

## INTRODUCTION

## Images and Power

This study is an attempt to retheorize a classic out-of-the-way place (Tsing 1993)—a society in the savanna region of West Africa where Meyer Fortes, Jack Goody, and Marcel Griaule conducted their ethnographic research. These scholars analyzed Tallensi, LoDagaa, and Dogon societies as if they were timeless and bounded, located beyond the space-time of the colonial and the modern. By contrast, my own analysis of a society in this savanna region—the Kabre of northern Togo—will argue that this place has long been globalized and is better conceptualized as existing within modernity.<sup>1</sup> To claim as much is to argue against appearances, however, for this is a place that has all the earmarks of a still pristine African culture: subsistence farming, gift exchange, straw-roofed houses, rituals to the spirits and ancestors. Moreover, many of these elements of “tradition”—the ritual system, the domain of gift exchange—have flourished and intensified over the last thirty years. And this during a time when the president of the country, who hails from this remote ethnic group, has vigorously pursued a modernizing mission.

I want to suggest that these apparently traditional features of Kabre society are in fact “modernities” (Dirks 1990, 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993)—that they were forged during the long encounter with Europe over the last three hundred years and thus owe their meaning and shape to that encounter as much as to anything “indigenous.” Moreover, it is in terms of these features that Kabre comfortably, if not always seamlessly, inhabit today’s world. I thus join other scholars of Africa (S. Moore 1986, 1994; Mudimbe 1988; Ferguson 1990; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1993, 1997; Appiah 1992; Apter 1992; Cohen and Odhi-

ambo 1992; Gable 1995; Hutchinson 1996; Weiss 1996; Barber 1997; Shaw 1997) whose work seeks to unsettle the orientalizing binarism—and conceit—that associates Europe with “modernity” and Africa with “tradition” and has long informed scholarship about Africa and other places non-Western.

There is more than mere scholarly debate here, however. Demonizing images of Africa circulate in the press these days with startling frequency. In a rash of recent articles in leading U.S. newspapers and journals, under headlines that invite the sort of prurient voyeurism that has long accompanied Western interest in places Other—“The Coming Anarchy,” “Our Africa Problem,” “Tribal Ritual on Trial,” “Persecution by Circumcision”<sup>2</sup>—Africa, and especially West Africa, is portrayed as a place where democracy and development have failed, where drought and disease run rampant, where nepotistic ethnic politics is the norm with genocide right around the corner, and where “traditional” cultural practices such as polygyny, spirit worship (“animism,” as the popular press refers to it), and clitoridectomy (often referred to as “female genital mutilation”) still hold sway. In short, it is represented as a place where modernity’s signature institutions and beliefs—democracy and development, monogamous marriage, individualism and secularism—have failed to take root. Moreover, in many of these articles the blame for this failure is placed on the tenacity of “traditional culture.” Such an explanation—striking for its inattention to history—resembles the refrain I repeatedly heard from people working in development in Togo during the 1980s when yet another project of theirs had failed—namely, that it was the local “culture” that had prevented the group in question from changing its ways. Here, of course, the contrast is particularly sharply drawn: “traditional” (anti- or non-modern) culture retards the embrace of modernity.



I sat eating lunch with a high official from the American Embassy on the patio at Marox, a German-owned restaurant that was a popular hangout among expatriates in Lomé. Beyond the railing of the patio, the pock-marked street was flush with pedestrians and taxis dodging huge puddles left by a drenching dawn rain—smartly dressed women heading to the Grand Marché; food vendors with piles of fish, fruit, and vegetables on platters on their heads; peddlers selling watches, sandals, and cigarettes.

A large man with a wad of money in his hand and deep scars on his cheeks—a Yoruba from Nigeria—stopped at the railing and asked if we wanted to change money. “Marks? Dollars? I can give you a better price than the banks.”

I had just returned to Togo in the summer of 1996 for a short trip to the north and had met the official in a hallway at the embassy while I was “registering” before heading upcountry.<sup>3</sup> When he found out I was an anthropologist who worked among Kabre (Kabiyé),<sup>4</sup> the minority group from the north that has held power since 1967, he proposed lunch—to talk, he said, about Togolese “cultural politics” (a phrase oddly reminiscent of leftist academics describing the struggles of subaltern groups against dominant cultural and political-economic orders; yet here—employed by an embassy official surveilling a troubled post-colonial context—it seemed to have a disturbingly different sense). “I’ve read some of your work,” he said. “Got it off the Internet. But it doesn’t address the current conflict between Kabre and Ewe and I’d like to hear your take on it.”

He was a slight man who seemed cut from the same cloth as many of my (white, middle-class) students at Duke—clean-cut, smart, easy to talk to, conservative. His job at the embassy was to advise the ambassador and the State Department on local politics. It was he who monitored Togolese elections and who kept tabs on the simmering conflict between Kabre and Ewe, the country’s two most powerful ethnic groups—a situation he kept describing, mantra-like, as “another potential Rwanda.” He was also in charge of gathering information about the case of a Togolese woman seeking asylum in the States. The case had flashed across the pages of U.S. newspapers during the spring and fall of 1996, and had become a cause célèbre in American feminist circles.<sup>5</sup> The woman, Fau-siya Kasinga, originally from a small village in the north, had fled Togo—first to Germany, then to the United States—because she was in danger of being forced by her family to undergo clitoridectomy at the time of her marriage to a businessman in the south.

I myself had become keenly interested in the case when it was first reported in the press that spring, and had used a *New York Times* article on it in a class I was teaching to point out once again how orientalizing the press was whenever it wrote about Africa. The background images that framed the *Times* piece—images of Togo as poor, patriarchal, oppressive, illiterate—dominated and overwhelmed the story of Kasinga herself. It seemed more an article about Africa’s Otherness than about

either the plight of a woman caught in a nasty local dispute or a difficult and complex issue that defies easy resolution. Demonization all over again.

“Why,” I asked, “was the embassy involved in Kasinga’s case?”

“Because it’s a high publicity case that could affect U.S. policy not only in Togo but also throughout Africa. There are proposals in Congress to tie development money to the eradication of FGM [female genital mutilation]. There’s a big debate going on in the State Department right now over precisely this issue. And, it’s not all one-sided: there are strong advocates of noninterference in ‘cultural’ matters, people who are arguing that it’s wrong—a type of imperialism—to impose our values on others. The U.S. courts also worry that if they grant asylum in a case like this, the floodgates will open and anyone claiming cultural persecution of any kind will be granted asylum. This is a very sensitive case. We need to make sure we’ve got our ducks in a row.”

Our discussion of the Kasinga case ended (the official wanted to move on to other issues) with his relating a strange twist that had emerged from his undercover work: one of his local sources—a woman in the Togolese government—had told him that Kasinga’s claim was almost certainly a cover for the fact that she was a member of an international prostitution ring that worked the Togo-Germany-United States triangle. “Whenever these women get caught,” he had been told by this woman, “they use this as their alibi.”

Sipping a strong German ale, my companion switched the subject, probing to find out more about my work. He wanted to know how much time I’d spent in the north, where I lived, whether I spoke the language. But he was especially interested in those aspects of northern culture that bore on the current political situation. He wanted to know how much support Eyadéma, Togo’s Mobutuesque president, had in his home region and seemed surprised when I said that it was decidedly mixed. He also wanted to know more about the young men from the north whom Eyadéma recruited into the military and police force. As the most visible arm of the state—clad in olive-green uniforms, brandishing AK-47s, they work the many checkpoints throughout Lomé and along the national highway that stretches to the northern border, often harassing drivers who seem suspicious or whose papers aren’t “in order”—they had been the target of intense criticism in the Togolese press during the early 1990s. They were also widely assumed to have “disappeared” members of Eyadéma’s political opposition. The press portrayed them as thugs who knew nothing but blind loyalty to the president and the power of

the gun—and who were the product, it was suggested, of a “culture of violence” that festered in the rude backward regions of the north.

I calmly but persistently tried to disrupt the stereotype, pointing out how those youths I knew in the north are not the thugs portrayed in the southern media, that Kabre are markedly nonviolent (and indeed always struck me as more so than any people I’d ever known), that Kabre and Ewe, the two groups at odds during the 1990s, have lived side by side in southern Togo since the early colonial period and there get along extremely well. I also suggested that the current conflict between the two groups was explained less by primordialist assumptions about ethnic groups—what the press was fond of calling “tribalism”—than by understanding the volatile mix of processes of underdevelopment with post-colonial power configurations, and that the international community was as responsible for this mix as anyone else.

It was the totalizing, essentializing cultural categories—the “Kabre” and their “culture of violence”—within which this official operated that I found particularly troubling. While he seemed well-meaning, he was the victim of a State Department policy of extraordinary hubris that rotates officers from one country to the next every two years. He thus had had little time to learn much about Togolese and their history, and by default fell back on ethnic stereotype. Most sobering of all was the fact that he wielded enormous power: at his suggestion—by the circulation of a single memo suggesting that Togolese were unwilling to engage in the electoral process or to eradicate clitoridectomy—millions of dollars in aid money, money a country like Togo relies on just to stay afloat, could be cut off overnight.

This encounter underscores the insidious and volatile way in which image and power feed off one another in this postcolonial context, and the enormous stakes involved. It also calls attention to the types of global processes and interconnections that seem ever more commonplace as the century draws to a close—processes that draw into the same tight circle a hill people living in a remote corner of French West Africa, a civil servant from the world’s most powerful country, and a Western anthropologist whose work can be downloaded off the Internet at the click of a mouse (and put to use in ways that are beyond his/her control). Clearly, the need is as pressing now as ever to write against power and against the images it deploys in legitimating imperialist agendas.