



## “Nowadays Spirits Allow Themselves to Be Photographed”

### Renegotiating the Political Role of Yam Ceremonies in Agou (Southwestern Togo)

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**Abstract.** – Based on fieldwork carried out since 2006 in southwestern Togo, this article analyzes the political, cultural, and social meanings of a vodu ceremony as a contested site where meanings, ritual practices, and discourses are constantly renegotiated by subjects in asymmetrical power relations. Moreover, it will also illustrate what consequences the process of politicization and mediatization of the ceremonies has had in changing the forms and the contents of a ritual practice that today appears as a privileged arena in reinforcing or contesting state power in a region, which has been historically the centre of the opposition to Eyadéma’s dictatorship. [*Togo, Agou, vodu ceremonies, mediatization, witchcraft, conflicts*]

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#### Introduction

*Vodu* ceremonies, both in the Guinea Gulf as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean, have been the subject of an enormous amount of research undertaken by explorers, academics, and missionaries. As Augé (1988) has shown in the case of Togo and Benin, Europeans were struck by the “materiality” of these cults that have been swiftly categorized under the evolutionary rubric of “fetishism” or “traditional religions,” destined to be replaced by “modernity” and “Christianity.”

The great internal variability, both in ritual practices as well as in beliefs of *vodu* ceremonies, their

significant diffusion in different geographical settings and social contexts and their susceptibility to incorporating new cults and new ideas, make it difficult, if not impossible, to consider them in terms of an homogenous “religion system.” The category of *vodu* is applied to such a large number of different cults that it seems to become meaningless. Classical ethnographies on the argument,<sup>1</sup> as well as missionary accounts (Spieth 1906; Debrunner 1965), have tried to give “order” to this supposed “confusion,” enumerating lists of gods and spirits, attempting to put them in a hierarchy of importance and to represent “traditional religions” as a coherent and undisputed “system of beliefs.” In general, however, little attention has been devoted in these studies to the links between religious practices, never reducible to a coherent “system,” and the wider political context in which they take place, despite the fact that many have noticed the deep interconnection between local concepts of spiritual and political power.

Based on fieldwork carried out since 2006,<sup>2</sup> this article analyzes a *vodu* ceremony which takes place every August in the Agou region (canton of Tavié) in southwestern Togo, from a perspective that tries to underline the political, cultural, and social meanings it acquires for subjects in asymmetrical power relations. This Ewe ceremony, devoted in particular

1 Herskovits and Herskovits (1933), Le Hèrissé (1911), and Maupoil (1943) for the Dahomey; Rivière (1981), and Surgy (1981, 1988) for Togo.

2 I attended the Gbagba ceremonies in 2006, 2007, and 2009.

to Gbagba (God of Yam and Fertility) and to Apetofia (the leopard spirit), celebrates the harvest of the new yams and, as I will illustrate, has also become an occasion to celebrate all the other *vodu* spirits of the region.

The main aim of this article is to show how these ceremonies have become a contested site where meanings, power structures, ritual practices, and discourses are constantly renegotiated by different subjects: “traditional” authorities and the state, Christians and *vodu* adepts (*vodusi*), elders, and young people. Moreover, I will illustrate what consequences the process of politicization and mediation of the ceremonies have had in changing the forms and the contents of a ritual practice which has become a privileged arena in reinforcing or contesting state power, in a region which has been historically the centre of the opposition to Eyadéma’s power.

As many scholars have shown, *vodu* ceremonies seem to have reinforced their social and political role in global scenarios and they have demonstrated a great historical and geographical adaptability to changing economic and social landscapes (Meyer 1999). In this sense, the famous statement of Evans-Pritchard (1937) – “New situations demand new magic” – seems also to be extremely significant for *vodu* in Togo.

The long history of internal migrations within Africa, the slave trade, the political and symbolic importance of precolonial states, as well as the impact of colonialism, have contributed to the diffusion of some cults and the disappearance of others, to the incorporation of new deities in local religious systems, to the merging of different deities, and to the pluralisation of the identities of a single spirit. This makes *vodu* an open field hardly reducible, despite the attempts of missionaries and ethnographers, to a closed “traditional” and static pantheon. As it has been shown (Brivio 2009), *vodu* religions are historically characterized by a considerable degree of internal variability and have always been enriched with new elements derived from an “outside”, that of Islam, Christianity or the “Northern Gothic” – to use Parker’s (2006) expression of referring to the occult powers attributed by coastal populations to migrants from the savannah regions.

Moreover, the attempt of missionaries to find decent translations of the Bible in local languages and the huge impact of conversions to Christianity often contribute to a change of the meanings of particular *vodu* words and rituals. The “classical” example of this process is the Ewe concept of “Mawu” which from the name of a local goddess became the term

used to translate the Christian God (Meyer 1999; Augé 1988).

As Rowlands and Warnier (1988: 129) pointed out: “... in the colonial period and at early independence, administrative and judicial authorities often confused witches and anti-witchcraft specialists, all of them being lumped under the category of ‘sorcerers.’” Forcefully contrasting *vodu* anti-witchcraft cults, colonial power was often perceived as indirectly supporting witchcraft. At the same time, missionaries, who often depicted local religions as “satanic worship,” reinforced the local beliefs about the efficacy of *vodu* powers. On the other hand, the difference between witches and anti-witchcraft specialists, with regard to *vodu*, is probably cut too clear. *Vodu*, in its moral ambiguity, emerges both as a generative as well as a destructive power and can be used both to harm as well as for promoting health.

Concepts such as “modernity” and “tradition,” as argued repeatedly by many authors over the last twenty years, crumble when faced with an analysis of *vodu* that takes into account a plurality of levels of investigation and a dense reading of the phenomenon, linked to its historical and social contexts of production and reproduction.

More recently, following the renewed interest in witchcraft and occult economies, reopened by the works of Geschiere (1995) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1993), scholars have illustrated how religious cults, with the possession rituals they often imply, involve a set of practices and discourses that bring to light the ambiguous local meanings that the concepts of “power,” “body,” and “self” assume in changing global scenarios. In this sense, discourses about witchcraft are a useful starting point for understanding conflicts inside and outside villages, among classes, genders, and generations for analyzing the opposition between moral discourses regarding the social production of health/wealth and diseases, the local strategies to reinforce or to challenge power structures and the forms through which colonial histories are embedded, renegotiated, and elaborated.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, the Agou region, in which the ceremonies take place, seems to be the perfect setting for understanding how global forces have historically shaped local contexts and produced local commentaries about the unequal redistribution of resources. Agou is known as the most fertile region of Togo

3 Austen (1993); Geschiere (1995, 1996, 2000); Stoller (1994); Comaroff and Comaroff (1993, 1999a); Argenti (1998, 2001); Schatzberg (2000); Bellagamba (2008); Quaranta (2006); Brivio (2009); Shaw (1997).

and during the centuries of slave trade it became a place to seek refuge from the raids of Dahomey in the east and Akan states in the west. During the 19th century, the region was deeply affected by the palm oil economies. Akwamu<sup>4</sup> tried to conquer the region many times from 1730 to 1830. Then it was the turn of the Ashanti in 1870. The region was subjected to three different colonial powers (German, English, and French), and in colonial periods it was central for the production of palm oil and cocoa, planted both by Ewe farmers as well as migrants from the north. Indeed, cash crops and share cropping agreements contributed to the settlement of migrants (mainly Kabié and Nawdeba) from the north of Togo, a region considered by colonial administrations merely as a reserve of labor, while Ewe were considered in general as more “civilized” than the others “tribes” in Togo. The involvement in cash crop economies enabled many to send their children to missionary schools and to strengthen their economic position. In Agou, the greatest European plantation in Togo was established (Ahadji 1996) and Kpalimé, ten kilometres from Mount Agou, was the terminus of trains departing from Lomé (from the beginning of the 20th century). Thanks also to its proximity to the border with the Gold Coast, it became one of the principal economic centres of the Volta region.<sup>5</sup>

### Vodu and Politics in Togo

*Vodu* can not only be seen as a plural religious system, resisting any attempt of analytical categorization, but also as a particular grammar through which discourses about economic inequalities among groups or individuals and about power relationships are elaborated. In Togo, as in many other African contexts, occult economies and mystical powers are deeply intertwined with local political discourses and the anxieties generated by what Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) called “the millennial capitalism.” The accusations and counter accusations of witchcraft between political elites and local populations are common themes in anthropological accounts and demonstrate all the ambiguities of the grammar of witchcraft. Indeed, as many scholars have shown, witchcraft can be read alternatively as a discourse against the “politics of the belly” (Bayart 1989) of the elites, accused as being “witches,” of stealing

health, money, and resources from the country, or, on the other hand, it could represent an accusation of these same elites against the “backwardness of the villagers,” accused of utilizing mystical forces to block the modernist teleology of “development” of the country, or to be envious of their health.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is important to remember that much of the conflict managed by local *chefferies* (related to land access, adultery, or contested inheritance) is often discussed through the grammar of witchcraft. The increasing competition for land access in the Agou region produced by demographic pressures, cash-crop economies, and the registration of land titles is directly connected to the current rise in accusations of witchcraft. In this sense, many *vodu* ceremonies, due to their anti-witchcraft aims, assume a crucial political role, on a national as well as a local level.

Toulabor (1986: 105–124) has highlighted the role the discourses concerning occult forces have played in the *mythopoiesis* of Eyadéma’s power. During thirty-eight years of the military regime established in Togo by Eyadéma after his (double) *coup d’état*, the so-called “Timonier National,” he was able to construct and exploit a mythology of invulnerability rooted in his supposed privileged relations with spirits not only belonging to his native region, the north of Togo, which was perceived by the southern people as spiritually stronger and more “traditional” following the colonial period, but also belonging to southern pantheon *vodu*. For example, it is said that the role of Gu (the Ewe God of the Iron) was crucial in his “miraculous” survival in the Sarakawa air crash.

As Toulabor has outlined, Sarakawa, as well as the failed attempt on Eyadéma’s life by a soldier, contributed in reinforcing the idea in local perceptions that the dictator was protected by occult forces and not only by the vast army he massively deployed to control the country. Eyadéma loved to portray himself as a great hunter (a central figure in local mythology as founder of villages and medium between the village and the wilderness of the forest, which is represented as populated by fearsome spirits) as well as a guardian of “traditions and authenticity,” following the example of his friend Mobuto. Eyadéma’s suspicious means of accumulating capital (through the illegal arms trade and diamonds trafficking, privatization of state revenues of bauxite exports, ambiguous relations with Rosicrucianism and European businessmen, exploitation of Cold War alliances and corruption – Labarthe 2005)

4 The Akwamu (also called Akuambo) was a state set up by the Akan people in Ghana which existed in the 17th century and 18th century.

5 For the history of this region, see Gayibor (1997, 2005, 2011); Nugent (2002); Lawrance (2000, 2002, 2003).

6 Bayart (1989); Geschiere (1995); Rowlands and Warnier (1988).

were the clear symbols of “the proliferation of occult economies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b), often perceived locally in terms of accumulation of wealth through the intervention of mystical forces. As Ellis (1993: 470f.) remarked:

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 [sic] 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.

Moreover, Eyadéma along with other ministers never concealed the use of diviners and *vodusi* to defend himself from mystical attacks, showing the necessity for the state power to discipline and control, as far as possible, the power of the spirits that could be used against him as well.

A good example of this hegemonic strategy has been illustrated by Piot (1999: 101f.), who shows how Eyadéma exploited the Kabié initiation ceremonies, which, as they became highly mediatized, changed radically in their form and content:

The reason Eyadéma attends so assiduously to ritual is that he understands the power and importance of spectacle – that his power will not be “real” to his subjects until it is made manifest and visible (in ritual). When he attends the ceremonies of *afalaa* (or insists that localities perform “animation” for visiting state functionaries), he centres himself and the state in representational nexus that constructs the nation as his and himself as the nation, while also positioning spectators as witnesses to – and, of course, potential critics of – such representations. But consider here the traffic in meanings between local and state: is this not an example of the reverse colonization alluded to by Bassari when he commented that the nation is the village writ large? Has not Eyadéma here appropriated the (village) culture of the spectacle to enhance the power of the state, in the process also transforming the power of spectacle into a spectacle of power?

Lomé was a ghost town on the night Eyadéma died in 2005. “We did not believe that Eyadéma was finally dead. We were happy and scared at the same time. Soldiers patrolled the street as witches, beating and killing everyone found outdoors” a university student of Lomé told me in 2011. The frightening and shadowing presence of Eyadéma survived his death, as many had understood some days previously, when one of his sons, Faure Gnassingbé (whose mother was an Ewe from Agou), replaced his father as head of the government ordering the bloody repression that killed hundreds of people.

But the position of Faure seems more fragile than his father’s. Eyadéma left more than a hundred children – some of them in influential economic and military positions. One of the most powerful of these was Faure’s brother Kpatcha, who has been arrested recently and convicted of having organized a *coup d’état* against his brother with the collaboration of some generals of the army. To consolidate his position Faure has tried to find the support of the opposition parties, with the historical approval of Gilchrist Olympio, the son of the first President of Togo who was killed by Eyadéma in 1963.

Rumours in Togo, which are important to the understanding of the local political discourse, as Ellis (1993) has demonstrated, show that the occult protection that Eyadéma possessed does not seem to have been completely transmitted to his son. Despite the fact that his mother originates from the Agou region, a region historically supporting the opposition to Eyadéma and some progression in freedom of speech, criticism from Ewe (the major linguistic group of Togo) has not decreased. Faure Gnassingbé is still considered “the son of his father” and changes in the local political context are sarcastically perceived as “changes under continuity.”

It is not surprising then, that the Eyadéma legacy of exploiting *vodu* ceremonies to reinforce the control and legitimacy of the state has been vigorously reaffirmed in the south, as the Gbagba ceremonies will show.

### **Gbagba and Apetofia: The Yam and the Leopard**

Yam has been the staple food for the entire population of the region for centuries, well before the introduction of maize and cassava during the slave trade. The yam ceremonies take place in many regions of West Africa and in many cases they represent the core of the ritual calendar, marking the end of a production cycle and the beginning of the next.



The yam ceremonies of Gbagba (God of Yams and Fertility) take place in the Agou region in August when the first yams are harvested and are central to the annual agriculture and ritual cycle. Despite the settlement of Christian missions in the region (Meyer 1999; Debrunner 1965), their systematic anti-*vodu* campaign and the considerable number of conversions recorded in colonial periods, it seems that the yam ceremonies have not lost their importance.

Rather than representing Gbagba ceremonies as “survivals” of a traditional past, it is interesting here to show how they have changed over time within a social arena characterized by conflicts and tensions between different groups in asymmetrical power relations. These ceremonies shed light on the current political dynamics of the region and on the political meanings that the term “tradition” has assumed in recent decades. They convey meanings about local representations of “fertility,” not only concerning land, but also of men and women, and they present themselves as a protection and an antidote to witchcraft (*adzè*) attacks. Witches (*adzètɔ*), both male as well as female, are locally characterized by their cannibalistic appetite and their individualistic strategies of consumption and accumulation, while Gbagba is represented as a force which lavishes wealth and fertility. The only references to the Gbagba ceremonies I found in the literature are from the missionary Debrunner (1965), but they are extremely vague and imprecise. Moreover, Debrunner cannot have witnessed them since, as he wrote in the introduction, he stayed in Togo (at Agou Nyogbo) only from October 1959 to April 1960 while the ceremonies took place in August, and did not involve the village of Nyogbo, but only the villages of Koumawou and Apegamé.

On the first day the ceremonies are officiated by *vodusi* (both men and women) belonging to the lineage linked to the god Gbagba (Gbagbasi),<sup>7</sup> and resident in Koumawou and in Apegamé. On the second and third day, the ceremonies involve all the *vodusi* of the area.

Herewith I present a description of the ceremonies as recorded in my notes of August 2007. Having followed the ceremonies also in 2006 and 2009, this description can be relevant in tracing the main events that mark the ceremonies in general.

7 As for many *vodu* cults, the priests (but not the followers) have to belong to a particular patrilineal lineage, whose ancestor was the first to worship the god and to bring it to the village, while in other *vodu* cults (for example, Heviesso or Mamiwata) everyone can become a priest. The “Gbagba lineage” is different from the lineages from which are chosen the village chiefs.

The ceremonies begin on Friday in the early afternoon when all the Gbagbasi of Koumawou convene at the Gbagba shrine. From there, after offering palm wine and corn to the god, they walk towards Apegamé where the Gbagbasi of that village are expecting them in the sacred hut where the two sacred drums of Gbagba are kept. They pass through Koumawou playing horns and stopping in every public square, where they are welcomed by the lineage chiefs and the notables and are offered a bottle of London Dry Gin and palm wine. It is drunk in turn, invoking peace to the villages and the ceremonies. The last sip of each one is offered to the ground for the ancestors. The meeting with the political authorities of the village is within a framework of respect and mutual recognition: an invitation of peace that is a clear reference to the role local authorities have in the villages. The procession continues and performs the same ritual with the village chief who waits for them at the exit of Koumawou. After this, the Gbagbasi continue their procession to the sacred hut in Apegamé. Around mid-afternoon, men, women, and children begin to crowd around the hut. All Gbagbasi are in the inner precinct. With their bare torsos covered with *alilò*, the white clay used as protection against attacks of witchcraft, they make their offerings to the god. Palm wine and water with medicines are drunk. The Gbagbasi only permit entrance to those who have come to make offerings of gratitude to the god for requests made the previous year and which have been fulfilled. This is especially true for women who bring palm wine to thank Gbagba because they have given birth to a child having requested it in the previous year.

A group of musicians then arrive, dressed up in a colourful and unorthodox way (men dressed as women, or as “white people,” with cardboard cameras, fake glasses, and cigarettes). They sing the songs of Gbagba, waiting outside the hut for the arrival of the two sacred drums. The crowd grows bigger. The songs intensify in volume. Meanwhile, within the boundaries of the hut the two sacred drums (the smaller “male” one, and the larger “female” one) are “dressed” with rich, decorative fabric. Gbagba is “called” by the complementary and diverse sounds of both drums, acting as a clear symbol of fertility. The bearer of the “male” drum, as well as the bearer of the “female” one, keep their eyes wide open and drink palm wine. They breathe deeply, waiting for the “descent” of the god into them.

The Gbagbasi get to their feet. Two groups of boys, holding long palm branches in their hands, construct two arches under which the drums are carried during the procession. The bearer of the “male” drum places it on his shoulder and prepares

to leave. The “female” follows and it is placed on the head of the other carrier. It will be played by a third Gbagbasi, who before they begin makes the sign of the cross. The wail of the horn gets louder. The sacred drums come out and are surrounded by children carrying palm branches. The Gbagbasi procession begin to play and they move toward the sacred forest of Koumawou surrounded by the crowd singing: “Give Gbagba, give!” The “male” drum precedes the “female.” The group of musicians in costume take their place at the end of the procession accompanying the beating of the sacred drums. Participants from the city take photographs. The local members of the government and of RPT (The Rally of the Togolese People or Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais) give interviews to local radio and television stations. They sit near the prefect, the village chiefs, and other military and political personalities in the public square of Apegamé ready to enjoy the show. Journalists follow the procession with the cameras. The children are excited.

The possession starts during the procession. There is no precise moment when the spirit descends. Sometimes it happens in the sacred hut, sometimes somewhere along the way. Possession may involve both bearers, but usually it is the bearer of the “female” drum who is selected. “It’s usually the mother who takes better care of her children” Gbagbasi say.

From the moment Gbagba descends on him, he moves stealthily under the weight of the large drum that is played incessantly on his head. Sometimes he hesitates. He looks at the crowd with inquiring eyes, searching for someone. He steps back, then takes one step to the side. He seems to continue, but then retracts. The drum oscillates on his head. He perceives a danger: an *adzètɔ* is hiding among the people. He makes a threatening gesture towards someone in the crowd. The children scream, excited and scared. The adults look serious. Someone with a sheepish grin stands out and lowers his eyes to avoid the stare of the bearer’s magnetic figure, who makes no sign of continuing. Then the *hevisi* approaches. The *hevisi* is the ritual specialist who speaks with the spirits of dead people. Dressed in white, he speaks to Gbagba, he urges him to move forward, he reassures him by telling him that he is there to protect him. The *hevisi* has had this role since 1986. It was previously attributable only to Gbagbasi. He was chosen because he enjoys a privileged relationship with the spirits and he has considerable power: he can rely on legions of spirits to defend the villages from witchcraft attacks.

Gbagba is hesitant, but continues. The *hevisi* moves forwards a few metres. He throws *alilò* in

the air to protect the god’s path and sternly rebukes the crowd, which is blocking the way of the drums. The singing continues, the procession arrives at the gates of the sacred forest. Here, at the entrance of the path that runs deep into the forest, some excited children and some of the musicians throw water on the ground in order to create a large stretch of mud. They take handfuls of the mud and throw it into the crowd. The people flee to avoid being hit. Those wanting to enter the sacred forest and to follow the drums have to be dirtied by the mud. It is believed that this particular mud attracts swarms of bees or mosquitoes, carrying malaria to those who dare to enter the forest without having respected the restrictions. Those who are dirty fear no danger and they enter.

The trail leads to a clearing where there is an enormous tree, the house of Gbagba. The drums are placed under the sacred tree. The bearer of the “female” drum has convulsions. Two Gbagbasi restrain him so he does not harm himself. Sometimes he speaks of oracles about the future of the village, the fate of sick people, the possible attacks of witchcraft. After some time, he calms down and relaxes, exhausted. He sits with his head in his hands: the spirit has left him. He breathes deeply. Meanwhile people dance, raising one arm then the other to the sky, shouting “Give Gbagba, give!” Those who have to make specific requests to the God go inside a small hut behind the tree, and, leaving a small donation, they are blessed by the Gbagbasi through the washing of their heads with water and medical plants and the ingestion of protective medicines. People sing and dance until the evening, after which everyone goes home.

The next day, the procession does not reach the sacred forest but it stops in a square in Apegamé. In fact, the second day is dedicated to the celebration of all the spirits of the region and, in particular, the possession by Apetofia, the spirit of the leopard, on which the main focus lies.

The history of Apetofia is “classical” due to its mimetic features: Apetofia was a great hunter and killer of leopards. Unfortunately, he had problems producing offspring: all of his children died at birth. He consulted a diviner (*bokono*) who informed him that every leopard he killed was one of his sons. Apetofia chose to stop hunting, but to demonstrate his power for the last time he captured a leopard, slung it on his back and returned to Apegamé. The other hunters killed the leopard and its skin was given to Apetofia. From that day onwards, according to local histories, every year during the ceremonies of Gbagba the spirit of the leopard is ridden by one of Apetofia’s descendants. The chosen man, dressed as

a hunter, carrying a leopard skin, mimes the leopard walk in a journey around Apegamé until he reaches the central square where the Gbagba drums are played. There, as a leopard scared by the crowd, he runs away quickly and disappears into the sacred hut.

Leopard and hunter at the same time, Apetofia shows the ambiguities in the bodily relations between human and spirits (who rides whom?) and the mimetic power of possession which allows the transformation of a potentially dangerous “Other” (a wild forest spirit) into a protector of the village, socially controlled to defend people against witches, which is a common theme in many African contexts. Moreover, “mimesis” is also demonstrated in the way in which many people during the ceremonies adorn themselves with “Western stuff” with the explicit aim “to mock”: fake cameras, cigarettes, necktie, pantyhose, symbols of Western richness and power.

If “mimicry,” as a useful analytical tool proposed by scholars<sup>8</sup> can be central to the understanding of these ceremonies, it should not be taken too uncritically, as Fergusson (2002) showed. Many practices that seem to be a mocking parody or “resistance through appropriation” have to be read as a “haunting claim for equal rights of membership in a spectacularly unequal global society” (Ferguson 2002: 565).

At the same time, if the use of fake cameras during the ceremonies can be interpreted as a form of hidden resistance to the mediatization of the ceremonies, or, alternatively, as a sign of the “global production of desire” (Trouillot 2001: 129), its carnivalesque and ironic dimensions should also be taken into account: people say that they dress up in strange clothes and bring fake cameras and cigarettes “just for fun.” As Olivier de Sardan (1993) remembers, the risk of (political or therapeutic) “over-interpretation” is high.

### Changing Ritual Practices and Conflicts

It has been stressed that *vodu* is not a relic of an unhistorical past, but has been subjected to changes and renegotiations. It is useful to note, that the changing forms of these ceremonies are recognized by the locals, albeit to differing degrees. Most young people have not seen substantial changes in the unfolding of the ceremonies in recent years and this contributes to the idea that these rituals are static. On the other hand, middle-aged people I inter-

viewed recalled how, about twenty years ago, the ceremonies took place over a much longer period and how they were much more popular, being the occasion in which migrants tended to return to the villages. Moreover, the Gbagbasi acknowledge that the ceremonies have changed radically over time, facing new political scenarios. Gbagba’s ceremonies usually did not have public features but were performed only in the family of his choice. In the wave of the gradual Christianization of the region, between the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, *vodusi* agreed to create a festival celebrating all the *vodu* spirits that could compete with Christmas. Regarding this, these are the words of an Apetofiasi:

Before there were no ceremonies apart from Christmas. There were no Gbagba or Apetofia ceremonies. Our ancestors organized it to commemorate Apetofia and all the other *vodu*. It became a great ceremony. But when I was little, it was not celebrated for only three days. Then, because of civilization, because of the Christians, it became a problem among the Catholic Church and the others, as during the ceremonies it is forbidden to play drums. But the priest on Sunday wants to play the drum at all costs, so we narrowed it down. We want peace between those who go to church and those who go to Gbagba.

Christmas is a holiday which was celebrated in Koumawou and Apegamé *before* the organization of Gbagba ceremonies. A statement of this nature sounds deeply provocative considering the view of those who tend to view *vodu* practices as ancestral relics that would have been gradually eroded by the arrival of so-called “religions of the book” and “modernity.” This does not mean that there were no ceremonies connected with fertility before, but the forms, and much of the content of Gbagba ceremonies, as they are today, evolved in opposition to the arrival of a militant Christianity.

The period of the celebrations of Gbagba is a fundamental moment in the life of the villages. Distant relatives come home with their families to celebrate in their native villages, singing, dancing, drinking, and eating. As it is forbidden to work in the fields during the celebrations, everything must be ready before then. The palm wine must have reached fermentation, the corn should be ready to eat, the wood already stacked. The earth has yielded its fruits: Gbagba has kept his promise the previous year and has endowed the fields with fertility. The new yam is waiting to be consumed.

During the week (including the three days of celebration) it is forbidden to consume yams and to play the drums. The first prohibition is justified by reasons of etiquette. One of the Gbagbasi explains it

<sup>8</sup> Stoller (1984); Taussig (1993); Bhabha (1994).



in these terms: “For example: if I give you this notebook, you normally thank me before first using it. For us it is the same thing. We have to thank Gbagba before starting to eat the yam.”

Gbagba’s power to bestow fertility symbolically stands as an antithesis of the *adzètɔ* (the witch), whose cannibalistic power is read in terms of a misappropriation of the generative power of land and people. Gbagba spreads fertility and life on the villages, *adzètɔ* steals it for personal enrichment. The merciless battle between the two contenders is reenacted during the ceremonies: Gbagba probes the crowd looking for an *adzètɔ* and blocks the path when it senses their presence.

During the ceremonies it is also forbidden to play drums. A village elder proposed an explanation based on the fact that only the sacred drums can be played to invoke Gbagba. Other drums could confuse the god’s descent. An interpretation that emphasizes the performance nature of the ritual recognizes the role that certain songs and music have in inducing possession, but it is usually replaced by interpretations who read the prohibition as a way of respecting the will of the ancestors. Violating it is considered as an insult to the ancestors, or, in other words, to those who now are the guarantors of the correct execution of the ceremonies; namely the Gbagbasi, whose authority is placed exclusively on a ritual frame and who are forbidden to be part of the local *chefferie*.

These prohibitions, although not perceived as particularly constraining by the inhabitants of Apegamé and Koumawou, however, triggered a *casus belli* between Gbagba and the Catholic priest of the village, who wanted to play the drum during the Mass and invited the believers to break the rule, without fear of attacking spirits which he defines as a superstition to be overcome, only to recognize the theoretical possibility of possession, because “the existence of Satan has been confirmed by the Catholic catechism,” as the priest told me during an interview.

As I was told, in 2000 the situation deteriorated: The date of the celebration of Gbagba coincided with the celebration of the Assumption of Mary on August 15th. The priest placed a group of young people playing the drums outside the church directly along the route of the Gbagba sacred drum procession. At the arrival of the procession, the Catholics did not stop playing. The followers of Gbagba and the crowd in the procession were extremely offended. The descent of the god was unsuccessful, leaving the village exposed to *adzètɔ* attacks. A violent row exploded. The Gbagbasi and notables of the village tried to calm both parties down and they

came to the decision to intervene in the ritual calendar, so that Gbagba celebrations were performed before the Assumption, in order to prevent a conflict that would have torn families and villages apart. These are the words of a Gbagbasi:

Gbagba is a ceremony of peace. We do not want to create conflict in the village. As the population of Agou is the same, why must there be issues between them? But there is also a matter of respect: when we go to Mass at church we do not start to whistle because it is forbidden. Why, then, must the priest play the drum on those days? It’s just for one week. I do not think it is too much.

Gbagbasi fear a folklorization of the ceremonies by the media and insist in their unequal struggle with the Catholic Church. They acknowledge they are losing recognition, especially among young people, who criticize the “traditional” powers, perceived as backward, linked to Eyadéma’s regime, and as an impediment to “development,” preferring the “modernity” of the suburbs of Lomé, where they migrate in search of work. For the Gbagbasi I interviewed, as well as for village chiefs and others members of the local *chefferies*, “tradition” appears as a tool to reinforce their local powers on the villages against a state perceived as inefficient and at the same time violent, and to reaffirm moral values against a global economic context producing atomization and unequal redistribution of resources.

The most observant Catholics, encouraged by the priest every Sunday, aim at transforming the ceremonies into a secular celebration of the harvest, eliminating the practices of worship, which they believe are characterized by a demonic aspect. They do not enter the sacred forest but simply watch the procession. They would like to separate the social dimensions of the ceremonies from the worshipping of a deity, which is in contrast with the biblical teaching. For example, a native of Koumawou, who now works as an architect in Lomé, believed that in order to preserve the participation in the ceremonies it was somehow necessary to suppress its religious connotations.

Other Catholics, actually a majority in the village, actively participate in the celebrations, considering the position of the priest as overly strict. An old Catholic woman of Koumawou noted that “it does not hurt to celebrate Gbagba. Gbagba gives fertility to the fields of the Catholics also. We all eat yams.”

Young university students, who return to the village for the summer break, or the inhabitants of Lomé armed with large and small cameras, who love to portray themselves as free from “tradition,” despite the fact that many of them acknowledge the



theoretical possibility of possession, look at Gbagba with a mix of scepticism and curiosity and often refer to it simply as a “theatre,” because “these ritual specialists have forgotten the elders’ secrets.” They wonder if it is credible that a man possessed by a god could maintain self-control to be able to follow the same path every year. Their criticism has to be considered in a wider social context, characterized by the increasing difficulties of the village elders to exercise control over young people who are trying to emancipate themselves from agricultural activities. Moreover “tradition” for many of them is considered political by the use made of it by Eyadéma. Village authorities are in general accused of being part of the system of terror established by the regime, and critics of “tradition” are implicitly critics of the structures of power in which they feel exploited.<sup>9</sup>

The plurality of these positions shows that the ceremonies emerge as a field which is open to constant renegotiation, whose meanings are never entirely fixed but represent key points of conceptual elaboration for the parties, involving the construction of social and individual identities, the internal and external struggles for power, and the elaboration of the meanings of “modernity” and “tradition.” It is clear that presenting the “Ewe religious system” as a coherent set of practices and beliefs conceals the fact that meanings are constantly manipulated, contested, reaffirmed, and renegotiated by subjects and do not take in account the political and social dimensions of religious practices.

### Pictures of Spirits

The media coverage of the ceremonies has indicated a significant change in the ceremonies and has had important consequences on the dynamics of local power. An old Gbagbasi argued:

Once, if you tried to take a photo in the sanctuary, the camera broke, but now, *because of politics*, they want to see the ceremonies on television, they want to see what we do. Because sometimes people thought that men were killed because of the ceremonies. So they want to come here with the camera and check. And also think about *afalaa* [the Kabiè initiation ceremony, in which Eyadéma attended annually] that monopolized the media! Everyone knew about that. So we also need to make our ceremonies known.

With modernization, many people think that these things are made to kill people. You see? So they want to

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion about the ambiguous relations between state and *chefferies* in Togo, see Rouveroy van Nieuwaal (1990, 1994, 1996, 2000) and von Trotha (1996).

come here to check. Before no one could see inside the hut or go inside. But they believed that bad things were made there. And now we have to show everything. Once, for example, you had to take off your shoes and go bare-chested to enter in the sacred hut of Apetofia. You could be Jesus Christ, but you would have to do it! But people began to think that we were wrong in asking this ... I do not know, shoes are a sign of civilization, and now we allow everyone to enter. Once, long ago, a woman tried to take a picture. One of our priests threw the *alilò* and the machine broke. It is not possible to take pictures of the spirits!

And why now do the cameras work?

I do not know, I do not know. For me, *politics has its influence. They have made it political*. They thought it was against Eyadéma. So they sent the Minister of Culture to check up on it. And we could not refuse. During the *afalaa* he cannot go so ... see? During the *afalaa* there are taboos and they respect them. People here are scared and so they negotiate.

But why don't the spirits break the cameras as before?

Because before we asked the spirits to do nothing. We tell them: “We are not in the old days, they want to come to see you. Please do not do any harm.” Because now we are in modern times, they want to see you on television.

The spirits, therefore, allow themselves to be photographed for “political reasons.” The constant demonization of *vodu* carried out by Christian churches, who created the equivalence between *vodu* and satanism, and the dictator’s suspicion that the Ewe ceremonies could hide critics of the government obliged the Gbagbasi to radically change the Gbagba ceremonies.

These ceremonies, now followed by the national press and the television, have become a major arena for politicians. Influential members of the government and of RPT attended the Gbagba ceremonies during my stays, both in 2007 and 2009. They entered the sacred hut with their group of photographers to ask for the god’s blessing. Gbagba, who possessed one of the priests at that time, harshly rebuked an RPT candidate asking him to strip and remove his shoes as is required to enter the sacred hut. Facing the wrath of god, the candidate of the RPT agreed and then smiled, an expression some way between embarrassment and contempt, to the cameras that were filming.

The *vodusi* are certainly not in a position to reject the cameras, although they recognize the benefit found in the increasing popularity of the cult of Gbagba, due to the fact that the celebrations are broadcast nationally, as is the case of the Kabiè *afalaa*. The two examples (Gbagba and *afalaa*) clear-

ly illustrate how the media coverage of the ceremonies and the political role they have turned “the power of a spectacle in a spectacle of power” (Piot 1999: 102) for members of the government. In return, however, this mediatization provides greater visibility for *vodusi* and gives them a means of defence against the ostracism of the Catholic priest.

As an elder from Koumawou recalls, the day after the clashes between Catholics and *vodusi* during the Gbagba ceremonies of 2000, the priest, through his older brother, who was a member of the RPT and a consultant at the U.S. Embassy in Togo, asked the government to intervene to prevent Gbagba ceremonies taking place. The Minister of Culture, also a member of the RPT, consulted the party leaders and denied his support to the request of the priest. Not only would this create another reason for protest from local residents, but abolishing a ceremony relating to the tradition would set a precedent that would trigger a tough problem to deal with, involving all the village chiefs and *vodusi* across the country, who would feel threatened in their functions. Moreover, *vodu* ceremonies are always a useful arena for the central government to ensure visibility and support and legitimize its power through the spirits. In addition, the government knows that the spirits have to be tamed. The *vodu* can easily be turned against the government, due to the possibility that someone wants to exploit their symbols in terms of political criticism.

The Gbagba ceremonies clearly show this contradictory aspect: *vodu* is at the same time a valuable tool for central power, and a strong weapon of criticism. This becomes clear if we consider the case of a deputy of the RPT, who, as an Apetofiasi told me, wanted to enter the sacred hut during the celebrations. Gbagbasi certainly do not have the means to prevent it (if they refuse, the army is ready to use their rifles for persuasion), but the bearer of the “female” drum, possessed by Gbagba, prohibited him to enter with his shoes and shirt on. Since the god was speaking, the deputy cannot refuse. Nonetheless, the deputy had shown himself powerful enough to enter at will in a place, which is forbidden for most and which is under the protection of the god. Possession, in this case, shows its ambiguous duality: on one hand, it is an arena in which it is possible to address criticism to the power that normally would not be tolerated, on the other hand, it emerges as a manifestation of “power” itself. The ritual power, which is given to yams and fertility, submits the crowd to scrutiny, defends the village, enters in the theatre of national politics, and becomes extremely important for those in search of political legitimacy.

The Gbagbasi exploit the media to resist the at-

tacks from the church and, simultaneously, to gain visibility in the competition against the Kabié ceremonies, central in the Togolese political rhetoric. If the ceremonies’ aim is to create a moment that brings people together in an atmosphere of peace and to try to enhance the sense of belonging in a “community,” they are far from creating an effective social cohesion, becoming instead an arena of conflict and of renegotiation of identities and power structures.

Gbagba ceremonies reflect a multiplicity of mimetic processes: the “taming of spirits” through possession in order to protect the village; the ironic “taming” of the symbols of “modernity” and “the taming of the ceremonies itself” by the media, in order to inhibit potential instances of protest against the government. The spirits enter the bodies of individuals and then these possessed bodies enter the radio and television system, which tries to reduce them down to a harmless “folkloristic festival” which can be “sold” on the current global market of “traditional cultures.”

By incorporating Gbagba ceremonies, the media ensures its legitimacy and value, and this, for example, allowed the Agou spirits to draw strength in a fight against a bauxite mining project in 2006. During the public meeting to present the plans for bauxite extraction, Gbagba became a major obstacle to take into consideration, because its value was fully recognized by the advertising media. Destroying the spirits’ sanctuaries in exchange for a sum of money was considered as act of “simony,” as it was described by one participant, who remembered that Eyadéma himself had come to make sacrifices years ago in Agou, in order to defend himself from attacks by the spirits of the men he had killed. Who would have dared to violate a place, which had proved useful to the very same Eyadéma? Why destroy the holy sites in Gbagba, which were known and revered, thanks to the television “not only by the Togolese but by the people of Ghana and Benin”?

Once again the question “Who possesses whom” is an extremely important issue in avoiding a reduction of the complex links among different powers to a simple dichotomy between state and society, powerful and powerless, hegemony and resistance.

## Conclusion

Far from being an uncontested and unchanging religious ritual, Gbagba ceremonies have emerged as a privileged site for investigating the dynamics of social tensions of a “remotely global” (Piot 1999) region as well as the renegotiations of meanings and

practices of cults which have a crucial political importance. Due to its explicit anti-witchcraft role, for many people Gbagba reinforces moral values regarding the redistribution of resources and the role of “tradition” as a valuable alternative to the immorality and the ambiguities of “modernity”, while for others it is nothing more than an attempt to reproduce the legitimacy of elders’ power or a “satanic worship.” Nevertheless, what is crucial is the role that these ceremonies play in a wider political context in which the government is trying to reinforce its legitimacy following the example of Eyadéma. However, it would be an error to categorize these processes only under the category of a hegemonic process, aiming at the extension of central control. At the same time, in fact, the process of mediatization and the “politicization” are used to give legitimacy to the ceremonies itself and to those who perform them against the attempt of Christian churches to demonize local religions. The power of Gbagba is confirmed and reinforced because of, and not despite of, criticism, mediatization, accusations of Satanism, and the governmental interest in the ceremony.

The changing forms of the ceremonies, the new meanings they invoke, the co-optation of new elements from abroad, and the dynamics of power they imply are symptoms of the fact, that *vodu* has not lost its historical vitality and its ability to change facing new scenarios. As mentioned previously, *vodu* practices and beliefs have always been able to incorporate external elements in their adaptability to new social and political contexts. Gbagba ceremonies represent a good example of this fluidity. They remain central to the understanding of the social and cultural production of local meanings of “power,” in a context characterized by the struggles of different social and political institutions (the state, the Christian churches, local authorities, *vodu* priests) to reinforce their legitimacy and their control over the occult forces which produce wealth and fertility.

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