

CHAPTER 17

The Exploitation of Apprentices in Togo

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The 1981 census found that the cities of Togo had 22,750 apprentices (30 per cent of them girls) working in the informal sectors of production, commerce and services, 11,500 of them in Lomé (32 per cent girls). The boys (5 per cent aged less than fifteen years; 76 per cent between fifteen and twenty-four) were scattered over a wide range of sectors: 4500 in transport, 4300 in various services, 4000 in construction, 2000 apprentice tailors, 1800 carpenters, 600 mechanics. The girls (7 per cent younger than fifteen; 80 per cent between fifteen and twenty-four) were overwhelmingly employed as apprentice seamstresses (86 per cent), the next largest category being hairdressers (5 per cent).

It is hard to say exactly how the figures have developed since then, but one thing is for sure: very large percentages of the youngsters dropping out of school have gone into apprenticeships in the informal sector where, as we shall see, there are a good many available openings. The Kodjoviakopé-Nyékonakpoè¹ division of the Tailors' and Dress-makers' Union recorded 300 indentures for the year 1986 alone (90 per cent girls), in a district which already had a garment workshop on every street corner. The clothing market may not be growing at that same rate, of course, but the 'bosses' are no less generous in offering opportunities because, in Togo, having apprentices means profits.

In a paper produced with a social services working group,² we estimated that there were 25,000 apprentices in Lomé and 10,000 in the rest of the country in 1987, not counting all those who wished to become an apprentice but lacked the necessary means. These figures certainly must have grown since then.

The Establishment of Apprenticeship Practices

Apprenticeship first emerged in Togo when modern manual occupations were introduced at the turn of the nineteenth century (baroque-style construction

techniques having been brought into the country earlier in the century by repatriated settlers from Brazil). Most of today's practising tailors, carpenters, mechanics and typographers are the direct descendants of those who learned their trade from 1912 onwards at the remarkable 'Brotherhomé' School of Professional Studies run by the Lomé Catholic Mission.³ The handful of craftsmen working during the colonial period were regarded as prominent citizens, not as wealthy as the shopkeepers and coconut plantation-owners but well-off nevertheless and highly esteemed. Lomé people still talk about the tailors Comlan 'Télagan'⁴ and Gaspar Noudekor, not to mention Aboki 'Gbèdè' the blacksmith, Gbadoé the carpenter and the photographer Alex Acolatsé.⁵

Apprenticeship became codified remarkably early. In 1924, the French governors of Togo in their annual report to the League of Nations described it thus:

The craftsman agreeing to teach a child his trade may demand no payment in return. It is understood that on completing his apprenticeship, a young man shall remain with his employer for a certain period of time – two years as a rule. During such time, he is employed as a worker without fixed wages but receives, in addition to his bed and board, a share of the sum his employer takes in earnings from the produce of his labour. Sometimes, in more progressive establishments, a privately settled contract stipulates that the employer be paid compensation should the apprentice quit prior to the agreed date.

This paternalistic-type system (where the employer treats his apprentice like his own son and the latter 'shows his gratitude' by working free of charge) still prevails in countries such as Burkina, Zaire or the Niger. In Togo, as in the Ivory Coast or Cameroon, apprenticeship is no longer free.

Lomé 'bosses' began demanding payment in 1945 and quite hefty sums at that, even more expensive than today's prices given the depreciation of the currency: in 1950, a four-year training course could cost an apprentice tailor between 8000 and 10,000 CFA francs⁶ (i.e. more than half the price of a Singer sewing machine)⁷ plus five or six bottles of what they call 'the hard stuff' (whisky, brandy, rum or gin – quality labels only!).

Written contracts first appeared as early as 1924 and soon became systematized, usually with a compensation clause included to cover the artisan in case the apprentice gave up before having paid for his/her release. Normal procedure is currently as follows:

1. The apprentice reports to a workshop once a verbal agreement has been made between the workshop-owner and the parent or legal guardian. An entry fee is paid in cash (between 1000 and 5000 CFA francs) in addition to one or two bottles of 'hard stuff' and a few of 'soft'. This is to help 'see to the rules'.

2. At the end of a three-month trial period, if all parties are in favour, a contract is signed and the first half of the agreed fees is paid along with the drinks (full details of which will have been laid down in writing). Most

contracts last for a term of three years (apart from hairdressers, for whom six months suffice). Shorter ones (two years) are more expensive, longer ones (four years) less so;⁸ employers are keen to keep hold of an apprentice for as long as they can.

3. When the contract ends, the apprentice is 'released'. Outstanding fees are settled along with the same number of bottles as before plus, in most cases, the ingredients for a celebratory feast (the most expensive rice, yams, oil and biscuits possible; a roasting fowl, goat or sheep; chairs; a sound system) at which the apprentice is officially 'released' before an assembly of invited guests – parents, colleagues, union representatives – and presented with a printed and calligraphed 'certificate'; despite having no real value in the eyes of the law, this document is regarded with the same quasi-religious reverence as if it were an academic degree.

4. It is very common to find that an employer still expects his apprentice to show his 'gratitude' by supplementing the various 'gifts' with three to six months' extra work, free of charge; only then will he give the 'blessing' which is seen as essential for later success in professional life. The young person can then finally set himself up in business⁹ and, on the strength of his certificate, in turn recruit apprentices of his own.

The Logic of the System

Informal sector economics operate on the basis of small sums of money rapidly changing hands between large numbers of people of very modest means within a regime of limitless competition. As a rule, the customers are more interested in rock-bottom prices than top quality when purchasing goods or having them repaired; apart from actively encouraging mediocrity, this forces craftsmen to work virtually at cost price in order to keep their customers.

Profits are therefore extremely low, allowing craftsmen virtually no chance of being able to afford to pay a journeyman's wages (as much as 800 CFA francs a day, when the employer himself is only taking in 1200).¹⁰

Apprentices thus serve a double purpose: (1) to supply free, relatively unskilled labour (skills being of scarcely any consequence here) which actually bears fruit very quickly – by the end of the first few months, apprentices have already learnt the basic essentials for their future careers with some having even mastered the finer points of the trade; and (2) to renew workshop capital, for apprenticeship fees mean a fresh injection of money that the employer can use to cover his living and equipment costs.¹¹

It is easy to see why, during an economic recession when there are too many people after too few jobs, employers tend not only to hire apprentices but also to raise indenture prices.

Apprenticeship is therefore extremely important to the development – if not the very existence – of the small-scale production sector which is in turn a key part of everyday life in urban areas for the masses of people earning

barely enough to meet their needs. So the employer therefore needs apprentices, lots of apprentices; meanwhile, each apprentice 'released' becomes an additional competitor for his former master: not as proficient perhaps, but certainly more flexible in his prices.

Although the system is coherent enough, certain aspects of it are, or become, far too unfavourable to the most disadvantaged young people, who find themselves increasingly excluded from it.

Soaring Costs and the Official Riposte

Stagnating business and the influx of young people into the workshops have together produced a very strong rise in indenture prices: from between 15,000 and 30,000 CFA francs in the early 1980s, to 40, 60 or even 80,000 by 1987-88, with certain profitable sectors such as hairdressing or electronic repairs asking 100,000 CFA francs.¹²

Some employers may well tend to ask for fewer bottles (whose unit price has also risen sharply) as more ready cash is seen as fair enough compensation for less drink. But others continue making exorbitant demands.¹³

These (albeit not very old) traditions may well have some cultural and religious aspects about them, which everybody – employers, apprentices and parents alike – regards as some sort of proof of credibility: metal-workers, for example, have to make a sacrificial offering to Gu, the guardian spirit of blacksmiths, and the tools of a future craftsman must be drenched in the blood of a chicken, otherwise they will be liable to injure him. But there is a great deal of abuse with regard to the compulsory expenses.

More and more employers are ordering novice apprentices to waste no time acquiring their own tools (or the tools that they themselves might need): until they have done so, they will have to settle for merely watching while the others work. Imported tools from Europe are very pricey; although less expensive, those coming from Nigeria or China are of mediocre quality and not as long-lasting. For carpenters or mechanics, a 50,000-CFA-franc outlay on equipment is practically the bare minimum: 100,000 would be required for a more operational range. Naturally, a graduating apprentice needs his own tools to start up a business; but buying them all in the early stages of an apprenticeship – rather than spreading the costs over the full three years – puts an overwhelming strain on the parents' finances. In some cases, the apprentice is not even allowed to keep tools – e.g. a set of spanners – that he will have put to all manner of uses over the years. The same goes for the often very costly uniforms that many workshops (especially in tailoring) demand should be worn either for everyday work or else – an even greater luxury – for the release-day celebrations.

Costs such as these can be crippling for less well-off families and many apprentices are forced either to drop out or to remain at their workshops for years and years without the prospect of release.

In 1989, the Ministry of Technical Education and Vocational Training (METFP) issued three decrees¹⁴ laying down precise rules governing apprenticeship conditions (a forty-hour week, one day off per week, thirty days off a year), the term of indentures (from one to four years, according to the seven professional categories regrouping the seventy listed trades) and above all, fees (according to the trade: 18,000 CFA francs in the food trade, 30,000 in hairdressing; such sums being inclusive of 'all ceremony-related charges and other fees called for during the course of the indenture's lifetime'; and employers lost the right to demand drinks of any kind).

If the stipulations regarding working conditions were always bound to go unheeded (how many inspectors would it take to check up on the 8000 or so workshops in the city of Lomé alone?), the war on costs was certainly worth a try. Indeed, the Togo Tailors' and Dress-makers' Union (for unstructured bodies can sometimes undertake their own structuring) has managed to keep the cost of a dress-making course stable at 24,000 CFA francs for several years, with union delegates officially present at the signing of an indenture and an apprentice's 'release' ceremony. For one or two years, the employers seemed to have been brought to heel thanks to the robust authority of a then unchallenged state; and they more or less complied with the restrictions laid down in the decrees of 1989.¹⁵ But it was not long before control slackened and prices have apparently returned to previous levels. Having said that, the current recession makes it impossible to carry out thoroughgoing research or to extrapolate.¹⁶

Use and Abuse of Apprentices

The logic of the system allows some bosses to take on an unbelievable number of apprentices: dozens of them (as many as eighty have been found at a cabinet-maker's; twenty working on two sewing machines at a tailor's). What can anyone actually learn under such conditions? How can sixteen people manage with a single refrigerator?

Notwithstanding the Togolese legislator's calls for compulsory schooling, there are still children under the age of fifteen in the workshops. They are generally not there to learn, but to be used as dogsbodies for the chores: the shopping, the laundry, the dishes. If they are actually 'released' at seventeen or eighteen years of age, what chance will they ever have of being hired for waged work, or being able to set themselves up in business and find customers? Such children as these will therefore remain limitlessly exploitable labourers way beyond the customary three years and three months.

Before the official formulation of a standard model indenture (which we cannot safely say has really been generalized) each employer had his own forms, written in very rough French and with a generally suspicious and one-sidedly demanding attitude towards the apprentice. Many of these contracts make a point of stipulating that the apprentice shall remain entirely at the

disposal of his boss and 'seniors', that is those who have been at the workshop longer. It offers numerous opportunities for abuse, where apprentices, especially the youngest, are used for all sorts of chores that have nothing to do with the trade they are supposed to be learning: cultivating the boss's fields or making breeze-blocks for the house he is building. Breaches of discipline are often punished with overly severe blows (particularly to the hands) and genuinely cruel humiliation.¹⁷

Equally deplorable is the practice of making apprentices keep watch overnight at the workshop, be it by rota or because they are living on the premises for want of a home of their own. Beyond the attendant hygiene problems, these night duties can leave them in potentially risky situations (e.g. initiation into drug-taking).

What is more, the quality of workshop training is in many cases far from satisfactory. There are, of course, employers who take the time and trouble to explain to their apprentices what they are doing, making them strip down and reassemble a given piece of equipment as many times as is necessary for them to assimilate it. But there are others who, out of fear or jealousy of potential competitors, would appear to go so far as carefully to keep certain techniques hidden from their apprentices. In any event, not everybody is gifted with the talents of a teacher; just because someone has a thorough working knowledge of his or her trade does not necessarily mean he or she knows how to impart it.

The apprentice's 'release' is a mark of success only in that it proves he or she has managed to last the course, been obedient and met all the necessary expenses; it is not confirmation of his or her abilities. Once again tailors (along with typists) are the pioneers, as they make their prospective 'releasees' take an examination to show what they are capable of doing. By the way, 'releasees' may in turn recruit apprentices who know even less than they do. This can send a trade spinning into a downwards spiral of deteriorating technical quality, with ever-increasing numbers of workers of limited ability: people who know how to repair the engine of a Renault but not a Peugeot, are bewildered by a two-way switch or can do nothing but endlessly reproduce the same pieces of furniture or shirts.

To tell the truth, making apprentices take an end-of-apprenticeship examination may also turn out to be something of a trap. It is very easy to withhold the certificate and force them to return to the workshop for another six months or a year.

So the large numbers of candidates applying should not deflect our attention from how hard life is for an apprentice in Lomé. In any case, being young is in itself already enough of a handicap, for youngsters are exposed to systematic bullying by anyone dressed in a uniform or carrying a firearm. In these days of crisis, with no clear paths to the future, it is to their credit that they are still, in spite of it all, striving to grow into adult men and women.

Sample Indentures Offered to Apprentice Joiners in 1993

SAMPLE I

We, the undersigned, Mr [Parent], on the one hand, and Mr [Employer] on the other, have agreed that [Apprentice] shall be submitted for apprenticeship under the following terms:

The duration of the apprenticeship shall be: 3 years, 4 years or 5 years, from [date] to [date]

- Three (3) years: Thirty-five thousand CFA francs (35,000 CFA francs)
- Four (4) years: Twenty-five thousand CFA francs (25,000 CFA francs)
- Five (5) years: Fifteen thousand CFA francs (15,000 CFA francs)

ON ENTRY: 6 bottles of 'hard liquor' + a down payment of half the agreed sum

ON RELEASE: 1 flagon of palm wine – 1 case of beer – 12 yams – 6 bottles of hard liquor – 1 case of soft drinks – 1 ram – the remaining half of the agreed sum

ARTICLES

- Article 1 – Each apprentice shall undergo a trial period of three (3) months' duration.
- Article 2 – During his apprenticeship, the apprentice shall obey and put himself at the mercy of his employer. He must promptly execute every task he is given.
- Article 3 – He shall be responsible for every tool placed in his keeping.
- Article 4 – The father or legal guardian shall pay for any acts of sabotage he might commit.
- Article 5 – If he should terminate his apprenticeship prior to the agreed date, the father or legal guardian shall pay his employer the sum of 25,000 CFA francs.
- Article 6 – The father or legal guardian shall request permission in advance for any leave of absence.
- Article 7 – Each day of absence without leave shall not be counted as a completed day of apprenticeship and shall thus extend the agreed finishing date by one day.
- Article 8 – At the workshop, the apprentice shall comply with all instructions issued by the shop foreman.

Date

Signed

1. Legal Guardian
2. Employer
3. Apprentice
4. Witness

SAMPLE 2

Apprentice's family name:
 given name(s):
 date of birth:
 place:

DURATION OF INDENTURE

- 3 years: 1st payment 30,000 CFA francs + Rum, J.B., Martini, Gordon's Gin
 2nd payment 30,000 CFA francs + Rum, J.B., Martini, Gordon's Gin
- 4 years: 1st payment 25,000 CFA francs + Rum, J.B., Martini, Gordon's Gin
 2nd payment 25,000 CFA francs + Rum, J.B., Martini, Gordon's Gin
- The apprentice must work steadily and shall never leave his place of work without prior permission. Costs of keep and food shall be charged to the parents.
- If ever the apprentice is disobedient or impolite enough to quit the workshop without his employer's knowledge, his parents shall pay us a sum of 100,000 CFA francs; but the employer does not have the right to dismiss his apprentice without the knowledge of the parents.
- The apprentice is under obligation to work overtime (including nights) with his employer 'free of charge' should the need rise [...]
- The workshop opening hours are from 06:30 until 12:30 mornings and from 14:30 until 18:30 afternoons.
- When the apprentice returns to his lodgings, he may not rightfully take from the workshop anything (such as tools) belonging to his employer; should he do so he shall be dismissed forthwith.
- The apprentice's parents shall equip their child with his own tools.

Two copies of this contract shall be signed, one to be given to the parents and the other to be kept by the employer.

Witnesses on behalf of the apprentice

Director:

- 1:
 2:

Notes

1. Districts of south-west Lomé, close to the frontier with Ghana (pop. 40,000).
2. 'General Discussion Document on the Problems of Young Apprentices in Urban Areas', Lomé, General Direction of the Social Services, Department of Youth Protection and Advancement, 1987 (9 pages), a number of whose elements have been used in this article.
3. *Brotherhomé* literally means 'with the brothers'.
4. Lit. 'Big Tailor', from the pidgin English: *Taylor-gan* (*gan* = big).

5. See, in particular, Y. Marguerat and T. Péleï, 'Si Lomé m'était conté', 2 vols (1992-94), Lomé, University of Bénin Press.

6. Multiply by 10 for the 1993 rates (1500 CFA francs = ± US\$ 1). All figures given here are from before the January 1994 devaluation of the CFA franc.

7. Today, a Singer costs between 60,000 and 80,000 CFA francs, although there are high quality Chinese copies selling for about 35,000 CFA francs.

8. For instance: 2 years = 40,000 CFA francs; 3 years = 30,000 CFA francs; 4 years = 20,000 CFA francs (e.g. for an apprentice plumber in the Nyékonakpoè district of Lomé).

9. Often taking with him a share of his employer's clientele; all the more reason why the latter tends to delay the parting of the ways for a maximum length of time.

10. A few journeymen may be found working at the most highly skilled garages and joinery shops.

11. Which accounts for the employers' generally hostile attitude towards contracts allowing payment on a monthly basis, an arrangement a lot of parents would prefer. Only a few haute couture dress-makers operate a monthly payment system (e.g. 3500 CFA francs a month over a period of one year or a year and a half).

12. Many such examples have been observed in various occupations and various districts of Lomé.

13. A case observed in 1987 at a cabinet-maker's shop on the road to the airport: on top of the basic 30,000 CFA francs for the contract itself, one apprentice had to bring with him twenty bottles of 'the hard stuff', fifty-six bottles of beer or lemonade (costing a total of 45,000 CFA francs) plus 35,000 CFA francs' worth of food and other sundry items for a large banquet and a further 2,500 to pay for printing the certificate - in short, the monthly salary of a high school teacher.

14. 89.013, 89.014 and 89.015; METFP, 25 April 1989.

15. It was naturally far easier for a social services official or an expatriate like myself to demand adherence to the official 1989 indenture than it would be for a humble father in a position of inferiority *vis-à-vis* his son's future employer.

16. Observed in early 1995: a 50,000-CFA-franc indenture had become the strict minimum in all trades right across the board - and not without some hard bargaining - and the bosses had started demanding their bottles again (with drinks prices having doubled since devaluation); meanwhile, the economic and political crisis has left families high and dry and the decrees of 1989 are now a thing of the past.

17. Running away from this is one of the reasons why there are so many young outcasts on the streets.

Marguerat Yves. (2000)

The exploitation of apprentices in Togo. In : Schlemmer Bernard (ed.). The exploited child. Londres : Zed Books, 239-247

Exploited children : child labour and proletarianization, Paris (FRA), 1994/11/24-26. ISBN 1-85649-721-6