

Before, Along and After the Railway: a Short History of Keteke in Togo

An historical accompaniment to the Keteke art installation.

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Keteke is more than the history of a railway. It is a history of how movement, territory and power were reorganised through a colonial line that connected selected points while marginalising others. Following Ingold (2015), this distinction between paths of wayfaring and point-to-point lines of transport offers a useful way of understanding both what preceded the railway and what the railway imposed.

The history of Keteke can therefore be read as a movement from pre-existing pathways and regional mobilities, through colonial territorial restructuring up to the railway's postcolonial and contemporary afterlives as we argue in this short history of *Keteke*, the Ewe name and reference for the railroad.

Before the Railway

Before colonisation, the territory that became German Togoland was not a coherent political unit awaiting connection, but a mosaic of communities, chiefdoms, trading towns and regional

networks extending towards the Asante kingdom in the west and Dahomey in the east and commercial centres farther north (de Haan 1983; van Criekinge, 1989). Footpaths, market routes, caravan networks and migration already structured mobility across the region (Gayibor, 1997).

In Ingold's (2015) terms, these precolonial mobilities can be understood as lines of wayfaring: paths produced through movement itself, rather than point-to-point transport routes imposed in advance. Colonial descriptions of "opening up" or "penetrating" an inaccessible *hinterland* therefore obscured existing and diverse geographies of movement. De Haan (1983) demonstrated that northern Togoland had previously been oriented more strongly east-west, while German colonial infrastructure increasingly redirected these relations southwards towards Lomé.

The creation of German Togoland following the establishment of a German protectorate in 1884 therefore involved more than drawing borders around an existing territorial entity. Colonial rule gradually sought to remake this heterogeneous landscape administratively and economically. Roads, taxation, labour regimes and large infrastructural works like railway lines were important instruments in that process of exploitation and "civilising the other" (van Criekinge, 1989). For example, Godfernaux (1911), a prominent French ingeneur at that time, referred to the railway as "the most powerful factor of civilisation" and "the most effective tool of occupation".

Thus, the territory was not simply *charted* in the cartographic sense; particular routes and centres were elevated at the expense of others (de Haan, 1988). What colonial officials perceived as *uncharted territory* was therefore never without geography or knowledge. Rather, colonial rule imposed a new way of charting it: rendering some routes legible and strategic while marginalising others. It was "uncharted" only from the perspective of the colonial project.

The Colonial Railway: Producing a Territory

Railway construction began during German colonial rule as part of this larger territorial project and introduced a different kind of line: surveyed in advance, connecting predetermined points and reorganising movement around the logic of transport (Ingold, 2016).

The first lines linked Lomé to Aného (1905), the “cocoa railway” to Kpalimé (1907), followed by the *hinterlandbahn* or “cottonrailway” to Atakpamé in 1913. The names given to these lines already reveal much about their purpose. Railway construction was principally designed to channel agricultural commodities towards Lomé and its harbour, thereby integrating the colony more directly into European markets, often at the cost of local trading systems (van Crielinge, 1989), benefiting foreign- over local interests (Nkrumah, 1965). By the end of German rule, the network totalled about 327 km extended to 450 km by the French colonial power (Schroeter, 1961; Baltzer, 1916).

Antosch (2004) similarly describes the expansion of the railway as giving colonial authorities greater access to existing and expanding produce of cotton, coffee, cocoa, palmoil, rubber, peanuts and coconuts in the interior. Thereby, the colonial state was not merely connecting places that already constituted a coherent *hinterland*. Through roads, railway lines, taxation, labour recruitment and commodity production, it was actively remaking territory and economically orienting towards “interior railway heads”, the capital Lomé and its “port concentration” (van Crielinge, 1989). The jetty through which this export geography was materialised is depicted in a historical image in the installation. Thus, the railway did not simply traverse a colonial territory; it helped produce one.

Yet, the apparent technological modernity of the railway depended profoundly upon African labour. Before trains could accelerate the movement of people and commodities, people first had to move for the railway. As such, a 1908 agreement between the German colonial government and the company constructing the Lomé–Atakpamé line stipulated that the administration would attempt to provide approximately 2.000 compulsory labourers continuously for railway construction (Deutsches Kolonialblatt, 1909):

“Das Gouvernement wird versuchen, der Bauleitung auf Anfordern zum Bahnbau zunächst ständig etwa 2.000 Pflichtarbeiter zu stellen, übernimmt hierfür jedoch keine Verpflichtung.”¹

Historical research indicates that fluctuating numbers of low wage workers were recruited particularly from Sokodé, Kara and Sansané-Mango in northern Togo and brought south to work

¹ Accessed 20 August 2026: https://staatsbibliothek.ewigerbund.org/viewer/image/kbl_1909/

along the line (de Haan, 1983). Gayibor (1997) demonstrated that almost double the amount of workers were ‘needed’ during construction of the *Hinterlandbahn*, with an average of around 3.500 people working on ‘the line’ each month. Of these ‘labourers’ only approximately one-third had voluntarily entered wage employment and high mortality rates among railway workers made ‘recruitment’ increasingly difficult (de Haan, 1983; *ibid*). An exploiting phenomenon also described in neighbouring colonies (van Criekinge, 1989). The other two-thirds ‘worked’ to meet ‘tax obligations’ and were often forcibly recruited (*ibid*). Gayibor (1997) estimates that more than 10.000 northern workers participated during the construction of the Lomé–Agbonou section alone.

The railway was thus built through a striking contradiction. It represented speed, mechanisation and colonial claims to technological progress, yet depended upon walking, carrying, digging, clearing and other forms of intensive often exploitative bodily labour. Before the railway could move, people had to move for the railway. Once operating, the railway remained deeply dependent upon Togolese labour. By the end of German rule its workforce reportedly consisted of 768 “African employees” compared with only 26 “Europeans” (Schroeter 1961). Mechanics and firemen were predominantly Togolese, particularly Ewe, while locomotive drivers remained German and German was maintained as the operational language (*ibid*). The railway might therefore be understood simultaneously as an apparatus of colonial authority and as an infrastructure materially produced, operated and sustained largely through African labour.

In August 1914 however, the First World War abruptly ended this German colonial rule. British and French forces invaded Togoland and German authority collapsed within weeks (Schroeter, 1961). Yet describing this simply as a conflict between European imperial powers obscures the position of the colonised population: Togolese people were drawn into a war that ultimately concerned not whether they would remain colonised, but which European empire would administer their territory. This transition is represented in the installation through the image of the mass grave and the Anglo-French occupation stamps, where the former reads:

Ici reposent des soldats togolais inconnus, décédés le 13 août 1914

*lors des combats pour les causes allemandes – Here lie unknown Togolese soldiers who died
on 13 August 1914 while fighting for the German cause.*

The inscription captures a painful contradiction of colonial warfare: Togolese soldiers died in the service of a European empire, yet this memorial commemorates them collectively, without names. Alongside Germany's celebration of Togoland as a *Musterkolonie*, or "model colony," their anonymity raises the question: a model for whom? Whose achievements were celebrated, and whose lives remained unnamed? The proximity of Captain Georg Pfähler's named grave sharpens this contrast: the German officer is remembered as an individual, while the Togolese soldiers remain an anonymous collective. Read together, these graves invite us to consider how colonial hierarchies can persist in the ways those who passed away are remembered.

This grave - or rather these graves - form part of an interwoven landscape of colonial remains in which the railway, military movement and the deaths of Togolese soldiers are materially connected. Following Stoler (2008), the graves, the tracks, abandoned stations and the stories carried by local families can be understood together as *imperial debris*: remnants whose meanings emerge through their relations and through the ways they continue to inhabit the present.

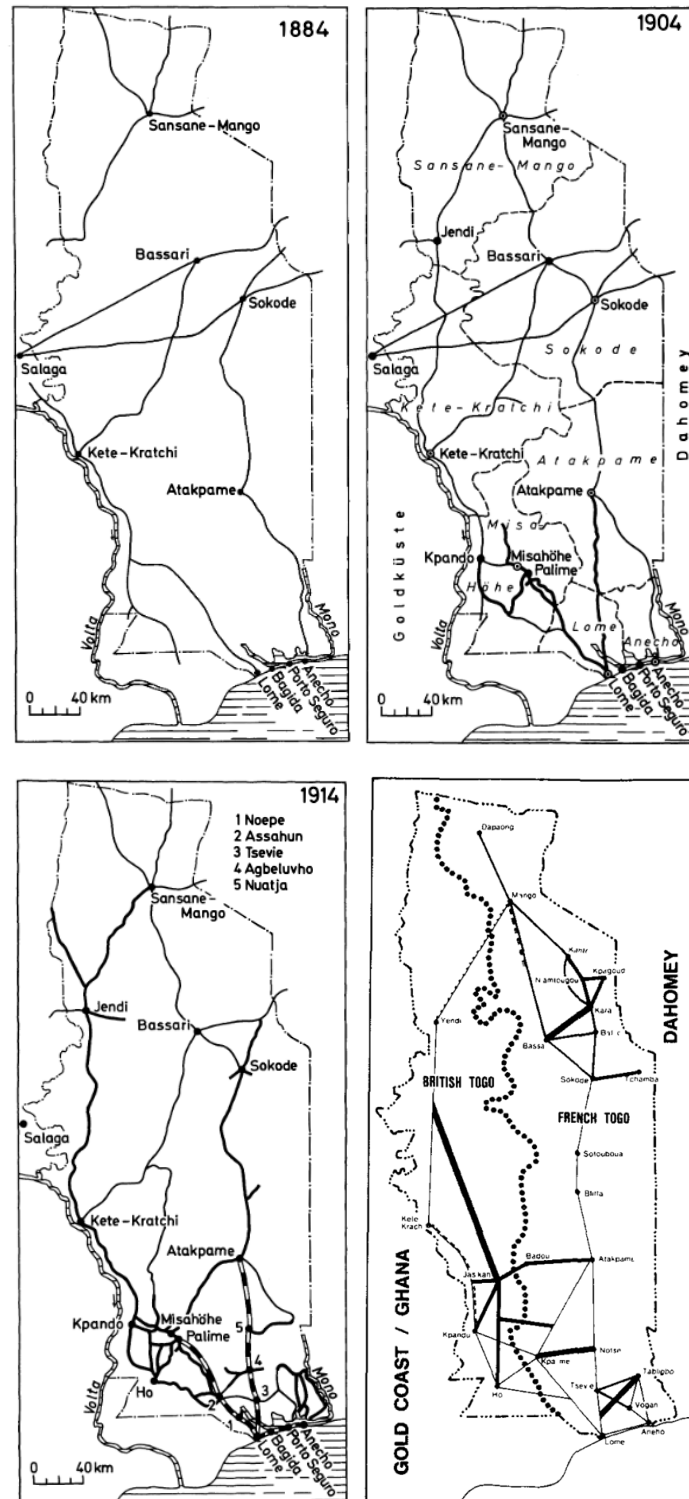


Figure 1 Pre-colonial infrastructure, 1884 (left); Administrative division in the German colonial era and infrastructure, 1904 (middle left); Infrastructure, 1914 (middle right); Post German colonisation and Anglo-French Occupation 1920 (right) – compiled from de Haan (1983; 1988)).

After the war, the territory lines were once again redrawn and ethnic groups split between borders. The postcolonial border reordered mobility once again, converting historically connected communities into different national subjects while leaving everyday movements to continually unsettle that division (Adotey, 2025). In the art installation, this is echoed by James and his companions - two Ghanaian and two Togolese hunters - moving together across a line that is politically real yet socially rather porous.

German Togoland was divided between Britain and France. The western portion of German Togoland was eventually administered together with the British colonised territory called the Gold Coast, while the entire existing railway network fell within French-controlled Togo (Schroeter and Ramaer, 1993). French colonial rule therefore largely inherited the spatial framework established by the Germans rather than replacing it. Yet, railway investment remained rather limited until the 1930s when the main line was extended northwards towards Blitta.

Unfortunately, construction farther towards Sokodé was begun but never completed (Schroeter and Ramaer, 1993). Ironically, both de Haan (1983) and Gayibor (1997) emphasise that many of the - often involuntary - labourers who had constructed the railway were recruited from these northern regions yet again. Thus labour coercion did not disappear with German rule either and the railway therefore belongs not to a single German colonial episode but to a longer colonial restructuring of territory, labour and mobility (ibid). This geography of labour and unequal territorial development also resonates with Ibrahim Mahama's contemporary artistic engagement with northern Ghana as a site of memory, labour and material circulation (Alibo, 2026).

Post Colonial Infrastructural Afterlives

Independence in 1960 did not erase the railway's colonial geography. Togo inherited an ageing network and material that required substantial post-independence investment designed largely around export corridors rather than territorial integration (van Criekinge, 1989). At the same time the state continued investing in rolling stock and industrial railways, while road transport – just

like in former neighbouring colonies – increasingly started to displace the railway as the preferred mode of transportation (World Bank, 1973; van Criekinge, 1989).

However, formal independence did not necessarily end externally oriented relations of power. The persistence of the railway's colonial spatial logic after independence can be situated within a wider postcolonial political economy in which formal sovereignty did not necessarily dissolve structures of external dependence; a relationship subsequently theorised through 'Françafrique' and neocolonialism (e.g. Taylor, 2019; Keese, 2008; Nkrumah, 1965). This shines through new dependencies but can also be found in narratives of postcolonial neglect of 'infrastructural legacies'. The latter risks reproducing a colonial nostalgia in which European infrastructure appears as a benevolent legacy (such as in Baltzer, 1916) and subsequent decline as evidence of African failure.

This nostalgia is also echoed in the art installation through a German colonial stamp collection issued a decade after the loss of the colonies. This transformed former imperial possessions into collectible objects of memory and longing, detached from the violence and extraction through which they had been constituted. Thereby, the idea that postcolonial states simply failed to maintain the infrastructures Europeans had "left behind" also sits within a broader paternalistic development discourse of the early independence period, in which former colonial powers continued to position themselves as arbiters of what constituted rational African development (Der Spiegel, 1964).

Today its afterlife is even more fragmented. Rails disappear beneath vegetation and roads; former stations remain as buildings, memories or ruins; parts of the track have become paths and informal crossings. Settlements formed around stations; markets responded to railway traffic; people crossed the tracks, followed them and incorporated railway spaces into everyday mobility. What was once conceived as a fixed line of colonial transport has become entangled with other forms of movement and everyday life. Built primarily for colonial exports, Keteke also served everyday mobility in independent Togo, carrying an estimated 1.5 million passenger journeys annually around 1980 (Gayibor, 1997).

What survives is not simply a colonial ruin but an infrastructural afterlife. Following Stoler's (2008) notion of *ruination*, these remnants can be understood not as inert traces of a finished colonial past, but as material formations through which colonial histories continue to inhabit the present

and this is perhaps where the grey area between *charted* and *uncharted territory* materialises once again. This makes *Keteke* more than the history of a railway. It is a history of territory being made, mobilised and continually remade: from the routes and political geographies that preceded colonial occupation, through a railway that sought to reorganise them around Lomé and the colonial export economy (van Criekinge, 1989) to a postcolonial landscape in which the physical line remains while its meanings and uses continue to change.

Keteke is therefore not simply the history of a railway, but of a territory repeatedly made and remade through movement: first through paths and regional exchange, then through colonial lines of extraction, and today through the fragmented afterlives of those same infrastructures. We followed that historical line on foot - not merely to retrace it, but to encounter what its maps, routes and colonial purposes could never fully contain. *Wayfaring Keteke*, in turn, transforms that transport line back into a path of “wayfaring” exposing the in-between in all its diversity (Ingold, 2016).

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