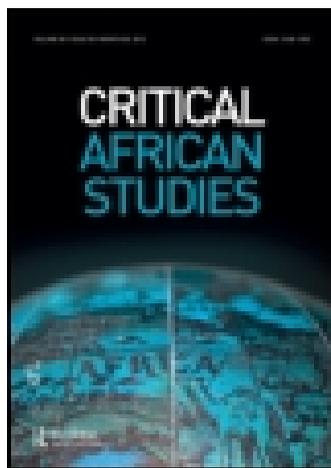


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## Where does fortune come from? Agrarian work ethics and luck in Togo D'où provient la fortune? Ethiques du travail agraire et chance au Togo

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Through the analysis of the biographical trajectories of three Togolese men of different generations, this paper explores the changing and ambiguous relation between notions of fortune and agricultural work in south-western Togo. Comparing their different work ethics, I will discuss which factors people of different generations and different economic conditions considered legitimate in enhancing individual success and fortune, the ambiguous moral discourses that historically have imbued agricultural activities, and their relations with other forms of accumulation more or less connected with the use or abuse of occult means. I would suggest that, far from being one the opposite of the other, work ethics and notions of fortune become part of the same moral discourse that people elaborate in order to legitimize (or delegitimize) given forms of accumulation and to make sense of new and old inequalities.

**Keywords:** work ethics; luck; agriculture; Togo

Grâce à l'analyse des trajectoires biographiques de trois togolais de différentes générations, cet article explore la relation changeante et ambiguë entre les notions de fortune et les travaux agricoles dans le sud-ouest du Togo. En comparant leurs différentes éthiques de travail, je discuterai les facteurs que hommes de différentes générations et de différentes conditions économiques considèrent comme légitimes pour augmenter leur chance de réussite et leur fortune personnelle, ainsi que les discours moraux ambigus qui ont historiquement imprégné les activités agricoles et leurs relations avec d'autres formes d'accumulation plus ou moins liées à l'utilisation ou à l'abus de moyens occultes. Je soutiendrai que, l'éthique du travail et les notions de fortune, loin d'être la première à l'opposé des secondes, font partie du même discours moral que les gens élaborent afin de légitimer (ou délégitimer) formes particulières d'accumulation et pour donner un sens aux nouvelles et aux vieilles inégalités.

**Mots-clés:** éthique de travail; chance; agriculture; Togo

### Introduction

This paper explores the ambiguous relation between notions of fortune and agricultural work ethic in south-western Togo,<sup>1</sup> a region that in the last century saw the rise and the decline of cocoa economy, radical changes in the forms of labour recruitment and the emergence of new forms of enrichment and models of self-realization. This theme will be addressed via the analysis of the life trajectories of three men from a village near Mount Agou: Yao,<sup>2</sup> a Ewe catholic landowner

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who profited from cocoa economy during the late French colonial period and the first decades after independence; his son Prestige, an opponent of the Eyadéma's regime,<sup>3</sup> who in the 1990s lost his job as a schoolteacher and after a period of migration was obliged to return to agricultural activities in his natal village; and his grandson Paul (Prestige's eldest son) who since 2006 has worked as a moto-taxi driver (*zemidjan*), refusing to cultivate his father's land, and whose dreams of self-realization are symbolized by a successful migration. Comparing their biographical trajectories and their different work ethics, this paper aims to explore the ambiguous moral discourses that historically have imbued agricultural work and local notions of fortune, and will show which factors people of different generations and different economic conditions consider relevant in enhancing fortune.

I met Paul in 2009 in a village near Mount Agou. He gave me a ride on his motorbike to the weekly market of Agou Gare. At that time, I was interested in an analysis of the impact of cocoa economy on the local forms of access to land. Paul told me that his grandfather, Yao, who had died some years before, was, in the past, one of the most important cocoa producers of the region. Some days later, I met Prestige, Paul's father, who recounted Yao's history to me. During a successive interview, our conversation turned towards the ethical values that Yao seemed to have attributed to agriculture work, which he considered to be the only legitimate way to accumulate money and enhance personal and social virtues. Paul was present and visibly bothered by his father's discourse. Later on, after speaking with Paul, I discovered that Prestige's speech about his father was addressed more to his son Paul rather than to me: Prestige did not like the fact that his son was a *zemidjan* and was trying to convince him to take care of the land he would inherit sooner or later. During successive meetings with them and with other inhabitants of the village, I became aware that the confrontation between Prestige and Paul was something more than a father/son conflict about work choice. It reflected their different life trajectories, the changes in the economic and social structures that have characterized the Agou region in the last decades, and, ultimately, it involved the different moral meanings they attributed to work and fortune as means to enhance success.

During our interviews about the role that fortune has played in his life, Prestige made reference to a well-known biblical story: When Job asked God why, despite being a pious, industrious and good man, he was punished with diseases, the death of his children and the loss of all his things, God simply did not answer. Instead, he recalled his omnipotence: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' This story has become one of the most known metaphors to describe the weakness of human beings, whose efforts seem insignificant in comparison to the overwhelming forces of fate and fortune. And yet, Job's questions continue to be asked and the answers that human beings have historically provided aim often to restore some dignity to human agency. Where does luck come from? Is fortune something totally independent from human agency? Are there ways to enhance it (or to avoid misfortune)? As Weber (1922–23 [1991]) suggested, the problem of the unequal distribution of fortune often involves moral concerns: on the one hand, people are generally not satisfied with being simply 'lucky', they must feel that their fortune is legitimate ('theodicy of good fortune'); on the other hand, it is necessary to find justifications (or rewards) for the occurrence of misfortune ('theodicy of suffering'). The unequal distribution of fortune can be conceived as a moral dilemma through which different societies provide distinctive solutions in specific political and economic contexts (da Col 2012). As da Col (2012, 3) outlined:

... luck and fortune appear to be tropes liable to affect all spheres of human sociality. In moral reflections, luck and fortune problematize notions of agency and responsibility; in political cosmologies, they intervene in the (dis)connections between will, action, and efficacy and confine the magnitude of human authority; in economic exchange, they single out the tensions between personal skills, choice, and notions of value, as in gift giving, where fortune and luck embed spiritual properties

within material entities. Through their relationship with temporality, luck and fortune unfold the nature of events encountered during the course of social activities. Yet this 'omni-potency' of luck and fortune calls for a definition of the corresponding analytical boundaries: the plethora and multiplicity of fortunes need to be accounted for as well as 'counted'.

In Africa, notions of fortune and misfortune have been traditionally related to the study of witchcraft. For many anthropologists, witchcraft accusations have been privileged points of departure in the analysis of how people elaborate moral commentaries on social, economic and political relations (Ardener 1996; Evans-Pritchard 1937; Fortes 1961) and are still crucial in order to understand how people conceive growing economic inequalities in contexts increasingly connected to a 're-enchanted' neoliberal momentum in which the accumulation of wealth and health appear to be linked to occult, immoral means (Bond and Ciekawy 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2001; Geschiere 1995, 1997; Kiernan 2006; Moore and Sanders 2001; Ndjio 2012; Rowlands and Warnier 1988).

And yet, even if witchcraft plays an important role in how people elaborate their notions of fortune and misfortune, the emphasis on the 're-enchancement' of the world sometimes hides the importance that people still attribute to work in shaping fortune and opportunities, even in a neoliberal era dominated by 'occult' or 'millennial' economies that seem to make work irrelevant for the achievement of wealth (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Far from being only related to witchcraft, in the context where I conducted my fieldwork, the reasons provided to explain bad or good luck were connected to multifaceted, contradictories and ambiguous aetiologies informed by the interplay between work ethics, political discourses, local cults and Christian faith. These aetiologies could not be reduced to a coherent and homogeneous 'system of belief'; they were not equally shared and were not untouched by history. Far from easy generalizations, they had to be analysed in their practical and contextual use by socially and historically positioned actors.

In this article, I would suggest that, far from one being the opposite of the other, work ethics and notions of fortune become part of the same moral discourse that people elaborate in order to legitimize (or delegitimize) wealth and success, and to make sense of new and old inequalities. Indeed, work ethics, witchcraft and luck were often evoked together (sometimes in opposition) by my interlocutors in order to explain, justify or criticize given forms of accumulation. As witchcraft (or other magical means employed to accumulate fortune), work ethics were not immune to possible criticism, insofar as they were at the same time a way to legitimize moral forms of accumulation, but also the useful rhetoric employed for the legitimization of labour exploitation. Agricultural activities are a privileged topic for this discussion, for they have been historically charged with multiple and often contrasting values. Agriculture was considered by some of my elder interlocutors as an ennobling activity in comparison to other more profitable businesses (as trade, for example, that often exposes people to the risk of accusation of witchcraft), as a way of enhancing individual and social virtues, of preserving a certain degree of economic autonomy and of facing economic crisis and uncertainty. For others, working the land appeared instead as an ambiguous necessity, but not a desirable fate. Several young people I met were trying (or had tried) to avoid agricultural activities, considered traditional places of exploitation and 'a trap where you work hard and you gain nothing', as Paul told me.

Before presenting Yao's, Prestige's and Paul's life histories and ideas, I will briefly stress how local notions of luck and agrarian work ethics are part of a fractured and multifaceted discourse on the morality or immorality of given forms of accumulation and I will discuss the ambiguous moral values attributed to agricultural activities during and after colonization. Then, exploring their life trajectories, I will suggest that a trans-generational approach able to link individuals' lives with wider historical contexts could be helpful to a discussion

about how shifting notions of fortune and work ethics become a political and moral arena of confrontation between people who experienced different labour conditions and have different ideas of self-realization and luck.

### Luck, witchcraft and hard work

In Togo, as in many other African contexts (see for example, Ardener 1996; Bond and Ciekawy 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2001; Geschiere 1995, 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001), witchcraft is one of the main causes that people evoke to explain individual and collective misfortunes (Ellis 1993; Gardini 2013; Piot 1999). Potentially, every kind of conflict along the axes of gender, generation, origin and class (from land disputes to contested inheritances, from adultery to political confrontations) could generate a witchcraft accusation, particularly if one of the contenders (or one of his/her family members) dies for unexpected reasons or is affected by misfortunes, madness or sudden and incurable diseases.<sup>4</sup> Witchcraft accusations have a long history in Togo and they emerged often as a moral commentary on political and economic inequalities. As Ellis (1993, 471–472) has shown:

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. [...] It is generally believed that people in positions of power sometimes sacrifice children as a means of acquiring or preserving power.

In Agou, elders were often believed to have powers or spells (*dzo*) that could be used to harm those who contested their authority and to protect their favourites. Governmental elite and successful traders were sometimes exposed to the accusation of having signed secret pacts with the spirits in order to improve their fortune. They were supposed to become able to transform themselves into spiritual, nocturnal beings who stole the life force of their kin and neighbours in order to feed the spirits that guaranteed them success. The accused traders I met in Agou were ready to defend themselves by saying that their success was a consequence of their hard work and turned the accusation of using magical means (*dzo*) against those who were envious of their fortune. Eyadéma justified his political power and wealth presenting himself as ‘chosen’ by the Christian god to rule the country (Toulabor 1986). As Sanders (2003) has shown for a case of rain witchcraft in Tanzania, also in Togo, witchcraft accusations were the arena where the local meanings of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ were renegotiated. Some Christians of Agou, for example, lumped together ancestor worship, *vodun* cults and *dzo* under the category of *adze* (witchcraft, as a power used to acquire money vampirizing others), in order to describe them as illegitimate, ‘satanic’ ways to enhance fortune. In their ‘modernizing’ rhetoric, they were strongly convinced that the persistence of these ‘traditions’ and these ‘backward and fetishist cults’ was the main reason that explained why Togo was not yet a ‘developed’ country. Others, on the contrary, were convinced that a major cause of misfortune came from forgetting ‘tradition’ and the embrace of the Christian god who was not so effective at providing protection from magical attacks. For them, ancestor and *vodun* worship and the use of powerful spells (*dzo*) were the best way to defend themselves against witchcraft (*adze*) and to induce a morally legitimate kind of luck that originated from social harmony, respect of the elders and of the ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, despite the important (and, for someone, growing) role attributed to ‘occult means’ in enhancing fortune, local notions of ‘luck’ (in Ewe *àklàmà*) could not be reduced to witchcraft. Indeed, fortune and misfortune were considered by my interlocutors to be affected by a

broader spectrum of forces that included divine intervention and human work. The German missionary Westermann, in the translation of Jehle (1907, 405–406), described *àklàmà* as follows:

The Ehwes say about the aklama that it is an invisible thing which God has given to man in order to be about him and accompany him wherever he goes. If you had a hair-breadth escape from an accident, or if a disease brought you within sight of the grave and you recovered, or if you found something nice, or if you succeeded in an enterprise, you would say: 'My aklama has given me good advice, my aklama was propitious, aklama was about me'. In most cases the aklama is propitious to the individual; it is his protector, adviser, helper. [...] Aklama (okra) sometimes means fate, fortune; in this application it may even have the plural: *aklamawo we didi*, by the grace of the aklama, i.e., by good luck.

The definitions given by my Ewe interlocutors of *àklàmà* ranged from the idea of a spiritual protective being (the idea collected by Westermann) to the idea that *àklàmà* was not a spirit, but either the direct expression of god's will, a personal attribute of the person, or an impersonal force. At different moments and for different aims, a number of other factors were evoked by my interlocutors to explain fortune (good health, offspring, money, good harvests, the acquisition of a job and success in business) or misfortune (accidents, disease and impoverishment): Christian god's or ancestors' (*tɔgbuiwo*) will, the use of magical means that could be inherited or bought (*dzo*), witchcraft (*adze*), the interventions of the plural local deities (*vodun* or *trɔwo*),<sup>6</sup> the respect of domestic taboos, personal, moral and physical strength, political and economic reasons and hard work. According to their religious and political beliefs, their power and economic position, and their personal experiences, people put a different emphasis on the role played by each one of these factors. As Yao's, Prestige's and Paul's histories will show, these different aetiologies were the conceptual framework through which the morality of given forms of accumulation was conceived, discussed and renegotiated by people of different generation and different economic conditions. The forces that generate luck were not represented as a domain outside human reach, but as a field that could be influenced, shaped and informed by human agency and work. Even the concept of destiny (*gbetsi*) was sometimes elaborated as a sort of choice. An old woman who worked as a seller of cloth in Kpalimé explained to me what *gbetsi* is by saying: 'Before being born to the world, an individual chooses the moment of his return to the spirit world. If during his life he does not keep this promise, the *gbetsi* kill him through an accident' (see also Meyer 1999, 63).

This emphasis on human agency called for an analysis of the role played by work in the local understandings of fortune. Work ethic (as the belief that hard work is intrinsically virtuous, that it is the only legitimate way to accumulate wealth, and that it plays a crucial role in enhancing individual and social moral attitudes) was often evoked as not only the antithesis of witchcraft, but also as one of the main (and licit) ways to try to tame, provoke or foster the multiple forces that controlled luck. And yet, work ethic was also an object of moral concern: on the one hand, there were economic activities socially considered more positively than others (teaching vs. prostitution, for example); on the other hand, and more importantly for the topic of this article, even 'licit' or morally legitimate works involved immoral forms of exploitation. These moral ambiguities were particularly evident in agriculture, where work ethic became the moralizing rhetoric used by the colonial and post-colonial state in order to improve agricultural production and the best way to legitimize the forms of exploitation that characterized the relations of production between elders and young people and between landowners and migrants.

### **The ambiguous ethos of colonial and postcolonial agrarian work**

In Togo, as in other colonial contexts, German colonial administrators put a strong emphasis on the moral value of agricultural activities, thought to be not only crucial to improve the agricultural

production, but also as an educational tool for colonized people, to whom the ‘value of work’ had to be taught (Ali-Napo 1995; Amenumey 1969; Gayibor 1997, 2011). The idea of the indigenous ‘lazy by definition’ was an integral part of the racist assumptions which were widespread in colonial contexts (cfr. Alatas 1977; Atkins 1993; Makgala 2013). The first accounts of missionaries<sup>7</sup> who described Ewe as industrious farmers, involved in the cultivation of cassava, maize, yam and palm,<sup>8</sup> were quickly forgotten by colonial administrators, who needed to boost cash crops production (particularly cotton) in order to make the colonial conquest profitable. Forced labour, tax collection, corporal punishment and the imposition of cash crops in order to satisfy the European markets were often legitimized as a way to ‘educate’ the colonized, who were considered ‘lazy’ people lacking any kind of ‘work ethic’. Colonial agricultural policies were aimed also at eradicating customs which were considered ‘savage’, such as polygamy, ‘superstition’ or what the German missionaries and administrators considered to be the ‘excessive economic independence of women’, which, they said, undermined the basic harmony of domestic groups.<sup>9</sup> The economic plans of the colony were intended not only to maximize production but also to replace the ‘traditional polygamic and animist’ family with a monogamous and Christian one, seen as more ‘modern’ and productive.<sup>10</sup>

The following French colonial administrators shared, to a large extent, the German ahistorical and racist representations: Togo needed a ‘modernization’ programme in order to ‘evolve’ and to abandon what they considered ‘irrational behaviors’ (most notably, the cutting down of palm trees for the production of palm wine, the slash-and-burn method of cultivation and ‘fetishism’).<sup>11</sup> Among the colonial policies that mostly influenced local economic context was the re-peopling of Central and South Togo by means of the forced settlement of Kabye and Nawdeba (Losso) people on lands which had remained empty as a result of the Ashanti and Dahomey slave raids (Gayibor 2011; Lucien-Brun and Pillet-Schwartz 1987; Piot 1999; Verdier 1982). These programmes, started in the 1920s on the initiative of governor Bonnacarrère, moved a considerable number of people towards the fertile regions between Kpalimé and Sokodé. The goal was to have on-the-spot cheap labour for the maintenance of main roads, as well to improve agricultural production.

Contrary to the colonial image of a lazy, static and ‘traditional’ peasantry, local farmers were ready to catch good opportunities when they appeared. Given the relatively high price of cocoa in the international market, the possibility it offered to reinforce land rights and to gain the cash needed to pay colonial taxes, cocoa cultivation was introduced in the south-western regions of Togo at the beginning of the 20th century by Ewe seasonal labourers coming back from Gold Coast (Gayibor 1997, 2011; Gu-Konu 1983, Lawrance 2003; Lucien-Brun and Pillet-Schwartz 1987; Nugent 2002; Quesnel and Vimard 1987, 1988). Ewe ‘landowners’ (generically elders and lineage heads who could claim allocation rights over their family lands and could mobilize more labour, but also married men who were trying to enhance their social status) reproduced with northern migrants the sharecropping agreements that were developing in Gold Coast.<sup>12</sup> These sharecropping agreements (known in Togo as *dibimadibi* or *deme*) for many Ewe landowners represented a way to recruit (migrant) labour outside the family, giving them the material possibility to invest in the upward mobility of their sons. At the same time, the *dibimadibi* system offered to Kabye and Nawdeba migrants the possibility of having access to the most fertile lands of the country and to transmit these land rights to their children (Gu-Konu 1983, Lucien-Brun and Pillet-Schwartz 1987; Quesnel and Vimard 1987, 1988). When the land available for new plantations became scarce, the agreements between landowners and migrants changed, as it became more profitable for landowners to hire seasonal labour rather than allowing migrants to settle permanently.<sup>13</sup>

The colonial rhetoric that considered hard agricultural work as a way of enhancing personal and social virtues was appropriated or rejected according to the power and economic position of

individuals. Owners of big cocoa plantations (as Yao), who were greatly profiting from the work of migrants and were reinforcing their land rights at the expense of other kin,<sup>14</sup> were likely to adopt this kind of 'agricultural work ethic'. However, the money they earned was invested, in many cases, to send their sons and grandsons to school. Schooling allowed some of them to emancipate themselves from agriculture and have access to the new opportunities that the colonial and postcolonial economic context offered: in state administration, commercial companies or in international cocoa and coffee trade. As Yao's history will show, in that period, embracing a strong agricultural ethic and the faith in the Christian god was the best way for those who were profiting from cash crops economy to legitimize their forms of accumulation and to protect themselves against the magical attacks of envious kin, neighbours or seasonal labourers.<sup>15</sup> Colonial agricultural ethic was rejected, instead, by those who were most exposed to forms of labour exploitation. Migration to Gold Coast in order to avoid taxes and forced labour or working as smugglers (Nugent 2002) were some of the strategies that many young people found in order to renegotiate their position vis-à-vis the impositions of colonial rule and their elders (Gayibor 1997).

The ethical and pedagogical values of agricultural work incentivized by colonialism became part of a long-standing narrative that the postcolonial state was ready to adopt. After independence, the moral value of agricultural work was relaunched by the so-called 'green revolution' promoted by Eyadéma in the 1970s. The project aimed at increasing the 'return to the land' for people (that was a quite ironic slogan for a country where the great majority of people were already farmers), the modernization of farming, the breeding of domestic animals of small size, the use of fertilizers and more productive varieties of maize, rice, cassava, cereals and sugar for domestic consumption and of cocoa and cotton for export (Schwartz 1989). The 'green revolution' resulted essentially in bankruptcy after only 10 years, since Togo was far from achieving self-sufficiency in the food industry. Consumer demand for food diversified both in urban and in rural areas, contradicting the same concept of self-sustenance; tractors purchased were damaged in a few months and have never been repaired and neither has the growth of agricultural production of food reached the levels of population growth (Duanenyo 1987; Schwartz 1989; Toulabor 1986). Furthermore, many of the operating funds for the agricultural world were illegally stolen by project managers. State companies that should have taken care of the sale and storage of products, actually provided a legal framework for the speculation on food organized by economic and political elites (including Eyadéma), which illegally exported the food destined to remain in the country (Toulabor 1986). From the farmers' point of view, these dynamics were not new: since the colonial period, they were fully aware of the fact that the governmental elite and the so-called 'buyers' were the ones who really profited from their efforts. The slogans of the 'green revolution' ('Produce more: Land will not make us fall', 'Return to the Land!') became ironic, at least to the ears of those who, aware of the exploitation inherent in agricultural activities, were trying to free themselves from that activity. In the post-colonial period, the successful model of the rich cocoa planter was replaced by the figure of the public servant and the soldier, who could have access to imported goods and to new standards of living, thanks to their monthly salaries. The moralizing rhetoric of the 'green revolution' was remembered by many of my interlocutors as an attempt to make desirable what was in fact often an imposition. The decline of the cocoa price on the international market made cocoa plantations, and agricultural activities in general, no longer able to provide the kind of upward mobility that people wanted.

In this context of growing economic inequalities, the fortune accumulated by Eyadéma and 'his clan' epitomized the immorality of accumulation. The power of national political and economic elite was critically considered to have been acquired through the morally ambiguous use of magical and occult means. Witchcraft accusations became one of the main forms of political criticism of Eyadéma's regime (Ellis 1993; Piot 1999; Toulabor 1986). These accusations increased

during the 1990s, when structural adjustments and the crises in the public sector brought the economic security of many Togolese public servants to an end. Many lost their jobs and some of them, as for Prestige, were obliged to come back to their land. The forces of opposition were not able to replace the regime (Macé 2004) and Eyadéma maintained control of the country until his death in 2005. Agriculture reacquired for many people part of the ethical value that it had lost previously, representing an anchor against instability, unemployment and uncertainty, and a kind of activity not linked to the immorality of witchcraft. But, as in other African contexts (Banégas and Warnier 2001), the crises in the public and agricultural sector, the liberalization of the economies and the impact of new media contributed to the emergence of new models of enrichment and success (as the business man, the NGO expert, the successful migrant, the rap singer, the football player and the church pastor) that considerably reshaped local notions of fortune. As Piot (2010) has shown, charismatic churches, the visa lottery, development agencies, internet points and all the new entrepreneurial strategies that have mushroomed in Togo during the last two decades have increasingly linked local notions of luck and fortune with globalized and neoliberal landscapes that have promised unprecedented opportunities and, at the same time, have produced harsh disappointments. It is against this background of economic uncertainty and new models of self-realization that the confrontation between Prestige and his son about work ethic and fortune must be read.

#### **Yao: ‘There is no magic to work the land, it is just waking up early in the morning’**

Yao (Paul’s paternal grandfather) was a Ewe catholic landowner of Agou who relatively enriched himself, thanks to cocoa economy. He was born at the end of 1920s into a lineage whose head (a paternal uncle of Yao) was appointed as village chief by French colonial authorities after the defeat of the Germans in the First World War. Yao, during his long life (he died in 2007), witnessed some of the major political events of Togolese history: the French colonial period, the struggle for independence (obtained in 1960: Agou was a stronghold of Olympio, the first President of Togo who died during the coup d’état of 1963), the rise of the Gnassingbé Eyadéma’s regime in 1967, the political upheaval of the 1990s against the dictatorship, the death of Eyadéma in 2005 and his substitution with his son Faure Gnassingbé. However, as the eldest son of Yao (Prestige) told me, Yao ‘was never interested in politics, he was only concerned about his fields’. Prestige described his father with a certain degree of idealization, as an austere man of few words, a faithful Christian, a hard worker, frugal, physically strong and entirely devoted to his wife, who died in 1966 after the birth of their third child. Yao was monogamous and never remarried. With the earnings obtained from cocoa, he was able to send all three of their children to school. Apart from his first son (Prestige), whose history will be the subject of the next section, the second born, Claire, is now in France and regularly sends remittances to her brothers, while the youngest brother is in Lomé.

Prestige recalled that Yao was strongly convinced of the ethical value of agricultural work. For him, working the land embedded a higher moral value than other economic activities and he considered lazy and potentially immoral those who refused to be farmers. Yao frequently repeated that working the land teaches children to live with honesty and to help the family; it makes them strong and able to withstand fatigue and deprivations.<sup>16</sup> An Ewe song, that Yao taught to his children, was: ‘*Agble de dzo meli wosana o fofo kabae* – There is no magic to work the land, it is just waking up early in the morning’, implicitly meaning that for economic activities other than agriculture, there is a magic (*dzo*) that could improve success, while success in farming comes only from fatigue and hard work. This was only partially true, for other people of the village, as Prestige himself, told me that there were actually *dzo* used to call the rain and I have personally witnessed the most important ceremony performed in Agou in honour of Gbagba, god of the yams, who bestowed fertility to human beings and land (Gardini 2014).

When I interrogated Prestige about this, he said that his father, being a fervent catholic, was suspicious of the local religious cults of his ‘backward neighbors’ that he considered satanic worship related to witchcraft or false superstitions.

Yao’s relatively good economic position and fortune had its roots in the 1950s when he inherited from his father one of the largest and most productive cocoa plantations of the village. Yao found a space for self-realization in the cultivation of cocoa, fed by the French colonial rhetoric dignifying agricultural activities and made profitable by favourable economic conditions, a relative high price of cocoa on the global market and the high availability of migrant labour. During those years, the Ewe landowner embodied an image of male success. A common accusation that I heard by both Ewe and Kabye is that, during the colonial period, while Kabye were working hard in Ewe plantations, the ‘lazy’ Ewe landowners were drinking beer under a tree (cfr. Meyer 1999, 7). And yet, as Prestige recalled, ‘Yao never sat under the tree drinking beer, but he worked every day together with his labourers ...’ – smiling – ‘... also because he was scared they could steal his cocoa’. When I asked Prestige if his father really believed that his success was just a matter of ‘waking up early in the morning’, he replied:

That was half of the story, indeed he believed that working the land made him physically strong enough to be able to resist witchcraft attacks. The other half is that he was a good catholic: he strongly believed that god was protecting him against the envy of his neighbors.

He did not mention the role that Kabye seasonal labourers had in enhancing his economic condition, just as he made no reference to the fact that a great part of his father’s revenue came, in his last 20 years, from the remittances sent by his daughter in France. With a bit of shame, Prestige told me that his father was among those who shared the idea that French colonial period was a better moment compared with the present situation:

My father loved to repeat provocatively that when the French were here, everything was in order, the fields were clean, and the sons respected the elders. He said that we should go to the French president and offer him a goat imploring him to colonize us once again.

Despite the efforts of the Eyadéma’s government to re-enhance cocoa production through the substitution of old plantations with new ones, Yao, as with many others landowners of Agou, found transforming its cocoa plantations into palm plantations (whose products could be more easily sold in the local markets) much more convenient and less risky, given the fluctuation of cocoa price on the international markets and the fact that it was necessary to wait many years until the cocoa trees become productive. Nevertheless, working the land was still interpreted from a moral perspective as a sign of independence and resistance against the dictatorship. Prestige recalled that his father was convinced that the regime had an influence in changing the attitude of people towards agriculture work, because the enrichment came from closeness to the regime, rather than from farm work:

Eyadéma has accustomed us to receive money in exchange for veneration. It was sufficient to get into a group of *animation politique*. The day of his visit, people hired by Eyadéma’s party sang and danced for a whole day and then they went back home with the same money that a teacher earned in a month. Why then work?”

In Yao’s perspective, as described by Prestige, land appeared as a metonym of the ennobling value of hard work (as opposed to the moral ambiguities of magical means) and as the cornerstone of a moral and political criticism of Eyadéma’s regime. This idealization of agricultural work that Prestige attributed to his father was something that Prestige himself shared for a large part. As

I will show in the next section, indeed, Prestige was obliged to come back to land after his strategies of emancipation from agricultural activities crumbled. When I met him, he was trying to convince his son to do the same.

**Prestige: ‘Fortune comes from your proximity to the regime or from the use of witchcraft, and that’s all’**

Thanks to his father’s economic condition, Prestige was sent to school together with his siblings and was able to become emancipated from agricultural work. In 1981, he became a schoolteacher and, after a year, he married and had his first son (Paul). He worked in the elementary school until 1992, when he participated in the strike organized by the forces of opposition against Eyadéma (Macé 2004, 875). Contrary to his father, he was really interested in the political situation of his country and he believed that the only tool for Togolese people to change the regime would be European instruction and ‘modernization’: ‘You know, Togolese people are mainly composed of ignorant farmers, really easy to control by the regime’. When I tried to criticize that idea by saying that the great majority of the farmers I met were as critical as he was of Eyadéma, he shrugged and closed the discussion saying: ‘However, we all failed when he had the opportunity. The Eyadéma clan is still there’. Prestige’s representations of Eyadéma were ambiguous: on the one hand, Eyadéma was described sarcastically as an ignorant, savage and sexually overactive man (he barely spoke French, he always bragged of his military carrier and he had more than a hundred children, three points that are often the subject of derision by Togolese people, see Toulabor 1981); on the other hand, he was depicted as a sort of invulnerable being, protected by mystical and occult forces that saved him twice from attempts on his life and gave him power and money (Ellis 1993; Macé 2004; Piot 1999, 2010; Toulabor 1986). His success was perceived as strongly related to witchcraft: as a witch (*adzeto*), he vampirized the country, earning money and power by killing and exploiting people. Prestige was convinced that the reduction of possibilities and chances that the Togolese experienced was inversely related to the growing hegemony of Eyadéma’s ‘clan’: ‘In some ways, he was eating our luck (*àklàmà*)’. The post-colonial regime of Eyadéma was, in many ways, considered as ‘occult and enchanted’ well before the rise of neoliberal policies. As a member of the opposition, Prestige lost his job and emigrated to Ghana (in part to escape the repression) where he worked as a translator for a European company involved in cocoa export. He returned to Togo in the late 1990s and opened a wood carving workshop, which failed in a few years. Since then, he, with the help of his wife, started to work the land of his father, who in the 1980s had converted his cocoa plantations into palms plantations. At that time, Prestige considered turning back to land as a personal failure and a sign of misfortune he attributed mainly to the incompetence of Eyadéma government in enhancing Togolese development. He also tried to found an NGO, but with no success because he could not find European partners. Meanwhile, his wife left him and went to work as a trader in Lomé. Prestige remarried after a while. Contrary to his father who was able to educate all three of his children, Prestige has only been able to send the younger son to secondary school. Prestige saw his plans crash one after another both for political reasons (the failure of the process of democratization of the 1990s) as well as in the difficulties in exploiting the possibilities that new emerging scenarios in recent decades seemed to offer (NGOs or the transnational trade of African sculptures). Starting from a position of relative privilege and believing that he had once and for all freed himself from farm work, Prestige was obliged to reassess his circumstances, and had to return to agricultural activities. His dreams of self-realization and of political change in his country both crumbled. The decline of the cocoa economy, the structural adjustments, the renegotiation of the value of the franc CFA (*franc de la Communauté Financière Africaine*) have worsened the economic condition of large parts of

the population, exposing more and more people to economic uncertainty. What still remained for Prestige was that piece of land that his father had wisely converted to palm trees. For this reason, he was trying to convince his eldest son (Paul) to look after them. The work as *zemidjan* was in Prestige's opinion a dangerous job (given the number of road accidents), but, above all, a symptom of laziness, a kind of activity too greatly linked to the unpredictability of 'luck'. Needless to say, his eldest son's ideas could not have been more different, as I will describe later.

When we discussed his father's life trajectory and his father's idea that success comes from hard work, Prestige said that Yao lived in a period when agriculture was still a good choice:

Now you can work a lot but you gain nothing. Fortune comes from your proximity to the regime or from the use of witchcraft (*adzé*) and that's all. Even to study means nothing when competitive public examinations are won by family members of those already in the administration and, if you migrate, your title has no value.

While Yao, at least in the romanticized reconstruction made by Prestige, saw fortune as something that it was possible to gain through a mix of personal hard work and god's protection, Prestige considered fortune as something that did not depend on personal efforts, but from given power structures that allowed access to resources only for those who were part of the regime or recur to immoral magical means. When I asked him if he ever thought that his misfortune came from a witchcraft attack by some neighbour envious of his father's success, he answered:

No, it's just politics! When I came back from Ghana, they refused to give me another contract as a schoolteacher because I was against Eyadéma. Neither is it because I did not put enough effort, it's just because I refused to sell myself to the government.

The idea that the Togolese political situation makes every attempt to enhance people's economic condition useless is widespread among the generation who really believed that the 1990s, or the death of Eyadéma in 2005, would be irreversible turning points for the history of the country (cfr. Macé 2004). This bitter disappointment was summarized by another friend of mine (another ex-schoolteacher fired in 2001, who now works in a Chinese shop of imported goods in Lomé), who said: 'Togo is a country where everything (every effort) is multiplied by zero'. For Prestige, working the land appeared as an ambiguous necessity, but not a desirable fate as it was for his father. And yet, Prestige believed that agriculture was the only morally legitimate way to earn something and to gain a certain degree of autonomy and security to face the uncertainties of global neo-liberal scenarios, characterized for him by the fact that it is still difficult to understand where the wealth of the elites comes from and by the fact that fortune is still related to the immoral practice of 'selling' oneself to the regime.

**Paul: 'If you stay fixed here, you will never have the chance to obtain what the world offers'**

Paul, Prestige's eldest son, was born in 1982 and finished elementary school with difficulty. For some years, he has worked on the land of his grandfather. Then, in 2006, having met the owner of a motorcycle willing to loan it in exchange for half of the gains and after a heated discussion with his parents, Paul decided to work as a moto-taxi driver (*zemidjan*) in Lomé, where he remained for 2 years as a guest of a maternal uncle. But in Lomé, there was huge competition between *zemidjan* and Paul could not earn enough, so in 2009, he returned to Agou, where he borrowed another motorbike and continued to work as a taxi-moto driver. He justified his refusal to work his father's land saying:

My grandfather (Yao) exploited others to work land and earned a lot. My father (Prestige) has never worked land except when he became old and just because he never found something else to do after he came back from Ghana. Why should I be the only one to throw my life away by working the land? To gain what? 1000 CFA a week? With luck I can make the same money in a day.

Paul hoped to set aside enough money working as a *zemidjan* to move and open a business in Ghana. In the meantime, he was trying his luck at the visa-lottery to get a green card for USA (see Piot 2010). Unlike his father, he showed a large degree of disinterest in politics: he did not vote ('You already know who wins'), he did not believe that opposition forces were a credible alternative and believed that Togo will never change. Paul's aspirations were linked to other landscapes and his models of self-realization radically differed from those of his father. In Togo, as in many other African contexts (see Banégas and Warnier 2001; Mbembe and Roitman 1995), the growing rates of unemployment and the crises in the public sector have considerably downgraded the image of public servants as a model of self-realization. Paul loved *sagacité* (a musical genre imported from Côte d'Ivoire which is also a dance, a way of dressing, and, above all, a form of ostentation of money linked to the successful models generated from migration in Europe), he assumed attitudes and practices of a 'Lomé guy', he did not want to engage in agricultural work ('I'm not a peasant'). He thought that schooling was no longer a guarantee for upward mobility ('Do you know that a lot of *zemidjan* in Lomé have a diploma?'). He was deeply disillusioned with regard to the political and economic situation in Togo and thought about migrating ('At first, to Ghana, then I hope France or the United States') as the only possibility of self-realization. He agreed with his father about the irreversibility of the Togolese political situation, but he criticized the idea that land could offer him a certain degree of autonomy and economic security. On the contrary, he thought that mobility was the only way to enhance luck and opportunities: 'If you stay fixed here, you will never have the chance to obtain what the world offers'. His ideas about what it means to be lucky differed radically from those of his father (and grandfather): 'You are lucky if you get a job in Europe, if you have enough money to buy what you want, if you are not obliged to be trapped here'.

Paul was in good company. Many young people (aged 18–25 years), I interviewed in 2010 in the villages of Agou, who work, if men, as *zemidjan*, or, if women, as petty traders, but who collaborate also in the farming activities of their domestic groups, explained their disaffection to agriculture by saying that 'working the land is hard' and 'agriculture makes you sick quickly'. They argued that by working the land, they were bound to the power dynamics of the village and the exploiting logic of the elders, who consider young men and women as the main source of labour. In Togolese schools in the countryside, it remains a subject known as T.M., *travail manuel*, which obliges boys and girls not only to work for the benefit of the school building (cleaning of classrooms, cutting weeds, etc. ...), but also involves working in the fields of the director or the teacher on duty. To refuse involves the severe beating that is normally reserved for 'lazy children' (see also Toulabor 1982). Few parents complain, for fear of repercussions on the children's school careers, and indeed, it seems that many require the school to be particularly severe in educating kids. The reasons given by teachers and by parents to justify this violent practice of child labour often reproduce colonial stereotypes. A teacher of a high school in Agou told me: 'You know, the 'blacks' do not work if not beaten, it's in their blood'. Some teachers frankly admit that, given the meagre income they receive from the state, they cannot afford to pay labourers to work in their fields. Though illegal today, this practice is extremely widespread throughout the country (with the exception of Lomé) and is often responsible for the desire of many young people to free themselves permanently from farming, an activity in which they are in fact victims of abuse and violence since childhood. As a young student sarcastically commented reading the motto 'Travail, Discipline, Success' written on the wall of his ex-high school: 'You see, it's a promise realized

for the 2/3: in Togo they give us only Travail and Discipline!'. The shared hope of these young people was to find a more independent and profitable job in the city or abroad, but in order to do that, it was necessary not to lose time in working the land, to go away, to be open to the possibilities the world could offer.

In order to enhance his luck as a *zemidjan*, Paul confessed to me that he secretly bought, from a *vodun* ritual specialist from Benin he met in Lomé, a spell (*dzo*) that 'attracts possible customers' and, sometimes, he went to ask the blessing from spirits worshipped in the region. Naively, I asked if that worked and he answered: 'Yes, it does! Do you remember the first time we met? I was among a group of others *zemidjan*, but you called me, not the others', which was actually true. While Paul's grandfather and father considered these practices immoral (the first for religious reasons, the second for political ones, being that magic and witchcraft was something he conceptually linked with Eyadéma), Paul found nothing bad in them: 'They give me more confidence in myself. Maybe it is for this reason that they work. Who knows?' However, he did not spend too much time asking himself where fortune comes from or if rich people had gained their wealth with witchcraft. Paul did not believe that his *dzo* was enough to enhance his luck. He also must 'wake up early in the morning', as his grandfather, 'because if you don't work, how you could pretend to be lucky?' For Paul, work continues to play a crucial role in enhancing fortune, *particularly* in a neoliberal context characterized by growing economic uncertainties and that seems to make work irrelevant. In the dispute with his father, he was trying to reaffirm the moral value of a different form of accumulation that, in Paul's terms, was much less exploitive and more economically convenient than agriculture.

## Conclusion

The biographical trajectories of Yao, Prestige and Paul testify that, even if land still represents for many the principal way to make ends meet and to obtain a certain degree of autonomy in Togo, the moral values attributed to agricultural activities seem to have crumbled with the decline of agriculture as a way to enhance economic and social conditions and with the rise of new models of self-realization. The agrarian work ethic was substituted (at least for young people who tried to avoid their elders' control) with new values that considered mobility and migration as the best way to enhance luck. Work ethics and notions of fortune altered according to the changes in the political and economic contexts that people had to cope with, but also according to their economic and political conditions in those contexts. However, the metaphor of the rising of a 're-enchanted' late capitalism that makes irrelevant 'hard work' and privileges magical, 'occult' or religious means to acquire fortune falls short in accounting for the multiple forces that are believed to shape luck in Togo. By paying more attention to the relation between work and fortune, I have shown that both Yao and Prestige were already elaborating their work ethics against what they considered 'occult economies' before neoliberal era. Yao, thanks to his cocoa plantations, was probably better linked to the global market in the 1960s than the way in which his grandson was in the 2009, and he was worried that his 'backward neighbours' could use their 'fetishism' against him. By vigorously asserting his agrarian work ethic and his faith in god, he was legitimizing his relatively privileged economic condition vis-à-vis neighbours (or employees) whose hard work was already 'irrelevant' for the achievement of wealth at that time. Prestige interpreted his personal misfortune by mixing political and mystical terms in his criticisms of the 'occult and enchanted' Eyadéma's post-colonial regime, and re-appropriated his father's ethos only when his 'modernizing' dreams of self-realization crumbled. On the other hand, Paul, despite the fact that he grew up during the structural adjustments and the rise of neoliberalism, believed that his *dzo* 'to attract costumers' was nothing more than a tool to

have more confidence in himself and was much less concerned with witchcraft issues than his father and grandfather.

What their life trajectories suggest is that the ambiguous moral values of work and the local notions of fortune emerged in Togo as a political arena of confrontation between individuals of different generations who historically experienced diverse labour conditions. In these contrasting work ethics, and in the social conflicts they imply, people negotiate, confirm or subvert their social and cultural repertoires of fortune and luck, in order to legitimize (or delegitimize) given forms of accumulation. By constantly intermingling human and non-human actors, material and immaterial factors, work and luck, politics and forms of exploitation in their heuristic frameworks, the people I met made sense of their life trajectories, they reshaped the relation between fortune and work ethics as social commentaries of moral and immoral forms of accumulation, and they reflected on the relation between their agency and the social, economic and political constraints they experienced in their everyday life.

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### Notes

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2. All the personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.
3. After having participated in the killing of the first president of Togo in 1963 and after his *coup d'état* in 1967, Eyadéma established a military regime that lasted until his death in 2005, when he was substituted by one of his sons. For a history of the Eyadéma's regime, see Toulabor (1981, 1986), Piot (1999, 2010) and Ellis (1993).
4. These accusations and counter-accusations rarely involve violent practices of vengeance or witch-hunting. Local chieftaincies exert a certain degree of control over this kind of matter and, normally, try to reconcile the contenders (Gardini 2013). During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to read the transcriptions of the trials settled by some Agou chieftaincies over the last 20 years. Many cases concerned witchcraft accusations, but only on one occasion was the accused obliged to leave the village (he returned 2 years later). In all the other cases, if the accused was found guilty, he/she was obliged to pay for the organization of a ceremony to the ancestors that could cancel the nefarious effects of his/her *dzo* or *adze*.
5. For example, in 2009, I accompanied a young man, who was worried about a job interview he had to do, to pray to his ancestors stools. During the ceremony, performed by the elders of his lineage, the young man promised to repair the roof of the hut where the ancestors' stools were stored only if he got the job. Once he obtained his first salary, he maintained his promise.
6. For classical studies on the Ewe concepts of *dzo* and *adze* and on local *vodu* cults, see Spieth (1906), Debrunner (1965) and Rivière (1981). For a study of how these concepts interplayed with Christian concepts, see Meyer (1999).
7. See, for example, Spieth (1906).
8. Since the formal abolition of slave trade at the beginning of 19th century, palm oil had gradually substituted slaves in the commercial networks that linked the interior regions with the coasts. Palm plantations were common in all the southern regions of the present-day Togo.
9. See, for example, Ahadji (1996, Annexe 3).
10. In order to develop cotton production in Togo, the Germans set up schools and test plots. As shown by Zimmerman (2005), the Germans employed a group of African-Americans from Alabama hoping that they could act as a model for Togolese farmers, who would, in the racist colonial perspective, follow the example of other 'more modern negroes' and eventually 'evolve'.

11. The Annual Report prepared in 1925 for the French government by the administration of Togolese territories reads (my translation):
 

Fetishism is the enemy of all civilization, it is the concrete manifestation of the obscurantism from which some exploiters of public credulity profit. But we have a weapon to fight this opponent: it is teaching, with all its train of benefits (knowledge of hygiene, love for work).
12. See, for example, Hill (1963), Sutton (1983), Ubink and Amanor (2008) and Amanor (2006).
13. For comparisons with other African contexts involved in cash crops economies, see, for example, Meillassoux (1964), Kuba and Lentz (2006), Chauveau and Colin (2010) and Juul and Lund (2002).
14. Cocoa plants could live many decades and they were generally inherited by the sons of the planters. Therefore, the land used for cocoa plantations could not be claimed back by other members of the lineage. Planting trees became a way to reinforce individual rights over lineage lands.
15. According to my interlocutors of Agou, rich cocoa planters were not accused of turning their labourers into zombies, as it happened in other African contexts involved in the cash crops economy (see for example, Ardener 1996). On the contrary, it seems that they were scared of being themselves attacked through magical means by envious neighbours or by their seasonal labourers. But this fear was evidently not enough to make them refuse the cultivation of cash crops.
16. In many African countries, work is considered of crucial importance for the process of growing up of children (see, for example, Spittler and Bourdillon 2012). Gaibazzi (2013), discussing the case of Soninke in Gambia, has shown that the “agrarian ethos” was considered both as a disciplinary technique for the control of young people, as well as crucial for enabling the agency of young migrants, who reinvested the “virtues” cultivated in agricultural activities in other economic sectors.

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