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RUMOUR AND POWER IN TOGO

Stephen Ellis

The present article describes some of the main political events which took place in Togo in mid to late 1991, at a time when the power of President Gnassingbé Eyadéma was facing more serious opposition than at any time since his assumption of the presidency twenty-four years earlier, and examines how these events were represented in popular discussion in Lomé. By analysing some aspects of the power struggle in that period, and popular perceptions of them, the article aims to shed light on the cultural mechanisms by which Eyadéma sustained himself in power and through which his power could be contested. For, as Patrick Chabal (1992) has recently reminded us, even the presidents of one-party states seek to legitimise themselves in a variety of ways.

Until the 1990s it was difficult to acquire reliable information on the real workings of the political system in Togo, since the security forces had instilled a fear so pervasive as to discourage any discussion of politics, particularly in the capital city (Amnesty International, 1986). This situation changed dramatically during 1990-91, when the circumstances became such as to encourage intense public debate about the nature of Eyadéma's government. There was an abundance of previously unobtainable information, written and oral, describing the techniques by which he had imposed his power on the population. This period therefore constitutes an exceptional point of observation for the political analyst interested in the Togolese political system.

Without doubt the main forum for debate on these matters was the National Conference inaugurated in Lomé in July 1991, which is described in more detail below. Many of the speakers at the National Conference wrote short papers which they circulated during their presentation. Photocopies of these documents were freely available at the time, although they may well have become more difficult to acquire since. There was also published a daily summary of the conference's proceedings, at least in its early stages. It is not clear to the present writer what has become of this record or of the archives of the National Conference in general: this is a matter of regret, since they constitute a valuable first-hand source.

The work of the conference was both supplemented and encouraged by the growth of the free press, as some twenty newspapers appeared in Lomé within a few months in 1990-91, many of them weeklies or monthlies which in fact were published rather erratically. The great majority of the new papers were hostile to President Eyadéma and sympathetic to the work of the National Conference. All the papers—and, indeed, the official press, television and radio, which had been taken over by anti-Eyadéma elements—reported the proceedings of the National Conference at length, adding their own editorial comments to the quoted views of conference-goers. However, within a couple of years many of the new papers had gone out of business as a result of commercial pressures or of physical intimidation by military supporters of President Eyadéma. Thus even some of the printed information

which was available during 1991 may not be easily located in future by scholars wishing to study Togo's short-lived attempt to install a democratic government.

As well as these written sources, another source of information was the form of oral communication known in French as *radio trottoir*, a term for which there is no good English equivalent but for which a poor translation would be 'bush telegraph'. It may be defined as the informal discussion of current affairs by the urban public in Africa. It has been argued elsewhere that *radio trottoir*, far from being mere gossip, and of little account, may be considered a modern form of oral tradition (Ellis, 1989). It is of considerable political importance, mainly because it appears to be the principal means by which many city dwellers in Africa acquire information. *Radio trottoir* consists not only of rumours, but also of jokes, puns and anecdotes passed on by word of mouth, and hence it is a field where ordinary citizens play an active role in forming a popular image of the government. Governments and their opponents certainly acquire information by listening to *radio trottoir*, but at the same time they seek to influence public opinion in a manner which, at bottom, is no different from the work of public relations specialists in modern Western politics. *Radio trottoir*, in other words, is a field of political contestation no less vital in its own way than the columns of the daily press or the television news to a modern Western government.

Previous authors have analysed rumours in various parts of Africa in an attempt to discern what these rumours tell us about political events (Musambachime, 1988; Kastfelt, 1989). A few writers have gone further, to analyse how rumour is formed and transmitted in Africa at a time of political tension (Bettison, 1968). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that analysts have generally tended to steer clear of *radio trottoir*, for the good reason that most of the information it conveys is impossible to check and its sources are generally impossible to verify. In fact one may go further and say that quite often rumours reported by *radio trottoir* are patently untrue, at least to the seeker of what may be called 'hard facts', meaning empirically verifiable statements.

Despite these difficulties, the rumours transmitted by word of mouth in Lomé in 1991, like other examples of *radio trottoir*, are worthy of study for the light they shed on the nature of political legitimacy and authority in Eyadéma's Togo, and the means by which they are contested.

PRESIDENT EYADÉMA

Gnassingbé Eyadéma, born some sixty years ago in the village of Pya in north Togo, and given the Christian name Etienne, has the dubious distinction of having instigated modern Africa's first *coup d'état*.

In his youth Eyadéma followed the path of many young men from the poverty-stricken north of Togo by enlisting in the French colonial army. When the country received its independence in 1960, its first President, Sylvanus Olympio, refused to incorporate some hundreds of Togolese who had been demobilised from the French army into the national army of the new Togolese state. On the night of 12-13 January 1963 Sergeant Etienne Eyadéma (as he then was) and others discharged from the French forces attacked Olympio's residence. The President was shot dead on the morning

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of 13 January 1963 as he was attempting to gain asylum in the American embassy next door. Eyadéma claimed to have carried out the deed, although it remains unclear whether he actually killed President Olympio. It also remains uncertain to what extent there may have been French involvement in the affair (Agbobli, 1992).

Following the death of Olympio, Eyadéma became Togo's military strong man and was elevated to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. (His current rank of general came later). On 13 January 1967, four years to the day after the assassination of Olympio, Eyadéma declared the dissolution of the government, soon followed by his own assumption of power as head of state. In 1969 Eyadéma founded his own political party, the Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais (RPT), which was to remain the country's sole political party until 1991.

In many respects Eyadéma's conquest and consolidation of power are a classic example of how a soldier from the lower ranks, having taken power by force, may use a variety of techniques to buttress his rule in a search for the elusive quality of legitimacy. Eyadéma learned much from President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, many of whose methods of control he frankly imitated and whose friend he became. Eyadéma was also an assiduous borrower of political techniques from a variety of other countries. His grip on power was backed by a vicious system of coercion and by pervasive networks of informers. The President took particular care to ensure the loyalty of his original power base, the army, which throughout his period in power has been composed mainly of soldiers from his own region. He became adept at appointing and reshuffling Ministers, army officers and senior officials, keeping them loyal with promises of power and wealth interspersed with the threat of prison or worse. There can be no doubt of Eyadéma's ruthlessness even towards those who had been close to him: in 1984 his own former Vice-president, Antoine Méatchi, died mysteriously while in prison. It now seems virtually certain that Méatchi was subjected to the *diète noire*, systematic deprivation of food and water until death.

Among his entourage Eyadéma was known simply as *le patron*, 'the boss'. In imitation of Mobutu, Eyadéma introduced a policy of *authenticité*, in which sweeping nationalisation of key areas of the economy was accompanied by a requirement that Togolese citizens should renounce their baptismal names and assume instead authentic Togolese names, the President himself having assumed the name Gnassingbé and dropped the Christian name Etienne in 1972. By 1976 all government officials were being expected to join the ruling party and to sport its badge on their lapel, as well as to wear the correct official dress in imitation of that affected by Eyadéma (Amnesty International, 1986: 27). Eyadéma promoted as official government dress a Western business suit, double-breasted if possible. This was seen by many people as an important symbol. As one Togolese journalist wrote (Apedo-Amah, 1991):

Eyadéma, in the 1970s, when he wanted to give himself a civilised air, following the odious murder of Olympio and to hide his characteristic as a hireling of the colonial army ('un soudard de la coloniale') introduced the business suit into the upper levels of the state apparatus. Even on television, programme presenters had to

wear a jacket and tie just to introduce children's programmes! When you were a guest on a television show and you arrived without a jacket and tie there was panic in the studios. . . .

The history of the suit used as the protocol uniform of the state is simply the will of Eyadéma to become at all costs a civilised man. Naively, he believed that manners maketh man. For him, wearing this civilian uniform which he had exchanged for military khaki is synonymous with the evolution of a primitive sergeant of the colonial army.

A most important aspect of the Eyadéma personality cult was the cultivation of religious and cultural symbols which were calculated to demonstrate to Togolese that Eyadéma was semi-divine and that his government was endowed with supernatural authority (Toulabor, 1986). Although certain aspects of the mystical side of the personality cult were evident enough to observers during the heyday of Eyadéma's rule, the general fear which his rule inspired was so extreme that it was very difficult for inquirers to compile data with which to analyse the bonds which connected ruler and ruled. Nevertheless, even at the height of Eyadéma's power it was possible for people to demonstrate their opposition to the ruling party by the use of puns, subtle parodies of official slogans and songs and general linguistic subversion (Toulabor, 1981). These forms of protest were a constant challenge to Eyadéma's dominance of both public and private expression, which is presumably why the police would sometimes punish people severely for even implied criticism of the government.

TOGO, 1990-91

By late 1990 this tyrannical government was under severe pressure. Eyadéma was regarded as a leading member of the group of French-speaking heads of state who had rejected the call for multi-party democracy by President François Mitterrand at the Franco-African summit held in June 1990 at La Baule, France. Nevertheless, under pressure from the political reform movement sweeping Africa, beset by economic difficulties and popular protest, Eyadéma had been forced into a series of concessions to popular demands.

On 5 October 1990 demonstrators defied the security forces to demonstrate on behalf of a number of students who had been detained and tortured for distributing anti-government tracts. The government had for years routinely detained and tortured anyone suspected of opposition and even some who were not, apparently, suspected of any offence but who were tortured simply as a warning to others. This time there was an unprecedented popular outcry. Encouraged, opposition forces began to display greater confidence and pressed demands for institutional reform. In April 1991 the President agreed to permit the foundation of opposition political parties, a key demand, and in June 1991 he yielded to demands for the staging of a national conference, similar to those which had been held in many other French-speaking countries in Africa over the previous eighteen months. Scanting victory, members of the National Conference which was inaugurated in July 1991 promptly declared themselves as constituting a sovereign body and suspended the constitution (Conférence Nationale, 1991). They went on to establish a

transitional government which would run the country until full multi-party elections could be organised in mid-1992, intending to leave the head of state, Eyadéma, as a mere cypher while the real power passed elsewhere. The conference pronounced the abolition of the ruling party, the RPT, and of its trades union arm, provoking bitter complaints from President Eyadéma, who accused the conference of going beyond its constitutional powers. On the night of 26–7 August 1991, amid high tension, and sitting in a building surrounded by hostile soldiers, the Sovereign National Conference elected as premier Maître Joseph Kokou Koffigoh, a well known lawyer and human rights activist (*Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens* 2390, 30 August 1991). Some radicals even called for Eyadéma to be put on trial.

The staging of the National Conference and its bold challenge to Eyadéma had an obvious therapeutic effect on the population of Lomé and other parts of the country. Over a period of several weeks people who for years had been obliged to keep their innermost thoughts to themselves gave public testimony to the conference, the proceedings being broadcast on national radio and television. Many gave harrowing first-hand accounts of over two decades of appalling human rights abuses, including illegal detention, torture, murder and exactions at the hands of the ruling party and the army on a large scale. The fear which had been instilled for over twenty years by the President and his supporters in the army and the RPT was broken.

The conference was discussed and reported in the new independent newspapers which had appeared in Lomé during the previous two years and even in the official daily, *La Nouvelle Marche*, once staunchly pro-Eyadéma. Like the multi-party system itself, these newspapers had initially been tolerated by President Eyadéma in an attempt to make concessions to calls for greater freedom while retaining his grip on power. As so often in circumstances of this kind, the emergent press had responded not with gratitude but by asserting its complete independence of his government, often expressed in the form of strong and even insulting criticisms of the head of state (Article XIX, 1991).

However, optimists were premature in believing that they had overthrown a dictatorship and installed a democratic system of government. The situation remained very unstable. The National Conference as a whole, and some individual politicians, had support from the mob which had constituted itself since popular disturbances the previous year and had become an actor in national politics. Power in the streets of Lomé had passed from the security forces to groups of youths who demonstrated, fought the army and police with stones, and attacked police stations or symbols of one-party rule. Prime Minister Koffigoh, inexperienced in politics and without any political organisation of his own to support him, was struggling to impose his authority on the interim administration.

It also became apparent, when the first euphoria produced by the public uprising against dictatorship had evaporated, that the democratic credentials of the transitional government were not beyond question. The National Conference was not popularly elected but was composed of nearly 1,000 distinguished individuals and representatives of various lobbies and political associations. It included a disproportionate number of members from the south of Togo and a relatively small number from the north, Eyadéma's

home area. The conference's assumption of sovereign status was self-proclaimed, which enabled Eyadéma and his supporters to question its legitimacy and to represent the events of July and August 1991, as a 'civilian coup' against a constitutional government. As Eyadéma pointed out, in law sovereignty could be delegated by the people only by universal suffrage (Eyadéma, 1991). In its haste to claim sovereign authority and to issue its own laws, in defiance of the President's authority, the National Conference may have made a tactical error, since it enabled Eyadéma to use some of the rhetoric of democracy and accountability in order to counter-attack.

To many citizens of Lomé these shortcomings were not at first apparent. In the capital city the National Conference enjoyed great popularity. This disguised the fact that its political base was insecure. When it closed at the end of August 1991 the conference haughtily proceeded to elect a Haut Conseil de la République, in effect a parliament which had not been popularly elected or approved by the head of state and whose status was, therefore, not beyond question.

Above all, it was unclear who really controlled the army. The army had been the mainstay of Eyadéma's power since his 1963 overthrow of Sylvanus Olympio. Although Prime Minister Koffigoh now claimed, as head of the government, to be in political control of the army, it was not obvious that the soldiers would obey him. Some three-quarters of the armed forces' estimated 12,000 men came from the President's home region in the north of Togo. Many of these soldiers could be reckoned as unconditional supporters of Eyadéma, who had habitually hand-picked new recruits during the wrestling matches which were traditionally held every year in his home region during the important festival known as *evala*. The army's officer corps contained a sprinkling of officers from every region of the country, but the most sensitive command positions were held by personal protégés of the President, including his half-brother, Colonel Donou Toyi Gnassingbé, and his son, Lieutenant Ernest Eyadéma. Soldiers had for years been subjected even more intensively than the rest of the population to the Eyadéma personality cult, supported by viciously harsh discipline. Other ranks were encouraged to believe that the brutal treatment they received from their officers was not condoned by the general, who was represented as a stern but benevolent father. As an army sergeant put it in 1991, when begging for Eyadéma to reassert his power (*West Africa* 3853, 15–21 July 1991, p. 1159):

Our action is that of the hands of subordinate officers outstretched towards their only commander, General Eyadéma, the outstretched hands of we your sons . . . toward their only father, Daddy Eyadéma, to demand their rights concerning the officers . . . [who are] brutalising us, and torturing us morally and intellectually, in the name of military discipline . . .

Please accept, without a lurking thought of revenge, the expression of these grievances, because you are our father, the only parent that loves us and listens to us with much attention.

The question of who should control the army was unclear even in the legal texts published by the National Conference. The provisional constitution described the President of the Republic—who also held the rank of

general—as the 'chef suprême des forces armées' (supreme commander of the armed forces). At the same time the transitional government, in which Me. Koffigoh fulfilled the roles of Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, was said to 'dispose[r] des forces armées' ('Have the armed forces at its disposition'). Some observers wondered whether the army was simply out of control. An attempt by a group of soldiers to take over the national radio station on 1 October 1991 and an apparent attempt to assassinate Prime Minister Koffigoh one week later gave rise to varying analyses and explanations. The Haut Conseil de la République on 8 October declared itself ready in principle to accept foreign military intervention in order to combat the army's reluctance to place itself under civilian control. These events demonstrated graphically that the Haut Conseil de la République, and Prime Minister Koffigoh's interim government, for all their bluster, did not have a real grip on the levers of power.

RADIO TROTTOIR IN LOMÉ

The hopes, fears and excitement generated by these events, added to the considerable confusion which reigned, naturally encouraged rumours of every description to fly around Lomé. The newspapers were only of limited effect in checking the allegations of *radio trottoir*, since the papers themselves were all to some extent written versions of rumour in the sense that most articles were not based on quoted sources in the conventional manner of newspaper reporting.

A typical example concerned the events of 10 April 1991, when there was a series of violent clashes between crowds of pro-democracy demonstrators and elite army units. On 11 April some twenty-eight bodies were recovered from a lagoon in Bè, a popular district of Lomé. A report by the Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme (1991b), an official human rights organisation established in 1986 by President Eyadéma but which had been taken over by anti-Eyadéma forces, maintained that the victims were mostly people who had been trapped between two army units on a causeway on the morning of 10 April, and who had jumped into the lagoon to escape. Some had drowned, and others had been beaten to death when they tried to haul themselves ashore. However, there were certain problems in the account compiled by the CNDH. According to one well-placed foreign observer who made extensive enquiries, for example, all the victims were found in the lagoon on one side of the causeway only, whereas if they had all been escaping panic-stricken, from baton-wielding soldiers, it would have been more likely that they would have escaped into the lagoon on both sides of the causeway. Moreover, the news that bodies were found floating in the lagoon did not break in Lomé until the morning of 11 April, whereas the clashes on the causeway had taken place almost twenty-four hours before. Why had the floating bodies not been in evidence immediately after the first clashes on the causeway which crosses the Bè lagoon? Were the bodies in fact those of people who had been killed elsewhere, and dumped in the lagoon only on the night of 10–11 April? All that seemed clear was that something nasty had happened, and that the army was responsible one way or another for most or all of the deaths.

Every significant move by the army, such as the 1 October attack on the national radio station, or the 8 October attack on the home of Prime Minister Koffigoh, was invariably said to have been ordered by President Eyadéma in an attempt to sabotage the transitional government. Was it really so? Was this not a simplistic explanation? It had become evident during the National Conference that the army was far from monolithic and some observers even suggested that President Eyadéma might be struggling to keep control of his armed forces.

In fact any occurrence which was not in the interests of the National Conference or of the transitional government it had established was widely said to be the result of manipulation by Eyadéma. Thus any political figure who dared to suggest that it might be in the long-term interest of the country for the transitional government to come to an understanding with Eyadéma on the division of powers risked becoming the subject of rumours that he was on the presidential payroll. The baleful figure of the President dominated discussion of current events, and it could be said that this was itself a form of recognition of his continuing influence over public life.

Certain dates in the calendar also provoked a spate of rumour. It was widely suggested, for example, that some element of the armed forces would attempt a *coup* on behalf of President Eyadéma on 5 October 1991, the first anniversary of the popular demonstrations which had sounded the beginning of the end for the one-party government of Eyadéma's RPT. Another rumour, reported to the author by lower-rank soldiers who had performed guard duty at the presidential palace in Pya, maintained that President Eyadéma was in the habit of performing human sacrifices every year in his home village of Pya on 12 January, the eve of the date in 1963 when, as an obscure army sergeant, he had assassinated the then president Sylvanus Olympio and begun his climb to power. The fact that dates such as this continued to be considered significant presumably gave Eyadéma cause for satisfaction, since it meant that *radio trottoir* continued to hold the official myths of his regime in awe.

In order to counter Eyadéma's influence over the calendar, as it were, there were popular calls for the renaming of streets and buildings named after key dates or places in the career of President Eyadéma, or Sergeant Eyadéma, as his enemies persistently referred to him, in recollection of his humble origins. The boulevard du 13 Janvier and the hôtel du 2 février, respectively a main avenue and the most prestigious hotel in Lomé, both commemorated dates in Eyadéma's rise to power. This struggle to control dates and names was taken so seriously that Prime Minister Koffigoh's interim government devoted attention to the subject at its first cabinet meeting, on 10 September 1991 (BBC, 1991). We may interpret this as an effort by the new government to impose its own identity on the physical space of Lomé, and hence on the psychology of its inhabitants, just as Eyadéma had done in his time.

In general, there was a widespread and spontaneous move to reject the symbols of President Eyadéma's long rule and that of the RPT. In Lomé, where many of the population are Christian, people again began using the baptismal names which had been banned when Eyadéma had introduced a policy of African authenticity in 1974.

ANALYSING RADIO TROTTOIR

The constant flow of rumours posed a considerable problem for any observer who wished to respect the conventional techniques of social science or the usual criteria of empirical analysis. There were few clear statements from authoritative sources which could be taken as the basis of journalists' despatches or scholars' footnotes. When there was a clear such statement, as when President Eyadéma appeared on television to deny any knowledge of the military intervention of 1 and 8 October, there were obvious grounds for being sceptical about his claims, but there was no firm evidence to refute him.

People offering information by word of mouth in the form typical of *radio trottoir* almost never cited their sources with precision, and quite often they offered no empirical evidence whatsoever for a theory of causation. They simply asserted an explanation for the cause of an event with no supporting evidence. Conversations with Togolese officials, foreign diplomats and others close to power were hardly different in the sense that such people, too, frequently offered assertions as to the course of recent events without precise sources. It appeared that everybody, from the head of state downwards, both listened and contributed to *radio trottoir*. There existed, in effect, higher and lower forms of rumour which could be measured according to the closeness to power of one's interlocutor. From the point of view of using *radio trottoir* as a conventional source of information, the best that could be done was to assess the accuracy of a rumour by reference to its inherent likelihood, the status of the person reporting it, and the context in which they did so. It could then be compared with other rumours from different individuals from other social groups. Rumours repeated in front of others, who could correct the speaker, had more status than those repeated in private.

It is productive not just to attempt to glean truth from falsehood in *radio trottoir*, but to consider what it says about Togolese concepts of political authority and legitimacy. Lomé is situated in a region that has long been well known for the importance of the cult of *vodun* and for the existence of a complex belief system which supposes the constant influence of religion on the affairs of humankind and which often seeks an explanation for human events in the spirit world (Maupoil, 1943). Belief in the spirit world is not restricted to the domain which might conventionally be called religious, but is also crucial in Togolese politics (Toulabor, 1986: 110–31). Thus during 1991 there were many rumours concerning spiritual phenomena or which supposed spiritual explanations for human actions. Some people in Lomé, for example, still recalled in 1991 that dissidents who had infiltrated the country and attempted to overthrow the government five years earlier had been able to cross the border from Ghana by using magical powers to transform themselves into owls, an animal which, being a carnivore that flies by night, appears to symbolise the darker aspects of power. It is notable that, in other parts of West Africa too, people possessing power are assumed to be able to transform themselves into animals (Gilbert, 1989: 59).

Similarly, *radio trottoir* reported in October 1991 instances in which a powerful politician was able to materialise in two far-apart places at the

same time. President Eyadéma seemed to play on this belief by occasionally letting it be known that he was at his presidential palace in the suburbs of Lomé, at other times in his home village of Pya. One could never be quite sure where he was. It was by the use of such techniques that Eyadéma ensured that an element of mystery remained concerning his person, and this in itself helped to bolster his power.

The identification of spiritual and political power, which appears to be at the centre of Togolese political thought, can be looked at from either side of the equation: just as a person known to have political power is presumed also to have power over the spirit world, so a person who successfully manipulates the symbols of spiritual control is assumed also to be in possession of political power. This means that the appearance of being powerful, achieved by maintaining one's prestige and manipulating the appropriate symbols, is at least as important as the possession of a legal right to control the government of the country, or some part of it. In the end, despite his legal destitution, President Eyadéma still had the appearance of power and Prime Minister Koffigoh had not. Public perception was a crucial field in which *radio trottoir* was all-important.

MATERIAL AND INVISIBLE POWER

It is not surprising to learn that almost every foreign observer confesses to finding Togolese politics to be—if I may borrow a useful image—a wilderness of mirrors. Nothing is sure; nothing can be known precisely. Manipulation and deception are constantly suspected, and the role of what in the West might be called the supernatural is taken to be of prime importance. A powerful person is one who gives the impression of being in control of this complex array of forces visible and invisible. In this respect, it should be said, Eyadéma appeared far more convincing than Prime Minister Koffigoh. In these circumstances, many observers have wondered about the material or empirical basis of certain beliefs or events in Togo. For example, is it really true, as is sometimes whispered, that powerful politicians perform human sacrifices to maintain their power, and hold ceremonies to communicate with the spirit world? Or is it true, as some foreigners have opined, that Eyadéma's fearsome reputation has been based more on appearance than on reality, and that his prisons are not as terrible as people have sometimes supposed?

The staging of the National Conference in July and August 1991, and the events surrounding it, constituted an autopsy of power in Togo. The National Conference revealed empirically satisfactory information, in the form of first-hand testimonies and confessions in public, about the repressive techniques used by President Eyadéma and his RPT government. Such information included evidence of the detention without trial of anyone even suspected of being an opponent of the government. More sensational—and more interesting for the purposes of the present analysis—was the evidence of the number of people killed, tortured or detained for the alleged practice of witchcraft, including considerable numbers of people from the President's native village of Pya (Assih, 1991; Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme 1991a). Victims of apparently arbitrary or

unjust imprisonment included the President's own adoptive father, who was also the traditional chief of Pya. Other victims in the President's own village included a man who had allegedly been responsible for the death of President Eyadéma's natural father by means of sorcery. Among those illegally detained was a woman who had conceived a child by President Eyadéma. She was detained together with her baby, Eyadéma's closest supporters had also used emerged evidence that some of Eyadéma's closest supporters had also used religious symbols in the pursuit of power. When a mob sacked the house in Lomé of the feared former Interior Minister, Kpotivi Tévi Djidjogbé Lacié, on 8 October 1991, the attackers discovered under his bed a human foetus preserved in a jar, a photograph of which subsequently appeared in a Lomé newspaper (*Courrier du Golfe* 117, Lomé, 130, 10 October 1991). This indicated that even the highest authorities in the land made use of such symbols, not just to impress the public but also in private rituals. This was not surprising to any Togolese, since it is generally believed that people in positions of power sometimes sacrifice children as a means of acquiring or preserving power. This, no doubt, was the source of the rumour circulating throughout mid-1991 that large numbers of children were disappearing. The story could be interpreted as meaning that political power had become unstable, and politicians were seeking spiritual power, by means of human sacrifice, in order to acquire or preserve temporal power. To judge from some of the things which were proved beyond reasonable doubt during the National Conference, it is quite likely that *radio trottoir* was literally true in some of these cases and that some politicians were indeed causing human sacrifice to be performed in their pursuit of power.

It became clear that popular fear of Eyadéma had a solid material foundation in the sense that he had indeed run a cruel and arbitrary system which physically threatened anyone suspected of being an opponent. It was clear too that belief in the President's powers over the spirit world was encouraged by the President himself, inasmuch as he persecuted those alleged to be using witchcraft to harm him or his government.

The public revelation of these things during the National Conference impaired Eyadéma's reputation. No Togolese had ever doubted that he was a cruel man, but laying bare some of the mechanisms of control removed the mystery, and thus part of the force, from his reputation. Power in Togo, it appears, is most awesome when it is exercised secretly. Different forms of power are connected: wealth, political control and spiritual influence all go together. Possession of one strongly implies possession of the others.

SPOKEN WORDS AND VISIBLE SYMBOLS

It is perhaps not surprising to know that politicians in Togo make frequent use of symbols of power, and that, in deference to the importance of spiritual belief, these symbols also have spiritual significance. Nor is it surprising to learn that sinister dictators make use of symbols which have sinister implications, presumably to cause others to fear them. After all, it may be argued, all politicians make use of symbols understood by themselves and their constituents.

However, examination of Lomé's *radio trottoir* and of the political behaviour which it reports suggests a qualitative difference between the use of symbols by modern Western politicians and their use by many Togolese politicians. In the latter case the role of the symbols is taken much more seriously, to the point where it is possible to assert that the public manipulation of relevant symbols is of overwhelming importance, as it is in many other parts of Africa (cf. Balandier, 1962, 1980; Martin, 1988: 248–81; Raison-Jourde 1991: 239–89). The successful use of the symbols of this power is not just a political tool: it is actually what politics is about.

In such a system symbols are to be found everywhere, even in everyday things such as clothes, food, drink and—above all—words. Names, for example, have very great importance in Togo. Far from representing a mere whim, the systematic substitution of new symbols for old, as in Eyadéma's authenticity campaign of the early 1970s, or as attempted by the Koffigoh government in 1991, is serious power play. In Zaire, where the policy of *authenticité* was first introduced, it was understood by many people as only one measure in a comprehensive policy designed to validate traditional symbols of power, including notably those relating to the spirit world and witchcraft (Roberts, 1988). In the same way, Eyadéma used language as a key field of political control, by obliging people to take Togolese names and naming public monuments after key events in his own life as visible symbols of his power. He borrowed at the same time many of the forms of indoctrination pioneered in Mobutu's ruling party, using the same type of '*animation politique*', even importing songs and dances originally composed in honour of Mobutu and translating them into Togolese languages (Toulabor, 1986: 161–82).

In Lomé the public have consistently reacted to attempts to turn all public performance into a paeon to the President by linguistic subversion, turning official names into obscene word play, designed to demystify and ridicule the government and the man who is officially referred to by a variety of grandiose titles (Toulabor, 1981, 1992). In the same spirit of struggle for linguistic hegemony, *radio trottoir* dubbed the stone-throwing mobs of adolescents who confronted the Eyadéma government throughout 1991 'Ekpemog,' a pun on the name of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the West African peace-keeping force in Liberia. 'Ekpe' means 'stone' in the Ewe language (*Jeune Afrique* 1601, 4–10 September 1991, p. 24). The implication was that the mob constituted a legitimate national army loyal to Prime Minister Koffigoh's government, in competition with the Togolese armed forces controlled by General Eyadéma. Eyadéma's government, like many others in Africa, had deployed a vast range of acronyms, particularly those applied to the parastatal organisations which are widely and justly regarded as the reservoirs from which politicians derive their funds or, in popular parlance, where they feed (Bayart, 1989). *Radio trottoir* is immensely inventive in parodying these, and there is hardly an acronym in Togo which has not been co-opted by *radio trottoir* for subversive purposes.

Politicians the world over like to impose their own terminology on political debate, recognising by instinct, experience or deduction the Orwellian truth that language and politics are inseparable. But, as with other forms of

political symbolism, the use of language in African *radio trottoir* goes further than this, for the reason that it is the product of cultures which have evolved over centuries without writing. The introduction of large-scale literacy in most of Africa dates only from the middle years of the present century, and it has neither wiped out illiteracy nor, more to the point, eliminated the cultural patterns and mechanisms formed during the times before writing was known or widely used.

It is evident that in oral societies the spoken word has a quite different value from that which it has in literate ones. Such cultures are far more subtle and inventive in the use of the spoken word than are long-literate cultures. Quite apart from any subjective or ideological values which may be attributed to spoken language, it has to serve a variety of uses which in modern societies are fulfilled by writing. Law, history and genealogies cannot be written but can only be remembered. Nevertheless, as Jan Vansina pointed out in his pioneering work on oral history, considerable use can be made of mnemonics, physical devices to aid memory (Vansina 1973: 36–9). In pre-colonial Africa oratory, politics and religion all intertwined, not least because politics in an oral culture require a far more intensive use of symbols to preserve an orderly system of laws and a constitution.

The words and symbols which constitute the basic political vocabulary of Lomé are also the vocabulary of *radio trottoir*. The latter is thus a crucial element in the interplay of forces between state and civil society, or an element of the politics from below described by Bayart *et al.* (1992). It was here, rather than on the official level of written laws or paper constitutions, that Eyadéma sought to find legitimacy with the general public in a city in which the President he had overthrown and murdered, Sylvanus Olympio, had been popular.

In analysing Eyadéma's grasp of power, one is constantly put in mind of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. There is a direct relation between the exceptionally crude manner in which Eyadéma first assumed power and the lengths to which he was obliged to go to create a myth of his own legitimacy. To cast doubt on that myth was to cast doubt on the regime itself in a manner which could be interpreted only as a direct challenge for power.

NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Michael Schatzberg for drawing my attention to this reference.

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Abstract

The article describes some of the main political events which took place in Togo in mid to late 1991, at a time when the power of President Gnassingbé Eyadéma was facing more serious opposition than at any time since his assumption of the presidency twenty-four years earlier, and examines how these events were represented in popular discussion in Lomé. By analysing some aspects of the power struggle in that period, and popular perceptions of them, the article aims to shed light on the cultural mechanisms by which Eyadéma sustained himself in power and through which his power could be contested.

Résumé

L'article décrit quelques uns des événements politiques principaux qui ont eu lieu au Togo dans la deuxième moitié de 1991, à l'époque où le pouvoir du Président Gnassingbé Eyadéma faisait face à une opposition plus sérieuse qu'à aucun moment depuis sa prétenction à la présidence vingt-quatre années plus tôt, et examine comment ces événements ont été représentés lors d'une discussion populaire à Lomé. En analysant certains aspects de la lutte au pouvoir pendant cette période et les perceptions populaires à ce sujet, l'article a pour but d'éclaircir les mécanismes culturels par lesquels Eyadéma a pu se maintenir au pouvoir et par lesquels son pouvoir pourrait être contesté.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE AFRIKANERISATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN STATE

Annette Seegers

With President F. W. De Klerk's speech of 2 February 1990, and the dramatic changes subsequently evident in South African politics, many scholars have aptly turned their eyes on the state. If a transition towards some form of majority rule is at hand, as most observers believe, the questions are: what is the condition of the state to be inherited by the new governors, and how did it acquire this condition?

We know, for example, that the state has almost 1.7 million employees, more than 1 million of whom are black (SAIRR, 1989: 395-7), and who work in sectors known as the central, provincial, local and homeland authorities and the semi-state.¹ Also known are some of the processes affecting these employees, ranging from regulations governing service (dating back to the Staatsdiens en Pensioenwet of 1912) to the enduring imperial tendencies of the central authorities and, more recently, policies of privatisation. But perhaps the best-known process is the afrikanerisation of the state, occurring through most of the twentieth century and especially after the (Purified) National Party Victory of 1948. The discussion, first, identifies beliefs and habits members of the bureaucratic elite acquired during their ascent through Afrikanerdom and, second, analyses the attempt to institutionalise these beliefs and habits within the state. This article is thus about the actions of an Afrikaner bureaucratic elite, ensconced in leading positions in all sectors of the state² over at least the last forty years.

Except in the crudest of formulations, afrikanerisation has for scholars not meant that an organic Afrikaner identity imprinted itself on the state. Any such identity must be described as changing in time and filled with complex layers of contradictions. When people use the phrase 'the afrikanerisation of the South African state' they usually have three trends in mind.

The first is the twentieth-century trend of the state serving the interests of the Afrikaners,³ the *primus inter pares* of the white community. The critical vehicle of this service was through political parties' control of the legislature. But political parties strengthened their ability to serve Afrikaner interests by linking up with cultural and socio-economic organisations (for example, the early Helpmekeer movement and the many efforts to uplift poor Afrikaners) and secretive entities like the Broederbond. More recently analyses have qualified this relationship between the state and Afrikaners by pointing out that the state has become more closely linked with some Afrikaner interests, such as Cape businessmen, than with others (Gillomee, 1982).

The second trend is the post-1948 replacement, in key positions in the central state bureaucracy, of English-speakers and those identified with the political interests of the United Kingdom by nationalist-minded Afrikaners. One manifestation was the early retirement of military and police personnel who had volunteered for service during the Second World War (Trapido, 1963), accompanied by deliberate neglect of institutions, like the Active Citizen Force in the 1950s, which attracted English-speakers (Grundty, 1978: 34-6).