Kate Skinner’s excellent new study, *The Fruits of Freedom in British Togoland*, examines the status and significance of ‘the British Togoland question’ over the period 1914-2014. Originally part of the German protectorate of Togoland, British Togoland was administered by the British government from 1914 onwards, first under the League of Nations’ mandate system and subsequently as a United Nations trust territory. After a plebiscite in 1956, the territory was integrated into the Gold Coast and became part of independent Ghana. The book traces the origins and evolution of the political movement known as Ablɔɗe (‘freedom’ in the Ewe language), which opposed this integration and sought reunification with French Togoland (the other ‘half’ of the original German protectorate, which was administered by the French until 1960 when it became the independent Republic of Togo). It is based on meticulous consultation of a wide range of archival material, printed sources and private papers, as well as dozens of interviews with Ablɔɗe activists on both sides of the Ghana-Togo border.

In Skinner’s hands, the ostensibly parochial question of the status of a small UN trust territory becomes a window onto wider debates about decolonisation, African nationalism, citizenship and political activism. In many respects, *The Fruits of Freedom* is an unusual kind of history. It takes an uncommonly long view of the British Togoland question, covering a hundred-year period and cutting across conventional colonial/postcolonial divides. Moreover, Ablɔɗe does not sit squarely within the national history of any one country. Instead, Skinner shows how closely the movement’s fate was bound up with the changing fortunes of the Gold Coast (later Ghana) and with those of French Togoland (later Togo). Yet Ablɔɗe was neither a project of ethnic nation-building nor a case of ethnogenesis. Not only were there many ‘native’ Ewe beyond the borders of British Togoland (in the coastal area around Anlo, for example), there were also many people within the territory for whom Ewe was not a first, or even a second, language. Moreover, activists did not seek to establish an ethnic homeland, but a multiethnic polity with the same boundaries as the original German protectorate. The book thus serves as a timely reminder that African languages can serve as vehicles for projects other than ethnic nationalism and that such projects can summon wider, more cosmopolitan publics. Finally, *The Fruits of Freedom* shifts deftly between scales, from the local to the international, in an attempt to do justice to the ‘geographical mobility and intellectual range’ (p. 256) of the Ablɔɗe activists themselves.

The book’s seven chapters reflect its impressive reach. Chapter one serves as an introduction to the Togoland question and to the implications of writing the history of a political movement ‘from below and from within’, as Skinner succinctly puts it. Chapters two and three show why teachers played such a prominent role in the movement. Skinner argues that teachers were an educated rural intelligentsia rather than a wealthy elite and were subject to the...
expectations and pressures of the rural communities around them. Chapter two focuses on the role that formal schooling played in offering new avenues for social and material advancement and shows how inseparable issues of individual status and livelihoods were from wider questions of progress and ‘development’. Chapter three focuses on adult extra-mural education. Designed to prepare Africans for citizenship, Skinner shows that these classes also provided a kind of rural public sphere where educated Togolanders could talk politics and make contact with other potential activists.

Chapter four examines the way that conversations held in these educated circles spilled out into, and were in turn shaped by, vernacular debates, often conducted in Ewe. Of particular value here is Skinner’s focus on Ewe language texts written by Togolanders, many of which she has collected from activists’ own ‘tin trunk’ archives. Several of these draw on powerful kinship-based idioms to describe the position of British Togoland, with the territory often portrayed as an ‘orphan’ or ‘stepchild’ at the mercy of hostile forces within the household. Equally central to such texts are vernacular ideas about ‘freedom’, which Skinner discusses at some length. On Skinner’s reading, freedom was defined both negatively against forms of servitude and positively as ‘having a state of one’s own’ (p. 143). Skinner’s material also suggests, though she does not make this point explicitly, that freedom might be understood as a component or outcome of relationships, with activists hoping to draw on certain kinds of dependent relationships in order to free themselves from others that they associated with British rule. Far from being of parochial importance, then, vernacular idioms were an important source of ideas about the future of British Togoland and this flourishing print culture can be seen as a popular counterpart to the formal petitions submitted by activists to the United Nations. Texts served to forge connections between activists and, as Skinner argues convincingly, can be read as ‘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’ (p. 25).

Chapters five, six and seven show the remarkable persistence of this constituency of British Togolanders in the years after the plebiscite of 1956. Chapter five examines the fate of the reunificationists who were forced into exile in Togo between 1958 and 1961. The centre for these refugees was the town of Kpalimé, where activists and writers more or less took up where they had left off. In particular, Skinner documents the role of a local newspaper, Ablőde Safui (‘Key to Freedom’), an important vehicle for ‘debating what it meant to be a citizen of a newly independent state and how an individual should go about the business of “making politics”’ (p. 172). The presence of the refugees made the Togoland question a pressing concern for French Togoland, as well as for Nkrumah’s newly independent Ghana. Chapter six extends this focus with a fascinating discussion of the overtures made to the reunificationists by Togolese president Gnassingbé Eyadéma (as Skinner explains, a rather unlikely ally), in the context of the rocky postcolonial relationship between Ghana and Togo. It also shows the persistence of concerns about the unequal treatment of British Togolanders in Ghana. Chapter seven suggests that the Togoland question sits awkwardly within existing interpretations of postcolonial Ghanaian politics, notably the conventional distinction between ‘elite’ and ‘populist’ traditions. Skinner argues that although the question has never quite been at the centre of national debate in Ghana, neither has it entirely disappeared from view.

Densely argued and packed with rich empirical material and careful analysis, the history of Ablőde that Skinner tells is painstakingly pieced together from over a decade of research on both sides of the border. Skinner has reconstructed an extensive network of Ablőde activists, writers and supporters, who might otherwise have been left out of the historical record. The
*Fruits of Freedom* is replete with biographical sketches and personal encounters which bring the book to life and the reader is conscious that it is not only the political activist who must forge relationships, make connections and follow leads. If ‘making politics’ was a personal business for Ablɔɖe activists, Skinner shows that writing history is too.

*The Fruits of Freedom* is a history of a ‘nation that never was’, of a movement that never quite got off the ground. Skinner is frank about the difficulty of how best to frame Ablɔɖe, but seeks to turn this into a strength, arguing that it helps historians to get a better hold on the ‘contingencies of decolonization in Africa’ (p. 3). On the one hand, it is hard to see the movement as anything other than a failure, on the other, it has had a ‘surprisingly long post-colonial tail’ (p. 168). Skinner discusses its legacies in modern Ghana, one of which is a powerful mistrust of ‘politics’ among former activists. But Ablɔɖe also remains a powerful rallying cry in contemporary Togo. When Togolese citizens debate the meanings of ‘freedom’ (*ablɔɖe*), describe themselves as ‘orphaned’ by the death of their first president, Sylvanus Olympio, or appeal to the United Nations or the African Union to assist them in their plight, they are drawing (often unwittingly) on the movement’s legacy. Ultimately, as Skinner shows, Ablɔɖe was about ‘the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the nature and form of self-government, and the place of trust territories in the international order’ (p. 257). Insofar as these questions remain urgent for Ghanaian and Togolese citizens today, Ablɔɖe may well continue to cast a long shadow.