

Chapter 2

The botanical diversity of the Atewa Range

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INTRODUCTION

In the early nineties, when I visited Atewa for the first time, we walked “the old geological survey road”, at that time a heavily eroded and overgrown road starting from the main road between Kibi and Asiakwa and going up to the top of the range. Later, after the road was brought back into use for timber extraction, even taxis were seen driving people up the ridge to collect whatever they needed from the forest. When walking west along a footpath located in the north (near Asiakwa), it was impossible at that time to avoid hearing the chainsaws from illegal timber extraction. One had to jump off of the path from time to time, when people carrying large planks of freshly sawn wood on their heads were almost running downhill. During this same period, the already narrow connection between the southern and northern parts of Atewa was mostly cut away by large scale illegal farming. Remembering this it is almost surprising that rich forest remains on the Atewa Range that is worth preserving.

Several foresters and botanists had already studied the forest on the Atewa Range many years before my first visit. The work of J.B. Hall and M.D. Swaine is especially well known. They were the first to recognize the forest of the Atewa Range, and of the less important Tano Ofin reserve, as a rare and special kind of vegetation for Ghana, a vegetation they called Upland Evergreen forest. With what is known today, it is clear that the Atewa Range was, and still is, a stepping stone for many forest species. During the driest periods of the Ice Ages, Atewa was at least partly covered with forest while data from sediments in Lake Bosumtwi (a lake which today is situated in the middle of the closed forest area of Ghana) have shown that forest cover disappeared from most of southern Ghana during the past ten thousand years (Maley 1991, Talbot and Johannessen 1992). Furthermore, several rare but widespread species are, in Ghana, only found on Atewa and many Upper Guinea endemics have their easternmost foothold within this range (see Figure 2.1 for examples).

METHODS

This report is based on earlier research and reports, no new field work has been carried out. Most important were the report prepared by W.D. Hawthorne (1998), who studied the forests of Ghana for many years, and the data available in the herbarium database at Wageningen. An important part of the Upper Guinea data in the database at Wageningen was digitized and updated for the ECOSYN project (1996-2005) at the Wageningen University, a research project on plant biodiversity and management of West African forests. This database currently includes data from about 67,000 herbarium specimens from Upper Guinea. The maps presented in this report are extracts from that database.

Botanical Samples in Atewa

Through the years many foresters and botanists have collected botanical samples in Atewa. To visit Atewa you do not need to plan an extensive expedition since it is in walking distance from the main Accra-Kumasi road – from Accra a visit is an easy one-day trip. As a result of this relatively easy access, several new plant species have been found for the first time on Atewa (e.g. *Aframomum atewae*). Most of the preserved samples from the area are stored in a small number of herbaria, in Ghana these are the herbaria in Legon and Kumasi, in Europe they can be found mainly in the herbaria in Oxford, Wageningen and Kew. These herbaria are in the process of digitizing their collections, and a Checklist for Atewa will be much easier to compile and much more complete when all these herbarium collections are online.