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Problems of Ineffective Government in Post-Colonial Dahomey

Dahomey: Between Tradition and Modernity by Dov Ronen; Le Danxome: du pouvoir Aja à la nation Fon by Maurice Ahanhanzo Glélé

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*Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1976), pp. 525-528

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#) on behalf of the [Canadian Association of African Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/483806>

Accessed: 15/05/2014 11:13

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that historians should look at Christianity at the level of village society because Christianity now appears in the context of African religious system.

Linden gives us a very good analysis of the Nyau societies which became a major agency persistent resistance to colonial rule in Nyasaland. The Chewa antimission protest thus became part of the wider African response to the colonial situation. However, he has failed to give us an analysis of the life and thought world of the Catholic peasants.

Taking into account the Catholic policy of restraint in adapting to local culture and conditions and the priests' negative attitude towards the Nyau societies, Linden's insinuation that Catholic priests from rural Europe were closer to the rural African peasants than the elitist Protestants is very illuminating but questionable. However, Linden exhibits a clear understanding of the history of the Catholic Church and the social background of the missionaries. This gives him a vantage point in his analysis of the interaction of Catholicism and the peasant Chewa society.

The differences between Catholic and Protestant missions were most visible in their educational policies. Linden has observed that the Catholic schools were mainly centres to attract the African peasants to Catholicism. Catholic missionaries did not regard themselves as agencies of social change in the same way the Protestant missionaries did. Christianity and Progress were not their banner.

The lack of a bibliography in such a solid piece of research is a serious omission. All in all, this is a well written, readable and painstakingly researched book.

To historians of African religions, here are two highly commendable books based on solid historical research.

### ***Problems of Ineffective Government In Post-Colonial Dahomey \****

Patrick MANNING \*\*

These two books address themselves to problems of ineffective government in post-colonial Dahomey (now Bénin), but from quite different perspectives. Ronen applies a variant of modernization theory, while Glélé works from reflections on the history of the Abomey kingdom. Of the two, Ronen's is simpler and clearer, especially as a summary of Dahomean political narrative. Glélé's work, however, is more original and shows more promise for future analysis.

Ronen maintains that Dahomey's political instability resulted from its inability to integrate modern institutions with traditional values. He concludes that centuries of precolonial contact with Europeans did not influence Dahomey except by creating an elite group, the Brazilians. The separation of the elite from the masses through the device of education is his main theme for the period 1900–1945.

The postwar period brought elections to Dahomey, and by the early 1950s the electoral organizations had assumed a regional character: one for Porto-Novo and its surroundings, one for Abomey and its surroundings, and one for the North. This, says Ronen, shows

the incompatibility of the Western political system with traditional values, norms, and attitudes in Dahomey. ... The Dahomean political system failed because the institutions

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\* Dov RONEN, *Dahomey: Between Tradition and Modernity*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, xviii + 272p. Maurice Ahanhanzo GLÉLÉ, *Le Danxomé: du pouvoir Aja à la nation Fon*, Paris: Nubia, 1975, 282p.

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themselves were injected into a virtual political vacuum — meaning the absence of political awareness, recognition, or consciousness in the society.<sup>1</sup>

Can this be? Can Dahomeans have become apolitical? Porto-Novo and Dahomey were each highly politicized states in the late nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century such groups as the Adjovi and Tovalou Quénum families, segments of the royal family of Abomey, and the Muslims of Porto-Novo had clear policies and active political programs. A prolific tradition of crusading journalism rose in Dahomey as early as 1913 (Ronen himself has written on it). Colonial Dahomey contributed at least two major spokesmen for African nationalism, Louis Hunkanrin and Marc Tovalou Quénum. Ronen refers to them only indirectly in an interesting comment about the tendency of Dahomean thinkers to join a “universal intelligentia.”

Yet it is clear that after 1945 Dahomey had virtually no organized political interests. Certainly nothing to be compared with the Ivory Coast planters who built the PDCI and took over the country. Newspapers were virtually absent from Dahomey in the 1960s and 1970s.

Was there no group in Dahomey with a need for political power? Why should the earlier tradition of political activism have died out? Here Ronen might have looked a little more carefully into the earlier colonial period. The French followed a systematic policy of playing Dahomean interests off against each other to keep them all weak. Dahomeans resisted many French restrictions successfully, but seem overall to have lost any effective base for political or economic organization. Further, French economic policy led to bleeding of the country by taxation and by refusal to invest. The explanation of Dahomey's political weakness may lie in these French colonial policies.

Ronen, in sum, has provided us with another political science country study. It is useful for tracing the evolution of government, elections, ties to international bodies, and military interventions in Dahomey from 1945 to 1973. But explanation of the more basic trends and problems in Dahomean politics has yet to come.

Maurice Glélé's study is not the comprehensive analysis we seek, but it provides some fascinating clues. The book is divided into two largely separate studies: a cross-sectional study of the institutions of the kingdom of Dahomey (or Danxomé, following Glélé's more meticulous orthography) which is, in a sense, a celebration of the Fon kingdom; followed by a study of political change among kings and chiefs since the French conquest, aimed at demonstrating that local chiefs provide an institution on which modern Dahomey may build an effective political system. Both sections are based on written sources and on oral evidence collected by Glélé.

The author is of the country's elite, both traditional and modern, and he is a nationalist. At the same time he is an intellectual attempting a critical evaluation of his country's prospects for advancement. Glélé is more direct, opinionated and personal than most African scholars. This perspective seems to me to provide the strength of his book.

The first part of the book adds somewhat to available evidence on the kingdom of Dahomey, and may thus be set alongside such sources as *Le Herissé* (1911) and *Herskovits* (1938). Glélé follows *Le Herissé* and *Le Herissé's* oral sources on many points of interpretation. He treats *Herskovits* more cautiously, principally because of a dispute with René Aho, a prince who was *Herskovits's* principal informant. Glélé asserts that the principal objective of the kingdom was territorial expansion (as *Le Herissé* argues) rather than profits from the slave trade (as many others, including *Herskovits* to an extent, have argued).

Particular attention is given to the institution of *vidaxó* or crown prince. Ahanhanzo, Maurice Glélé's great-grandfather, was *vidaxó* under King Glélé until his sudden death in 1874. Bitterness resulted between the followers of Ahanhanzo and those of Béhanzin, who subsequently became *vidaxó* and then king from 1889 to 1894. Maurice Glélé implies, for instance, that Béhanzin was left-handed and should not therefore have become king.

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1. Ronen, pp. 96, 107.

Glélé emphasizes the Fon rule against putting princes in high office for fear of their personal ambition, and yet the steady trend to placing more and more princes in high office – which trend continued in the twentieth century.

It also appears, however, that Glélé intends his study of precolonial Danxomé as a device for commenting on modern Dahomey. For example, the Soglos are given attention as the military companions of the Fon kings from the earliest days – Gen. Christophe Sogle was, of course, twice president of Dahomey. Yet Glélé also states that a military coup would have been impossible in precolonial Dahomey. He asserts that Danxomé had become a nation-state by the late nineteenth century, and that government depended on the careful maintenance of a broad consensus. It is clearly implied that these are standards modern Bénin should seek to emulate.

But the most clearly useful part of the book is the second. Glélé shows the steps by which, under the impact of French pressure and policy, Dahomey and its royal family were split into a variety of factions. The kingdom was partitioned upon conquest, and only a quarter of the kingdom was left to the throne. Secondly, a split occurred between the partisans of the deposed Béhanzin and those of Agoli-Agbo, his brother who was placed on the throne by the French.

The third split was the establishment of the “proconsulate” of the *chefs de canton* following the deposition of Agoli-Agbo in 1900. The *cercle* of Abomey was divided into *cantons*, and a chief selected for each. The majority of these chiefs were of royal blood – a violation, therefore, of the rule against giving offices to princes. Each of these promptly had himself installed with the rituals of a king of Dahomey. To maintain their position and the favour of the administration they restricted education, for example, and made no move to constitute political parties. Glélé labels them “grand electors.”

A further dispute then arose as to who would be considered king or head of the royal family. Certain energetic *chefs de canton* aspired to the title. One of them, Justin Aho, convinced an apparently credulous I. A. Akinjogbin in Paris that he ought to be recognized as king.<sup>2</sup> The preponderance of opinion gives the position to Sagbaju, a son of king Glélé who is now a century old, and who technically acts as leader of ceremonies for the royal ancestors.

It is certainly striking that the Fon, who were so politically dominant up to 1893, have never dominated colonial or independent Dahomey. Their large population and prior leadership would seem almost automatically to make them the leading force in the country. But two sorts of reasons emerge for their weakness. Firstly, the French dismembered the kingdom and relentlessly split Fon leaders. Secondly, tensions within the Fon system. The kingdom relied on the selection of a unique leader. The more it became possible for princes to gain political office, the greater became the tendency to form factions within the kingdom. These factions have continued to neutralise each other, in both the “traditional” and “modern” sectors.

Justin Ahomadegbé, therefore, was never able to gain the complete support of Abomey and Ouidah. The founder and head of UDD, a party based in Abomey, he began in the 1950s to represent himself as a member of the royal family, though his tie was through marriage to the descendant of an eighteenth-century king. The partisans of Béhanzin supported UDD, but the partisans of Agoli-Agbo supported the PRD of Sourou-Migan Apithy. And the *chefs de canton* could never be brought into a single political organization. Consistent failure of the UDD to get solid support in Abomey and Ouidah cost it election after election.

Glélé’s conclusion is stated more as an article of faith than as a proposition whose value has been demonstrated. He believes that a strong local government structure is necessary, and he believes that village chiefs, the only surviving political institution from precolonial Dahomey, still provide the best hope for such a local government structure.

Ronen presents the chiefs as an obstacle to political development; Glélé presents them as the main hope. Ronen suggests that the Dahomeans need new attitudes; Glélé believes they need new institutions. Ronen’s survey of recent political events is set against a shallow

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2. I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours, 1708–1818*, Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 6.

background of history, including a stereotyped notion of traditionalism. He assumes, for example, that having royal princes as *chefs de canton* represents tradition, and explains the relative order in the region of Abomey. Glélé shows the power of the *chefs de canton* to be an innovation, and suggests that order existed because of an alliance of chiefs and administration. Ronen has summarized Dahomean politics to permit it to be compared to other countries; Glélé has begun a synthesis of Dahomean history to facilitate an attack on its current problems.

### **Actualité du mouvement Mau Mau \***

Denis MARTIN \*

La révolte Mau Mau... rarement événement africain aura déchaîné autant de passions; aura donné naissance à une littérature aussi abondante: reportages journalistiques, enquêtes plus ou moins officielles, récits historiques, études sociologiques, mémoires, biographies... D'une certaine façon, on peut y voir un signe de l'importance accordée à la première guerre de libération nationale ayant éclaté en Afrique noire. Mais la quantité n'est pas nécessairement fidèle et surtout l'image qui s'en dégage évoque plus un puzzle encore incomplet qu'une synthèse stimulante.

Des pans entiers du phénomène nous restent inconnus ou sont du moins déformés par la qualité des documents prétendant les retracer: les conditions immédiates du déclenchement de ce qu'il faut bien appeler une lutte armée et le déroulement concret de celle-ci. De ce point de vue on doit reconnaître que les pages écrites par Bildad Kaggia dans une semi-retraite politique (il a été battu aux élections de 1974 comme à celles de 1969) n'apportent pas grand-chose de nouveau. Sinon sur un point: les relations, ou plus précisément le peu de relations, existant entre Jomo Kenyatta et le Comité central clandestin de l'organisation que les Européens dénommaient Mau Mau, Comité central auquel appartenait Bildad Kaggia. S'il en était encore besoin, son témoignage contribue à démonter le mythe de Kenyatta, chef Mau Mau. Il était en fait un politicien rusé, obligé de tenir compte du mouvement radical et de la force populaire que lui donnaient les serments, comme, de l'autre côté, il s'efforçait de ne pas se heurter de front aux autorités britanniques. Et il est dommage que Bildad Kaggia ne s'étende pas davantage sur les relations qui s'instaurèrent ensuite entre les condamnés de Kapenguria (Jomo Kenyatta, Achieng Oneko, Fred Kubai, Paul Ngei, Bildad Kaggia, Kungu Karumbu, que vinrent rejoindre Waruhiu Itote, « Général China », et Kariuki Chotara) à Lokitaung puis à Lodwar.

Il laisse entendre que dès les premières années cinquante, un conflit latent existait entre Kenyatta et les jeunes radicaux, que cet antagonisme ne se dissipa point, au contraire, en captivité; mais il préfère se taire plutôt que de parler de l'actuel président kenyan, plutôt que d'évoquer, par exemple, les tentatives d'assassinat dont il aurait fait l'objet de la part de ses co-détenus... Et pourtant, tout cela est sans doute encore bien présent aujourd'hui. Que des hommes comme Paul Ngei et Bildad Kaggia n'aient pas eu la possibilité d'entrer au Conseil législatif quand ils reprirent leur vie politique; qu'en général, tout ait été fait pour que les anciens combattants et les anciens détenus participent le moins possible aux décisions capitales qui préludèrent à l'indépendance, cela illustre l'opposition entre les combattants et les militants,

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\* Robert BUIJTENHUIS, *Mau Mau Twenty Years After. The Myth and the Survivors*, Paris, La Haye, Mouton, 1973, 170p. ill. h.t. + bibliographie. Bildad GAGGIA, *Root of Freedom, 1921-1963. The Autobiography of Bildad Kaggia*, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1975, 202p. ill. h.t. + index.

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