

A GLIMPSE OF AFRICAN IDENTITY  
THROUGH THE LENS OF TOGOLESE LITERATURE

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## DEDICATION

To the memory of my cherished parents, Alberto and Raymonde Charles

And to Appolinaire "Appo" Komla Nyédji Galley, my beloved husband

Togo: this is also for you!!!\

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## Abstract

Togo, this small West African nation, is still relatively unknown, even in today's jet set world. The Western world is only now discovering the numerous advances Togo has made in its social and economic policies, but most of all in its political conjectures. After its Independence on April 27, 1960, Togo had barely begun its journey to democracy when the dictatorship of Gnassingbe Eyadema became the yoke of the people for over thirty-one years, on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1967. The consequences of the stranglehold exercised by Gnassingbe was to shut the nation's cultural growth and cause the people to close in onto themselves and build a protective barrier between themselves and the rest of the world.

Yet, Togo had great beginnings. It was one of the pioneers of Sub-Saharan literature, publishing in 1929 one of the first true African novels still read today. In 1929, native son Felix Couchoro, was among the first Sub-Saharan authors to write a novel which gave agency to an African protagonist in a story set in Africa, with an African-themed plot, and with a conclusion that aimed at rethinking African society. Couchoro was the first to look deeply into his culture and the social identity of his nation. He brought forth suggestions that would help in Togo's growth and insure its successful battle for Independence.

In doing so, however, Couchoro also created great controversy around a subject which continues to plague not only Togoese people, but all Africans who feel pulled in two directions: preserving their authentic traditional customs while taking an active part in the modern world, through economic improvements as well as technological advances. In this dissertation, I will first study Couchoro's flagship novel which was the starting point of this quest for a modern identity, then analyze how subsequent Togoese writers have taken up Couchoro's legacy.

## Introduction

### Togolese Literature:

#### From Its Early Writings to The Present

*Dans le simple décor d'une maison de campagne, des passions s'agitent comme dans le cadre d'une vie de 'civilisés' avec son confort. On verra que la passion n'est point l'apanage de telle race parvenue à un certain degré de civilisation. La passion n'a besoin pour naître, que du cœur de l'homme (Felix Couchoro. L'Esclave. 1929.) \**

In this statement, Togolese writer Felix Couchoro's vision of "*passion*" refers to all universal emotions, regardless of whether the individual lives in Africa or the "civilized" world of Europe. In Couchoro's opinion, the human soul can either be full of refinement or reach the most reptilian of urges whether a man resides in a luxurious setting or a poor dwelling. Humanity itself is in a constant battle with emotions such as Pride, Ambition, Hatred, and Love. These emotions organize and shape human beings regardless of where they live and, because of this universality of emotions, understanding the African character should not differ from discerning European distinctiveness.

For Couchoro, the African undergoes the same angst and gamut of feelings as any other human being. Yet, in depicting the African protagonist (especially during colonial times), Europeans often downplayed the African's humanity. Historically, this

underestimation has led to stereotypical views of the African continent, its people, and its culture.

In this dissertation, I study how Togo has struggled to lay the foundations of an established, universal, and exceptional literature, while also working to modernize its ancient traditions. In doing so, I hint at how Togolese literature sets itself apart from the colonial discourses of other African francophone literatures, as well as how social and historical forces have fashioned Togolese identity. However, before developing my argument, I take a brief look at the Western portrayal of Africans— from Medieval times to the nineteenth century— using examples mostly from France, as well as the history of Togo itself. In the chapters that follow, I then study five different Togolese authors, analyzing their novels, poetry, and a play to illustrate Togo's unexplored contribution to World Literature.

### **Identity: Socio-Historically Defined**

To explore the various forces (for example, tradition versus modernity) in the works that I propose in this dissertation, I find it necessary to define the meaning of the word identity. For this, I base my understanding on the research suggested by Professor of History and Women and Gender Studies Linda Nicholson in her book *Identity before Identity Politics* (2008). Nicholson provides a comprehensive explanation that guides my work.

She defines society and identity as the explanation of how individuals not only become representatives of the geographical, cultural space in which they evolve, but

also how the decisions that govern that space impact them. In her opinion, society has constantly, throughout history, created hierarchies that stratify people into specific groups. Nicholson bases her observations on historical analysis through which she seeks to “illuminate the historicity of some of the ideas about social identity that have organized the lives of women and black people” (Nicholson, 2008:5).

Though Nicholson’s work focuses mainly on women’s history and social evolution (as well as on the history of African Americans in the United States), her theory, which postulates that everyone belongs to some race or culture, plainly explains that being part of a given social group provides a rich and multifaceted aspect to one’s social identity. Nicholson also attests that the elaborate frameworks that produce these identities have existed since the conception of a “society.” These frameworks have invented constructions which account for social divisions and, in turn, have become natural happenstances, projecting an aura of objectivity and neutrality. In other words, the evolution of societies created barriers which, through time, became the norm.

But as Europe and the United States moved into the nineteenth century, these social frameworks combined with new disciplines—like psychology and sociology—which, by increasingly defining individual characteristics, eventually became tools to identify groups. In contrast, Nicholson argues that an individual’s character within a social group remains unique, although these personality traits are the very result of the social experiences that give birth to them. Moreover, the individual is the outcome of a variety of environmental interactions rather than a “bundled” set of attributes emanating from inherited natural-born traits (Nicholson, 2008: 33). Therefore, our identity, or identities, are a result of our surroundings and are further shaped by “identity

obstacles,” such as discrimination and the “justified” grounds of prejudices based on biological or even geographical differences (Nicholson, 2008:34).

On the issue of identity itself, Nicholson explains that the concept of social identity is used as a form of labeling that ranks human beings. This practice began with the creation of the first nation-states and state governments. Along with the social changes that ensued in the nineteenth century, the concept of culture began to emerge. Within a culture, individual identity developed parallel to the practices of different social groups. “Culture” has then come to describe many of the practices previously associated with racial identity.

Culture is viewed as a practiced construct—one less naturally acquired than racial identity. It describes the practices associated with national identity and social groups, and are more arbitrarily acquired than intrinsic individual values (Nicholson, 2008:72-91). Thus, Nicholson’s historical analysis serves to “illuminate the historicity of social identity” (Nicholson, 2008: 72-81). I will partially use this concept of identity as a base for clarifying the themes of the universal versus. the exceptional, and tradition versus modernity that are developed in the novels, plays, and poems analyzed here.

### **A Brief History of Togo**

In addition to defining identity, it is also important that I briefly consider the history of Togo. This will help establish a context to better understand the writers that I study. This allows us to see how each author evolved and developed his/her unique style and approach on the theme of identity, especially because Togolese society defines itself

mainly through strong historical frameworks. However, defining Togo's cultural and historical identity comes across as a daunting task given that, like many African nations, Togo is a country of varied ethnic groups with unique and defined traditional traits. In other words, it is a non-homogenous nation. The historical and cultural richness of Togo helped to create its compelling literature, and by the same token, had a major impact on the authors I present (starting with Felix Couchoro).

According to the census, there are six major ethnic groups, and over 30 minor subdivisions, all living in a geographical space of approximately 57,000 square kilometers (22,000 sq. km). Because of its topography and cultural diversity, the nation is divided into five administrative sections. The apparent palliative to such a rich amalgam of culture and languages is in the ostensible accepted dominance of two ethnic groups which have given the country most of its cultural flavor. In modern times, the northern Kabye tribe have slowly been adding to the cultural colors of the nation's overall traditions. Nonetheless, the Ewes, who established themselves in the central/mountain region, and the Minas who live mostly in the coastal area of the country seem to dominate still.

The Ewes represent 32 percent of the population and are the largest ethnic group in the vast geographical section made up of Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The Minas' coastal position, on the other hand, gave them a unique historical advantage: they were the first to be in contact with the Europeans, according to historian Robert Cornevin in his book *Histoire du Togo* (1962, 119-125). Earlier in my introduction, I spoke about the German and French colonization of Africa. Of the French colonization, historian Maurice Besson reports in his *Histoire des Colonies Françaises* that when the French arrived in

Togo, they found an affable society already accustomed to hard work but one whose self-understanding, self-image and identity was well established. Besson (1931 : 369) writes *“C’est une belle colonie... de plus d’un million d’indigènes de race dahoméenne et généralement plus cultivés que nombres de populations de la côte Occidentale d’Afrique... Le Togo représente une valeur incontestable.”*

In Togo, French colonialism began relatively late (after World War I), and it followed the German colonization which had been administering in the region since 1884. German colonization was not assimilationist, however. They allowed Togolese tribal culture to prevail, and they only taught their subjects rudimentary German—enough so that the Togolese could understand orders. Because of this, the Togolese did not experience a radical break with their past. While the French did practice an assimilationist form of colonialism, the people of Togo were only truly under French rule for sixty years. What we see in Togolese literature, as opposed to any other Francophone nation, is not a quest to recover lost memory nor to refer to a broken path which might have occurred during their history. On the contrary, Togo’s writers have felt the need, from the beginning, to establish a literature that looked at the past only insofar as it helps to create the present and ensure the future of Togo as a participant in the world at large—a concern that has only recently begun to preoccupy other writers of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Togo did not cloud its literary discourse with anger against colonialism; it looked instead toward becoming a nation that already had a clear idea of its identity. Curiously, however, the assimilationist policies of French colonialism in practice during the colonization periods of history were viewed as a dangerous liberal fantasy by French

conservatives, and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, France found itself grappling with diverse opinions on this policy. Early twentieth century became the scene of worldwide changes—mostly social, political, and philosophical.

Togo always had to “overcome” the presence of others occupying her land as early as the sixth century with the invasion of Arab Muslims spreading Islam. Since the early 1500s, Togo had contact with Europeans, once Portuguese explorers established slave posts in the coastal cities of Ouidah and Porto Seguro (modern day Agbodrafo). What the early explorers, as well as the later colonizers, found was a people already used to mixing with different countries and cultures. Togo’s tribes—the Ewe, Mina and others—had been exchanging goods (salt, cloth, gold, oil, fish, etc.) even before that time. They had established codes of peaceful coexistence reinforced by their religious beliefs, their music, and their cultural philosophies strongly rooted in the family unit. Each of these tribes cultivated their own identity despite the numerous peoples who passed through, or established themselves in the area, or even ended up colonizing them. Because of an ingrained belief in their animist religion (some of which had been syncretized with Islam), Togolese people (mostly the Ewe and the Mina) had a solid and long-standing self-determination and never truly broke away from their traditions.

Togo had traded slaves with the Muslims as early as the 600s and started doing so with the Portuguese towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Togo did not become a colony in and of itself until 1884 when Germany entered the “colonial race.” From the start, Germany’s goal for colonization was one of development. She claimed a protectorate over a stretch of territory along the coast (known as the underbelly) and gradually extended its control inland after signing a treaty with Togolese King Mlapa III

at Togo Ville. Germans fought for five years to establish their political hegemony over the natives (whom they subsequently ruled over for twenty-five years with an iron fist). However, they gave a certain degree of authority to some of the tribal chiefs and allowed for the profits from the colony to be trickled down and reused for the good of the collective (benefiting both the established colonizers as well as the native population)—unlike what was happening in the French, Portuguese, English, or Spanish colonies (Knoll, 1978). Furthermore, the Germans worked alongside the local inhabitants to build the colony,. but they never extended their cultural practices to the natives, and they barely allowed them to be educated in the German school system (which was never truly established in Togo).

The French colonization of Togo, which began after World War I in 1918, was more of the assimilationist type and left a more durable imprint on the country, “coloring” with a decidedly French tone the nation’s identity in the process. During World War I, the German territory of Togo was invaded by British troops from the neighboring Gold Coast colony to the west and French troops coming from the Dahomey Kingdom (modern day Benin) to the East. After Germany lost the war in World War I, Togo first changed to a French/British joint rule upon a League of Nations agreement over the area which was known as Togoland. That area consisted of half of what are today’s nations of Benin and Ghana.

In 1956, a plebiscite was held under the supervision of the United Nations. This allowed for the territory mostly administered by France (modern day Togo and Benin) to become a completely French colony, while the western part of the former German

colony (modern day Ghana), would become British. The French wanted to create a colonial region as large as Brazil with the addition of Togo to their already vast possessions in Africa. The colony that France established in the West of Africa, known as *Afrique Equatoriale* would spread from Senegal to modern day Congo Brazzaville, and the style of government that France established throughout her colonies was one of assimilation. While the French imposed their customs and traditions in most of their colonies, they could not eradicate the millennial traditions of Togolese culture.

Nonetheless, in a great effort to do so—and with a greater determination than the Germans—the French established numerous schools and really worked at recreating France and a French society within Togo (Manning, 1998: 86-103). So while Germany developed a colony based mostly on trade, a hallmark of the French colonial project in the late 19th century and early 20th century was the civilizing mission (*mission civilisatrice*), the principle that it was Europe's (to be understood as France's) duty to bring civilization to benighted peoples. As such, colonial officials undertook a policy of Franco-Europeanisation in French colonies, most notably French West Africa and Madagascar. Yet, legal privileges such as voting were not necessarily an automatic right. Only education (especially if it could shape the subaltern's mind towards serving France) was available to whoever chose to become a servant of the realm (Manning, 1998: 57-84, 161-178).

The dominance of two ethnic groups (Ewe and Mina), have given the country most of its cultural flavor. The Ewes established themselves in the central/mountain region, and the Minas live mostly in the coastal area of the country. The Ewes represent 32% of the population and are the largest ethnic group throughout a vast geographical

section that are made up of Ghana, Togo and Benin. The Minas' coastal position on the other hand, has through history given them the unique advantage to be the first in contact with the Europeans, according to historian Robert Cornevin in his book *Histoire du Togo* (1962, 119-125). Extended families are the most important units of social life. Most Ewe and Mina can trace their male ancestors to their original villages and define the markings of their territorial divisions along the Republic of Togo and Volta Region lines. Neither Ewe nor Mina has ever supported a hierarchical concentration of power within a large state; However, in modern times, the country has been led mostly by these two groups with the northern Kabyé tribe forming the bulk of the army. The Ewes are essentially a patrilineal people; the founder of a community is considered the established chief, and is usually succeeded by his paternal relatives. Regardless of the ethnic tribe in Togo, family, religion, and clanship are the foundations of individual understanding of self and determine in large part everyone's sense of being grounded.

### **Evolving Concepts on Identity**

Reconciling entrenched concepts established by traditions (and evolving into a more modern understanding of the world) has been a theme of choice in many societies, often articulated in response to contacts with other societies or cultures, regardless of the nation. The Western World, for example, has had to reshape its own societies many times and in doing so, its concepts on other foreign societies such as those found in Africa. In Medieval times, the African was an unidentified "other" non-Christian, completely different because of his skin color. During the Renaissance, Africa was the marketplace where slaves were purchased to work the new lands discovered in

the Americas. The Classical period reinforced the ideas of black inferiority thanks to the *Code Noir*—which became acutely severe in both its concept and its implementation during the reign of King Louis the XIV of France.

Eighteenth-century France, the age of the Enlightenment, saw several philosophers re-enforce and augment stereotypes and prejudices already prevalent since Medieval times. In the process, proponents of slavery defended the institution as necessary to the economy. In *L'Esprit des Lois*, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, considered one of the first among eighteenth-century French philosophers of the Enlightenment, states that slavery goes against the natural way of things, but in some cases, it remains just, because “founded on a natural reason.” For him, slavery is not lawful because slaves who are slaves by birth are not benefitting from the law; the law works against them at every point in their lives. In making these statements, the philosopher hoped to steer French society away from slavery. But while Montesquieu is against slavery as an institution, he sees the enslavement of Africans as necessary because “Sugar would be too expensive if the plant producing it were not cultivated by slaves” (Montesquieu, 1758: Book XV, Chapter 5: 143).

Montesquieu describes blacks in the following manner, basing his statements on the pseudo-science of phrenology (quite in fashion in the eighteenth century) to portray African inferiority to his eighteenth-century audience:

“These creatures are all over black, and with such a flat nose that they can scarcely be pitied. It is hardly to be believed that God, who is a wise Being, should place a soul, especially a good soul, in

such a black ugly body... It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christians.” (Montesquieu, Spirit of Laws, bk. 15, CHS. 1, 5)

Another philosopher, Francois-Marie Arouet, dit Voltaire—for his part—thought that black Africans were the true “Other,” or the repugnant face of the Enlightenment. For Voltaire, also referring to the pseudoscience of phrenology, the black’s overall features and countenance, his lack of intelligence made him akin to the ape, not to humans. Given Voltaire’s propensity for sarcasm, there has been much debate on the philosopher’s true beliefs regarding Africans. However, Voltaire’s opinions, as stated in his 1756 book *L'Essai sur les Mœurs et l'esprit des Nations*, (*Tome 1, p 6-8, 11, 38 and Tome 2, p 49*) leaves little doubt to his true beliefs on the subject. All the same, it is important to mention that some critics have argued that the statements of eighteenth-century philosophers regarding race, were part of a rhetorical ploy to criticize and debunk the beliefs widely held by many of the time.

During the nineteenth century, the “Black continent” was one in which its inhabitants were not considered to have a civilization, let alone a culture and much less an identity. This manner of understanding the African (and, moreover, black Africa), will find its full purpose in a speech that Victor Hugo gives at the May 1879 commemoration marking the end of slavery. This speech is partially reproduced in an article published in 1997 by Frank Wilhelm <sup>2</sup>:

*Emparez-vous de cette terre. Prenez-la. A qui ? A personne.*

*Prenez cette terre à Dieu. Dieu donne la terre aux hommes, Dieu offre l'Afrique à l'Europe. Prenez-la. Où les rois apporteraient la guerre apportez la concorde. Prenez-la, non pour le canon, mais pour la charrue ; non pour le sabre, mais pour le commerce ; non pour la bataille, mais pour l'industrie ; non pour la conquête, mais pour la fraternité. Versez votre trop-plein dans cette Afrique, et du même coup résolvez vos questions sociales, changez vos prolétaires en propriétaires. Allez, faites ! Faites des routes, faites des ports, faites des villes ; croissez, cultivez, colonisez, multipliez ; et que, sur cette terre, de plus en plus dégagée des prêtres et des princes, l'Esprit divin s'affirme par la paix et l'Esprit humain par la liberté !<sup>3</sup>*

In this part of his speech, Hugo describes the African continent as a virgin territory whose only ruler or “*propriétaire*” is God himself, who has granted the European all rights to its future. Hugo thus defines as God’s will Africa’s colonization and exploitation by the Europeans. This “civilizing mission,” described as both an opportunity and a responsibility, to colonize Africa, must be conducted peacefully because, despite “*les rois qui apporteraient la guerre*” et “*le sabre,*” the European will respond with “*la charrue*” (hard work), “*commerce*” (modern economic development), and “*fraternité,*” (partnership) with those that “*Dieu*” (God) has supposedly divested of all right to their own lands.

Thus, Hugo's plea, calls upon the progressive people of Europe to conquer an Africa viewed as a virgin land—a Garden of Eden—and to turn it into a modern,

industrialized territory, ultimately to profit Europe. However, again, Hugo emphatically insists on the mission of civilization, with France holding the banner high on moral grounds. As seen in Hugo's speech, nineteenth-century French Romanticism is full of a generous sense of humanity and brotherhood. Many prominent writers such as Hugo fought to impose a Republic in France in 1848, and they hoped to share progressive ideas in the name of Mankind's Universal Destiny. Hugo is a progressive, but he views Africa as a place to instill France's own brand of civilization, its ideas on humanity, a place to exploit in the interest of France's own development.

It is rather disheartening to read such words from the writer who has come down through history as the defender of the proletariat, the widow, and the orphan. With Hugo, himself disregarding Blacks and Africa in general as inconsequential, all the while commemorating the abolition of slavery, Europe (mostly France) seems to have attained an apex in seeing the "Other" in a negative light. Whether Europe was still working at developing its own image or not, Hugo's crushing words would only exacerbate the negative image of the African and deprive him for an even longer time of the right to reclaim his worth, and his identity as a human.

Hugo's statement reflects a general sentiment of the nineteenth century—most importantly, the continued ideas of the supremacy of Europe over Africa. Colonization was another means for France to rebuild its economy and reclaim its place as a superpower. By the mid-nineteenth century, French finances were in disrepair. First it had to recover from the Revolutionary war, which had nearly emptied the national coffers, but it also had to overcome losing its prize colony of Saint Domingue in the Caribbean in 1804. Perhaps most importantly, France had to jump over the hurdles of

numerous social upheavals which plagued that century—upheavals to which Hugo refers as “*questions sociales*” that could be solved by turning the urban French proletariat into a “*propriétaire*” (one who would thus enjoy a considerable social mobility) in Africa.

In its conquest of Africa, France practiced an assimilationist vision, which made Africa an outpost of France. This policy insured that French culture would never take a back seat to any other culture, especially after France had lost its position as the dominating power of Europe (which it had held for over three centuries). To create the justifications for colonizing the continent, it became imperative to further dehumanize the black African by maligning his right and ability to control his own land. While not represented by Hugo’s quote from the 1879 speech, there is one important aspect of the Romantic Era’s point of view on Africa that differs from the ideas previously discussed. For the people of the Romantic Era, the image of the “Other” resides in the exotic, and the birth of the exotic stereotype represents the ethos of the Romantic Movement prevalent at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The Romantics had an obsessive fascination about distant pasts, distant peoples, and distant places because, in their view, the exotic and mythic past could help cure their—what Baudelaire termed—“spleen:” that sense of lack of direction and purpose which came about after the unfulfilled promises of the 1789 French Revolution. At first, the distances are not terribly great—Spain is exotic enough for a while. But then exotic assumptions of North Africa and the Middle East began to enter the minds of the Europeans. For the Romantic, exoticism consists largely of stereotypes endlessly repeated. These prefabricated concepts do not change despite the Romantic age being

a period of travels, explorations, and discovery. This is a time when many Europeans are experiencing firsthand the far-off lands they had read about. So, while the nineteenth century is a time when travelling becomes more common, contact with the Other does not change the prevailing prejudices inherited from centuries of cultural supremacy.

The mindset of the nineteenth-century travelers is heavily freighted with the attitudes fostered by past European colonialism and prejudices dating from Medieval times. Before they even left their European ports, these white explorers already considered most natives to be lazy and incapable of governing themselves. Further, those very natives who aspired to European sophistication were often derided as "spoiled." Many male European travelers viewed the women of these foreign places as more sexually desirable and available than the women at home. Thus, the portrayal of the African we later find in fiction, drama, art, and opera would continue to buttress the racist attitudes already present since the Renaissance.

### **A New African Consciousness**

The brutal colonization of Africa, which begins in the 1860s, attests to a less-humanistic application of the ideas that Hugo would later articulate. Hugo, who never went to Africa, could have never imagined how much his dream of a mission to civilize based on "*fraternité*," "*liberté*" and "*concorde*" would be distorted. Indeed, viewing Hugo's discourse in hindsight, and with a contemporary lens, Frank Wilhelm points out that there was no expectation that the black African himself or herself would have little desire to embrace European customs. In retrospect, many critics now argue that the

nineteenth century's French Republican ideal was a paternalistic one, which in time gave way to principles of inequality and the superiority of one group of people over another (for example, in addition to the colonized, women, and the working classes). This different kind of inequality and sense of superiority—born not only from colonization, but also from the French Republicanism—is explained by Professor Pheng Cheah, University of Berkeley professor, in his 2007 book *Inhuman Conditions*, in which he explores the consequences of social ideals as articulated since the age of enlightenment and more particularly since the nineteenth century. Though Professor Cheah's main idea focuses on the impact of these philosophies on East Asia, there is no doubt that these considerations apply to all cultures formerly governed by Europe.

The consequence of Europe's reign in Africa in the nineteenth century created ethnocentric beliefs that shaped general opinion for the next century and beyond. As suggested by the above overview of European attitudes toward Africa, the absence of previous knowledge of African culture led to the belief that the continent had no history at all. However, post-colonial studies, such as those of Christopher Miller, critique the colonial mentality and illuminate the intrinsic values inherent to African cultures revealed especially by the writers of Sub-Saharan Africa. Miller, among others, shows that African writers themselves—while using the language of their former colonizers—have for decades been unveiling the richness of African philosophy, wisdom, and values, and at the same time revealing the fullness of their own written word and intellectual processes.

Indeed, Sub-Saharan Africa has been writing about itself since the 1910s. Alain Ricard (1987:9-10) cites the works of Thomas Mofolo (1876 -1948) and Lesotho and E.

Casely Hayford (1866 – 1930) from Ethiopia—the first a novelist, the other an historian who, in the English language, greatly influenced African politics and thus helped shaped the history of their time. Ricard further discusses Bakary Diallo, from the Congo region, who is credited as the author of the first novel written in French (and published in France) by a Sub-Saharan African, *Force Bonté*, published in 1926. However, Diallo quickly fell into disfavor with readers, first because his novel was considered a mere copy of European literary style, with little to no reference to Africa, its people, nor their traditions.

Secondly, his work was published in France and satisfied the French desire to prove the success of their civilizing mission. Therefore, for Ricard, the first true novel in French from Sub-Saharan Africa (1987: 9-10) is Félix Couchoro's 1929 first work, *L'Esclave*, the topic of Chapter one, to follow. Couchoro's work is not only the first novel of its kind to give complete agency to a Sub-Saharan African subaltern, but also the first to paint a more favorable image of indigenous characters and to give a place of importance to African culture for its own sake. Furthermore, Couchoro's novel is the only work from the 1920s written by an African about Africa that remains appealing to today's readers and continues to generate debates in literary circles.

In the West, literary scholars are only aware of a few well-known Sub-Saharan contemporary writers such as authors Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, Ousmane Sembène and Mariama Bâ of Senegal, Amadou Kourouma of the Ivory Coast, and Mongo Béti of Cameroun. These authors gained recognition because their stories reflected the period of anti-colonial struggle—and its immediate aftermath—when African national identity was starting to appear on the world stage. Ousmane

Sembène, in his novel *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (1959), epitomizes a people's struggle to regain independence and the right to exist. Cameroonian Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy* (1956), represents the gradual emancipation of a young African boy growing up in the service of his white owners. Also from Senegal, Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre* (1979), articulates the hope of liberation of women from all types of oppression. In all the works cited above, the common thread is the strong effort to discard the perceived invisibility and marginalization of Africans caused by colonization.

Other acclaimed African author René Maran's 1926 novel *Batoula* is considered one of the first African historical novels. This is debatable, however, as Maran (originally from the French colony of Martinique) wrote from a European point of view, and most would not consider his works to be African. True African historical novels by African writers themselves did not emerge until mid-1950s when Anthropology and the research of Cheik Anta Diop of Senegal began. During that time—from the first publication from Félix Couchoro in 1929, until 1953—Togo did not produce much in terms of literature. When literary production did resume in Togo, the theme of Independence did not have as much appeal there as it had in Senegal, Cameroun, or Ivory Coast.

Togo's pioneering role in the realm of literature derives from its history, which differs somewhat from that of other West African Francophone nations. For example, both Senegal and the Ivory Coast were also colonized by France, but this took place during the rush to colonize Africa in the 1860s. In Togo, French colonialism began relatively late (after World War I), and it followed the German colonization of the region, which was non-assimilationist. German colonization certainly ruled through violence and oppression, but the Germans also allowed Togolese tribal culture to continue to flourish.

Because of this, the Togolese did not experience a radical break with their past. And though the French practiced an assimilationist form of colonialism, the people of Togo were only truly under French rule for only sixty years.

Thus, what we see in Togolese literature, unlike that of other Francophone nations, is not a quest to recover lost memory, nor to refer to a broken path which might have occurred during their history. On the contrary, Togo's writers have felt the need from the beginning to establish a literature that looked at the past only insofar as it helps to create the present and ensure the future of Togo as a participant in the "greater whole," a concern that has only recently begun to preoccupy other writers of Sub-Saharan Africa. Togo did not cloud its literary discourse with anger against colonialism; it looked instead toward becoming a nation that already had a clear idea of its identity.

### **An African Literary Production "Beset by Storms"**

The literary liberation of Africa does not come without some controversies. For example, the debate over which language to write in still preoccupies many writers such as Kwame Botwe-Asamoah (2001)<sup>4</sup> who continues to arbitrate for the use African languages in published works. In a related point of view, other critics talk of an "African Renaissance," which began with the end of the colonial period of Africa. The critics talk of a renewal that has allowed Africa to take pride in its ancestral legacy and defend and share it. African critic and philosopher Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (*Something Torn and New* 2009:71) represents this argument and refers to the colonial period as the Middle Ages of Africa, a hiatus in which Africa, just like Europe, fought against forces both from

within and from without the continent, which caused it to become dismembered from its past. It is said that the African Renaissance is still defining itself.

A better model of the relationship between tradition, modernity, and identity in Togo is offered by philosopher, cultural theorist, and novelist Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his 1992 book *In My Father's House*. He views the historical, psychological, and social accounts on racism—and what caused Africa in general to appear to have lost its identity and self-appreciation—as simple examples of dynamics that characterize all societies. While he agrees in principal with Thiong'o's approach to Africa's need to reconnect with its past, Appiah states that there is more to the issue than simply reconnecting with bygone times. As for the use of native languages, Appiah suggests that there are honorable reasons for the extraordinary persistence of the colonial languages. He states that society cannot ignore the practical difficulties of developing a modern educational system in a language in which none of the manuals and textbooks have been written (Appiah, 1992:47-72). He further reminds us that these colonial languages have become a status symbol for many of the elites of the former colonies. Other Togolese writers like Couchoro and Ekue do not question or exhibit conflict over using a colonial language in their writing, the colonial language being the vehicle of communication between all the ethnic groups in the country.

Appiah, however, complicates the language issue by acknowledging the difficulty of using the colonizer's language mixed with African ancestral beliefs to express modern sensibilities and worries:

We may acknowledge that the truth is the property of no culture, that we should take the truths we need wherever we find them. But for truths to become the

basis of national policy and, more widely, of national life, they must be believed, and whether whatever new truths we take from the West will be believed depends in large measure on how we are able to manage the relations between our conceptual heritage and the ideas that rush at us from worlds elsewhere. (1992:5)

In other words, ideas and truths are neutral, and what determines the acceptance of ideas coming from other places is the connotations that they carry and how these relate to local ideas, traditions, and common sense.

Appiah implies that since Western ideas were long imposed and defined as “better” than African ideas, the tendency might be to reject them outright. Appiah asserts, though, that what must be rejected is the assignation of hierarchies to these ideas, not the ideas or truths themselves. As my dissertation shows, this rejection of the hierarchies that assign different values to Western versus African ideas is precisely the project that Togolese writers pursue. Appiah also asserts that violence and repression were used as a racial tool against the African, but World War II helped Africans to understand that they were not the only group to be subject to European dominance exercised through violent tactics:

European colonialism could lay waste to African lives with a careless ease; now we knew that white people could take the murderous tools of modernity and apply them to each other... Africans come from cultures where black people were in the majority and where lives continued to be largely controlled by indigenous moral and cognitive conceptions; they had no reason to believe that they were inferior to white people and they had,

correspondingly, less reason to resent them....Most Africans raised during and for some time after the colonial era are sharply aware of the ways in which the colonizers were never as fully in control as our elders allowed them to appear. (Appiah 1992:7).

So according to Appiah, Africans have never had a sense of loss of identity despite the terrible vagaries of colonization and post-colonial exploitations, and the experience of World War II revealed that Europeans were not averse to exercising dominance and violent repression against their own.

In his point of view, the persistent power of cognitive and moral traditions (in religion, music, dance, and family life) ensured that the perspective on the self in the African person was never totally altered, regardless of which colonial power was present on their land. Whether in Europe or in Africa, what Africans were left with was a sense that “they had a great deal in common with everybody else, that this common feeling related to their shared ‘African-ness’, and that they largely accepted the European view that this meant their shared race.” Out of all or most African colonized nations, Togo might possess the literary tradition that best demonstrates Appiah’s argument.

### **Togolese Voices in The Universe**

In 1929, Felix Couchoro, the first African francophone novelist to publish his work locally (as a series in a colonial newspaper) takes the first steps towards a shift in the perception of Africans and chooses to do so in classic French. In 1929, the aim of

African intellectuals like Couchoro was to demonstrate the African's ability to master and employ the French language as well as any well-educated French person.

Couchoro sought to rehabilitate and represent African cultures through classical French to hasten their integration into and acceptance by the world; to reach the French public more directly; and to thus encourage them to understand the African's humanity, and that they had a great deal in common with everyone else.

*L'Esclave* tells the story of the slave Mawoulawoê, at the service of a local tribal chief since childhood. Mawoulawoê loses his way at the death of his master who had adopted him as a member of the family, although without allotting him equal rights as those of a real son. Exasperated with his lot, Mawoulawoê embarks on a journey which takes him on a downward spiral of ever-increasing trials ending with the death of his former master's wife (whom he had coveted and who had become pregnant by him), as well as his own. Though the outcome of the story comes across as tragic, never does Couchoro portray his protagonist as lascivious, infantile, or savage. Mawoulawoê is simply misguided because of the beliefs and customs of his indigenous society.

The plot of *L'Esclave* leads the literary critic Koutchoukalo Tchassim (2012:270) to emphasize that Couchoro's work never explicitly expresses anti-colonial sentiments. This may account for the novel's many years of critical neglect and why French Guinean-born René Maran's *Batouala*, published in 1921, had more appeal both with European audiences and to some extent the local African population, as well. Maran's preface to *Batouala* gives a clear, vivid account of colonial power at its most heinous. Even when he was still living in Martinique, Maran had always been aware of the

tendency of the French army to exert power and exploit the indigenous populations of their colonies to ensure that the Europeans enjoyed a better life.

Maran was the son of an emancipated black Martinican government worker and a French mother. He had followed in his father's footsteps and in 1919, during a governmental shake up in France, was sent to the colonial post of Equatorial Africa to work in the administrative offices of the French government there. Maran publishes *Batouala* in France in 1921, eventually winning the coveted and prestigious Goncourt literary prize a year later. The granting of this prize to a black novelist for the first time created much controversy, which only increased the novel's reputation today as a radical anti-colonial text.

Indeed, the preface to Maran's novel gives a vivid account of the colonial practices of young French officers confiscating at gunpoint local products for the benefits of the colonists, leaving the local population to starve after witnessing scenes of abuse of power on the part of colonial officers. The actual story of *Batouala*, recounted in the style of a European traveler's tale, depicts the indigenous people through existing stereotypes by representing blacks as lascivious, undisciplined, and with no greater abilities than those of a child.

Three major themes can be gleaned from this novel: the ravaging effects of colonialism on the local customs, local practices of adultery, and revenge. The story is told in flashback by Yabada, great grandson of a friend of chief Batouala of the Banda people in Central Africa. The main sentiment expressed in the novel is that of regret for not eliminating the white man from their shores the first time he set foot on their land. Now it's too late. Maran narrates the antagonism between a young warrior and the local

tribal chief. This young warrior disagrees with the tribal chief's ways of dealing with the European colonizers, who have taken the village's entire livelihood and left them with little to eat.

Adding insult to injury, the chief's wife and the young warrior have fallen in love and plan to run away together. The plot focuses on the puerile thoughts of the chief, who focuses on his woes, appeasing and pleasing the colonizers, and pouting over the machinations of the young warrior. He never fights the white colonizer who took over his land nor does he oppose the young warrior's advances on his wife. As Maran asserts, colonialism and assimilation to French culture have destroyed his spirit. The novel ends with the chief dying of poison at the hands of his unfaithful wife, who runs away with the young warrior. Overall, the novel is a denunciation of how the culture of one people is supplanted and replaced by that of another, in part due to the complicity of greedy leaders and with complete disregard to the consequences on the subaltern's psyche, culture, economy, and society.

Couchoro's novel differs from Maran's in that it offers a subtler critique of forces that have limited African progress. Couchoro also appoints greater agency and psychological depth to Africans which downplays the overall effect of colonialism on the characters. In fact, colonialism is not one of the themes of Couchoro's work, in that Couchoro only once mentions the colonists and never shows their relationship with the indigenous population. His focus is the story of an African community, its traditions, and its influences on its people.

Helping Europeans understand Africans appears to have been one of the goals of Couchoro's novel, and in this sense colonialism provides an undeniable, yet unrepresented, context for the novel. Couchoro's goal, however, of showing Africans as individuals independent of European influences (but Europeans all the same) seems to have lost its relevance for today's critics who look for more militant, direct responses to Africa's colonization. Despite its "apparent" absence from Couchoro's novel, colonialism did leave its marks on Togo, though, as stated above, the experience did not become the subject of constant reflection in literature.

### **Chapter Summary**

In Chapter 1, I examine Couchoro's *L'Esclave* as an example of Togo's early articulation of Africans establishing their sense of purpose and agency. As it stands, we find the main character, Mawoulawoê the slave, fighting to regain some form of composure and self-worth in a world that has stripped him of his humanity. As the story unfolds, we discover that this is (in the author's point of view) the result of a society that has unwittingly created situations that have given way to stagnation of personal growth and unequal social hierarchies. All the characters are marked one way or another by the societal disparities that ground the plot, and Couchoro affirms that these disparities generate the personalities and influence the choices (good or bad) that each of the main characters make.

Part of my analysis of Couchoro's "self-discovery" will be set against the manifest of the *Négritude* movement as created by Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédhar Senghor and

Léon Damas. I will show how Couchoro's novel did not follow the parameters of *Négritude* which came to prominence in 1930, a year after the publication of *L'Esclave*. Let us recall that the *Négritude* movement primarily aimed at restoring the dignity of the black person from the Caribbean to the Americas and Africa by disfavoring French colonialism and claiming that the best strategy to oppose it was to encourage a common racial identity for black Africans worldwide.

In articulating their initial philosophy on *Négritude*, the founding members, especially Aimé Césaire, included Marxist ideas and used a realist literary style, but later they were also influenced to some extent by Surrealism . In Césaire's 1955 book *Discours sur le Colonialisme* the author—unlike the white Marxists, including Sartre—and other black *Négritude* writers (given their understanding and lived experience of racism) could not separate the class problem from the race problem, and they refused to overlook the connection between capitalism and colonialism. Couchoro, on the other hand, established himself within African indigenous constraints, and tried to create a balanced form of writing that paralleled European style, but still managed to demonstrate what comprised African distinctiveness.

Chapter 2 looks at how women enter the Togolese literary tradition. I analyze Tchotcho Ekue's 1988 novel *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables* as well as Gad Ami's 1989 romance *Étrange Héritage*. In Ekue's novel, the plot revolves around the brutal and ignorant theft of an aspiring writer's identity, rendering him subject to the whims of the perpetrators. But the young hero knows his worth, his value, and his accomplishments. He will not be conquered. He seeks to reclaim his identity but in doing so, he commits involuntary manslaughter. Although he goes to prison for his

crime, it is his unfortunate fiancée who pays the price of completely losing her own identity as she becomes victim to traditional society's means of social regulation by bearing the shame of her fiancé's crime. She is shunned by her community and her self-esteem is shattered. The second novel, Gad Ami's *Étrange Héritage*, is reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, a love story gone wrong because the lovers are from different sides of the track: the boy is rich, the girl is poor. Unlike Juliet though, Gad Ami's female protagonist and narrator simply loses her mind, her grip on reality, and finally her identity.

My analysis of each novel argues that, for the African woman, individuality and indigenous tradition can be a burden, an obstacle to overcome. Indeed, if the African woman becomes too westernized, she is ostracized. I will use Norwegian-born literary theorist Toril Moi's (1988) *Teoría Literaria Feminista*, in which she compares French and American feminism and how both are represented in literature, and I will see to what extent her theory can help clarify African feminism.

In Moi's point of view, American women are more strongly able to represent their political allegiances, while French feminism is often more undetermined. Moi establishes that the American feminist is more forceful and decisive, and the French—which she labels as ahistorical, idealist, and lacking in politics—is less aggressive. Moi's argument about feminist movement will in turn help to understand African feminism and Tchotcho Ekue's take on the subject. Gad Ami's position, on the other hand, will be analyzed through the lens of socio-critic Ian Fraser, relative to her protagonists and the way tradition weights and stigmatizes them.

In Chapter 3 I analyze the 2008 play *Chemins de Croix* by renowned contemporary writer Kangni Alem and in Chapter 4 his 2009 masterpiece *Esclaves*. I argue that Alem departs from his Togolese literary forefathers by exploring the product of displacement, the consequences of exile, and the ramifications of a return to reconcile with oneself (or, by the same token, the representation of a more universal all-encompassing understanding of one's purpose in life). The self-referential drama of *Chemins de Croix* depicts the efforts of a character determined to escape his author and creator with the hopes of affirming his distinctiveness and his own faith.

Alem's play, in representing the protagonist's attempt to escape his "creator" or "master," resonates with Togo's need to overcome years of dictatorship and assume self-determination and control over its own future, though the play in and of itself is not a political play. *Esclaves* recounts the poignant story of a man who stood up in defense of his sovereign who wanted to stop slavery in his kingdom of Dahomey and put an end to the slave trade. The institution was still going strong in that kingdom despite European abolition. In standing up for his king, the young ritual master is made a slave and is shipped to Brazil. He recounts his ordeals, his journey, his years of slavery, his subsequent trial in trying to free himself, and his return to his Togolese homeland where nothing is the same. At each stage of his ordeal, this character seems to reinvent himself, yet his essence remains intact—his dreams and his memories never faltering.

In Chapter 5, I examine poetry written as a form of response to the alleged "silent period" of the dictatorship. The collection *Togo Mon Coeur Saigne* was written by sculptor and painter Paul Ahyi during the years of the dictatorship, but he did not publish it until 2008 for fear of reprisals. In this collection, the author continues to insist upon

Togolese self-determination and sense of purpose, which prevails against all odds no matter the situation. His poetry represents the resilient spirit of the Togolese people in the face of adversity and the preservation of the poet's own Self, which never gives up, never gives in. While all Ahyi's poems treat the theme of self-preservation with equal force, I only examine in depth two poems, the lyric *Une Mauvaise Herbe* and the more militant *Mon Peuple Debout* to show the relevance of the Self in situations of oppression (in which the individual's greatest fear is being insignificant, useless, and invisible, and in which the Self serves as the basis of resistance that is both individual and collective).

Through these various literary approaches, I hope not only to introduce the still-unknown Togolese literature, but also to develop interests in exploring this different approach to African literature in general: concealing the traumas its society has lived through by revealing the resilience and sense of purpose of a nation trying to reconcile its past with its present and preparing for the future as a participant fully cognizant of its place in the world.

#### Endnotes:

\*In a simple country homestead, passions simmer in the same manner as in a 'civilized' manor with all its comfort. We then realize that passion is not the sole prerogative of a given race that has reached a degree of civilization. To blossom, passion needs only the heart of man (Felix Couchoro, *L'Esclave*, 1929, p.23)

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## Chapter 1

### Defining Togolese cultural identity through Felix Couchoro's *L'Esclave*

As described in the Introduction, Togo, as with most African nations, is multiethnic, with a varied past that includes European influences. At the time of Felix Couchoro's birth (January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1900), Togo had passed into the hands of France and was ruled under that principle which distinguishes French colonization: assimilation. Assimilation was viewed as a dangerous liberal fantasy by French conservatives, and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, France found itself grappling with diverse opinions regarding this policy. It is in this turbulent time of cultural, political and philosophical examinations—both in France and in Togo—that Felix Couchoro was born, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1900.

He grew up during the transitional period of German to French colonization. His mother was Catholic, a Yoruba; his father a Fon. He was born in the city of Ouidah, a former Portuguese trading post which had all the varnishes of a cosmopolitan city of the time (cathedrals, numerous schools, and an important presence of Portuguese colonizers). Couchoro's background—that of his birth, his own schooling during French colonialism, as well as the ethnic and educational differences between his parents—played a major role in shaping the author's beliefs, which critic Alain Ricard identified as existing in three different stages.

Couchoro had an interesting educational upbringing. The objectives of French colonial teachers were to create students who were devoted and loyal to the French way of thinking. In this, France had a great ally in the Catholic Church given that France

had, for centuries, been considered as both the protector of Rome and the Church, and as the First daughter of the Church. In practice, it was the Church that implemented France's policies in the colonies and worked at creating local intellectual elites.

Couchoro's mother had very little education yet had been raised as a Catholic. His father was a carpenter who apparently did odd jobs for the Church. Felix Couchoro was one of the few (there were nine students in his graduating class) who benefitted from the educational system established at the beginning of the French colonization. This played a great role in his mode of thinking and in his future career. Because his parents had such strong connections to the Catholic church, Couchoro grew up in a French seminary, not in his parents' home. Without the direct influence of his parents and the cultural guidance and stimulus of the extended family, Couchoro's education made him more susceptible to adopt a Europeanized ideal of "the proper gentleman," and he learned to view the workings of society from a Western perspective. This is a great point of controversy in the author's life and subsequent literary endeavors—according to modern critics such as Alain Ricard (1987) and Koutchoukalo Tchassim (2012), who view Couchoro's work as not African enough.

Nonetheless, because of—or despite—his education, Couchoro became one of Togo's first promoters in formalizing his nation's identity. While his first efforts towards that definition meet with much criticism (mainly from Tchassim, as noted above), Couchoro's work, especially his first novel *L'Esclave*, might indeed be the first blueprint that begins the conversation around what Togolese identity looks like.

## The Social Climate during Couchoro's Time

Couchoro's approach to defining Togo's cultural identity seems at first glance to exclude and reject the traditions of his ancestors. However, despite their criticisms, both Alain Ricard and Koutchoukalo Tchassim suggest that the author chooses a different process to represent his understanding of his society's socio-political composition in order to create a new dialogue based on "self-criticism" (in view of reaching the ideal of a nation based on fair rules for all) (Tchassim, 2012: 269-273). Alain Ricard in particular suggests that, in his own way, Couchoro's tactics were to help prepare the way to achieve a self-sustaining society which could eventually become independent.

In his biography of Couchoro, Ricard (1987: 21) states that Couchoro's most influential teacher had been the priest Père Aupiais, who in 1903 had presented himself as a strong advocate for the cultural and historical recognition of the African people. R. Bruce Yoder, a biographer of Père Aupiais, states that Aupiais worked on the idea of ethnology as a point of departure for understanding and reaching African societies as well as leading them. When Aupiais takes over as school master in Porto Novo (today Agbodrafo, Togo) in 1919, he eagerly sets out to integrate the indigenous languages, the history of the local people, and the richness of the art as part of the curriculum of his pupils. This, in many ways, goes against the process of assimilation as determined by French authorities.

In 1925, Aupiais founds the Dahomean journal *La Reconnaissance Africaine* to promote recognition of the positive qualities of African traditions and to encourage and publish ethnographic studies of African societies by indigenous researchers. In 1938, Aupiais published *Le Missionnaire* which related the story of missionary life and work in

colonial Francophone Africa. In 1939, he was appointed to the Academy of Colonial Sciences (today the Academy of Overseas Territories), and in 1945 was elected deputy in the First Assembly of the French Fourth Republic for the Dahomey-Togo ward, but died before its inauguration.

According to Yoder, Aupiais had a high regard for traditional African religious, social, intellectual, and moral customs. He found in traditional religion a fertile ground for Christianity and identified three *pierres d'attente* (known in English as foundation stones, meditation stones) that prepared Africans for a transformation to Christianity: the religious essence of the African soul, the innate desire to please God and submit to God's will, and the deep respect for ritual and its meaning in traditional religion. Yoder states that Aupiais believed that Africans could enrich Catholic liturgy if they were allowed to express in it their own understanding of humanity's relationship with God. He integrated traditional music, costumes, and dances into the celebrations of Christian holy days and advocated for Christianity's adaptation of places of worship and religious practices from traditional religion.

Echoing Yoder's words, Ricard for his part, further adds that Father Aupiais seemed to have used his knowledge not only to Christianize the natives, but also to educate them about themselves through a concept of Aupiais' own understanding of regionalism. This term—mostly defined by Aupiais—would find its way in Couchoro's works later on. The following passage is from the magazine *Reconnaissance Africaine* created and directed by Aupiais:

*(...) organe d'enseignement religieux et d'études historiques dont le programme est de faire connaître les religions fétichistes, les coutumes et l'histoire du pays, de prouver que les indigènes possèdent un fond de sentiments et d'idéals élevés, peu connu et souvent mal interprété. (Ciarca, 2008: 28-47)*

Aupiais' arguments for regionalism do not take him away from the ideal of mankind reaching the goal of Christianity as represented by Europeans—particularly by France. Even when promoting the idea that no human value should simply be relegated to “primitivism,” Aupiais calls for consistency in reaching for higher thinking and behaviors. Aupiais' teachings are said to be within the realms of universal ideology and a defense of local particularities (Ricard, 1987: 22). Ricard agrees and affirms that Aupiais' position is part of a new wave of thought prevalent in the early 1920s in which Europe—while still seeing itself as superior—no longer rejected its subjects' values and beliefs as unimportant. However, Ricard is prompt to point out that Aupiais' ideas of regionalism differed greatly from another social and philosophical point of view on the “universalism” of the Black man promoted by W.E.B. DuBois in the Paris Symposium of 1919.

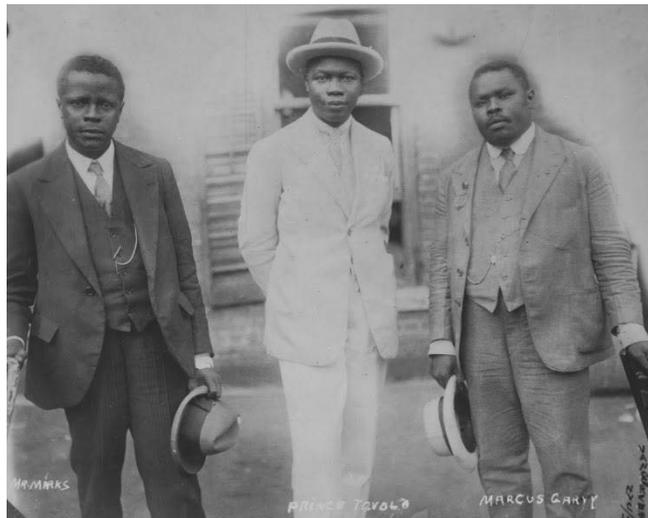
Parallel to Aupiais' philosophies, in France itself, public attitudes were inspiring new conversations for socio-political modifications within the nation, as well as in the colonies. In the early 1900s, political parties such as the traditionalists, the royalists, and even the Catholics were losing political grounds—caused, in part, because of major scandals that had shifted political opinions toward more liberal inclinations. The colonies were never completely cut off from the progressive ideas circulating in from the

Americas and France. But while it cannot be confirmed that Couchoro had at any time become familiar with any of the major social philosophies in fashion at the time, it is possible that the young author was constantly influenced by the many liberal ideas from the thinkers whose works he would read through the colonial press and books coming from France. What is certain is that more militant newspapers reproducing the new waves of thinking—papers such as *Les Continents* and *La Dépêche Africaine*—began to appear in Togo in 1924 and 1928 (respectively) around the same time Couchoro's novel was published. As a result, the debate on colonization itself that had begun in liberal circles in France had finally reached the colonies. Even in the occupied territories, the issue of liberation from France had been opposing those who favored assimilation to those who preferred independence.

Much of the conversation on the issue of colonization and decolonization would find its source in the liberal education France gave some of her indigenous population. For example, Professor of world history at the University of Pittsburgh Patrick Manning, in his book *Francophone Sub-Saharan African 1880-1995* (1998: 102), reports the story of Marc, the son of Joseph Tovalou Quénum, a great merchant and planter who had supported the French conquest of Dahomey. Quénum was the last king of Dahomey. He had been sent to Europe in 1900 for his education and was a brilliant student who completed a law degree (plus some medical work) in France.

Tall, handsome, and aristocratic in his bearing, Marc developed an impeccable style in French. He returned to Dahomey for the first time in 1920, where he was welcomed by the elite for his accomplishments. But during his visit, Marc began to become disillusioned with the reality of colonial rule, which contrasts the vision he had

maintained in France. He changed his name back to its original, more phonetically and more African-sounding Kojo, and slowly but surely became the most prominent cultural figure, and the most devastating critic of the French colonial order in Dahomey. It was he who founded the newspaper *Les Continents*—as well as the association *La Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire*—in 1924. He was the association's president while René Maran, colonial administrator from Martinique and author of *Batouala*, was its vice president. He travelled to the United States and befriended Jamaican-born black activist Marcus Garvey. The French government responded by harassing him, disbaring him, and cutting him from his contacts, friends and influences. He died in a Senegalese prison in Dakar in 1936, where he was serving a sentence for contempt of court.



George Marke, Prince Kojo Tovalou-Houenou, and Marcus Garvey, 1924.  
[http://plaquehistorique.blogspot.com/2013\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://plaquehistorique.blogspot.com/2013_10_01_archive.html)

Consequently, France shut down newspapers that it deemed as subversive, but it did not stop the education and acculturation those papers were imparting to its indigenous subjects, nor could it stop any of its citizens from developing independent

and critical thinking. The unforeseen outcome of liberal assimilation brought many to voice their opinions in newspapers. Unfortunately, *La Dépêche Africaine*, one of the avant-garde African newspapers, was taken off the list of permissible readings in 1935 by French authorities who view the publication as “subversive”—most likely because they thought it gave the natives “ideas.” Indeed, according to both Ricard and Tchassim, this particular journal had apparently published articles from militant blacks such as W.E.B. DuBois, Jane Nadal, and Aimé Césaire, among others.

*La Dépêche Africaine* was a window to conversations about desegregation, equality of the races, and of course decolonization. French authorities felt that the magazine propagated ideas unfavorable to the system of colonization implemented by France. However, both Ricard and Tchassim affirmed that, even before the magazine had started circulating in Togo, Couchoro had already formulated his own ideas a long time before—though his interpretation of how to attain independence, affirmation of self, and identity would take on a controversial stance.

Given this background in which Couchoro was raised, and the ideas circulating around him, it is possible that the author decided to develop his own point of view on the issues and take a more compromising stance on the matters at hand in his published work. However, it is imperative to state that very little to no records exist to help prove or confirm any of Couchoro’s ideas and/or inspirations.. Nonetheless, it is not surprising that despite the circumstances of Couchoro’s first printed novel, *L’Esclave*, being staged as simply a story of adultery, readers quickly realized that there was much more to the narrative. Even today, as we delve into the story, we recognize some of the social

principles of Couchoro's time even if they come across as articulated from a Eurocentric perspective.

Before looking closely at *L'Esclave*, it is truly important to understand the author as he advanced in the 1920s. Alain Ricard (1987: 19-45) summarizes Couchoro's evolution in three distinct stages, establishing how the author became exposed through the years to various ideas, ideals and socio-political movements.

There is a thirty-year gap between Couchoro's first novel, *L'Esclave*, and his subsequent works. *L'Esclave* represents the author from his regionalist point of view, one which Ricard refers to as the writer's young journalist period in which he is trying to establish a link between universalism and regionalism, the former being led by W.E.B. DuBois and the latter by Father Aupiais. It is only in Couchoro's later years, starting in the 1950s, that the author develops nationalist and then socialist ideals—aspects that come about during the time of Togo's independence and struggle for political hegemony.

I am mostly interested in how Couchoro's regionalism reflects the awakening of the African towards his own society; his own cultural differences which make him/her a subaltern vis-à-vis the Westerner; and how, despite it all, he/she manages to establish his/her identity regardless of difficult circumstances.

### **Synopsis of Couchoro's *L'Esclave***

This focus on Couchoro's early years has me looking only at his flagship novel *L'Esclave*, thus setting him among the pioneer writers of Sub-Saharan Francophone

Africa. This novel remains significant especially because it is one of the rare novels written by an African at the height of colonization that is still read today. Above all, the contribution it makes to establishing the Black African as a human and not an “Other” continues to be relevant today. The core of the novel consists of two main chapters subdivided in seven episodes each. The title of each episode announces the plot that will unfold in each, allowing (as stated above), for a sort of guided reading. For example, in the first chapter, the first episode is aptly titled: *Une nuit de noces*. It recounts the wedding preparations, the ceremony itself, and the details of Komlangan and Akoêba’s wedding night.

The main characters are Komlangan, heir to the chiefdom, and Akoêba, his young bride. The first two episodes recount Komlangan’s wedding to Akoêba. The ceremony is intricate and Couchoro painstakingly describes the wedding night, the “deflowering” of Akoêba, and the importance of this moment, mostly for Akoêba’s parents. If Akoêba had not been a virgin, she would not have bled as profusely as she did, and this would have been to her parent’s shame, making the advantageous wedding she had just contracted with Komlangan null and void. Couchoro paints the scenes of wedding preparation and festivities with much detail. But he does not dwell too much on the fact that Komlangan is old enough to be Akoêba’s father (Komlangan is the same age as Akoêba’s father), that he has been married four times already, and has a son the same age as his new bride. Incidentally, polygamy will never come across as an issue to be dealt with in Couchoro’s novels. For today’s reader, the huge age difference between the newlyweds is unsettling, especially because it appears to be of little consequence in the novel. However, it is important to understand that marriage

was a means of financial security for women, and age differences were not considered. Togo's indigenous population did not necessarily enjoy great economic freedom during colonial times, and the only means of survival for a woman in early twentieth-century Africa, was to marry a man (regardless of his age and number of wives) who had land and could provide financially. Komlangan is rich—he is the chieftain of the village, so this is a good match for Akoêba.

Akoêba is young and beautiful. She attracts the attention of Mawoulawoê, the embittered slave inherited by Komlangan from his father. Mawoulawoê had been raised in the family more like a son than as slave, and Komlangan calls him his brother. Because of this, Mawoulawoê also believes he is entitled to the same benefits as any son of the family. After the death of his former owner (Komlangan's father), he is shocked by the way Komlangan reverts to treating him as a common slave, and not as an equal. Furthermore, Komlangan refuses to grant him land or freedom. Already predisposed to anger and violence, Mawoulawoê slowly develops a sense of entitlement which brings him to the brink of madness. Mawoulawoê argues with Komlangan who denies him everything, and then decides to covet Akoêba, while increasingly mistreating his own wife Dansi. Crazy with rage, Mawoulawoê hatches a plan that involves killing Komlangan; his own wife Dansi; and Koffiwa, Dansi's friend, in whom Dansi had confided her suspicions about her husband's murderous actions.

Another aptly titled episode, *Et L'Amour Vint*, opens the plot of the story to the rest of the developments. As part of his plan, Mawoulawoê takes Akoêba as his lover, but soon, Akoêba finds herself pregnant. The happy event soon turns into a nightmare

given the strong resemblance that Akoêba's son bares with her lover. Filled with remorse, Akoêba tries to pass the baby off as the posthumous child of her deceased husband Komlangan who died poisoned at the hand of Mawoulawoê. As events unfold in the second half of the novel, Mawoulawoê's crime spree only gets worse. Akoêba, now pregnant with a second child, can no longer hide her affair with Mawoulawoê. To dissimulate, Mawoulawoê persuades Akoêba to abort. Unfortunately, the witch doctor's potion has unhappy consequences and the abortion becomes Akoêba's death sentence. In her agony, she confesses to the murders she and her lover Mawoulawoê committed (Komlangan, Dansi and Koffiwa), and to the true paternity of her first child. Full of remorse upon Akoêba's death, Mawoulawoê commits suicide, far away from the home he had known since the age of eight.

### **Identity in the Novel *L'Esclave* and the Critiques of Koutchokalo Tchassim**

In her analysis of Couchoro's novel, Koutchoukalo Tchassim (2012:13-55) attests that the writer of *L'Esclave* based his attempts to "reframe" Togolese identity on social observations. She indicates that Couchoro, in doing so, not only questions his own renderings, thoughts and depictions, but also seems to invite the reader to develop a personal line of interrogations based on the "facts" that he illustrates through his characters. In a way, Couchoro is inviting the reader to fully participate in the story by employing the technique of effective storytelling, thus utilizing a pure African style of oral history.

According to Tchassim, effective storytelling is the art of developing and presenting a story which cuts across age barriers and will hold the interest and reach its listeners. Stories will be remembered long after other orations. Knowing and applying the basics of storytelling will strengthen your stories. The audience has a very important role in storytelling: their minds are the canvas on which the teller paints his tale. It could then be said that Couchoro wrote what traditionally was transmitted orally in his culture. In order to keep his audience captivated, he reports things, in writing, as he sees them, and it is up to the reader to judge and decide on the lessons to be learned and attitudes to be adapted from reading the tale.

Tchassim states that Couchoro established his role as that of a messenger—a different kind of socio-political mediator—a guide through whom each reader reaches a conclusion and takes on social responsibilities based on their understanding and personal choices (Tchassim, 2012:7). But Tchassim also seems to think that the ultimate idea behind this sort of journey (led by the author) is to lead readers towards freedom from the archaic—to which he constantly refers. The ultimate goal of the story is to get the reader to reach a different awareness of life, to renew one's understanding of the world, and to develop a more forward-thinking way of living which could eventually lead to freedom of all types, even possibly to independence.

*L'Esclave* is the first of a series of twenty-one novels and short stories by Couchoro. Ricard tells us that the publication of *L'Esclave* was preceded by numerous ads which appeared in *La Dépêche Africaine* beginning October 1928 (1987:24). He seems to think that those ads were deliberately aimed at the French reader interested in

African life. In those ads, it is clearly stated that the novel is an indigenous story but that the style would please the reader because it was similar to colonial literature. The French reader would still be able to recognize familiar characters and subject matter: women and adultery, respectively. By the time of the publication of Couchoro's novel, *La Dépêche Africaine* was facing some financial difficulties and the actual distribution of the book had to be done through a different editor in France—Mr. B.P. de Souza's, with the additional help of A. Nicoue's printing house in Cotonou (capital of today's Benin).

Nonetheless, the publicity around the novel had managed to generate great interest in the story. From the very beginning of the introduction, the reader is taken into a locale purposefully created to appeal to the French reader looking to “better understand” the African (Ricard, 1987: 27). Couchoro paints the image of a tropical scenery in a style reminiscent of the naturalist novels of Emile Zola or Gustave Flaubert in nineteenth century French literature. Much like his French predecessors, Couchoro seeks to depict believable everyday reality. But, what sets Couchoro apart is that he also infuses his work with the regionalism inculcated by father Aupiais, thus giving his story enough exoticism to satisfy the literary palate of those needing something different from the simple European storyline of infidelity. A pre-independence novel, the story evolves in an environment entrenched in traditional structures (Tchassim, 2012:13). The preface takes the reader to the events in the following manner:

*Coulant du Nord au Sud vers l'océan, le Mono sert de limite, dans sa plus grande partie et sur un assez long parcours, entre le Togo et le Dahomey... Et*

*parfois, le Mono charrie, dans ses tourbillons, dans ses cruels tourbillons, au milieu d'un bruit de tonnerre, des cadavres humains.*

Before colonization, the land known today as the country of Togo had already been a territory where numerous ethnic groups lived side by side, on the West side of the Kingdom of Dahomey. The Mono river serves as a natural boundary between Togo and that now-defunct Kingdom. The Mono river has strong currents, but often overflows its banks during the rainy periods. Just as the Nile river in Egypt, the Mono is considered a river of life for the fertile soil that results from those floods, but also a river of death because those same flood waters often cause loss of lives in the surrounding villages. This explains the last section of the above quote that refers to the river carrying cadavers in its flows. These human cadavers could also be the victims of ethnic wars or colonial savageries, but this is only speculation.

Because of the afore-mentioned possibilities, the Mono serves as a focal point for many stories and while Couchoro sets the fictional village of *L'Esclave* near the Mono river, he creates a curious juxtaposition of time and facts around this river to surround his description of this exotic setting of the Mono.

*Jadis, échappés de la nuit des temps et partis à la conquête du monde, le Gaulois et le Germain se retrouvaient sur les berges opposées du Mono, d'où face à face, ils se tendaient la main et se partageaient dans un magnifique voisinage quelques terres de l'Ouest africain. ... les deux pavillons clapotaient au souffle de la brise (L'Esclave, Préface, p 22)*

In using the word “*jadis*,” Couchoro seems to place the story in a vague, unspecified timeframe. It is up to the reader to set the plot in a specific period, especially after he/she is given the words “*conquête du monde*.” The appellations “Gaulois” and “Germain” refer to a time before the modern era, as if to show his erudition. Then, Couchoro quickly puts these two groups into a more modern setting by saying that these groups both arrived as conquerors on the banks of the Mono river. Colonization of Africa as we know it didn’t begin until mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, in this part of the section, Couchoro wants the reader to believe that these two people (which the reader comes to conclude as French and Germans) were in agreement to each occupy either side of the Mono river and live in harmony, their respective flags flapping joyfully in the wind.

*Mais un grand souffle passa ! Souffle plus puissant que le souffle de la brise du Mono ! L’un des deux puissants pavillons s’abattit avec un fracas épouvantable. La pauvre étoffe, faite de trois bandes, se déchira aux ronces. ... Et maintenant, là-bas, au-delà du Mono, ce n’est plus le Germain ! Un autre Gaulois se dresse, magnifique, avec, sur ses lèvres, le sourire du conquérant ! Et les deux voisins, désormais frères, se tendent la main pardessus l’invisible haie de mitoyenneté qu’est le Mono ! (PAGE)*

The “*Grand souffle*” to which Couchoro refers is *World War I*, which resulted in the Germans losing their colonies and the French taking them over. Couchoro paints the devastation of World War I as greater than any of the floods of the Mono river. Referring to the German flag as the “*pauvre étoffe*” seems to call attention to the sympathy that

many Togolese had for the German form of colonization, echoes of which are still heard in the comments of older Togolese who lived the waning days of the German colony. As French colonization replaces it, and the French come as conquering heroes, they now span their reach over both sides of the Mono river, Benin being under the French flag already.

In his introduction, Couchoro contrasts several images and ideas. Yet, despite some contradictions in the use of images and historical facts, one important message from the above passage is that nature, the universal teacher, demonstrates that life is ever-changing. The passage seems to aim, at first, at depicting a tropical country-side (for that touch of exoticism which was pleasing at the time for the Western literary taste on all things African). The “poetic” references Couchoro makes to the colonial powers that influenced Togo seem ambiguous and somewhat disingenuous, especially because the main story takes a completely different tone and no longer makes inferences to the colonizers through the glorification of nature. African beliefs and the base of African culture is expressed through the very strong ties it has with nature. I venture, then, to say that the main purpose of this elaborate introduction is to serve as a smokescreen for the author’s main purpose: establishing an African identity through telling the story of an African tribe. The introduction thus serves as a “hook,” a ploy not only to get the novel published, but most of all to get it read and accepted as an intellectually stimulating story at a time when the common African was not expected to have “intellectual abilities.”

Furthermore, written in what has been labelled “high class French” by both Tchassim and Ricard, the story in and of itself is elaborated in comprehensive vignettes, like a painting, in the style of French Naturalist novels—a style that prevailed in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The only difference, according to Tchassim, is that Couchoro lays out the structures and social institutions of his novel in a more factual manner; that is, Couchoro describes the actions of his protagonists in a more matter-of-fact manner (Tchassim, 2012: 3-6).

### **A Complex and Controversial Novel**

A close analysis helps decipher the author’s goals. We first try to understand the anti-hero, Mawoulawoê, a northern-born slave. Historically, the north is considered land of the Kabyé, the predominant ethnic group of northern Togo. It is also the land where Ewes and Minas (with the complicity of the Kabyés) would get their slaves. It is no surprise that Couchoro chooses a Northerner as a slave. But in doing so, he falls into the trappings of stereotyping, allowing the prejudices of Southern Togolese “elites” to surface. Nonetheless, Couchoro’s first novel has that particularity of touching on many social themes at various levels, leaving the reader with a wealth of information to analyze. It is perhaps because of this that both Ricard and Tchassim agree in their critique that Couchoro wants to re-imagine Togo too quickly. Couchoro’s story touches for example on matters of :

#### **Inheritance:**

*Alors Komlangan lui fit savoir en termes clairs qu'étant l'aine il avait tous les droits ; que l'esclave n'avait qu'à se tenir dans le sillage du nouveau maitre qui s'imposait à lui ; que chez d'autres, les esclaves avaient toujours hérité du maitre au détriment des enfants du sang ; mais qu'avec lui, il fallait abandonner, ravalé de tels espoirs. L'un était un esclave, de basse condition, un parvenu, un usurpateur. (P. 50)*

### **Women's rights:**

*Les femmes trépignent. La porte, sous la poussée, s'ouvre avec fracas. Elles entrent toutes, en s'écrasant. L'homme sort. La tante se rue sur le lit et le fouille avec rage. Elle sort, suivie des autres femmes. Elle montre triomphalement entre ses deux mains levées un mouchoir d'un blanc éclatant, tacheté au milieu de quelques gouttes de sang...C'étaient les pétales rouges de la fleur vaginale. La tante parle : « Akoêba était vierge ! Elle ne l'est plus! Elle est femme désormais.» (Pp. 30-31).*

*L'autre, l'épouse, la maîtresse de maison, qui se voit privée de ses droits par l'incompréhensible coutume qui veut que les droits d'héritage appartiennent au fils de l'argent au détriment des fils du sang. (p. 91)*

This passage refers to the need for women to be virgins on their wedding night to prove that first they come from a proper family, then second that they are unsoiled properties ready for their husband. This speaks to the fact that women are simple objects; that

under no circumstances are they allowed to become property owners themselves. They must always live by the charity of men.

*Komlangan assurait à chacune de ses femmes une pension mensuelle.*

*C'était la leur subsistance. (P. 47)*

This quote explains how women had to be dependent on their husbands for food and shelter even though they were allowed to have a small trade. The money they made from their small trades could only be used to buy personal toiletry items they would need.

### **Servitude and slavery:**

*Mawoulawoê avait été, à l'âge de huit ans environ, acheté par le père de Komlangan loin vers le Nord, au pays des Okou-Okou. La bonne mine du petit esclave plut fort à son maître ; aussi celui-ci se garda-t-il de faire défigurer ce visage en y faisant inscrire au couteau le tatouage des esclaves. Il le nomma Mawoulawoê, ce qui signifiait : « Dieu y pourvoiera. » Rien ne le distinguait donc de Komlangan avec qui il grandit, partagea ses jeux, peina sur le sol en maniant la houe. Le petit esclave devint jeune homme : il allait au champ, travaillait dans les palmeraies, vaquait aux occupations domestiques, tout comme son « frère. » (Pp. 50-51)*

When Komlangan's father dies, Mawoulawoe—now a grown man in his thirties—hopes to gain his freedom. In his mind, he feels that he has earned the right to be his own

person, and he believes that he has the prerogative to be an equal to his “brother” in all things (such as owning property and a share of the family fortune). The subsequent denials to freedom and ownership that he gets from Komlangan ignites dark passions which the author suggests are inevitable responses to basic human aspirations and needs.

The following quote is a glimpse of how the author seems to view traditional medicine, local beliefs, and religion. The quote follows the scene in which Mawoulawoê has poisoned his wife Dansi in order to silence her and to stop her from letting Komlangan know that his wife Akoêba and his “brother” Mawoulawoê are now lovers. Pretending to be alarmed by the violent illness that results from this poisoning, Mawoulawoe goes to the witch doctor for help, hoping to “save” his wife from the wrath of the Serpent-god which all believe she has offended. Though they do call upon the witch doctor for help, they are skeptical, especially Komlangan:

*Komlangan avait une confiance plutôt relative en l'efficacité des sacrifices. Non pas qu'il fut incroyant, mais sa foi de fétichiste ne l'empêchait pas de penser que souvent, dans les luttes de la vie, les suggestions venant du bon sens et de l'expérience acquise étaient de mise, plutôt que la confiance aveugle en la puissance des dieux. (pp. 70-71)*

**Medicine, and religion:**

Couchoro never denounces forthright the evils of what he feels are outdated practices. However, in the scene of Akoêba's agony, the author has the dying women offer a rather acid opinion of the type of medicine that causes her to die. She refuses modern medicine knowing that it's too late because unfortunately: *"Nous avons tenté, il y a quelques jours, la criminelle manoeuvre pour arracher ce fruit de mon sein. L'opération a réussi, homme, au-delà de tes espérances, puisqu'elle tue non seulement le fruit, mais aussi la mère. Je m'en vais !"* (p. 134)

The passages cited above are only a glimpse of what Couchoro sees as a society that has social instances that do not function for the good of all of its people. Considering those dysfunctions, the author appears to make underlying suggestions. For example, when the question of inheritance is disputed between Komlangan's real son and the slave Mawoulawoê, Couchoro suggests that one of the women (wife, sister or daughter) from Komlangan's entourage should inherit, more likely, Komlangan's first loyal and good wife. This is a true departure from tradition because, in the Togo of the time, women were considered property themselves and could not inherit. At the time *L'Esclave* was published, internal slavery still existed in the guise of indentured servants. The practice was still in vigor during the years of independence. In depicting Mawoulawoe's predicament and his fall from grace, Couchoro seemed to have embarked on a mission to show how forced labor was unequal and unjust to men and women alike, but also how it created additional social strife.

Another social conflict that the author refers to is in the confinement of women after the death of their spouse, as described in the scene upon Komlangan's death. It is

a custom that widows remain in solitary confinement, with very little to no right to leave the space of their quarantine (not even for hygienic reasons, except at night, when everyone else is asleep in order to avoid any type of interaction with the rest of society). In a major departure from tradition, Couchoro views the practice as psychologically bad on women's morale. He seems to think that by confining women, two major problems happen: first, a half of society loses its economic force, and the second is that women might end up traumatized by this form of ostracism and come out of it damaged and useless to society. Beyond simply depriving an individual of his/her freedom, Couchoro's allusions to inheritance—for example—refers more to that which liberates our minds and allows us to judge for ourselves: the right to education and the pursuit of personal lofty gains. For Couchoro, a liberated, educated individual can use judgement not only for his/her own benefit, but also for the benefit of mankind.

Couchoro's vehemence seems greater on the matter of healers and witch doctors (who, in his point of view, know nothing of true medicine). Their ignorance of health issues, especially those of women, are appalling and cause grievous harm to a society already ignorant and ill-informed. Couchoro never refers to the religion of Vodou when explaining the spiritual practices of his characters. He does, however, call the priest of the cult by his true title: *le féticheur*. He also refers to the objects used in the practice by their real name (*le tam-tam, les divinités, les mystères*). Couchoro talks about "*les forces occultes*" and even names some of the "*divinités*." But he never voices an opinion about nor does he allude to religion as a concept to be explicitly explored (*L'Esclave*, p39).

According to Tchassim (2012:19), Vodou, in Couchoro's perspective, is the root reason why Africans are still viewed as unable to progress socially. In Couchoro's point of view, practitioners of the art (those who do not truly grasp the idea of spiritualism but only strive at extracting money from the unsuspecting and ill-advised) are those who do the most harm. Akoêba's botched abortion is a testament to the practice of bad medicine, bad hygiene, and bad ideas about health. All these issues are condemnable for Couchoro because they do not advance Togolese society. As for the *féticheurs*, it is evident that Couchoro doesn't think much of their skills. Through the story, he relates several times how they are called upon to cure sick loved ones, only to have Gabriel (Komlangan's son) wish for a "*medecin qui viendrait avec des medecines plus appropriées*" (*L'Esclave*, p131). As an example, the reader is left with the feeling that if Akoêba had had access to Western medicine, maybe she might not have died.

As I stated earlier, the novel acts as a blueprint for revisiting Togolese traditions, habits, beliefs, and beliefs that should be left behind for new habits. In the concluding pages, Couchoro appears to suggest a cultural fusion by which Togo would be a better nation, if only it could merge its good traditions with good advanced Western ideas. Despite their criticism, both Ricard and Tchassim agree that Couchoro's view that Togolese society can progress only when it embraces modernity.

Breaking the link from an obsolete (sometimes dangerous) heritage such as traditional medicine allows emancipation. Women's rights and their social ostracism, polygamy, animism, the Vodou religion, lack of industry, and an antiquated administrative and justice system are all legitimate fields of criticism that Couchoro uses

to show that Togo (and the Africans that live there) has a long way to go in their quest for progression. His aim is to bring the nation into modern times. However, in his attempt to reform his society, Couchoro fails to include the *entire* Togolese nation, and thus falls into prejudices that limit his argument in support of progression. It is because of this that Tchassim argues that Couchoro's novel is not representative of Togo. In her opinion, Togo's growth is stunted by customs still practiced in remote areas. When criticized in this light, Couchoro's novel as the "blueprint" for social change seems rather elitist—dividing society into authentic children of the land and acolytes of an oppressive system.

To make her point, Tchassim clearly states that Couchoro never openly or explicitly protests against colonialism (2012:2). His work established itself apart from the various Black emancipation movements from the very beginning. In Couchoro's defense, however, the standards of the *Négritude* movement to which the author's work is set against wouldn't make its official mark until a year after the publication of *L'Esclave*. And for both Ricard and Tchassim, Couchoro's main objective seemed to distinguish itself from *Négritude* by not viewing itself as simply black, but rather as a fusion of cultures emerging in a new world, post colonialist. Because Couchoro's stance seems in favor of a more Westernized version of Togo, his point of view on African identity makes it hard to accept at first. His critique of the customs, beliefs, and cultural practices of his people are viewed more as biased against his own world. But identity, especially within colonial times, is a difficult issue to resolve at best. To understand its complexities, it is important to take a step back and try to recognize the beliefs about social distinctiveness as they take shape at each instances of history.

African identity is not easy to define. While some might base identity on the cultural practices inherent to each group of people, the question of which cultural values, traditions, and languages are to be adopted always remains a largely unanswered. The history of social identity that has organized Togo and motivated the creation of Couchoro's first novel has been challenged, especially by Tchassim, in many different ways since the novel appeared. Couchoro's admiration for all people (and things) who carry themselves with prestige, great education, and values has been widely seen as promoting Western customs and Tchassim (2008:13) makes it clear that this has, and is still, to some extent excluding Togolese people—especially the northern ethnic groups.

Tchassim further argues that the north has long been marginalized, misrepresented, and differentiated. Though Couchoro never mentions Mawoulawoê's tribe by name, he always referred to the character's northern origins. Let us recall that it was the northern tribes that were sold off as slaves and Mawoulawoê was bought as a slave by Komlangan. Man's social inferiority comes from being subject to another's decision-making process. According to Ricard, in Couchoro's world, the inability to decide for oneself—even when the process is carried out by one's own kin—is no different from being colonized by a Western power. True freedom can only happen when one has the ability to choose his path and gain access to the common good without restrictions, taboos, or discrimination based on gender, marital status, or ethnic background.

## Couchoro Versus the *Négritude* Movement

Couchoro is often criticized for his apparent disassociation with the philosophy of *Négritude*. The author, in his “apparent” embrace of Western culture and the underlying discrimination of his own, is disparaged by his critics for seemingly falling into the trap of identity politics—or that of the division of humanity. This division creates pockets of distinguished groups of people that are considered inferior (and, in opposition, those other groups that are considered superior), according to certain criteria and degrees of comparison. The Minas and the Ewes to which Komlangan “belongs” are viewed as civilized, while Mawoulawoê’s northern tribe is uncouth and in need of a “cultural makeover.” The divisions here are clear and are a great weapon in the arsenals of Couchoro’s critics.

I propose, however, that Couchoro’s *L’Esclave* is more a discussion on *bridging* the cultural differences between the Western and African cultures than trying to separate them further. One element that helps in creating this bridge is viewing *Négritude* as the manifestation of black agency, as Couchoro sees blacks embracing both their culture and Western culture at the same time. Though *L’Esclave* was published a year before the *Négritude* manifest, Aimé Césaire, one of the founding fathers of the movement, argues vehemently for the invention of an “*écriture nègre*.” There are no accounts that Césaire would have read Couchoro or vice versa, but rather than view Couchoro’s novel as anti-Négritude, it could be argued that for the first time, a novel by an African writer—giving agency to an African protagonist, in an African setting, in the format of oral African storytelling—was a form of “*écriture nègre*.”

The aim of the “*écriture nègre*” as first suggested by Aimé Césaire (*Discourse on Decolonization*, 1955) is to transmit the true reality of the colonized experiences. This is the opportunity to honestly search for one’s identity—which was stolen, then reconstructed in a new reality by someone other than the one whose identity was stolen (i.e. the European). Césaire talks about needing a conscious understanding of self, of history, and of the battle at hand—because once the oppressed becomes truly conscious that he is the only one who can reclaim his identity, this translates into an active and defensive attitude from which derive dignity and refusal of oppressiveness.

In defining *Négritude*, Césaire affirms that there should be a battle against inequalities and a world cultural system characterized by prejudice that leads to an intransigent hierarchy. In his 1955 book *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, Césaire affirms that to simply recognize that one is black (accepting that blacks are able to create their own destiny and accepting black history and culture) helps position black people within a global community of equals. For Césaire, *Négritude* is linked to the concept of a specificity and unity derived from the Slave Trade and the plight of the black in the New World. However, unlike Couchoiro, Césaire rejects assimilation and indoctrination. Césaire sees that black people already have a culture which does not necessarily need to be part of the greater human culture. It stands alone. However—in contradiction of himself—in spite of rejecting Europe, Césaire continued to claim Martinique as part of France, never once clamoring for independence, but simply for self-governance.

A more “African” perspective on *Négritude* comes from Léopold Sédar Senghor, Césaire’s co-creator of the movement. In 1988, in his book “*La Négritude comme*

*mouvement humanitaire*,” Senghor states that *Négritude* (a term which he says was Césaire’s invention) is a philosophy that embraces the rhythm and forms of African art, music, and culture showing the essence of man to the world. For Senghor, *Négritude* is a series of facts. It is a group of values (economic and political, intellectual and moral, artistic and social) not only of Sub-Saharan Africa, but of all black minority groups (American, Asian, and Pacific nations). It is the hard work provided by all black Africans and their descendants whom the ancient Greeks of old used to call Ethiopians, and whom sciences such as anthropology, ethnology, and sociology have devoted full areas of study.

Subjectively, *Négritude* is the accepting of the above facts. It is acquiescing that Africa has a history, has always contributed to world history, and will continue to do so for a long time. Black civilization will continue to project its culture, and all the representatives and defenders of this culture will continue to assume the values of this civilization, will keep updating it, and will help it to flourish continuously. Black civilization will always be updated through the exchanges it will have with the outside world. These exchanges with the outside world will in turn, create paths of self-evaluations, and will re-create new tracks to be shared by all—both from within Black civilization as well as within the Universal Civilization.

Senghor’s point of view does not seem too far away from Couchoro’s application of his understanding of regionalism and universality in *L’Esclave*. This has prompted Senegalese literature professor, literary critic, and former cultural minister Makhily Gassama (*Ethiopiennes* numéro 22, 1980) to reiterate Senghor’s thoughts on African

literature that African literature has worked incessantly to be witness to the notion of identity to the point of threatening the national unity of some governments.

When it came out in 1929, *L'Esclave* was received with mixed review. In part because Couchoro treats certain cultural traits (polygamy, paganism, and the treatment of certain members of society—i.e. women and slaves) as old-fashioned practices. For many Africans, these ancestral practices were what made them unique and different from the Europeans. By proposing to replace some of these customs with more modern and Europeanized manners, Couchoro gives the impression that he was alienating his own culture. Furthermore, when Couchoro's positioning is examined against Césaire or Senghor's definition of *Négritude*, the author comes across as falling short of giving Black culture its rightful place. However, the main purpose of *L'Esclave* is to expose and to examine the shortcomings and failures of a society, and to think about how these failures stomp progress. In this, and much like Senghor, Couchoro shakes society, sets it against itself, and gives it pause.

### **Couchoro's Legacy**

Despite Couchoro's apparent rejection of his nation's cultural traditions, *L'Esclave* goes beyond *Batouala* (Rene Maran's 1921 novel), in that the story ends with the hope of a brighter future for a more just society. Furthermore, Couchoro's novel, while portraying an anti-hero victim of unfavorable social concepts, also has good-natured characters who work at improving the world around them. Because of this and despite

her criticisms, Tchassim (2012) agrees that the author's push for modernity and reforms are viable in contemporary Togo.

For example, since the advent of the new millennium, women have been enjoying equal rights in many areas such as the right to inheritance, and there are now rules and regulations in the nation's constitution protecting and guaranteeing women's rights to property. Contemporary Togolese women literature such as that of Gad Ami and Tchotcho Ekué (both writing in the late 1980s) have advocated—since the time of Couchoro—for a sincerer, authentic African identity—one in which customs that still mark women as inferior be repelled. These women also call for embracing modernity in a way that allows for a happy medium between cultural practices that show a progressive Togo, but not at the expense of what marks her difference from Western civilization and other African nations.

*Dans nos pays, nous avons notre éducation, des formes courtoises de langue, une culture d'esprit, un code de convenances, des usages, des cérémonies ou l'emphase ne cède en rien au désir d'être poli et de plaire...notre esprit s'irradie en pensées élevées. Et un civilisé qui serait appelé à vivre notre vie en tirerait cette conclusion, que le qualificatif de « sauvage » semble désuet et suranné quand on l'applique en bloc à toutes les races de la « sauvage » Afrique.*

In this statement, the author sets forward the uniqueness of African traditions which are good and should be kept. He speaks of the courtesy embedded in the language itself, of politeness that comes with the social covenants and the upbringing.

He assures that any “civilized” (i.e. Westernized) person who would socialize with a Togolese native could not under any circumstances label this person “savage.” We could therefore say that, in writing *L’Esclave*, though the novel comes across as a critical social self-examination, much of the author’s vision has received more sympathy as time has evolved. While Couchoro condemns customs that diminish mankind—slavery, the rejection of women, traditional medicine— traditions which stump emancipation, create an unjust and unequal society, kill more than cure, he proposes to consider an overall change that would lead to new rules and laws, which, in turn, would balance life out and establish a new nation.

In 1920, his vision and his premises suggested that a society should catch up with its times. According to Ricard, the critics were expecting a diatribe against colonization (1987: 166-201;202). In the long run, the book was appreciated for its innovative characterization and for having set a black writer on equal par with a European writer. While it is true that the criticism levelled at Couchoro’s has some truth (certain prejudices), the author’s ideals have prevailed and have been vindicated through the modernizing of Togolese society itself. As stated before, Couchoro has the added distinction of being one of the very few early Sub-Saharan authors still read in contemporary literature. He is one of the first to give complete agency to Sub-Saharan “authentic” African protagonists, evolving within their own settings without European intervention.

Couchoro gave a voice to Togo. His approach gave Togolese literature a distinctiveness from other Francophone Sub-Saharan literature by choosing to depict

the individual as the hero affirming his identity against the social forces which aim to pin him or her down. Togolese literature chooses not to dwell on either colonial or postcolonial issues, but on depicting universal concerns, hopes, and dreams because "A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people," (Ghandi, "Mahatma Gandhi Quotes." BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2017. 12 November 2017. <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mahatmagan160857.html>)

## Chapter 2

### Reformulating Togolese Identity Through the Feminine Perspective

#### Political Barriers

As we have seen in Chapter 1, Togo was one of the first French-African nations to publish a novel (Felix Couchoro's *L'Esclave* in 1929). But this initial resounding success—setting Togo as a trailblazer in African literature—was thwarted by the vagaries of colonial policy. According to literary critic Alain Ricard (1987: 29), the scarcity of Togolese literature following *L'Esclave* was in part due to “*le manque d'élites francophones*” in the country. As stated in the introduction, the French colonized Togo relatively late. During the French colonial era, schooling—especially higher learning—seemed to attract only a small segment of Togolese society, and for the most part, many Togolese were still learning to master the French language. Perhaps as a by-product of the small pool of educated readers, there was very little motivation for writers to produce literature.

Literary production didn't resume in Togo until more than twenty years after *L'Esclave*: the publication in 1955 of *Le Fils du Fétiche* by David Ananou, a didactic novel that represented the dismantling the animist cults prevalent throughout Togo in favor of Christianity. Furthermore, the writing produced in Togo between 1953 and 1970 was not as successful in catching the attention of international readers as the literature of Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon with authors such as Ousmane Sembene, Ahamadou Kane, and Mongo Beti. Nonetheless, from the 1960s until the early 1980s,

Togolese authors such as Victor Aladji, Gnoussira Analla, Julien Atsou Guenou, Koffi Mawuli Agokla, Towaly, and Yves Emmanuel Dogbé endeavored to give genuine literary bodies of work to the nation. However, most of their publications remained known only to an elite few. Even Tété Michel Kpomassié's bestseller *L'Africain du Groenland*, a travel journal relating the author's adventures in Greenland, saw its initial success diminish, then practically disappear after a time.

This lack of international attention might explain why, in Togo, the novel as a genre was less popular than theater productions. A "new" category of popular literature called the *concert-party*—a theater genre performed in the local vernacular languages of Togo—became the favorite form of written art during this time period. This was an issue for the Togolese, because between 1960 and 1980 (roughly the post-independence period when Togo was under the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadéma), Togolese literature was "prevented" from flourishing altogether. These years, later known as the Silent Years, prompted many historians, journalists and writers to say that the political landscape of the time (from 1967 to 2005) created an atmosphere that constricted production, perhaps explaining the lack of international attention to Togolese novels and poetry. Indeed, many writers went into exile and as a result, even the popular theater genre dwindled and nearly disappeared.

Barely seven years after it gained its independence, Togo's burgeoning democracy abruptly ended as Eyadéma's dictatorship threw the nation into turmoil. For the thirty-eight years of his "reign," Gnassingbé ruled with an iron fist. He had the support of national and international partners who chose to turn a blind eye to his policies. His socio-economic decisions—as well as his political machinations—crushed

the nation into adopting an apathetic and submissive platform, especially after the failed 1993 coup d'état, which caused the death of hundreds of victims. In typical dictatorial style, the focus of the nation revolved around Eyadéma, and all manifestations of nationalism had to be formulated as a tribute to his glory. It perhaps goes without saying that, unlike Leopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal—another post-independence African ruler—Gnassingbé had little interest in culture or the arts.

For this reason, along with political repression, very little effort was given to developing the arts or literature. Gnassingbé "feared all forms of writings:" tracts, pamphlets, plays, and novels. More than a dozen people were arrested and accused of terrorism for distributing "subversive literature" in the summer of 1985. Togolese cultural production was further undermined by the dictator's excessive personality cult expressed using various tactics to affirm his own identity at the expense of his country. The dictator's eccentricities and his thirst for power can be seen in the myths he cultivated around his invincibility, especially after he survived a plane crash on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1974. Other aspects of this cult of personality came in the form of national holidays that he created around to celebrate his accomplishments: his taking over of the government (January 13<sup>th</sup>), the day he survived the plane crash (January 24<sup>th</sup>), and many other days which held an cult meaning for him.

Anecdotal accounts I gathered personally from Togolese individuals (a group which included teachers, retired military officers, publishers, authors and television personalities) during my visits to Togo suggest that because of Gnassingbé's intimidating and bullying campaigns, Togolese people became passive, closed-in, introverted, and only able to quietly try to make sense of their world. The fear was such

that people became afraid of their own family members and friends, dreading betrayal at the least provocation. Despite all this, many Togolese still feel that Gnassingbé left the nation with a strong infrastructure and a good base for growth—though his contribution to the Arts were only expressed through the appreciation for a certain northern Togolese custom: the Evalas (wrestling matches carried out in the Kabyé region of Togo). Gnassingbé elevated the event to a yearly national two-week talent competition that government officials were required to attend. Gnassingbé's personal artistic legacy resides in the ribald songs he would sing with his army, songs which have been recorded for posterity and are available on YouTube. <sup>1</sup>

## **Togolese Women Overcome Obstacles**

Despite Gnassingbé creating an atmosphere of political repression, it was during the 1980s, at the height of the dictatorship, that women novelists labored to revive the literary production of Togo and worked at reshaping the nation's identity and culture. Their efforts would propel them to become prolific writers. Most of these female authors had recently returned from foreign countries with degrees, mainly from France. Two of these women stand out from the group: Tchotcho Christiane Ékué and Gad Ami. Togolese critics and literary personalities such as Kangni Alem agree that these two novelists stand out because they dared to defy traditional conventions and a society in which women had been relegated to domestic work. It is also agreed that their works contain important messages of hope, equality, and a call to look towards the future as a nation fully engaged in world progress.

Women's literary production in nineteen-eighties Togo is all the more laudable because, at the time, there were only two editorial companies in the country. Most Togolese had to have their works published either in Cameroon, Senegal, or the Ivory Coast. One of the two editorial houses responsible for publishing both Ékué and Gad Ami closed in early 1990. Tchotcho Ékué, stimulated by her love of books and literature, established her own editorial company in 1999, thus helping not only to distribute Togolese works, but also to disseminate schoolbooks.

### **Christiane Akoua Ékué alias Tchotcho Ékué**

Tchotcho Ékué was born in a family where mainly the Mina language was spoken. Her father was an accountant, and her mother a grade-school teacher. We know that she attended grade school where her mother taught, and that—upon graduating high school in Togo—she left for France to attend college in Beaune (from 1968 to 1974). After her time in France, she went to Germany (1974-1982), where she graduated from the University of *Saarbrücken*. Once she completed her education, she worked as a copy editor for the Togo publishing house *Nouvelles Editions Africaines*, and it is through that company that she publishes her first novel in 1989. This novel, *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables*, presents great interest, not only because of the subject it develops, but most of all because of its various complex layers—a structure that hides strong underlying messages. The analyses and interpretations of the novel are many and potentially never-ending, yet that deliberate complexity serves to hide both a

critique of the dictatorship and its effect on Togolese society and a message of hope—one to which the nation could hang on to in regaining its stolen identity.

On one level, *La Rue des Notables* seems to reclaim the right to be visible in a world that endeavors to marginalize its citizens by an abusive power. It represents this quest, not by accident, in the story of a writer—the novel's protagonist—whose newly completed manuscript is stolen. On the one hand, the novel comes across as a critique of certain Togolese practices, as the work takes a serious look at Togolese traditions considered obsolete by many. Those condemnations are found mainly in the scenes that surround the four main female characters of the story. On the other hand, the theme of the novel seems straightforward at first: it's simply a story of theft. But the multifaceted nature of the sub-plots gives the main plan of the story depths which fan out into numerous interpretations. Throughout the novel, these various layers appear to constantly imply situations in need of change: a need to break away from crushing traditions and enter a more modern, forward-thinking, and more enlightened society. The form of Ékué's novel, then, is designed to advocate change, but it does so subtly in order to hide its critiques from the dictatorship's censorship. As I analyze the story and the characters, an important tool will be, first, understanding the dialectic of identity and personality of the various characters (by using a study proposed by Ian Fraser) and, second, (to a much lesser degree) reflecting on Ékué's feminism (or lack thereof) and its relation to modern feminist theories such as that of Toril Moi.

**Synopsis of Tchotcho Ékué's Novel *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables*.**

Djani Taro, the young hero of the story, is a university student at the College of Languages and Literature, University of Mono (the latter, a fictitious city, is also a wink to Couchoro's *L'Esclave*). He is also a budding novelist who enjoys reading, especially books by Black American novelists which he finds inspiring. When we first meet him at the beginning of the novel, Djani is proofreading a story he has just finished writing. He has many reasons to be proud of himself: First, he has recently completed a successful semester at the university, and now he has just finished writing what, in his point of view, is a very good novel. Proud of himself, he sets out to meet with his friends to celebrate. From the very beginning of *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables*, readers are introduced to the first layer of complexity: in just a couple of pages, we are told the gist of the story written by Djani. Djani's novel tells the story of the beautiful African woman, Cika, a formidable character whose personality seems to play a great role in understanding not only the subplots of *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables*, but also the personality of the main character, Djani. Cika's story itself is not a major focus of the novel.

Cika's story is as thus: Cika, Djani's heroine, lives during colonial times in a town called Seko. Cika falls in love with the French governor of the colony, Cornillon, and eventually marries him—to the dismay of the other colonizers. The colonists are even more appalled after they discover that Cornillon had been stealing from the treasury to lavish upon his new bride. Six months after Cika and Cornillon's marriage, the governor's legitimate European wife arrives in the colony. Upon finding out about her husband's infidelity, the European wife raises the colonists against him, hoping that he will leave his "African mistress." Cika, for her part, also tries to gather her own group of

support against her European rival. The situation drives Cornillon to severe alcoholism and to further mismanagement of the colony finances. Disgusted, Cika abandons him for a younger Brazilian merchant. This ends up pushing Cornillon deeper into alcoholism and eventually to commit suicide, especially after he finds out that his European wife has just given birth to a mixed-race child—the offspring of her own secret love affair.

Once Cika's story is recounted, Ékué describes Djani, himself. She spends time describing his plain looks, his great mind, and his kind heart. He comes from the small farming village of Gbota (another fictitious village). His hope is that, after obtaining his university degree and having published his novel, he will be financially and socially settled for life. Djani dreams of being acknowledged in great literary circles and his accomplishment makes him feel equal to any task. He daydreams about other activities that he could take on upon the publication of this first novel. He reads his manuscript several times to ensure that he has corrected all his mistakes. Once satisfied, he puts it in a plastic bag and sets it on a little table next to his bed. Djani then goes out with friends (20), and buys presents for his family that he will soon visit (34). In the scenes related to Djani's routine, Ékué subtly paints various images about family customs (35-36), culture and education (38-39) in a favorable light. Djani's daily life is represented as both common place and universal.

The real adventure begins after Djani's best friend, Karim, tells him about a publishing company in the city of Kurta (in the neighboring state). Before going to the publisher, Djani has his manuscript typed. He then travels to Kuta, but unfortunately gets involved with various women, one of whom—Peacy—will eventually unravel his

world. Peacy (a high-class prostitute) and Djani spend the night together and by morning, she disappears with all his belongings: his money, his clothes, and the manuscript. Djani feels defeated and like a complete failure, mostly because he has lost his manuscript. Peacy, on the other hand, has no interest whatsoever in the novel. She is only interested in the money and simply abandons the manuscript in the taxi that she boards to get away from the scene of her crime. A passenger in that very same taxi finds the novel and, recognizing the value of Djani's work, steals it and uses it to his own advantage.

This passenger, Dadjé Massé, himself an aspiring writer with no talent, is down on his luck. The fortuitous discovery of the manuscript could not have come at a more opportune time. Massé works quickly at rewriting a few scenes to suit his needs and manages to have the work published, at the very company where Djani had intended to have his own novel published. With the proceeds from "his" published book, Massé begins to boast of his newfound fame and talents. But Djani, recognizing Massé's work as his own, returns to Kurta to meet with Massé in hopes of clearing things up with him.

Barely into their discussion, a fight ensues between Massé and Djani. Massé, a man of violent temper, lunges for Djani who, in self-defense, pushes him out of the way. This causes the latter to fall back and break his neck. Massé dies immediately. Accused of murder, Djani is sentenced to prison for involuntary manslaughter. As the news travels to Djani's hometown of Gbota, his girlfriend Méta (who had just given birth to their son) commits suicide out of shame, but also because she feels helpless and too weak to fight the harassment of the village women. She throws herself into the village well to the triumphant cheers of the women folk. By then, proof that Djani had been the

original author of the novel published under Massé's name comes out, and it is also revealed that the latter suffered from poor health and had in fact died from a collapsed respiratory system brought on by being over-agitated during the altercation. Djani is given a five-year prison sentence and a full pardon from the court upon his release three years later.

## **Deciphering the Levels of Meanings in Ékué's Novel**

### ***A) Cika: A Strongly Identifiable Character***

There are several stories in *La Rue des Notables*. The story of Cika, reported only through the lens of the main protagonist Djani, has a powerful significance in Ékué's novel. The character of Cika is that of a strong, independent thinker who defies the limits, conventions, and institutions of her time to flaunt her relationship with the governor of the colony. She goes from being a slave to the first lady of the colony, practically overseeing the white colonizers. Cika, through her bold acts of defiance (and by using her feminine wiles), seems to shame society, politics, social entrenchment, and values. Her identity, the person she decides to become, and what she decides to do with her talents are all her own choosing. She imitates no one and lets no one undermine her. Cika finds her strength within herself.

We don't have direct access to her words, but the reported story has many seeing Cika as a woman who would stop at nothing to reach her goals. It is possible, though, to interpret Cika more negatively and not-so-deserving of praise. Some readers have denounced Cika's overall countenance as that of a gold digger, a luscious woman

who uses her femininity as a tool to get what she wants. At first glance, Cika uses her feminine wiles and "sells" her body to get what she wants and could be considered as loose with her morals as Peacy is. But Peacy and Cika differ because while Peacy uses her body to make a living, Cika uses hers to aspire to higher goals. She becomes a business woman and defines her life in terms equal to those of the men around her. Thus, I chose to see her actions as part of a political satire in which roles seem to slightly imitate reality: Cornillon, the colonizer, could very well be a representation of Gnassingbé, the African dictator, while Cika is the symbol of a nation that refuses to comply to the conventions imposed on her (or of a small group of people who prosper despite dire circumstances). I will expand on this in the following paragraphs.

In the story of Cika and the governor, the more Cornillon lavishes Cika with gifts and power, the bolder she becomes. Cika feels that she can take on any challenge set before her, but most importantly, she feels inferior to no one. Cika becomes a great success in establishing her agency and her role in what she probably sees as a more modern, forward-thinking society. After officially becoming the governor's wife, she goes into business for herself—by herself—imposing her point of view even after she is separated from the governor. Cika's story, as a symbol of the Togolese people's power, might at first seem at odds with the reality of the Togo under Gnassingbé. Yet, in Togo's history, there are real-life models for Cika. In fact, under Gnassingbé's rule, there were successful and powerful women known as the "Nana Benz," who flourished in Togo despite (and especially during) the dictatorship years. The term first came into use in the 1930s to refer to Togolese businesswomen whose talent in "*affaires*" made

them the first people both in Togo—and in the African sub-region (South West from Senegal to Nigeria) in general—to acquire Mercedes-Benz cars.



Nana Benz in 1970s. <http://www.africardv.com/developpement/togo-manatex-une-vraie-histoire-de-pagnes/>

It is interesting to note that, indeed, the most successful years of the Nana Benz occurred during the dictatorship itself (in the seventies and eighties). They sold the famous "Dutch wax cloth" used to make the renowned "*pagne*" dresses (traditional attire that is still in vogue today in Togo and throughout Africa). These women held the monopoly of trade on this Dutch product throughout West Africa. Most of these women started from nothing to become the country's richest business people, so much so that they had great influence on Gnassingbé himself and on the economy in general. Gnassingbé had great esteem for the Nana Benz, and once again anecdotes abound about the dictator even consulting them on economic decisions.

This was because between 1976 and 1984, at least 40 percent of the commercial business in Togo, which was in the informal sector, was in the hands of the Nana Benz. The trade in textile at the time exceeded the country's phosphate industry, supposedly Togo's primary source of revenue. Though many of the Nana Benz were uneducated, they travelled abroad on business and played a leading role in national politics, rising

through society's hierarchy, with one even being appointed to high office—Mrs. A. Amédomé, who became Minister of Social Welfare in 1977, despite her inability to read or write. Thus, when considering the importance of the Nana Benz to Togo under the dictatorship, it seems clear that Ékué's creation, through Djani's perspective, of Cika, is a veiled reference to the power and prestige that women could attain under the oppressive conditions of the dictatorship, models of how women could work the system to assert their agency and power.

### ***B) Djani: A More Complex Character***

The characteristics of drive and strength in Cika as described above also seem present in Djani as he fights society on all levels. Djani is an African male who tends to be polygamous and industrious and likes beautiful things and enjoys life. To understand Djani, we need to see him from various points of view, starting with that of the characters that surround and interact with him. Massé and Peacy, represent envy: envy of Djani's talents and efforts but also treachery and thievery. They epitomize the hurdles of ignorance that Djani must fight against using only his education as weapon. Djani must also overcome the prejudices expressed by the secretary at the Kurta Editorial Agency, who looks down on him when he first arrives to get his manuscript published. She only sees a poor student, not an individual with something to offer or contribute to society. This secretary speaks to him in the purest of French, thinking that he cannot respond in kind, that he is incapable of being an articulate person altogether. In Djani, she sees the provincial, not the person who has managed to transform himself into an educated cosmopolitan city-dweller. The interactions between Djani and the secretary

illustrate the extent to which social status is based on whether one is "modern" and Europeanized, signified by one's mastery of the French language.

Thus, as seen above, there are deep, complex issues that contribute to shaping Djani's character. Ékué's novel is preoccupied with the constant oppositions between village life versus city life; education versus ignorance; tradition versus modernity; and most of all, wealth versus poverty. These oppositions constantly surround Djani, but also determine the circumstances of all the characters' life choices and explain how they evolve (for example, as the village women harass Méta and drive her to suicide).

Ékué represents this cruelty as the result of their ignorance, lack of education, intolerance, fear, poverty, and prejudice. It can be said that similarly, the dictatorship used the same tactics of intimidation—as well as brute force, fear, and superstition—to maintain Togo in its submission or to send people into exile. It is because of social prejudices that Djani cannot fit into the city and is viewed as an awkward peasant by all who meet him, from Peacy the prostitute to the secretary at the Editorial Agency in the city of Kurta. Ékué shows that ignorance due to lack of education and poverty pushes people to unwarranted prejudices and blind conclusions. This is seen vividly in Peacy who doesn't recognize the value of the manuscript that she steals. Symbolically, this lack of recognition of the merit of the manuscript reflects the way that the dictatorship did not recognize the value of its own citizens and the contributions—literary or otherwise—that they could make to the nation.

### **Other Layers of Complexity in Ekué's novel**

Understanding social dysfunction in Ékué's novel begins with the title itself. *Rue des Notables* is an oxymoron, a pure contradiction. In French, the word *Notable* can mean: one worthy of being noticed; of noble stature (i.e. physically worth noticing); one given in the study of the law; or one who is respectable and respected. Then again, it can also mean one who lives in a certain manner (denoting a certain stature in society). For Djani, notable means becoming someone important, or worthy of praise. The *Rue des Notables* in the novel is, however, nothing close to any of the above definitions: it is a pitiable dirt road with shabby dwellings on either side, dimly lit by a couple of lamp posts. Furthermore, the main setting (the city of Mono) takes its name from the Mono river (also present in Couchoro's novel *L'Esclave*.) This river, which serves as a natural border between Togo and Benin in real life, is known either for being good for irrigation or for causing devastating inundations. This suggests that Ékué choose this fiction to imply a double meaning: that the city nourishes aspirations and is the place where one must reside to become a "notable." At the same time, aspiring to rise above one's station is fraught with danger, and the city is filled with obstacles and people that can lead to one's downfall.

Yet another layer of the novel to analyze relates to the strength of self, the affirmation of one's convictions. Neither Cika nor Djani seem to need society to affirm their worth; they have enough confidence within themselves. They know their gifts and tacitly accept their weaknesses. They forge their own way in life. The opinion of others matters little to them, despite the obstacles that others present—at least in the case of Djani. In contrast, public judgment plays a major role in Méta's case. She allows the malicious attitude of the women in her village to define her. Cika, for her part,

epitomizes agency as a woman who doesn't attend to the judgments of others; she oversees her own destiny. She sees herself only as a successful person.

Identity through the eyes of the other in the novel is registered as the act of recognition expressed through admiration—first and foremost, admiration of one's own abilities, or self-admiration. Djani is proud of his accomplishment; He has written what he feels is a masterpiece. He bestows that same feeling of satisfaction onto Cika, who feels that she is strong enough (regardless of her race and status as a slave) to conquer the heart of the governor of the colony, as well as become leader of the colony and the white colonizers.

Another force that plays against Djani's character is lust—a debilitating "problem" that causes his downfall. Djani has a need to see admiration in the eyes of women. That is why he is not only engaged to Méta, but also why has an affair with Mona (whom he met at a bar) and with Peacy (when he arrives in Kuta to get his book published). All these women lavish some degree of admiration on him, though both Mona and Peacy do not necessarily find him attractive. In Méta he finds true love. Mona is only a playful pastime, and boredom is relieved in Peacy. Womanizing thus leads to his downfall. Cika (Djani's creation), for her part, capitalizes on the lust of others to help catapult her to the highest echelons of her society. But she is a fictive creation, perhaps representing Djani's fantasy that seeking admiration through seduction carries with it no risks.

Additionally, hypocrisy and envy are also represented as threatening forces to Djani's and, to some extent, Cika's strong personality. We see how these forces limit the life of Peacy, who only covets other people's belongings, and thus only sees in Djani

an easy prey to fleece. We see how it destroys Masse as he plots to pass himself off as a great writer by stealing the material that will ultimately lead to his death. And finally, we see how it boomerangs back on the women of the village, making them not only directly responsible for Méta's death, but also responsible for damaging their community and damning it to be viewed as the most uncouth and retrograde in the country. In the end, Ékué's novel reads as an allegory, one that depicts a fight between modernity and forward thinking versus crushing traditions and obsolete conservatism.

### **Insights from Ian Fraser's Identity and How This Applies to Ékué's Novel**

Ian Fraser (2013: 31-45), in discussing the eighteenth-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Freidrich (G.W.F.) Hegel's theory of recognition, explains that determining an individual's identity involves two self-consciousnesses helping each other to exist. The protagonists are aware of their own self, and they also obtain proper self-certainty through "dialectical mediation" (reciprocal recognition) between one person and another. These two self-consciousnesses first need to determine their own grounds. They then can engage in a struggle, where each seeks the death of the other (thereby affirming their own existence).

For Hegel, the individual participating in this struggle can only be recognized as a person or achieve true independent self-consciousness by being recognized by and recognizing the other. Without mutual recognition, a person only exists if they can

supplant another in the dominant position, thus becoming a "master," who is only recognized in the eyes of inferiors. In this case, recognition depends upon seeing one's own worth in the eyes of one who is "beneath" him. Such a relationship creates a subject that, while dominant, is dependent (on a slave), and thus, in some sense, is weak and insecure about his true dominance.

Upon close analysis, Ékué's characters exemplify Hegel's dialectic of identity. Their interactions and the effect of their relationships on one another determine their behaviors. From the start, Djani proves to be his own master, but needs to affirm himself through the recognition of his work by the society at large. But the loss of his identity begins with his unfortunate meetings with unsavory characters, who "win" the battle to the death as Djani's search for recognition in the eyes of Peacy, nearly destroys him, by annihilating his selfhood, his identity. All the same, Djani is aware of his worth at every moment, despite his weakness for women in whom he desires admiration. He continues to fight to regain recognition, first to ensure that his identity is restored, then to prove it to the world around him.

In this dialectical process of identity formation described by Fraser (using Hegel's theory), not all individuals can regain recognition. Some lose their identity completely—as with the character of Méta. Unlike Djani, Méta represents the other end of the spectrum. Seeing herself mirrored in a flawed society finally causes her to lose her sense of self completely, which is symbolized by her collapse and death. In Méta's case, the "Other" is traditional society and it wins the battle to the death, which ultimately affirms its existence and values.

In a way, Méta represents the Togolese people—browbeaten, introverted, and shying away from fighting for their own recognition and abilities. Méta's own sense of self dissolves from the pressure of the gossiping, disapproval, snickering, and outright disrespect from the women in the village upon hearing the news of Djani's misadventures and subsequent imprisonment. Because of these social pressures, Méta cannot see herself as capable, worthy, or strong. The image she acquires of herself becomes a reflection of society.

Her identity is supplanted by that of the stronger personalities leading her, eventually, to think of herself as a failure and a woman of no worth. She sees no other way out but to kill herself. She does not understand or remember that in the eyes of her fiancé Djani, she had value. Djani himself loses the one in whose eyes he was perfect. Yet, despite this major "derailment", Djani's identity is renewed because he will eventually fight back to reintegrate himself into a society, which, though flawed, is the only environment available to him in which to fulfill his potential. Despite the lack of social progress of the women in the village that shamed Méta to her death, Djani as part of that society will bring progress and model self-worth.

The dialectic of Hegel described by Fraser is referred to as the dialectic of the master and the slave. The master in this novel is potentially Djani, but he must fight to find worthy "Others" and create a society based on mutual recognition. He thus continues to fight for self-preservation and the recovery of his identity, without, however, seeking to dominate others. If the novel has a "slave," unfortunately, it is Méta. She relinquishes herself to society, which pushes her to kill herself, gaining for "society" the

role of master that dominates. Djani's obsession with recognition through the novel is a quest to achieve reciprocity in his relationship with society, with his audience.

Fraser, basing himself on Hegel, also implies that we can never truly know one another without mutual recognition, and the processes of recognition and misrecognition never end. There is a constant ebb and flow, or struggle, between the self and the other. Because everyone has his/her own identity or selfhood, the result is the creation of multiple selves interacting with multiple others, creating a perpetual process of recognition-misrecognition, mutual recognition-misrecognition-recognition. Mutual recognition in all its forms should be what all relationships aim for, and Ékué shows Djani experiencing the struggle to achieve reciprocity in a world characterized by an unequal dialectic of identity (again, city/country; educated/uneducated; rich/poor, etc.). Thus, Ékué depicts Djani falling into the wrong relationships at times, which results in misrecognition and effacement rather than independence.

### **Positioning and Relationality**

Our positions in life are never set in stone; they change constantly. Often, we take stances that end up hurting those closest to us. Ékué's hero, in standing up for himself, unwillingly and inadvertently alienates the only woman of the story he truly loves. If Djani had not been needing recognition from society, the chain of events and the choices that he made through the novel would not have brought shame on his fiancé, Méta. As a result, Méta commits suicide because she misunderstands Djani's positioning. The consequences of Djani's actions become the subject of derision for the

women in the village. Méta becomes invisible, assuming a position of subaltern—victim to the cruel whimsy of the township gossips. But for Djani, invisibility (being a subaltern) went against his true nature. For Méta, Djani's quest had become a unintended weapon used against her. Tchotcho Ékué uses Djani's fight and Méta's suicide as a literary contrast to reveal the many social taboos which can dampen the evolution of self-determination. In this respect, she seems to continue the struggle begun by Couchoro. But Ékué is a realist, and she shows this in the way Djani is undoubtedly able to form a clear understanding of his positioning, behaving differently when he is with his village folks or alone, or even when he is with his rich friend Karim (the son of a Minister of the government).

The story and the overall language used throughout the book is simple, easy, and accessible. This simplicity renders her criticism clear. The depiction of the village girls' cruelty upon hearing the sad news of Djani's imprisonment is Ékué's way of lambasting the backward thinking of uneducated people, too easily manipulated by powerful social prejudices. From the first chapters of the story, the author's position on the need for education is very clear. The emphasis Ékué puts on education as a social means for improvement (not just of self, but also for the progress of society), is reminiscent of Couchoro's admonition for social improvements and forward thinking. An example of Ékué's vision regarding the importance of education is seen almost from the beginning of story as she relates Keli's admiration for Djani's social graces: *"Il admirait Djani parce qu'il s'exprimait bien en français et il espérait acquérir à son contact les belles manières"* (pg. 12). She also writes: *"Celle-ci [Méta] avait eu la chance de*

*fréquenter une école primaire, contrairement à certaines filles du village dont les parents pensaient que des études en feraient des dépravées” (pg. 13).*

Also from the very beginning, Ékue’s stance against polygamy is clear: “...il [Governor Cornillon] garda ses deux femmes qui s’entendaient comme chien et chat” (pg. 8) or again:

*Même le chef du village, qui avait la soixantaine comptée et était déjà leste de cinq femmes, avait voulu ajouter Méta à sa collection de pondeuses, mais avait essuyé un refus catégorique des tantes de Méta, tout chef qu’il fut. Les tantes et la mère de Méta trouvaient ce soupirant bien trop âgé pour leur petite Méta qui avait l’âge de certaines filles du chef. Comment Méta aurait-elle pu tenir au milieu de cinq coépouses, avec leur progéniture qui devait bien s’élever à une quarantaine d’enfants ? La petite Méta méritait mieux. (pg. 13.)*

The last quote, not so subtle, is a determined positioning against polygamy, as is the previous quote depicting the immediate antagonism between Governor Cornillon’s two wives. Ékué also takes a stance against racism (pg. 42), against the uninformed stubborn convictions of villagers against modernism and modern medicine (pg. 13–14), against social discrimination (pg. 46–48), and most of all against ancestral beliefs that can be detrimental to social growth (pg. 126–127). Ékué’s mouthpiece for this is Assiba, Méta’s best friend and confidante, the last character we meet towards the end of the novel. She lashes out against the village women whom she blames for Méta’s death, accusing them of blatant selfish ignorance instead of compassion and understanding.

Ékué/Assiba is hurt beyond everything by the lack of "enlightenment" of the village women. She perceives them as so uneducated that they are incapable of even empathy. These women are entrenched in their small-minded customs, which do not allow them to develop a new zeitgeist or to think for themselves. They are therefore unable to appreciate Méta as a person; they cannot appreciate her kindness and her gentleness.

For these women, the world is set in black and white and anything outside of their understanding is cause for ridicule. But Assiba had not been in the village the day of the tragedy; she had gone on a trip to selfishly pursue her boyfriend in another village. The devastating news that she receives upon her return overwhelms her. While she blames herself for having left her friend alone in such a vulnerable state, she still lambastes the ignorance of those who were left behind and should have been in solidarity with her friend. Assiba vehemently accuses the village girls of utter stupidity, curses them, and causes fear in them.

Reminiscent of Couchoro, Ékué seems to make the same critiques as those expressed by Couchoro in *L'Esclave*, but unlike Couchoro, she falls short of calling for the adoption of Western culture to compensate for social change. She simply contents herself to point out the negative aspects of living in an enclosed world that clashes with the outside world that is changing rapidly on the wings of modernity. And through her many critiques and the various layers and metaphors in her novel, Ékué seems to quietly postulate that Togo as a nation (as she saw it in the 1980s at the height of the Gnassingbé dictatorship) needed to wake up and take a stand against social

predispositions, which were stunting the growth of the nation. The regressive traditions reinforced by the dictatorship had turned the entire nation into “Méta the victim.”

Ékué’s novel, much like Couchoro’s, ends with hope. As stated above, Djani is eventually rehabilitated, and his hope for a bright future gives him the impetus to prevail in the knowledge of his own self-recognition. Thus, Ékué’s novel, while it takes a critical look at narrow-minded customs that negate the individual, proposes a more inclusive world—unlike Couchoro. Ékué sees people losing their ability to exist because of a stifling social system prevalent in all sectors. She focuses on individuals where Couchoro focuses on culture. Thus, Ékué’s novel is a modern recasting of Couchoro’s *L’Esclave* in which modernity is valued over backwardness. Education, though it reinforces differences and oppositions between traditional/rural and modern/urban society, is demonstrated as the only way to advance. *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables* is also a lesson in which Ékué teaches us to look beyond appearances and to reject traditions that create demeaning discrimination.

### **The Feminist Perspective in Ékué’s Novel**

An important layer in *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables* is feminism, which plays differently and on a different register than what is typically seen in Western novels. One way of seeing the role of the female characters is to note how each represents, in her own way, the multiple stereotypes of women: strength and vulnerability (Cika and Méta,) sensuality (Mona and Peacy,) labor and compassion (Assiba,) and haughtiness (the secretary). Thus, while these traits should only be considered as literary attributes and

stereotypes, they stem from actual social constructs. The author seems to have deliberately chosen to oppose Cika and Méta's worlds to demonstrate: 1) how women cannot be "normal" in society—they are either harlots (Peacy), victims (Méta), or forces of nature (Cika)—and 2) how one should find his/her own way and own distinctiveness in society. Again, interpreting their individual lives as metaphors for the social level, Ékué uses her characters as metaphors to inspire the Togolese nation into finding itself again and to pursue its own agency and self-determination.

To help understand Ékué's take on feminism, I appeal to Norwegian-born literary theorist Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1988) to consider the female characters in the novel and the role they play in this unique approach on the theme of identity. Moi established her views on modern-day feminism by only considering the historical events that shaped the women's movement in the Western world, with no input from cultures such as those of Africa. We must adjust Moi's theories, then, to account for African women. Moi's premises establish feminism on two fronts: American feminism—which is more forceful and decisive and French feminism—which is more ahistorical, idealist, and lacking in politics. The French, Western-based perspective on feminism is possibly the point of view closest to Ékué's take on the issue, likely due to her education in France and elsewhere in Europe.

All the same, it is important to mark the differences between African ideas on feminism and those of the Westernized French vision on women's issues, as African feminism is also an influence on Ékué. In the writings of Togolese women, the importance lies not in giving masculine traits of power to presumably "weak" women in order to overcome their woes. The importance is in telling the story of women in

general, in recounting how they generously give of themselves, and how these women use their identity for the good of all. African feminism sees the fact that when a woman is the main character of a story, the woman represents a sharing of space in the circle of characters in general. From that perspective and take on feminism, the world is no longer simply dominated by men. Woman becomes as important as man simply because she is also being represented. Thus, there is no call for feminist diatribe as suggested by Simone de Beauvoir (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949), but an acceptance of female "ego" as described in its original meaning. The "She" is spoken about, therefore "she is." Thus, when women are present in an African-related story, the struggle between two protagonists vying to gain power over the other is different from that told in a Western story. In his 2012 article *De la littérature féminine africaine aux écrivaines d'Afrique*, Hugo Bréant explains the following regarding women's writing in Africa:

*Invisibles et invisibilisées, ces écrivaines produiraient nécessairement une écriture féministe qui brise les tabous. Pour Angèle Bassolé Ouédraogo, [Ivorian-born Canadian poet and journalist] cette inscription des femmes dans le champ littéraire est ainsi une conquête réalisée par des « militantes de l'ombre » (Ouédraogo, 2008). Par essence transgressives, ces écrivaines mettent principalement en scène des personnages féminins puissants et développent une écriture spécifique, corporelle, « sociale et sensitive » (Brière, Gallimore, 1997), qui a cette force d'être vindicative et constructive à la fois. Envisagée sous cet angle, la littérature féminine africaine constitue un véritable contre-discours positif, à même*

*de revendiquer des changements sociaux majeurs* (Bréant, 2012: 118-119).

Two articles, the first by Nicki Hitchcott and the second by Helen Chukwuma, argue that African feminine writing is characterized by two styles: the reflexive perception and the inversion. In the first article *La Problématique du féminisme dans la littérature francophone des femmes africaines* (1997), the character goes through the angst of self-discovery (or comes across as "Other" even to her own self) through unplanned or planned activities. In the inversion, characters who perform the traditional literary female images and stereotypes come across as comical, socially inept, and less than intelligent; thus, these women hide their true identities behind a façade, which if known, would be used against them. It could be argued that African women's writing also does this. For Toril Moi, feminist literary criticism has become "an urgent political necessity" (1988: 82). The overriding problem is "how to avoid bringing patriarchal notions of aesthetics, history, and tradition to bear on the "female tradition" (1988: 82). Moi argues that the rules of literary criticism as established by men—when used in analyzing women's literature—might end up imposing limitations on female/feminine narratives. African women's writing, contrary to Moi's perspective, dismisses this and finds its purpose and resistance to the male dominated discourse in simply being visible in texts.

At this point, the standards are such that, for the most part, it is understood that if women's literature is to be taken seriously, it should be able to stand up to even the strongest tools of aesthetics and criticism. Toril Moi's argument that "without an aesthetic effect there will be no political effect" is right in so far as "feminist criticism

deconstructs the binary opposition between politics and aesthetics and takes them as relational concepts and as value-free categories" (1988: 85). If feminist criticism wants to generate new analytical methods in its readings of literary texts, it can only achieve its aim by challenging and disrupting the patriarchal tradition within its dominant discourses, that is, by working from within that tradition.

This is precisely what Ékué's novel sets out to do. For Moi, feminist critics can no longer claim that they work from marginalized positions. Per Moi, "Feminist criticism...is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism..." (1988: 204). Thus, the term "feminist" implies a political position in Moi's point of view. Tchotcho Ekué's novel sets itself in opposition to both militant feminists. The protagonists in Ékué's novel are committed to building themselves up regardless of their environment. They are self-motivated and unapologetic for wanting to evolve as "more" regardless of their surroundings, politics, the economy, or social norms.

### ***Étrange Héritage : A Different Feminine Perspective***

Unlike Ékué's optimistic struggle for identity, my second example of a Togolese female writer, Gad Ami, brings a different—yet just as important—piece to the cultural mosaic of Togo's African identity. Gad Ami (Lolonyo Amivi Dzifa Brigitte Beauty M'Maye) was born in Togo in 1958. Her parents are originally from Adafienu, formerly part of British Togo (now Ghana), and the family speaks Mina. Her father worked in commerce and her mother was a retailer. Gad Ami went to Lomé Methodist School

before studying at the secondary level at the Collège Notre Dame d'Afrique in Atakpamé. She also went to Lomé's Technical College. After graduation, she enrolled in a secretarial course in Paris then later at the University of Créteil, in Paris. She lived many years in Lomé and worked in business, but the economic climate forced her to give up business. Gad Ami now lives in the USA and works in a children and family center.

Gad Ami's *Étrange Heritage* is the story of a love gone wrong, due to the machinations of a manipulative father, to the detriment and destruction of the two people involved in the relationship (one of whom is his own son). Delali Date and Koffi Kodjo are from different walks of life, but work at making their love work despite the understanding that there are obstacles. Délali, affectionately known as Déla, is finishing her last year of secondary studies. With a group of classmates and friends, she is preparing her Baccalaureate exams. On a rainy day coming back from school, she meets Koffi Kodjo who, along with the driver of the only taxi she finds that day, tries to strike up a conversation with her. Déla avoids getting too chummy with the pair and prefers to display a cool detachment towards Koffi Kodjo's advances. But Koffi has his eye on the beautiful Déla, and the following day, he deliberately shows up at the high school gates offering her a ride to her house again. For a week, Koffi pursues Déla who eventually gives in to Koffi, to the point of calling him by his nickname Koko. Koko, preparing for his own university exam, is none other than the son of the richest man in Togo. His father has the reputation of being a mean-spirited capitalist who stoops to nothing to get his way.

Despite this, little by little, Déla falls deeply in love with Koko all the while keeping ever present her role in her own family, her desires, aspirations, and her personality. She remains keenly aware of the class differences that separate her from Koko. When we meet Déla's family, we are immediately introduced to a group of people of modest means. Aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, as well as Déla's parents live in a compound—a big family dwelling that, while not poor, is not the luxurious villa where Koko's disparate family lives. And always there is life, love, and camaraderie among its members, despite Déla disapproving of her uncles' polygamy.

Déla loves Koko, but she is not sure of the reciprocity of his feelings—a doubt that will plague the relationship throughout the story. However, she is determined to maintain her connection with Koko and accepts the invitation to go to his house. Koko's huge house sits on one of the highest points at the center of the city and is surrounded by a vast garden and grounds. Flowerpots are set around the perimeter of the house; two great gateways lead to the main family space, one of which leads directly to a two-car garage.

Déla's family is as different from Koko's as they could possibly be. While the abundance of life and activity around Koko's home creates a lack of intimacy and somewhat limits privacy, Koko's family dynamics are referred to as a secret garden, cold and detached. In meeting Koko's family, Déla begins to doubt herself: "*Je suis Daté de nulle part.*" Class-consciousness hits her hard because as she has her first contacts with the Kodjo family, she realizes that rich families only intermingle with each other, and she is an outsider. Jean Kodjo, as his own father had before him, had worked hard to build his empire. But as any magnate, he has not hesitated to hurt people along the

way, most especially his wives. He had married three times. His first wife, Koko's mother—who had helped him build his empire—was his first victim. His philandering, penny pinching, and miserable treatment of her had sent her to leave her broken marriage. Upon their divorce, she left their son Koko with Jean Kodjo while taking their daughter Belmonda with her to Ghana. Jean's second wife did not fare any better, but she was prevented from divorcing by her own money-hungry mother. This second wife gave him two daughters. Trapped in her loveless and insufferable marriage (and her ill treatment from Jean Kodjo), she suffers an aneurysm and dies suddenly. Jean Kodjo does not stay alone for too long. He remarries a third time, but this time, seems to have found his match. His third wife—a manipulative, superstitious person—comes into the marriage with an agenda, and although she "only" gives Jean two daughters, is determined (through playing the superstition card) to keep Jean constantly at her side.

Through her scheming and use of fetishism, she reinforces her husband's plot to separate his son Koko from Déla. First, he sends Koko to pursue advanced studies in France. When Déla becomes pregnant by Koko, Jean only finds more arguments to convince his heir to abandon her. When Déla and Koko's son is born prematurely, so visibly resembling his father, Jean still finds a way to accuse Déla of having had relations with other men. Jean twists the situation in such a way that even Déla's letters are never delivered to Koko in France.

In the long run, Koko comes to believe his father, who always twisted the truth to him. He agrees to marry his stepmother's niece and comes to believe all the lies laid before him about Déla. By the time he sees Déla and his son again, the situation is quickly deteriorating. Déla throws herself at him one last time trying to rekindle their

love, but he has pledged himself to marry Annie, his stepmother's niece. That very evening, however, Koko drinks himself into a stupor and dies in a terrible car crash. Déla writes her final words in a long letter to him, apologizing for having loved him too much and allowing this love to make her lose her sanity. With Koko dead, Déla falls into madness, apologizing for leaving her son this "strange inheritance."

### **An Analysis of Class Struggles and Their Impact on Identity**

Gad Ami's novel truly highlights the finer points of class struggles within Togolese society. Ian Fraser, in reviewing E.P. Thompson's 1970 *The Making of the English Working Class*, reminds us that the issue of class experience and consciousness is a struggle, the dynamics of which can determine identity within a cultural setting (2008: 91). According to Fraser, Thompson's basic understanding of class is based on an historical phenomenon that brings together many apparently unrelated events in our everyday experience and in our consciousness. Class is not a structure or a category, but a process that takes place in human relationships. Class is dynamic and based on agency just as much as it is based on conditioning.

For Fraser, Thompson's argument is based on the assertion that this point of view on class becomes lost if we limit the concept to its simple meaning and understand it as sociologists do. Fraser reports that Thompson asserts that defining class is as realistic, as trying to give a pure definition of love or deference, because the only way to understand class or love is through the relationships embodied by people as they live their lives. Class happens, then, when people come together through either inherited or

shared common experiences, and articulate and feel the identity of their interests in contrast to other people, whose interests are different from and usually opposed to theirs.

With this definition of class by Fraser and Thompson as our foundation, it is important to understand the class system within Africa itself, and more particularly the class system in West Africa. When applied to African societies, it becomes more crucial than ever to establish a clear understanding of the concept of class—because in Africa, this conception is set against the notion of caste.

Ritassida Mamadou Djiguimde from Ball State University explains how class and caste systems evolved and how they still function in West Africa:

“No formal documented account exists to this day as of when this social stratification of West African societies exactly started. The origin of the West African caste system, just like its starting period, has not been established by any formal documented account. However, evidence from the names attributed to different castes suggests that division of labor might have been the originating factor. Statistically speaking, non-casted people make up about 70% of the population while casted-people make up the remaining 30%.... As of this date, the notion of caste is still a reality in much of West Africa and it still determines whom one can marry in many instances. However, its future is at stake due to the growing influence of religions such as Islam and Christianity, which forbid discrimination on grounds, such as the ones alluded to in the caste system. One thing we do have to keep in mind though is that social categories naturally form

as a result of a people's attempt to define the "Other". This "Other" is most likely to be determined by the social and cultural realities of a time. <sup>2</sup>

In Gad Ami's novel, neither modernity nor education can change the ancestral, somewhat-rigid social stratification of African society. While the young protagonists of the novel hope to bring changes to what Felix Couchoro would consider backward thinking, the older generation—which decides the fate of society—cannot dissociate itself from beliefs and customs about caste and class, no matter how dysfunctional. Hence, Jean Kodjo, the master manipulator for whom only money and class counted, can only be portrayed in the bleakest, most conformist and conservative of ways:

*... le père Kodjo était un fin spéculateur. Il était déjà marié à cette époque et comme il économisait presque tous ses sous, sa femme enceinte avait des difficultés financières. Et il s'en souciait très peu. Il était dur et décidé à faire fortune comme son père l'avait fait avant lui. Pour cela, il était prêt à tous les compromis. Il prêtait de l'argent aux revendeuses à un taux exorbitant et ses obligées étaient tenues de respecter leurs engagements sous peine de voir leur maison ou certains de leurs biens saisis. Arrivé à ce stade d'homme d'affaire rusé, il démissionna de son poste et ouvrit son propre magasin en s'approvisionnant chez son employeur, John Holt. Avec le temps, il arriva à agrandir son magasin en supermarché et commanda directement ses marchandises chez des fournisseurs. Pendant qu'il économisait, sa femme colportait pour nourrir sa petite famille : son mari et son enfant. Après, ce fut l'enfer. Le père Kodjo allait dans les boîtes de nuit et dans les restaurants avec des jeunes filles et*

*certaines même venaient le voir en présence de sa femme. Cette dernière ne se laissait pas faire et se disputait chaque fois avec son mari. Elle voulait partir quand elle tomba de nouveau enceinte mais cela ne changea rien au comportement de son insensible mari. La pauvre se résigna et subissait le calvaire.*

*Le père Kodjo ne voulant plus fréquenter ses anciens amis qui lui rappelaient son passé, mon grand-oncle ne lui rendait plus visite. (Gad Ami. 1985 :112)*

This passage could be about any man from any region whose only and main goal is capitalistic gain. Here, we recall Felix Couchoro's idea of universalism when he states in the introduction of *L'Esclave*:

*"Dans le simple décor d'une maison de campagne, des passions s'agitent comme dans le cadre d'une vie de 'civilisés' avec son confort. On verra que la passion n'est point l'apanage de telle race parvenue à un certain degré de civilisation. La passion n'a besoin pour naître que du cœur de l'homme" (Felix Couchoro. *L'Esclave*, Préface, 1929).*

In Ami's novel, these human behaviors act somewhat as an obstacle, making the question of a pure African identity difficult to pinpoint. The use of fetishes, the intervention of priests of the occult to help Koko's stepmother and father, and Déla to see more clearly all combine with the "universal" fruits of greed. In this respect, we find a renewal of Couchoro's spirit in both Gad Ami and Ékué's novels in the assertion that Togo should be a society in which there would be no manipulator impeding another's

agency of self-determination. Just like Couchoro, both Ékué and Ami (each in her own way) wish for a society and nation that would allow people to thrive in a more just, modern, and enlightened way.

Revisiting Thompson (1970), Fraser claims that one of the defining factors in determining social identity is to go beyond just looking at a multitude of individuals with a variety of experiences (2008:52). Instead, we need to observe people over an adequate period of social change; then observe the patterns that exist through these individuals' ideas, their relationships and their institutions to discern the concerns which are part of their identity. At that point, according to Thompson, we will be able to define class as the pattern by which people live their history as a cultural and social formation that arises from processes over a considerable period of time.

In Gad Ami's work especially, we see a Togo fighting against immovable prejudices, which affect whole groups at a time. In Ami's *Étrange Héritage*, the class struggle that ensues between Déla and Jean Kodjo for the heart and love of Koko is more than just the struggle of one woman; it reveals the interdictions against people hoping to cross social divides. Per Fraser (again quoting Thompson), class struggle occurs when people find themselves in social relations where they experience domination or exploitation that causes them to share their interest with each other and to band together against the common "enemy" (Thompson 2008:71). Within this process is the theater of class hegemony with opposing forces attempting to subvert the rules of the social game. It becomes important that the subaltern's voice be heard at this point, and Déla in writing her story for her newborn son makes sure that she is not left out of the game. Finally, she is the winner. Jean Kodjo is the loser because Koko dies in

a car accident, and he cannot have access to his grandson from this point on. It is true that Déla's breakdown and subsequent institutionalization appears to show her also as one who loses. But because the story is narrated in her voice, her point of view, she claims the discourse and is the one the public sympathizes with. Jean Kodjo is the bully whose access to means and fortunes and manipulation of situations—in the end—make him appear as the villain. It is tempting to call Koko and Déla's temporary class struggles dislocation and to extrapolate this dislocation to a national cultural struggle.

Great parallels can be made between the manipulative Jean Kodjo and the dictator Gnassingbé who crushes (and kills) Déla's (Togo's) identity and reshapes to his liking the lives of all those around him. *Étrange Héritage*, just as Ékué's *Le Crime de la Rue des Notables*, aims at denouncing practices that only crush the nation's growth towards progress. Social progress ensures economic and political progress and vice versa because they are so closely intertwined. Though it can be argued that rich manipulators exist in every country and are responsible for the currents that govern our world, Gad Ami—although not as vehemently as Ékué—seems to sound the alarm at this practice which, in her novel, ends up costing the life of her heroine. Furthermore, the victim was a woman, and she simply was an expendable member of society, not worth fighting for

#### Footnotes:

1- [www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=gnassingbe+eyadema+chante](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=gnassingbe+eyadema+chante)

2- <http://ritassida.weebly.com/lets-talk-language/previous/3>

## Chapter 3

### A Contemporary Take on Togolese Identity

In the years that followed the successful introduction of women writers on the Togolese literary scene, and especially since the beginning of the twenty first century, Togo has been experiencing a boom in the creation of works of all genres, from fiction to poetry to plays. For the most part, this increase of creativity reflects the continued interest of Togolese writers in the theme of Identity. Togolese literary critics such as Marthe Fare have dubbed this new generation of writers that has emerged since the latter part of the 1990s as "the third generation," considering Felix Couchoro as the first generation, and the writers from the 1950s to the 1980s (including the women writers) as the second generation. The contemporary writers of this third generation have been working at creating material that is propelling Togo into the international literary scene, as well as awakening Togolese interest in their own culture.

Of the present-day writers from Togo, Jerry Tama, Sami Tchak, Kangni Alem, and Paul Ayi have not only distinguished themselves by winning literary prizes, they have also contributed works of various genres that reflect the different aspects of the Togolese collective soul and highlight a people still looking to understand itself. I emphasize two of these authors: Kangni Alem in Chapters 3 and 4, and Paul Ayi in Chapter 5. Paul Ayi has received numerous recognitions for his contribution to World Culture from the United Nations—among others—and Kangni Alem, a very prolific writer and currently a member of the Permanent Council on Francophonie, has for his part been awarded the Williams Sassine Prize for Marginalized Literature and the Grand Prix

Litteraire d'Afrique Noire. In this chapter and the following, I endeavor to accomplish an in-depth analysis of two works by Kangni Alem—*Esclaves* (2009) and *Chemins de Croix* (1991)—by framing them within the history of Togo and investigating the author's contribution in articulating Togolese identity.

### **Kangni Alem's Background**

Born in Lomé in 1966, Kangni Alem has been writing novels since the year 2000, and in that short period, he has produced four novels, three essays, four plays, and five short stories. However, his first official foray into the literary world began in 1991 with the play that I analyze in chapter 5. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Modern Literature from the University of Benin (now University of Togo), which he obtained in 1990, and a diploma in French from the National Institute of Educational Sciences acquired that same year. In 1999, he received his Doctorate in French and in Francophone and Comparative Literature from the University of Bordeaux with very distinguished mention. Since 1989, Alem has been directing the *Atelier Theatre de Lomé*, which he created and where he has produced various works by African writers such as Wole Soyinka's *La Route*, as well as his own *Chemins de Croix*.

In an article for *HeLix* magazine in 2013, Author Eva Andrea Dorn states that Alem's general style of writing is considered powerful, forceful, and direct. Dorn writes that Alem's works play with and intersect different levels of reality: history, daily life, and collective life. Establishing himself as an omniscient narrator, he then reconstructs the dispersed truths grounding his characters' identities. Alem's stories have numerous and

varied settings, yet the recurring theme throughout is the same highlighting Felix Couchoro's career: Togolese identity, both cultural and social. However, Alem's quest is articulated differently. While looking within his own cultural background for answers, like Couchoro, Alem also embraces new concerns that juxtapose various human concerns (exile, origins, and family, among others) alongside Togolese cultural traditions. What Dorn's statement about Alem's style seeks to explain is that most of Alem's novels tend to make the reader stretch his/her emotions to extraordinary limits; they force the imagination to great depths and push the understanding to very extremely high levels of analysis.

As such, Alem's tendency to juxtapose numerous influences and traditions requires the reader to face several possible interpretations, which have made a literary critic such as Leo Mamavi as quoted on his television program *Alineas* qualify the author's writing as enigmatic. Nonetheless, we can identify certain persistent characteristics in Alem's sometimes difficult *oeuvres*. First, Alem doesn't romanticize his stories; he is not afraid to talk about the unpleasant nature of life and does not shy away from creating very difficult situations in which his protagonists evolve. Whether Alem places his characters in a foreign setting or within Togo itself, he always gives a realistic depiction of his heroes' plight. A second characteristic of Alem's novels is that, in the long run, the hero/heroine always overcomes his/her problems and re-emerges with something more added to his/her identity. However, Alem's work is eclectic. He embraces various literary genres and his body of works reflects the influence of his studies and his love of creative writing.

That is why Dorn insists on the importance of understanding Alem's characters whom she says represents chameleons: forever changing, but always the same because, deep down, they never lose their identity. Alem's characters seemed to be saved by the strength of their conscience in a perpetual quest for the meaning of life, but most of all, in the faith—and thus in the need to affirm their uniqueness—as inherited from their society and culture. But through these very characters, Alem suggests an identity that is both from the past and of the present. It is a hero with a thousand faces that Alem presents to us. This hero, through his/her trials and tribulations, helps us to reconcile ourselves to ourselves by looking towards the future with no bitterness toward the past. Alem plays on the theme of identity by addressing humanity in general, taking a stand against forgetting, and using history to say let's move forward. In a way, Alem speaks to the resilience of humans to face difficult various pasts and the ability to move on without bitterness and anger.

Dorn suggests that for Alem to make his point on the resilience of Togolese people, his protagonists, though they might come across as unrealistic because of their abilities to survive and overcome superhuman circumstances, are meant to demonstrate that one's identity (in Alem's world) can prevail (Dorn, *Ethique de l'interrogation. Ironie, exil et sexualité dans l'écriture "sadienne" de Kangni Alem* : 39-45). They always manage to recover and find their center, which is anchored in their culture. Finally, according to Dorn, because Alem himself refuses to be defined by the term "exiled," and because he describes himself as an author who voluntarily selects his travel, he is also free to determine his protagonists' journey. For his part, Kangni Alem describes himself as being his own master, one who cannot be boxed in by any genre,

one who creates his own world and chooses his own path especially in his writing style. He projects the very same characteristics unto his protagonists. This is made particularly clear in the major points of difference between Alem's *Esclaves* and Couchoro's *L'Esclave*, and represents the crux of the problem for Alem's hero, whose story I analyze in this chapter.

### **Comparison Between Couchoro and Alem**

Alem's flair for the dramatic and for creating superhuman characters who overcome extreme obstacles (as explained in the above paragraph) is in direct contrast with Couchoro's more straightforward approach to depicting the social. Indeed, Alem's novel *Esclaves* differs from Couchoro's *L'Esclave* mostly because Couchoro views Togo's obsolete traditions and customs as asphyxiating the growth of its peoples, while Alem approaches social failings as one influence among many, showing that they do not determine Togolese identity.

In Couchoro's novel, the main character, the slave Mawoulaôe, is a victim of the crushing conditions of indentured servitude as depicted in the anonymous village where the story takes place. This slave aspires to reverse his social position by becoming like his master—acquiring property, riches, privileges, and his master's wife. But the only social system that Mawoulaôe knows is based on mastery, violence, and involuntary bondage. Everything he acquires is consequently lost to him, and his own life ends in suicide. The institution of slavery had degraded him and left his horizons as an individual too limited; worse yet, it rendered him incapable of thinking outside of the

system to bring positive changes to his life and his social world. Mawoulaôe had no positive cultural influences to bring him into the modern world.

On the other hand, Alem's novel represents slavery to show that identity is a resilient element of all people. For Alem, identity is sustainable through the worst conditions, and for this reason, his characters overcome any difficulties they encounter. Couchoro approaches the theme of identity by telling the story of one individual who reflects a closed society, while Alem's tactic is to recount the history of society at large as it impacts the identity of an individual. Further, Couchoro's cautionary tale looked at the internal social strife slavery brought upon society by recounting the story of one individual whose plight he painted through the stigma of backwardness. In contrast, Alem uses important historical facts of Togo's formation—including slavery—to demonstrate how the life of one man intertwines with the greater story of humanity at large, which both expands the horizons of his identity and validates the value of the individual.

First, it is imperative to understand that *Esclaves* attempts to explain Togolese identity by considering deep historical subjects such as the repatriation of African slaves from Brazil, as well as the very touchy subject of trans-Atlantic slavery. The story that interests Alem is not only how the slave trade affected Togolese culture, society, and identity, but also how the repatriated slaves from Brazil, known as the Afro-Brazilians, came to exist in Togo. Togolese people have relegated that part of their history to the background and no one has ever brought the history of the repatriation to the forefront. Left for the most part unspoken, only a derelict museum in the coastal town of Agbodrafo (formerly known as Porto Seguro) gives silent testimony to the plight of the

slaves. Both subjects, slavery and the repatriation, have been relegated to a shameful taboo, never to be talked about. Through his novel, Alem tries to elucidate the question as to the veracity of Togolese complicity (real or unreal) in the history of slavery, and to explain how Africans with Portuguese surnames came to exist in Togo. Subsequently, Alem also wonders what the future holds for the nation once it confronts its past.

However, though Alem seems to be writing a historical novel, the story Alem tells in *Esclaves* is not necessarily completely based on facts. Through his fictionalizing of the main character's life, Alem recaptures a historical phenomenon crucial to Togolese identity: the middle passage and its ramifications. Alem depicts how his main protagonist suffers through being captured into slavery, how he survives the triangular trade, and the humiliating years of slavery in Brazil, and then turns this negative moment of history into a positive outcome. Besides retracing the return of former slaves to Africa, Alem also explores the globalization of Togo through trans-Atlantic slavery by fictionalizing a historical event—a slave revolt in Brazil after which the slaves were returned to what is modern-day Togo. Alem is quick to point out how the haphazard repatriation did not necessarily mean that re-integration was a foregone conclusion.

These Afro-Brazilians, upon returning to Africa, had to re-learn how to be Africans after having been indoctrinated into a different culture, religion, and social practice. Some were born in Brazil and had, unlike our hero in the novel, never been to Africa. Nonetheless, history tells us that these Afro-Brazilians eventually integrate into Togolese culture, prosper, and become an important factor in the nation's history. They take an active part in the country's fight for Independence and the first President of

Togo upon Independence, Sylvanus Elpidio (also known as Sylvanus Olympio), was a descendent of Afro-Brazilians.



*Maison Des Esclaves D'agbodrafo (Porto Séguro) Togo et la cave, à l'état nature, au casernement des esclaves. Dans cette cave, il était impossible de se mettre debout. L'esclave restait assis..*  
<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/24764288> and <https://visionssolidaires.com/2014/06/24/devoir-de-memoire/>

### **Brief History of the Slave Trade in Togo**

Togo's history has been marred by slavery, both internal and external. Internal slavery was carried out in two different ways: indentured servitude, and the sale of slaves from the North. Because of slavery, Togo started having relations with the international community as early as the year 600 when Muslim merchants first appeared in the general subregion. These merchants mostly traded with the old African kingdoms until the arrival of Portuguese and Dutch sailors in the fifteenth century. Togo's international relations were the product of human trafficking.

This aspect of African history has caught the attention of scholars, such as Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., looking to clear the myths that still surround the issue. As the director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University,, Gates writes, in his documentary *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross. Episode 1: The Black Atlantic*, that slavery existed within Africa long

before a white person ever came onto the continent—as part of a system based, not on race, but on ethnic differences and brute power.

This system involved an enormous array of monarchs, merchants, and mercenaries. African kingdoms were at war with one another (just as in Europe) for many centuries. Black Africans didn't necessarily feel the bonds of skin color any more strongly than white Europeans did. According to Gates, African society and governance functioned in a manner much like the Roman Empire, which would make slaves of any people whose territory it had conquered. Africans did not invent slavery; it existed everywhere, dating back to the most ancient civilizations. "However, they never imagined that slavery was something which would be passed on through generations nor would it become a matter based on race," says Gates. "This was a European invention" (Gates, 2013: episode 1). Looking at Africa's participation in the slave trade helps to clarify the circumstances surrounding the enslavement of the protagonist of *Esclaves* as the narrative unfolds.

### **Recapturing Identity in Alem's *Esclaves***

*Esclaves* is divided into three main components and includes a prologue and a separate conclusion. The novel resembles *le roman réaliste*, meaning a literary portrayal of life in a faithful, accurate manner, unclouded by false ideals or misplaced aesthetic glorification and beautification of the world. Alem divides the novel into specific historical periods, though he takes poetic license in mixing events. He also takes liberty in the creation of some of his characters. For example, Kings Adandozan

and Guezo were real historical persons as well as Queen Sophia, Adandozan's European wife. Nansica, the Amazon warrior, is based off of a real person: her name comes across in the archives, but it is not certain what her role was in the events that took place in the court of Adandoson.

The protagonist on the other hand, is a pure invention. Furthermore, Alem is keen on using anachronisms (the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in the prologue). In the 2009 interview on the Togolese literary talk show *Alineas*, Alem admitted to having deliberately used these anachronisms to help enhance the dramatic effects of the plot and to pique the reader's interest. Alem's goals are to disorient the reader to change his/her mind about the story of slavery and to shed light on the Afro-Brazilians.

Each of the three sections is set in a different geographical space and time, but each is linked by the story of the main character. The titles of each section are a telltale sign of the events to come. The prologue sets the scene for the violence, indifference to humanity, lust for money, and sense for adventure that characterized the slave trade and its practitioners. The events in the prologue occur some twenty-one years after the onset of events described in Chapter One. In the prologue, Alem tells us that the wreck of a ship is the outcome of a curse that had been pronounced against the vessel by the slaves it carried from Africa to Brazil. The events recounted in the prologue seem somewhat out of place. In fact, it is difficult to link the story of the passengers and the ruin of the boat to slavery until Alem tells us clearly that the *James Mathew* was formerly known as the *Don Francisco* and had been a slave ship. The slave who cast the curse on the ship was a practitioner of *Vodoun*.

Trapped in the boat, the slave called on his ancestral beliefs with such clamor that the frightened crew had to gag him to stop him from continuing to shout out to his gods. His incantations coincided with the seas becoming so rough that no one could stop but wonder if his powers were real. Proving the slave's magical powers, the breached haul of the boat miraculously closed on its own once the slave was silenced. Nonetheless, the incantations seemingly had a delayed effect and the boat would eventually crash in the southern seas after having delivered its human cargo. In the prologue, we are introduced to the slave whom we will later know as Miguel. A former priest for the Dahomean King, he has learned powers that will allow him to resist his captors, and seemingly enact revenge against them. The prologue also gives us a glimpse of the turbulent history which will surround our protagonist.

While the prologue gives us a glimpse of the characters we are to meet in the rest of the story and tells the fate of the slave traders who brought Miguel to Brazil, the first section, entitled *Temps ancien* and written as a flashback, recounts the events that take place in the Kingdom of Danhomé, in King Adondoza's court and the events that would lead to our hero's enslavement. Our protagonist is introduced as the *maître des rituels*; his real name is never given. He holds a prestigious place in the King's court. He is powerful, respected, and—because he practices *Vodoun*—he is considered wise, knowledgeable, and very capable. We get to know his personality through his accomplishments at the Court, as well as through his belief system, both of which are almost immediately revealed.

*Temps anciens* starts out with the scene of betrayal of King Adandoza, one in which the power struggle between the King himself, his nephew Gankpé, the

Portuguese slave trader Francisco "Chacha" Da Souza, and other forces revolve around the brutal issue of slavery and its ramifications (lucrative for a few, dehumanizing for many). We are also introduced to a very important character, Sophia de Montaguère, the King's European wife and Gankpé's object of desire. She speaks several European languages and Gbe, the King's language. She is the King's confidante and interpreter, and she can stand up to all the powerful men who both admire and desire her, yet resent her influence on the King.

*Temps anciens* also reveals that the Kingdom of Danhomé was not an isolated African nation, but that it had global relations, albeit based on slavery. King Adandozan is in the midst of heady negotiations which would change the terms of the slave trade. He does not support the system, which takes so many people away from his lands. He would prefer that the slaves work in Africa rather than on lands across the ocean, and he would prefer to keep the profits of their labor in Africa. He has the support of European abolitionists from Denmark and England, also gathered at the court to participate in the talks. But the negotiations are fraught with problems because the king's major enemies will stop at nothing to maintain the slave trade. Gankpé, the king's nephew, allies with Francisco Da Souza, the director of the slave post at Porto Seguro. Artfully, the *maître des cultes* is manipulated into participating in the King's misfortunes and cannot give him succor.

The first chapter ends with the ceremonial destitution of King Adandozan, whose name is erased from the annals of history, never to be pronounced again. In the meantime, the *maître des cultes*, remorseful for having unwittingly participated in the King's overthrow, rushes home, hoping to save his family from Gankpé's vengeful

rampage. But, the *maître des cultes* is too late. Dispossessed of his belongings, with his family either killed or sold into slavery, he himself is stripped of his title, his post at court, and his identity.

The second chapter, *Nouveaux mondes*, opens with the *maître des cultes* running away from his pursuers determined to kill him. Gankpé had threatened to kill any of the *maîtres des cultes*'s family members only if he had tried to thwart the plot to depose the king. But upon returning to his village on the outskirts of Adandozan's court, the *maître des cultes* finds that Gankpé and de Souza had betrayed him and already carried out their threats and murdered three of his wives, his children, and most of the village dwellers to further ensure his complete silence. Worse yet, Guezo dispatches his Amazon warriors to capture the *maître des cultes* and kill him.

Trying to escape the Amazons' murderous clutches, the *maître des cultes* is captured by Nansica, the head of the Amazons, who along with two other warriors, gang rape him, but do not kill him, as was ordered. After the rape, Nansica tells him that she admires a man of his caliber who will fight for the safety of his own, and that in raping him, she hopes to become pregnant and birth a son as valiant, loyal, and committed to family as he is. "Tu es un homme, un vrai, et il me faut un homme de ta carrure pour me sentir exister" (p. 125). By raping the *maîtres des cultes*, Nansica, in a sense, steals his identity and power for herself and to pass on to her own descendants.

The title *Nouveaux mondes* can refer to both the *maître des cultes*' new life, dispossessed of his privileges at the court, and as the beginning of a miserable journey towards new shores across the sea—towards an unknown "new world." As the chapter

develops, the *maître des cultes* is sold as a slave to an English merchant who proceeds on his departure to the Americas. Completely broken in body and soul, his journey on the slave ship becomes a haunting tale of gradual dehumanization while he attempts one last time to cling to beliefs which had once been part of his identity. But slavery is about bending a human being to another's will, and the *maître des cultes'* dehumanization, the loss of his identity—initiated first by his rape by the Amazon—is redoubled from the moment he is captured.

The first change to his identity on the slave ship takes place when the captain proceeds to give him a new name—Miguel. Despite all his losses, his name indicates a new life in the "*nouveaux mondes*" of which he will become a part. Maintaining his sense of self and agency in his new identity, he hopes to be sold in Cuba where he had heard that what was left of his family had been sold. But he quickly realizes the futility of his wishful thinking. He falls back on what he knows best. Illuminating the events of the prologue, he calls upon his Vodoun divinities to curse those who have imprisoned him and his kin and to curse the boat that is carrying him to an unknown destiny. Miguel's way to resist his circumstances is to chant, not only for revenge, but also for hope. Here, Alem shows that somehow every individual who undergoes an ordeal has something that remains of their identity to which they cling:

*Au moment où les pêcheurs Guin-Mina le soulevèrent pour le poser dans la grosse pirogue, il se mit à prononcer les terribles litanies que les prêtres lui avaient apprises pour s'allier les forces de la nature. Des phrases dangereuses, issues des pratiques de la magie noire, qu'on lui avait enseigné à ne prononcer qu'en dernier recours, sa formation initiale*

*n'étant ni celle d'un sorcier ni celle d'un magicien, mais celle d'un honorable prêtre des dieux du tonnerre et de la variole, deux des divinités piliers de la religion Vodoun. (p. 128)*

The Identity which stays with Miguel and which helps him to endure his misfortunes is that of the "honorable" priest of a powerful African King's court, a priest who can commune with the "Gods of thunder and disease," Gods who will respond to his distress. All the same, as the *maitre des cultes* is transformed by the new hands of fate, and as he struggles to hold on to what had been his life at the court, he slowly but surely loses control of his own life as the unfolding of events slowly erodes it. All the same, at this point, other aspects of his identity emerge; the very characteristics that had captured Nansica's admiration: his true essence, his generosity of spirit, as well as his leadership qualities that continue to shine on the ship.

In the beginning of his journey, he is bound to another slave in the ship's hull. He tries to be comforting to his companion of misfortune at first by encouraging him to keep strong and to hold on to the hope that this ordeal will be over soon, and that somehow, their plight will be reversed. When all the slaves are allowed the one-hour of fresh air on deck, again it is he who initiates the chanting of hope, lifting the spirits of the slaves by singing a song to the god of despair and the god of the sea for deliverance. This reinforces Miguel's standing, because the slaves realize who he is and what his rank and duties had been at Adandonzan's court:

*Parmi les esclaves, on savait qui était l'esclave Miguel avant sa captivité.  
Certains prisonniers de la même nation que lui avaient parlé... Miguel*

*s'écroula de fatigue sur le pont. Il a été transporté comme un objet précieux par les autres esclaves jusqu'à sa place dans la cale. (p. 135)*

Just as he did with the slaves, Miguel also catches the attention of his slavers from the very beginning, and they mark him as valuable: "Miguel, nègre civilisé de nation fon, bien noir, sans barbe, grand et sec, yeux grands, bonnes dents, intelligent et très habile" (p. 125). But the slavers transform Miguel's human value into an economic one of which they take advantage, and Miguel's objectification is suggested by the list of his characteristics, which reads like an advertisement or bill of sale.

Upon hearing that their destination is not Cuba, Miguel becomes distraught, physically ill, and even contemplates suicide—especially after the death/suicide of the unfortunate companion to whom he was shackled. Determined to live and overcome the deplorable conditions of his crossing aboard the slave ship, he calls one last time upon his *Vodoun* gods, hoping to send the ship to Cuba instead. Whether by the force of his incantations or by extenuating circumstances, the ship—after several unexplained occurrences at sea—finds itself disembarking some of its cargo in Cuba. For reasons not divulged, Miguel is not sold there. This is one way for Alem to maintain a sense of ambiguity about the reality of Miguel's powers, and to maintain the idea that the middle passage for Miguel, like that of the other slaves, is a voyage into an unknown. Instead, Miguel becomes part of the lot, which finds itself in Brazil.

Discouraged once again, his spirits low, Miguel wishes once more to die. Yet, fate has other ideas for him. Alem suggests that because of his status as a priest in the Kingdom of Danhomé, his story will necessarily be different from that of the other

slaves, and Miguel, set apart by his power, gifts, and ultimate resilience, fulfills Dorn's assertion that Alem demonstrates the resilience of individual identity (one's self-hood or core) through protagonists that are often "superhuman." Thus, twice he finds favors with his slavers: once on board the slave ship (pp. 132-133) and again before he is sold to his first owner in Brazil (*Esclaves*, p. 140). The slavers nurse him back to health; they force feed him and spare him nothing. Miguel is valuable cargo indeed.

With most of his strength and health returned, Miguel is ultimately sold for a very handsome profit to a Christian pastor named Lourival Do Nascimento. A religious fanatic of an undetermined protestant denomination, Do Nascimento's first act is to re-baptize him, as if to cleanse Miguel from any taint of the slave ship and of his former identity. His new owner, a pastor and a religious fanatic, is a brooding sort whose wife had recently miscarried. As Miguel adjusts to his new life as a slave under the rule of this new master, he befriends a semi-freed slave, Sule, who will have a major influence on how he adapts to his new world.

Representing the colonial slaveholder's own fantasy of creating a "new world," Do Nascimento has materialized his dreams in the establishment of a new church—a kind of sect that he intends to turn into a well-organized clerical house of worship, making his slaves its adepts, worshipers, and leaders. He pays the Catholic priests in the parishes around his plantation handsome money to turn a blind eye to his dalliances, as well as for his manipulations of the Church rites and dogmas, and his re-interpretation of the Bible. At first, he assigns Sule as leader of his new sect, but then decides to have Miguel officiate all the services, because he too sees Miguel as different, with special abilities. Miguel, for his part, after being instructed on how to

conduct service for the slaves, takes advantage of his new position and both mocks and enhances his newly given religion by incorporating some of his own unforgotten, animist practices into the prayer meetings.

To make matters even easier for Miguel, Do Nascimento does not pay much heed to the happenings inside his church, given his other preoccupations: he has a black mistress with whom he is very much in love (to the point of distraction) and a pregnant wife. His wife, after recovering from her miscarriage, becomes aware of her husband's dalliances; she becomes bent on destroying her rival. She has the mistress killed and her body torn apart. Do Nascimento's fervor for both his mistress and for his vision of his own new religion, having led him to complete distraction, also causes him to eventually lose his property, his slaves, and his fortune.

An important fact in the novel at this point is Alem's representation of Miguel's early years of captivity, and his living conditions in the service of Lourical do Nascimento as less harsh than Miguel had originally feared. From his first day at the plantation at Recife and upon meeting Sule, he begins to be favored with some form of freedom, assuming responsibilities given only to those slaves considered special. Sule becomes his mentor and slowly shows Miguel how to survive in his new environment, encouraging him to adopt the culture of the Afro-Brazilian environment into which he has been thrust by learning the language. Sule eventually instructs him to marry—which he does—and he weds another slave, Sabina, with whom he fathers three children. But the most important pieces of knowledge that Sule bequeaths to Miguel are reading and writing, and Islam—a religion which will eventually help center Miguel as he develops towards his rebirth in this new country, and through which he is gradually regenerated.

Indeed, through the ordeal of captivity, a part of Miguel symbolically dies, symbolized by his forgetting his birth name. When he introduces himself to Sule with the words "Moi, c'est Miguel," the former responds:

*Non, pas cela, je veux dire, votre vrai nom ? Il y eut un vide dans sa tête. Il ne sut plus, sur le coup, quel était son nom d'antan. Oui, il avait raison, Miguel n'était pas son véritable nom, alors quel était le vrai ? Le vide se mua en vertige. Il ferma les yeux, secoua la tête pour remettre en place ses idées, mais sa mémoire s'était enlisée dans un sable fin de bord d'océan, sur une plage où on l'avait fait tourner neuf fois autour de l'arbre dit de l'Oubli. (pp. 146-147)*

However, despite forgetting his birth name, Alem reveals that the *maître des cultes* has not lost his identity. The traumatic circumstances that brought him to Brazil altered the direction of his life, but, as we see in his adaptations of Do Nascimento's religious dogma—which he is required to preach—deep down he never loses the basic precepts of his culture as established by *Vodoun*. Sule's teachings on Islam further enhance this religious faith, as well as Miguel's worldview, and thus his identity. The superstitious tradition of having slaves turn around the tree of forgetfulness before boarding the ship failed in making Miguel forget the basics of his life's knowledge learned from the cradle. The trauma of the middle passage, the changing of his name, the adoption of Islam, and the acculturation with the Brazilian-Portuguese culture transform him into an individual who, still holding on to his own core culture, is able to embrace his new life to become part of the *nouveaux mondes*, for which he would also, in a twist of events, become a kind of ambassador.

In the meantime, Miguel had been on the plantation for a year, had fully embraced Islam, and he was actively mocking Christianity—which he felt had been turned into a joke by the colonizers themselves (given that Church rules and practices were only respected on Sundays and only in Church). As time goes by, thanks to Sule's lessons, Miguel eventually acquires a new self-assurance, and most importantly, Islam becomes the means through which Miguel's humanity is restored. Eventually, Miguel replaces his native African beliefs with the Islamic beliefs that he now views as articulating a higher understanding of humanity. Through Sule's teachings, Miguel sees Islam as a philosophy, as well as a religion, which helps him to realize that he no longer carries hatred and a need for revenge against his enemies (Guezo, Nansica, and his colonizers).

He is never far from being indoctrinated into Christianity during his captivity, but Islam was the religion which taught him to read, write, and regroup. Christianity only taught him to obey his superiors, but did not teach him anything that would help him find his way in his new surroundings. In the environment of New World slavery represented in *Esclaves*, Islam is a philosophy of human rights through which Miguel can maintain a belief in his own humanity and in that of the people—especially the enslaved Africans—who surround him. But Miguel's attraction to and adoption of Islam is not random; it accords with the sense of humanism that Alem shows to be Miguel's basic nature, exemplified in the compassion, for example, that he shows for the deposed King of Danhomé.

That human kindness and compassion again appears in Brazil, this time when Miguel helps Sule, the man to whom he owes so much. Miguel works at helping the old

slave pay off his debt for freedom. And as if a calming balm had been poured upon his distressed soul, after adopting Islam as the new compass of his beliefs, Miguel begins to see his fate with less pain. And when Sule believes that he is about to die, he instructs Miguel to become a member of a secret group of revolutionary slaves who have organized around the colony, a movement that is gathering strength, and which will indeed change Miguel's fate by allowing him to act upon his philosophy of the essential human rights of the African slaves. Sule bequeaths to Miguel his role in the insurrection that will soon explode. As Sule is about to die, he tells Miguel :

*-Je n'irai pas à Bahia, lâcha-t-il au bout d'un moment.*

*-Tu vas faire quoi ?*

*-Je vais rentrer chez moi. Plus de dette à payer, pas de femmes pour me séduire, je vais rentrer chez moi.*

*-A Sokoto?*

*-Non, chez moi, c'est-à-dire chez Lui. Je vais rejoindre mon créateur. Mais toi tu iras à Bahia, là-bas ils vont avoir besoin de toi.*

*-Qui ?*

*-Écoute, ne fais pas semblant. Je t'ai appris à lire et à écrire l'arabe, la seule langue par laquelle nous communiquons depuis des années entre Recife et Bahia, entre esclaves lettrés. Il se prépare là-bas une grande révolte contre l'esclavage des Noirs. Ils auront besoin de toi. Je te dirai avec qui entrer en contact, une fois sur place. Mais surtout n'oublie pas : jeito, jeito, Miguel*

*-Astuce, art et adresse, je n'oublierai pas, père Sule (p. 161).*

As the insurrection gathers force, Miguel has become accustomed to his surroundings. But, he is sold once again to another Master in Bahia, a two-day journey from his first home in Brazil. Once again, under the ruling of his new master, Lord Pereira, Miguel quickly rises to become bookkeeper on the new compound he now calls home, thanks to his skills and overall demeanor. He distinguishes himself especially by showing a calm and reserved disposition. At the immense farm that is now his home, Miguel enjoys favors more so than ever—more than most of the other slaves. It is at this point, with new confidence and more at peace with his conscience, that Miguel marries again and has a new family. Though his old family in Africa has been relegated to a past he cannot change, their memory still lingers:

*Il mangeait dans le noir, en pensant à ses épouses et aux enfants, et constatait, sans grand pincement au cœur, que la douleur de la perte de sa famille s'estompait sous le poids de sa trop grande fatigue morale (p. 146).*

In his moments of solitude, Miguel reminisces. He does it in the dark. He does not want to be caught for fear of being punished by his master who might take his grief for ingratitude. Slaves were supposed to be happy and grateful for their plight, for having someone who cared enough to take them away from the "uncivilized" world of Africa. Miguel had to hide his pain to avoid any form of punishment, despite the stature and certain privileges he enjoyed in comparison to the other slaves. For the outside world, Miguel had leadership qualities, which had been enhanced by his Islamic

teachings (he had learned to read and write). But the private man never forgot his former life, and he can never stop lamenting his departed loved ones.

Notably, in *Nouveaux mondes*, Miguel/Sule is not the only one who undergoes a change of identity. We see the same struggle, though to a lesser degree, in the deposed King of Danhomé through during his ordeal with his nephew Guezo. Miguel/Sule hears the outcome of Guezo's treachery when it is reported through the stories of the newly arrived African slaves in Brazil. Along with him, we learn that the former king is never again to be referred to by his royal name, but by the derogatory title *Daa Gbólòlometon*, meaning the "errant one." This does not stop the former king from continuing to exercise wisdom upon his impetuous son, who wants to exact revenge on Guezo, nor does it stop him from adopting Nansica and Miguel's unfortunate son as an ultimate gesture of human kindness. Ultimately, the former king continues to exercise humanity despite his former identity having been obliterated.

On the other hand, Gankpé seems to grow greater in his inhumanity after adopting the name Guezo, in the same manner that Francisco De Souza becomes more violent especially after adding the nickname Chacha to his given name. Chacha, in the Gbe language of the Ewe-Mina, means "the one who gets what he wants." In all four cases, naming symbolizes how environment, circumstances, socio-cultural concerns, and spirituality (manifested or not) play a major role in shaping each character's identity. Adversity made the *maître des cultes* and the king more humane, while power-hungry Guezo and De Souza only grow more rapacious the more power they acquire. All the characters undergo some type of test that makes their true nature

come through, and their knowledge of self and their deeply entrenched cultural identities always come back to help guide them towards reuniting with themselves.

While the events described above take place in Danhomé, Brazil becomes the scene of the first of the slaves' unrests. When the slave revolt erupts in Brazil, for Miguel it is not only a time to shine, but also a way for him to reclaim his freedom. Sule's Islamic "education" coupled with his natural-born leadership abilities indeed propel him to become one of the top architects that bring the revolt of the *Malês* (name given to this historic revolt because many of the slaves were Muslims) to a successful outcome. Old Sule had purposely prepared Miguel for this once he had understood his pupil's talents. Sule wanted him to become part of a larger network of leaders who had been working at abolishing slavery—by force if they had to. In becoming an insurrection leader, Miguel's name changes again: he is now called Sule, and symbolically assumes the role of his former teacher, elder, friend, and mentor on the plantation at Recife.

Miguel finds out about his new name through a letter Sule had written to another insurrection leader in Bahia, who explains to Miguel that his new name, as prescribed by the old Sule, will now be an indication to the other insurrectionists of strength, leadership, and knowledge. Miguel's identity is again expanded and transformed: the memory of his cultural background is restored; his education is augmented with a new religion, a new philosophy, and a new culture; and it is a "new man" who fights to become master of his destiny by facing the forces of life that surround him with a different attitude and a different approach. Under his new hybrid name of Miguel Sule, our hero becomes an even greater figure than either the *maître des cultes* or Miguel. By

adding old Sule's name to his own, his identity encompasses greater wisdom and experience mirroring a natural pattern of personal evolution:

*L'esclavage allait finir, oh oui il allait finir, et au nom du Tout-Puissant  
Miséricordieux, lui et ses enfants quitteraient ce pays pour retourner vivre  
là où la vie aurait du sens, et lui un statut autre que celui de nègre au  
sourire pastèque, habitué aux courbettes et autres veuleries. (p. 212)*

Here, Alem depicts Miguel Sule embracing his leadership role in the 1835 slave revolt of the *Malês*. Historically, the revolt had great repercussions on future events in 1888 when slavery is officially abolished in Brazil. However, Miguel Sule is now much older and, though eager to carry out this revolt, is leery of the attitudes of some of his foot soldiers who demonstrate too much impatience and not enough forethought on strategies. His hesitations, due both to his experiences and his learning with Sule, conflict with the demands of leadership bequeathed to him, his personality, and his core sense of self. Indeed, the lack of good planning plays against Miguel, and the insurrectionists are thwarted in their movement.

Captured, tried, and found guilty of sedition and inciting a revolution against the administration, Miguel Sule is condemned to be repatriated along with many other revolting slaves back to Africa. Miguel Sule's involvement in the revolt will cause him to lose everything he had strived hard to rebuild: namely, his new "Brazilian" family with his wife Sabina and their three sons, denied the right to go to Africa with him.

*... Sabina demeurait, malgré son union avec Miguel, la propriété du seigneur Pereira, et ce dernier n'allait pas se séparer d'une esclave pour la seule raison qu'elle était mariée à un vilain qui avait fait le coup de feu contre les maîtres et allait payer son outrecuidance. Mais malgré cette situation triste, l'ancien esclave Miguel était heureux de rentrer. Il pensait fortement à l'autre Sule, son homonyme, le vieil esclave haoussa qui avait été son mentor à Recife, celui grâce à qui sa vision du monde avait été transformée. Sans sa rencontre avec cet homme, se disait-il, qu'aurait été sa vie de serf? (pp. 231-232)*

Despite his disappointment at losing his family, Miguel Sule manages to find a silver lining behind this new tragedy due to the knowledge that he has gained from Sule—a knowledge that transformed his vision of the world (pp. 231-232). He rejoices at the idea of life's continuing evolution and of thus regaining his freedom and returning home. Part two ends with Miguel being shipped back to Africa along with many of the insurgents who had tried to overthrow the system that had so dehumanized them. Alem depicts Miguel Sule, the New World slave, coming full circle back to where he started: Africa. But, can one come home again? Will home be the same? What will this do to his overall identity? Will he fit in? Miguel does not think about these issues, but only of freedom as a sense of rebirth, a literal return. "L'heure du retour avait sonné, et il était content de retourner chez lui vivant, usé mais bien vivant" (p. 232).

Part three titled *Temps mêlés* sees Miguel Sule's return to Africa, under the full name of Miguel Sule Djibril-(Djibril being a name which he adds to honor his Islamic

religious affiliations). *Temps mêlés* could be the section that shows the "new" (the knowledge brought from the New World) meeting the old (what is left of the traditions in Africa). Our protagonist remembers the old ways from before his capture, and—along with his new name, which accounts for his experiences as a slave (Miguel) and as a Muslim (Sule Djibril)—he returns home with mixed feelings, not sure what to expect. We cannot be certain how the repatriation occurred for the actual historical slaves. In his interview with *Alineas*, Alem affirms that the repatriated slaves were for the most part "dumped" on the shores of West Africa, whether it was their original homeland or not, or whether they were born there or not.

For his part, Miguel Sule Djibril lands not too far from his birthplace. But we soon discover that the repatriation is fraught with difficulties for many of the slaves. At first, out of anger and because of an on-going political battle with Portuguese politicians, Brazilian officials had ruled that no slave would be returned to his/her country of origin. Furthermore, all slaves who had participated in the revolt, whether they were born in Africa or not, would be forced to migrate to that continent. But, where was home for these slaves? Due to the intervention of influential political figures from Portugal as well as abolitionists in Brazil, the banished revolutionaries were given the opportunity to choose their landing points upon repatriation. While some chose this option, others did not, and they were indeed "dumped" pêle-mêle on the shores of West Africa. Miguel Djibril Sule chose to disembark in the port of Agoue, not too far from his native village. Agoue is the city where his former sovereign had been deposed.

Twenty-four years had passed since Sule's capture, and it is a mature man in his mid-fifties who returns to Africa, not the twenty something *maître des cultes* who was

powerless against Guezo and Da Souza's machinations. During his captivity, Miguel had worked hard to end slavery. He had learned all about the dehumanizing effects of that institution first hand and did not wish it on anyone. He had acquired great skills during those twenty-four years, from learning Portuguese and Arabic, to learning how to read and write, to working the technology and machinery of his time, to bookkeeping. Miguel's musing on the "grace of repatriation" of his brethren is inevitably bittersweet:

*A son tour, arrivé devant Agoué, il avait dansé sur la même échelle de corde, puis les piroguiers l'avaient emmené jusqu'à la plage, avec ses bagages.*

*« Vous avez des parents ici ? » lui avaient-ils demandé.*

*Il ne les écoutait pas. Touchant le sol, il s'était souvenu de vieux gestes ancestraux. Personne ne l'attendait, personne pour faire en sa faveur une libation de djassi, le mélange d'eau, d'alcool et de levure de maïs versé au sol pour apaiser les mânes et quérir leurs bénédictions. Personne pour lui donner l'accolade fraternelle. Parti dans l'anonymat de la soute du bateau négrier, il était de retour dans l'indifférence totale de ses frères.*

*« Vous avez des parents ici ? » continuaient les piroguiers*

*...Il s'agenouilla et d'un geste hésitant prit dans la main une poignée de la terre que ses pieds venaient de fouler... Les piroguiers éclatèrent de rire en le voyant porter la motte de terre à la bouche. Un enfant ou un fou, devaient-ils se dire, car seuls les femmes enceintes, les fous et les nourrissons sont réputés être capables de manger de la terre quand l'appel irrésistible de leurs sens affolés le commandait... (p. 235).*

The boatmen's repetition of "do you have family here?" only emphasizes Miguel Sule's status as an outsider, reinforced by his performance of outmoded gestures that make him appear "Other" (a "child," a "madman") to his own people. But in the rest of the episode, Miguel's status as outsider is depicted differently, revealing a reversal, in which Miguel is confronted with local traditions of welcome with which he is unfamiliar:

*A l'approche de la concession du chef, plusieurs jeunes filles aux seins nus et bourgeonnants se présentèrent devant lui et le saluèrent en pliant le genou. Le geste le toucha, et il leur tendit la main, comme on le faisait à Bahia. Etonnées, elles prirent néanmoins sa main et éclatèrent de rire quand il fit le geste de leur secouer le bras. Drôle d'étranger, devaient-elles se dire, il secoue la main des gens comme on secoue le palmier !*  
(pp. 237-238)

Here, Miguel is both misunderstood and does not understand: rather than the man returning from Agoué's forgotten past, he is the man from across the seas, from the Americas, whose gesture of greeting (shaking hands) is met with surprise and laughter. Sule, upon his arrival on the shores of Africa, is caught between two worlds.

Alem represents Sule's repatriation as bittersweet because everything had changed. First, he is not welcomed in the customary way he had been used to so many years ago. Protocol and respect to the elder as he remembers them, are practically nonexistent: «*tout un pays faisait usage des oublis, abondamment.*» It is only when a white man, the local magistrate receives Sule that he understands: «*qu'il était de retour*

*dans un monde qui n'avait pas changé depuis son départ.»* In other words, while slavery has been abolished, it has been replaced by colonialism.

For the last time in the story, Miguel Sule Djibril is again confronted with having to adjust his cultural identity. He is home, but it is not the same home. For him to adapt, he must now resume his life in the apparent indifference of the authentic natives untouched by the taint of exile. Sule must create yet another identity for himself, one in which all his experiences from his ordeal need to reconcile with the local customs. For example, his new beliefs in Islam would have to find a way to mesh with Vodoun, the cultural glue and point of identity of the people of his village:

*Il ne se sentait plus le même homme... Justement, Djibril Sule ne se considérait pas lui-même comme un revenu, mais simplement comme un homme de la cote, qui avait vécu une expérience redoutable, laquelle l'avait transformé. / S'il y avait une chose dont il était revenu, aimai-t-il enseigner à sa progéniture, c'était de la mort, de la honte et de l'humiliation de l'esclavage. Pas de quoi faire de lui autre chose qu'un homme qui a beaucoup souffert, de la main de ses propres frères et de la cruauté de ses maîtres blancs. Mais justement parce qu'il avait connu tout cela, mais aussi des êtres admirables au cœur pur comme le vieux Sule, l'esclave haoussa qui lui avait enseigné l'islam, ou le mulâtre Felix Santana, fomenteur de révolte et défenseur acharné de la condition du Noir, il ne pouvait plus faire semblant d'être le même homme (p. 250).*

Sule Djibril still feels himself to be "a man of the court," which was his birthplace, but one whose identity, beliefs, and knowledge have been broadened and transformed by his experiences in a faraway world—experiences so life-changing and critical to the future of his African brethren that they must be passed down to his heirs—the horror of servitude, but also the knowledge of one's own humanity, gained through the Islamic teachings of Sule and the "defense" of the Black race that he learned from his fellow revolutionary Felix Santana. In the interview with *Alineas*, Alem affirms that his goal in writing this story was first and foremost to understand not only the *raison d'être* of the presence of the Afro Brazilians in Togo, but most of all to understand how these repatriated slaves could reconstruct their identity. And thus, Sule becomes the ideal type of the Afro-Brazilian, a product of all his circumstances as exile—the good and the bad—and an allegorical representation of Togo's repatriated slaves.

As first shown in Sule's visit to the Magistrate's house, while slavery has been dismantled and the slave trade has dwindled, another sinister ordeal looms in the shadows: colonialism. In answer to all this, Sule's identity continues to develop in his "new" home of a transformed Africa. Sule rebuilds his life by marrying Musibath, also a former slave from Bahia returned to Africa. He sets up a prosperous business and has more children. He becomes a wise counselor in his village. He is known as a prosperous, fair, honest businessman. People come to him for advice when they want to establish their own business. Sule is at peace with himself. While he is not serving at a court, he still carries a leadership role within his community. However, despite his success at re-establishing himself in his former country, Sule remains wary and

cautious of his fellow countrymen. His fate is in the balance because, unlike the other repatriated that found it hard to rebuild their lives, he has succeeded.

He understands that a reversal of fortune is probable at any moment. As it stands, one repatriated Afro-Brazilian becomes jealous of Sule's success and with the help of other members of the repatriated community, sets fire to Sule's home (a reference to contemporary Togolese resentment of the often-affluent Afro-Brazilians). Exiled again, he barely escapes with a few belongings and decides to live in a different village, far from his lands. For the most part, the other repatriated slaves from Brazil that settled into various communities along the coast become prosperous, although some gain prosperity through the practice of illegal trades (such as slavery).

### **Historical Debates on Slavery in *Esclaves***

Although Alem's main purpose is to understand Togolese identity by viewing the history of trans-Atlantic slavery through the contemporary lens of the cultural contacts that hybridized Europe, the Americas, and Africa, along the way, the author addresses numerous themes (as mentioned in the beginning of the chapter): politics, religion, cultural practices, and the philosophical and moral issues debates that surrounded the slave trade. In the narrative of Sule, we have already overviewed the themes of religion and culture. The politics in *Esclaves* involve manipulation, betrayal, and the use of brute force that involve both Africans and Europeans on African soil. The politics as well as philosophical and moral issues generally involved the fundamental matter of the story: slavery. In his novel, Alem does not shy away from representing the complexity of the

issues, for both Europeans and Africans. For example, through the reported thoughts of Francisco Da Souza, we learn that this former Brazilian landowner overcomes conflicts with the laws of his country and the powerful landowners who had contributed to his demise by becoming a slaver. In need of cheap labor, he finds justification for buying slaves in the teachings of the Catholic Church, which argues that these

*...gens-là (qui) n'avaient pas d'âme, ainsi que l'avait décrété la sainte Eglise catholique. Et lui était d'éducation et de nature à faire confiance au jugement de l'Eglise... On racontait que ces gens-là étaient tellement paresseux que les ramasser et les déporter vers les champs de canne, de coton et de tabac du Nouveau Monde, c'était leur donner la chance de faire quelque chose de grand de leur vie d'ennui... Il crut déceler une logique imparable dans la démarche esclavagiste : ne serait-il pas plausible que la traite fortifiât à long terme la race avilie des Noirs ? ...les cannibales de l'Afrique pouvaient être réduits en esclavage, leurs enfants constitueraient plus tard une nation, et nous béniraient de les avoir tirés d'un état véritablement dégradant (p. 37).*

As a slave trader, Francisco Da Souza's way of thinking represents the position of the ruling white class of his time. Buttressed by the Catholic Church, the point of view that most slavers had of the Other's identity is that it was non-existent and, moreover, irrelevant. Further, the Church taught that slavery would eventually civilize and humanize the "savage" Africans through their contact with a superior civilization.

Yet, as Alem shows, the position represented by Da Souza did find opposition. He represents the presence of the English naval fleet trying to stop the slave ships travelling to the Americas from Africa; the presence of Danish abolitionists in King Adneome's court; examples of Catholic clergy, as represented by Father Antonio da Silva, who secretly hope for an end to the immoral practice; and finally, the resistance to the practice by mulattos and by the free slaves themselves. The various positions on slavery represented by Alem are based on real historical events. Yet, despite the debates, Alem shows that Da Souza's point of view remained the prevailing philosophy of the time. Far from dying with the end of slavery, as shown in the novel, the oppression of African "others" is replaced by colonization: slavery without the addition of transcontinental hardships.

Nonetheless, Alem represents (in the character of old Sule) a competing philosophy—created by the slaves themselves—that insisted on Africans' human rights. Followers of Islam and the slave revolutionaries of Brazil allowed for African identity to survive thrive within the plot of enslavement and forced exile. Furthermore, Miguel counterbalances the European philosophical point of view on African identity by overcoming its obstacles and being constant not only to his humanity, but to his identity. All his struggles could have undone him. He could have become violent, or committed suicide, or turned against his enemies with forceful, passionate vehemence. Not once, even when confronted with the massacre of his village, his family, or even when he is being raped does he stop being the pacifist, the deep thinker, and lover of human life. He only involves himself in violence when a mass movement, justified by the demand for the slaves' right to be human and free (ideals in which he firmly believed) called

upon his leadership. All our hero's actions lead toward the disentanglement and reestablishment of the identity the slavers had tried so hard to strip him of. His centeredness is not only re-established and affirmed after each trial, but the very identity which was thought to be lost remains alive, always ready to be enhanced.

### **Alem's Articulation of Identity and the Scrutiny of Literary Criticism**

It is imperative to remember that Alem takes a different stance from what Felix Couchoro proposes in *L'Esclave*. While Couchoro views identity as the result of a closed community forming the individual, Alem sees the individual as a member of the world at large, of "*nouveaux mondes*," while still having roots within his/her community. For Alem, this means that one's personality/identity is not simply the result of the internal social mechanics—which first nurture it—but is also the result of circumstances—particular and universal, good and bad—all of which enhance it. For Alem, we do not live in a vacuum, proven by the history and the identity of a people like the Afro-Brazilians whom Alem researches and analyzes—a people that left little to no personal testimonials in the annals of African history, much less Togolese history.

Alem's ultimate point is to show that whether we look at internal social strife (Couchoro) or international conflict, man's inhumanity to Other man can have dire repercussions on one's psychological bearings, but not necessarily cause one to lose one's essential characteristics. Miguel Sule's ordeal never made him lose sight of who he was, where he came from, and the ways that the social cultural background had

shaped him. In the same manner, the Holocaust did not make the Jewish nation forget their ancestral traditions.

Alem seeks to not make a distinction between identity and human essence, but to show that one's true nature works in parallel with one's identity. Alem seems to suggest that whether we are good or bad people (no matter what happens to us in life, and no matter where we live out the circumstances of our life), we always demonstrate a set of core beliefs instilled in us from the social and cultural surroundings that formed us and gave us our identity. Though Miguel suffers through a traumatic, dehumanizing ordeal; temporarily forgets his name; and chooses to forgo the use of his birth name—recreating himself through his slave name—he never stopped being human.

As I have mentioned throughout this chapter, from the moment we meet Miguel, we understand his personality through his works, his thoughts, his compassion, and his feelings of betrayal, loss, and despair. Only once does he seek revenge by using his skills and command of the occult, which he hopes and believes will punish his enemies. Though he becomes the leader of the slave revolt in Brazil, Miguel uses his knowledge, leadership skills, wisdom, and sense of humanity newly enhanced through Islam to carry out his mission. Though he fails and loses all that he has painstakingly rebuilt, we never see the man change into a different person (i.e. becoming embittered or vengeful). He cannot change—he is the quintessential historical figure that is always good and always the hero.

Alem's point of departure on identity can be understood through a more contemporary interpretation of the concept itself. According to Ian Fraser (45), identity is

dialectical: abstract and concrete, universal and precise, working in an alternating movement. This understanding of identity implies that the self is a social self, engaging in constant interpretations, language and dialogue, and affirming life through social relations and responsibilities with each other. For Fraser, literary characters sometimes respond to challenges imposed on them in an opposite way than what was expected, especially when those challenges are harsh.

Fraser explains that readers confronted with this in a text might view these unexpected reactions on the part of protagonists as a form of revolt. When literature represents these moments and attitudes of revolt (positive or negative), these occasions determine the affirmation of identity, clearly explaining the character's personality. Through these characters, we experience spiritual and moral uplift that allow us to see the world differently; we question basic assumptions and act in a different manner. In so doing, we re-interpret ourselves in an instance of transcendence.

Author John Anner (*Beyond Identity Politics*, 1996) states that identity is a tricky category because it depends on choices that are shaped by fluid social circumstances. In Anner's view, one of the key determinants is the society-wide level of mobilization both intellectual and practical. According to Anner, as individuals are drawn into the struggle of affirming their identity, they start to question the ways in which the universal premise of their own communities applies to their own situations, and they start to find new ways of thinking about themselves. In other words, if we are the result of our environment or a given society in which we evolve, and furthermore if we are formed to become productive individuals of that society, we should all have similar traits within our identities. Miguel could have shown tendencies towards deviancies when set against

other deviant individuals in the novel. He could have chosen to be aggressive against his persecutors and slavers. On the contrary, he only grows at each moment into a better-rounded person.

An example of the ever-forgiving nature of Miguel takes place when, upon returning to Africa, he encounters his son born from his rape by Nansica the Amazon. This son, whose name Alem does not give, is only mentioned as a footnote towards the end of the narrative. But Alem does point out that Miguel, upon meeting the young man, is happy to have someone to carry out his name. But the author leaves us with an interesting unspoken point of great importance: the name itself. As we remember, the young man was the result of a violation, which occurred twenty-four years before. The child grows up in the home of the deposed king Adandozan, now managed by the village leader, not knowing the story and circumstances of his birth.

Unfortunately, Alem stops the story with Miguel meeting this son and telling him that he had a story to tell him. We are not told what Miguel tells his son. But we can't help but wonder how both Miguel and his son from Nansica are affected and how this encounter will affect their future. Miguel's character contradicts Anner's assertion because he does not have much in common with most of the characters from his original environment, and he reacts differently to the oppression he lives through during slavery.

Literature plays a major part in defining identity because it gives us context is that text refers to the background of groups of people, establishing precedents, and outlines circumstances—which, in turn, leads towards the above-mentioned

transformative occasions and how they are reflected on characters in the narrative. In addition, author Paul E. Lovejoy confirms Alem's search for the understanding of the mechanics and the history of slavery and its effect on identity (*Transformations in slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 1983. p. 15). Lovejoy notes that slavery has been found in many places from classical antiquity up to the present day. He states that slavery from the onset implied that coercion could be used at the will of a master who had bought into the idea of the slave as an outsider—alien to humanity—and denied his heritage through judicial or other sanctions.

Slaves were chattel. While in the beginning, the original practice of slavery in Africa was linked to serving one's kin (poor relatives at the service of richer ones looking to ensure their daily meal and protection), slavery, Lovejoy states, later became fundamentally a means of denying outsiders the rights and privileges of a society so that they could be exploited for economic, political, and/or social purposes. These "outsiders" were perceived as ethnically different and easier to control. The more removed a slave was from his/her roots, the easier it would be to break them to later control and exploit them. The more complex the social structures and the economies, the more pronounced the identification of slaves as outsiders. Slavery was always initiated through violence to reduce a person from a condition of freedom and citizenship to one of slavery. A feature of slavery is the absolute lack of decision-making or choice on the part of the slave.

After all, given the ordeals that Miguel goes through from the moment we meet him, we half expect him to become bitter, withdrawn, vindictive, or even suicidal. But on the contrary, he pushes back the limits that his circumstances—imposed by the world

around him—want to enclose him into. Hope, as sustained by religion, motivates him. As for the former king, while we know nothing of his spirituality, we can venture to say that he is a person of great humility and humanity who—despite losing his name, being shamed, and falling into disgrace—understands the need to spare others from suffering similar humiliations as his own. These pacifistic reactions are the response he gives to the violence of Guezo and Da Souza.

One of the important aspects of Miguel Sule's new identity stems from the choice Alem made to make his hero a Muslim. In an interview with the cultural show *Alineas* on Togolese television in 2009, Alem explained that he chose Islam for historical accuracy, given that the insurgents who had participated in the revolt of the Malês in 1835 were educated slaves who were Muslims who knew how to read and write in Arabic. They were called Malês in the colloquial language of nineteenth century Brazil.

Islam, unlike Christianity, taught its adepts how to read and write. When Miguel mocked and thumbed his nose to Christianity, it was because he had witnessed great hypocrisy from within. Islam, on the other hand, allowed him to reconcile with his own cultural identity. Alem chose Islam because it allowed his hero to grow. Had his protagonist remained a Christian, he would have had little-to-no chances of cultural, educational, or personal growth. He would have simply followed a faith blindly, one which would teach him to accept his fate quietly and submissively with the hope of obtaining rewards in the afterlife. Historically, Islam has been part of African, and more specifically, Togolese culture since the sixth century.

## How Alem's Take on Identity Gives a New Meaning to the Term

As suggested above, Alem's understanding of Togolese identity encompasses humanity in general and goes beyond nationality. Alem shows this in the way he developed his character Miguel. All of Miguel/Sule's redefinition of identity takes place in a setting outside of Togo in traumatizing circumstances. This leads me to propose that Alem believes contemporary geographical displacement, while nowhere near as traumatic as enslavement, also creates its share of concerns and has an impact on the lives of those forced to leave their country for whatever reason. Modern issues of people fleeing their countries because of civil war, economic hardships, and terrorism, are factors that have been plaguing Africans since their Independence from their former European colonizers. Post-colonial Africa has had to confront issues which have left its population fleeing towards better and safer horizons. Brutal dictatorships, civil unrests, militant groups, mass killings, and genocide have contributed to people fleeing their known world in the hope of finding peace.

However, many displaced people have taken to making perilous journeys to *any* haven—often undergoing worse hardships than what they left behind at home. These refugees often carry no modern identity markers. Once their destination is reached, there is an innate need to rebuild. Just like our character Miguel, they must "forge" a new identity. Some find strength in religion; some find the ability to rebuild this identity through picking up new cultural practices (with the help of other community members with whom they connect). Some embrace their new culture, losing their native traditions and memories. This aspect of adaptation affects mostly the younger members of these immigrant groups and, thus, they are uncertain of their identity, finding themselves

caught between two cultural worlds, confused, being of no identity. These struggles for identity are crucial in Alem's novel. All the above points used to regain identity are present in Alem's *Esclaves*, and they help Miguel to survive.

On the issue of religion—which was such a pivotal point for Miguel—general studies about faith have explained that people adhere to forms of beliefs not only for the sake of saving their souls, but also as a coping mechanism. Religious scholars agree that regular participation in faith-based activities is good for the body and mind. Though some argue that giving people religious reminders makes them feel like they have less control over their lives, others state that it also gives followers extra abilities to resist any form of temptation, especially the self-destructive ones. Happiness, calmness, and contentment come not from being part of any particular denomination or belief, but from the social joys of being part of regular services. Getting together with others at a church, temple, or synagogue allows people to build social networks, closer ties, and—ultimately—more life satisfaction. Religion may also make one have better self-esteem by making the participant feel part of a larger culture.

People who are religious have higher self-esteem and better psychological adjustment than people who aren't religious. Historically, Islam played a major role in the account of slavery. It is through Islam that Miguel finds peace and renewal of his spirits. There was a form of evolution for him which could be summarized as: "this is what we were, this is what we can become." It is not "because we were this that we cannot become that." Immigration changes us, whether we want it or not. Sometimes it is consciously done, other times we are simply molded unwillingly into new beings with a different point of view. This, in turn, makes going home and re-adaptation awkward.

The home we go back to only lives in our memories, reality clashes with those memories, and the person returning with the new experiences is forever a wanderer.

As a *maître des cultes* in Africa, his gifts were feared because he was the embodiment of the kind of power that should never be toyed with for fear of repercussions. It was believed that he could read the weather and predict its patterns as well as cure unknown diseases and read people's thoughts. While in Brazil, Miguel/Sule's acquires new skills and abilities. In espousing Islam in Brazil, Miguel is now able to reconcile himself to higher levels of thinking and a greater understanding of humanity by firstly knowing and understanding himself. Thus, Miguel can attain one unshakable truth: wherever you are going, there you are. This not only speaks to the strength of this character's personality, but also to Alem's own point of view of identity that I have explained from the beginning. Alem believes that identity, once formed by cultural surroundings, can only be enriched and never dissolved.

We should keep in mind that Miguel had never truly and completely lost memory of his former self. His recollections might have suffered "alterations" because of his ordeal. However, with every event in the development of the story, the very memory of the existence of goodness seemed to enhance his abilities to overcome the worst of his experiences. Throughout the text there is constant proof that his very essence had never been taken away. His forced displacement, his disgrace, acculturation, and his new religion never fully managed to eradicate who he truly was.

Even though his birth name is never revealed, we know who he is because his actions continue to carry the same spirit of generosity, duty, fairness and courage which

he displayed from the beginning—first when he attempted to cure the deposed King from the poison Da Souza had given him, then when he fought to save his family, and again when he helped to free old Sule. He never sought revenge against those responsible for his demise, but simply yearned for a way out of the pain. At all times, he is kind, gentle, and forever grateful that he manages to survive the worst of his plight. Because he is human, at the worst of his pain he curses his enemies, calling for their punishment through sufferings greater than what they put him through, but he never gives in to violence. His thirst for learning, which is how we meet him in the first chapters of the novel, continues even during his time as a slave. He learns about Islam, Arabic, Portuguese, mathematics, and the law. In the end, Miguel leaves us with the understanding that humanity (and Togo in particular) should never forget what slavery did to mankind and that under any circumstances should we ever lose sight of who we truly are.

## Chapter 4

### **A Divergence in Togolese Cultural Identity in Alem's *Chemins de Croix***

In this chapter, I analyze another of Alem's works, *Chemins de Croix*, a play in which the main character, named Amouro, represents an individual trying to define himself—his identity—outside of the constraints and conventions that Togolese society has deemed the norm. In appearance, the main character's stance against his society comes across as an inflexible commitment to a political cause, one that resists the violent dictatorship that he denounces in his monologues throughout the play. But alongside the political theme, the play traces the quest of an individual who wants—more generally—to define himself according to his own values, and who wants to be his own ruler—regardless of the social currents that surround him, and moreover, in complete defiance of the author's pen.

The main character wants to break away from what he feels are conditions (traditions, politics, social codes) which have given certain individuals rights over others, allowing them to profit from what should be available to all. This play inscribes itself into the common concern of seeking identity in today's world while navigating the conflicts of the particular versus the universal and of individualism versus communalism. To discover identity in the current era, Alem plays on the opposition of ideals versus reality, meaning that he suggests that identity is formed through ideals, which may not always be realistic, but rather wishful thinking. As such, Africa's contemporary quest for identity, and more specifically Togo's search, is represented as the attempt to balance individuality as modeled by the Western world, with the challenge to maintain the

traditional ways that mark the differences between Africa and the West. By implication, *Chemins de croix*'s protagonists can never quite resolve the dilemma of African or Togolese identity's relationship to modern life because they are confronted by multiple possibilities, but also because their own traditions have been so degraded and instrumental to the dictatorship. Thus, the quest for identity in *Chemins de Croix* becomes a struggle on the part of the individual to assert, at all cost, his own "counter-tradition" represented as his values and personal convictions.

We would do well to remember that the identity issues presented in Alem's novel *Esclaves* are a result of the violent separation of the slave protagonist from the source of his cultural "base" (or from what constituted the cradle of his character and his identity), a separation that persisted over decades and under dire circumstances. Being cut off in this brutal manner for years could have resulted in a radical change of identity. But as we have seen, while acquiring knowledge of other cultures, Miguel Sule never abandons his own original culture, nor does he ever lose the memory of what grounded his identity despite his brutal displacement. When Miguel Sule returns to the source—his homeland, Africa—he does not completely return to his former self, but simply readjusts. He is different, not necessarily better or worse. But in Alem's next work, *Chemins de Croix*, we find a character who seeks to truly redefine his identity. This self-determination, this quest to be different, is ubiquitous in Alem's play in which the main character escapes even the writer's pen, in a show of force, seemingly developing a personality of his own.

## Perceptions of the Togolese Character

Given Togo's history, this self-determination as presented in the play marks a divergence from what has been perceived as the "Togolese character:" peace-loving, tolerant, and circumspect. Some of these characteristics are even mentioned in the tourism section of the Washington D.C. Togolese embassy website, which states, "The people of Togo have kept, across the centuries, an authentic and deep tolerance, a mutual respect towards the other races, cultures and regions, very solid family ties, and a balance between work and leisure."<sup>1</sup> Some would argue that the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadema, in a sense, created passivity, complacency, and resistance to conflict (or, in other words, tolerance), and created a society whose members indeed chose capitulation and peace over resistance and conflict—because the latter would only risk increasing violence and would court the risk of imprisonment or even torture or death.

Interestingly, numerous monuments signifying and honoring peace have been erected all over Togo. The most famous, *La Colombe de la Paix*, a tourist destination located on the road from the country's main airport to the capital, Lomé, is described as "*l'un des endroits les plus touristiques de Lomé par son monument dédié à la Paix symbolisant une colombe perchée sur un bloc, tenant un brin de laurier dans son bec.*"<sup>2</sup> The *Colombe de la Paix* was built in 1982 to honor the 1963 Independence of Togo, which was indeed achieved more peacefully than in most of the other African nations. Yet, from the moment it was finished, the monument would have been a somewhat hypocritical assertion of "peace" as a national attribute, given the dictatorship's violence against his own people.

For some Togolese, the monument must have seemed a kind of warning not to seek to trouble the "peace" (or complacency) that the dictatorship demanded of its people. As Humanitarian and Development Assistance Specialist Mark G. Wentling states, following the violent demonstrations that took place when Gnassingbé was replaced by his son Faure upon the former's death, "the Dove of Peace statue on the road leading to the airport still stands, as if it is waiting for a genuine period of peace that has not yet arrived."<sup>3</sup> The *Monument de L'Union* in the Northern city of Dapaong, also erected in the 1980s, has likewise left the Togolese people wondering about a long lasting real peace in their nation. Nonetheless, despite the violence of 2005, to which Wentling surely refers, the Togolese have also developed an ethics of peace in recent years, and the monuments should now be seen as testimonies to that sentiment.

### **Historical and Political Background Preceding the Play**

There are many instances of minor revolts in Togo's modern history in which citizens tried to fight back against the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadéma and what they now view as the dynastic current government of his son Faure Gnassingbé. Before overviewing these instances of rebellion, we must understand modern Togolese socio-political history. To do so, I turn to Charles Piot, professor of cultural anthropology and African and African American studies at Duke University. According to Piot, in his book *Nostalgia for the Future* (2010), three years after taking power, Eyadéma created the Rally of the Togolese People (RPT) as the country's only legal party. He won an uncontested election in 1972. In 1979, the country adopted a new constitution that returned the country (at least nominally) to civilian rule. The RPT was entrenched as the

only party; the president of the party was automatically nominated for a seven-year term as president upon election to the party presidency and confirmed in office via an unopposed referendum.

Under these provisions, Eyadéma was unopposed in his re-election in 1979 and 1986. During his rule, he escaped several assassination attempts. In 1974, he survived a plane crash in the northern part of the country near the city of Sarakawa. After another unsuccessful assassination attempt by a bodyguard, he carried the bullet removed by the surgeon as an amulet. However, a national conference was held in August 1991 electing Joseph Kokou Koffigoh as Prime Minister and leaving Eyadéma as merely a ceremonial president. Although Eyadéma attempted to suspend the conference, surrounding the venue with soldiers, he subsequently accepted the outcome. Despite this, Eyadéma managed to remain in power with the backing of the army. In March 1993, an unsuccessful attack was made on the Tokoin military camp in Lomé where Eyadéma was living; several people were killed in the attack, including Eyadéma's personal chief of staff, General Ameji Mawulikplimi.

In 2005, Eyadéma's son, Faure Gnassingbé was installed as president following his father's death. Mass protests against Faure Gnassingbé's government turned violent a week after his inauguration. Thousands of people throughout the country opposing his army-installed presidency burned tires and threw jagged pieces of metal at police on the second day of demonstrations. Security forces fought back with tear gas, batons, and stun grenades, killing at least three protesters as leaders from across Africa sought to stem the unrest.

Interior Minister Akila Ezzo-Boko confirmed the deaths, but said police fired after they were surrounded and protesters tried to rip their guns away. Two protesters died immediately, and one died later in a hospital.<sup>5</sup> Appearing on state-owned television, Gnassingbé condemned the demonstration and criticized opposition leaders, telling them they should "show more maturity" (National Togolese Television, 1993). The fifty-two-nation African Union issued a statement from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, expressing concern over "the rapid deterioration of the situation in Togo."<sup>5</sup>

The statement also deplored "intimidation of journalists and the closing or jamming of independent radio stations," and implored Togolese authorities to restore constitutional law. The protest drew about 3,000 people (three times the number that showed up at a rally the day before) and turned increasingly violent throughout the day before subsiding by nightfall. "We're not stopping until Gnassingbé is gone," said Harry Olympio, one of Togo's main opposition leaders. "We're going to fight every day, and tomorrow we start again."<sup>5</sup>

More recently, on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the BBC compiled a political profile of Togo's political history and one date that was highlighted was the April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012 elections in which they state that clashes occurred between civilians and law enforcement agents as demonstrators gathered in Lomé to protest reforms to the electoral code that favored the ruling party. The next year, the ruling party won two-thirds of the parliamentary seats in elections. Then, on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the Togolese news website [www.icilome.com](http://www.icilome.com) published the following:

*En prélude à la manifestation qui verra les femmes togolaises exhibées leur nudité dans les jours à venir pour exprimer leur ras le bol sur les dirigeants togolais, certaines jeunes femmes, face à la barbarie et l'oppression que leur font subir les forces de l'ordre et de sécurité, n'ont pas hésité à se mettre nues devant ces derniers, en signe de profanation, lors de la manifestation du "Collectif Sauvons le Togo" (CST), organisée dans la capitale togolaise, ce mardi 28 août 2012, a constaté un reporter du mo5-togo.com ([www.icilome.com](http://www.icilome.com)).*

Performing traditional forms of resistance, Togolese women thus organized their own protest in coalition with the larger opposition organization, the CST. These young women demonstrated their new sense of freedom as women who could protest independently, yet they did so by performing a traditional cultural ritual signifying resistance as "profanation" of the status quo.

In my own experience in Togo, I have noticed that the Togolese have great religious faith, and thus patience. In their daily speech, one often hears "*fais doucement*," meaning "be careful, tread lightly, and watch your step," a possible holdover from anxieties that developed under Gnassingbé's rule. This form of speech is ingrained in the daily conversation of the Togolese, who are careful and mindful of everything they do and wishes the same for everyone else.



1982 - *La Colombe de la Paix* , Lomé



1986 -*Le monument de l'Union* -Dapaong -

## Synopsis of the Play

Two prisoners—both students—Amouro and Amel find themselves in a cell because they dared to distribute political leaflets. While they are in the jail cell, after a difficult beginning in their conversation, they engage in an exchange about their ideals, dreams, and hopes as well as their philosophies and beliefs. While they disagree on most of these subjects, both agree on one thing: change should come to Africa. They discuss at length how this change should come about and what it should entail, and they explore the means, brutal or gradual, of bringing about these changes. Yet, while Amouro articulates a more revolutionary stance, Amel worries about all the sacrifices that would be necessary to bring about a true revolution.

Amouro has very resolute points of view and he will give his all to see changes brought about in the socio-political arena of his country. To the great despair of his fiancée, and even the jail guard, Amouro refuses to retreat from his standpoint. He

states that he cannot because he must save face: he would have to face psychological and social consequences, some of which, however, appear to be self-imposed. For example, Amouro feels that once one is engaged in the revolutionary process, it is this person's duty to see the changes to the very end, no matter the consequences to one's personal life. In his view, retracting from one's ideals means that not only was one never fully engaged in the struggle, but also that personal matters, which he equates to selfishness, matter more. According to Amouro, in a revolution personal matters should not interfere, as the greater good must take precedence.

To better understand this play, I place myself in a conversation between the critic Hemedzo, the seventeenth century French play *Polyeucte* by Corneille, literary critics Chinua Achebe and Christopher Miller, and Alem himself. I will start with a comparison of *Chemins de Croix* with Corneille's play *Polyeucte* because of the resemblance between the characters of Alem and those of Corneille's play.

On close examination, we find that Amouro could indeed be compared to Corneille's hero Polyeucte and, to a lesser degree, Horace—another of Corneille's protagonists. Corneille writes his plays within the strict rules of seventeenth-century French Classicism in which the author must respect the main rules of time, place, and action (meaning that only one action can take place in one locale in one span of time, thus making the play credible, and giving the work the classical aesthetics in fashion at the time). The rules of Classicism did not allow much latitude in terms of exploring different scopes within the play. However, Corneille—through his heroes Polyeucte and Horace—gives us characters full of human complexities who are able to transcend the

plot that created them. Alem gives us the same type of character: one who will even succeed in escaping his author's pen.

Both Alem and Corneille's heroes become obsessed with what they perceive as their ultimate duty, which often puts them at odds with their loved ones. Polyeucte is a newly converted Christian in third-century Armenia, a time and place in which Christians are persecuted for their faith. Polyeucte embraces the political consequences of his new religious beliefs, putting him at odds with his father-in-law—the Roman governor of Armenia, Felix. Polyeucte's wife Pauline, trying in vain to make her husband change his mind, finds herself instead offered off to Severe, who is in love with her. Polyeucte accepts his martyrdom for the principle of it all, sacrificing his love for his wife to his rival, and his social/political status to death. Pauline adjures Polyeucte to renounce this faith which is separating them, but his answer leaves the audience in clear understanding of what has become an obsession:

*Pauline :*     *Quittez cette chimère, et m'aimez*

*Polyeucte :*   *Je vous aime, Beaucoup moins que Dieu, mais bien plus  
que moi-même.*

*(Act IV, scene III)*

Amouro's wife, Lucette, fares no better. When she visits him in the jail cell, it's with the hope of convincing him to accept the pardon that is being given to all the students involved in distributing the political tracts. The cell guard, as well as the magistrate, easily convinced Amel who, upon hearing about the pardon, immediately

becomes contrite for his “crimes.” But by the same token, this offered pardon earns the scorn of Amouro. He accuses Amel of never having truly been a revolutionary and of literally being a sell-out.

In Amouro, the protagonist of *Chemins de croix*, we see a representation of the historical resistance of the Togolese people—an individual who fights against the historical idea of Togo as complacent, obedient, fearful, and ready to conform. This is the main reason why critic Hemedzo, among others, interpreted *Chemins de croix* as a partisan cry against tyrannical governments. The main character is jailed for having distributed anti-government pamphlets, and he refuses an official pardon and chooses to be a martyr for the cause.

This character is determined to let the world know that the government is evil and has not only subjugated society, but has turned the people into compliant victims with no will to fight for their rights. In view of these considerations, Alem’s play departs from representing Togo in terms of passivity and complacency in the face of oppression by revealing the violent forces at work that indeed produced passivity in some, but resistance in others. As such, among his other concerns, Alem meditates on the definition of peace and how one achieves it in a state that is anything but peace-loving.

Yet, first and foremost, Alem’s play is a drama, and an in-depth analysis reveals elements that make this play more than an exploration of political power and conflict. *Chemins de Croix* is a complex play organized by what the author calls “sequences” rather than acts. There are three sequences, and the organization of the play gives it a novelty, which announces a breaking away from tradition. Further, the gloomy décor of

the jail cell gives the impression of dealing with an additional character. The jail cell's unspoken messages become audible as the prison cell eventually becomes part of the cast of characters themselves, incorporating their psyches and their very being.

The complexity of Alem's play also extends to self-referencing; in order to state that he is his own person and no one's Pygmalion, the main character escapes his own author's pen. Unlike Miguel in *Esclaves*, Amouro will never allow himself to be manipulated or shaped by others, and his combativeness from the onset—his insistence that he needs no one else to determine his destiny or what he stands for—creates the dramatic tension of the play. As he does in *Esclaves*, Alem represents a precise idea of identity in *Chemins de Croix*. He asserts that Togolese identity should not be confined simply to its place of origin because, although the essence of Togolese uniqueness can never be destroyed or replaced, the Togolese remains part of a larger humanity. Alem thus situates identity in a more universal, general understanding of humanity. For Alem, identity develops from an inner courage and conviction through which the individual or a whole nation—by seeking to overcome forces that seek to control it—experiences the fullest realization of its humanity.

It is easy to see why Hemedzo sees *Chemins de Croix* as simply a political play, and that he fails to identify themes beyond the political. While it is true that Alem appears to contest the legitimacy of any ruler bent on imposing his own will on his people, his characters display a rich philosophical and psychological depth reminiscent of the seventeenth-century tragedies of Corneille and Racine, whose heroes also struggle against powers, in the form of fate or destiny, that at times push them beyond human limits. Similarly, Alem's play depicts characters struggling against the powers

that will punish them for their convictions and desires. Alem even seems to refer directly to the royal settings of French classical theater by calling the dictatorship, "the Empire," and the dictator, "the Emperor."

Further, Alem refers to the *Commedia dell'Arte* that influenced Corneille's comedies by giving certain characters the allegorical names that denote "types" (or stock characters), such as "Amouro" and "Lucette." Interestingly, though, the author names the man imprisoned with Amouro for the same crime "Amel," a sly reference to his own name "Alem" that perhaps suggests the latter's own position on the play's central conflict (since Amel decides to accept the pardon and rejoin the society he so loathes).

But once again, the importance of the characters' power struggles with the forces that be are most vividly evoked in the character-author relationship. From the opening, the author warns the public that while he tried to tell a particular story, the characters became larger than his ability to contain them. The struggle of the characters for self-determination against their own "creator" (Alem) does not conform to the ideology of literary authorship, just as the student activists do not conform the ideologies of their society. Further, such rebellion against the ideology that defines the writer's power over his characters is not logical, as it is the writer who has total control over his characters' fate and actions. But in *Chemin de Croix*, logic itself—as an absolute—is called into question; it becomes another form of ideology and power that works to control and contain those who seek to carve out their own paths.

Another important aspect of this play is Alem's take on the "Absurd." Amouro's character and his insistence to remain in jail and suffer repeatedly the wrath of a prison guard who cannot die is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's 1953 play *Waiting for Godot* and more especially, Albert Camus' 1942 novel *L'Etranger*. Both works inscribe themselves in the genre of the absurd in which the conflict for humans is the tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the inability to find any. Amouro, in refusing the government pardon and in denying his wife's request to reconsider his position, seeks to reconcile his understanding of a malicious and hard world with his need for clarity about the human heart. Failing to find the desired balance, he chooses to remain in a place where there is chaotic nonsense, incoherent thoughts, and unnecessary harshness. Amouro's anger towards the difficulties that life sends his way is the expression of his very inability to resolve the issues in front of him. His anger is not the echo of a people's suffering. In this respect, Alem simply mirrors Couchoro's thoughts by pointing out a universal truth about humans: we are all slaves of something, most of all our passions.

My interpretation of *Chemins de Croix* thus supplements Hemedzo's political analysis by focusing on the determination of the main character to decide his own fate, his own actions, his destiny, and his mark on the world. The students involved in distributing the political tracts, the cell guard, and the magistrate easily convince Amel, who upon hearing about the pardon, immediately becomes contrite for his "crimes." This action earns him the scorn of Amouro, who accuses Amel of never having truly been a revolutionary, and of being a sell-out.

It is easy to see Alem's story as representing a fight against authority in which Amouro searches to affirm not only his beliefs, but to create a world in which he can act on those beliefs. However, in doing so, he creates a personal prison that goes beyond the actual prison walls and bars. Amouro, in a sense, is another version of Alem, who also sought to create his own identity in a world dominated by rigid authorities. In his autobiography, Alem tells us that he was born at the beginning of the thirty-year dictatorship of Togo. He relates that his mother, without necessarily being overbearing, exerted a strong control over his life, insisting that he receive, for example, a very rigorous traditional education in a strict Catholic school. Alem's relationship with his mother—as well as with the priest overseeing his education—and with religion in general eventually motivated him to stage a mini revolution. Based on this information, we could interpret Alem's play as a representation of his own rebellion against anyone or anything that dictated to him what he had to do, think, or become.

However, to better understand the commitments to self-determination that so interested Alem, it is paramount to look at an African theorist. In a 1965 essay entitled "The Novelist as Teacher" (which appears in the 1990 collection *Hopes and Impediments*), Chinua Achebe of Nigeria asserts that "we have learnt from Europe that a writer or an artist, lives on the fringe of society . . . he is in revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion if not hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything" (p. 40). While Achebe goes on to argue against this European notion (stating that though it is adopted by many African writers as a model, it does not in fact fulfill the different expectations that African society has of its writers), his assertion nonetheless affirms what we learned about Alem in

Chapter 3: that he would not be boxed in, and that he created his own literary formulas and rules while giving the world characters who do the same within the particular milieus that he places them in.

In this respect, Achebe's quote indeed applies to Alem—the epitome of the African writer who writes as the individual that he is, not shying away from representing to the public his own truths and personal beliefs, nor what he has learned in his experience of the world. Indeed, in my conversations with Alem, he clearly stated that his writings reflect his own world view. In sharing his understanding of the world in general and Togolese identity in particular, he hoped to help his society achieve a level of cultural sophistication like that of the West, a position that concurs with Achebe's call for the "novelist as teacher," but one that could also decrease his popularity with Togolese cultural nationalists and traditionalists. All the same, Alem differs significantly from the African writers described in Achebe's 1965 essay, and, following the European model of the artist, are in "revolt against" and are marginalized from society. While Achebe's description may have once described most of Africa's writers in the contemporary era, those writers who dare to speak their minds, like Alem, are not necessarily viewed with suspicion, and in fact they are often looked up to as cultural innovators and "leaders" in the sense that they are forging new ways of thinking about Africa's place in the world.

### **Amouro's Martyrdom**

AFrom the beginning of the play, Alem tells us that his characters "ran away" from him, developing a life of their own. As readers, therefore, we assume that the

character of Amouro might have at some point represented Alem, or even have developed Cornelian or Racinian traits by becoming too involved with his ideals and symbolically enclosing himself within a prison that he unwittingly created, negating love and life. But Amouro deliberately chooses both to stay in a physical prison and to multiply its means of confining him. Amouro feels that the society in which he would be reincorporated is nothing more than a poor reflection of humanity. From the beginning, we are made aware that Amouro's hatred of his world steeped in a morality that encourages corruption and cronyism, not progress, is based on certain past experiences. Sounding much like Achebe's marginalized artist, "*L'Empire n'a pas besoin d'intellectuels pour son développement . . . Nous sommes les trouble-fêtes, les empêcheurs de magouiller en rond*" (p. 13).

Since Amouro believes that accepting the government pardon would equate to agreeing with its society's values, he chooses to become a "martyr" for the cause. Further, his total rejection of the Empire and its debased values and greed (even more than its politics) explains why Amouro so easily accepts the task of distributing political tracts without even having read them or without ascertaining what they advocate, demand, and critique. He does so simply because of "*une conviction viscérale que [les rebelles] étaient dans le vrai.*"

When Amouro reveals that he had indeed involved himself in a movement of political resistance to the Empire "*dans la région de Pamélé*" that was discovered and its members brutally punished, it is not the crushing of the movement's ideals and work that troubles him, but the cruelty, barbarism, immorality of the authorities and their

henchmen, and the total disregard for human life that they demonstrate as they torture and murder the rebels, including the twelve-year old daughter of their leader.

*J'ai très tôt flirté avec la liberté, la contestation. A douze ans, l'initiation a eu lieu. Dans la région de Pamélé, la jeune Sofia, fille du rebelle Felicio qui avait soulevé Pamélé, dut porter elle-même pendant la messe d'abjuration le drapeau de l'Empire et le déposer aux pieds de l'Empereur à la fin du credo. Quelques jours plus tard, le lendemain de Noël, cet enfant de huit ans eut les yeux crevés et le clitoris sectionné. Les cadavres de Felicio et des autres rebelles furent tirés de leurs tombeaux et décapités sur la place publique. Le père d'un de mes amis, qui avait essayé de fuir a été arrêté et assis sur un siège de fer chauffé à blanc ! On l'a coiffé d'une couronne de métal incandescent qu'on a enfoncée à coups de maillets sur sa tête. Une seconde couronne de fumée s'est élevée au-dessus du supplicie. Et les soldats de l'Empire ricanèrent. Et leurs rires m'ont poursuivi longtemps et déterminé mon caractère (p. 15).*

In recalling these atrocities, Amouro reflects that *"la chair est faible. . . Interdit de réfléchir avec la chair"* (p. 10). In other words, to remain committed to his position, he must deny his own body's capacity to feel, his own body's determination to survive. Finally, it is in part this experience that motivates Amouro's refusal to be pardoned, which, for him, would signify an acceptance of a barbaric and inhumane society that puts little value on human life. He thus chooses isolation in a prison cell—a kind of haven for him—over life in that world.

Though Amouro despairs being part of the world, he appears to return temporarily to his former self when his fiancée Lucette shows up at the prison to beg him to reconsider the offer for forgiveness from the Emperor. He describes his life in prison to her in the following terms: “*je vis toujours. Je fonctionne. C’est drôle ce que la vie peut ressembler parfois au néant.*”<sup>1</sup> Equating living with simply functioning as a mechanical, disjointed automaton, Lucette attempts to recall Amouro to life by arguing that her own life depends upon it:

*J’existe et tu m’ignores. Tu parles de l’Empire. Tu veux le reconstruire seul et ton rêve creuse des deserts sous mes pas, me laissant seule, face au Minotaure, au monstre portant le deuil d’un amour mort-né. Songe à cet amour que menace ton rêve! Pense à moi, Amouro! (p.51)*

But Amouro, like Polyeucte before him, refuses everything, including life and love, and Lucette’s cry of despair does nothing to move him, nothing to help change his mind. He remains only focused on a commitment to a revolution, which at this point turns into pure refusal, self-denial, and an embrace of “le néant.”

### **Analysis from an African Perspective**

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In the essay entitled “The Writer and the Community” (originally presented at the Regent’s Lecture at the University of California at Los Angeles in November 1984 and published in 1990 in the *Hopes and Impediments* collection), Chinua Achebe discusses the role played by individualism in the complex relationship that exists between the author and the community. Quoting authors such as Milan Kundera, Achebe asserts that in Western writing—especially in the Western novel—the hero is often on a quest to find himself: “the novel is an investigation into human existence . . . [It] proclaims no truth, no morality . . . that is a job for others: leaders of political parties, presidents, terrorists, priests, revolutionaries and editorial writers” (Achebe. 1984, p. 55).

Quoting the French anthropologist O. Manoni, Achebe further asserts that there appears to be, then, a “conflict between the social being and the inner personality in Western culture” (and thus in its novels’ protagonists), with this tension sometimes characterizing those whom he terms the West’s “newly ‘civilized’ and ‘civilizing’ surrogates” (Achebe. 1984 p. 54). According to Achebe, many believe that African literature, however, does not fit the models set by Western civilization because African authors will not always reflect the “moral pattern” by which the hero must conform to social norms.

The reader is then left with the question of figuring out if political events truly did affect the creation of Alem’s play. *Chemins de Croix* has been compared to a partisan cry against tyrannical governments. The main character is jailed for having distributed anti-government pamphlets, and he refuses an official pardon and chooses to be a martyr for the cause. This character is determined to let the reader and the public in general know that the government is evil and has not only blindly subjugated

society, but also that the people have become an impoverished and compliant victim with no will to fight for its rights. In view of these considerations, Alem's play seems to depart from what constitutes Togolese general behavioral profile and identity. It also explains why the play has been linked to politics.

### **Why Alem's Play is Usually Viewed as a Political Play**

Togo has only been independent since 1960, and has only seen the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadema end in 2005. Because of this, the Togolese seem to be living a sort of catharsis in which everything has the tint of politics. This explains, in part, why Mensah Hemedzo, in his doctoral thesis at the University of Strasbourg in June 2011, proposed to analyze *Chemin de Croix*, among other theater pieces, only through the lens of the politics that permeate through the story. The general scope of his thesis involves the history of Togo's theater through which the main encompassing theme was politics. In this respect, his work turns out to be a political history of Togolese theater. However, while Hemedzo affirms that Togolese theater is essentially a political one:

*Ce qu'il faut retenir d'emblée, c'est que le théâtre togolais est un théâtre essentiellement politique, à ce sujet, la période que couvre notre étude (1965-2005) est marquée par le règne sans partage du général Eyadema Gnassingbé dont l'ombre funeste a couvert le pays et sa création littéraire, après le coup d'État du 13 janvier 1963 jusqu'à sa mort le 5 février 2005. Comment ? La réponse à cette interrogation s'égrainera au fur et à mesure que nous exposerons notre analyse (Hemedzo, Introduction, p. 3).*

Hemedzo's perspective as a native son predisposes him to this point view, while my approach is more generalized. Hemedzo's studies of Togolese literature encompasses the period from 1965 to 2005—time during which Togo lived under the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadema. The former leader's one-party rule curtailed any desire on the part of writers to express philosophies other than those of the government. It is an undeniable fact that freedom of expression seemed repressed during that time, and most of the literary production which occurred during those years of the dictatorship came across as a diatribe against the oppressive nature of the government in place.

It is therefore easy to see why Hemedzo sees *Chemins de Croix* as simply a political play with nothing more to offer beyond that theme. While it is true that Alem appears to contest the legitimacy of any ruler bent on imposing only his own will on his people, throughout the development of the characters in the play there is a richness of philosophical and psychological depth reminiscent of the great plays of Corneille and Racine, whose heroes face tremendous personal demons and struggles, pushing them at times beyond human limits. The play is not only about the various forms of power, although it does appear to constitute its main theme.

One form of power struggle is in the character-author relationship. From the set-up, the author warns the public that while he tried to tell a story, the characters became larger than his ability to contain them. The struggle of the characters go through to achieve self-identification does not conform to the ideology of what a play should be. A play should conform to ideology or to logic. It is usually the playwright who determines the characters' fate because, in the long run, he is the "dictator" of his play and of the

action. Given the dismal track record of the government towards its citizens, Amouro even despairs about being a part of the world. He appears to temporarily come back to life when his fiancée Lucette shows up at the prison. But he equates that version of living to simply functioning, thus becoming a mechanical, disjointed automaton, devoid of senses. Amouro, like Polyeucte, rejects everything and Lucette's cry of despair does nothing to move him or help change his mindset. Amouro is only focused on a revolution, which at this point seems devoid of meaning or justification.

Achebe suggests that in Western literature, there appears to be a constant "conflict between the social being and the inner personality," and this sometimes appears in the "surrogate" westernized civilizations (*The Writer and his Community*, p. 47-51). However, according to Achebe, it is widely believed that African literature does not quite fit the model set by Western civilization because it will not always conform to the "moral pattern" by which the hero would conform to social norms. But for Achebe, individualism is as "old as human society itself." In this, Achebe joins Couchoro who believes that, skin color notwithstanding, all individuals are part of the same human race, and deep down share the same basic human feelings and thoughts. Therefore, the literature of all mankind should simply reflect human preoccupations. Achebe doesn't necessarily call for similarities between Western literature and African writings. He does call for the representation of one's own reality from one's own "backyard," but by the same token, human foibles should be represented as they are, in their reality.

Literary critic Christopher Miller (*Theories of Africans*, 1985) clarifies, however, that the best way to understand African literature is not through the lens of western viewpoint, but through an appreciation that would value a more authentic vision of local

customs and culture. While he strongly advocates an ethnological approach, he also sees the limits of this analytical tool. In conjunction with Wole Soyinka, Miller says that the best way to understand African literature is to get rid of any sort of universal abstraction defined and brought forth by literary theories, which translate western realities and preoccupations. Yet, the departure from any western influence in understanding Alem's work would have us miss too many of the subtleties the characters present and which do come out in Hemedzo's thesis to a certain degree.

For example, Hemedzo does acknowledge one universal truth: that of individuality as a human truth similar to the one proposed by Achebe. Hemedzo stipulates that in general, Togolese youth (and the people in general) are not adverse to the idea of becoming rich by renouncing their own ideals and embracing those of the powers in place. Sell-outs are not a novelty, and the character of Amel, therefore, does not surprise and, when given the opportunity to save himself, seems to gladly embrace what he once fought against. Amel doesn't fight too much against the currents of turning pro-government; he simply thinks of self-preservation and, in fact, his is the altruistic gesture of a brother trying to stay alive to protect a younger sibling. As the story develops, however, it is rather difficult to truly say that Amel is selfish and thinking only of saving himself because what he believes is that he will be able to protect his younger brother if he is out of jail. He even seems to ask for forgiveness for this altruistic gesture:

*Non, je doute que tu comprennes mon geste. Ce n'est pas pour ma mère.*

*Pour mon frère. Le sauver des griffes de l'ogre. (p 44)*

However, Hemedzo in his historical studies, affirms that:

*La censure et l'autocensure naissent donc selon un schéma classique qui va de la culture de la peur à la récupération du mythe de l'aïnesse.*

*Cependant, en manipulateurs psychologiques bien aguerris, les dignitaires du Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais savent jouer autant sur la carotte que sur le bâton. En dehors des sommes faramineuses octroyées aux délateurs, le système dictatorial togolais permettait à ses adhérents un enrichissement personnel inouï. (p 69)*

Hemedzo's thesis gives the impression that he only focused on the political aspects present in the play, analyzing only the circumstances of the author's own life which might or might not have been transmitted in this work. Yet, the author himself warns from the beginning of the play that the characters "did take a life of their own," developing their own sphere of authority over their own actions, decisions, and destinies. We cannot always find the author in the characters. This is evident when we further analyze Amouro's character.

The rapport that Amouro creates with his environment is one of determination, and he follows through. He does see the manipulative ways of the government and its fierce need to control its people. But in the long run, he ends up in control of his own life, deciding if and why he will not leave the prison cell. He becomes Sisyphus, somehow enjoying his plight by understanding that his rock and the steep hill are of his own making because he chose to disobey the rules. Therefore, he lives knowingly and proudly with the consequences. As Amouro's days are to end in perpetual imprisonment (it is to believe that he is already in purgatory), he accepts that his punishment is to

never love again, never see his people again, never see the sun again, constantly be harassed by the same guard who doesn't die, and to constantly repeat his torturing day. In his mind, he has beaten the system because he is not out in the world to see it being tortured. Amel, on the other hand, wants to tempt his chances with the real world. He hopes to make that difference if only by protecting his little brother.

These characters' decision-making abilities come from a very African trait, and as Hemedzo points out, a tradition steeped into the ethnic group known as the Ewe. According to him, the Ewes see speech as either constructive and edifying or purely destructive. In this we can see how Amouro's speech can be destructive because he sees the world only as something to contradict. In his view, Amel's "capitulation" is "*L'odeur de la défaite.*" As his way of saying good-bye to Amel, Amouro reminds him that they will meet again, but only in death.

Speech for Amouro is equated to giving in to the authority, renouncing the right that one must simply exist. In Amouro's view, speech is the only thing that is still his, and his way of preserving his speech is by "destroying" the other (Amel, Lucette, the government) by denying them the validity of their opinions. For Amouro: "*C'est drôle ce que la vie peut ressembler au néant*" (p.49). Amouro, despite it all, is in control through his speech. As he is being tortured and insulted by the guard, he tells a nasty story, insulting to police officers (Sequence 3), which only increases the intensity of the guard's ritual of torture—a response, then, that Amouro deliberately incites, thus gaining him control even over his own torture at the hands of the state.

As for Lucette, she hopes to win back her man through her charms. She seems to personify various feminine stereotypes—most likely Lorelei, the mythical Siren who lured sailors and entire ships to their death in the sea. Rather than use her power of speech, she sings as she enters the prison. Yet, this feminine form of expression has little to no effect on Amouro, although his name evokes love. Lucette, whose name here becomes ironic, cannot bring "light" to this ever-more dismal world in which the absurdity of Amouro's fight, at this point, does not escape the reader. The conversation between Amouro and Lucette become a "*dialogue de sourds*," with each character simply speaking his/her position without seeking common ground. Hemedzo argues that Lucette is a realist and Amouro a dreamer, but Lucette is also a temptress, hoping to entice her husband to betray his ideals, his will to control and determine his actions, his authority over himself, and his sacrifice:

*Lucette : Amouro, regarde. Regarde mes lèvres, mes citrons, mon ventre !  
Des objets sans valeur. Des gadgets inutiles. Touche-les, Amouro. Ils sont  
froids. Ils sont morts. Depuis cette étrange saison où nos corps gémirent  
de la douloureuse scission, où nos voix puériles moururent au seuil des  
muets royaumes. Touche-les ! Redonne-leur vie, comme autrefois ! Vas-y  
! Il faut que tu reconnaises que tu t'es trompé. Il faut revenir à la vie. [...]  
J'ai besoin de ta vie pour inventer la mienne.*

*Amouro : Conserver ma vie ? Il me faut trahir d'abord.*

*Lucette : Trahis donc. Amel a trahi et s'en porte bien. (p.51)*

Lucette wants to save her husband and herself. Her space is love. What of Amouro? He seems determined to commit the ultimate sacrifice: giving up his life to become the martyr for the good of everyone. Has he developed a messianic complex as Hemedzo proposes? For Amouro, it is not about simply living as his wife suggests, but living with decency, knowing that one did the right thing. In this respect, Amouro is Corneille's Horace. He is stoic, living out an idealized version of the true patriot who, like Horace, will even kill his own sister for the good of the nation. Horace, like Amouro, ends up living in a world of his own, separated from security because he cannot renounce his ideals. Like Amouro, he ends up in a prison of his own making. Amouro is not only confined in a physical jail cell, but also a prison of self-sufficiency which he invents out of the same convictions that he seems to share with Horace. Both Horace and Amouro seem to value honor above all. But we must ask, is this honor honorable?

Amouro's "honorable" sacrifice, in time, comes across as excessive tragedy, and we are left with more questions at the end of the play than answers. While Hemedzo clearly sees political ramification in Amouro's sacrifice, the human psychology that prevails in every character in *Chemins de Croix* insists that we analyze Amouro in more complex ways. The title of the play alone, in the plural, underlines the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations. From the compelling aptitude of the hero to totally immerse himself in a passionate ideal, to the complex layers of authority (from the Empire, to the author himself), this play represents several points of view on subjectivity, social relations, personal relationships, and inter-subjectivity. While there is a constant questioning on the (somewhat) absurdity of it all, nothing prepares the reader for the emptiness with which the author leaves him/her wondering, allowing for interpretations

as multiple as the readers/viewers who consume the play. For, as Jean Paul Sartre asserts, the meaning of literature resides beyond language, and as such meaning is revealed and created by the reader him/her self.

Eva Andrea Dorn, in analyzing several other writings of Kangni Alem states that the author often constructs archetypes in search of an identity (*Ethique de l'interrogation. Ironie, exil et sexualité dans l'écriture "sadienne" de Kangni Alem. 2013*). According to Dorn, this is a trend that many contemporary African authors have displayed in their works to attest to an evolving spirit, as well as the inescapable fact that authors are universal as well as implicitly personal. Yet, she says that Alem doesn't want to be defined by the term "exiled," but prefers to be portrayed as an immigrant writer who deliberately chose his itineraries.

We can only muse at the idea that this trend as represented by Alem is only but one path to understanding Africa and its myriads of cultures and identities. Alem reveals himself in the modern way of viewing humanity: we are all one people. There are no borders. Because history has brought us to interact with each other since the beginning of time, no culture is unique or operating in a vacuum. For Alem, identity can be simply defined as being human or a citizen of the world.

Footnotes:

1-<http://www.togoleseembassy.com/togo-tourism.cfm>

2- [http://peace.maripo.com/x\\_africa.htm](http://peace.maripo.com/x_africa.htm)

3- Plays were produced under strict rules overseen by the creator of the French Académie, Cardinal de Richelieu, King Louis XIII's prime minister.

4- <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/communiqueeng-30th.pdf>

5-<https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/af/issue/current>

6- [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-02-12-togo-protests\\_x.htm](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-02-12-togo-protests_x.htm)

## Chapter 5

### A Poet's Point of View on Togolese Identity

Ever since Felix Couchoro began the discussion on Togolese identity, many artists, in a variety of genres, have explored the subject. One such contributor to the dialogue is the poet Paul Ahyi. This artist's work encompasses more than the written word. Ahyi has left his legacy in sculpture, painting, and everyday useful objects—much of which have become symbols of Togolese uniqueness.

Paul Ahyi was born in 1930 in Abomey, one of the last remaining cities of the dismantled Dahomey (a.k.a Danhomé) Kingdom (now Benin). Though his birth parents were Togolese, Ahyi was educated in the royal household of his father's second wife—a princess of Abomey, daughter to a famous Amazon warrior from that kingdom. During his childhood, he was surrounded by great architecture, sculptures, and art of all kind which attested to the glory of the Dahomeyan kings of old. Still today, the royal palace of Abomey, holds many sculptures and indigenous art which Ahyi must have admired as a child. It is reported that his love of art began while living in the palace.

The richness of the art at the court, and the monumental proportions of some of the sculptures represented power to Ahyi—especially that of the defunct Danhomé (Dahomey) kingdom. The kaleidoscope of colors and the raw material of bronze, textiles, precious wood, iron, and polished ceramic were used to their utmost effect to create works that continue to exhibit the Dahomean kings' might to this day. Given the richness of the cultural paraphernalia which surrounded him as a child, it is no surprise that when Ahyi sets off for university in 1955—first to Senegal then to France—he seeks

and befriends artists such as Pablo Picasso and writers such as Cheikh Anta Diop whose visionary theories exert a strong influence on the young man's philosophical and cultural point of view. Ahyi's eclectic background becomes an integral part of his art and his writings.

When Paul Ahyi died on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010, he left a compelling legacy that has become an integral part of Togo's identity. One key element of his sculptures and paintings, for example, is the inclusion and representation of Togbé the Ancestor, the spiritual leader of Togo. In Togolese folklore, this leader is part of the beginning of creation and speaks to the very character of Togolese people. In using this character in his work, Ahyi ensures the unequivocal presence and affirmation of the Togolese spirit as the basis of his work, thus representing loud and clear where Togolese Identity begins. By including Togbé in most of his work, Ahyi demonstrates respect and admiration for the ancestors, and for Togo's traditions. While Ahyi uses Togbé the Ancestor to represent the traditional aspects of Togolese identity, his representation of modern elements, on the other hand, comes from whatever is at hand. For example, a cooking pot can become part of a sculpture, or a spoon can become a sword. Other themes that generally appear through Ahyi's work include the future, hunger, freedom, and hard labor. Ahyi often uses people from all levels of the social hierarchy to represent his themes: married couples, workers, battered bodies, ancestral deities, and people from the different ethnic groups of Togo and Benin.

Beyond his creative art, Ahyi is credited most with designing Togo's flag. He fashioned the Togolese standard by basing it on the colors of the Pan-Africanist flag. Pan-Africanism is a worldwide intellectual movement that aims to encourage and

strengthen the bonds of solidarity between all people of African descent. In using the philosophy of Pan-Africanism as the base for the Togolese flag, Ahyi must have believed in integrating Togo into the greater African brotherhood, therefore allowing for a larger frame to help define Togolese identity. Along with the red, black, and green Pan-African flag, the Liberian flag (which bears a close resemblance to the flag of the United States) also served as a model for the creation of the Togolese flag.

The Liberian flag—created in 1847 to represent the freedom won by former American and Caribbean slaves—has similar red and white stripes, as well as a blue square with a white star in the canton (a square usually situated in the upper right hand corner of a flag, similar to the square with the stars in the American flag). It is a heraldic symbol intended to explain the reason and purpose of the nation it represents. In creating the Togolese flag, Ahyi used the same horizontal stripes seen on the Liberian flag, but Ahyi changed the Liberian blue canton to a red square symbolizing the bloodshed incurred during the struggle for independence (although Togo's fight for independence was one of the more subdued struggles during the time of African independence from France in 1960, according to most historians, Robert Cornevin In particular).

It is said that the yellow stripes of the flag represent Togolese soil, while the green symbolizes Togo's forests and agriculture. Ahyi added a white star to the canton square in the upper left, similar to that of the Liberian flag to represent light, intelligence and peace.



The symbol of the star in and of itself speaks to the moderate characteristics of Togo as a nation and seems to say that Togolese people always strive for peace and prosperity, and that they seem to resolve their struggles through discussions and negotiations rather than brute force. The Togolese flag represents the general idea that the fate of all African peoples and countries are intertwined. Reflecting a vision of ancient times (soil, agriculture, forests), this flag represents and promotes values that belong to all African civilizations, values evoked in modern times to represent common struggles against slavery, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. This national symbol of Togo further sets itself among the flags of a number of nations in Africa—among others, the 1897 flag of Ethiopia (the continent's oldest independent nation, which has for centuries been the flagship nation of African pride, self-determination, and forward thinking).

Another aspect to this prolific artist's work is his massive production of outdoor monuments, reliefs, and sculptures, with his most important work—The Monument to Independence—standing in the center of Lomé. The memorial was built in 1960, two years after Togo gained its independence. It is an enormous block of cement with the carved silhouette of a person breaking his chains. Within the block is a smaller statue representing a woman offering a bowl of libations. Promenades, manicured lawns, fountains and a black and gold iron fence surround the memorial. A plaque on the East flank of the monument reads: *"Peuple Togolais par ta foi et ton courage une nation est*

*née*" (Togolese people, because of your courage, a nation is born). This monument was created to celebrate Togo's freedom from a century of colonization and to rejoice in her right to finally govern herself. However, the height of this memorial measures far less than the Hotel 2 Février (now called Radisson Blu Hotel 2 Février), which sits at an angle behind it. The Hotel 2 Février, a 334-foot six-star hotel, sits as a tribute to Gnassingbé Eyadéma's governance and literally dwarfs Paul Ahyi's memorial to independence.

The date of February 2<sup>nd</sup> has no real significance in the annals of Togolese history, but it was of great importance to Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who honored certain days with events, monuments, and paraphernalia of any type as expressions of his own greatness. However, research reveals that on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1974—two weeks after he miraculously survived the famous January 24<sup>th</sup> plane crash while on a visit to the northern city of Kara—Gnassingbé nationalized the phosphate industry based on his suspicions of a foreign plot against his government. Because of the size and magnificence of the hotel, the *Monument à l'Indépendance* has been relegated to a simple curiosity and is considered with some indifference by most Togolese people who are more preoccupied with down-to-earth concerns such as surviving day to day. The erection of the hotel seems to show that Independence itself had been crushed under the feet of the dictatorship, and that all the ideals of solidarity, unity, and closeness it represented were dissolved by the self-aggrandizement of one man.



Other outdoor sculptures and statues created by Ahyi can be found on buildings and in parks throughout Togo, as well as on the international scene (the Vatican, Senegal, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and South Korea). He also made pieces that have more practical uses: jewelry, pottery, ceramics, and tapestries. Ahyi furthermore worked as an interior designer creating household objects and more accessible art pieces for the general public. In recognition of Ahyi's efforts to contribute to a national culture based on humanistic principles of peace and human harmony, Irina Bokova, the director-general of UNESCO stated that Ahyi's death in 2010 was "a great loss for Togo and Africa and also for UNESCO, which had appointed him as one of its advocates for "peace and social cohesion." <sup>1</sup>

But beyond the plastic arts, Ahyi also expressed his love of people and country through his various publications on art, but more specifically through his poetry. Though he only left one publication of his verses, his forty-six poems gathered in one simple book are further testimonials of the beliefs he had in his nation's greatness. It is said that he had been working on this book of poetry since his days at the university in the 1950s; however, this literary collection did not become public until 2008. The late publication of Ahyi's poetry could be because, like most authors, he feared censorship, exile, or more severe punishment for denouncing the state of affairs of Togo during the

thirty-eight years (1967-2005) of Gnassingbé Eyadéma's dictatorship. An expression of resistance against this brutal dictatorship, Ahyi's poems have now become an important expression of a people deeply committed to centering itself once again, hoping to reclaim an identity interrupted by the Eyadéma regime.

### **African Philosophy of Self-Discovery and Self-Determination as Inspiration**

As stated above, Ahyi's vision of what constituted Togolese identity had various sources: traditions, his childhood setting in the Dahomey palace of his childhood, and the influence of his friends involved in international arts and literature. His book of poetry, *"Togo, mon coeur saigne"* (2008), displays both the artist's monumental views on art as well as the expression of a more intimate sense of searching for his and his people's self-worth and identity. In more than one way, his poems echo the national malaise that had been kept silent for years. This is made especially clear in the introduction to the book of poems, the first sentence of which reports a conversation with other expatriates (represented by an anonymous "toi") whom he meets in France: *"Allo! Cher ami comment va ton pays?"* Ahyi's response is a learned and politically committed explanation about the struggles of all black nations to overcome the difficulties inherited from colonialism and post-colonialism. Articulating his pan-Africanist sentiments, he talks about the common fight for freedom that all blacks (*"les nègres," les "colonisés," les "bico," les "beurres," les "communistes," les "malgaches," les "Haïtiens"*) must carry out by "sticking together."

Such preoccupations with solidarity were the result of conversations taking place even before the time of the independence of Africa in the 1960s. African philosophers of diverse backgrounds questioned even further and with more acuity the meaning of their existence, their future, and their identity. These preoccupations found their momentum in the writings of authors whose main goal was to help bring forward the imperative to rebuild their nations and to redefine them. One such philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appia, whom I discuss in my introduction, approaches the concept of African identity by making a distinction between the concepts of race and culture. For Appia, the definition of race—which has been in constant revision since the time of the ancient Greeks and throughout history—generally ends up depicting Africans as devoid of culture, as inferior beings who only became significant in the nineteenth century thanks to colonization. Appia reminds us that Africans never called themselves “Africans,” much less blacks. Rather, they have viewed their worlds in terms of the cultural differences between ethnic groups, as well as their connections to nature and to each other (Appia, 1992:12). Appia explains that Africans have a good deal less in common culturally than is assumed, but they have always cultivated one form of connection or another through the ages whether good (trade) or negative (warfare, occupation, slavery.)

Although popular belief persists in the belief that there is only one universal form of thinking known as “unanimism” in Africa (Appia, 1992:24), it is, in reality, hard to define a true unifying cultural link amongst the many tribes, languages, and geographical settings of the continent. For his part, contemporary Kenyan historian Ngugi wa Thiong’o argues that the notion of blackness and skin color in general as we know it, was not a concept in early African societies, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa

(*Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. 2009). The idea of Africa (which took its name from the small town of Ifrika in today's Tunisia) as a continent did not become a reality until the arrival of the first Europeans in the time of the "great discoveries." Adding to the above discussion, Congolese philosopher and professor V.Y. Mudimbe (*The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. 1988) elaborates on this topic by arguing for the constructed nature of Otherness or difference:

"All cultural figures determine their own specificity in apparently regional ruptures and continuities, whereby the otherness of their being appears as dynamic event, and thus history . . . [A]ll histories deploy in effect the dispersion of the violence of the Same, which from the solid grounding in the present, invents, restores, or endows meaning to the Other in a past or in geographically remote synchronic cultures" (P. 195).

Mudimbe refers here to the rich cultural, historical, and geographical diversity that exists on the African continent. The differentiation of peoples should be based on the uniqueness that stems from being so diversified; it should be based on the singularity of each groups' social practices instead of basing it on geographical closeness. While there might be similarities, there are enough differences among peoples to warrant a close look at each individual assemblage (their own specificity in their regional ruptures and continuities) as humans evolving in their own space without any emphatic imposition of a "one-size-fit-all" definition. Mudimbe seems in the last part of this quote to critique the modern efforts to define the "Other's" identity. Through the "violence of the same," meaning is imposed on the "Other," one based on fictive

constructions that deny differences and create fictive pasts and places whose creative clues are change (synchronic). Modern African cultural identity, as we have come to know it, is a construct from a Westernized matrix which has depicted a continent devoid of history and a proper identity except that which was imposed upon them by colonization. Since Independence came to them, Africans have been reclaiming this Identity. Togo is no exception and Paul Ahyi's contribution clearly marks this.

### **How Ahyi's Poems Articulate African Philosophy on Identity**

While Ahyi's work overall strives to paint Togolese identity and its inscription in Africa's greater canvas of humanity, it is important to remember that one of the premises of "*Togo, mon mœur saigne*" is to bear witness to the social-political atmosphere that had been evolving for the three decades of Gnassingbé Eyadéma's dictatorship. We remember that there are forty-six poems whose themes range from love (between man and woman, the general idea of love, or brotherly love) to issues surrounding political turmoil, reconciliation, and national and universal (African) unity. His literary endeavors, as well as the ensemble of his work, earned Ahyi the *Gong de CAPAR* Award on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008, which he received at his home. This award was created by the *Cercle de l'Apologie Artistique*, an International organization created in 1995 by the following nations (and has been active from 2004 to the present): Togo, Burkina Faso, France, Tchad, Portugal, Venezuela, Vietnam, Ukraine, Cameroun, Mali, and Canada. The prize rewards all who contribute to the development of peace, prosperity, and the advancement of people not only within their own country, but also to

the world. Recipients of this award are given the honorific title of "King." Ahyi was given the award in recognition for his contribution to his country's progress regardless of the political pitfalls. This significance of this award is made clear through the analysis of some of the artist's poems—poetry which is borne of desperation, disenchantment, and disbelief in the face of the waste and is made of the sacrifices that had led Togo to Independence, which had become an object of ridicule under Gnassingbé. In his poems, and in his art in general, Ahyi takes a stance against the vagaries of the dictatorship while aspiring to a greater Pan-Africanism, which could help galvanize his own people once again. Because of this, Paul Ahyi is considered somewhat of a militant who, despite his European-based education, never forgot his roots—especially the noble Dahoméen ancestors in whose palace he spent his childhood—nor his destiny and the role he was called to play in greater Africa.

Some of the poem's titles are evocative of his foreign experiences, his travels, and all that he witnessed. The poems reflect hope coupled with despair, the brevity of time, the peasant who toils a merciless land, the belief in God (though sometimes his Magnificence seems far away), the swaying of that belief in God, change and the need for change, and the need for improving humanity's living condition around the world, especially in Togo. Some of the titles of his poems speak for themselves: *Le vent du changement souffle*; *La fleur assassinée*; *On peut gâcher tant d'avenir*; *N'DEYE KOUMBA: A toi mon églogue*. Two of Ahyi's poems, which I reproduce here, demonstrate the artist's sentiments, which I mention above: *Une Mauvaise Herbe* and *Mon Peuple Debout*. While the first poem is short and makes us think of a man at the end of his rope, hanging on to one last instance of hope, the second—longer—poem

has a more universal appeal, a call to arms to all Togolese people, but also to all blacks who need to remember their worth, their glorious past, and their ancestors to overcome all mistreatment, all discrimination, and all abuse. *Mon Peuple Debout* is reminiscent of another "call to arms" by Haitian writer Jacques Roumain in *Sales Nègres* (1945), but with a less political overtone. After analyzing Ahyi's poems, I will briefly discuss Roumain's poem written in 1945.

The theme of overwhelming adversity is understood in the line: "*Car l'Africain nouveau est en marche... C'est aujourd'hui que comme/ ton avenir, ce future plein de promesses*" (lines 25-28.) Ahyi calls for a time of unrivaled unity, sense of identity and togetherness: *Debout l'Afrique qui est une et indivisible* (line 15) He calls for all to overcome the forces which aimed—and still try—to put a wedge between the sons of the land who were called to be brothers from time immemorial: "*Finies les manoeuvres sournoises pour diviser!*" (line 17) Africa is no one's puppet, he claims in line nineteen. For Ahyi, the future is one in which African culture is held in esteem and where all its people can march victorious towards the sun in love and harmony, their heads held up high.

Nonetheless, as many have acknowledged, Togo is the embodiment of a country in which diverse groups have integrated peacefully. It has learned to ally its varied past with contemporary sensibilities. Togolese people first define themselves as part of humanity, then as Africans belonging to a patchwork and network of humans with various characteristics, then as Togolese. Edouard Glissant's theory on the dislocation of people (*Poétique de la Relation*. 1990) might not apply in the case of colonized Africa, but the hybridity of cultures within Togo and contemporary Africa more broadly

attests to the need for revisiting pre-conceived notions about the continent, its people and the nature—singular or hybrid—of its contributions to a world ethos.

All the same, as the introduction to *“Togo, mon coeur saigne”* suggests, Ahyi believed that Africa required at least the feeling of cultural unity. During the fictive conversation with the anonymous “toi” discussed earlier, Ahyi recalls the great men who fought for the independence of their respective countries. He remembers the glorious promises and hopes that self-governance would bring, and had brought in some cases, but that in many others had become an illusion. He declares that :

*Aujourd’hui, l’Afrique, leur Afrique, notre Afrique est devenue le pays où l’on tue, pille, et assassine sans vergogne. Nous voyons que les fauves ont changé de place. Ils sont maintenant dans nos villes fumant de gros cigares et entourés d’escortes armés de kalachnikov et de bazooka qui leur garantissent le déplacement. Notre Afrique dont les habitants délogés par des guerres qu’ils n’ont pas allumées errent à travers monts et clairières sur des chemins tortueux avec leurs baluchons sur la tête à la recherche d’un refuge... Voilà des images navrantes que l’africain d’aujourd’hui offre à l’Afrique nouvelle... Cela doit changer. Cette Afrique qui nous est offerte n’était pas la nôtre. (p.27)*

In the above passage, Ahyi complains about the disastrous outcomes of internecine wars in which people are displaced, starved to death, and dehumanized. This Africa is not "his" Africa. He laments this because blacks have lost their way, their sense of togetherness, and their sense of self. Essentially, they have lost their identity.

In response, he claims that this is not "*notre Afrique*," and he envisions an Africa that is free, not only from its former colonizers, but also from the legacies of prejudices that have resulted from colonization, legacies that have created wars and rivalries, pockets of self-doubt, prejudices, and even self-loathing within the continent. Because of this, Ahyi visualizes Africa not as a continent, but as a country ("*pays*") still engaged in a common struggle for self-determination and for the realization of what he refers to as "*notre Afrique*."

Thus hope is never far. My copy of Ahyi's book of poetry bares a handwritten dedication from the author to his son that says the following: *A mon fils Claude très attentif à la mutation de notre Nation, je dis courage. Demain sera un autre jour.* The author never stops believing that black people as a group would, without violence, develop strategies that would not only propel each nation to greater heights, but also restore the dignity and identity of all oppressed people:

*...Il faut du cœur pour poursuivre  
la route sans rancune,  
Mon frère tu n'as pas choisi le lieu de ta naissance  
Donne-moi ta main et marchons.  
Mon seul désir: enrichis-moi de ta différence...  
(Togo mon Coeur Saigne - back cover)*

Ahyi thus balances his sentiments between his love for his country and that of the continent, constantly reminding his citizens to fight the good fight, to always aim higher by keeping faith and hope. Though he is appalled by the machinations of a dictatorship

which had become progressively more repressive and brutal, he continues to plead for a renewal of spirit and faith in a Togo which was witnessing "political delinquency," military barbarism, lies, and pillaging at the hands of an infernal system. Ahyi's own cultural background helps us to understand the author's love and concerns for his country, but also how he viewed himself and the role he was meant to play in defining his nation. His poems reflect his concern for his fellow Togolese, for the peasant, and for hard working black people not only in Africa, but also throughout the world.

In the first poem *Une Mauvaise Herbe*, we are given insight into the author's own emotions regarding the failures of African independence, and especially the violence and repression of the Eyadéma regime. The point of departure to understanding this elegy is the title itself. Literally translated, the words mean "a bad grass," but are usually translated into English as "weeds." In contemporary French, this term is often used to explain a person's temperament: bad disposition or overall bad manners. However, going back to the Bible, Jesus often refers to reaping the good wheat after having discarded the bad seeds (the chafe). In French, this is referred to as "*détruire la mauvaise herbe*." Christians began to attribute this Biblical reference to any unchristian-like behavior.

All of these meanings are alluded to in the polyvalent title, *Une Mauvaise Herbe*. In the poem, Ahyi seems to be trying to rid himself of a disgusting inheritance, a physical defect, and an organic sensation by pointing out that it is not in fact natural or necessary, but created by a social condition. This social environment has brought about a mixed bag of sensations: at first defeatism, loathing, and disgust ("*le peu de moi/qui demeure homme*"); then pure hatred from which he tries to extricate himself ("*extirper*

*de ma chair la haine*”). The poem metaphorically describes the disgust he feels for the political situation that he is witnessing. The poem diametrically opposes two sets of feelings: hatred and love, life and death. The general mood is one of being overwhelmed by a hatred that is a response to surrounding events. He needs to excise (“*extirper*”) this emotion, which threatens to overtake him; otherwise, this will prevent him from reconciliation “*avec moi-même.*”

Ahyi expresses these emotions poetically. He wants to become a better human being and rid himself of hatred for all things negative that pull him towards revenge (“...*extirper de ma chair la haine. J’ai soif d’amour et de chaleur humaine*”). Because we know that this poem is written during the harsher times of the dictatorship, we can venture to say that given the trying times under Eyadéma, Ahyi might have thought it easier to give into the very human sentiment of reclaiming his life, his joy, and his peace through violence. But this poem urges all who read it to do the opposite. It proposes instead that only love, truth, and humanity is the right and only answer. Giving into anger, or the need to exact revenge, would only result in creating more violence, and, just like bad seeds, vengeance grows even in the driest of place like tumbleweed. The best attitude is love, peace, and to remain humane.

hough written in one long strophe, there are clearly two separate moments, and the sound of the words used in each gives a different accent to the sentiments expressed. In the first part of *Une Mauvaise Herbe*, from line 1 to line 8, the hard staccato of the letters *v*, *p*, *c*, *q*, *d*, and *r* marks the virulence of anger, as if the author is about to regurgitate all of humanity before he succumbs to negative emotions. The presence of the *f* in the word “*souffle*” (breath) barely holds the first part of the poem

together, enhancing the virulence of the feelings the author is trying to convey. Rage permeates through the sound of the word “*rattache*” (used here to mean “holds me to the human race”). With such flaming intensity, the outcome—which begins in line nine of the poem—is a welcomed, yet tentative contrast. First because of the brevity of the line, then because of the quiet intimacy of comfort that it conveys: “*Cher ami*” (dear friend).

The remainder of the poem reads like a conversation through which a moral lesson is learned, and at no point in the poem is the reason for the rage of the first part of the poem concretely explained. Yet, the lesson is poignant—the tone of the words like a calming water fountain in comparison with the violent mood of the beginning. The predominance of the *j*, *n*, *an*, *s*, *m* and *eu* sounds gives the impression of a wind blowing away the anger expressed at the beginning: “*Avec le peu de souffle qui me rattache aux vivants.*” While these lines offer a calm philosophy of the reality of the human world, the final words do not resolve the tension, but acknowledge the possibility that cycles of vengeance and hatred may never end because “*la vengeance/est une mauvaise herbe qui pousse/meme sur le rocher aride.*”

*Une Mauvaise Herbe* signifies the general feeling of many Togolese during the time of the dictatorship—feelings of hatred and vengeance against the dictatorship and its supporters that Ahyi tries to overcome and to rise above. It has been reported that during the time of Gnassingbé Eyadéma’s government (especially after the 1974 plane crash in which very few survived), government crackdown had become even more difficult to sustain. The nation had been stripped of many of its rights, especially the right to assembly, the right to hold meetings, the right to free speech, and many more.

People had started to fear one another; even family members were sometimes held at arm's length for fear of reprisals or revenge. There was much abuse of power at the time. National unity and Togolese identity were difficult, moreover, unthinkable concepts. For the most part, people "muddled" through during those years, especially the poor.

### **Comparing Ahyi to Other Francophone African Authors**

Togolese identity has from the beginning always been a national preoccupation. The plurality of Togo's background (the various occupiers and colonial forces as well as the numerous ethnic groups) has pushed Togo to work hard at truly defining itself as a nation as it is with any multiethnic nation. However, with Ahyi, a shift occurs, because for the first time in the modern era, an author represents the Togolese people, truly uniting in the realization that they are one people. This was a moment that resisted Gnassingbé's own efforts to promote and integrate the nation as symbols of his own power. Ahyi's poem, *Une Mauvaise Herbe* truly reflects what the Togolese felt during the thirty-eight years of Eyadéma's rule: anger, fear, caution, and helplessness.

Ahyi's poem also suggests that these emotions paradoxically helped the Togolese to no longer see themselves as alone but as part of a world, members of a vast continent fighting similar battles. From 1960 to 1978, African nations were coming into their own, reclaiming their lands and territories. However, many of the newfound freedoms of some countries of francophone Africa (e.g. Gabon, Tchad, Niger) were suppressed by dictatorships almost immediately. Ahyi addresses the universal Africa that is suffering from this type of disaster by keeping the dialogue in *Une Mauvaise*

*Herbe* anonymous, and by simply conjuring more positive thinking. Thus, it is safe to assume that Ahyi's poetry reflects the "universal human emotion" first proposed by Couchoro in his novel *L'Esclave*.

The second poem that I will discuss in this chapter, "*Mon peuple debout*" reads as a patriotic call addressing the Togolese nation itself. Yet, in addressing the poem to "*Mon peuple*," Ahyi in fact appeals not only to his country, but also to all people who have become victims of their governments. "*Debout*" (stand) is the order that Ahyi gives to all his people—to stand up for what they believe in, to stand against tyranny, and to stand against whatever oppresses them. He calls on one and all to be proud, to have dignity, to count, and to show that they know who they are, and that they have an identity. The poem echoes the philosophy of Pan-Africanism so dear to Ahyi because it is both exclusive (addressing only the Togolese) and inclusive (calling upon all Africans).

All the major ethnic groups of Togo, and Africa, are summoned in lines one and two. The "*nègre*" is all of those who toil under the hot sun in any African country on the vast continent. When Ahyi uses the word "*noir*" instead, he is addressing the Westernized African worker, or those of African origins who have lived other experiences and have been cut from Mother Africa for a long time. The "*nègre*" can also be any dark-skinned person who feels rejected, dejected, or forgotten, while a "*noir*" could simply be referring to a non-white individual. A "*métis*" could be anyone of mixed origin, of Togolese ancestry, or all the Africans from the Northern African Maghreb. At any rate, in calling to all whose ancestry is in Africa, Ahyi pleads for courage and determination, reminding them that only strength and intelligence are the individual's

constant weapons to forge forward. Ahyi calls to all whose heart claims Africa as home to stand up and not only defend her (*“Finies les manœuvres sournoises pour diviser”*), but rebuild her (*“Ton avenir, ce future plein de promesses”*); to get educated (*“Arme-toi du savoir”*) and to be proud as Africans (*“Ensemble comme un rocher/ Le regard haut dans la direction du soleil”*). Ahyi’s poem responds to the way that colonization and the firm denial of African history on the part of Western colonizers; Africa’s history is greatly unknown, even to Africans themselves. In forgetting their history, Africans have forgotten who they are; they have exchanged their ancestral identity for that of the colonizer, full of prejudices and racism. Ahyi calls upon Africans then to *“Brise les remparts... de la honte raciale et de l’infortune/ Marche la tête haute.”* Unfortunately, this emphasis calls for some violence : *“Arme-toi s’il le faut de bazooka.”* *“S’il le faut”* means "if necessary." As stated previously, Togo saw very little bloodshed during its fight for Independence, unlike countries such as Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, and Tchad. This is because Togo was more a protectorate than a colony, though the French ruled over her as if a colony. Ahyi’s call to unite all who suffer from the weight of oppression no matter the degree of the domination nonetheless keeps open the possibility that violence might be a necessary evil to redress the wrongs of the past.

In the second stanza, Ahyi demands that Africans be proud of their race, that they cease being ashamed of being black. He implies that colonization, slavery apartheid, and structures of racialized inequality which contributed to the marginalization of blacks on their own land are now a thing of the past: *“car l’Afrique nouveau est en marche.”* In the repetition of the word *“fini”* in the second stanza, Ahyi calls on Africans to leave behind the rifts and armed conflicts between blacks

themselves, and to leave behind the self-loathing, self-hatred, and self-doubts created by European colonizers and settlers who practiced the art of divide and conquer (“*les manoeuvres surnoises*”) by blatantly favoring lighter-skinned Africans, instilling in them a sense of superiority, and of inferiority in the others.

Ahyi’s approach to this problem shows the influence of Ahyi’s friend—the Senegalese historian, anthropologist, physicist, and politician Cheikh Anta Diop. Through his work, especially in his 1954 work, *Nations Nègres et Culture*, and in *Evolution of the Negro World*, Diop argued that there was a shared cultural continuity across African peoples that was more important than the existence of different ethnic groups who, over time, had developed different languages and cultures. Ahyi’s poem reflects aspects of Diop’s work on proving the origins of humanity from within Africa. Ahyi reshapes Diop’s critique of European concepts of African identity into the words of a militant call: “*Ouvre les frontières, brise les remparts/ Ces remparts de la honte raciale et de l’infortune. Marche la tête haute.*” While Diop’s work mainly focused on an Afro-centric anthropological research, Ahyi’s talent aims at making an artistic statement that will bring Africans back to themselves. The atmosphere created by the poem is like a gathering song, which has greater resonance today more than ever.

Though it could be argued that the structure of this poem seems haphazard, “*Mon people debout*” in fact participates, formally and thematically, in a tradition of mid-century pan-Africanist militant poetry well-represented by Haitian writer Jacques Roumain’s poem “*Salut Nègres*”—another poem reflective of its author’s political commitments as well as his love for humanity. Roumain was a prolific writer who is mostly known for his 1944 novel “*Gouverneurs de la Rosée.*” Notably, Roumain

established the Haitian Communist Party in 1934. From then on, his life was at the service of the interlinked socialist and anti-colonial cause, whose revolutionary outcry he expressed through his writing. In his works, Roumain thus aimed at using the power of language to reflect on the plight of those still under the throes of colonialism, or suffering under the dictatorship of capitalism; and in short Roumain was preoccupied by all the complex dialectical social relationships which governed the world in his day. Roumain's "*Sales Nègres*" is a long freestyle elegy. I will only reproduce a portion, in English, to help compare the emotions, the theme, and the goal of "*Sales Nègres*" to Ahyi's "*Mon Peuple Debout.*" The left column is Roumain's "*Sales Nègres,*" and the right column is Ahyi's "*Mon Peuple Debout.*"

All right, here it is;	Eh bien voilà ;
Us others	nous autres
The negroes	les nègres
The niggers	les niggers
The dirty negroes	les sales nègres
Won't take it anymore	nous n'acceptons plus
That's it	c'est simple
Finished	fini
Being in Africa	d'être en Afrique
In America	en Amérique
Your negroes	vos nègres
Your dirty negroes	vos niggers
We don't take it anymore	vos sales nègres
That amazes you?	nous n'acceptons plus
We say: yessuh	ça vous étonne
While we polish your boots	de dire : oui missié
Oui mon père	en cirant vos bottes
To the white missionaries	oui mon pé
Or master,	aux missionnaires blancs
While we work your	ou maître
Sugar cane	en récoltant pour vous
Your coffee	la canne à sucre
Your cotton	le café

Your peanuts	le coton
In Africa	l'arachide
In America	en Afrique
Like good negroes	en Amérique
Like poor negroes	en bons nègres
Like dirty negroes	en pauvres nègres
That we were	que nous étions
That we won't be anymore	que nous ne serons plus
That's through, you'll see soon enough	Fini vous verrez bien
Our yes Sir	nos yes Sir
Oui blanc	oui blanc
Si Señor	si Senor
And	et
Attention ! Soldier	garde à vous, tirailleur
Oui, mon Commandant,	oui, mon commandant,
When they order us	quand on nous donnera l'ordre
To machine gun our Arab brothers	de mitrailler nos frère Arabes
In Syria	en Syrie
In Tunisia	en Tunisie
In Morocco	au Maroc
And our white comrades striking	et nos camarades blancs grévistes
Starving	crevant de faim
Beaten	opprimés
Plundered	spoliés
Despised like us	méprisés comme nous
The negroes	les nègres
The niggers	les niggers
The dirty negroes	les sales nègres
.....	.....

Though I only reproduced a portion of the poem “*Sales Nègres*,” Roumain’s words are all about breaking with a status quo that has oppressed and violated the rights of people marginalized because of the color of their skin or their class position. Mankind, as represented by the blacks—the “dirty Negroes” formerly in the role of vile submissive servants—have now revolted and stand firm against their persecutors, arm-

in-arm with others who are victims in the same condition. The overall emotion in Roumain's poem is combative, and the language is strong. When read out loud, whether in French or English, the overall result gives the impression of a fight. Carolyn Fowler, in her book *A Knot in the Thread* (1945) about Jacques Roumain's work, agrees that "*Sales Nègres*," though furious in its outcome, is the manifestation of sentiments that exhibit a shift occurring at the time Roumain was writing the poem.

Published in 1945, "*Sales Nègres*" is thus an international hymn for the anti-colonial movement. It is a virulent tirade against humiliation and exploitation, and it calls upon all blacks from Africa, the Americas, and all oppressed people (including Arabs and Southeast Asians) to resist the humiliation and exploitation of colonialism. One single strong word links the two poems: "*Debout*" (stand). But while Ahyi's poem is a militant call to his black brothers to awaken to all their possibilities, his poem in general has a less eruptive tone. Ahyi is not a Marxist. He addresses only his black brothers and, more emphatically, his African brothers. Roumain involves all victims of oppression, even "white strikers." Despite their different historical contexts and political orientations, both poems call for a new international brotherhood that would work towards changing living conditions for all and creating a more just world in which everyone would become proud citizens of the world once again.

There are other examples closer to Ahyi's time and space that also relate more closely to the poet's national and universal goals and aspirations. Senegalese writer Camara Laye in "*L'Enfant Noir*" (1954) speaks to the failed pedagogy of Europeans in trying to make Europe the ancestral home of Africa, which effaces an African universe based on symbolism and rituals. In his novel, Laye represents coming of age rites like

the ceremony of the lions, which takes the boy at age twelve, on the journey from childhood to adulthood. In the ceremony of the lions, the boys must learn to face their fears and master themselves. Not long after, the protagonist of the novel must leave his village to attend the *Ecole George Poriet* in the capital of Guinea, Conakry, where European ideas will compete with and often crowd out the African knowledge the boy has acquired.

Similarly, Donato Ndongo of Equatorial Guinea explores the theme of revisiting childhood memories and giving prominence to culture in his novel *Las Tinieblas de tu Memoria Negra* [*The Shadows of your Black Memory*] (1987). The protagonist of this novel rejects his western life and relives his childhood through recollecting all the cultural traditions of his village. The poignancy of both Laye's novel and Ndongo's *Las Tinieblas de Tu Memoria Negra* is found in their representation of a universal African experience, a search for self, and the quest for identity within the treacherous realm of colonialism and its aftermaths.

### **Togo's Universality**

What Togo has managed to achieve in developing its own version of cultural identity is to understand that while it functions as a nation, it is part of a greater whole. For a while, European condescendence had dubbed the nation the "Switzerland" of Africa (mostly because of favorable banking practices in the 1970s and 80s). Togolese identity resides in the acceptance of its plurality as so aptly presented by one of Paul Ahyi's last poems: "*Je t'aime tel que tu es, mon pays*":

*Je t'aime tel que tu es mon pays*  
*Fragile comme la liberté*  
*Vague comme la vague chargée d'espérance*  
*Etendu, efficace comme un amour*  
*Tant que je vivrai*  
*Mon cœur ne cessera de t'aimer.*  
*O ma chère patrie (p.135).*

Ahyi's life, his pan-Africanism, and his European experiences are a reflection of how Togo's people have learned to ally their love of nation with its flaws and weaknesses with an understanding that humanity is universal. Basing our understanding of Togolese identity on the readings of Ahyi's poetry, I venture to say that Togolese people recognize that though their souls will always be defined by the boundaries of the culture that gave of their birth, they are also part of something greater than their immediate geographical space—they are part of a global humanity. Just as Couchoro stated in his epigraph:

*La passion n'a besoin pour naître, que du cœur de l'homme (Felix Couchoro. L'Esclave, Préface, 1929).*



Monument de la fraternité entre les allemands et les togolais représentant une femme allemande à gauche et une femme noire à droite.

**Footnote:**

- 1- <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=33421#.WS1-bxPytsM>
- 2- [http://www.ipsos.co.ke/NEWBASE\\_EXPORTS/Standard%20Chartered%20Bank2/150626\\_The%20Star%20-%20Friday\\_41\\_9b9ce.xml](http://www.ipsos.co.ke/NEWBASE_EXPORTS/Standard%20Chartered%20Bank2/150626_The%20Star%20-%20Friday_41_9b9ce.xml)

## Conclusion

### **What The Future Holds for Togo**

Togo is still relatively unknown to the world. Throughout its history, Togo has quietly developed in many areas, and at times, it has even been the pioneer in implementing certain technologies, economic changes, and policies in West Africa. Togo is the primary commercial and trade center of the region. The country has been a member of the United Nations since September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1960 and in 2010 it became head of the *Conseil de Sécurité* of the organization. It is a member of ECA (the Economic Commission for Africa) and several non-regional specialized agencies, such as the World Bank. Togo is also member of important African bank consortium, some of which have their headquarters in Lomé.

In environmental cooperation, Togo is part of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Kyoto Protocol, among others. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports that in 2005 Togo's gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated at \$9.0 billion. In that same year, the nation's per capita GDP was estimated at \$1,600. The annual growth rate of GDP was estimated at 2.8%. The average inflation rate in 2005 was 5.5%. It was estimated that agriculture accounted for 39.5% of GDP, industry 20.4%, and services 40.1%. Togo's labor force in 2002 (the latest year for which data was available) was estimated at two million. In 1998, about 65% of the labor force engaged in agriculture, 30% in services, and 5% in industry. Most families engage in subsistence farming. Data on unemployment in Togo was not available.

Togo is predominantly an agricultural country, with about four-fifths of the workforce engaged in farming. Approximately 12% of the land area is arable. Most food crops are produced by subsistence farmers who operate on family farms of less than 3 hectares (7 acres). Peanuts and sorghum are grown in the extreme north; sorghum, yams, and cotton in the region around Niamtougou; sorghum, cotton, and corn in the central region; coffee, cocoa, and cotton in the southern plateau; and manioc, corn, and copra near the coast. Agriculture accounted for about 39.5% of the GDP in 2003. The National Institute of Scientific Research, founded in 1965 at Lomé, is the central scientific coordinating body.

Several French research institutes have branches in the capital, and there are pilot farm projects throughout the country. The University of Benin at Lomé maintains faculties of sciences and medicine and schools of engineering and agriculture. Togo also has an agricultural school at Kpalimé and a technical college at Sokodá. In 1987–97, science and engineering students accounted for 35% of college and university enrollments. In the same period, expenditures for research and development totaled 0.5% of GNP. For the period 1990–2001, there were an estimated 102 scientists and engineers, and 65 technicians engaged in research and development per million people. High technology exports in 2002 were valued at \$1 million, accounting for 1% of the country's manufactured exports.

The Togolese are among the most active traders on the West African coast, with much of the domestic trade handled by women. The national trade organization, *Société Nationale de Commerce* (SONACOM), has a monopoly on importation and distribution of soaps, cereals, sugar, salt, and industrial products, but there is still a

flourishing free market both within Togo and with neighboring countries. Togo is a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), whose development fund is in Lomé. The country is also a member of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). Affiliated with the UEMOA is the West African Development Bank, also based in Lomé.

In 2001, about 2% of children between the ages of three and five were enrolled in some type of preschool program. Primary school enrollment in 2003 was estimated at about 91% of age-eligible students. In 2000, secondary school enrollment was about 26.6% of age-eligible students. It is estimated that about 77.8% of all students complete their primary education. The student-to-teacher ratio for primary school was at about 34:1 in 2000; the ratio for secondary school was about 31:1. In 2000, private schools accounted for about 40% of primary school enrollment and 18% of secondary enrollment. The National Library in Lomé has a collection of approximately 18,000 volumes. The University of Lomé Library offers some library services to the public. There is a public library with 26 service points holding a total of 63,000 volumes. The National Museum, founded in Lomé in 1975, has ethnography, history, and art exhibits. There are regional museums in Aného, Kara, Savanes, and Sokode.

Until the year 2000, the government was the sole proprietor of the only major television station as well as the primary radio stations. The radio network presents programs in French, English, and local languages. Television service, broadcast in French and local languages, began in 1973. Since 2007, several dozen private radio stations and a few community radio stations transmit multiple international broadcast stations. Two state-owned TV stations with multiple transmission sites, five private TV

stations broadcast locally, and cable TV service is available. Private media in Togo has proliferated, with dozens of commercial and community radio stations as well as a handful of private TV stations in operation. Radio is the most popular medium, particularly in rural areas. The main TV station is the government-owned *Television Togolaise*. Togo is opening to the world. Radio services such as the *BBC World Service*, *Radio France Internationale*, Gabon's *Africa No. 1* are also available for free. There are no known government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitors e-mail or Internet chat rooms without judicial oversight. *The Journal Officiel de la République du Togo* is published daily in Lomé; another Lomé daily, *Togo-Presses*—published in French and *Ewe*—had a circulation of 15,000 in 1999. Both are government owned. In 2005, there were at least six privately owned weekly papers.

Most importantly, the constitution of Togo provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, though the current government is said to generally respect these rights, it has on one occasion intimidated journalists through threats, detention, and other persecution. Opposition media are tolerated, though sometimes censored or prevented access to information.

On November 17th, 2014, in a message written to the Washington Post, Faure Gnassingbé wrote the following message: "My country, the Togolese republic, may be small, but we are strategically located, and our people and strong vision for the future make us an important leader and valued partner to our neighbors." Since 2011, the government's plan of action to revamp the nation's economic structures also affected changes in the area of art. In literature, the government recognized that books—high

literature in particular—help preserve, promote, and expand cultural identity and culture in general. This was a breakthrough given that since its independence, Togo's people have been preoccupied with more esoteric preoccupations—i.e. getting a job and feeding one's family.

Though education is more widespread, most Togolese think of literature as irrelevant and unequal to the sciences, politics, and trade. In their understanding, a formation in these fields not only guarantee a good job, but also answer the needs of a people still struggling with being an emerging economy. Nonetheless, among the strategic steps the government has started implementing to help literature is a tax reduction on imported books. Togo also plans to create literary awards, celebrate local authors' international awards, train librarians and archivists, and develop children's taste early for local literary production. All these measures would encourage a more receptive audience and local literary production would be greatly enhanced.

Despite these efforts, literary agents of all categories (editors, critics, writers, etc.) are still disheartened by the lack of progress and apparent indifference they feel their works are experiencing. This lack of interest is aptly reflected in the thoughts shared by the associate editor at the publishing house *Graines de Pensées*, Yasmin Issaka Coubageat. According to her, one of the major obstacles to the diffusion and propagation of literary productions within Togo comes from the bookstores and librarians themselves who do nothing to promote or give their fair worth to these works. Locally, there is little interest in the creativity of those involved in the world of art, literature, or others. As an editorial company, *Graines de Pensées* only produces about twelve books a year. Though the works the company puts out vary on the theme,

audience, and genre, public reception is lukewarm and sparse, and “*ça c’est très décourageant*,” says Ms. Issaka.

Yet, there is still the need to write and to tell stories. The editorial enterprise holds periodic workshops on creative writing and has had great success in that area. Nonetheless, literary works only find their success if and only if the author has worked elsewhere and gained public recognition first. “*Aucun auteur togolais peut vivre seulement de son art*,” says Ms. Issaka. Another major obstacle to the fruition of Togolese literature is the lack of interest in reading altogether. Togo is one of the leading nations in the West region of Africa to promote literacy, reading, and writing, but literature is not the priority. Bookstores are more interested in buying school books which will give them a quicker profit.

To this, Kangni Alem adds that the problem goes further than simply promoting books. In his view, Togolese literature lacks the means that could help a literary culture flourish. The support of teachers in high schools as well as specific state superstructures that would allow for a cultural space of exchange and knowledge are scarce. “*La réceptivité littéraire nous fait défaut. Aucun journaliste n’a jamais écrit un article sur aucune œuvre littéraire (roman, théâtre) ou même sur un auteur. La presse doit s’ouvrir un peu vers d’autres horizons et voir autres choses que la politique*,” says Alem.

There is, however, hope that the new generation of writers will help create more interest in literature. The works compiled by today’s Togolese writers are likely to appeal to a greater public in search of finding itself in the books published nowadays. One such

author, Reine Lawson-Body Laparra, has drawn from her experiences as a former employee of the now defunct Air Afrique to depict how socio-political decisions can negatively impact individual lives. Her book bares a long title, but no other heading could be more apt at summarizing the author's sentiments: *Travers de Sociétés, Colère et Inquiétudes d'une Intellectuelle Engagée*. Gerry Tama, a former army officer, chose to develop crime stories which only obliquely address the issue of Togolese identity.

African literature in the written form (as opposed to the traditional oral literature) is still in its infancy. Nonetheless, much can be said about the African literary style, among which is the fact that it is didactic and instructive. It is a documentary literature meant, in large part, to be entertaining and comprising of moral lessons which are meant to be passed along and shared. Togolese literature inscribes itself in the greater concepts of African literature because not only does it fulfill the above-mentioned criteria, but its goal to inform is also paired with the additional task to liberate through creating challenging information, building communities, and inspiring peoples to look at their heritage with critical eyes so that they can be inspired to become greater. In other words, Togolese literature calls on its people to constantly work on making their identity strong and solid.

### **A Legacy for Women**

Since the publication of both Chocho Ékué and Gad Ami's novels, Togo has seen a resurgence of women in the political arena, working hard to change the mentality, social conditions, and overall situation of girls and women throughout the

country. Per statistics from both the World Bank and UNICEF, seventy-five of one hundred children are enrolled in elementary school, yet 44.5% of women between the ages of 15 and 24 are illiterate. Only 52% of children old enough to go to school are enrolled in any program, and 23 of 100 children finish the primary grades. UNICEF added the following to its 2012 report on Togo's literacy:

*Si la différence entre la scolarisation des filles et des garçons est équilibrée au niveau national, 71,8% des filles et 77,3% des garçons sont scolarisés, les disparités entre régions s'avèrent inquiétantes. L'accès et le maintien des enfants de 5 à 15 ans jusqu'à la fin du cycle primaire est amélioré : • Le taux net de scolarisation passe de 75,7% à 90%. • La parité entre les sexes passe de 0,9 à 1. • Le taux d'achèvement net de scolarisation passe de 23% à 50%. (D'ici 2015, 100% des enfants ont un accès égal et facile à une scolarité gratuite et de qualité atteignant l'Objectif du Millénaire pour le Développement (OMD), en matière d'éducation. (UNICEF. 2012)*

In 2013, the Togolese government issued the following statement regarding its efforts towards its education program:

*Ce 16 octobre 2013, les élèves reprendront le chemin de l'école. Et tous les acteurs de l'éducation s'efforcent pour réunir toutes les conditions possibles pour que cette année scolaire 2013-2014 soit une réussite. Et dans ces nombreux efforts consentis, la scolarisation des filles aussi se retrouve au centre des débats. La ministre de l'Action sociale, de la Promotion de la Femme et de l'Alphabétisation, Dédé Ahoéfa Ekoué, s'est prononcée sur la*

*question le vendredi dernier, reçue dans le journal de 19h30 sur LCF, dans le cadre de la journée internationale des filles, célébrée chaque 11 octobre. Pour elle, bien que le taux de scolarisation des filles soit élevé au Togo, d'énormes défis restent encore à relever, « car aujourd'hui au niveau du primaire, à peine 2/4 des filles finissent l'éducation et en montant vers le secondaire, le mal se fait plus ressentir, on a moins de deux filles dans le premier cycle du secondaire et dans le second cycle, c'est une fille sur quatre qui finit l'éducation secondaire ».* (Ministère des Enseignements Primaire Secondaire et de la Formation Professionnelle. 2013)

One major complaint in the workforce in Togo is the lack of representation of more women, because a quarter of school girls not only do not finish elementary school, but they also do not pursue secondary—much less university—education. Nonetheless, both the former and the current Minister of the Promotion of Women in Togo have committed their department to work diligently to ensure that the gap between women and men especially in literacy be drastically reduced by 2015. Statistics are not yet available. In the meantime, the economy, trade, and agriculture, mostly held by women, receive 65% of the national budget to help in its continued growth.

Since 2006, because of the new vision of the government (now headed by Faure Gnassingbé, Eyadéma's son), more women are participating in improving the nation. They are working at empowering, encouraging, and supporting every element

of society, in the same manner as their male counterparts. Togo's new contemporary identity is one where what matters is one's abilities, worth, education, and valor. Structures have been put into place to allow all Togolese to flourish, though both efforts and results are still very timid. All the same, the new Togolese identity seems characterized by a break with the old ways of thinking which tended to hold people back, and instead, merges good traditions with progress, no matter where the influences come from.

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## Vita

Marie Line is originally from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She spent her childhood travelling between Port-au-Prince and Chicago, Ill, alternating her school years between the two cities, thus being schooled in both French and English. Marie Line obtained her bachelor's degree in Chicago at Saint Xavier University. Upon graduation, she first returned to Haiti where she taught English as a Second Language, then to Mexico where she studied for a Masters in Comparative Literature. In Kansas City, at the University of Missouri, she obtained her Master's in Education and decided in 2011 to pursue her Doctoral degree in Romance Languages at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Her first published piece is a book review regarding contemporary Haitian Writers and was circulated by *Alternative Francophone*, December of 2013. The title of the article is: Book Review/ Compte rendu on Menard, Nadève. *Écrits d'Haïti. Perspectives sur la littérature haïtienne contemporaine (1986-2006)*. Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2011, 486 p. *Alternative Francophone vol.1, 6(2013): 97-98*.<sup>1</sup> She is working on two opinion pieces that she is hoping to have published very soon: the first one on Equatorial Guinean author Leoncio Evita's novel *Cuando los Combes Luchaban*, and the other on Haitian author Gary Victor's *A l'Angle des Rues Paralleles*