

Sanwi Separatism in Historical Perspective. Politics of Belonging in the Côte d'Ivoire-Ghana Borderland

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Côte d'Ivoire's transition to independence and the following decade were complicated by the claims to separate statehood brought forward by the Anyi dominated kingdom of Sanwi, located in the extreme south-east corner of the country, on the border with Ghana. The separatist crisis had two main phases: 1959-1966 and 1969-70. It had dramatic effects on Sanwi and its people, who suffered repression and enduring marginalization, and affected the inner dynamics of the Ivorian ruling group. The external impact of the crisis was largely limited to Ghana-Ivory Coast relations. Kwame Nkrumah's interference marked the 1959-1966 phase (he hosted and funded a Sanwi government-in-exile), although his shows of interest in the crisis were by and large tactical maneuvers governed by his policy towards his arch-rival, the Ivorian president Houphouët-Boigny.

We should not underestimate the lasting effects of the Sanwi crisis on all levels of society in the Ghana-Ivory Coast borderland and beyond. A most evident effect was the local power vacuum caused by the weakening of the Anyi-Sanwi ruling group, while minority autochthonous and immigrant communities took their chances to secure their hold on the land. The Nzema community, for instance, expanded in numbers and scope, with a dramatic growth in both seasonal and permanent cross-border mobility from the Nzema areas of Ghana. Any substantial evidence to back up Abidjan's recurrent fears of Ghana encroaching into Eastern Ivory Coast, points not to any planned efforts on the part of Accra, but rather to the informal micro-politics of borderland communities.

At the same time, the linkage between Sanwi separatism and Ghana confirmed historic trends easily documented from the 18th century onward, and consolidated Sanwi self-representation throughout the 20th century as a bridge between Akan East and West (Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire), capable of sharing a common discourse with both sections.

After pacification was reached, the Sanwi royal institution came home in 1981 from a long exile in Ghana, having developed an intimacy with the Ghanaian culture of Chieftaincy. Currently the Sanwi royal stool is enhancing its influence and visibility on the bases of renovated assertions of Sanwi identity, in the wake of the new situation determined by the discovery of huge offshore oilfields located in Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire border areas.