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Lomé, Togo

It is often claimed that the urban *milieu* engenders violence, confrontation and insecurity, based on cases where social tension is so strong that it actually explodes. Lomé presents a different case. This is a harmonious and peaceful city where the stakes of state power, which according to Max Weber are vested with the monopoly of violence, have become the principal cause of urban violence.

History of a non-violent society

Contrary to what obtains in other African capitals, Lomé enjoyed an exceptional tranquillity until a few years ago. This tranquillity can be explained by two factors: its cultural traditions and its urban geography. The city of Lomé, capital of Togo for a century, is characterised by the Ewé civilisation with its diverse components. This cultural preponderance gives Lomé a strong unity. Everybody, including immigrants, speaks the Mina dialect more fluently than French and there is a distinct consciousness of Lomé's personality rooted in its history.

The Ewé society has rejected violence for a long time. The tradition upon which its identity is founded attests to this: the exodus from the town of Notsé around the 16th Century, in flight from an autocratic tyrant, represents an old and profound rejection of autocracy. The Ewé society broke up into little entities which became the current administrative districts, ruled by the consensus of the lineage heads.

Official power, where it remained, was confined to religious functions which held it in check. Apart from some military incursions by the Ashantis or the Dahomeans in the 19th Century, the whole evolution of the Ewés was peaceful and devoid of outstanding occurrences.

Along the coast lived societies with a more tumultuous past, linked to the violent disturbances which rocked the whole of the Gulf of Guinea during the 17th and 18th Centuries. These groups rapidly dissolved into the Ewé

cultural world. In the West, the conservative theocracy of the king-priests of Togoville held sway. In the East, the trading towns of the Mina experienced a few short civil wars in 1821, 1834, and from 1859 to 1961.

These conflicts generally did not last long – a few days at most. Much powder was wasted in musketries which were noisier than dangerous, and few people were killed. When the colonial powers arrived – the Germans in 1884, having been pushed out by the French, and the English in 1914 – it was naturally out of the question to resist, and colonial peace succeeded pre-colonial peace.

Thus, the south of Togo and in particular, Lomé society, has never bred violence. Lomé is a traders' town, where verbal virtuosity, finesse, and business acumen is admired, not force. Certainly, this society knows how to be hard on the weak and how to give in to passions and fierce jealousies. Dictatorship would also later find all it required here in terms of paid or benevolent spies and informers.

But, for the observer of daily events in the city, it is striking to note that as soon as a brawl begins and insults threaten to yield to the exchange of blows, everyone intervenes to separate the feuding parties. 'Restrain me, or I'll do something bad'. Such is the demand of protagonists, and they are restrained.

The second reason for the security which reigned in Lomé deals with the spatial structure of the city, which surprises those familiar with other African cities. Colonial processes shaped the urban landscape and these cities were systematically divided into homogenous wards: rich, average, poor, very poor wards, and lastly slums where every conceivable problem can be found, and where the 'dangerous classes' are lumped.

Sharp social inequalities are not unknown to Lomé. On account of its history, it has always avoided spatial segregation founded on wealth or origin. The key to this peculiarity resides in its point of departure: Lomé is not a colonial city, nor is it a traditional African town.

The urban development of Lomé

Lomé was created some years before German colonisation by Anlo and Mina traders from the coast who went there for business. Its inhabitants had called for these colonisers to avoid falling into the hands of the neighbouring English, with their heavy custom duties. They took over the

land and put in place land tenure practices which would permanently mark the evolution of the city.

These practices ensured that everyone should feel at home as proprietor of his land and builder of his house. These were visible signs of success, to be bequeathed to the family. The private house is seen as an inviolable sanctuary and all forms of burglary are therefore sacrilege.

From the end of the 19th Century, the large enterprises and the coconut plantations of the periphery were parceled out, allowing many to become proprietors and to establish their homes. The administration, which had to buy the standard 150 hectares like everyone else to form its own ward, ratified these private acquisitions. Later the state would supply a minimum of collective infrastructure. But these were never adequate for the rapid growth which saw the population of Lomé double, and the built environment triple between the 1970 and 1981 census.

The driving force behind this urban activity is the social model imposed on the city by its founding African *bourgeoisie*. The culture of the 'home' obliges every man approaching 40 years of age to build his own family house. This would become the collective property of his heirs who could not sell it under any circumstances. Buyers would at any rate be scarce, since culture dictates that you build your own house rather than live in someone else's.

The abundance of available land, the absence of artificial scarcity introduced by public regulation, the low rate of speculation on lands – since plots are generally bought for one's children, not for their resale value as the prices hardly ever rise – all combine to keep the price of peripheral lands low. Thus, a large proportion of the populace was able to buy.

According to a 1987 study, 46% of family heads were tenants, 12% were accommodated by their family, and 42% were proprietors (a quarter of whom were under 40 years of age). Since the average family size in the household of a tenant family head is 3,8 and 7,3 in a proprietor's household, it is evident that a good part of Lomé's population lives in their own homes. This has obvious stabilising effects on the urban environment.

Since prices were almost the same in all urban wards, rich and poor were able to buy side by side. Naturally, the most fortunate were quicker to erect their buildings. These fortunate occupants could contribute towards

the provision of water and electricity for their ward, an advantage which others would enjoy only when they found the means to settle down. Social democracy, cohabitation of social ethnic classes, and ward life which ensures that residents feel like members of a community, are the fundamental elements of the quality of life in Lomé.

Certainly this society, like all others, has its tensions, its injustices and its poverty. Lomé also has the problem of street children, a phenomenon dating back to the years after the Second World War. Numbers increased during the 1980s from about 100 children to one million (JAD inquiry 1989). The nature of the problem remained unchanged, however, as only 12% of the youths questioned in 1989 were from rural areas (Poiton 1994).

It is the crisis of the urban family more than urban misery which continues to chase children into the streets. Twenty six percent of children questioned said the reason for their flight was not having enough to eat at home. Seventy four percent did not have this problem, complaining rather of 'bad treatment' and 'lack of affection', neither of which form a good basis for a peaceful life. This harshness towards some children is not, however, pervasive.

One thousand marginalised youths in a city which in 1989 had about 600 000 inhabitants – in other words 100 children in every 120 000 homes – remains a modest proportion. The binding solidarity of Lomé society can be seen in the evolution of the average family size which decreased from 5,7 persons in 1958 to 4,9 in 1981. In 1987 the figure climbed to 5,5 people in the face of generalised unemployment.

Lomé lived in relative harmony, especially in comparison with many equivalent cities. It is significant that not long ago, Lomé was one of the rare African coastal capitals where one could stroll anywhere in total security. Delinquency was not, however, unknown and the big market was full of pickpockets and street children who knew how to pick the locks of temptingly parked cars.

From time to time, there were burglaries which were sometimes daring. Public opinion systematically attributed this to Ghanaians or to the Beninoise. Just as the great rural-urban migration of Togolese moved rather toward neighbouring capitals, the youth of Lomé who were candidates for truancy moved to Accra, Lagos or Abidjan to try out their skills, giving Lomé a tranquillity which everyone appreciated.

During 1990 and 1991, security slackened in Lomé independently of the political disturbances we shall discuss later. This stems from the rapid increase in the consumption of hard drugs. Many youths, including those in the streets, have become addicted and will do anything to get their dose. This explains the increase in cases of bag snatching or puncturing of tyres in order to strip the motorist of his briefcase. But this trend was submerged by the mighty wave of political violence at the time.

Society and state violence in the past

There is no society so peaceful as to avoid using primitive violence to repress anti-social components. In the pre-colonial Ewé world, the council of family heads took decisions in this respect. In Togoville, it was the task of the body of king-priests, after seeking advice from the oracles. In Aneho, it was the most powerful *cabécières*, who were reputed to be fair and stern.

The dispensation of justice was one of the first functions the colonialists appropriated. The Germans sentenced people to flogging and imprisonment, with legchains. As soon as the ruthless pacification of the North was accomplished, Togo became a tranquil colony. The German authorities were content with a police force of 500 men commanded by eight white officers, for a territory of 80 000km² and a million inhabitants.

Apart from the political problems that we shall discuss later, delinquency during this time was essentially limited to cases of fowl theft and violations of public hygiene – which was not taken lightly. There were also complaints about burglaries which were always attributed to people from neighbouring territories. The peaceful population, who noisily hailed the arrest of thieves, was hardly ever confronted by colonial violence.

Nevertheless, riots did break out in Lomé in January 1933. There had been a sharp drop in custom revenue owing to the global crisis, and the administration wanted to enforce a higher increase of direct taxation on the population, who expressed their dissatisfaction. The police arrested two ringleaders, with the result that angry market women marched on the governor's palace which they besieged until he capitulated and released the prisoners.

Later that evening, the crowd attacked notables who were deemed too francophile. The following day, security guards at the station had to withdraw under a hail of stones aimed at passing cars and at the windows

of the trading posts. That afternoon the governor capitulated a second time and had the controversial taxes annulled. Calm was restored instantly. This ability to move from tranquillity to extreme agitation, then return to complete calm as if nothing happened, was to remain a surprising characteristic of Lomé half a century later.

After the Second World War and the birth of politics, the Togolese were torn between the nationalists of the *Comité de l'Unité Togolaise* (Cut) and the progressives of the *Parti Togolais du Progrès* (PTP) which was backed by the colonial administration. Political competition was keen and often vindictive, but without violence. Only some rows and two bloody mishaps occurred at Vogon in 1951 and at Pya (Kabyè land) in 1957. Overwhelmed, colonial troops had opened fire on the crowd and the victims numbered several dozen.

Lomé was fief of the Cut party and on 27 April 1958, elections under international control swept away the PTP government in favour of the *Comité de l'Unité Togolaise* (Cut) of Mr Olympio. The city, which voted 80% for the Cut was shaken by a violent demonstration and the detested outgoing president had to flee to the protection of the French police.

For six weeks, the victory of those whom the administration had persecuted for such a long time paved the way for excesses. People were beaten and houses ransacked – bearing in mind how sacrilegious the violation of a house is to the people of Lomé. The paramilitary security service of the Cut, the *ablosodia*, henceforth maintained its adversaries in the grip of fear. For the first time, political violence went beyond words. It would hardly ever be reversed.

Violence as the foundation of state power

The Olympio regime proclaimed independence on April 27 1960, and quickly glided towards authoritarianism. In 1961 the government prevented the opposition from presenting candidates at the legislative elections, leading to a *de facto* single party regime. The press was also forced to tow the line. Leaders, opposition activists and former political companions were forced into exile, imprisoned or accused of conspiracy. Some were severely tortured.

Today, the youth of Lomé, who passionately claim to be democrats and heirs of Olympio, are hard pressed to admit that the 'father of independence' was also the undoer of democracy in Togo. Yet, this is the

reality. Former Cut party adherents agree that the regime descended into dictatorship and imprisoned many people, but they argue that 'at that time, people used to come out of it alive'.

On January 13 1963, Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated by a commando of soldiers largely from the North who were demobilised from the army. Olympio had refused to recruit them into the small Togolese army which he maintained at a symbolic level. Above their professional claims, the soldiers had no political programme and invited political leaders opposed to the assassinated president to take over. The latter accepted, proclaiming reconciliation without investigating the murder and punishing the guilty.

Thus, a rather unstable Second Republic was formed, which although shaken by fierce rivalries, nevertheless restored freedom. Along with freedom, however, came the get-rich-quick mentality and squandering of state resources, which soon discredited the new regime. Supporters of the First Republic planned a reclamation of power through a rebellious riot, which the army appeared to favour.

In November 1962, a crowd gathered at the *place Fréaujardin* – the traditional ground for popular gatherings – and began to move toward the administrative district. The army then changed its stance and severely repressed the protest. For the first time there was fighting in the streets of Lomé.

With its rapidly increasing size, the army became the sole obstacle to the return of Olympio's followers. It was thus to the relief of many that on January 13 1967, the army announced that it was taking power. There was no resistance as President Grunitzky practically surrendered after a telephone call. This date was later to become the Togolese national day – the *Fête de la Libération*.

Military dictatorship and bankruptcy

After three months, Colonel Eyadema officially took over the reins of power. He was very popular and cleverly exploited the themes of national unity and reconciliation, which were certainly necessary after two decades of political hatred. But divergent opinions could not be expressed and soldiers beat up citizens with impunity. Satisfaction soon gave way to fear, as the new regime abrogated all forms of freedom and all the institutions of civil society.

A single party, the Togolese People's Rally (RTP), was created in 1969, which ensured the enthusiastic support of the populace. Conspiracies, real or imagined, inspired a wave of arrests and tortures, some of which resulted in death. Totalitarianism blossomed with frenzied propaganda, the enrollment of people, and especially the youth in 'entertainment groups', and mostly an unbridled personality cult built up around the person of the Head of State. People spied on and denounced their neighbours for fear of being denounced first, as Togo became dominated by fear.

The placement of new staff in positions of responsibility whose principal talent was political flattery, led Togo to economic disaster. From 1982, the regime acknowledged bankruptcy, which could largely be attributed to the treachery of civil servants. Salaries and employment in the public sector were more tightly controlled and the most delirious aspects of the political folklore were toned down. Togo became the 'good pupil' of the World Bank, bearing a decade of grave economic difficulties for Africa as a whole, appreciably better than other countries.

In August and September 1985, bombs exploded in Lomé, targeting symbols of the regime. Unable to determine who was responsible, the police made a wave of blind arrests, trying in vain to obtain results through torture. The panic of the authorities provoked an outbreak of heinous fascism. The population were mobilised by force against unknown 'terrorists' and their 'accomplices'.

Lomé passed through particularly difficult times. Then Amnesty International intervened, showing the extent to which Togo's external image as the 'Switzerland of Africa', held dear by the regime, had been damaged. With the government under pressure, more bombs in December had practically no repercussions. A year later, in September 1986, a commando of the so-called 'terrorists' attempted an attack on the city.

The attack was neutralised without difficulty as it was infiltrated by spies. But soldiers who were facing fire for the first time, panicked and began shooting in every direction, even killing each other. The exact number of deaths is unknown, probably running into hundreds. Lomé, which had passed through two World Wars unscathed, became a battleground. Paradoxically, this episode which terrified the population, engendered a certain liberalisation of the regime. Fear was whittled down appreciably in people's minds.

A National Commission for Human Rights was even created under the leadership of Barrister Agboyibor, a lawyer known for his courage and his quiet reformation of security force practices. Basking in the euphoria of its new acceptance, the regime went as far as granting press freedom in 1990, assuming no one would be daring enough to use it. That represented a misunderstanding of the inhabitants of Lomé and their critical mind.

If the Third Republic appeared to be solid, it was nevertheless bogged down by the progressive weakening of the Togolese economy and its corollary, the massive reduction in employment. The regime's reaction was a systematic regionalist nepotism. In the rare openings for administrative posts, southerners were largely sidelined. Kabyè workers were placed at the head of almost all state owned companies and those in the para-public sector.

Violence as a political weapon

Like a sudden burst of thunder the discontent of the youths exploded in October 1990. In August that year, arrests had been made in student circles for issues concerning 'subversive' elements and opponents of the government. The UNCHR protested against the ill treatment of prisoners and Colonel Eyadema magnanimously pardoned the students, sending only adults to the tribunal.

The audience at the tribunal showed a rowdy solidarity with the accused and police were sent to quell the uproarious crowd, even if this meant beating up the lawyers. The youths left the tribunal, spilling out into the heart of the city, attacking and destroying police stations, and plundering public property and signboards of streets named in honour of the regime. Twenty years of oppression and hate suddenly exploded.

Government was unsure how to react. A month later, a strike of taxi drivers also degenerated into opposition protest. There were violent clashes with the army and protests were no longer confined to Lomé, gaining ground in all of the large towns in the interior like Kpalimé, Atakpamé and mostly Sokodé, former capital of the North. For a quarter of a century this town had been methodically displaced in favour of Kara, the headquarters of Kabyè land.

During this time, the free press rapidly became more daring and openly hostile towards the President. Newspapers had to be auctioned, with

people rushing for them like bread. Commercial life also increased along with the compulsive reading of the Togolese, who started buying three or four newspapers per week.

In March 1991, students took action at the University. They were brutally repressed, following which women took to the streets for the first time since 1933 to protest the treatment of 'their children'. The police charged and struck blindly. Soldiers who were then let loose invaded houses, brutalised inhabitants, wrecked property, and fired tear gas. Thirteen people were killed and 328 wounded.

Public opinion was in revolt and henceforth all legitimate claims to power were contested. During the night of April 10, the army threw protesters from the Old Bè into a lagoon along with grenades. In the morning, 28 corpses of men and women were recovered. The horror which shook the nation only encouraged people to continue the revolt.

To cause a diversion, the official media focused disproportionately on the violence against Kabyè families – Colonel Eyadema's support base. People were regrouped in wards to the North of the lagoon and pressure was exerted on non-Kabyès in these areas – until then a strong majority – to leave or tow the line. Thus, for the first time in Lomé, an ethnic (and political) ghetto came into being.

At the same time, the authorities made symbolic concessions to the people. The national anthem of independence (formerly considered subversive) and the celebrations of April 27 were restored. This change in government attitude was welcomed by the people, but because nothing decisive was obtained, opposition leaders declared a general strike in June 1991.

The first days of the total strike were peaceful and rather joyous. Then word spread that 'the Kabyès were coming'. In an instant, barricades were erected, with the youths in the front line and adults behind. The whole city was ready and soldiers had to fight desperately against a hail of stones. Thanks to the mediation of the French Ambassador, Colonel Eyadema finally yielded and granted a national conference with full powers to place the country on a new footing. Indescribable joy immediately spread throughout the city.

The conference, which brought together 900 people representing the country, commenced with immense enthusiasm. It was mostly an occasion for uncovering all the atrocities committed under the dictatorship. Since everyone among the elite more or less participated in

the regime during the last quarter of a century, general pardon was granted to all who asked for it. Colonel Eyadema, however, never asked for pardon.

Ultimately, a provisional constitution was drawn up and Barrister Koffigoh, president of the Togolese League for Human Rights, was elected Prime Minister. Everybody believed that democracy had been established for good. Colonel Eyadema had, however, never envisaged losing power. It took him a month to recover and take the offensive with the only means remaining: violence and the power to kill.

Democracy again defeated through violence

In October 1991, soldiers seized the radio station and began to broadcast Eyademist slogans. Youths confronted them and the army coldly opened fire with machine guns, killing and wounding dozens. Political violence was changing in nature. Henceforth, one would think twice before taking to the streets.

This was only the first step toward the recapture of power through the force of arms, but the appearance of legality was always maintained. The major shock came a month later, following an attempt by the provisional parliament to dissolve Colonel Eyadema's Togolese People's Rally. Hordes of rioting protesters from Adéwi destroyed everything on their way through the northern wards of the city.

The official quarters of the Prime Minister were then surrounded and the radio house occupied by soldiers who broadcasted menacing messages that 'for every stone thrown at any member of the security forces, the reply will be blasts of fire'. About 30 civilians were shot dead in the streets and the terrified population went into hiding. A brief reprieve followed the announcement that the French army would arrive in Benin, and the soldiers withdrew their siege on the Prime Minister's premises.

But the joy was short lived, as the French did nothing. The army then returned and launched an attack. In the butchery which followed, the attackers recorded more deaths than the defenders. As the old German palace went up in flames, the Prime Minister surrendered. He was taken to Colonel Eyadema who, having shown his power, let him go free.

After a month of tense negotiations, former Prime Minister Koffigoh accepted only a government of national 'unity', in which ministers of the

former regime would participate. In preparing for elections, the census in 1992 revealed that the North – Eyadema's support base – which all believed was evenly matched with the South, contributed only a third of the country's population. This meant it would be impossible for Eyadema to win the election unless he controlled the process.

Operations then increased to prevent normal political activity, ranging from political assassinations to the ransacking of the electoral commission's computer installations by soldiers. To silence the media, the printing presses of the main weekly newspapers were attacked, and machines and journalists thrown out of the windows. Newspapers would, however, continue to appear, incisive as ever.

Night life in Lomé was also rocked by armed attacks and hold-ups which public rumour attributed to soldiers, both in and out of uniform. Numerous luxury cars were seized and whether curfews were official or not, the streets were deserted from early evening. It is difficult to attribute this violence to political will or 'pure' criminality. It is possible that those sent to destroy and terrorise acquired a liking for it. The public ascribed the insecurity to the army and the pillagers of Adéwi.

As the one year period fixed for the transition process approached, the situation came to a standstill and elections were impossible. During negotiations, democratic leaders had to accept a new government in exchange for prolonging the transition. This time, the ministers of the former regime had the essential power.

The new grip was so evident and intolerable, that after renewed violence by soldiers against the provisional parliament, the opposition proclaimed an unlimited general strike from November 16 1992. The strike was effective and even the informal sectors deserted the streets. The general mood was far from what had prevailed in the June 1991 strike. Time passed and the resumption of some trading and discreet dealings allowed the population to hold out. To break this resistance, the government resorted to the most extreme form of violence.

In January 1993, during the mediation visit with the French and the German Ministers of Cooperation in Lomé, security forces opened fire, at close range and without warning, on the immense crowd gathered in the Fréau-Jardin square to welcome the ministers. It was impossible to estimate the extent of human loss, as military lorries carefully removed the dead and dying from public view.

Five days later the whole eastern part of the city was attacked in cold blood. Soldiers swept through the streets and in the evening, as if in reward, they quickly and methodically ransacked all the big shops in the heart of the city. Terrified by this unprecedented massacre, the populace fled *en masse* towards neighbouring Ghana and Benin. In the following weeks the city appeared deserted, yet the strike continued.

The threat of immediate dismissal and individual pressure gradually led to the fraying of the strike. During April and May 1993 most civil servants returned to work and the strike was defeated. Exhausted opponents were forced to sign an accord in July 1993 which allowed for elections in a country fully under the control of Colonel Eyadema. International supervision ensured that the presidential elections took place under formal conditions. The prevailing atmosphere was, however, one of tight control of the North where declared opponents were harassed, propaganda was used in the public media and electoral lists were manipulated.

The certainty of a bloodbath in the event of victory by the opposition forced its leader, Edem Kodjo, to withdraw at the last minute, calling for a boycott of the elections. Colonel Eyadema was thus triumphantly elected by a third of voters officially registered. The legislative elections of February-March 1994 confirmed this result. The Togolese People's Rally (RTP) won almost exactly the number of votes that Eyadema had, while two of the democratic parties, the UTD of Edem Kodjo, and the CAR of barrister Agboyibor, won the rest.

By refusing to accept his party's electoral defeat, Eyadema was able to manoeuvre brilliantly and divide the opposition. He won over the support of Edem Kodjo who had been appointed Prime Minister after interminable negotiations. This allowed Eyadema to have parliamentary majority and thereafter to preside over a Fourth Republic which had all the appearances of legal system.

Conclusion

Are Togo's problems solved? Has calm returned to Lomé for good? Alas, it is not certain since political violence still occurs. In January 1994, a 'terrorist attack' at the Ghanaian border brought about a bombardment lasting several days, with summary executions of young non-combatants, some of whom were killed in their hospital beds. Public opinion speaks of 200 dead, as corpses remained in the streets for several days before being removed by the army.

In May 1994, an armoured truck belonging to the Central Bank was attacked in the administrative district. The attackers made off with 9,5 billion FCFA, a record by African standards. Fear continues to reign in Lomé, which is still under a *de facto* curfew imposed by soldiers who do as they please. Economic activity is almost at a standstill and salaries are not paid.

The population is at the end of its tether, profoundly frustrated and hopeless, convinced that they have been abandoned by all. Such feelings of hopelessness, hate and vengeance may lead to new forms of spontaneous or organised violence. Only real reconciliation can prevent this. But there cannot be pardon without a clear recognition of the facts, particularly the nature of the violence which has haunted the country for a third of a century, as described here.

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Cities

Under

Siege

**Urban Violence in South,
Central and West Africa**

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and
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