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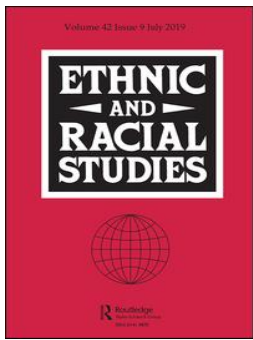
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“Because migration begins from the villages”: environmental change within the narrations of the Ewe diaspora

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the role of environmental change within the narrations of the Ewe-diaspora, a sub-group of the Ghanaian diaspora. It focusses on the role and the impact of the diaspora when it comes to coping with environmental change at the place of origin. It highlights the nexus with international migration.

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Introduction

Academic literature refers to the Ghanaian diaspora as among the most organized and well-researched communities (Orozco et al. 2005; De Haas 2006; Manuh 2006; Nieswand 2008; Orozco and Garcia-Zanillo 2009; Nilsson 2011; Faist, Fauser, and Reisenauer 2013; Otieno Ong’ayo 2016). Much of the literature points to the interaction within this group once it has reached the place of arrival, often located in the cities of the Global North (e.g. Mazzucato 2008; Sinatti and Horst 2015). In contrast, our research concentrates on a subpopulation of the Ghanaian people, the Ewe-diaspora, living across Ghana, Benin and Togo. This diaspora population partly originates in Keta, a place in Ghana that has been experiencing severe environmental changes for several decades now, i.e. coastal erosion and floods. One could expect that these problems are reflected in the narratives and activities of the diaspora. Our research thus looked at how the phenomenon of environmental change is reflected in the transnational living of the diaspora, including the impact of their actions on the place of origin.

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If – and this is an often repeated assumption in the current debate on migration from the Global South to the Global North – environmental change is among the key drivers of future migration, we can expect to learn from the case of “Keta in the world”. What is the role and impact of the diaspora when it comes to coping with environmental change at the place of origin? When does environmental change become an issue within the narratives of the diaspora and translates eventually into a driver of international migration? Our article highlights this relationship between the place of origin and the diaspora abroad on these questions. Up to now, no research has given attention to this issue. Our article responds to this research gap.

The focus of this article is on the presentation of the rich empirical material gathered during several field stays in both the places of origin and arrival. The authors decided to provide only the most recent insights from the literature on environmental change and to keep the theoretical discussion on the diaspora formations concise. Next, we present a brief overview of the Ghanaian diaspora in the world and the Ghanaian Ewe diaspora. After explaining the methodology of the empirical research, the place of origin is introduced. The emphasis here is on the results of the empirical research, which are themed around the role of environmental change as reflected in the narratives of the diaspora (4.1), the contemporary organization of the diaspora (4.2) and the ways of “helping out” in the form of investments and remittances to keep the bonds alive (4.3). The conclusions summarize the main findings.

Insights into the theoretical debate

For our research three strands of academic literature are relevant to theoretically frame our empirical results: first, on diaspora formation and the linkages between globalization and transnational communities; second, on the diaspora and their new role in development policies and third, on environmental change and migration.

First, globalization has not only affected the size and speed of flows of people between places, but has also transformed the relationship between people of the diaspora and their places of origin. This has led to a greater connectedness between modern diasporic populations as opposed to those of the past (see, Faist, Fauser, and Reisenauer 2013), resulting in sustained transnational connections and practices that have transformed diaspora formations and actions (Story and Walker 2015; Itzigsohn 2017).

In this article, we thus use the term diaspora in a general way to refer to a web of people abroad who are part of a certain ethnic group living outside the place of origin, identifying as an ethnic group (here: the Ewes). In the literature on the diaspora, the term often relates to a pole of attraction that is usually identified with the country of origin and thus, more generally, with the nation state.¹ In this approach, “diaspora” is strictly linked to the idea of

ethnic communities spread over a *national* territory and the emphasis is thus on the ethnic origin of these communities (Kothor 2012). Other understandings highlight the importance of the social (Sheffer 2003) and political ties (Bauböck 2010) that the diaspora maintains with the country of origin.

Among the authors who have proposed criteria to define “diaspora” in light of such approaches, Safran (1999) and Cohen (1997) refer to a variety of markers that all diasporas have in common (being dispersed from a centre, retaining a collective memory, showing feelings of alienation in the place of arrival, regarding the homeland as the place to future return and contributing to the homeland). Most important, “Imagining the homeland is a potent force in diasporic communities, and diaspora cultures mediate ‘in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement of living here and there’” (Akyeampong 2000, 185ff). In this line of thinking, diaspora is also a space to remake one’s self and to overcome the social liabilities of birth. Space is considered an important element within diaspora formation, which is partly determined by the kind of rights available and accessible to migrants, as well as by the activities they engage in within the urban space in which they reside (Finlay 2017). Consequently, this helps to shape the identity of diaspora groups which then contributes to shaping their agenda for establishing associations and projects, including transnational projects. However, transnational projects are largely shaped by the local historical contexts partly highlighting the heterogeneity of diaspora groups (Safran 1999; Brubaker 2005; Bulmer and Solomos 2012; Guarnizo 2017). The Ewe are, as mentioned before, connected with different national territories. What binds them together is a common history, culture and language. As we consider the Ewe diaspora to consist of formal and informal actors, we prefer to talk of a diasporic formation.

Mainly drawing on the literature of Cohen (1997) and Vertovec (1999), actors such as the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration have recently added other interpretations to the term and placed them in the context of development policies. Most importantly, they point to the link between the state and the diaspora understanding the latter as part of state politics, to strengthen the role of the state in the creation of so-called “diasporic policies” (cfr. Manuh 2005; Bulmer and Solomos 2009). Some scholars (e.g. Guarnizo 2017; Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler 2019) have argued that this state–diaspora relationship has been initiated by the recognition of states, especially sending states, that migrants are crucial to their development (through, for instance, remittances and skills transfer) – thus reversing previous negative notions of the diaspora. This positive discourse on the potentials of the diaspora has greatly contributed to the proliferation of diaspora institutions, driven mainly by sending states hoping to engage their diasporic populations in socio-economic development (Goethe and Hillmann 2008; Story and Walker 2015; Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler 2019). At the same time we observe an increase in number and importance

of migrant self-mobilizations and organizations (e.g. hometown associations), demonstrating the urgency of the agency of migrants in shaping the course of development (Orozco and Garcia-Zanillo 2009; Otieno Ong'ayo 2016; Guarnizo 2017; Itzigsohn 2017).

It is sometimes argued in the literature that migrant organizations are more likely to first focus on their incorporation into the host country before possibly turning to transnational projects and/or engaging in developments in the origin country (Itzigsohn 2017). Though, more successfully integrated migrants are better positioned to contribute to developmental projects back home. This underscores the relevance of conducting more thorough scientific research into the relationship between processes of integration of diasporic groups and transnational engagements within the context of developmental projects in the origin countries. While the debate on the role of diaspora groups as social agents receives more attention, it is also argued that diaspora associations might not be as independent as expected since state officials are increasingly interfering in their work (c.f. Itzigsohn 2017).

For the purpose of our research, we were interested in understanding how the migrant trajectories of the Ewe migrants that were part of our study encouraged diasporic formations, which are important to understand the dynamics of the global dispersion of Africans. Acknowledging that migration is a fluid process with non-linear, flexible routes embedded in a mobility regime (Grillo 2007; Schapendonk 2010), we interpreted migrant trajectories as “the collective and visible outcome of numerous individual migrating persons” (Spaan and Hillmann 2013, 65), hence to some extent as “collective biographical paths” that might be linked to diasporic formations.

The third strand of literature case looks at the complex relationship between environmental change and migration. The extractive logic of current capitalism is thought to provoke further out-migration in many places in the developing world (Sassen 2014). Estimates already indicate that migration will take as many people away from environmentally challenged areas as it will bring to the same risky areas (Black et al. 2011, 25; Hillmann et al. 2015).² Internal migration still accounts for the majority of total global (Black et al. 2011, 32). However, in opposition to the general assumption that people will naturally migrate when faced with an uncertain environment and displacement, it is argued that more people remain in place and that the most vulnerable population strata are trapped in immobility (Black et al. 2011). In many places, people will demonstrate a high level of resilience to cope with external stress such as environmental degradation. Thus, the agency of migrants is presented as an important factor contributing to the resilience and/or adaptive capacities of people residing in the communities of origin. Additionally, those who stay may receive financial help and other support resources from family members or networks abroad (Black et al. 2011, 32). The regional context is decisive to understand the nexus

between environmental change and migration (Teye and Owusu 2015, 240–41f). What follows is thus a brief outline of the regional setting of Keta, homeland of the interviewed Ewe.

The Ghanaian and Ewe diasporas

According to the UN, diasporic populations in total have grown faster than the world population. Especially the Ghanaian diaspora has evolved from out-migration since the late 1950s. Its numbers increased in the late 1970s (Anarfi, Awusabo-Asare, and Nsowah-Nuamah 2000) as a result of eroding socio-economic conditions including massive unemployment, political instability and deepening poverty, among other factors (Anarfi, Awusabo-Asare, and Nsowah-Nuamah 2000; Manuh 2006; Quartey 2009). From the colonial times until the mid-1960s, Ghana was the desired destination for many people, especially from nearby countries like Nigeria, Togo, Burkina Faso. At that time, political stability served as a pull factor for many others, including displaced persons escaping conflicts in the West Africa sub-region. Mass expulsion of foreigners from Ghana in 1969 considerably reduced the country's economic activities (Manuh 2006). This downturn later resulted in the mass deportations of Ghanaians from Nigeria in 1983. Since then, large numbers of Ghanaian professionals have continued to migrate to Europe, North America, Asia, the UAE and other parts of Africa, causing a “brain drain” in Ghana. Building on colonial ties, professionals and students emigrated mainly to English-speaking countries. According to the UN³ outward migration from Ghana in 2015 numbered 801,644, representing 2.84 per cent of all citizens of Ghana. The Ghanaian diaspora is known to maintain multiple links with Ghana as well as with other places, both at individual and group level, but there are currently no reliable estimates (Akologu 2005; Orozco et al. 2005; Orozco and Garcia-Zanella 2009; Nilsson 2011).

Over the years, the focus of the activities of the diaspora has been on sending remittances.⁴ This financial help has proven to be a huge source of support for the governments of the home country (Quartey 2009). Further, there is a transfer of skills and knowledge from diaspora members to the home country, for instance through state-supported programmes by international development agencies with government support and special programmes.⁵ The transfer of resources for socio-economic development from the diaspora to the home country is often coordinated through associations founded by expats, thus enabling Ghanaians abroad to foster solidarity and affirm their identity (Owusu 2000; Orozco and Garcia-Zanella 2009). Approximately 500 Ghanaian hometown associations exist globally (Orozco and Garcia-Zanella 2009). Ghanaian churches and ethnic associations are another stronghold of the diasporic formation (Akyeampong 2000, 208).

The Ewe diaspora is one of the most active ethnic-based Ghanaian diasporas. The Ewes (sometimes: the Anlo-Ewes) are an ethnic group that

inhabits the southeastern coastal area of Ghana, which includes Keta and its surroundings (Kumassah 2009) but also extends to neighbouring Benin and Togo. Historically, the Ewes were divided among three colonial powers: Great Britain, Germany and France. All of them speak the Ewe language and share their common history, which enables them to thrive within the same alliance in the diaspora. Migration is a central and recurring topic in the narratives of the history of the Anlo-Ewe, dating from the late fifteenth century (Ladzekpo and Dance 1995). Until today, the exodus and final settlement at the current location are memorialized annually at the Hogbetsotso Za festival in Lomé. Historically, the Ewe left their country and moved abroad (Hiheta 2005) during certain periods: during the process of decolonization, in the early years of independence and during the 1970s, when Ghana, as well as Togo, experienced political and social conflicts and crises. There is no recent literature on this diasporic formation.

Methodology

The empirical material of this article originates from three sources.⁶ Most relevant is the material we gathered through the interviews with Keta people in the diaspora. We rely on a sample of twenty-one interviews with migrants in the Ghanaian diaspora – fourteen men and seven women – conducted in 2016 and 2017. All interviewees are originally from around the region of Keta and currently live in the US (New York City) and Europe (Berlin, London and Milton Keynes). The main method for sampling was “snowballing”. Initial contacts were made with Ewe associations and through friends and families, both in the US and Europe, and sometimes through networks. The interviewees were between thirty-eight and sixty-eight years old and the average age was around forty-nine years. Only three of the interviewees arrived in the US or Europe within the last decade. This empirical material is supplemented with a second source, namely findings from a survey conducted in Keta and surroundings⁷ in 2015 and 2016 (Hillmann and Ziegelmayer 2016). A third source was added to understand the interviews with the diaspora in a more comprehensive way. That is, we analysed another seventy interviews that were held in 2015 and 2016 with community leaders, migrants, fishermen and experts in Keta and Accra. This helped us to embed the narratives from the diaspora in the general migratory pattern of the place of origin, Keta.

Keta, the place of origin

The town of Keta is located on a sandspit between the Gulf of Guinea in the south and the Keta Lagoon in the north. It has a long history as a small port and important marketplace for traders from neighbouring regions and

countries. The still existing Fort Prinzenstein is a stony testimony to the slave trade that took place in this region once ruled by the British, Dutch and German colonizers. After the 1960s, the booming town experienced an economic decline due to the opening of the central harbour in Tema, as well as the shift of the regional capital to Ho in the northern Volta Region in 1968. Furthermore, the Aliens Compliance Order (1969) led to the expulsion of foreigners. The local market in Keta, neighbouring Togo, relied precisely on the trade with foreigners and at the same time was exposed to erosion and environmental degradation. In the 1960s it was widely believed that nearby Anloga would become a major industrialized site due to the discovery of oil. Regional development policies favoured industrialization and large-scale infrastructure projects throughout the region (Akyeampong 2001). In consequence, livelihoods were seriously affected by the loss of arable land, forest resources and the disappearance of creek and clam fishing, traditionally done by local women. In the last thirty years, this development was accompanied by out-migration, as we understood from our interviews.

In this area, out-migration is mostly a seasonal movement, varying from several months to a few years, e.g. for fishing or trade. People move upstream and to other coastal cities for work. Many also venture abroad to destinations in West Africa, mainly Ivory Coast (Abidjan), Togo (Lomé), and Nigeria. Local fishermen temporarily move along the coast as far away as Sierra Leone and even Angola, following the fish stocks. Interviews with fishermen and local experts reflected the need to be mobile due to the diminishing catches along the coastline, partly due to the overfishing by European and Chinese trawlers and the insufficient meshes used by many local fishermen. Women, who traditionally sell the fish at the market, argued that the changes in Keta started a vicious cycle of downgrading, thus producing out-migration.

The NRF-survey revealed that migration is a stable component of the livelihoods of the local households: one quarter of all households had one or two circular migrants, most of whom moved to and from (the city of) Accra and usually stayed away from home for less than six months. Only 5 per cent of the households reported they had members who left for more than two years. Circular migration was directed mostly towards (Greater) Accra and the Keta Lagoon (68 per cent). Return migrants, defined as persons who lived away from home for more than three consecutive months during the past five years, lived in 27 per cent of the interviewed households. In 71 per cent of all cases, out-migration was directed towards Accra, while 8 per cent ventured into neighbouring African countries such as Benin, Nigeria and Togo. Very few migrated to Europe and the US via Accra. No agencies facilitated the migration. About one third (30 per cent) of all interviewed households said that they received remittances from migrated household members, generally between 100

and 499 Cedi⁸ per year (which contributed to an average income of around 4,000 Cedi per year). Despite the fact that 167 out of 288 households (60 per cent) said they had experienced damage to personal property or health due to extreme environmental incidents, environmental change was not reported as a major motivation for out-migration (only by 0.7 per cent of all respondents). In sum, there is a culture of migration in Keta and environmental change was not perceived as a key factor in the decision to migrate. We now consider the notions of environmental change within the narratives, the changing dynamics within the diaspora itself and the linkages between the diaspora and the place of origin.

The narratives of the environmental crisis

Environmental change was repeatedly highlighted in the interviews with our respondents. The motivations to migrate internationally were largely centred on major “turning points” in the personal lives of the interviewees and their respective networks. It was possible to establish that the scope of environmentally related migration was mainly internal, i.e. to nearby cities, towns, or major cities like Accra (approximately 170 km away) or Kumasi and Takoradi. Here, the degradation of the environment was central to the decision to leave. Abgozo is a 39-year-old single man with three children who was born in Accra but was later brought to the village. He migrated to the Bronx, New York, because he had read on the internet that there were many Ghanaians there. About his motivation to leave, he said:

So, the fish is the livelihood of the people. Actually, my mother, the whole of my family, they rely on the fish, because they do fishing business. When the fishing business collapses, they have nothing to do anymore. [...] So all that is to go to Accra. So, me, my brother, my cousin, all of us, we decided to go to Accra ... Because migration begins from the villages. I migrated myself from the village to Accra, because of the changes in the environment which is: there are no fishes in the water bodies and all that. So, I left for Accra and then in Accra I decided to come here again ... Most of the houses are gone with the sea. A lot of people migrated because of all this. (Agbozo_p.10_35)

As for international migration, none of the interviewees migrated to Europe or the US solely because of the direct effects of environmental change, be it the destruction of houses or diminished fish stocks by flooding or sea erosion. At first sight, the migratory decisions of these interviewees were mainly personal, albeit some families and other networks supported the migration process. In the second instance though, professional performance turned out to be entangled with environmental change, such as the loss of fishing opportunities. Paul is a 66-year-old married man with four children. He migrated to New York, where he now lives, at the invitation of one of his brothers. He said:

Our family, the whole village I would say is very poor, the fishing industry back there is no longer yielding fish, a lot of fish, the young ones who get out of school have to go the city to look for jobs. So, at that time, it was beneficial if you had somebody outside Ghana who could help you go over there, get some education, and work basically for money so as to help others back home. (Paul_p.2)

The respondents' narratives regarding environmental change in Keta mainly reflected how the livelihoods here were based on farming and fishing. However, erosion and dehydration of the water bodies have more generally affected the sources of revenue. Kwame is a single man with a child and lives and works as a business analyst in Milton Keynes. He first came to the UK to study, lived in Ireland for twelve years and then returned to the UK. Thinking back he told us: "My link back home as we are talking now, our family home in both Keta and Anyarko, half of it has been taken away by the sea" (Kwame_p.7_45). The narratives point to the belief that too many people fish in the same waters every day, giving the water little chance to replenish with fish. Because the area lacks adequate industry and employment opportunities migration has become a survival strategy. Agbozo reaffirmed this pattern when talking to us:

In one way or the other one can also say environmental change also has to do with international migration because environmental change affects the people also in the city, not only in the villages. When there are no jobs, there is nothing happening in the country. Everybody wants to leave ... There is no easy access to use water; there is no easy access to electricity. ... Everything is completely down. The farmlands are not good. The water bodies are not (producing) enough fish because there are too many people going to the same water every day. (Agbozo_p.10_35)

As some scholars suggest, environmental change alone cannot explain the process of faster urbanization (Tacoli 2009). The broader socio-economic context is crucial for the decision-making. When explicitly asked about the role of environmental degradation, things get clear. For instance, Paul narrated: "So, that erosion had a big impact on the village, on the whole village. A lot of people moved out of the village. And those, like I was saying, my brother was here at that time, so he was able to help me to come over here".

The destruction of houses has scattered family members across different regions. Floodings lowered the living standard for many. Tobgui lives in Berlin and is an event manager. He migrated to Germany to reunite with his German wife whom he had met during one of his events in Ghana. He narrates:

I drove through Keta once to see how structures have been deserted because the sea invaded the area. People don't live there anymore and those places were inhabited when I visited. But the second time I was there, there were no

human beings living there anymore ... Some had to move to nearby villages to settle since the major occupation was to fish in the lagoon. So they moved into huts, into mud houses, in the nearby villages. (Tobgui, 35-25, p.4-5)

Not everyone moved or wished to escape the crisis. Some people demonstrated a high level of resilience and exhibited their agency in adapting to the situation. People's attachment to their social and geographical space was often strong and made it difficult to migrate. Tobgui went on to say: "But there is the case that people don't move. They said, 'Why should I leave, this is my place I've lived here for years, let the sea come and kill me, fine'". This form of resilience could also be interpreted as a reflection of a limited understanding of the risks associated with ongoing environmental change. A member of the diaspora blamed this naïve understanding to the low level of public education and the lack of awareness in the region.

Certain aspects of the environmental change were thought to be natural phenomena to which the locals could adjust and still make a living somehow. Yet, the emigrants had good knowledge on what was happening in terms of environmental change caused by men. Tony is a 41-year-old married man living in London with his wife and children. He initially came to the UK to study and is now a project manager in petroleum engineering. Concerning the extraction of natural goods, he told us:

Salt mining was being done on small scale by the local people. And what happens is that the lagoon, normally it's seasonal. So I think in some part of the year the lagoon, the level of the water goes down and then you see the salt coming up; then we'll go and fetch the salt, store and sell it. Then when it starts raining all the salt goes away. The lagoon comes to the normal level and they start doing their fishing activities and all those things. That's how it's been over the years naturally. (Tony_20, p.3)

This sustainable approach changed when foreign investors arrived. They bought portions of land, taking away the livelihoods from the local people. Through their activities they polluted the water, which was the main source of drinking water for the local population. Tony continued explaining us:

So foreign investors are into business and their main aim is to make a profit. They started to do salt-mining throughout the whole year. So, whether the salt, the water level goes down or not, they will, they have means of getting their salt and that is what is affecting the local people at the moment. I think they are even drilling underground to get the salt and it's affecting the water system. (Tony_35, p.3)

The narratives about the environmental issues related to the national context. Some of our respondents mentioned *galamsey* (illegal mining) to support their claim that investors pay less attention to their responsibility than to economic gain.

Leaving Keta and finding the diaspora

As our empirical data show, the Ewe diaspora, consisted of people who identified themselves as Ewe and either originated from locations populated by Ewe or were born to Ewe parents at home or abroad. Our research reveals that the Ewe Diaspora associations [or groups] acted in various ways to increase their influence on the migrant trajectories of those coming. Apart from the more informal networks, a formalization of the association had to be set up for example when a member of the community died. Paul narrates: "But one Ewe died over here in New York ... Then from here the group started developing, let us send some books to the schools back home, let us send some medical equipment to the hospitals, let us help in general our people back home". (Paul_p.5)

Generally, the Ewe diaspora associations served as a platform where members revive Ewe culture through cultural activities and other social events, thus functioning as what Akyeampong (2000) called "a space to remake oneself". Since the Ewe diaspora also includes Ewes from Togo and Benin, support activities were structured in such a way that the needs of all the represented communities were included. A common goal was to gain strength and unity for the sake of a greater impact of development projects in the home communities. Richmond is 55-year-old married man. In Ghana, he worked as a driver with the Water Research Institute. He migrated to Germany because he had "a calling to be a pastor". He first came to Munich but then moved to Berlin and is also an active member of the Ewe Association here. He narrated:

We are Ewes, but we come from a different part of the Volta Region ... [...] we want to raise funds to support orphanages in Togo, Benin and Ghana, and so we are trying to be very strong here. We want to involve the embassies, Togo, Ghana, and Benin. (Richmond_p.8)

The diverse nature of the Ewe diaspora associations also means that consultations on a particular project or mission may take time. Due to limited resources and the need to meet the demands of the various members, projects are undertaken in turn. Issues discussed at meetings or conventions relate to both the place of residence and the place of origin. In specific cases a feedback mechanism is adopted, for example in the form of a fact-finding mission at the place of origin by association members. The selection of projects to support is rather arbitrary. Alex has lived in New York since he migrated to the US thirty-five years ago for his studies. He is an active and founding member of the association in New York. He told us:

The New York association (the United Volta Association) meets once a month. And at our meeting, we discuss social and economic issues. At times we do get requests from home, people need something and then we will come out

to the fundraising, we raise money and help ... Some of our colleagues went to Ghana and went to the school and saw how the condition was and they came and did a presentation and the association decided to help out through fundraising. (Ghanaian living in New York, Alex_25, p.5)

The Ewe diaspora associations are structured in such a way that each regional association periodically hosts all other organized groups. This seems to foster the sense of unity among the extended Ewe diaspora by providing a platform for the exchange of information and experiences on issues of common interest. Large member groups facilitate the mobilization of resources for the planned projects. This explains why the Ewe Diaspora Association (in Berlin) is reaching out to recruit new members. A large number of members contributes to a "strong voice", which is needed for advocacy and other politically oriented actions (in the place of destination and the place of origin). As such, former executives of the association remain part of the association. The definition of membership status turns out to be blurred and mainly of a strategic nature. First, the associations can leverage the vast experience in diaspora formation and related administrative issues, which must be passed on to new executives.

Second, the participation of former members is crucial to the functioning of the diaspora, also due to the perceived lack of interest and involvement of the younger generations not only in the affairs of the diaspora associations, but also in a more general sense in diaspora formation. Interviews in the UK indicated that, next to the general Ewe diaspora associations, the Ewe diaspora was organized family unions, youth associations and alumni unions, as well as hometown associations (e.g. the Council of Ewe Associations of North America [CEANA] and Ewe association in Berlin). Many of our respondents still belonged to their old students' union diaspora groups. Here, social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook have become the main tools for the mobilization and communication in Ewe language. Most of the younger respondents were aware of the existence of the Ewe and other diaspora associations. However, they explained that they did not take part in the formal diaspora organization, partly due to their tight work schedules. These "non-traditional" diaspora groups (e.g. family, alumni, youth associations) carried out as many welfare and support functions as the traditional diaspora associations. To some extent, they also contributed to the regeneration of towns in the region of origin – as the next section shows.

Helping out and keeping the bonds alive

Diaspora associations such as the CEANA also engaged in local politics, producing a new type of socio-economic organization in our region of study (Keta). Traditionally elected chiefs who resided outside Keta were still be involved in local policies and development. The main goal was to secure connections to

NGOs and to increase the contact with government officials to elicit help. In contrast to earlier times, chiefs were also selected on the basis of their resources to help develop the region (therefore called “development chiefs”), connecting internal hierarchies with exterior stakeholders. The support of individual members of the diaspora usually included remittances and other private investments, for instance in the renovation or reconstruction of family houses destroyed by the sea erosion. In particular, support for securing decent accommodation was crucial. Accommodation was very scarce, even for those who had the resources to afford it. Many houses needed to be rebuilt or renovated.

The narratives from the diaspora members confirmed to some extent the positive perception that the local population in Keta had about migration. One of our interview partners from the local population explained: “Yes, this is their diaspora, so they come back. Our economy is partly being pushed ahead by investment from [the diaspora] ... You see they bring money to the country and build houses here and send some [money] to their family”. (Informant in Kedzi, Volta Region, Ghana – 08.09.2014, p.17_30)

For families who had no relatives living abroad and who did not receive any support from networks abroad, dealing with the effects of environmental change was a challenge. Nonetheless, a few interview partners said that the need to stay and make efforts in providing for the needs of the families in the face of the environmental challenges was more rewarding and provided a sense of contentment. Investments went into houses in the origin region, even if it suffered from coastal erosion. Our interviewees emphasized that the local politicians were less concerned and supportive than the diaspora in dealing with the effects of environmental change.

The diaspora acknowledged that the environmental issues at home are bigger than the local population can handle. Consequently, the narratives shed some light on the attempts to engage leaders and political actors at least at the local level in addressing the environmental issues, even though the outcomes have been less than hoped for. Some believed that the government has not done enough to address the situation, which was why help must come from the outside. Paul underlined:

If a family is there with no relative outside the country, these people are suffering, they get sick, no help ... unless you have somebody outside the country sending you some money. So, the only thing is that we are all waiting for the government to do something. Mosquitos are all over the village, we need somebody to spray the mosquitos every now and then, so that malaria sickness can be reduced. People are dying of malaria, the government is doing nothing about it. (Paul_p.12)

The support of burials of association or family members in the place of origin appeared to be one of the key support activities of the Ewe association. The

transport of the corpse back to the hometown is crucial, but even more important is the performance of the final burial rites. The attachment of many members of the diasporic formation to their hometowns is so strong because of the belief that the natives already buried there are something like the umbilical cord (Kumassah 2009). This connection to the place of origin seems to fade with the next generation. The perceived lack of interest from the younger generation in matters concerning diaspora associations and transnational living depended on the level of socialization and cultural training given to them by their parents abroad. Though, some respondents said that their children thought of Ghana as a holiday region, others said that there were strong and repeatedly activated bonds through exchange activities.

Conclusions

We have observed a well-organized diasporic formation in the US and Europe that on the one hand sought to grow in terms of members and on the other hand was about to lose the younger generation. In the case of the Ewe, the ethnic origins of the diaspora were still relevant and the interviewed people originating from Keta felt responsible for their co-ethnics in Benin and Togo. Rituals like burying people in their hometown and the need to support members of the diaspora to preserve their culture stood out as a main reason for the formation of the diaspora organizations in the beginning. While networks played a significant role in initiating and shaping the paths of the migrants, particularly the individual educational background shaped their subsequent trajectories.

In our interviews, the issue of environmental change was an important part of the narratives on migration. Our respondents, members of the diaspora, repeatedly said that environmental change and its adverse effects had already had an impact on the migration decisions, although this mainly concerned internal migration. Migration to the urban hubs, to neighbouring countries and, in exceptional cases, to Europe and the US was a common practice triggered by socio-economic transformation, partly caused by environmental change.

In our interviews the interaction with the place of origin turned out to be still important and new forms of cooperation evolved. We were told about development chiefs who were elected mainly for their transnational ties with NGOs. We found material, social and emotional investments, especially for the regeneration of the place of origin, for instance through the support of fellowships or orphanages. The narratives underscore that these transnational actions and projects of the diaspora have been largely shaped by the current environmental change and conditions in the region of origin, Keta.

In many cases, the effects of environmental change were enough to raise concerns about development issues in the country of origin – more than a few respondents clearly indicated that fishing opportunities had already decreased. The emigrants also noted that the increased exploitation of natural resources contributed to the deterioration of living conditions in Keta. Interestingly, some of our interview partners doubted whether the local population was fully aware of the ongoing changes. They assumed that lack of public awareness and education on the effects of the environmental change was a root cause for this.

We argue that the reflections of the members of the diaspora contribute to a better understanding of the dimensions of environmental change by offering different perspectives on the issue. In other words, what happens on the spot in terms of environmental change is to be understood in the interaction with the diaspora. Thus, it is in the interaction with the diaspora, so to speak from “the outside”, that what is happening on the spot in terms of environmental change, is understood. For instance, our respondents pointed to the logic of extractive and profit-oriented behaviour that impacts on the place of origin and argued that the government and local authorities could do more to tackle the effects of environmental change. The case of “Keta in the world” shows us that the narratives of the members of the diaspora tell us about the need to take action on environmental change. The Ewe diaspora depicted here took environmental degradation as a starting point for concrete action and also involved local authorities in their actions, even though the local population was not yet fully aware of the scope of environmental change.

Notes

1. We work with pre-colonial borders, thus with the region, and that our emphasis is on the ethnic community abroad.
2. See Hugo (2013), Foresight-Report (2011), Piguët, Pécoud, and de Guchteneire (2011), Hillmann et al. (2015), Van der Geest (2011).
3. In terms of regions, in 2015 Africa registered the largest share of Ghanaian emigrants (403,038 or 50 per cent), followed by Europe (29 per cent), North America (20 per cent). ECOWAS – United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015).
4. In 2016 remittances sent to Ghana were \$2,008,000,000 with the top five countries as follows: US (\$537 million), Nigeria (\$362 million), UK (\$258 million), Italy (\$131 million) and Germany (\$105 million). (<http://www.pewglobal.org/interactives/remittance-map/>).
5. A notable example of these programmes is the Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) Ghana Health project, organized by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). For more information, see diaspora.iom.int/mida-ghana-health-project.
6. The study was part of the research consortium “New regional formations: environmental change and migration in coastal areas in Ghana and Indonesia” (NRF), which was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (2014–2017).

7. That is, in the nearby towns of Kedzi, Blekusu, Anloga, Kpeme (in Togo), Denu, Ho, as well as Accra and Tema.
8. 100 Ghanaian Cedi is equivalent to \$31 (January 2015). A fisherman earns around 2 Cedi a day, the minimum wage is 5 or 6 Cedi a day (interview 21, 2014).

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