

# Mapping Precolonial States and Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa

Henry Mohn and Martha Wilfahrt

## Introduction

Historical “fundamental causes” of contemporary political outcomes are increasingly being identified by political scientists and developmental economists. In Sub-Saharan Africa, scholars now argue precolonial state centralization explains present levels of development. Georeferencing unmapped kingdoms of precolonial Sub-Saharan Africa reveals the difference between precolonial centralized states and cultural boundaries.

## Research Task

### RESEARCH THE KINGDOM'S HISTORY

- Search historical sources for precolonial state years in existence, system of rule, method of succession, local representation, identity, key points of trade, tribute system, and status at the point of encountering Europeans.
- Find the kingdom's capital and other important villages.
- Identify important physical features in the state's territory.

### GEOREFERENCE THE KINGDOM'S LOCATION

- Use historical maps to find important villages for the kingdom (Fig. 1).
- Determine if historical villages still exist in the present day. Often, settlement remains in the same location today, but under a different village name.
- If the village cannot be found in the present, use historical maps and GIS to closely estimate the village location.
- Using all villages, estimate the kingdom's territorial extent.

## Example: Sanwi

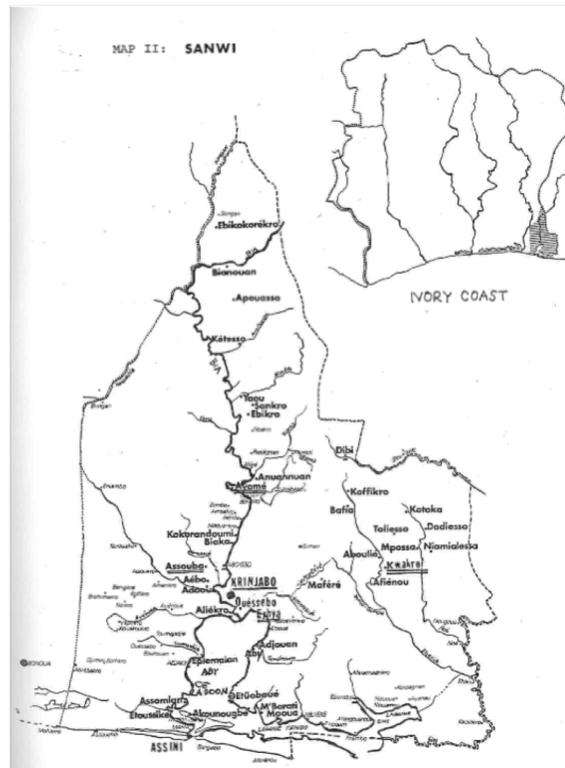


Fig. 1 Historical map of Sanwi (Horowitz 1977).

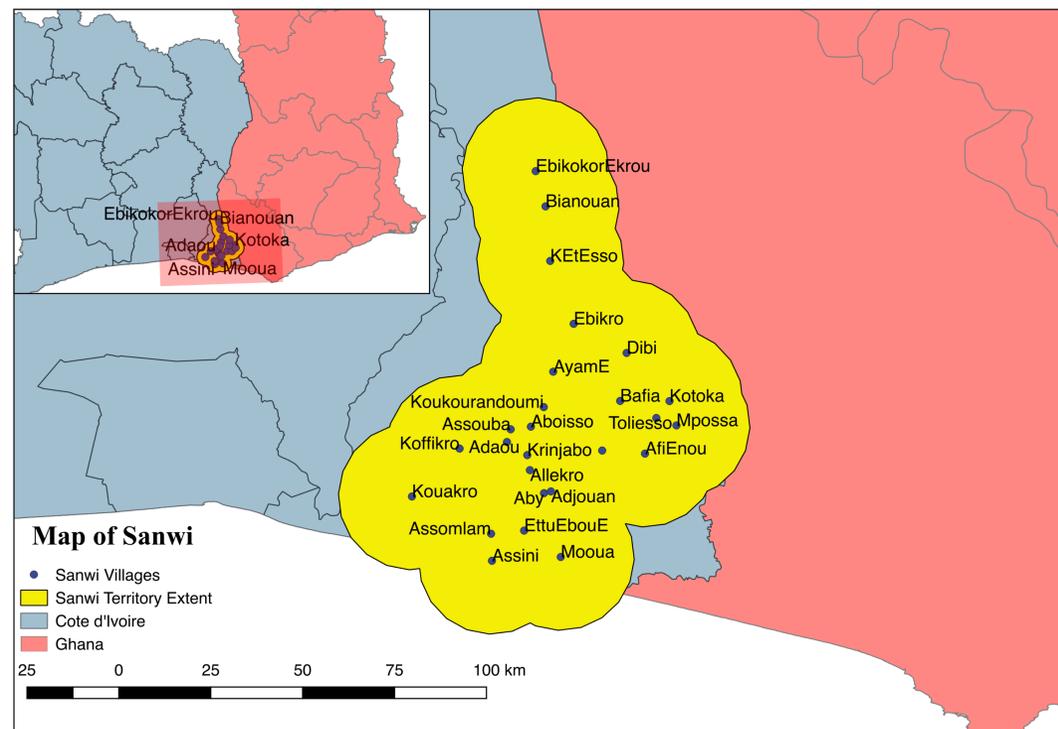


Fig. 2 GIS rendering of Sanwi territory overlaid on a present day map of Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana

Sanwi was an Akan kingdom and vassal state of the Asante Confederacy. Located in present day Cote d'Ivoire on the Gulf of Guinea, Sanwi was an important gold and slave trading state. Krinjabo was the royal capital until Sanwi was taken over by the French at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- A variety of historical sources were searched for information on the history and village locations of the Sanwi kingdom.
- Villages found in Fig. 1 and other sources were inputted into GIS.
- A buffer zone of 20 km was added around each village to estimate the surrounding regions that likely would have been controlled by Sanwi.
- When the buffers were merged together, the territorial extent of Sanwi's kingdom was visible.
- Combining all village territory, Sanwi became a clearly defined state in the southeastern most corner of present day Cote d'Ivoire, at its boarder with Ghana.

Sanwi is a rather straightforward example where the extent of the kingdom lines up with current country borders. In many cases precolonial kingdoms will extend into the borders of multiple present day countries. Additionally, as a part of the Ashanti Confederacy, Sanwi is relatively well studied. Precolonial maps of Sanwi were thus easier to find and relatively more detailed than for many other states.

## Results

- Georeferencing precolonial states has argued that precolonial past matters for cultural reasons.
- Precolonial territorial centralization does not necessarily align with cultural attributes.

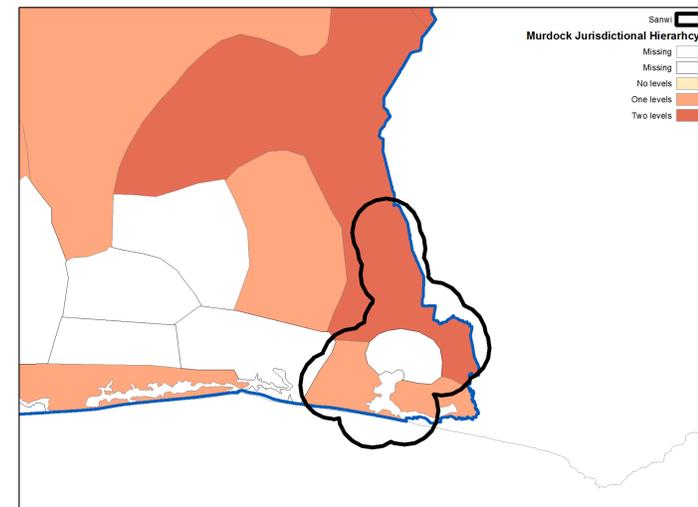


Fig. 3 GIS map of the Sanwi's region showing the divide between cultural attributes and state centralization. Jurisdictional Hierarchy refers to the level of state centralization.

## References

1. Horowitz, Richard. 1977. External Trade and Foreign Relations of Sanwi: 1840-1900. PhD Thesis. Northwestern University, Department of History.
2. Wilfahrt, Martha. 2018. Precolonial States and Precolonial Cultures: Concept Formation and Misinformation in the Historical Renaissance. Northwestern University, Department of Political Science.