

Lomé 2018

I returned to Lomé for a short visit in February 2018. It was *harmattan* season, when the Sahara blows hot air and dust down to the coast, turning the tropics into a desert: blistering days and chilly nights, haze everywhere, the sun a smudge in the sky. Like Trump's election on America, the *harmattan* left a pall hanging over West Africa, bleeding into Trump's latest outrage—his shithole countries comment and his insistence that he would end the DV Lottery.

Kodjo and I met at our usual spot, a bar called "After Beach," named as if for us in its evocation of an impossible fantasy—of drinks after sunning on the beach, or of life in the US after being selected in the lottery. Small wooden tables covered in gaudy contact paper teetered on a concrete slab, with potted baby palms serving as separators. Underpaid waitresses shuffled dispiritedly among the wobbly rectangles, the smallest tip bringing cheer to their lives. The busy street outside reverberated with the beep-beep of motorcycle taxis. This tinsel set was our salon, our laboratory, a space



where we sliced and diced the DV, and one that had listened in on a vast archive of visa lottery stories over the years.

Kodjo greeted me warmly, an infectious smile filling his chiseled face. He turned the conversation straight to Trump, wanting to know what Americans thought of his presidency and his blustery rebukes of the DV. “What is the chance the visa lottery will survive this time—not good, I assume, since the president of the United States is calling for its end?” I sounded a more optimistic note, reminding him that the DV Lottery has been under siege since its inception and that Congress will have to find the will to agree on a new immigration bill in its entirety before the DV is eliminated, something it has been unable to do since the early 2000s—and a tall order in the current conjuncture.

“I don’t understand why he’s against the lottery. It sends a good message to the world and helps to diversify the US population, which is one of your values, no? But I agree with Trump in his criticism of family reunification. Why should an immigrant be able to bring over all his family members? His wife and children, yes, but why his parents and siblings?” Another fetching instance, it seemed, of Kodjo’s ability to separate passion from intellect, his dislike of Trump from a reasonable argument.

As for Trump’s presidency, I assured him it would only last one term, that the opposition had risen in the US as never before. “What I find unseemly is that he says things no president should ever say,” Kodjo interjected. “Take his comment about shithole countries. We all know it’s true that African countries are poor, but his choice of words is insulting. Presidents should be diplomats to the world, not vomiting words that do harm to others. To have someone like this as the leader of the world’s most powerful country is unthinkable.” I added that, ill-chosen words aside, the flaw in Trump’s reasoning about the DV—which assumes that desperate immigrant origins produce undesirable and undeserving citizens (or worse, criminals and terrorists)—is that immigrants from West African countries are precisely the ones the US should be recruiting, because their precarious origins make them exemplary worker-citizens after they arrive in the US.

I switched the conversation to Togolese politics. Out-of-nowhere street protests had rocked this small country in August 2017, with protestors demanding that the current president, Faure Gnassingbé, resign.¹ While agreeing with the spirit of the protests, and indeed feeling that Faure should have left after his second term, Kodjo reverted to constitutional arguments, insisting that you cannot void the law, which currently sets no term limit for presidents. “These issues can’t be decided on the streets,” he said. Recall here his surprising view of the protest outside the embassy in 2008, that it was predicated on the false premise that the consulate might be able to revisit visa denials or return interview fees to those who were unsuccessful. If the protestors had carefully read the State Department website, Kodjo insisted, they would have realized that they had no grounds for protest.

But he worries that his country, long peaceful, might descend into violence this time. Not only a large majority at home but also over 2 million Togolese in the diaspora are agitated as never before, with rumors circulating that weapons are being stockpiled outside Togo’s borders. One of the consuls told me that the number of Togolese DV applications spiked dramatically in fall 2017,² clearly a response to the current political impasse and

another index of the close tie between the DV Lottery and the loss of hope, in this case political as much as economic.

I asked about his 2017 cases. He had ten selectees, of whom eight received visas before two failed. The financiers of the two who went down stubbornly insisted, against Kodjo's counsel, that the winner they were financing (Kodjo's client) add the beneficiary (their loved one) to their dossier before going for the interview. But as pop-ups, both couples were quickly identified and rejected by the consuls. "There was nothing I could do, as it was their money that was financing my client, so they were able to call the shots. And I was caught off-guard and failed to protest as strongly as I should have because one of my eight winners added a spouse after being selected—and went through."

"But here's a case that will interest you," he continued, with a gleam in his eye:

One of my winners changed phone numbers after she applied, and when she was selected I didn't know how to reach her. I called a cousin of mine who works for Togocel [the phone company] and asked her to give me the last two numbers this person had called before she stopped using the old number. One came up empty—the person had no idea who I was asking about—but the second said he knew her and would bring her to me. Apparently seeing a chance for profit-making, he brought someone else in her place! I sensed right away that she wasn't the person I had signed up and that they were trying to play me—which became obvious when I looked at her identity documents.

Miraculously, the real winner called me a week later to give me her new number. Still cautious—what if this was another imposter?—I asked to meet and told her to bring all of her identity documents. Happily, they lined up, and today she's on her way to the States.

The words fell from his mouth well-chosen and clean-edged, like dough from a cookie cutter. He loves the details of these cases—their twists and turns, their surprises—and like a Raymond Chandler detective, he adores the chase. Note, too, the reversal: the fixer is here serving as identity gatekeeper and fraud legislator, a task normally reserved for the embassy's fraud unit.

I asked Kodjo how his system of reimbursement was working, whether those singles he had financed who were now in the States were repaying him. "Not as they promised! Now they all want to buy cars and have put

off paying me back. Imagine those three boys you visited in Omaha, they haven't been in the US for a year and they all have their own cars." "But they all work at the same meat-packing plant," I interrupted. "Why do they all need cars—can't they share?" "They say they work different hours and it's easier on everyone if they each have their own. But you know why they really want their own cars? *Pour faire le show!*" (To put on a show!).

I sensed as much—about the cachet of the car for the new immigrant—when I had visited Omaha. The young woman who worked at the furniture company—the one who was detained at the Lomé airport because of a delinquent payment to Kodjo—had just bought a 2015 Toyota Camry and preened when she showed it to Jeannot and me. Owning your own car was another marker—alongside the large flat-screen TV—that the dream was real and the effort had been worth it.

I HAVE A SWEDISH ancestor who came to the United States during the nineteenth century as a stowaway on a boat—an illegal immigrant, whose son (my grandfather) nevertheless went on to great achievements. A best friend's daughter recently married her British boyfriend because his US papers were about to expire. Her niece did the same with her Spanish boyfriend. Neither was sure they would stay in the relationship, but they were willing to get papers for their partners by any means possible—and creating fake-real marriages seemed the most expedient way. When I recently gave a talk about the visa lottery at an Ivy League university, the first comment after my presentation came from an eminent scholar who said the only reason he and his wife ever got married was because a judge in California told them there were large tax advantages to tying the knot, and that he would gladly put them through the paces.

My guess is that many US families have such histories, such skeletons in the closet—of illegal entry, of marriages of convenience, of doing whatever it takes to get family and friends a piece of the pie—if indeed they're skeletons at all. They seem more norm than exception—aren't we all illegal (cf. Nail 2015)?—with nonstandard immigration a common thread and driving force throughout the nation's history. But more to the point, how are these arrangements different from what West African lottery selectees are doing in trying to get to the US and make a better life for their families?

AT OUR SECOND MEETING, again at our favorite drinking hole, Kodjo dropped a bombshell: he'd recently discovered that his best friend and long-standing DV partner had been stealing winning files from him. He was alerted to this deception at his doorstep when another associate, the photographer at the university who helps him sign up clients, told him that selectees of his reported that someone other than Kodjo was treating their files—a discovery that didn't sit well with them.

Kodjo assumed the teenager he had hired to help enter client applications in the online DV system during the October sign-up period was involved because he was the only one with access to Kodjo's dossiers and confirmation numbers. When confronted, the young man spilled the beans, saying that Kodjo's partner had asked that he divert winning files to him after the May drawing in return for a cut of the spoils.

My question to Kodjo was not only why his best friend might betray him like this—his answer: poverty can push you to do extraordinary and unseemly things—but also how do you continue to do business with anyone, especially trusted friends, after such massive deception? To wit, who can you trust if not your best friend, and how do you inhabit a world in which you may no longer be able to trust anyone? Needless to say, a question with global reach today (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2016).

"C'est une belle question!" (It's a nice question!), he responded. "This experience really disoriented me. I couldn't sleep for weeks. How could my best friend and closest business partner, someone I had grown up with, someone with whom I had always shared everything, do this to me? For years, he had come to me for advice, which I offered freely. And I gave him extra files when he was short."

"Will you ever be friends with him again?" I asked. "That will be hard," he said sadly.

But then the punchline: "You have a choice whether to trust people or not. I can't imagine living every day and doing business with others while trusting no one. This would take the pleasure out of life. So I continue to trust, while nevertheless taking precautions. You know how I have set up my business with lottery winners and their financiers, with all those checks against malfeasance. I must now do the same with partners and friends."

This high-road response—that despite massive betrayal by the closest of friends he would nevertheless continue to trust others—was not only characteristically disarming but also revealed a thoughtful, even existential Kodjo. Was this not the believer's leap of faith, the Kierkegaardian gamble



to hold fast to belief in a skeptical universe, here transposed onto a world of ubiquitous fakes and fraud?

On the day I left Lomé, I asked one more time: “Are you sure you want to publish this material?” “We fixers all have different practices, and mine are changing all the time,” he repeated. “Now that I’m mostly financing clients myself, none of what you report in this book will be true anymore. By the time it’s published, I’ll be on to something new—as will others in Lomé.” Forever the shape-shifting trickster.

When I arrived in Lomé, I had given Kodjo this book’s chapter about Togolese DV winners in the US, and I asked what he thought. He liked it, he said, as it rang true to what he had heard from returnees about life in the States. “But what about your role in continuing to recruit and send DV winners,” I asked, “when many are unhappy and wish they could return home? How to justify your business in the face of that awareness?” “Yes, I’ve thought often about that,” he replied.

But I’m not the one who created the dream of the US. That fantasy comes from the street and is produced by the desperation of Togolese today. Were I to tell a winner not to go, she would never believe me and would wonder about my motives in suggesting that. Don’t forget that, despite their unhappiness, these emigrants send money home

each month and support entire families in Lomé—which gives them a status they would otherwise never have. They are important people today because they live and work in the US. And remember their children, who will now have a better life than they would have had in Togo. As a *traiteur*, I do little more than help Togolese realize what they already desire and what they have already chosen.

In parting, I asked what he would do if Trump got his way and the lottery was eliminated? Another surprise: “I’ll become a farmer. My brother just purchased some land near Kpalimé where I’ll cultivate corn and maybe yams. You know how I’ve always loved to farm.” “But won’t you miss the lottery?” I asked. “*Bien sur, mais c’est par default.*” (Of course, but I won’t have a choice).

“And, don’t forget, I just married my wife to one of my winners. When they pass the interview, I’ll send her to the States, where she’ll open a braiding salon. With the money she earns, she’ll return frequently to Lomé to visit. With time, she’ll divorce her visa spouse and remarry me. I know I will be in your country one day.”

His answer joined those that had been gathering in the air above the small bar, then floated up to mingle with the dust of the harmattan, before heading out into the Atlantic.