférable que les questions posées lors du plébiscite au Togo britannique ne se réfèrent pas, même indirectement, au sort du Togo français”. Ibid.

19 Today’s confusion around the HSGF’s claims concerning the “union” between Ghana and Togoland can be traced back to the Indian draft resolution, which changed the wording of the ballot from “integration” to “union” because it

“[T]he separation of Togoland under British Administration from the Gold Coast and its continuance under Trusteeship, pending the ultimate determination of its political future”.

Thus, the people in British Togoland could choose between either independence or the status quo. Skinner assesses that the “ framing of the plebiscite question reflects the extent to which the reunificationists had lost – or had been excluded from – control of the mechanisms through which the future of the trust territory would be decided” (Skinner, 2015: 153–154). The British willingly left open the question of whether British Togoland would gain independence as a federal state of Ghana or be subsumed under a unitary constitution. The question divided many unificationists and dominated much of the campaign, which was riddled by ethnic divisions and political manoeuvring.²⁰

The British Togoland Referendum

The referendum was held on 9 May 1957. As predicted, the northern section voted overwhelmingly for integration, whilst in the southern section the vote was divided between the Guans and Akans, opting for integration, and the Ewes, opting for separation. Overall, 54,785 to 43,976 voted in favour of integration.

The UN plebiscite commissioner attested that the plebiscite was held in an “ atmosphere of absolute freedom, impartiality and fairness” (GAOR, 1956b: 467). Especially Ewes criticised the result because it degraded them to an ethnic minority within Ghana and further removed them from the Ewes in neighbouring French Togoland. While the association with Ghanaian independence symbolised an anti-colonial victory for Nkrumah’s CPP, it was tantamount to an anti-colonial defeat in the eyes of the Togoland and Ewe unificationists. After the referendum, a delegation of the Togoland Congress made one last attempt before the UN. They agreed that the referendum was impartial but not interpreted correctly. The French feared that the question of the southern section could be reserved until the referendum in French Togoland²¹ but a resolution taking note of the plebiscite commissioner’s report decided upon the termination of the trusteeship agreement of British Togoland. Since the UN did not want to consider the different election results in the north and the south, Antor maintained:

sounded less aggressive and “ would leave open the question of the nature of the union of Togoland with an independent Gold Coast” GAOR (1955: 437).

20 Nugent’s (2002) analysis of the referendum, however, concludes that ethnicity played only a minor role in the referendum.

21 ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2182/3, Procès-Verbal des entretiens franco-britannique des Directeurs, 17-18 May 1956: 2.

“The plebiscite had, however, been held simply because the United Kingdom, having discovered a new kind of colonialism – the colonialism of the Commonwealth Club – wanted the Gold Coast to join that club as a larger, wealthier, and more desirable member than it would be were Togoland under British administration not integrated with it. In 1946, when the Trusteeship Agreement had been signed, the people of Togoland under British administration had already been under United Kingdom administration for thirty-two years. At no time during that period had it been suggested that they should be called upon to decide their own fate [...] If for thirty-two years Togoland under British administration had not been qualified to decide its own fate, it might be asked by what miracle it had been transformed within two years into a country fully qualified to express freely the wish to be self-governing. The truth was that [...] Togoland was therefore to be sacrificed to satisfy the requirements of the new colonialism of the United Kingdom and France” (GAOR, 1956a: 17–18).

The northern integration-favouring part of British Togoland eventually became the Northern Region of Ghana, while the southern separation-favouring and predominantly Ewe inhabited Trans-Volta-Togoland became the Volta Region.

The French Togoland Referendum

In June 1956, a month after the Togoland referendum, the French National Assembly passed a framework law with an of autonomy statute: while conferring more powers to French Togoland’s political institutions, thereby turning it into an autonomous republic, at the same time, the statute was intended to definitively integrate the territory into the French Union. The framework law foresaw a referendum in which the people of French Togoland could choose between the new statute and the continuation of trusteeship. The decision was thus either for the French Union or a simple step backwards. In July 1956, the French submitted an urgent request at a special session of the Trusteeship Council, inviting the UN to supervise the planned referendum in French Togoland (TCOR, 1956b: 299). The request came as a surprise since a couple of months earlier the French delegate had ruled out a referendum during the Trusteeship Council’s last session. Yet, the Council rejected the French request in a 7:7 tie vote (TCOR, 1956b: 342).²² The Suez crisis, the war in Algeria and the unificationists’

22 The seven Administering Authorities (Australia, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Italy, New Zealand, and the United States) supported the proposal; the seven non-Administering Authorities (Burma, China, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Syria, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) opposed it. The distribution of votes is

past accusations of election rigging gave the Council much reason for its decision. The Council might have agreed to oversee the referendum if France would have agreed to revise the outdated electoral list, but the non-administrating Council members based their opposition to the proposal on several grounds: neither did the Council have enough time to consider the question nor had it been authorised by the General Assembly to supervise any referendum for the purpose of terminating the Trusteeship Agreement. While autonomy did not equate independence, sending United Nations observers could be seen as an endorsement of the referendum's results.

After the Council's decision, the French representative stated that France would refuse to be a party to any procedure which would delay the consultation. The referendum would, therefore, take place at the appointed time and under the conditions envisaged but in the absence of United Nations observers (TCOR, 1958: 8). Since the referendum was part of a law that had already been passed by the French National Assembly, the French were anyhow legally bound to proceed with the referendum.

Amenumey (1989: 286) holds that "Over the succeeding months it became clear that the [French] Government tended to conduct this popular consultation in such a manner as to achieve the particular results it wanted". As unificationist parties were not allowed to participate in the committee revising the electoral lists, they again called for an electoral boycott. Therefore, the referendum led unsurprisingly to a landslide victory in favour of the new statute. At a special meeting of the Trusteeship Council in December 1956, France announced to request the termination of the Trusteeship Agreement based on the referendum. The Council send the question to the General Assembly, which dispatched its own Visiting Mission to examine the implementation of the new statute. The mission concluded that the statute "represents a very significant step in the achievement of the objectives of Article 76 of the Charter and of the Trusteeship Agreement" (TCOR, 1958: 58), yet, it called for new Legislative Assembly elections on the basis of universal suffrage and UN-supervision to decide under which political party the trusteeship status would be lifted (TCOR, 1958: 55-56). In 1958, for the second time in its long-continuing history of electoral observation, the UN was to oversee again an election in Togoland. But this time, bound by the guidelines of the UN observer mission, to everyone's surprise, the CUT led by Sylvanus Olympio emerged as the clear winner. Internationally disavowed France did not interfere in the transfer of power and Olympio led Togo to independence in 1960.

not mentioned, but can be deduced from the speeches of the Council members.

The New Regions Referendum and Western Togoland Secessionism

Is the history of referenda in the Volta Region repeating itself? No. Unlike the unification movements of the decolonisation era, the Western Togoland secessionists of today are neither calling for the reunification of Ewe- nor of the former two Togolands. Crossing linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries, the HSGF represents nonetheless a straightforward revival of the territorial nationalism propagated by Tolimo of the 1970s, itself a successor to the Togoland Congress of the 1950s, the Togoland Union of the 1940s and the *Deutsch Togobund* of the 1920/30s. For his part, Kudzordzi (2016) makes no secret of his Germanophilia and glorification of the *Deutsch Togobund* as the national boundaries of the longed-for state are based on the borders drawn first by German colonial officials. Yet, these national foundations will hardly mobilise the masses. This is also the reason for a remarkable parallel to its predecessors: While the HSGF embraces a Western Togoland identity (Kudzordzi, 2016), it simultaneously propagates an Ewe identity (Kudzordzi, n.d.). Like the Togoland Congress before it, the HSGF's base is in Ho, in the middle of the Ewe-speaking areas of the Volta Region, where it recruits its following largely from Ewe-speaking populations. Western Togoland nationalism undoubtedly benefits from the comparatively weak economic and infrastructural development of the Volta Region, leaving many Ewes with a sense of neglect, disenfranchisement and being turned into an ethnic minority within Akan-dominated Ghana. As such, Western Togoland nationalism propagated by HSGF is neither the same as Ewe nationalism, nor can it be neatly separated from it. Much like the unificationists in the 1956 British Togoland Referendum, the HSGF tried to mobilise the population by portraying the 2018 *New Regions Referendum* as a territorial attack on the Ewe, who see that the borders around them are once again being changed by outside interests.

The 2018 *New Regions Referendum* also shows noteworthy parallels to the 1956 British Togoland Referendum. In 1956, the majority of Southern Togoland's former Buem-Krachi district, mainly inhabited by Guans and Akans, voted overwhelmingly for integration into an independent Ghana, while the Ewe-majority in the southernmost Kpandu and Ho District voted for separation (Coleman, 1956: 73). After the 2018 *New Regions Referendum* the border between today's Oti and Volta Regions runs almost parallel to this voting pattern. While the HSGF railed against the referenda in the region, it has always rejected proposals to campaign for a referendum on secession on the pretext of an excessive danger of manipulation by Ghana. It is more likely, however, that the HSGF knows it cannot achieve a democratic majority.

Conclusion

Contrary to the HSGF's allegations, there can be no doubt that the British Togoland referendum was democratic, legal, and largely free of manipulation. But were the conditions of the referendum sufficient in terms of decolonisation? Hardly, because the referendum reflected rather colonial strategy than popular initiative or democratic emancipation from colonial rule. The current contentions of the Western Togoland secessionist over the British Togoland referendum of 1956 cannot be meaningfully understood through a methodological nationalism, but only transnationally, that is, in the context of the French Togoland referendum. Considered together, these two referenda reveal a colonial complicity as both consultations were organised and international supervision was requested when the framework conditions safeguarded the desired result for France and Britain. By convincing the UN of the democratic support for their thesis, France and Britain prevented a simultaneous referendum in both territories, gerrymandered the Ewe and Togolese vote and thereby converted the two seemingly democratic referenda into colonial instruments to legitimise the division of Togoland.

In view of the recent secessionist outbursts of violence, Ghana is anxiously turning its gaze to the former British territory of Cameroon, where the UN supervised a referendum in 1961, after which the Muslim majority of Northern British Cameroon joined Nigeria and the Christian majority of Southern British Cameroon joined French Cameroon. Even though John Dring served as the British plebiscite administrator in both referenda, the voting districts in British Cameroon, unlike in British Togoland, were considered separately by the UN. Yet, a standalone independence of the territory was not on the ballot either and 60 years later secessionists from precisely this remaining English-speaking region of Cameroon are now fighting for the independence of "Ambazonia".

As the first in a series of UN-supervised referenda in the decolonisation era, the 1956 British Togoland Referendum illustrates the power which Administering Authorities held over them. The UN shares responsibility in this history, as UN-supervision was unintentionally complicit in legitimising French and British territorial interests. This was also made possible by the UN's involvement in a colonial discourse in which the introduction of Western-style democracy in general and independence referenda in particular played a necessary role – not in the emancipation of the electorate but in the "maturing" of dependent peoples. The French Union and the Commonwealth no longer exist in the form in which they were conceived after World War II. Nevertheless, the UN-supervised referenda that were conceived to integrate the Togolese territories into them, still influence African democratic politics today.

Frederick Cooper cautioned African history scholars to neglect paths not taken and alternatives not followed as this “risks misunderstanding not only the past, but the extend and limitations of alternatives for the future” (Cooper, 2008: 196). As for Togoland – the precedent of UN electoral supervision – one such path not taken was to hold a simultaneous UN-supervised referendum in both British and French Togoland. The unification movement has been calling on the UN since its inception to organise first a plebiscite on Ewe unification and later Togoland reunification. If the unificationists’ request for a simultaneous referendum had been granted, the Ewe votes alone would not have decided the matter. But if the CUT’s electoral victory in 1958 provides any indication that Togoland would have voted for reunification in a simultaneous referendum, or at least for the continuation of trusteeship, the map of West Africa might look different today. Even with the same event of a defeat, it would have taken the wind out of the sails of today’s secessionists. May the unwillingness to take this path be a lesson for future UN electoral missions.

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