

# In the Hope for Change: Media and Audience in the Post-Charisma Era in Benin and Togo

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## **Introduction: Media and People in the Changing Era of West Africa**

Benin is a West African nation in which political leadership has changed three times since the democratic transition. Togo, another West African nation, has also experienced political turmoil since the death of its president and his son's subsequent takeover in 2005. These neighboring states have many things in common such as democratization passed by a National Conference, (*Conférence Nationale*) generational changes in charismatic political leaders, and an animated private media-backed dialogue among the people. In addressing the recent political situations in these states, we consider people's hopes in an era of post-charismatic political actors (Alber, van der Geest & Whyte 2008). The charisma of these countries' former presidents has had a significant influence. We focus on events other than action and mobilization such as demonstrations, voting, marches, party action. This refers to earlier studies of African political anthropology taking up various grassroots actions as political expression.

Comi Toulabor, a Togolese political scientist, contrasted people's representation of power with legitimated political power and then examined political power after democratization, not only in the realm of traditional politics but also in its cultural aspects (Toulabor 1992). Considering people's derision, mockery, and rumors of power, he examined the local political situation as well as the use of religious or mythical symbols.<sup>(1)</sup>

Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian political scientist and thinker, indicated

that African rulers and people were connected via the conviviality of various events or festivals, citing newspaper cartoons as an example (Mbembe 2001). While the government called on people to participate in the events, mobilizing symbolically, people responded by evading them.<sup>(2)</sup> In a postcolonial political structure there has been a shift from political and economic subjugation in one direction to a subtle power relation, which works in multi- and two-way directions as well as subconsciously, according to Mbembe.

In his ethnography of Africa's media, Francis Nyamnjoh, a Cameroonian political anthropologist, confirmed that media play a role in empowering people and supporting democracy, yet he indicates the insufficient deontology and negative function of media in Africa (Nyamnjoh 2005).

These studies, called *Le politique par le bas*, have brought to light things that had not been focused on previously, such as rumors, cartoons, and convivial events, and determined the political significance in their influence, therefore creating a shift in the history of African studies. Based on these studies, this paper explores opinions expressed in radio programs and interviews regarding politics that indicate a hope people have for the future, which have not always been apparent.<sup>(3)</sup> The following sections will address recent political situations in Togo and Benin.<sup>(4)</sup>

### After Eyadéma in Togo

After 38 years in power, Togo dictator, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, died in February of 2005. Acting as the father of his nation with funds from phosphorus resources and French financing, he ruled the nation with so-called *Eyadémaïsm* and deified himself by establishing memorial days, places, and events associated with his own political biography (Piot 2010 : 26-28). Immediately following his death the Constitution was revised and his son succeeded him in power, triggering severe criticism at home and overseas. Ensuing demonstrations and conflicts with the army caused approximately 23,000 to flee to neighboring countries. The disturbance was so played up in the media that people still have vivid memories of the events of 2005.

The new president, Faure Gnassingbé, and his government made efforts to appease internal opposition, but they were firmly rejected. Most Togolese were tired of 40 years of domination by the dynastic Gnassingbé family. For instance, the result of the national election in 2007 showed that the Union of the Forces for Change (UFC), the first opposition party, amassed considerable votes as the majority of those in the southern region, the center of politics and economy, supported it.

However, the Faure government carried out domestic reforms little by little, repairing roads in urban regions such as Lomé and Kara, improving medical facilities, and so forth. The EU's economic sanctions have lifted since Togo's government pledged to democratize at Brussels in 2004. In the presidential election of 2010, Faure was elected, receiving over 60% of the votes, with the result that the opposition could not unite and nominate one candidate. This situation created a turning point in the political history of Togo.

### **Groping for a New Order**

In May of 2010, Gilchrist Olympio, the leader of the first opposition party, determined to form a coalition with the Rally of Togolese People (RPT), the ruling party, which resulted in the UFC's obtaining seven cabinet posts (Tété 2012 : 150-155). This was a symbolic moment of reconciliation between the family of Gnassingbé and that of Olympio, which had been in opposition for 47 years. People were disheartened by this reconciliation and viewed it as the collapse of a charismatic leader. However, it became obvious that a new generation had replaced the political actors of the Independence Era or Democratic Turn.

Togo suffered a serious economic crisis when European investment declined and the world economy went into a recession in the 2000s. The UFC seemed to have no choice except coalition because domestic conflict would turn out to be futile and it could no longer remain the opposition party. After 40 years, however, the UFC had not inherited and thus could not transmit the know-how required to manage the state, as indicated by Olympio after-

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wards (*Liberté*, No. 726, 20 May 2010).

In 2012, Faure dissolved the RPT of the old regime and transformed it into the party of the Union for the Republic (UNIR) in order to improve the image of political realignment. Displaying the achievements of building Lomé's infrastructure and international airport, supporting thriving businesses, and attracting foreign investment, the government advocated change in continuity and in stability, implying that the Faure government was sure to develop social and economic conditions with its inherited leadership. In contrast, the oppositions could not present a promising vision of the nation to their supporters. Soon thereafter some representatives switched from the opposition to the UNIR. The Togolese public then grew tired of the opposition's boycotting. This was the confused situation in Togo following the generational change of political actors. The next section will address the generational and political changing circumstances in Benin.

### **Change of Generation in the Political Scene of Benin**

In the presidential election of March 2006, Mathieu Kérékou and Nicéphore Soglo, charismatic figures who led the democratization, declared that they would withdraw their candidacies in accordance with the Constitution. Adrien Houngbédji, the leader of the Democratic Renewal Party, and Bruno Amoussou, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, ran for the presidency because they were well-known political actors and masters of conducting state affairs. However, people turned to an outsider with no prior political experience who was president of the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO). Unlike his rivals the candidate, Yayi Boni, did not belong to a political party or specific ethnic group. Using the slogan *Ça va change* ("It will change"), he received three-quarters of the votes and overwhelmingly defeated Houngbédji in the run-off election.

Was *le Changement* ("the Change") effective? The policies of the Yayi government directly affected people's lives in the following ways:

- (1) Maintenance of infrastructure: paved roads, electricity, and water

supply

- (2) Improved working conditions for teachers and public officials
- (3) Free elementary education
- (4) Micro financial support for working women

It is true that these concrete policies took effect and that people who enjoyed these benefits, particularly the third and fourth ones, supported the government. These provisions enabled women and children to participate in work and school, opportunities that they had not previously enjoyed. However, many others believed that if women were furnished with microcredits, they would not use such funds for business but spend them on their families and daily needs. The structural problem of poverty could not be solved so easily, according to the opposition. At about the same time a serious scandal was brought to light in relation to the government.

In 2006 the ICC Service, a would-be non-governmental organization, began to operate a mutual financing association in various areas of Benin.<sup>(5)</sup> It advertised that people who deposited money with ICC would be offered an exceptional interest rate of 200% for one year. Tempted by this advertising, many people joined. However, the service suddenly suspended payments and defaulted on contracts in 2010. A protest movement was started against this scheme, and it quickly expanded from urban to other areas. Even worse, before this failure the ICC's chief executive had maintained a close relationship with cabinet ministers, a fact that was disclosed by the media. The police suspended ICC's services in July of 2010.

Against a backdrop of criticism of the administration and a mistrust of politics, a presidential election was called for in 2011. The election centered on three candidates, Yayi and two opponents. The first rival candidate, Houngbéji, took all possible measures to form a political alliance, thinking that this would be his last chance to win and coalesce the opposition to form a party union, the Union fait la Nation (UN). The second rival candidate was Abdoulayi Bio Tchané, known as ABT, who had been Director General of BCEAO in Senegal and who was born in the northern prefecture of Donga.

He aimed to deprive Yayi of his power base, the northern regions.

In the March 2011 contest the Election Administration Committee (CENA) counted votes immediately, and an initial count from southern regions appeared to be in favor of Houngbédji. However, when the overall election results were in, CENA declared that Yayi was re-elected since he won a majority of votes. Yayi received 53% of the votes, Houngbédji 35%, ABT 6%, and other candidates shared the remaining 6%.

### **Hope for post-*Le Changement***

What about the Change? At about this same time, in addition to the ICC affair, other scandals occurred such as padded accounts in preparation for the Cén-Sad summit, inflated expenses for the Maria Gleta power plant, and embezzlement of Dutch financing for the water supply. These scandals heightened the populace's suspicion of political, governmental, and industrial corruption.<sup>(6)</sup> Furthermore, Yayi appointed Lionel Zinsou, who had connections to the French prime minister as his successor, thinking that doing so would help his personal influence. This action provoked even more defectors. Disheartened over Yayi's attitudes, people began to look toward other candidates, such as Pascal I. Koupaki, Minister of Plans, ex-candidate ABT, and Sébastien Ajavon, a young successful businessman.

Around the year before the election, an independent candidate, Patrice Talon, emerged to the front. He had backed the inauguration of the Yayi government since 2006. Talon had graduated from Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal and attended an airline company's training course in France before returning to become a successful businessman, well known as the Cotton Billionaire or King of Cotton in Benin. As many as 33 candidates ran for the presidential election of 2016. Talon finally won a run-off to become the seventh President by breaking away from the Yayi regime.

A review of national elections in Benin after the Democratic Turn of 1990 indicates that political corruption and imbroglio in the Assembly continued despite changes of government. Newcomers, especially if political outsiders,

were favored by Beninese voters to become president. Usually, however, they were compelled to resign sooner or later due to corruption scandals and allegations of seeking a third term. As the corruption continued, another newcomer was expected to win. Regarding the history of favoring outsiders, we can find no difference or evidence of progress between Yayi and Talon, but rather a kind of reiteration, even when compared to Soglo. To understand this pattern, we will discuss discourse on the political scene in the following sections.

### Media Scene in Benin and Togo

Utilization of cellular phones and smartphones as well as the Internet is widespread in present-day African society. Whereas the situation involving water, electricity, and infrastructure has not markedly improved, Africans send text messages and phone calls with rechargeable cell phone, getting information from radio rather than from TV. Brief histories of media in the two nations are instructive.

In Benin radio broadcasting began in 1953 under the French colonial regime. Before and after the Democratic Turn in 1990, private newspapers reported political issues, and both radio and TV stations met the needs of audiences, broadcasting in local and multiple languages. The Office of Radio and Television in Benin (ORTB) was at the core of all media there, and many stations came into being after the liberalization of frequency in 1997. The Beninese people could tune into more than 3 TV and 70 private radio stations after 2008 (Allagbada 2014 ; ODEM 2001 ; Frère 2000).

In Togo, although a radio station had existed since the 1950s, the media was only used for propaganda by the government between 1967 (Eyadéma's coup-d'état) and 1990 (National Conference). Togo Television, the core of Togolese media, was occupied at the time of military intervention in 1991, whereas various private newspapers had been issued since 1989, reporting news from a viewpoint other than the government's. After the pledge at Brussels in 2004, freedom of the press had been guaranteed, so that public

and private broadcasting stations soon totaled more than 70 (Vondoly 2015 ; Rambaud 2006).

Participation programs on private radio quickly gained popularity in both Benin and Togo. When the state-operated station controlled the flow of information, it broadcast one-way programs on domestic news and state publicity. However, private stations appealed to audiences because they disseminated local information. Although there were few cell phone users in the 1990s, this number has rapidly increased since the 2000s, and people began to call into programs with this new tool. The form of participation varied, from requests for music selections to opinions on political matters, and audiences were able to access the media easily<sup>(7)</sup>.

In this kind of media environment after the Democratic Turn, Africans express their opinions and exchange information vigorously. Participation programs in particular allow for free-flowing exchanges among audience members. Thus, we can grasp some idea of public opinion from the voices of active audiences on these programs<sup>(8)</sup>. Interestingly, each program has some regular audiences who express their opinions frequently, so that we will explore these exchanges as examples of public opinion in the next section.

### *Nuhountolé and Their Opinions*

Some audience members not only listened to radio programs but also became regulars who called into the stations. They became acquainted with the announcer and other aspects of the station, calling themselves *Nuhountolé*, “those who express their opinions.” They had connections with each other and formed “fun” clubs to support particular programs and stations.

In the case of Radio Tokpa situated in one corner of the Dantokpa market in Cotonou, a capital of Benin, an old man called the station frequently. Known as “Mr. H” and born in 1942, he organized a club in support of Radio Tokpa and became its president. He was interviewed because of having triplets in the past, and the journalist at that time established a new radio station, Radio Tokpa. This is why he began to organize the club and to back the

station. Even after he retired from his work as bureau chief of a factory in 2002, he remained the organizer of this club (summary of interview, August 2012, Cotonou). Thus, he and others supported a media program in which audience members could actively communicate their opinions.

In the following, we will compare the political views of *Nuhountolé* in Togo and Benin. Even after a change of government, the influence of the Eyadéma regime persisted in Togo. The control of expression and unwarranted detention under the previous regime were still vivid in people's memories. Despite searching for active audiences in Togo, it was difficult to find anonymous audiences through connections of multiple journalists. Excerpts from these interviews follow (interview, 24-25 August 2016, Lomé).

I am one of the generations that knew well Dictator Eyadéma and his regime. I can well recall the assassination of Sylvanus Olympio, the hero of the Independence Era, on January 13, 1963. We could not even talk about this kind of matter. But now we can express our opinion. This is a big step. Still, this is not change in the true sense. It is the public who are the patrons of democracy. The patron is not the chief; it ought to be the public, so that in the election we can choose the person to be elected. So freedom of expression and its circulation and also egalitarianism are important. Particularly freedom of expression is so necessary; we must encourage this. Some who are frightened agree with our intervention. We know each other well. We do not fear anything. That's why we take intervention in the program by calling in. We should not leave our nation as it is. What we are doing now will be good for the next generation. (age 65, male, ex-communication engineer)

This speaker remembered well the control of expression under the previous regime. Many of his acquaintances were wounded and became refugees in the democratization disturbances of the 1990s. The actual situation indebted to the pain and hardship of the past. He therefore understood the paramount importance of free speech and of giving fellow Togolese hope

for connecting with future generations.

Another regular audience member, an instructor in an IT technical school, talked about the politics of Togo.

Togo is a state in the system of a multi-political party democracy, whereas the rule of the game is not prevalent yet. There seems to be rupture in a stratum engaged in politics. Opposition is merely *shadowboxing*. As they are always excluded from political affairs of the state, their idea of reform takes no effect. While one says something, the other says another thing, and they don't have dialogue or come to terms. Worse still, younger generations become indifferent to politics; that is another concern. As the older people have managed all, the young think they are outcasts from politics, for the older always reign over the young. Although the older generations are replaced by the younger, the latter are not entering the political scene. In fact, the younger people are not allowed to participate in the political scene. Here in Togo the political debates are not opened up to all strata in the true sense of the word, despite generation change. (age 50s, male, instructor)

Political leaders in Benin during the Democratic Turn, such as Kérékou and Soglo, retired from the political stage, and a generational change has been recognized. However, in Togo the Eyadéma faction is still the majority in the Assembly, and therefore the same political force has been in power for more than 40 years. Because the opposition cannot exert influence, their criticisms and reforms have not taken effect. Moreover, in Togo, to open discussions with the younger generation and to view this as a public concern are really important. Nevertheless, the young have become indifferent toward politics and are not hopeful about the future (cf. Macé 2004 : 881f ; Sylvanus 2012).

By way of contrast, the activity of a club shows that exchange of opinion in radio program is animated, for the freedom of expression is guaranteed in Benin. People have heated political debates via participatory programs. As to the potential for a change of government in 2017, they were open to

discussion as seen in the following three excerpts from interviews. The *Nuhountolé* spoke candidly and enthusiastically (interview, 13–18 August 2017, Lokossa).

Being tired of the candidate who has political relations, Beninese people prefer the candidate who will bring a change to the known politicians. They are not constant. Beninese people are so capricious that they give up and begin to criticize the politician as soon as they find him incompetent. (age 50s, male, tutor)

Yayi came from the banking and financial circle, while Talon is a businessman. Though both Yayi and Talon had worked in foreign countries for a long time, their careers have not been the same. Talon runs diverse businesses, such as cotton, fertilizer, hotels, and real estate. Zinsou, Talon, Ajavon, and others were running for the election. It was Talon and *Yovo* (a white=Zinsou) that advanced to the run-off round. As Ajavon stated, he didn't agree with Yovo and appealed to his supporters to vote for the man that can be agreed upon. Thus Talon was elected finally. (age 30s, male, staff of the ward office)

We voted for Talon because we hoped for him to change the situation. After the decade of precedents, we shall see how the new president leads us. Talon explained various things clearly, and his words were comprehensible to us, the people. When Yayi took power, things went well. No troubles for five years. But he continued for ten years. Finally he exited the same way Soglo did. So this time, voting for Talon, we will see how he guides us. If Talon cannot manage well, we may put Yayi back. (female, grocer, *vodunsi*)<sup>(9)</sup>

Due to corruption and a continued recession, the willingness to embrace political newcomers has repeated itself in Benin. The first interviewee indicated that this was because of the Beninese character. No sooner had people voted for one candidate than they began to find fault with him. Nevertheless, changes in political actors and instability should not be harmful, according to respondents. The third interviewee said that those who voted for Talon

believed that he would change the nation. With the new president being just one of her choices, she may change to another candidate if he is not qualified. She believed, in other words, that people can improve government through democratic election. This is based on the fact that the presidential changes, i.e., Soglo, Kérékou, and Yayi, have been peacefully realized in Benin. Thus, a repetition of change is not stagnation or a negative consequence.

On the other hand, the situation seems bleaker and more tenuous in Togo. Despite a generational shift in power, the Togolese can hardly hope for an effective change in government. Therefore they have no choice but to get along with the government, for it controls daily concerns such as issuing visas and passports. Although it is true that they seem to suffer from a sense of stagnation, *Nuhountolé* emphasize the importance of expressing opinions and sustaining dialogue.

### **Conclusion: The Hope for Change and Stability**

As Charles Piot, an American social anthropologist, has described them, the Togolese long for a future that replaces untoward pasts both politically and culturally. He referred to their mentality as “*Nostalgia for the Future*” (Piot 2010). Such desire for a different future and a new politics is elusive. People place their hope on an uncertain future rather than focusing on past disappointments. In classical political science this approval of a present situation has been slighted (cf. Bayart, Mbembe & Toulabor 2008 : 14-19). In sociology and anthropology, another interpretation may be applicable. Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist, indicated that French youth tended to delay finding a job because they viewed the present and immediate future with uncertainty in their rapidly changing society (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu applied the term *allodoxia* to this misrecognition in which one thing is not recognized for what it is because it was not previously within the range of *dispositions* and the *habitus* of the person. Anthropologist brought this to the fore, not only the virtual and effective activity but also their thought and talks of life strategy with which people live through by conversion of recognition.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, African political anthropologists interested in *Le politique par le bas* — namely Toulabor, Mbembe, and Nyamnjoh — have examined various media images and communication that had not previously been considered as political expression. These included pavement radio, rumors, jokes, cartoons, and graffiti that had not immediately caused political actions or mobilizations, yet their focus was serious. This paper dealt with the political opinions of regular participants on interactive radio programs.

At first the opinions of *Nuhountolé* seemed to be distractions from daily discontent, but in fact this dialogue or public space was created by the media. Radio “fun” clubs in Benin enabled audiences to get to know each other well and guaranteed the safety of speakers. In Togo also such media forums prevented audiences from being in isolation. Whereas Togolese audiences were fearless, freedom of expression in Togo is not as yet fully guaranteed.

With regard to free elementary education and microcredit in Benin, and visas and improvement of infrastructure in Togo, the government intervenes into the public’s daily life. People are obliged to accept their government’s policies. Utilizing mass media and cell phones, they therefore exchange information with the diaspora overseas as well as with the inhabitants of remote areas at home. Given this situation, while the Beninese view change of political leadership as either reformative or progressive, the Togolese compromise stability with change in their lives while remaining obedient to the government. For instance, some representatives switched from opposition to the UNIR after the transformation of the party in 2012. In addition, Togolese journalists who had severely criticized the government became members of the UNIR, looking for connections with ministers or officers. The Benin government advocates continuity of change, whereas the Togolese government advocates change in continuity. This paper has attempted to illuminate actual practices in both West African nations by focusing on the discursive maneuvering of people, media, and political actors regarding change and continuity.

## Notes

This paper is based on field research in Benin and Togo after 2000 on the correlation of media, religion, and democracy in West Africa. This was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 15K03055, 22520829. In the text above I cite interview materials, noting dates, place names, and the characteristics of interviewees that I recorded. These materials are translated from French and local languages into English.

- (1) Toulabor (1992) gives the following examples. Using the French language, people often distorted *Gnassingbé*, the family name of the dictator, into *Grand Singe* (Big Monkey). The ruling political party, *RPT*, was pronounced as *air pété* (smell of gas).
- (2) Mbembe (2001) also cites as examples symposiums and commemorative events that seemed unrelated to political activities.
- (3) For further information on African media, see Bourgault (1995), Hyden, Leslie & Ogundimu (2002), Fardon & Furniss (2000), and Tudesq (2002).
- (4) Tanaka (2012) described and critically examined Beninese presidential elections in detail. A Beninese journalist, Kékou (2010), also addressed this issue. Tété (2012), a Togolese journalist, reported Togolese elections in detail. At times their styles tended to become quite emotional.
- (5) ICC Service is an acronym for the Investment Consultancy and Computing Service. It defrauded investors of millions of dollars in Benin. As mentioned in the text, ICC operated from 2006 until 2010.
- (6) For further studies of corruption and fraud in African society, see Apter (1999), Comaroff & Comaroff (1999), and Adjovi (2003). Apter based *Politics of Illusion* on a case study of Nigerian Criminal Code 419 and the money politics of then President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, so-called IBB in the 1990s.
- (7) For more information on interactive radio programs in Africa, see Mwesige (2009), Adjovi (2003), and Gratz (2011). For comparisons with other regions of the world, see Ninan (2009) and Bessire & Fisher (2013).
- (8) Regarding anthropological issues of media and journalism, other helpful sources

include Hannerz (2002), Ninan (2009), and Gratz (2011).

- (9) *Vodun* is the traditional religion in Benin and Togo. For more details see Amouzouvi (2014).

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