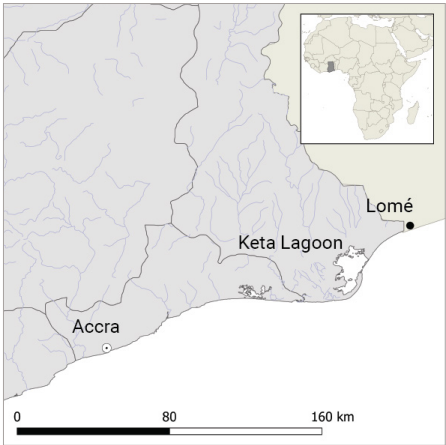
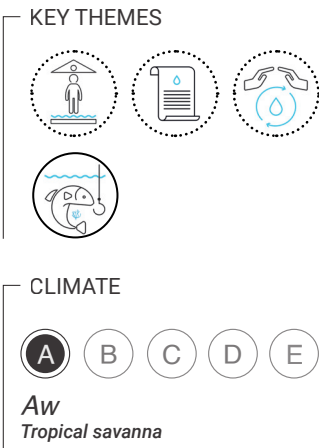




# Keta Lagoon: Uncovering Suppressed Heritage Practices for Sustainable Wetland Management

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Current efforts to integrate heritage practices in the sustainable management of wetlands in postcolonial nation-states assume that these practices have always existed in the forms they are now. The colonial order, whether deliberately or otherwise, suppressed many local traditional practices. The postcolonial authority’s adoption of Western science invariably continued the suppression, albeit in a more liberal form. In the Ramsar Convention, natural scientists were assigned the role of conserving wetlands “for the benefit of humankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of natural properties of the ecosystem.” This became known as the wise use principle. This article highlights the history of the Keta wetlands and proposes an integration of key knowledge holders into management plans for a wise use of wetlands in postcolonial states. The colonial and postcolonial regimes made the knowledge holders invisible. Modern imaginaries – Western legal institutions, Western science and Christianity – were privileged over local heritage practices. It therefore requires historical and heritage expertise to uncover local sustainable knowledge for integration into the Ramsar management plan, hence a wise use of wetlands in postcolonial states.



< Fig. 1 A fisher using sail on canoe, 2021 (Source: Jonathan Doe).

## Introduction

On August 14 1992, Keta Lagoon, located in Ghana, was designated the Keta Lagoon Complex Ramsar Site on The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention) list. Although Ghana as a contracting party to the Ramsar Convention has five wetlands listed, the focus of this article is on Keta Lagoon, the largest and most complex wetland in Ghana, and the Anlo-Ewe people who live on the banks of the lagoon. Anlo-Ewe people migrated from the ancient town of Notsie to the banks of the Keta Lagoon in the early sixteenth century (Amenumey 2008). Their institutions and belief systems made them well-adjusted to the vagaries of the Keta Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean (Akyeampong 2001; Nukunya 1969). From the ethnographic record, they attribute female and male genders to the Keta Lagoon and the Atlantic ocean respectively. Many decades after that, the Anlo-Ewe people came under the control of Danish, German and British colonial regimes. Their chiefs, priests, diviners (*boko*) and belief systems became entangled with colonialism. Local belief systems were also suppressed in colonial and postcolonial regimes. Here, the local fishing practice, *atsidza*, will be highlighted as a *wise use* and as a sustainable fishing practice. In this article, “local belief systems” is used interchangeably with “heritage practices.”

## Suppression of Heritage Practices during Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts

In postcolonial Ghana, Western science, Western legal regimes and Christianity occupy a dominant position. All three have been perceived as vehicles of modernity and hence modern imaginaries that influence policy choices. Christianity was introduced during colonial

encounters and embraced by a large section of the people. The local belief systems were thus perceived as non-Christian, non-scientific and antimodern (Akyeampong 2001). Colonial laws were established to regulate knowledge holders, local belief systems and practices in relation to the Keta Lagoon. For instance, the authority of the priests of Togbi Nyigbla and Mama Bate – a male and female god respectively among Anlo-Ewe – was undermined regarding how the lagoon could be used. In 1914 the priests in charge of gods banned the use of sails on the lagoon. The reason for the ban is not clear from the archival records. Suffice it to say, there were sails on European slave ships docked at the nearby Danish slave fort, Fort Prinzensten (Ghana Museums and Monuments Board). The people observed the ban from 1914 until 1920s when the colonial district commissioner teamed up with the paramount chief to remove the ban. Though sails are part of contemporary fishing practices in the area (fig. 1), the agency of knowledge holders had been chipped away. In the same period, some of the mangroves along the banks of the lagoon were seen as shrines, and thus were (p)reserved as such. In 1915, a sub-chief who had been converted to Christianity destroyed the mangrove-shrines in his jurisdiction as an attempt to “christianize” all his subjects. Then, in 1959 the colonial government introduced the concept of a forest reserve along a portion of the lagoon, but there was no relationship between the reserve and local belief systems nor was the agency of the priests of Togbi Nyigbla and Mama Bate engaged in management of the forest reserve (Asafu-Adjaye 1961).

The trend of suppression of local belief systems and knowledge holders took place under colonial direct rule and indirect rule regimes. The forest reserve laws and the laws that banned some of the local practices were implemented

through the chiefs of the Anlo-Ewe. Thus, the priests, diviners and leaders of the shrines were sidelined. When Ghana attained independence in 1957, Christianity and its associated modernity continued to be on the rise, while the local belief systems, as well as holders of such knowledge forms, continued to be suppressed. The logic in modern philosophy that allowed for the suppression of local beliefs took on new forms when Ghana ratified the Ramsar Convention in 1988. The lagoon was seen as a scientific object, and it was scientists who determined who should play what role in its management. The involvement of local knowledge holders followed the same logic as the colonial indirect rule system. The Keta Lagoon management plan acknowledges that the traditional council of Anlo owns the Keta Lagoon. It is further acknowledged that the Anlo traditional council determines who is a community member; the council also resolves conflicts among traditional members.

Furthermore, the council makes “by-laws for wetland resource management based on local knowledge of the ecological dynamics and institutes measures to deter local people from using wetland resources” (Tufour 1999, 27). However, the composition of the traditional council did not directly include priests or diviners, nor was any role directly assigned to them during either the colonial or postcolonial period. Again, the notion of ownership does not include the families and clan heads, some of whom could disagree with the traditional council (Doe 2022).

Instead, traditional authorities, district assembly and civil society groups, which are mainly modern institutions, are recognized as having “decision-making” roles (Ministry of Lands and Forestry 1999, 17). These groups are not direct knowledge holders, as was the case in 1914. There is no clear-cut role for diviners (*boko*),

Togbi Nyigbla or Mama Bate priests.

### The *Atsidza* Fishing Technique

The *atsidza* fishing process begins with cutting stems and branches of trees from the bank of the lagoon or on the mainland. The number of trees depends on how big the fisherman wants the *atsidza* to be. The cut branches are allowed to dry for about three weeks. The fisher then piles the branches in a boat and ferries them to a desired part of the lagoon, which is usually in deeper areas (*Uego*). The branches are dropped at a specific spot to cover a radius of about three meters. The fisher uses stronger and taller stems for three purposes. The most obvious is to serve as a barrier to prevent the lagoon currents from dispersing the branches. The *atsidza* eventually becomes compact and firm, trapping sediment (mainly anaerobic mud, sand and shell) and creating soft ground for fish to burrow in. When it is left for about a year, the bigger fish (tilapia) go deeper by digging holes in the ground, and the *atsidza* becomes a covering. The other purpose is that the poles serve as a signpost and a warning to other fishers that there is a deposit of branches there. The final purpose of the taller poles is as a stamp of ownership. In some cases, the fisher hangs a bundle of red cloth and cowries, signifying that the *atsidza* is under the protection of his god, so everyone in the community knows the *atsidza* is owned by a particular member of the community.

With the poles showing, it is clear that the *atsidza* occupies space in the Keta Lagoon and has an owner (fig. 2). However, if the poles become weak, it is pushed down by the lagoon currents and it is assumed that no one owns it, so others can harvest the fish residing in the *atsidza* or they may find different uses for the



^ Fig. 2 A fisherman using the atsidza technique in the Keta Lagoon, 2021 (Source: Jonathan Doe).



^ Fig. 3 Seine fishing net, 2021 (Source: Jonathan Doe).

branches. Therefore, *atsidza* ownership is subject to time: it is temporary, with no guaranteed ownership. After a period, the space can revert to another person in the community. There is yet another factor that is important for the duration of ownership: labor. Sure enough, there is labor involved in the cutting of the trees and the making of the *atsidza*. Continued maintenance is needed to ensure the lagoon currents do not overpower the poles. The individual's time and labor become intervening factors in the duration of ownership. It can be said that the time-labor factor, the involvement of personal gods and the belief in the instructions of local priests regulate(d) communal resource ownership in the Keta Lagoon. Given the time-labor factor, most fishers prefer seine net fishing with wooden canoes and sails. However, the *atsidza* fishing technique is sustainable in that it does not pollute the lagoon and does not necessarily deplete the fish stock, but serves as a temporary haven for the fish from those who use the seine net method daily (fig. 3).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the search for sustainable heritage practices for wetland management in postcolonial states requires a deep look at heritage practices that have been suppressed in the colonial and postcolonial periods. There are some that remain visible, like the *atsidza* fishing technique, but they require a shift from dominant modern imaginaries to see how they innovatively complement sustainable measures of SDGs 14 and 17. The combination of archival research, participant observation and awareness of colonial direct and indirect rule would help uncover sustainable heritage practices and their knowledge holders. The current roles ascribed to some local leaders were convenient for the colonial enterprise and may not be helpful for fully integrating heritage practices in wet-

land management plans. Communal ownership is one viable concept that could be part of management plans. Finally, when heritage practices in Aŋlo are better known, they could promote Ramsar's *wise use* philosophy.

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