

## NOSTALGIA FOR THE FUTURE: TOGO AFTER THE COLD WAR

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*The death in 2005 of Togo's long time dictator both symbolised and facilitated the death of traditional culture and related power structures. In its place, argues Charles Piot, two new sovereigns have assumed control over the country's social, economic and biopolitical spheres: Pentecostal churches and neoliberal NGOs.*

In February 2005, Togo's dictator of four decades, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, died of a heart attack on a plane to Israel – or at least that was the official story. “Radio trottoir,” intrigued by the fact that there was no open casket at the funeral, spun the dictator's demise differently – that he had scalded himself to death in his bathtub, and that, by the time the conversations among his sons about proper burial had finished, the body had putrified and become so disfigured that it had to be withheld from public viewing at the last rites.

The dictator's death, or at least the story told on the street about his death, is spectacularly overdetermined. Not only a tale about Eyadéma's literal death and the decomposition of his body, it also reads as symptomatic of the death of the dictatorship and the era it defined. But it condenses other histories as well, most notably that of the death of culture or “tradition,” now rotting away in the villages, an end-of-tradition embodied in the un-interred corpses that litter the landscape today – those not given proper treatment because of the Pentecostal



Photo: courtesy Charles Piot

interdiction on local ceremony. Eyadéma's death also concretized the demise of those authority relations that sanctioned and nurtured the ceremonial complex, relations that radiated out from the village all the way to the metropole. With Eyadéma's passing, as it were, an entire cultural system, and the political culture that patronized it, entered history's dustbin.

The larger context is that of the end of the Cold War and the eclipse of those sovereignty relations that defined the decades leading up to 1990 – of a strong/authoritarian state tethered to the metropole, on the one hand, and to the villages through ongoing indirect rule, on the other. In the 1990s the Togolese state was largely eviscerated and the money spigot turned off, interrupting long-standing flows from metropole to state, and state to village and village chief. At the same time, two new sovereigns – Pentecostal churches and neoliberal NGOs – stepped into the gap, assuming control of the social and biopolitical, and effectively deciding who would live and who die. Both proxies demonized

local culture – seeing village religion as instrument of the Devil, on the one hand, and “traditional culture” as impediment to neoliberal development, on the other. These shifts, both political and cultural, are perceived as greater than any in living memory.

Today in the northern villages, young school teachers, many of them charismatic Christian, are replacing animist chiefs as local authorities, and never miss an opportunity to criticize tradition and proselytize the “rights of man.” They walk arm in arm with the NGOs and the churches, pushing the new humanitarian agendas and deciding who to support and who not to support. Bizarrely, all this stirring of the pot, this new biopolitics, is carried out on a resource-starved terrain that last saw inputs to infrastructure over 20 years ago. Equally puzzling, the new agendas are largely immaterial, targeting youth and gesturing towards an unknown future, content on developing human potential, whatever that might mean.

I am especially interested in the way temporality and spatiality get re-configured by the new dispensation. Today, the linear time of the dictatorship (with its modernist teleologies and steady sources of income) and the continuous time of the ancestors is being replaced by a non-continuous temporality, one that is “punctuated” and event-driven, and one that anticipates a future while closing its eyes to the past. This is not only the temporality of the Pentecostal, of “event” and radical rupture (and End Times futurity), but also that of the NGO, the new sovereign who appears and disappears, hopping in and out, slithering snake-like before disappearing into its black hole (its eyes fixed on a distant future). “We used to be able to count on things, knowing that if you did this you would get that,” a local resident

said at a development conference I attended in December 2007. “But today everything is in disorder. You never know when it will be your time, when you might get lucky and when not.”

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The re-temporalizations of the new dispensation are matched by a rescaling of the spatial. The distant is now proximate in ways that it never was before, and the proximate seems distant. Thus, at the same time that kin in southern Togo have disappeared from the horizon, a family in Europe (through one of development’s proliferating child sponsorship initiatives) parachutes in to provide financial and affective support. At the same time that ancestral shrines and mission churches are losing their importance in mediating access to the divine, the Holy Spirit descends from some distant realm to save a soul. At a moment when local ceremony no longer provides entertainment, satellite TV and the Internet connect to distant elsewhere and to other spectacles. And, where a chain of human connections used to mediate communication between far-flung friends and kin, with word passing from person to person and village to village, cell phones now leap-frog those webs of connection and incite direct, instantaneous contact. This evacuation of the proximate, this disconnection from village and neighborhood and nation – manifest in its most extreme form in the sprint to enlist in the US green card lottery and to depart the space of the local altogether (Togo has the highest per capita participation in the Diversity Lottery of any African

country) – works by substitution, slotting in imaginary and distant objects for those that are close at hand.

An entire spatio-temporal system and cosmology – of time moving teleologically from past to present to future (the time of the dictatorship and the time of the ancestors) and of spaces connected as dots on a map (a village to the city to the metropole) – is thus rescaled by the post-Cold War moment, with implications not only for the lives of those undergoing these changes but also for theory. Much of the theory to which we are accustomed, and I would not exclude postcolonial theory here, relies on notions of temporality and spatiality that are continuous: of pasts that produce (and “haunt”) a present, of proximate spaces that influence/colonize/appropriate one another – billiard ball conceptions of history and cultural influence. How, though, to come to terms with the new temporalities and spatialities of the present, with the immanence and simultaneity of the global, with a moment in which all outsides have been banished and cultural production itself is reconfigured as at once, or simultaneously, globally and locally authored, with a biopolitical which seems both produced from above and below? Thus, how to think culture and culture-studies today without remaining trapped by epistemologies generated by earlier colonial and postcolonial knowledge formations, and, more broadly, how to make the current moment as productive for scholarship as it has been for cultural production itself?

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Eyadéma’s naked body – unmasked, disrobed, vulnerable – might also be read as a stand-in for the

bare or naked life, as conceived by Giorgio Agamben, produced by the post-Cold War moment. Stripped of citizenship rights – of access to development, to free water – by the retreat of the state, and of culture and tradition by the churches and NGOs, those in the villages have been reduced to naked life. With their ceremonial system in ruins, they no longer command the respect of southern diasporics (whom they ruled like royalty as recently as ten years ago). With village and family authority systems in disarray, the conviviality that was these social units’ trademark is a now thing of the past. With witches everywhere, raw nerves and necropolitics are the stuff of everyday life. This once-proud aristocracy does little anymore other than scratch a living out of rocky soils.

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Oddly, they blame themselves as much as others for their abandonment and disposability. When southerners no longer return to the north for ceremonies, they invoke their own bad faith. “It is our neglect of tradition that has produced the disorder that now reigns.” When their children leave to work as would-be slaves in Nigeria (in what the humanitarian organizations refer to as “child trafficking”), they shrug their shoulders. “It is our poverty that drives them away.” When an NGO departs the area, they claim it was their fault. “We couldn’t get along with each other. It was our jealousy that made them leave.”

There may be something culturally-given here – a reflex to look inward first, to not accuse others when one knows that he or she is also to blame. This has long been the impulse at the heart of witchcraft discourse: Evil in the world derives from the local



Photo: courtesy Charles Piot

not the beyond; the witch who is trying to kill you is always close to home, often in your own family. But I think there is something more going on as well. To claim responsibility for one's "abandonment" is not only to fall in line with local norms of conduct (and, implicit within such ownership of responsibility, to retain agency and the power to change things for the better) but also to seek acknowledgment or recognition by international humanitarian groups. "This self-criticism makes us stronger for the future and will help impress the next NGO," a local school teacher responded when I asked him about this instance of self-blame. He followed this up with a disquisition on how destitution is what the NGOs are seeking. "The village they like is one that is like an orphaned child, one that has nothing but also one that will be grateful to be saved," he concluded.

["This self-criticism makes us stronger for the future and will help impress the next NGO"](#)

In the same way that Eyadéma/the dictator invented states of emergency, and Pentecostals produce an ongoing state of crisis, the northern villages are "producing" their own abandonment, producing themselves as disposable naked life – in order to be recognized. Moreover, is not this self-willed encampment related to the Pentecostal desire to jettison the past and start anew? Both gestures are aimed at recognition and seem motivated by the desire to be acknowledged as full members of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To put this in terms conceptualized by Ferguson, Togolese, like others across the continent, are acutely aware of their position in the world today, of their "abjection" or expulsion from (or persistent non-inclusion in) European modernity – a modernity they see every night on the TV screen but cannot touch, a modernity they hear spoken but may never inhabit. In the same way that Ferguson reads mimesis of the modern and emulation of European style among Zambians as a type of global plea, as an attempt to stake a claim to the "rights of full membership in a wider society", I see something similar at work in Togolese appropriations of charismatic Christianity and in villagers' invocation of the rhetoric of "abandonment." Both are passionate pleas to establish their rights to inclusion in global society.

This same desire is what motivated 300 lottery winners who were denied visas to sit in at the US Embassy in Lomé throughout the spring and summer of 2008. Despite the serendipity of the selection process, those who were chosen had an abiding sense of entitlement. "We were picked for visas, then denied them on arbitrary grounds, and we are here to claim what is rightfully ours," the organizer of the sit-in said when I met him in June 2008. Behind him, the group of 300 strong, all dressed in red ("to

show our wounds"), united in prayer to the Holy Spirit, one of their thrice-daily pleas for divine intercession. With a persistence that strained credibility – they showed up every day for five months, from eight o'clock in the morning to five in the evening, through blistering sun and driving rain, until forcibly removed in early October by Togolese security forces – they were pleading for global access.

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Jean and John Comaroff have recently suggested that a signature feature of the neoliberal moment in Africa and beyond is the delinking of the domains of production and reproduction, engendering a crisis within the domain of social reproduction. The Togolese material from the post-Cold War moment would appear to provide a particularly cogent example of social reproduction's travails at this moment – but also of the novelties and desires that such a crisis can produce. Witness the array of new kin-related practices that increasingly permeate the Togolese landscape today – from the way in which Pentecostalism substitutes a new spiritual community for family and neighborhood, to the arranged marriages and adoptions that define the pursuit of visas, to the "adoption" practices of child sponsorship organizations, to the "child trafficking" panic in the northern villages, to the manner in which authority structures within families are being undone by children who invoke the "*droits de l'homme*."

Moreover, what does it mean for social reproduction that NGOs and distant European families are becoming surrogate parents for children in remote villages or that siblings are shuffled between homesteads to qualify for NGO aid? What does it mean

that kinship and marriage are being reinvented and refigured by visa practices that conjoin unknown partners and generate debts across an ocean? And what does it mean for social reproduction that the traffic in children to Nigeria generates resources for the local marriage market while at the same time removing labor from families and workgroups? Finally, what does it mean when such instrumental practices become binding or even desired? Some of the more touching visa lottery stories are those in which partners of convenience became lovers and even spouses. And some of the European child sponsorship-inspired shuffling of children between houses lead to permanent realignments, with children staying on beyond the departure of the NGO.

I remain compelled by the privations of the current moment and sympathetic to the ways in which the death of tradition, the end of chiefship, and the dissolution of the dictatorship complex have disrupted those frames that are responsible for reproducing the conditions by which life is lived. And I read the rumors that circulate in Togo today of missing human organs, often reproductive organs, as symptomatic of the very real crisis of social reproduction that the collapse of these structures has engendered. But I also want to remain open to those new possibilities that are emerging out of the current moment, especially because the old structures were so closely tied up with power hierarchies that benefited the few and rendered submissive the many.

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But what of the “political” in a moment of wholesale rejection of the past and embrace of Euro-otherness, at a time when an entire nation (region? continent?)

has a single desire – to go into exile and evacuate the space they call home – and in an era when the only form of protest is that being staged at the US Embassy, as if being denied a visa to leave was the only grievance worth fighting for? And what of the political in an era of diffuse power when it is difficult to locate the source of one’s discontent and to know what might be an appropriate and effective response? And what of the political when it is hard to know on what side of power any actor lies? Does the Pentecostal’s identification with Christianity and middle-class desire, and their disavowal of African tradition, place them on the side of power, or does their opposition to the culture and authority relations associated with the dictatorship complex and Cold War geopolitical interests position them against power? Does the peasant’s embrace of tradition place him in bed with the chief- and dictatorship system, or does his marginal economic status position him – always and forever – on the other side of power? Needless to say, politics here can no longer be located in any of the standard gestures or in any of the usual places.

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I am compelled by recent calls to resist the romance of resistance and to fight the impulse to make theory adequate to political desire. Political aspirations certainly need to be tempered by experience, by the times in which we, and those about whom we write, live. But the question of the political is begged by the material itself, by the way in which old systems of



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authority (within nation, village and family) are being refused, by the numbers of those who sign up for the visa lottery and the persistence of the protestors at the gates of the embassy, by the mass conversions of West Africans to charismatic Christianity, by the way in which witchcraft imaginaries shadow global capital. For all the shifts of the post-Cold War moment, political agency seems far from evacuated.

Moreover, the Derridean gesture represented in the desire to deconstruct old forms of authority and the cultures that attend them, to wipe the slate clean, to return to naked life, strikes me as in and of itself a form of political aspiration. In taking apart old authority structures, not only local but also geopolitical, this cultural revolution bespeaks an opposition to power and the status quo, and an open-ness to new forms of sociality and the political – to be sure, forms unknown and desires still inchoate, but an open-ness nonetheless. Furthermore, there seems a recognition that remaining incarcerated by tradition and the local, by Togolese-ness or African-ness,



Photo: courtesy Charles Piot

leads away from rather than toward global inclusion and a better life. Is there not here a nascent post-national, even global, conception of citizenship?

But wither anthropology in the face of culture's sacrifice? A discipline that feasted on those cultures that nested within the colonial and the Cold War state apparatuses, it has long made its living celebrating the local (its complexity, its nuance, its alternative rationalities and subjectivities), and, in anthropology's reincarnation as postcolonial studies, valorizing the local's encounter with its others (its ways of appropriating, domesticating, and hybridizing the state and the global). However, both theoretical moments – moments I was keyed into and remain compelled by – are past, and the cultural formations that accompanied them are dead or dying. In their place are those futurities and immanences, those rescaled temporalities and spatialities, those commodified imaginaries and desires, those global aspirations that Togolese and many West Africans are today embracing with such zeal – in short, much

that the old paradigms figured as politically suspect and lacking in cultural thickness and authenticity. And, yet, if our interlocutors are tired of being incarcerated by local categories and cultures, and long for the new horizons of global citizenship, it behooves us to do what we have always done best and follow their lead, even if it means giving up all for an unknown future.