WHY STUDY EWE?

Ewe has increasingly gained prominence in Togo and also Ghana as a subject of study at all levels of education up to tertiary level. Although French is regarded as the official language in Togo, Ewe and Kabiye are the two indigenous languages being promoted for official use in the media, education, courts and other institutions. Together with Ga and Akan, Ewe has also become an important indigenous language in southern Ghana. It is the lingua franca used in radio and television broadcasting, community newspapers, adult literacy programmes and other forms of literature.

Above all, English and French are present in the Ewe speaking communities of Togo and Ghana, with some speakers being bilingual and multilingual. For these reasons, Ewe has become the vehicle for understanding the cultures and peoples of both Togo and Ghana. Since the language forms part of the Gbe language cluster spoken beyond Togo and Ghana as far as Benin and Nigeria, Ewe has come to be crucial to the study of literatures written in this vast region.

WHAT'S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

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As a tradition, Ewe religion is centred on belief in one supreme god called Mawuga Kitikana or simply Mawu. Beneath this omnipresent divinity are other lower level divinities such as Yewe the god of thunder and lightning, Afa the god of divination and Yewe’s young brother, and others like Eda, Nana and Mamiwota. The Ewe practice their religion through these lower gods. When members are initiated under the god Yewe, their old names become taboo. If they continue to use such old names, they can be put before the council of priests and sentenced to pay a fine. Thus when members get new names they do not keep their birth names. Ewe boys for instance get their names on the seventh day after birth and undergo circumcision. The girls have their ears pierced on the seventh day after birth and are also named on this day.

Ewe funeral ceremonies are often extravagant events involving many activities spread over a month’s span. It is only recently that the funerals are taking place over a single weekend in order to allow distant relatives to travel to and from work.

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WHO ARE THE EWE PEOPLE?

The Ewe people are an African ethnic people of approximately 5 million people who live in Togo extending across the borders with Ghana and Benin. They trace their origin from the Oyo region of western Nigeria from where they are believed to have migrated to Notsie region in Togo during the later part of the 17th century. An interesting legend helps to explain the wide spread of Ewe speaking people across the Volta region. After their arrival in Notsie, the Ewe are said to have been ruled by a ruthless king called Ago Akoli who ordered all the elders to be killed in order to erase oral history. But as the legend goes the Ewe kept one wise elder called Tegli hidden from sight. Notsie was surrounded by a large defensive wall that prevented the Ewe from escaping Akoli’s oppressive rule. From time time the Ewe consulted Tegli who gave them a plan of escape. For many days, Ewe women would moisten the wall enclosure in one place after washing their clothes. When the wall was weak enough, all the Ewe gathered in one place. Tegli, the hidden wise elder, drew the ‘Sword of Liberation’ while summoning the gods and piercing the wall proclaiming the words, “O great God Kitikana, open the door for us so that we walk through!” The Ewe were thus able to settle along the coastal regions that later came to be associated with the slave trade that tormented the Ewe people.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

Ewe, also written as Evhe or Eve, is a cluster of related tonal languages or dialects collectively known as Gbe. Although the Ewe dialects have distinct varieties, speakers from different localities understand each other and can identify each other’s linguistic peculiarities. These Ewe dialects include Anlo, Tonu, Avenor, Dzodze, Watsyi, Gen, Aja, Xwla and other inland sub-dialects characterized as Ewedomegbe. Ewe is a written standard language based on the various regional dialects with a mutually intelligible coastal content. The standard variety has emerged across the dialectal contact sites such as schools, marketplaces and churches.

The Ewe are a patrilineal society who trace their origins and relationships to a common male ancestor. Each member belongs to a clan whose lineage is believed to have descended along the male line. In turn, each lineage has its own symbols, ancestral shrine, communal property and is headed by the eldest surviving member of the clan. The lineage head has the final say in matters relating to decision-making and conflict resolution. He regulates all dealings involving lineage interests including land disputes and religious observances (as chief priest). All religious offerings are presented to him thus serving as the link between the living and the dead. Being a patriarchal society, Ewe men are the heads of their households and act without interference from their wives except from their fathers.