By the Belly Alone: Clientelistic Tensions in Southern Benin

Nathan T. Hedges
Dallas, Texas

BA, Dartmouth College, 2003
MA, University of Virginia, 2010

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Ira Bashkow, Chair
Adria J. LaViolette
Roy Wagner
Joseph C. Miller

Abstract

This dissertation represents a tentative first step towards reframing the anthropology of corruption as an anthropology of political legitimacy. People in southern Benin identify corrupt politicians as a serious problem that renders government ineffective and impedes local development. But even as they accuse elected officials of corruption, they seek and expect to have their own votes reciprocated by redirected appropriations of government funds to such local infrastructural projects as medical clinics and schools. Political candidates launch their campaigns by distributing large sums of money to local community leaders, and they go on to perform their generosity at campaign rallies by ostentatiously distributing food, drink, and money to everyone in attendance, while promising to deliver new infrastructure projects to the locality. Clientelism thus plays a prominent role in the run up to elections; corruption seems to figure both as a central complaint and central value in southern Beninois politics.

This dissertation seeks to resolve this paradox by accounting for the ways in which people construct political legitimacy in southern Beninois culture. I argue that the ambiguity of corruption reflects an enduring tension between two major forms of clientelistic relationships: *gift-clientelism* and *commodity-clientelism*. The first is an unmediated, personal, and reciprocal relationship; the second is opportunistic, impersonal, and mediated by money. Through ethnography I observe that patron-client gift relationality constitutes a central ordering principle in local greeting, courting, marriage, childrearing, schooling, and ancestral worship. People understand clientelism in these intimate and relational spaces as a moral economy structured by a conceptual

dialectic that I refer to as *the belly and the head*, according to which patrons follow their individual desires in accumulating wealth (belly) but subsequently redistribute much of it according to community obligation (head), thereby providing for the immediate material needs of clients in exchange for their future labor, loyalty, support, and praise. Following Gregory (1982), I conceptualize this moral economy as gift-clientelism, for it centers on reciprocally dependent actors exchanging inalienable things and thereby creating qualitative (personal) relationships between them. I argue that local people experience clientelism in politics as legitimate because it intuitively conforms to these gift-clientelistic practices.

Once elected, however, politicians routinely ignore their constituents, keeping misappropriated funds for themselves as they navigate the elite circles of urban Porto Novo and Cotonou in pursuit of yet more acquisitive opportunities. According to local commentary, such elected officials "eat politics": that is, they betray the obligations of gift-clientelism by consuming the material resources of the state with no thought for their community obligation to voters. The fact that such tendencies are widespread I trace to the local historical impact of merchant capitalism in the form of the Atlantic slave trade, specifically the commodification of political relationships, and the subsequent effect of the French colonial period, in particular the abandonment of community obligations on the part of political elites. In response to these events, political elites beginning with the eighteenth century rulers of Dahomey transformed the operative political logic of gift-clientelism into commodity-clientelism, which involves independent actors exchanging alienable things, thereby creating quantitative (price) relationships between those commitments, in this case buying votes with campaign disbursements. I thereby argue for

a rethinking of Bayart's (1993) classic notion of the "politics of the belly" as the result of local rulers restructuring gift-clientelist practices in the formal political sphere according to the protocols of an emergent global capitalism, and subsequently losing a sense of community obligation during the colonial period. Contemporary southern Beninois politicians are heir to these dual legacies.

This disjuncture in parallel clientelistic understandings creates an enduring tension in which ordinary southern Beninois experience corruption as a moral betrayal of gift-clientelism on the part of political elites. As collaborators explained, one should "eat the state" but "never eat the state alone". By contrast, political elites see their election according to the logic of commodity-clientelism, in which no social obligation exists, but they nonetheless evoke an illusion of gift-clientelism in order to elicit votes. Electoral politics in southern Benin remains suspended in this tension.

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Dedication

For Dr. Howard and Elizebeth Hedges, who nurtured my curiosity.

For Patricia Sanchez Bao for her love, her support, and her strength.

In Memoriam

For Paul Kenou, my big brother, my guide, my friend.

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By the Belly Alone:

Chapter One: Introduction

> *You know what it is with these politicians? They eat until their bellies are full, but then, they keep eating! They eat until their bellies are full, and the food starts to pile up in their esophagus, because there's no room left in their bellies. And little by little the food piles up higher and higher, all the way to the mouth, but still they keep eating. And so they have to start cramming food in the back corners of their mouths, under their tongues, between their teeth, until even their mouths are full. But they keep eating!*
>
> — *Zemijohn* Motorcycle Taxi Driver, Cotonou

This dissertation examines local notions of political legitimacy in Benin as a means of understandings local experiences of corruption. I focus on an aspect of Beninese political economy that, according to Western perceptions at least, seems to be a paradox: local people widely accuse the Beninese government of corruption yet simultaneously frame their appraisals and expectations of local political candidates in terms of the personal returns from misappropriated public resources that they obtain through them. During political campaigns, candidates invest great sums of money paying local community leaders in cash for their support. At campaign rallies, candidates uniformly promise the building of local infrastructure, typically medical clinics, schools, and roads, in exchange for votes. At these events, local singers, dancers, and dance troupes energize the crowds as they praise the candidate, who then rewards them with paper money affixed to their sweaty brows, a dramatic demonstration of both their ability and willingness to provide material resources. Candidates go on to distribute food, drink, and small amounts of money to everyone in attendance. Some candidates go so far as to build a clinic or classroom building in the community of their core constituents before election day, typically

writing their names on its exterior walls, a powerful promise of future largesse. Seen through Western eyes, corruption in Benin seems to figure both as a widespread object of complaint and one of its key constitutive practices.

In order to resolve this paradox, in this dissertation I argue that Beninese people understand vote buying in a fundamentally different way than do Western observers, that is, they understand vote-buying as a legitimate political practice. Beninese do so because vote-buying intuitively resonates with widespread clientelist practices operative in their daily social lives. Politicians thus attract electoral support by performing their compliance to these widespread clientelist practices. And yet, once elected, many elected officials ultimately fail to redistribute to their constituents as promised, as they keep for themselves, their families, and close associates the money that they redirect from the state. For Beninese voters, it is this failure to redistribute misappropriated funds that constitutes corruption. As Beninese voters regularly explain, "One should eat the state, that's normal. But one should never eat the state alone."

To make sense of this departure from Western perspectives of corruption, I build on the anthropology of corruption literature, which has documented similarly local, culturalist, and thus relativistic understandings of corruption around the world. I also argue, however, that this literature suffers from a conceptual barrier to understanding corruption due to its epistemological framing. By making corruption the object of investigation, rather than the culturally-derived intuitions that define it, anthropologists must constantly contend with Western-derived universalistic definitions of corruption that are well-entrenched in political science, foreign policy studies, economics, development aid, and other academic disciplines. I thus propose reframing the anthropology of corruption as an anthropology of political legitimacy: people intuitively identify as legitimate those political practices that conform to the larger cultural

themes that structure their daily lives; what people identify as legitimate they do so *according to local, culturally-based intuitive evaluations*.

By contrast, a long line of Western political philosophers have consistently claimed that people determine political legitimacy by explicit and rational calculations of their individual self-interests (Hobbes:1651; Locke:1690; Rousseau:1762; Weber: 1921). This acultural and contractual model of legitimacy, established by Enlightenment philosophers, has served as the foundation for Western political science, law, and government for more than two centuries. Contesting this view, I put forward a culturalist argument that human beings rather determine political legitimacy according to culturally framed intuitions regarding an ideal social and moral order; in other words, people understand legitimacy implicitly as opposed to explicitly and according to culturally derived-intuitions as opposed to rational, acultural calculation.

In southern Benin, people have for over three centuries structured their understandings of political legitimacy according to a conceptual dialectic that they express in metaphors contrasting the belly and the head, according to which patrons follow their individual desires in accumulating personal wealth but subsequently redistribute much of it. For Beninese, the belly houses individual desires while the head socializes these desires for collective benefit. Within this framework, patrons provide for the immediate material needs of clients in exchange for their future labor, loyalty, and praise. The belly and the head dialectic, the central mechanism of clientelistic practices in Benin, permeates the Fongbe language through scores of metaphors, idioms, and proverbs that articulate an elaborate moral configuration through which local people evaluate local clientelist practices.

Beninese clientelism has, however, changed over time. First embedded in the relational context of small-scale lineage villages, clientelism initially followed a wealth-in-people social

paradigm in which patrons stored economic value in the generalized future obligations of clients. Following Gregory (1982), I call this form *gift-clientelism*, as it centered on reciprocally dependent actors exchanging possessions seen as inalienable, thereby creating personal relationships between givers and recipients, a configuration that emphasizes wealth as valuable primarily in its circulation. Beninese continue to structure their lives according to gift-clientelism, particularly in rural locations where a majority currently live. It is only in reference to gift-clientelism that one can make sense of Beninese approval of vote-buying in contemporary politics; it is according to gift-clientelism that Beninese people structure their cultural intuitions regarding political legitimacy.

Access to the Atlantic slave trade stimulated a new kind of valuation, that of commodities, which reconfigured gift-clientelism in the political domain according to its own alternative operative principles to produce *commodity-clientelism*, a paradoxical relational frame in which patrons ignore the gift-obligations they have towards their communities. Commodity-clientelism involves reciprocally independent actors exchanging alienable possessions, thereby creating relationships between things rather than with one another, a configuration that emphasized the accumulation and retention of material wealth. In a reworking of Polanyi's (1966) dual-model of state distribution and village reciprocity, I argue that the rulers of the eighteenth-century military regime of Dahomey implemented commodity-clientelism on the state level, layering it on top of the gift-clientelism still operative on the local level. The rulers of Dahomey clearly communicated this shift to their subjects and rivals alike by reciting the mythical founding of the polity: Dakodonu, the first ruler of Dahomey, was approached by Dan, the ruler of a neighboring polity that was paying tribute to him. Dan protested to Dakodonu that his tribute was too high; in a dramatic display of protest, Dan hyperbolically asks Dakodonu

whether he should cut open his own belly so that Dakodonu could found a new kingdom. This, however, is precisely what Dakodonu does, naming his polity Dan-xo-me, or "In the belly of Dan." This move symbolically reconfigured the dialectic of the belly and the head by emphasizing the former over the latter, integrating the logic of commodities into political rule, thereby proposing in metaphorical terms to govern by the belly alone. Contemporary Beninese politicians are heir to this legacy of commodification and consumption.

Today, ordinary Beninese inhabit an enduring tension in which they evaluate political figures according to gift-clientelism, as it is this moral framework that structures their daily lives, whereas politicians merely project their obedience to its precepts while often disavowing their attending responsibilities. People signify gift-clientelist relations in their body comportment, dress, and greetings, and in the numerous idioms and metaphors that articulate the larger themes of the belly and the head. The practical logic of gift clientelism structures Beninese childrearing, schooling, courting, marriage, and ancestral worship. In short, gift clientelism represents a central practical and relational theme in everyday Beninese life. When ordinary Beninese evaluate political candidates, officials, institutions, and policies, all in the belly of politics, they intuitively carry the moral legitimacy of gift-clientelism, complete with the calculated regard of the head, into their appraisals.

Well aware of the powerful moral approbation and practice of gift-clientelism in southern Benin, local political candidates skillfully portray themselves as generous patrons situated within this moral frame, that is, as paternal figures who in exchange for the political support of their clients will meet their social obligations to reciprocate with material redistribution. And yet, politicians in reality frame their relationship to voters according to a paradox that I describe as commodity-clientelism, in which no social obligation exists. Within this alternative, shadowy

frame, politicians typically ignore their constituents once they reach office, busying themselves with mutual co-optations of other elected officials as they enrich themselves personally.

The real tragedy of contemporary Beninese politics thus stems from this betrayal: from the politician's use of political office to siphon wealth into commodity clientelist hiding places—typically foreign bank accounts and real estate in Paris or Brussels—that should instead be directed into gift clientelist networks. For Beninese, ordinary people experience corruption as moral treachery, represented by commodity clientelism intruding into a moral world structured according to gift clientelism. In other words, the widespread practice of political candidates buying the votes of local people is not what is corrupt, but rather those political candidates who buy votes but who do not properly redistribute, that is, vote-buying *without honoring reciprocal social obligations*. By voting for political candidates who seem to conform to gift clientelism, people hope they will ultimately honor their social obligations as they claim, but in reality rarely do.

My research findings in southern Benin—the moral economy of gift-clientelism and the cynical machinations of local politicians—inspire two general arguments with which to build towards an anthropological theory of political legitimacy. First, political legitimacy is *culturally embedded*. It is according to local histories and distinctive cultural norms that people as subjects collectively come to intuit their notions of political legitimacy, as opposed to explicit and rational individual calculation. It is because Beninese live in a clientelist culture that they frame their understanding of political legitimacy in clientelist terms. Second, political legitimacy is *contextually embedded*; intuition is unavoidably context dependent. When Beninese claim that their government is corrupt, they are faulting political officials for not redistributing, but

following Gupta (1995), they are also voicing their displeasure that they are not redistributing *to them*. Political legitimacy necessarily contains a dimension of self-interest.

I begin this introduction with a description of the dialectic of the belly and the head, which is crucial to understanding Beninese definitions of political legitimacy and by extension corruption. I then describe an everyday scene in southern Benin, an informal conversation among relatives and neighbors regarding a local political candidate, Paul Kenou,. To Western perspectives, this conversation smacks of corruption; to Beninese, it epitomizes political legitimacy. I then use the scene as an object of contemplation to tease out these different points of view and what the structure of these differences says about the perception of corruption and political legitimacy. This discussion begins in southern Benin but then travels to Western academic debates, the World Bank and other multilateral institutions, and finally back to southern Benin, where I outline the rest of this dissertation.

The Belly and the Head

Beninese consistently frame their perspectives regarding moral legitimacy, social normativity, and by extension, political legitimacy, in terms of a constellation of metaphors, idioms, and proverbs contrasting the belly and the head, which permeate the Fongbe language, the most widely spoken indigenous language in the region. For Beninese people, the belly symbolizes individual needs, wants, and desires, whereas the head stands for human communication, social norms, community integration, and collective well-being. One cannot understand Beninese notions of political legitimacy except through this socio-moral framework.

Several Western scholars have recently emphasized the crucial symbolic importance across sub-Saharan Africa of the belly in local conceptions of political legitimacy.

Anthropologist Jean-François Bayart's (1991) foundational work, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, describes the ways in which African politicians make explicit promises of material redistribution to voters, who in turn vote for whom they judge most likely to honor such promises. Once elected, politicians enter into a complicated and contested game of reciprocal assimilation, co-opting allies to compete with rivals for a piece of the national cake. Building on Bayart's conception, political scientist Michael Schatzberg's (2001) *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food*, traces the widespread use of eating metaphors in local newspapers from Senegal to Kenya, which together express and in turn recreate a general cultural expectation of material redistribution on the part of ordinary citizens concerning heads of state. A good leader relates to his citizens as a father of the country, his metaphorical family, whom he is obligated to "feed" through redistribution.

Bayart's *politics of the belly* conception, further illustrated by Schatzberg, readily accounts for the broader contours of contemporary Beninese political experiences. It does not, however, account for the history of such experiences, or the meanings to which local people attach to their broader contours. More significant than these shortcomings, however, is that while local Beninese perspectives have indeed emphasized the belly as a central object of symbolic contemplation, a locus of great metaphorical importance, these perspectives have equally emphasized a contrasting head. Bayart's *politics of the belly* model is thus only half the story.

This insufficiency should, of course, surprise no one. That a prevailing Western model of African politics is not only incomplete, but lacking in precisely those aspects that explain African social organization, stability, and political order, reflects a colonial double-movement the consequences of which persist to this day. On the one hand, Western observers continue to struggle with understanding indigenous African political systems. Part of the reason for this

incapacity is intellectual, as Westerners typically cannot move from their own paradigms to local African ones (Evans-Pritchard 1940); another part is historical, as colonial regimes went to great lengths to disempower and delegitimize indigenous polities as they understandably considered them a threat to their own legitimacy.

On the other hand, Western observers largely interpret this perceived lack of political order and stability, again due to a combination of colonial policy and general ignorance, as instead reflecting a lack, an emptiness, and a pathology intrinsic to the continent itself (Mbembe 2001:2; Ferguson 2006:2). Burdened by these legacies of colonialism and their attending preconceptions, contemporary political science and development economics have undermined "the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts" (Mbembe 2001:7). For this reason, Beninese preoccupations with the head attract little scholarly interest in the West just as those of the head find a ready and curious audience. And yet it is only by conceiving of both simultaneously that one can come to a productive understanding of Beninese cultural intuitions regarding political legitimacy.

To that end, this section presents an analysis of metaphors, idioms, and proverbs having to do with the belly and the head, as a means of underscoring a general conceptual orientation to the ways in which women and men in present day southern Benin experience their daily social lives, which I argue determines the way in which they frame their notions of political legitimacy. It is through consistent reference to the belly and the head that men and women in southern Benin conceive of the many competitions and jealousies, alliances and intrigues that together constitute social life as an enduring tension between fragmentation and solidarity, division and unity, individual and community.

The belly is powerful because it is opaque and thus a deeply ambiguous space that inspires attraction and fear, hence ambivalence. In Fongbe, the word for belly, *xomɛ*, literally means "belly-inside," as it is the felt contents of a stomach rather than the unseen organ containing them that matter. The belly is for Beninese the site of all human desire and volition, urges that they experience as hunger. This hunger, however, has a double valence, as it can express bodily hunger, such as the desire for security, shelter, and of course, food; but also existential hunger, the ambition for fame and prestige. And so, Beninese insert the expression *Gbɛtɔ do na ɖù nu*, or "a person has to eat," when speaking about food insecurity but also about the machinations of the ambitious. Physical hunger, *xovɛ*, means "a painful stomach," and to express the discomfort of experiencing hunger, one says*, xovɛ sìn mì*, or "my painful stomach tightens," and again these sensations can apply to both bodily hunger and existential appetites.

That the belly is hungry, Beninese consider to be not only natural but also good, since it is by the impetus of satisfying hunger that people are motivated to work, to build, and to procreate, and thus hunger represents the central mechanism by which human energy is brought into the creation of social worlds. Correlatively, asocial and apathetic persons are said to have a dying stomach. The belly is so integral to Beninese social life that it is directly implicated in a number of human exchanges. If one defeats another person in a competition, either in battle or in a friendly game of cards, one says *un ɖù do jito e*, or "I ate on top of him," often shortened to *un ɖù e*, or "I ate him." In a more vulgar register, utilized most often by male youth, *un ɖù e* can also mean "I conquered her sexually."

Lovers speak to one another in regular reference to the belly, often saying to one another *ma blɛ mi ɖù*, or "Don't trick me with words that I eat," a versatile expression that varies widely in meanings according to context. If spoken softly, such words present a playful if feigned

objection to softly spoken promises; if spoken harshly and with accusation, they signify defiance of suspected deceit. Among married couples, perhaps the most scathing criticism that a husband can level against his wife is *wô fá* or "the food [that you prepared] is cold," a serious accusation that she is not providing the most essential components of proper, mutually supportive domestic life.

To be happy is to *ɖù gbɛ*, or eat life, and to *ɖù gbɛ tawun* is to live life fully. Once, I was feasting with a close collaborator at the reception at his eldest daughter's wedding. As is often the case with Beninese weddings, it was a large and extravagant affair, and my friend found himself surrounded by food, family, friends, and the great pride of a father who had succeeded in bringing a daughter to the threshold of creating new life. After having finished his meal, he sat back in his chair with a glass of Johnny Blue in his hand, folded his hands upon his gut, and exhaled deeply while declaring *Un ɖù gbɛ tawun*, "I have eaten life to the fullest." It is thus by virtue of the belly and the hungers that emanate from it that people pursue goals, work hard, and take ultimate satisfaction in realizing them.

The belly is also implicated in material exchanges. When making a purchase, to ask the vendor "how much do I owe you," one asks *nabi un ɖù do we*, or "How much did I eat of your account?" To inherit something is to *ɖù gû*, or "eat the inheritance," and to profit is to *ɖù lè*, or "eat the profit." Conversely, to go into debt is to *ɖù axɔ*, or eat the debt, and to go bankrupt is to *ɖù agbán*, or eat the merchandise. So too is the belly involved in more interior states. Not all bellies are the same, and their varying specific qualities offer a way to talk about someone's emotional state or general character. Consistent with the ambivalence indicated by metaphors of eating, the many ways of describing the stomach also indicate indeterminacy. On the one hand,

xomɛdido, or sincerity, refers to words that come directly from the stomach (compare to Dave 2014). Similarly, generosity or *xomɛninyɔ* is described in terms of having a good stomach.

And yet the stomach is also the site of profound moral anxiety. When describing a suspicious person or their behavior, people often say, "The problem is that one cannot know what is really going on in their stomach." In an effort to assuage such anxiety, it is conventional among Beninese when asked, *a do ganjí à*, "How are you?" to respond with *un do ganjíme*, adding "me" to the word for "well" in order to say "I am well *on the inside*." When asked about the accuracy of that statement, however, collaborators consistently stress that a person is merely being polite and could always be lying.

An empty stomach, also described as a pure stomach, indicates innocence. And yet, the very idea of such emptiness itself arouses suspicions; collaborators insist that everyone's stomach has something in it, or so goes the proverb, "Just because your spit is clear, do not think that your stomach is empty." A painful stomach signals regret and compunction. Conception is often described as a woman's stomach in the act of finding the semen and thus creating life. Happiness is represented by an open stomach but also by a cool stomach; people often talk approvingly of their lovers by saying "my lover cools me." A closed stomach, by contrast, indicates anger, but also selfish excess: the saying *nu a ɖù nu bi-o, a na gigo*, meaning "if you eat everything you will become constipated," is commonly used morally to condemn politicians who consume assets from the state but do not redistribute them.

The belly, possessing as it does such powerful desires, can also be the cause of great danger. One proverb warns that "Even if one has eaten to satisfaction, one's appetite for meat remains," meaning that one can never have enough of the good things in life; one always wants more. While hunger serves a crucial function by motivating people to work hard and to create,

the utter insatiability of the belly is, my collaborators again stressed, also the cause of much human suffering. Jealousy can kill through others' machinations of the occult, in which witches are said to "eat" their victims. Businesspersons divert corporate funds for their personal ends by "eating" them, and particularly crafty and ambitious politicians are said to "eat" politics itself. As Benin faced the rapid entry of free-market capitalism in the 1990s under imposed "structural adjustment" programs, a former government official lamented to a local newspaper, "this privatization is happening to soon, we haven't eaten (*bouffé*) enough of this company" (Heilbrunn 1993:282).

Taken together, I think that Beninese conceptions of the belly suggest a deep ambivalence about the many and unpredictable possibilities of human social life, or more specifically, an inherent suspicion of others' motives (and even one's own). The belly drives human creation but also human destruction; through it one can become but also bewitch. As discussed, a wife is supposed to bring hot sustenance for her husband's belly but simultaneously and by her own affections also cool it, in effect maintaining a delicate and precarious balance. If innocence is an empty stomach and yet people warn one another not to think in such a naïve way, then the very idea of innocence is perhaps misleading and even dangerous. One can be sincere and even good, but not innocent, as both sincerity and goodness are judged by socially verifiable acts, either speaking or giving, respectively. Sincerity, which requires volition and intent, can come only from inside the stomach, but so too can lies, and there is great unease about the fact that one can never verify that which remains hidden.

If a dying stomach is apathetic and asocial, then sociality can be seen as a particular kind of sustenance for the stomach and by extension for the person. Happiness does not have to do so much with having a good stomach, but rather an open one; conception itself, in which a stomach

"finds" new life, is of course dependent on such openness. Anger and selfishness are, it seems, among the more dangerous attributes as they both block circulation. Beninese place great emphasis on the continuity of social flow and the avoidance of asocial blockage (see also Taylor 1992). And yet the belly cannot achieve such openness, such flow on its own. Left to its own drives, the stomach will eat everything that it can find, and as warned, will ultimately become constipated. And yet, eating is precisely what the stomach does; it is its one and only contribution to life. By itself, then, the belly makes for an ultimately destructive bundle of drives. Every belly, my collaborators stressed, needs a head.

The head is the site of all human socialization. Unlike the stomach (*xomɛ*), which when translated literally means "stomach-inside," a prepositional object, a metaphor for the unknowns of human urges and the anxieties that they inspire, the word for head, *ta*, is a noun, a more straightforward signifier. In Fongbe, a social gathering or reunion is a "head invitation" (*tagbesò*), as it refers both to the social part of the body as well to as its more cooperative capacities. To submit to someone else (*jôtanúme*) is to deliver one's head to them. To annoy someone is to "break head" (*tagbà*), that is, to disrupt balance and social flow; to be mentally disturb someone, as do evil spirits, is to "knock over the head" (*flí ta*). Someone suffering from a headache will complain that *tadùmì*, "my head is eating me," a reference to the sudden inability to think or to carry on easily with normal social interactions.

This head is the site of intelligence, which is (*tame*, or inside the head). Whereas *xomɛ* is something unknown and mysterious, tame is straightforwardly knowable, even predictable. For Beninese, intelligence is not so much the ability to ponder abstractions as it is the capacity to position oneself properly into a social ordering.[1] The head thus orients the body to human

[1] The head is the site of intelligence but not of thought. Thought, Beninese maintain, cannot be separated from volition and particularly not desire, and so it is said to rather emerge from the belly.

relationality; to be intelligent is to "have all one's head," (*dô tame*), to and to be "good" (*tamedagbe*) and "soft" (*tamebibo*) in the head. One can also say "to exist in the head" *(tíin tame*), another reference to intelligence as collective engagement. Cultivating intelligence for Beninese is thus largely a matter of proper socialization. It is through the capacities of the head that people successfully navigate different social contexts, know the appropriate words to say, and generally get along with their friends, families, and associates. Properly ordered social engagement depends on familiarity and a certain degree of conformity, all of which lead to social consensus as social norm.

While first learning to navigate Beninese roadways on a motorcycle properly, when coming to crowded intersections I would hear unfamiliar insults shouted by drivers jockeying for position, two words most of all. *Yehinon* and *jimakplón*, collaborators told me, mean both "bad or inconsiderate driver." As I was both an eager student of the Fongbe language and a frustrated driver on Beninese roads, I quickly added these words to my burgeoning vocabulary. Within only a few days, however, a close friend strongly dissuaded me from using them. "Those are harsh words, and great insults. I never use them and would not if I were you." At first I was confused, but my friend went on to elaborate: *yehinon* more specifically means "a simpleton so dumfounded as to be speechless," whereas *jimakplón* means "ill mannered" and "poorly raised." He then explained that for Beninese, to be properly socialized and to know the right words to say in the right context are by far the most important personal abilities to get along; to be accused of the opposite is incredibly offensive. Beninese place great emphasis on the value of social intelligence, which again is primarily indicated by speaking appropriate words; for them intelligence means proper socialization guided by the head.

The head is a site of balance. In stark contrast to the belly, which is defined by that which lies hidden inside it, a mindless assortment of uncontrolled needs and wants, desires and ambitions that, if left unchecked, will disrupt the flows of sociality, the head is a place of openness and harmony. Perhaps most threatening to this harmony is insanity (*taɖù,* head eat), in what is perhaps recognition of the potential danger of the belly and its driving force, hunger. Through the belly's attachments to fantastic, perverse, and enigmatic hungers, persons with insanity ultimately "eat away" at their own heads, and ultimately at the social order that the head potentiates. And indeed, mentally disturbed people in Benin are typically quite conspicuous and even dramatic in acting out asociality in public spaces. Among people who place great value on cleanliness and self-presentation, the hair of mentally ill persons is often dirty and unkempt; their clothes are typically soiled, torn, and particularly in the case of men, often missing altogether. Indeed, male *taɖùnɔ* walk naked along major roads leering at strangers and frightening children. Speaking to collaborators, it becomes apparent that these disturbed individuals paradoxically bring strangers together in order to care for them, even if such care is given at a hesitant distance. But also, such troubled persons serve as an object of contemplation, impressing upon passers by the crucial importance of both a good head and the capacities of sociality to deal with a head that is eaten.

Such social capacities figure centrally in more extended treatments of mental illness. I once spent several weeks living in a rural village in the commune of Ze, north of Allada, the guest of a self-described evangelical minister who was building a church in order to heal people. He specialized in treating mental illnesses. Worried family members would bring their disturbed child, sibling, or cousin to the minister to be healed. Assistants to the minister would chain the ankles of the mentally afflicted to the trunk of a tree located next to the home where I was

staying, and the disturbed persons would spend much of the first several days (and nights) of their visit yelling undirected obscenities, hurling biting insults at everyone in sight, and issuing grave warnings about evil spirits in the forest.

But they would also spend upwards of six hours a day speaking quietly with the minister, one on one, and much of these discussions would involve strained social relationships, whether a quarreling spouse or a disaffected sibling. The minister would then demand that these relations come to his church in person, so that he could lead a mediation. "Their bellies," the minister would say, "are eating you too. I will not allow that." Over the course of one woman's treatment, relatives living in the region would regularly stop by to visit with her and the minister. Some relatives came from as far away as Cotonou, one traveled from Abidjan, Ivory Coast. An assistant claimed that the minister had once convinced an estranged brother to travel all the way from Switzerland to sort out his relationship with a sibling.

Over the course of these conversations and engaged visitors, the disturbed person's shouts would slowly diminish both in frequency and intensity; after one or two months, they had ceased altogether. During a discussion with the same assistant, I asked him if the disturbed persons treated by the minister are ever really healed. The assistant looked at me and smiled, "I was once like them. Now I am well; now I assist the minister." The head, then, is nurtured by sociality. But, in a more figurative and phenomenological sense, the head *is* sociality.

The head is also a conduit for good fortune, as "to be lucky" is directly translated as *nyô ta*, or "to be good in the head." Here again there is a particular emphasis given to socialization. Beninese rarely leave fortune to chance but rather seek out *vodun*, or deities, as cosmological patrons, beneficiaries who can bestow good fortune upon them, whether in the form of plentiful rains, a pregnancy, or a thriving business. To garner the favor of a *vodun*, one must have learned

the proper protocol—the right sacrifices to offer, the right incantations to say—in order to please the spirit. One must be "intelligent" in order to follow such conventions correctly; else one is liable to fall into bad luck, or *takúkú*, a "dead head," a head without the intelligence needed to follow social protocol. If the belly has to do with individual human will and capacities, then the head is preoccupied with finding a balance with the will and the capacities of others, including those of non-human forces, whether ancestors, *vodun*, or other cosmological actors. Here, the proverb "One who knows how to ask never goes to bed hungry" reveals that for Beninese clients, a belly must have a head in order to properly and successfully ask for something to eat.

For others, the head provides the capacities for wisdom, intelligence, proper socialization, and luck, in short, all of the attributes of peaceful, orderly living. *Bla ta un me*, to enthrone a Dah, or lineage head, is to "attach a head," to embody and to personify the order to his lineage. And indeed, it is the Dah who is charged with resolving whatever conflict or controversy might divide his collectivity; he is less a ruler and more of a conciliator among rival parties. Such leaders makes themselves available to other lineage members by holding court in prominent and typically open-air locations in the lineage compounds, and such a spaces are designated as *xwétá*, or "head of the house."

As a conceptual framework the dialectic of the belly and the head directly informs social encounters throughout the Beninese life cycle. It is due to the widespread understanding of the belly—that is, the insatiable bodily and existential hungers that motivate self-interested behavior—that Beninese not only accept but even expect satisfied persons, whether a parent, a lineage head, a vodun priest, a school principal, or a business owner to "eat" well, literally but also economically and sexually. Corpulence is an outward sign of health and wealth, that is, a properly functioning and properly satisfied belly. And yet, Beninese equally emphasize the

head—social correctness and responsibility, a consideration of one's community however so defined—as a means of balancing and morally redeeming the rapacious urges of the belly. It is according to this dialectic of the belly and the head that Beninese experience politics, both legitimate and otherwise.

In the next section, I attempt to illustrate the ways in which a group of local people living in a rural community in southern Benin evaluate a local political candidate in direct reference to the conceptual dialectic of the belly and the head. Virtually all political candidates, the good and the bad, the responsible and the deceitful, have a well-developed belly, as judged by their success in business but also in solving local conflicts, feuds, and other intrigues. For local voters, the enduring challenge of electoral politics is to determine which of these candidates most "exists in the head," that is, which of them are most likely to honor the social obligations conventionally attached to the cultivation of local personalities of renown.

An Everyday Scene

"He's fed us a little, I don't deny that. But what if he *really* just wants to eat?" Faustin warns the group. He and his cousins Cyrano and Edgar sit on wooden chairs in a small half circle under a large tree behind the family compound of their lineage. Jules and Patrice, their friends and neighbors, doze on a straw mat positioned next to the chairs. Faustin continues, "How many times have we been here before? I like Kenou, I do, but what if he is like all the other politicians? We can't trust them, so how can we trust *him*? With politicians, you never know what's really going on in their bellies. So what if…" Edgar cuts him off with a glare and a hand gesture so that the group can listen to the small radio cradled in Cyrano's hand. This afternoon, the local radio

station is broadcasting an interview with Paul Kenou, a young and ambitious political candidate seeking to represent their district on the city council.

This small group of neighbors gathers regularly at this same location after selling bush meat on the side of the nearby highway or working in adjacent fields. Here, under the generous shade of the tree, they rest, gossip, drink *sodabi*[2], and often talk politics. In two months Benin will hold much anticipated local elections throughout the country, and for several weeks now these contests have figured prominently in national print, television, and radio, Facebook discussions, and in daily conversations. This particular discussion among relatives and friends takes place in the village of Zokou, home to no more than three hundred people grouped mostly in lineage compounds that straddle National Highway Two, about fifteen kilometers south of the provincial capital of Bohicon, in southern Benin.

Paul Kenou, the candidate for city council, grew up in Zokou before leaving for the National University of Benin and is now a high school principal in nearby Bohicon. A year ago, my collaborators explain, Kenou successfully lobbied his contacts in the Ministry of Education to construct a new classroom building at Zokou Primary School that tripled the capacity of the campus. Similarly large gifts, whether from elected officials or from mere aspirants, are quite common in southern Benin. Some of these structures even bear an explicit message, painted prominently on an exterior wall: "A gift from [the candidate's name]." Such monumental acts of calculated generosity dot the Beninese landscape. This past week, Kenou had again visited Zokou for a campaign rally held in the courtyard of the school, the new building serving as a powerful backdrop.

Kenou had promised that the building was just the beginning, that if he were elected, he would bring other goods things, specifically a library, a medical clinic, and electricity for all. He

[2] Distilled palm wine made locally in Benin.

also pledged to pay for the school fees of children from impoverished families and to bring jobs for young people. First, he explained to the

crowd, he would secure a place on the city council; then, he would advance to the National Assembly, and then beyond, the implication being that each step up the ladder would bring ever more largesse for his constituents, those from his natal village the most important of all. Voters knew that such promises would inevitably require the misappropriation of government funds, but, they reasoned, what are other communities, filled with people they don't know, to them? Besides, the people of Zokou further reasoned, if they did not try for it someone else would. There was only so much to go around, and voters in Zokou wanted, through the positioning of their elected officials, to be as close as possible to first in line.

During the rally, a steady procession of local dancers, musicians, and other performers approached Kenou praising the candidate, singing traditional songs but with lyrics altered to sing his praises, and whipping up the energy of the crowd. As a much anticipated reward, assistants to Kenou affixed paper currency to their sweaty brows while onlookers gawked and smiled and cheered. Towards the end of the rally, Kenou had proceeded, in a symbolic gesture meant to reassure potential constituents, to distribute sandwiches wrapped in paper towels, plastic *sachets* of water and hibiscus, and small amounts of money to everyone in attendance. Such practices are common at campaign rallies.

Kenou is not the first politician to make such promises to the people of Zokou. Indeed, virtually every political candidate to pass through Zokou since the transition to democracy in 1991 has assured local voters that their election would bring much needed new infrastructure. In Beninese politics more generally, promising material wealth for the community represents a central campaign strategy. Debates over policy are rare. In national French language media such

as newspaper articles, television broadcasts, and radio interviews, candidates typically veil promises of largesse with democratic platitudes like education, public health, decentralization, and of course, development.

In local, face-to-face exchanges conducted in the local language of Fongbe, however, such platitudes are largely absent, with appeals quite explicitly celebrating redistribution for its own sake. Like electoral politics elsewhere in the world, Beninese voters expend great energy in their evaluations of candidates, not only of the words they say but also of how credible their promises are likely to prove. Ambiguity in this way inspires ambivalence. Beninese voters experience this ambivalence quite acutely, for while candidates always promise infrastructure that, particularly in the case of clinics, can mean the difference between life and death, elected officials too often use their office not to help their constituents but rather to enrich themselves, typically through close relationships with other officials and local business elites but also with the United Nations, the World Bank, and scores of other non-governmental organizations (NG0). Before officials come up again for re-election, to answer for their negligence, they have already transitioned into the government bureaucracy or the private sector, whether in Benin or abroad.

Kenou's candidacy has quickly become a lightning rod for conversation in Zokou. People seem either to love him or loathe him. On the one hand, Kenou has a near perfect pedigree for a rising Beninese politician: a college education, contacts in government ministries, a proven capacity to bring needed infrastructure to his natal village, and no shortage of ambition. Supporters regularly compare him to Laurent Djisou, from Adjahoun, a small community not far from Zokou. Only ten years ago Djisou was, like Kenou, a high school principal in Bohicon. Since that time, however, Djisou has quickly risen through the ranks of the local city council, then the National Assembly, and most

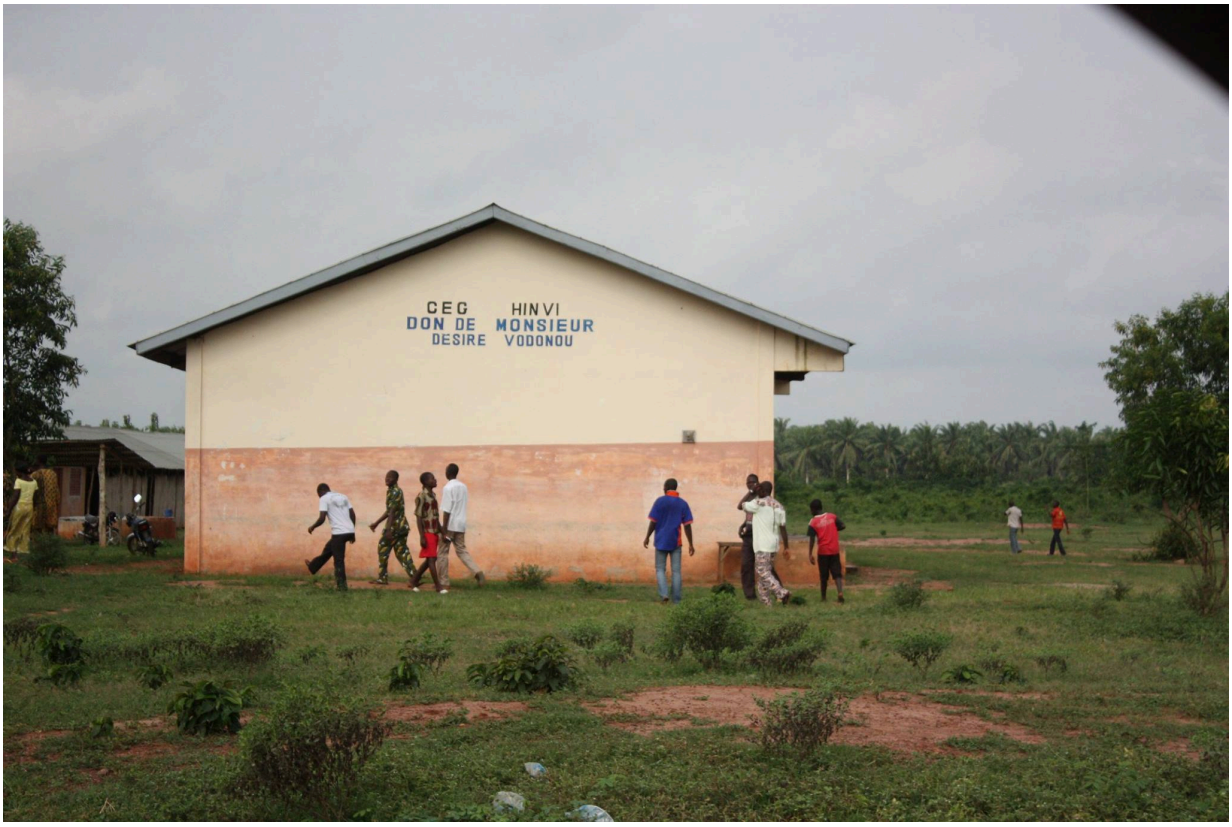

Photo 1: School building constructed by a local politician during his first candidacy, with his name displayed on the wall facing Highway National Two, for optimal viewership.

recently to the Beninese High Court of Justice. Along the way, Djisou brought to Adjahoun three new school buildings, two water wells, a clinic, and electricity. Djisou also built a large home in the middle of town to remind everyone that it was he who had given so much to the community. Djisou now lives in the Akpapa neighborhood of Cotonou, while his home in Adjahoun sits almost always empty. For years now, women in Zokou have hauled water from the new wells of Adjahoun, and upon their return often marvel at how modern the once small village now looks, to the point of standing out among other communities in the area. Zokou, they invariably observe, particularly pales in comparison.

On the other hand, the very attributes that make Kenou an enticing electoral choice to some inspires trepidation among others. Setting aside the small radio in his hand, a look of concern in his eyes, Cyrano announces to the group,

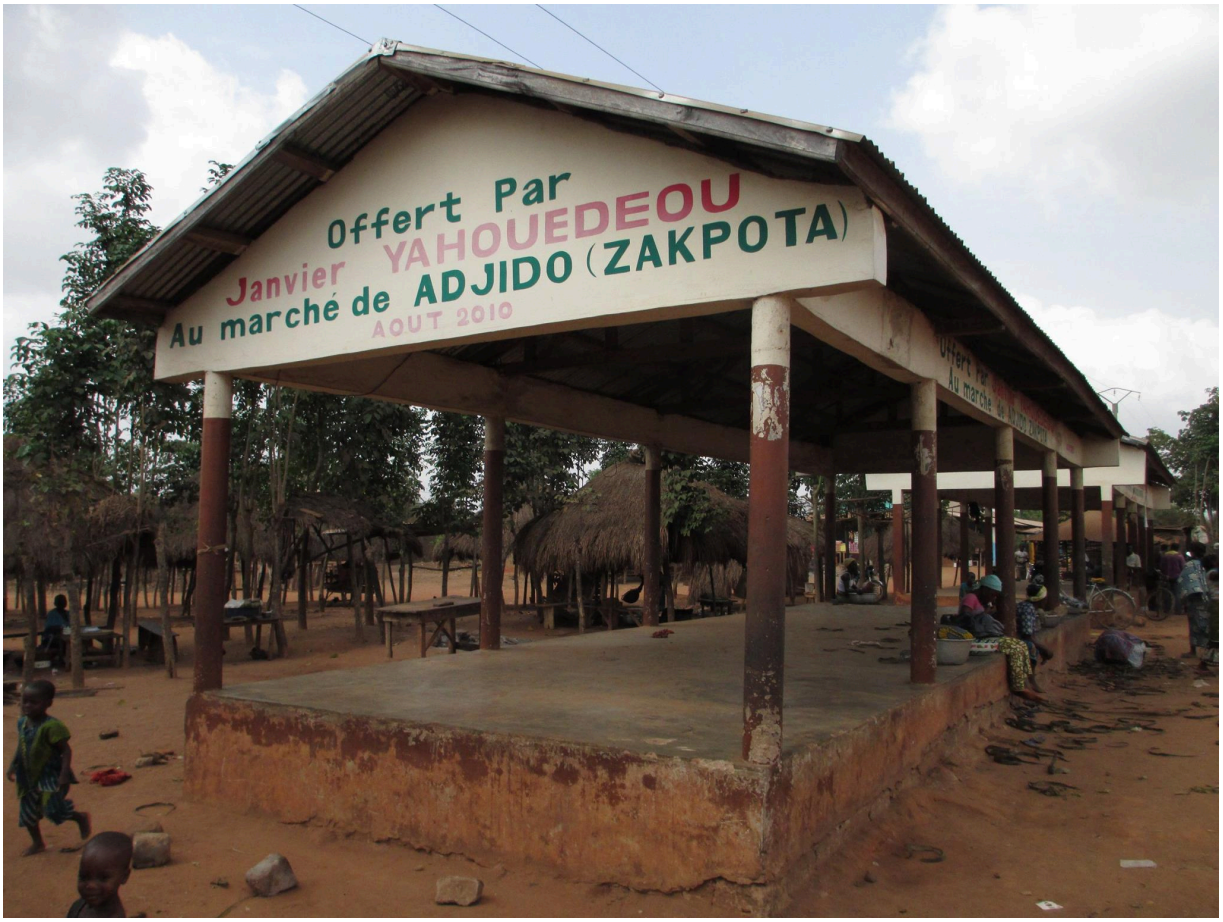

Photo 2: Market building constructed by a local politician, again with his name displayed on the wall facing the main thoroughfare, in this case, Highway National Four.

> *What worries me: if Kenou brought the school through his contacts in the Ministry of Education, that means he already knows the people who make that decision; so he's already way above us. We're just a stepping stone for him. If we vote for him, he'll just disappear, like…who was the deputy in the National Assembly we voted for in 2004…?*

"Amoussovi[3]," Patrice answers from the mat without moving or opening his eyes. "Amoussovi, yes. What then?" Edgar then challenges, "But who is Amoussovi to us? He was born in Cana and

[3] Voters in the southern department of Zou elected Pascal Amoussovi to the National Assembly in 2004. Amoussovi had, according to local people in the department, campaigned on his close ties with a German Non-Government Organization (NGO) that had dug scores of water wells in the north of Benin. Amoussovi had promised that, if elected, he would have the NGO dig wells in Zou. Once elected, however, Amoussovi was a largely absent and unresponsive representative, and the German NGO never came to the district. Amoussovi later accepted a position with a Belgian engineering company and now spends his time between Cotonou and

he grew up in Cotonou. Do you think Amoussovi has forgotten his family, his natal village? Kenou, he is from *here*, from *Zokou*. I've eaten with his cousin," pointing eastward, in the direction of their family compound. Some in the group then look in that direction, while the others keep their eyes fixed on the ground, somewhat reassured but still concerned. Politicians have neglected Zokou for years, resulting in continued privation while some nearby communities have prospered. For local residents, the stakes are high.

For many readers, particularly those in the West, such deliberations and the larger political system that they imply are as easy to identify as they are problematic. Western observers tend to view the campaign strategies of Paul Kenou, and for that matter the vast majority of Beninese political candidates, as unambiguous forms of vote-buying. To them, these prl-barrel projects are clear instances of corruption. Not surprisingly, perhaps, in 2010 the American State Department reported that in the Beninese government, "official corruption remained widespread" (State Department 2010:11). That same year, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index placed Benin in the bottom third of all countries examined. In its 2012 report, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office states that despite recent efforts, corruption remains a "key problem" in Benin (FOC: 2012).

And yet, it should be noted that there is nothing secretive about the deliberations here under the tree in Zokou, or for that matter those in national media, or in the symbolically powerful distributions of food, drink, and cash at campaign rallies. All such exchanges consistently revolve around both the ability and willingness of political candidates to redistribute material resources, and unabashedly so. Such exchanges exhibit none of the moral stigma that a

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Brussels. No one in Cana has heard of him in years, although it is widely rumored that he sends money to his relatives via Western Union.

Western observer might expect: no speaking in hushed tones, no rush to recontextualize patrimonial dealings.

Quite to the contrary, one finds a straightforward openness to such deliberations but also a great collective joy when candidates make promises of future largesse, greater still should elected officials actually fulfill such promises. Communities mark their public redistributive acts with jubilant festivities, filled with singing, dancing, morality plays, acrobatic acts, and plenty of drink. For political figures and their constituents alike, the disbursements of politicians and candidates satisfy not only the practical aspects of meeting great local need but also seem to fulfill a moral imperative. To Beninese, responsive politicians are not just means to an end, but also celebrated citizens, exemplars to school children, and the focus of constant and ebullient public praise; political discussions of material redistribution seem to reflect not only what politics *is*, but more importantly, what politics *ought to be*. Here under the tree in Zokou, Westerners would find not only a deviation from conventional political practice, but perhaps also a deviation from conventional political ideals.

When experienced on the ground, it becomes apparent that a profound disconnect exists between Western condemnations of Beninese vote-buying and Beninese celebrations of it. At no point during campaign rallies, stump speeches, or the local deliberations that ensue do participants evince the anxieties or ironies of outside observers. Listening to conversations in the crowd and seeing the looks on the faces of those attending, for an ethnographer what takes places at these rallies is difficult to experience as corruption. Throughout the unfolding of local electoral processes,

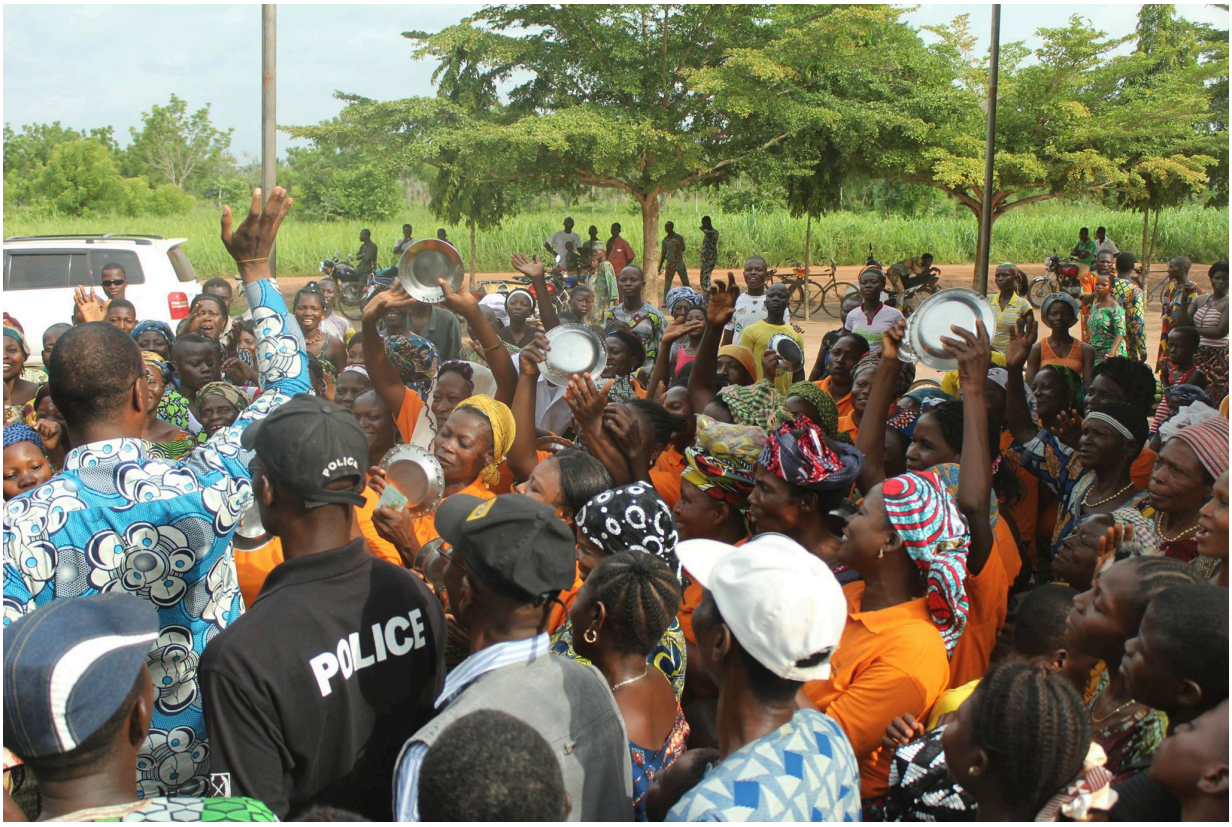


Photo 3: A local political candidate waves to the crowd as he leaves a campaign rally. As he made his way to his SUV, a local group of market women, all dressed in matching orange polos and armed with homemade noisemakers, rushed his entourage while cheering and chanting his party's slogan. They had been whipping up the energy of the crowd for the past two hours. To reward them for their performance, the candidate hands one of the members several green bills of 5,000 cfa (about $10), which she quickly counts before sharing with the others.

something in the air suggests that the redistributive appeals of the candidate are not morally problematic. If anything, such pay-offs seem morally sanctioned.

This is not to say that Beninese have no conception of corruption. They certainly do, but although they use the French word *la corruption* when they discuss it in that language, their understandings differ markedly from what Westerners might expect. When, for instance, Beninese politicians steal resources from the state in order to buy a flat in Paris or Brussels—a common occurrence—both Western and Beninese observers decry corruption, but for different reasons: Beninese condemn them for keeping for

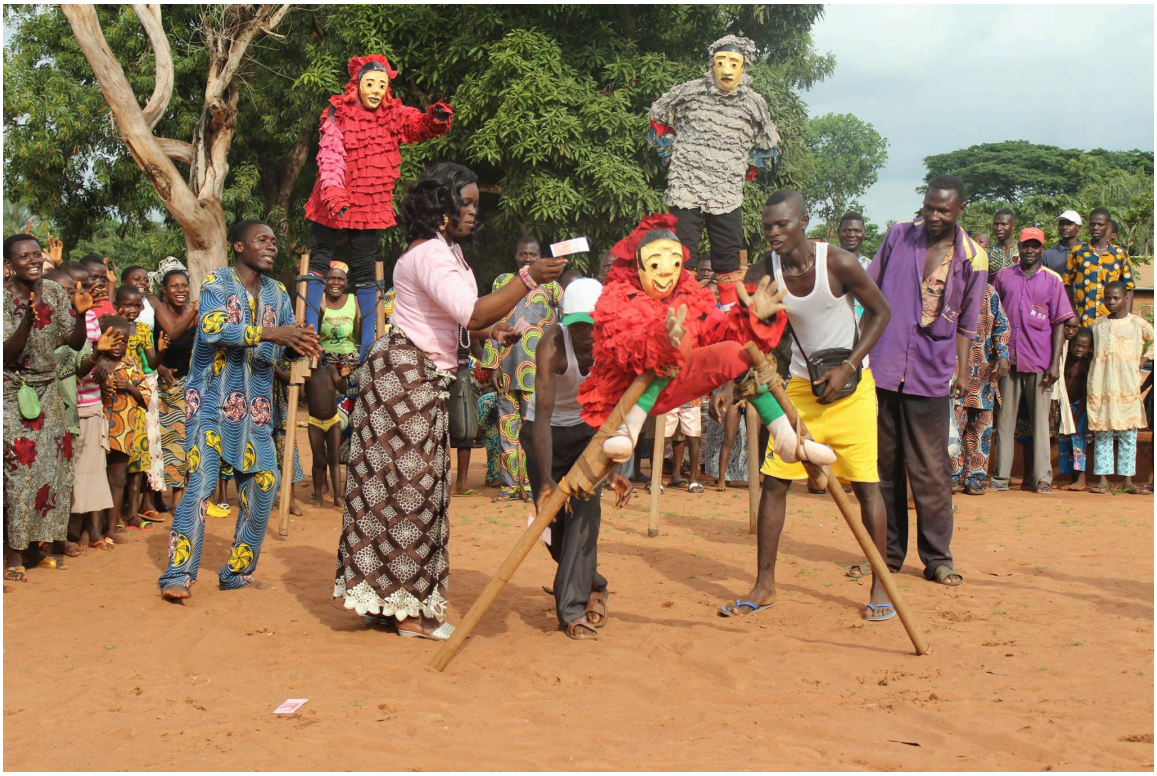


Photo 4: A performer and member of a local acrobatic act performs a difficult somersault in order to entertain a local political candidate at a campaign rally. Several hundred local people look on. To the left of the stilt-walker, an assistant to the candidate rewards the performer with multiple pink bills of 1,000 cfa (about $2.00), one of which has fallen to the ground. Campaign rallies witness seemingly endless spectacles of clientelistic redistribution.

themselves what was stolen, Westerners because they stole in the first place. While Benin shares a government structure similar to Western countries, namely, a constitutionally based democracy, it is evident that Beninese look to government to fulfill markedly more personalistic roles.

Considering both the apparent incommensurability of these two perspectives, the global and the local, the Western and the Beninese, and the continued economic influence of the United Nations, the World Bank, Transparency International, and other global disciplinary regimes, I argue that anthropology offers a needed service to the parties involved, to account for this disjuncture. For the past several decades, foreign governments and multilateral organizations have implemented anti-corruption programs across the African continent with the aim of

bringing African governments into compliance with Western notions of transparency and good governance.

Anthropology and the Definitions of Corruption

What is corruption, anyway? The term conjures up specific practices as diverse as fraud, bribery, embezzlement, cronyism, favoritism, influence peddling, extortion, and theft, but according to what understanding are all of these practices related? For decades Western policymakers, aid agencies, and many academics have defined corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gain," and in doing so these actors have followed a public, bureaucratic, universalistic, and moralistic understanding of corruption as personal. Increasingly, however, some of these same actors have come to realize that corruption takes a wide variety of forms, many of which challenge the public and bureaucratic aspects of their working definitions. In response, many Western actors have broadened their understandings beyond bureaucratic preoccupations, making their working notions more inclusive but also more vague, to the point of hollowness, while simultaneously holding firm to the universalism and moralism of the original definitions. During this same time, anthropologists have explicitly contested universalism in understanding corruption, consistently pointing out its deficiencies while arguing for a local, relativist, and culturalist view.

Standard Western understandings of corruption emerged from the work of political scientists beginning in the 1960s and expanded significantly among economists in the 1990s (Banfield 1961; Nye 1967; Heidenheimer 1970; Shliefer & Vishny 1993). Nye (1967) defines corruption as "behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates

rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence." Echoing this contrast between public and private domains, Morris (1991) describes corruption as "a behavior by a public official that deviates from public interest," while Shliefer & Vishny (1993:599) conceive of corruption as "a manipulation of powers of government or sale of government property, or both, by government officials for personal use."

By the mid 1990s, institutions such as Transparency International (1995) and the World Bank (1997) had taken these academic perspectives into account, but rather than limit themselves to the narrow specifics of the preceding definitions, adopted a more general definition of corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gain," which quickly became the dominant understanding among Western policymakers, aid agencies, and academics (Tanzi 1995; Transparency 1996; Asian Development Bank 1998; Gray and Kaufmann 1998; Zakiuddin 1998; Amundsen 1999; Lambsdorff 2007; OECD 2008). During this period, Klitgaard (1998) went so far as to define corruption by the economic formula C=M+D-A, or Corruption equals Monopoly plus Discretion minus Accountability, implying that Western understandings of corruption were nearing the level of a quantifiable, and hence measurable and replicable, science. Haller and Shore (2005:2) observe that "upon this definition now rests a whole raft of policies concerning transparency, liberalization and 'good governance'" that through global anti-corruption campaigns and other policies affect people and governments around the world.

Issues emerged almost immediately regarding the generality and clarity of the public and bureaucratic aspects of this definition. For one, as Gupta (1995) has shown in India, "public" and "private" are not universal categories but rather rely on culturally and historically determined understandings of proper social activity (see also Sneath 2002). Also, this standard definition focuses on public-sector corruption to the near exclusion of private-sector actors (Amukowa

2013). Haywood (2015:226) observes that many good-governance initiatives utilizing the standard definition of corruption were designed "as if private-sector corruption only happens at the boundary of the firm when it interacts with the public sector, when an official demands a bribe," disavowing instances involving the collusion of private entities, including banks and global corporations. Szeftel (1998) similarly demonstrates that World Bank reports repeatedly portray private-sector actors as victims as opposed to collaborators and beneficiaries.

In an apparent reaction to these conceptual issues, some governments and multilateral agencies have moved away from the public and bureaucratic aspects of the initial definition, adopting a broader conception not limited to state actors. The original emphases on universalism and moralism have, however, endured. Already by 1997, merely a year after supporting the consensus definition of corruption, Transparency International Chairman Dr. Peter Eigen issued a press release stating:

> I urge the public to recognise that a large share of the corruption is the explicit product of multinational corporations, headquartered in leading industrialised countries, using massive bribery and kick-backs to buy contracts in the developing world and the countries in transition… Transparency International is not saying in this index that one country is more corrupt than another. We are reporting how business people, political analysts and the general public around the globe perceive levels of corruption in different countries. (Transparency International: 1997)

In a single statement, Transparency International (TI) seems to dispose of the definition "the abuse of public office for private gain," in all of its dimensions: public, bureaucratic, universalistic, and moralistic. TI did not, however, officially discard of the conventional definition until 2007, a full decade later, with a modified definition as, "the abuse of *entrusted power* for private gain." What the change from *public office* to *entrusted power* effectively does,

I argue, is remove the exclusively public and bureaucratic dimensions of the original definition while preserving its universalistic and moralist aspects.

Bureaucracies have a relatively unambiguous notion of public office— as a system of responsibilities and authorities organized into institutions administered according to clearly defined rules and procedures—that render abuse quite easy to objectively identify; not so with "entrusted power, " which expands coverage of the definition to include a more ambiguous, informal, and relational notion, that of trust. While trust can be read as equivalent to defined bureaucratic duties and limits on power, it also refers to the subjectively experienced expectation that another party will honor social norms, however (and by whoever) so defined. While the generality of the notion "entrusted power" does allow for the inclusion of corrupt acts by private, non-state actors, thus resolving the dilemma encountered by the original definition involving "public office," this generality is double-edged, as it can be so vague as to apply to any situation, and thus, none at all.

For instance, the same year that TI changed its definition from public office to entrusted power, the African Development Bank (AFDB) redefined corruption as "the offering, giving, receiving, directly or indirectly, anything of value to influence improperly the actions of another party," leaving to the discretion of multilateral organizations like itself the interpretation of "improperly." Worded differently, TI and the AFDB have both adopted modified definitions of corruption suffused with ambiguity that international bodies alone are qualified to resolve, while simultaneously maintaining the universalism and moralism of earlier definitions and that continue to mark global anti-corruption campaigns today.

This move to open the definition of corruption to subjective interpretation is not limited to Transparency International or development banks. According to the International Bar

Association (IBA), an international definition of corruption "does not exist," as "different interpretations of 'corruption' are given by multiple jurisdictions according to their own cultural considerations" (IBA 2012:1). Nonetheless, the IBA goes on to explain that international organizations do follow "leading norms" as outlined in the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), which goes into considerable detail in delineating distinctions among bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement, money laundering, and other "various forms of corruption" (ibid, 1)! The IBA does not, however, establish who defines "leading norms," nor does it establish who applies these norms, and according to whose discretion.

In short, among Western countries, multilateral institutions, NGOs, and other international actors, the *idea* of corruption continues to inspire universalizing and moralistic disciplinary campaigns, while the *definitions* of corruption have come to occupy a thoroughly particularist space. Corruption nonetheless continues to exist on the level of general perceptions and leading norms. Worded differently, corruption exists not so much as a formal and universally applicable definition as a *cultural intuition*, self-evident to a certain community while ill-defined and even inscrutable to both observers on the outside and critical observers on the inside.

Anthropologists have been strangely absent from these discussions. In fact, the entire practical exercise described above, that of wrestling with the ambiguities of corruption in Western aid and policy circles, stretching over the last twenty-five years, has gone on to the near total exclusion of anthropologists. While the academic disciplines of political science, economics, and law have each contributed greatly to the many debates, conferences, evaluations, declarations, and enforcement regimes that together constitute global anti-corruption efforts, anthropologists have scarcely engaged. As the World Bank (2006) Literature Survey on Corruption has found, anthropological studies accounted for roughly 2% of the thousands of

academic papers regarding corruption published between 2000 and 2005. As Torsello (2015:5) has noted, recent cross-disciplinary literature reviews by Jain (2001), Rose-Ackerman (2006), and Lambsdorff (2007) have simply ignored anthropological research on corruption.

Anthropologists' lack of engagement with government and policy circles is unfortunate, for the anthropology of corruption literature offers insights directly relevant to these conversations about applicable standards. During this same period of time, roughly 1990 to the present, anthropologists have consistently demonstrated that people frame their understandings of corruption based on culturally specific intuitions and not on legal definitions, which is *precisely* what Transparency International, the International Bar Association, and other prominent institutions have expressed in their policy statements if not also in policy adoptions.

While it is government that indicts, prosecutes, and convicts corrupt actors, suggesting to some that corruption is bureaucratic and legalistic in its definition, anthropologists have shown that people conceive of corruption according to intuitions specific to their cultural lived worlds; because understandings of corruption are historically and socially specific, they cannot be universal. Corruption and the processes by which people define it might, in their political *effects,* be legal facts, but in their *causes* they are rather social facts.

Culturally specific orientations to the definition and experience of corruption exist independent of universalized formalized legal frameworks and sometimes in opposition to them. Working in China, Yang (1989, 1994) describes a disconnect between the operative logics of the state and *guanxi*, a set of informal social practices—reciprocal gift-giving, cultivated indebtedness, and mutual help—that translates to "social connection," as it structures a vast system of social networks. Chinese people widely perceive *guanxi* to be a legitimate solution to such common challenges as securing a better education, looking for a job, and accessing

government services. The Chinese state has, following a Western bureaucratic frame, condemned and prosecuted *guanxi* as corrupt, seeing job networking as cronyism and giving gifts to government bureaucrats as bribery.

Many Chinese people do not, however, agree with this straightforward criminalization; according to local perspectives a fine line distinguishes the admired art of *guanxi* and corruption. Yang explains that "*guanxi* cannot be reduced to a modern western notion of corruption because the personalistic qualities of obligation, indebtedness, and reciprocity are just as important as transactions in material benefit" (Yang 1994:108). Torsello (2014:19) adds that "In the case of *guanxi*, connections are justified by the Confucian virtue of connectedness, according to which individuals are not single atomized beings, but social beings inserted in nested relations." According to those who practice *guanxi*, social connectedness is as strong a motivation as self-benefit, or accessible and manageable means to that end.

When ordinary people are faced with a disjuncture between state conceptions of corruption and their own moral evaluations of the same practices, the tendency is to follow the latter. Kondos (1987) articulates a disjuncture between bureaucratic proceduralism in Nepal and the Hindu practice of *natabad-crypabad*, or helping others, explaining that local people typically do not see nepotism or cronyism as problematic because in Hinduism, seeking favor constitutes a legitimate way of navigating social relations, a notion with which people structure their encounters with the state. Reflecting on the ways in which Indian people generally talk about corruption, Gupta observes that "the discourse of corruption varies a great deal from one country to another, dependent as it is on particular historical trajectories and the specific grammars of public culture" (1995: 392). These authors uniformly contest conventional Western understandings of corruption as an explicitly rational, bureaucratic, and legalistic identification,

arguing instead that the identification of corruption is the outcome of an ongoing moral evaluation, implicit and culturally intuited, that takes into account both the logics and the nuances of local social contexts. What remains central to this moral evaluation is not the violation of impersonal bureaucratic rules but rather the betrayal of a social obligation.

Running like a thread throughout these informal evaluative frameworks is a concern for a shared social good, which according to local people the state does not always serve. In Latvia, Sedlenieks (2004) explains that people understand money to be "fertile" if it is used correctly, that is, if it engenders long-lasting personal relationships. "Barren money," by contrast, is money that benefits only individuals at the expense of the community. Consistent with these shared understandings, local people generally find the misappropriation of government resources by politicians to be acceptable if politicians then use that money to create and maintain personal relationships with their constituents. Lazar (2005) explains that local people in Bolivia see corruption in the formal sense as inevitable but also of only secondary importance to the meeting of local need. Officials can misappropriate government funds—indeed, to a certain degree people view misappropriation as remuneration for their work—as long as a certain amount of the diverted funds benefits local communities in the form of local infrastructure. In the eyes of local people, "leaders tread a fine line between being fairly recompensed for their work and the expenses that they incur, and spending the neighborhood's money on themselves" (Lazar 2005:219). Sedleniek and Lazar both demonstrates that local, informal practices can deviate significantly from official state processes, and in such cases it is typically the former that local people validate (see also Gledhill 2004).

Others argue that the moral approval of investing public funds in private networks of patronage might have something to do with the alienating and isolating characteristics intrinsic to

a bureaucratically ordered society. Visvanathan (2008) argues that in India, many people deem corruption to be morally acceptable because it is socially cohesive, contrasting "the warm nature of corruption against the cold of bureaucratic rationality." Writing about sub-Saharan Africa, Olivier de Sardan (1999) argues that corruption is socially embedded in a local "moral economy" constituted by informal practices of negotiation, gift-giving, redistributive accumulation, and group solidarity, much like *guanxi* in China and *natabad-crypabad* in Nepal.

In all cases considered in this section, there exists a disconnect between state definitions of corruption, which typically follow the Western bureaucratic definition, and local understandings and practices. Part of this divergence, I argue, stems from the historical contexts in which the state emerged in these countries, whether communist revolution in the cases of China and Latvia or Western colonialism in the cases of India, Bolivia, and sub-Saharan Africa. But historical foundation is not the entire story, for as I further argue, people understand corruption according to cultural intuition rather than rational calculation. Since no purely rational and bureaucratically administered culture exists, to varying degrees government bureaucrats will necessarily find themselves in the position of mediating two distinct relational logics, the bureaucratic and the social.

As Gupta has shown, some bureaucrats like Sharmaji, an Indian land records official, are able to navigate this disjuncture adroitly by modeling purportedly bureaucratic actions according to local operational logics, in his case an Indian *darbaar*, or royal court (Gupta 1995:395). While local people approach Sharmaji because they need, for instance, a government-issued land title, the social protocols that they follow—the use of body language, address, and turn-taking in conversation—over the course of their meeting with him emulate the decorum of an Indian royal court, and as Gupta explains, Sharmaji plays the two contexts off one another.

For other bureaucrats, the opposition between local norms and their bureaucratic rules proves more difficult to negotiate, as their respective contexts and protocols differ significantly. Olivier de Sardan explains that in Sub-Saharan Africa many civil servants

> find themselves in a schizophrenic situation. Their administrative and professional legitimacy is derived from their training in modern European administration (which is now a world-wide standard) and therefore in its values concerning the 'public service'. But their social legitimacy implies, on the contrary, that they act in conformity with more or less contradictory 'sociocultural' logics. The very widespread adherence to abstract official norms of European origin, advocating the impartiality of the state and the necessity of an ethic of the general interest, thus coexists peacefully with an equally prevalent pattern of behaviour in conformity with social norms in favour of the preeminence of private and partisan interests.

This "schizophrenic" experience of state bureaucrats, and for that matter anyone who must interact with the state, whether a taxi driver at a road checkpoint or a voter at election time, is particularly common in sub-Saharan Africa, due to both the significant differences between indigenous models of sociality and the contexts of governance imposed by European colonial rule, and the violence and coercion with which
colonial governments subjected local populations to their rule.

Anthropologists, joined by the occasional political scientist, have shown repeatedly that people understand corruption according to a culturally-specific intuitions as opposed to legalism or rational calculation. This fundamental anthropological insight regarding corruption resolves two dilemmas that have long troubled multilateral institutions and policy circles. First, as described previously, if people understand corruption according to their cultural backgrounds, then no universal definition of corruption can exist, because there exists no universal human

culture. The World Bank's abstract universal ongoing definition of corruption, the "abuse of public office for private gain," is thus rendered inoperative, as Transparency International ultimately concluded when it broadened its own working definition in 2007. Second, the use of these broader definitions is also suspect, because the ambiguity inherent to them unavoidably calls for local cultural frameworks to interpret them.

Despite these insights, however, a conceptual obstacle to the anthropology of corruption remains, and that is the word corruption itself, or rather the connotations that the term unavoidably conjures. If the concept of corruption calls forth culturally specific and intuition-based evaluations, then no discourse, however critically engaged, can totally escape one's own ambient cultural frame. No conversation can completely avoid ethnocentrism; no debate can be truly free of relativism. Instead of asking "is this practice absolutely and universally corrupt," one should turn the question around and instead ask in culturally relativist terms "*of what* is this practice a corruption?" The problem with the very notion of corruption seems paradoxical because it both ignores and answers the question *of what*, that is, it both ignores analytically but answer intuitively how one is to define corruption in the first place.

By failing to explicitly, critically, and consistently ask "of what is this practice a corruption," Westerns actors allow their own cultural backgrounds to provide an implicit response. This unawareness of what values are being violated is, I claim, precisely what Transparency International and the International Bar Association are doing when interpreting their own ambiguous definitions of corruption: relying on particular—their own—cultural backgrounds to guide them through culturally diverse applications of the general moral principle of trust.

In the West, this "of what," according to which are calibrated Western understandings of corruption, is founded upon a culturally specific conception of government as impersonal and one with a particular history: based on the political philosophy of the Enlightenment and articulated by Weber's study of bureaucracy, government is composed of office-holders temporarily foregoing their private interests to serve the greater good of citizens, and is supported by the majority of electoral support freely given by rational, self-interested actors. Since the American Revolution of the late eighteenth century, Western countries—Europe and North America—have slowly worked out this rationalist model on their own cultural terms and according to their own interests.

It is according to this impersonal and bureaucratic frame that Westerners conceive of corruption all over the world, thereby interpreting the giving of a gift as a bribe, favor as the buying of a vote, or other actions comingling public office and private gain as unambiguous instances of corruption, despite significant differences in local histories, contexts, and meanings across a great number of different lived worlds. In place of holistically-formed insights of diversity and multiplicity one finds an implied single universalism; absolutist conceptions seem to sweep away relativistic nuance.

And yet the question remains: when something is corrupt, *of what* is it a corruption? Given the intense emotions that often accompany violations of norms, whether the anxieties caused by suspicion or the reprehension leveled at guilty parties, it seems that to be corrupt is to threaten something essential to human social life. And yet, despite the conventional working definition of corruption in the West—the abuse of public office for private gain—the small assembly of cousins and friends under the tree in Zokou makes it clear that a universal model is simply not appropriate for understanding perceptions of corruption in southern Benin. But how,

then, to conceive of corruption in theoretical terms appropriate for the global diversity of perceptions? If corruption is a political matter, and if it particularly concerns the breaking of procedure, laws, but also moral codes, then it seems that corruption has to do also with the ideas that render justifiable and acceptable those rules in the first place. In other words, I answer my question, "of what?" by arguing: that which is a corrupt is so because it is a corruption *of the politically legitimate*.

According to post-Enlightenment political theory, legitimacy is a matter of rational actors calculating their self-interest, whether from the perspective of rulers (Weber 1947) or of citizens (Hobbes 1651; Locke 1689; Rousseau 1762; Habermas 1962). Agents reason their ways to legitimacy rationally, that is, in a kind of cultural and historical vacuum. And yet, if rationality of action and freedom to act prevail, then why do different countries at different periods conceive of political legitimacy so differently? In Sweden, for instance, more than 80% of all campaign finance comes from public funds managed by the state, for according to Swedish public opinion, private campaign finance is intrinsically corrupt. In the United States, by contrast, virtually all of campaign finance is private, and although some citizens find private contributions problematic, many do not. Moreover, American media unambiguously rate the strengths and even morality of different political candidates based in part on how much private money they can raise. How can contract theory—universally adjusting social relations through freely acting calculations of self-interest—account for such pronounced differences between different countries?

What humans understand to be politically legitimate is, I argue, not outcomes of carefully considered contractual obligations so much as it is products of intuitive processes situated in a particular shared experiences of history and reflective of culturally specific moral orientations. Identifying the legitimate is an experience rooted first and foremost in a gut feeling and only

subsequently expressed in thought.[4] To understand what it means for people to identify a social phenomenon as corrupt, one must first grasp the ways in which they understand legitimacy, which, like corruption itself, can be understood only holistically and relativistically.

To that end, this dissertation contributes to anthropological understandings of corruption by examining the specifics of what men and women in southern Benin conceive of as political legitimacy. Understandably, one might expect a contribution to the anthropology of corruption to take as its central object of inquiry explicitly corrupt acts: fraud, collusion, misallocation of resources, embezzlement, and so on. This approach has certainly become a predominant convention in the anthropological literature regarding corruption. And yet, in doing so, I argue, one cannot avoid the risk of importing one's own culturally derived evaluative intuitions. This dissertation takes a different angle, one that tries to understand a seemingly straightforward instance of corruption—the buying of votes in southern Benin—in relativistic and holistic terms, that is, according to the social and moral contexts in which those instances occur.

I argue that vote-buying is for many Beninese understood not as corrupt but as legitimate; in their lived social world, local people experience vote buying as not only morally sanctioned but also morally ideal. Throughout daily social life in southern Benin, ordinary people pattern informal greetings, courting spouses, raise children, worship ancestors, and start new business ventures according to the same implicit logic of reciprocity as that which structures vote buying. For that reason, I argue that men and women in southern Benin conceive of political legitimacy most compellingly and consistently with reference to an ideal form of mutuality and obligation, the patron-client relationship. As we shall see, this relational ideal is experienced in many

[4] In the first chapter of this dissertation I argue that some cultures can be and have been explicitly rationalist, such as the Enlightenment cultures of Great Britain and the United States in the early nineteenth century. But, I go on to argue, even here, citizens determined legitimacy not so much as *explicitly thinking* Enlightenment rationality but rather by *intuitively feeling* the rationality derived from the Enlightenment.

variations, but all share a balanced though asymmetrical reciprocity between two parties of unequal status. Those of lower status seek out and elicit material wealth from those of higher status, who, in their provisioning of such resources, attempt to contain the recipients, that is, to control their behavior for their own benefit and at the exclusion of other high-status persons. In this human economy of reciprocity, clients receive material resources in exchange for praise, loyalty, and labor.

It is with the purpose of clarifying this reciprocity, and explicating the prototypical social forms that give it cultural force, that the following chapters are written. As with people living throughout southern Benin, the group of friends and relatives gathered under the tree in Zokou seem at once to engage in a local democratic process while paradoxically violating one of its most basic tenets, at least according to Western understandings. This dissertation endeavors to make sense of this seeming incongruity by interrogating and thereby disentangling its many premises, assumptions, logics, and justifications.

A Portrait of Benin

The area that I have named Southern Benin is a somewhat arbitrary distinction, although one that Beninese themselves use often, comprising the departments of Kouffo, Zou, Plateau, Mono, Atlantique, Littoral, and Ouémé. So defined, southern Benin is a densely populated region home to a majority of the country's 11 million people. A slight majority of Beninese live in rural settlements, although many live in the urban centers of Cotonou, Porto Novo, and Bohicon. Southern Benin is as much an ethno-linguistic area as it is geographical, with more than 60% of Beninese self-identifying as Fon, a higher concentration than the country as a whole, which

stands at 40%, making Fon by far the largest ethno-linguistic group (CIA World Factbook: 2016).

Anthropologists have generally described Fon kinship as patrilineal, patrilocal, and polygynous, (Herskovits 1938; Kennell 2011; Landry 2013) although Falen (2005) has recently noted a growing disapproval of polygyny. Fon people have conventionally organized themselves into large patrilineal compounds of anywhere from 20 to 50 people, although urbanization and labor migrations have replaced these large groupings over the past several decades, with increasingly numbers of people adopting a more nuclear model of smaller family organization. Through the annual ancestral veneration of *ahanbiba*, which sometimes attract more than 100 attendants, the broader patrilines are able to preserve a sense of group belonging.

Most Beninese work in subsistence agriculture or engage in small-scale regional trade, centering on corn, cassava, yams, beans, palm oil, and peanuts. Cotton remains the principal export commodity, accounting for 40% of gross domestic product and 80% of official export receipts. In urban centers, many Beninese generally provide for their livelihoods by working a broad range of small jobs. From the post-independence period of the early 1960s well into the 1980s, salaried government jobs were the surest way to success in the cash economy. But, in the wake of structural adjustment policies of the late 1980s, the public sector has significantly receded. Today, most Beninese make ends meet by offering informal motorcycle taxi services, hauling goods, and selling commodities such as soap, AA batteries, cans of tomato paste, and cell-phone credit. Most people conduct their sales on the street, although more successful traders dedicate a room of their homes to furnishing a small boutique, with the most successful traders opening stalls in the nearest marketplace. Even Beninese with a dedicated trade such as mechanical repair or tailoring typically supplement these incomes through trading on the street.

Hierarchy is an irreducible first principle of Beninese social life. Birth order determines rank among children in families, and, in polygamous families, wives are positioned hierarchically according to their order of arrival. In daily social interactions, a broad repertoire of hand-shakes, bows, prostrations, and other gestures create and maintain social ranking. Fon people address strangers with kinship terms that reflect and thereby extend notions of hierarchy within the family—both in French and in Fon. If, for instance, one approaches an unfamiliar woman in the street, one typically addresses her as either "little sister" or "big sister" depending on age but also on dress, comportment, association, and context. It is important here to stress that the French term "sœur" is never used in this context without its ordinal component; in Fongbe, a term for sister (or brother) without acknowledging precedence does not exist.

The asymmetrical reciprocity of gifts figures prominently in the creation and maintenance of hierarchical relations. *Medaxo*, or big person, customarily provides *mepevi*, or little person, with material wealth, most typically in the form of food or money, and in exchange the recipient offers labor, loyalty, and praise. The material wealth proffered can take a variety of forms, including capital for small businesses. Saving money for oneself is a morally charged affair, for according to Beninese perspectives it deprives one's dependents of greatly needed resources. Entrepreneurs thus seek out wealthy patrons for starting capital, that is, conforming to rather than going against the general hierarchical contours of daily social life. Successful client entrepreneurs provide their patrons with labor and consultation, and in the even that their patron enters into politics, typically serve as campaign advisors and volunteers.

Bridewealth offers another example of the asymmetrical reciprocity of gifts. Bridewealth makes marriages socially legitimate, and it is through bridewealth that children born of the union become members of the father's lineage; without it, their lineage membership is open to

contestation. Young men, for whom the costs of bridewealth are typically beyond their means, generally look to patrons to provide the needed resources. In the past, these patrons were often lineage elders who through their provisioning of resources were able to maintain control over junior members; more recently, however, patrons often come from outside the lineage, and their support weakens conventional lineage ties. In exchange, young men perform regular errands for their benefactor, and not uncommonly work their agricultural fields.

Field Experiences

I did not begin my graduate studies focusing on clientelism, corruption, or political legitimacy. These themes rather emerged only over the course of preliminary fieldwork. I had entered the graduate program at the University of Virginia wanting to study the intersection of race and international development aid in Benin, and through the conceptual lens of exchange theory, an interest that had derived from my experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in that country. The more time that I spent with Beninese, however, the more I realized that such a question simply was not important to them, that their concerns and interests lie elsewhere.

Throughout my preliminary fieldwork I noticed a recurring social pattern surrounding international aid: foreign development workers would arrive for assessments, implementations, and evaluations but kept a significant social distance from local people. Interactions were rare and structured from the top down, typically taking the form of formal meetings with set end-times, as personnel were preoccupied with project logistics; foreign personnel left most local interactions, which were open-ended, including awareness-raising campaigns and impact assessments, to brokers, who were comprised of local people with college educations often earned abroad and experience in international development. The really fascinating insight into

these brokers came after the conclusion of foreign aid projects: brokers often spun their narratives of such projects to greatly enhance the role that they themselves had played in securing the project in the first place. This move garnered brokers significant local attention, which many brokers ultimately used as entrees into politics. My challenge, then, was to understand the social protocols that these brokers followed to make this transition, and what these common moves might say about local lived worlds.

My field research in southern Benin totaled twenty months, divided mostly between Bohicon and Cotonou, the first six of which consisted of preliminary fieldwork divided over the summers of 2009, 2010, and 2011. The final fourteen months, between February 2013 and April 2014, yielded most of my ethnographic data. In February 2013 I moved into a three-family compound in the center of Bohicon, just south of the main market. Local elections had been scheduled for May of that year, and I devoted the majority of my time during the next six months to learning the Fongbe language and following local campaign events in and around Bohicon. I also spent a significant time "hanging out" with the two families in my housing compound and with various neighbors on my block, mostly in order to practice Fongbe. The national government postponed local elections on an almost monthly basis, ultimately holding them in June 2014, well after I had left the country. As the announcements for these delays came month by month, local candidates continued to campaign, which gave me countless opportunities to attend local rallies. My general efforts to embed myself were successful, as I was able to replace French with Fongbe in most of my daily interactions, I managed to attend over a dozen campaign rallies and stump speeches, and I established rapport with Paul Gbehou, who would become my closest collaborator and mentor.

Two developments in August 2013 fundamentally changed my fieldwork. First, my spoken Fongbe had reached a level that raised significant concern among local people and caught the attention of authorities, a source of tension further heightened due to my clear interest in local politics. At the time, Beninese President Yayi Boni was attempting to change the constitution to remove the two-mandate limit, and a sense of general distrust and unease permeated the country. Also, as Paul Gbehou explained, the revelations of WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, and Chelsey Manning had stimulated the imaginations of Beninese officials and ordinary people alike. In August I inadvertently invited the attention of a group that identified itself as the Beninese Secret Police, who suspected me of being an agent of the CIA and interrogated me in a government field office outside of Benin. After this grilling I both reduced the amount of Fongbe that I spoke on a daily basis and kept a low profile regarding campaign events.

This suspicion and official scrutiny were an unanticipated and at the time a somewhat devastating development, as my original focus on politics no longer seemed tenable. But, as is often the case with fieldwork, this development was in retrospect quite serendipitous. With no other options open to me at the time, my neighbors and the families in my housing compound, all of whom knew me quite well by that point, became my main and sometimes only collaborators. Although I did not realize it at the time, it was during several months of intimate daily activity—cooking, washing clothes, working with my neighbors in their fields, working on our motorcyles, listening to their commentary as we watched both Ivoirian music videos and dubbed Mexican soap operas—that I began to see the sheer ubiquity of clientelistic relationality in lived Beninese worlds, a fact that I explore in depth in Chapter Four.

As the end of 2013 approached, I was able to resume my study of political campaigns by patiently forming close relationships with a small number of local political candidates. It was during the months of October and November 2013 that I followed Paul Gbehou closely in his candidacy for local city council.

My situation changed fundamentally yet again in January 2014, when Paul died suddenly in circumstances that clearly suggested political assassination. At the time I was unable to understand Paul's death or what it meant for my own safety in the country. My fieldwork became increasingly precarious, as multiple high-level officials began to openly accuse me of CIA-affiliation, not a secure position in a country jealous of its autonomy on a global stage dominated by the United States. Despite these difficulties I had planned to stay in the country until July 2014. But, as my standing in official circles continued to deteriorate rapidly, I decided to leave the country in early April, leaving three chapters of my planned dissertation lacking critical data. I was, however, able to compile enough information to write two chapters of field data, which I present at the end of this dissertation, following a theory chapter, a literature review, and a chapter covering local history, which I briefly outline below.

Organization of this Dissertation

I divide this dissertation into five chapters, followed by a concluding statement. In chapter one I explore the contributions of both anthropology and political science to theories of political legitimacy and corruption, which I consider to be two sides of the same coin; one cannot study one without studying the other. I begin the chapter by teasing out inconsistencies regarding standard Western understandings of corruption as evidenced in publications by the World Bank and Transparency International, and argue that people determine corrupt acts according to

culturally-derived moral intuition. I then turn to political legitimacy by examining the respective cultural backgrounds of the three foundational contract theorists—Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—and argue that despite their universalizing pronouncements, each theorist proposes a notion of political legitimacy consistent with their particular cultural-derived intuitions. I finish the chapter by arguing that ordinary people and political theorists alike think of political legitimacy, and by extension corruption, according to cultural intuition and not explicitly rational calculation.

In chapter two I review the anthropology of clientelism literature and argue that although anthropologists initially studied clientelism holistically and relativistically and thereby portrayed such practices in local and often positive terms, subsequent anthropologists gradually abandoned these insights in favor of a pathologizing Western gaze. Influenced by political scientists studying clientelism, anthropologists came to adopt what I call a *clientelism-as-corruption* paradigm, one that disregards local contexts in favor of a normative and universalizing valuation of Western democratic governance. In this dissertation I propose reinstating the holism and relativism of earlier anthropological studies of clientelism.

In chapter two I review the history of present-day southern Benin. I trace the emergence of what I term *gift-clientelism* in the local coherence of small-scale lineage villages, where *toxosu*, or village heads, oversaw a redistributive moral economy based on wealth-in-people and operating according to the dialectic of the belly and the head. These small lineage villages grew over time to form the larger village confederations that enter the historical record in the sixteenth century as the polities of Allada and Hueda, due in part to increased trade with European merchants, a thrust of commercialization to which the small-scale gift-clientelism model could accommodate. Instability grew. Later, in the eighteenth century, the rapid growth of the

transatlantic slave trade led to local slave raiding and regular warfare that overwhelmed the small-scale communities, while simultaneously giving rise to the military regime of Dahomey. Following Gregory (1982), I argue that Dahomey's well-known state innovations in state bureaucracy, military organization, and also state rituals, all reflect a larger shift from the pre-existing local governing model of gift-clientelism to an ever-expanding commodity-clientelism among strangers, one marked by personal accumulation, independence, and quantity of relationships, specifically subjects, slaves, and wives of the ruler. Dahomey, I claim, based its claims to legitimacy on the local governing framework of local gift-clientelism modified according to the commodity logic of the transatlantic slave trade. Contemporary Beninese politics is heir to this overlay of commodity logic of exchanges among strangers on a maintained economy of gifting among obligated familiars.

In chapter three I examine and articulate present-day gift-clientelism in southern Benin, based again on a local moral economy of asymmetrically reciprocal gift exchange, as evidenced in daily social practices including greetings, manners of dress, general body comportment, childrearing, and the courting of mates. This moral economy of gift-clientelism forms the ultimate referent for the creation and maintenance of local social relations and appraisals of ordinary daily behavior.

In chapter four I argue that it is in implicit reference to the daily social practices of gift-clientelism described in chapter three that Beninese make their evaluations of local political candidates. Voters look for political figures and institutions that seem to best reflect the social practices and logics of gift-clientelism that inform their own daily lives. Determining political legitimacy, I claim in this chapter, is a largely intuitive process that is tightly interwoven with local histories, cultural practices, and their attending logics. In this chapter I follow the political

campaign of Paul Kenou, the local high school teacher who launched this introduction. Kenou, in his mastery of local political dynamics, brings into stark relief the enduring tension, originally derived from the commercializing innovations of the Dahomey kingdom, between the moral economy of gift-clientelism operative in daily social life and the commodity-clientelism that structures political life.

In the conclusion I offer some culminating reflections on this dissertation and this research.

Chapter One:

The Anthropology of Clientelism: A Literature Review

In order to understand Beninese perspectives regarding clientelism, one must first come to terms with Western preconceptions concerning the clientelistic framework. As I attempted to demonstrate in the introduction, the anthropology of corruption literature overcomes Western biases by emphasizing local understandings of corruption. One finds a similar move in the early period of the anthropology of clientelism, from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s: stressing local, culturally derived understandings, anthropologists replaced conventional Western understandings of clientelism as corruption with characterizations of a legitimate political framework. Starting in the 1970s, however, the anthropology of clientelism shifted towards a pejorative consensus with political science and economics, coming to see clientelism as a corruption of legitimate Western-style democracy. Before one can study clientelism in southern Benin on Beninese terms, one must first account for this shift from relativistic assessments to judgmental absolute standards of Western ideals—disregarding practiced—as universal.

Today many Western scholars hold a number of preconceptions regarding clientelism, sufficiently consistent to form a paradigm that must be articulated and evaluated before an ethnographic experience centered on patrons and clients can be analyzed comprehendingly. If it is true that "the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds" (Kuhn 1970:149), then it is only by identifying the predominant paradigm in explicit terms can one move outside of it. To that end, this chapter reviews the anthropology of clientelism literature from its beginnings in the early 1960s to the mid 2010s. I also incorporate an analysis of the political science clientelist literature, as it has had a profound effect on anthropology.

Writing about clientelism in an anthropological frame—that is, in holistic and relativistic terms—is difficult to do in early twenty-first century academia, for there exists a widely shared set of negative assumptions regarding the phenomenon. For many scholars, clientelism is synonymous with undeserved favoritism, inequality, exclusion, social stratification, the abuse of elites, democratic dysfunction, and perhaps most of all, corruption. Whether in political science, economics, law, public policy, development studies, or anthropology itself, clientelism most typically signifies an abnormality, an impediment, in short, an obstacle to overcome.

Why is this so? Why is it that scholars—many anthropologists included—have come to view clientelism in such negative terms? Such a question becomes particularly motivated when considering the holism, relativism, and lack of condemnation that marked the earliest scholarly examinations of clientelism, those of anthropologists working in Latin America and Southern Europe in the 1960s. In these early contributions to the literature, anthropologists understood clientelism quite successfully according to the perspectives of local participants, framing the interrelations of patrons and clients in reference to local religions, kinship, and economic organization. The contrast with the universalizing and judgmental tendencies of more recent scholarship is striking. What, then, happened in the intervening years?

To account for this shift in the anthropology of clientelism literature, I stress two historical developments. First, I argue that anthropologists initiated the study of clientelism in the early 1960s and according to the relativism and holism that together make for insightful cultural analyses. By the 1970s, political scientists had begun to make their own contributions, and in such high numbers that they soon came to dominate the subject in wider interdisciplinary conversations. The universalizing nature of democratic modeling central to the discipline of political science necessarily elided the relativistic emphasis that had made early anthropological

studies compelling. In this way, the normative gaze of Western democratic theory recast clientelism as a pathology, a deficiency, a general disorder.

Second, I argue that as anthropologists studying clientelism geographically expanded beyond Latin America and Southern Europe, first to Asia and subsequently to sub-Saharan Africa, they shifted away from the holistic emphasis of earlier contributors. By the 1970s, Asianist anthropologists had begun studying clientelism, as had Europeanists and Americanists a decade prior, and yet their understandings were quite narrow compared to their predecessors, as their inquiries were limited to *political* clientelism, thereby disregarding clientelistic practices in economics, religion, and family organization.

Starting in the late 1970s, anthropologists and political scientists alike began to study clientelism on the African continent, a place that for Western observers has long served as an "absent object," a lack, a failing, and an evolutionary predecessor to a more advanced West (Mbembe 2001:2; see also Ferguson 2006:2). In short, as scholars expanded the geographical application of clientelism beyond Latin America and Southern Europe, first to Asia and then to Africa, the general scholarly perception of clientelism accumulated a number of negative connotations that had little to do with the subject itself.

This nonholistic narrowing of scope to clientelism in politics, coupled with the universalizing (read anti-relativistic) tendencies of political science, led to what I term the *clientelism-as-corruption* paradigm. These later developments to scholarship pertaining to clientelism—the robust entry of political science and the geographic expansion to Asia and Africa—transformed the anthropological study of clientelism from an illuminating application of holism and relativism to a misrepresentation focused on the universal application of Western democratic norms. Such a transformation prevents the development of academic understandings

in line with the experiences of local people whose political experiences but also daily lives are structured according to clientelistic logics.

The Anthropology of Clientelism: A Review

I begin this review with a basic definition. Clientelism refers to patron-client relationships, regarding which virtually all scholars agree on three basic characteristics: they exist between actors of unequal socio-economic status, are based on asymmetrical reciprocity, and are maintained by informal and often face-to-face interactions as opposed to formal, legal proceedings (Foster 1963; Boissevain 1966; Wolf 1966; Weingrod 1968; Scott 1972; Lemarchand and Legg 1972; Barnes 1986). Patrons are positioned higher in local social hierarchies and offer basic, tangible, and readily available goods to clients such as food, access to infrastructure, medical assistance, and money. Clients are lower in those same social hierarchies and offer, at some later date, less tangible goods such as loyalty, public praise, and labor.

Beyond these basic parameters, however, there exists little scholarly agreement in the literature, particularly concerning efficiency, social justice, and morality. Such disagreements, I argue, have less to do with ethnographically observed differences and more to do with differences among disciplinary optics, general intellectual and political trends within the academy, and unstated regional preconceptions. Since the 1970s, the scholarly portrayal of clientelism in Africa has largely been synonymous with corruption, among both political scientists and anthropologists. But again, this basic equation was not always the case; rather it emerged as a social fact well after scholars had begun studying clientelism in other places. Indeed, much of the early contributions to this literature came from anthropologists working in Europe, Latin America, and later Asia. At no point during this early period, roughly 1961 to

1975, did the notion of corruption come up. It was not until political scientists, many of them working in Africa, added their voices to the conversation that clientelism acquired its association with corruption. In order to understand clientelism in present-day southern Benin and on Beninese terms, I argue, one must unravel these historically misplaced scholarly associations.

The anthropology of clientelism first emerged in the early 1960s with the pioneering work of George Foster (1961, 1963). Although a dedicated structural-functionalist, Foster found the existing literature insufficient in describing social realties in his field site of Tzintzuntzan, a village in rural Mexico. Whereas Fortes (1949, 1953) and Evans-Pritchard (1940, 1951) had long since established a general theory of unilineal descent groups through their work on the African continent, Foster found relatively few theoretical generalizations about bilateral kinship systems, despite clear commonalities between the works of Pitt-Rivers (1955) and Kenny (1960) in Spain, Banfield in Italy (1958), and his own experiences in Mexico, sufficient to contrast them all with closed African corporate-unit groups.

To facilitate the development of a general theory of what he called the European Mediterranean type, Foster proposed a model: outside the nuclear bilateral family, adults organized social relationships by means of informal dyadic relationships based on reciprocal obligations. Foster identified two principal types. Colleague contracts horizontally bound people of equal socioeconomic status through the symmetrical exchanges of the same kinds of goods and services; patron-client contracts vertically bound people of significantly different socioeconomic status through the asymmetrical exchange of complementing kinds of goods and services. Between these two types of dyadic relationships, Foster argued, one could make sense of social organization both in Europe and in Latin America. While the colleague contract offered little new to Weberian social scientists, his notion of the patron-client contract, presented in

terms of exchange, was both innovative and immanently applicable.

Foster's patron-client model burst onto the anthropological scene as a regional model meant to understand social organization in Europe and Latin America as anomalous, compared to democratic contract theory and liberal economic markets, all premised on individuated autonomous decision-makers. Within only a few years, anthropologists had put his model to work in Spain (Kenny 1962), Greece (Campbell 1964), Italy (Silverman 1965; Schneider 1969; Brögger 1971), Malta (Boissevain 1966), and Brazil (Greenfield 1968; 1972). This early work was unified not just in terms of region but also by theme, specifically, holism and relativism.

Holism was a widely shared approach in these early accounts. Among the Sarakatsani of rural Greece, Campbell (1964) demonstrated that while the social logic of patronage structured local experiences of politics, so too did it characterize kinship and economic networks. In Malta, Boissevain (1966) showed that changes in the political and economic structure effected parallel changes in religious beliefs and behaviors. In rural Sicily, Schneider (1969) argued that although emigration had reduced both the size and number of large estates that had anchored clientelistic social patterns in the nineteenth century, the same social directly informed newly emergent practices that were less hierarchical and more fluid than in the past. The patronage system as it existed in the nineteenth century was gone, not because clients had wholly abandoned patrons but rather because "it is increasingly possible for nearly everyone to play the patron's role from time to time, albeit in much more limited and temporary spaces" (Schneider 1969:111). Clientelism, it was clear from these early ethnographies, could not be understood solely as a political phenomenon; rather, a consideration of other spheres of social life proved essential in properly contextualizing these practices.

Tied to this stress on holism in this early literature was another classic and essential anthropological theme, that of relativism. Throughout this early literature, anthropologists went to great lengths to describe local clientelist relationships in their local contexts, providing detailed portraits of everyday relationships between patrons and clients. In rural Spain, Kenny (1960) argued that local people widely understood the figure of the *patrón* not just in practical or instrumental terms but also as a religious and familial figure whose presence facilitated the structuring of Spanish families after the Christian Holy Family. Kenny stressed that in Spain, patron-client ties were created through the widely adopted institution of godparenthood, a "cherished spiritual relationship" for local people (Kenny 1960:15). In Central Italy, Silverman (1965) presents a vivid account of the *mezzadria* relationship, in which agricultural laborers would work the fields of a local landlord in exchange for protection from rival landlords. Silverman explicitly extended Foster's dyadic relationship to the respective families of both parties, portraying the solidarity and shared sentiment that reveal these relationships to be far more than merely instrumental. For her informants, the logic of clientelism had clearly moral connotations. Wolf (1966), in a careful exploration of the many variations of patron-client relationships found in different regions in the world, stresses the importance of understanding both local kinship organization and political structure in order to properly contextualize particular clientelistic forms.

Geopolitically speaking, these early scholars argued almost unanimously that clientelism was morally, economically, and politically well suited to rural, non-industrialized face-to-face communities. It was also, however, functional in that it could serve to connect these rural spaces to larger, urban spaces, which included both economic centers and sites of state administration (Boissevain 1966; Powell 1970; Silverman 1967; Weingrod 1968, 1974; Wolf 1966). Clientelism

could thus account not only for the predominant types of relationships between rural landlords and their clients, relationships replete with social and religious meaning, but through political brokerage this framework could also describe relations between these peripheral communities and political or economic centers (see White 1980 for a discussion).

In this initial stage of clientelist studies in anthropology, all of the authors presented clientelism most essentially as a relational motif that stretched far beyond politics to pervade family dynamics, religious practices, and economic structures. It was only in the context of these many different non-political spheres of local life that clientelism was thinkable and, by extension, morally justifiable. Holism and relativism were in this way really two sides of the same coin. Despite this crucial aspect to the anthropological insights of Foster's early model, this holism-relativism complementarity in the scholarly literature would not remain intact for long.

So compelling were these early anthropological works on clientelism that by the 1970s, anthropologists working in Asia had begun to apply the model to their own ethnographic data (Mayer 1967; Scott 1972; Musgrave 1972; Ike 1972; Landé 1977; Attwood 1974; Breman 1974), despite Foster's original argument that it was the cultural specificities shared by Latin and Mediterranean populations that warranted a new model in the first place. The pull, as James Scott (1972) would explain, was that Western theories of political organization had until that time largely relied on two unsatisfactory models of association and conflict: the horizontal class model familiar to Marxists, and the vertical 'primordial' model that derived large-scale conflicts from differences in language, religion, or ethnicity. The horizontal class model, Scott noted, was simply not applicable to many groups, whether rural-based populations or nonindustrial countries; whereas the vertical primordial model could seem to explain only conflict, leaving cooperation unexplained. Patron-client relationships, which offered a bottom-up explanation for

social integration, independent of yet often working in conjunction with formal state organization, had ready explanatory appeal.

Early Asianist contributions to the anthropology of clientelism literature maintained the relativistic approach of previous scholarship. For instance, in the Philippines, Scott's (1972) relativistic understanding of clientelism was very much in line with what others had reported in Europe. Community social norms and the sanctions for breaking them were crucial; "the power imbalance," Scott writes, "is not so great as to permit a pure command relationship" (Scott 1972:93). Stressing a relativist stance, Scott wrote that "while a patron and client are very definitely alive to the instrumental benefits of their association, it is not simply a neutral link of mutual advantage. On the contrary, it is often a durable bond of genuine mutual devotion that can survive severe testing" (ibid, 94).

So too did other anthropologists generally appreciate clientelistic models on their subjects' own social and moral terms. In India, Breman (1974) described the historical changes by which the Hali patronage system, better known by its northern Indian term *Jajmani*, dissolved just as a global capitalist system, facilitated by westernized urban elites, transformed local agricultural relations from a face-to-face clientelistic system of reciprocal obligations to a impersonal system of wage labor. Following in the spirit of Dumont (1966), Breman portrayed an Indian social system not in Western terms of stratification but rather in local terms of hierarchy. Musgrave (1972) closely articulated the complex relationships between landlords in Oudh Province, their tenants, the British Raj, the unfolding of nineteenth-century Indian history, and the continued appreciation of hierarchical social forms despite ongoing abuse by the local British colonial officials.

This emergent Asianist literature on clientelism did, however, narrow in scope—from a fully holistic view of Europeanists a decade earlier to a more selective preoccupation with *political* clientelism—and this understanding would soon be found elsewhere. With the exception of Breman (1974), all of the Asianist contributors to the anthropology of clientelism focused exclusively on formally political practices, thereby abandoning the social contexts in which those political practices occurred. Writing about the patron-client model in the Philippines, Scott (1972) attempted "to demonstrate its applicability to political action in Southeast Asia," implicitly disregarding the model's applicability to kinship organization, religious life, or economic practices. Attwood, working in India, went further to encourage this narrowed scope as a needed rethinking of the very concept of patronage. He writes, "We can begin by redefining patronage (in a processual sense this time) as the extension through informal, face-to-face contacts of resources acquired through state-sponsored systems in return for public support" (1974:236). For Asianist anthropologists, studying clientelism exclusively meant studying political clientelism, that is, involving a state.

This politicizing move was already a significant departure from Foster's original kinship model, which was meant to explain societies without an effective state. "We must not," Wolf (1966:1) had affirmed, "confuse the theory of state sovereignty with the facts of political life." Indeed, as Campbell's portrayal of Sarakatsani herders in rural Greece had demonstrated, patronage systems could go a long way in describing how some people could live *without* a state system. Although Scott (1977; 2010) would go on to contribute greatly to scholarly understandings of stateless people, most other anthropologists studying clientelism went in the

opposite direction, portraying clientelism with an exceedingly narrow, and thus decontextualized, political scope.[5]

Already by the early 1970s, a mere decade after Foster first introduced his clientelist model, its use by anthropologists had narrowed to formal political spheres. Like all conceptual models, clientelism is a constructed heuristic bound by the epistemological assumptions of its many contributors to its construction, as opposed to a flawlessly floating objective representation of lived social worlds. Foster had named his patron-client framework 'the European Mediterranean model,' intending for it to be applied to southern Europe but also Latin American countries of Mediterranean heritages, such as his own field site in Mexico. Anthropologists working in Asia nonetheless found his model readily applicable to their field sites. Although their studies would maintain the relativism of earlier contributions, they nonetheless marked a decided shift away from holism. With a few exceptions that I will cover later in this review, this shift has not wavered in the forty years since that time.

Despite this emergent shortcoming of clientelist research in Asia, clientelism has come to exhibit a lasting staying power in anthropology, with the disciplines of sociology, political science, economics, and public policy implementing it subsequently as their explanatory frameworks. Driving this sustained utility is the on-the-ground, ethnographically driven evidence of clientelist studies. Wherever one goes, it seems, there clientelism is, but not as a model projected from outside; asymmetrical dyadic exchanges do indeed seem to occur everywhere (Lemarchand and Legg: 1972:149; Landé 1983:440; Omobowale 2008). For disciplines that either constantly wrestle with the risk of projecting Western, modernist assumptions onto the rest

[5] One cannot escape a certain sense of irony on this point, for after all, political anthropology first emerged as a sub-discipline by demonstrating the ways in which people living without a formal state could nonetheless organize their social lives by myth, kinship, and other alternatives to Western governance (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1940; Leach 1954).

of the world, or ignore such risks to their epistemological peril, the attraction of clientelism is readily apparent.

At this time, in the early 1970s, political scientists began to use the anthropological model of patron-client relationships to account for observed political behavior in the field. Like anthropologists working in Asia, political scientists used this model not in its original sense—as a kinship model that could work without sovereignty in a variety of contexts, even those independent of a state—but rather as a political model to analyze the sphere of formal state politics. The combined efforts of political scientists and Asianist anthropologists more or less permanently reconfigured Foster's kinship model as a political model meant to understand formally organized states.

For political scientists, Foster's patron-client model—informal political alliances articulated by ethnographers analyzing interpersonal relations—solved two problems at once. On the one hand, it offered a model of activity that seemed applicable to countries everywhere (Lemarchand and Legg 1973:149). Throughout the 1960s, within the discipline of political science,

> a major objective sought by the comparatavists at the time was the development of a framework and categories that were universally valid so as to permit comparison of all types of historical and contemporary political systems irrespective of scale, structure, or the cultural matrix within which they are found (Coleman and Halisi 1983:40).

Clientelism, particularly of the narrow political type suggested by Asianist anthropologists, seemed to offer such a framework. Already by the end of the decade, Roth (1968) had proposed using the clientelism model to analyze the new, so-called "developing" states. Political scientists thus incorporated an anthropological model, but not as alternative frame to their primary unit of

analysis, the nation-state, but rather as a pathology of that unit. Foster's patron-client model of kinship now seemed to allow for universal comparisons of informal (and problematized) political activity in order to better understand, and as a science, formal politics.

On the other hand, political scientists were drawn to what they understood to be the methodology of anthropologists—ethnography—as a way of studying politics "well below the level of national politics and examining the way these interactions aggregate into more complex political systems" (Kaufman 1974:284). Starting with face-to-face interactions, Kaufman went on to argue, clientelism could offer a way not only to understand entire nations and then compare them to other nations, but could also complement preexisting frameworks, such as dependency theory (ibid, 286).

The problem was that political scientists, in their rush toward a universal comparativist model, had mistaken nineteenth-century ethnology for twentieth century ethnography. Ethnology, of the kind Frazer (1890) would recognize, in which scholars collected and recontextualized cultural practices according to their own cultural perspectives in order to compare them to one another, was widely understood to be essential for political scientists as they lacked the conceptual tools to build theories by weaving together local experiences from a number of different places without decontextualizing those experiences.

And yet this move, a clear epistemological mistake in the eyes of anthropologists, was crucial for the larger purposes of political scientists. Writing about the first decade of clientelistic studies performed by political scientists, Landé (1983:438) lamented that "Another shortcoming of such models is that each of them is designed to fit a specific country and therefore is of little use for the study of other political systems or for the development of a typology of political systems." Among political scientists at the time, there seemed to exist little appreciation for

either holism or relativism, the very attributes of Foster's kinship model that had proved so fruitful in Europe a decade earlier, which seemed to pose an ongoing frustration when it seemed to pop up (see Lemarchand and Legg 1972:149). Political science had come to use an anthropological model but at clear cross-purposes with itself.

Significant problems arose with political scientists' use of an anthropological model, and from the beginning. Not only had political scientists long searched for a universal theory of political organization, but they had further oriented this search towards explaining the emergence of Western-style democracy, the implicit *telos* of much twentieth-century Western political thought. In an early article, Powell (1970:423) offered clientelism as a way to understand the teleological transition from authoritarianism to democracy, writing that "clientelist patterns of interpersonal behavior may be a significant factor in the process of peasant politicization everywhere." Lemarchand and Legg (1972) elaborated on clientelism as a transitional process, distinguishing between "traditionalistic clientelism" and "modernizing clientelism," the former consisting of a single ruler redistributing largess, the latter demonstrating a wide range of patrons "by no means confined to the political sector" (ibid, 167). In a counter-intuitive though seductively simple framework, the continued diffusion of patron-roles ultimately leads away from the abuses and excesses of intransigent tradition and towards a comfortably familiar destiny:

> The dominant trend in modernizing-patrimonial systems is clearly in the direction of a greater variety of clientage networks, a diversification of transactions, and a greater precariousness in the incumbency of patron-client roles. At the point where demands previously met through personalized clientage networks are met predominantly through the economic system or by universal governmental action, the stage of the industrial polity has been reached *(ibid, 168)*.

Political scientists had, in this way, appropriated an anthropological model but not before pruning it of both complexity and alterity in order to make it fit a prefabricated modernist teleology. It seemed to matter little that the authors failed to cite a single case in which a country had followed such a path to a modern state, or that, as the authors themselves acknowledged, actually distinguishing between such supposed types "is highly arbitrary" (ibid, 168). Clientelism, political scientists decided, had a new and prominent role to play in the emergence of political theories meant to explain the inevitable transition to Western-style democracy.

Early contributors to this highly-normative political science literature quickly set about studying virtually every possible way in which clientelism could facilitate the march towards Progress. Powell (1970:171) saw clientelism as a "rural problem-solving system," that is, as a mechanism by which rural people weathered the storms of abrupt political change for which they were largely unprepared. Lemarchand (1972) advocated the use of clientelism as a valuable heuristic to explain the apparent incompatibility between ethnicity and nation-building, as in fact, ethnicity was often the means for participation (by parties) in national politics. Lemarchand and Legg (1973) pondered whether clientelism could actually facilitate economic development. Jackson (1973) argued quite cogently that clientelist categories of patron and client, as opposed to Western categories of urban and rural, or Marxist class distinctions of capitalist and worker, were what actually structured African societies, and that both economic development and nation-building schema would proceed only by diligently working through such particularities.

These early contributions were consistently neutral regarding the ethical acceptability of clientelist practices in a formal political sphere, avoiding the explicit relativism of early anthropological studies but also making no universalist judgment. For these scholars, what mattered was *understanding* clientelism as an alternative to democratic individualism.

Lemarchand (1972), for instance, went to great lengths to develop an entire categorical framework for clientelism, subcategorizing various arrangements as patrimonial, feudal, mercantile, or saintly. For political scientists of the time, it was apparent that their existing comparativist models, whether of political elites, religions, ethnicities, or of course, nation-states, were insufficient to describe lived complexities encountered on the ground. Clientelism, developed through the anthropological method of ethnography, offered precisely what was missing for political scientists: a logic of common, everyday social practice that could expand from small rural communities to capital cities, from ordinary people to government elites.

And yet, despite these promising beginnings, the specificities of political scientists' reconfigured notion of clientelism, as not only an embedded social system of consequence only through its political aspects, also as a useful precursor to modern democratic governance in all times and in all places, rather inevitably recast the actual places where researchers documented clientelism as backward. If clientelism represented a step towards democracy, the flip side of the coin was that it also was a step *behind* democracy, as a flawed precursor to legitimate Western-style governance. Nowhere did this teleological and nationalist implication find more expression than among political scientists working on the African continent.

The earliest political scientific uses of the clientelistic framework to places in Africa were exploratory, diagnostic, and ethically neutral. This general tone would, however, soon change. Whereas Lemarchand and Jackson initially seemed preoccupied with the inner workings of clientelist redistribution, the conceits of their modernist preconceptions would inevitably lead to normative judgments and condemnations. Lemarchand (1972) encouraged research into clientelism primarily because the framework promised to explain the transitional process from traditional to modern patterns of political behavior, thereby situating clientelism squarely within

(and more towards the evolutionary beginnings of) Democratic Transition Theory. For Jackson (1973:392), the flip-side of the coin was to be stressed, as for him political clientelism appealed to leaders who somehow "had not perceived the possibility or advantage of joint political action," a perspective rather striking in its patronizing overtones. Quite clearly for Jackson, the obstacles faced by modernizing African political elites derived not from the colonial heritage of postcolonial governmental forms, nor from haphazard colonial drawing of borders, nor from the economic neocolonialism lamented by Nkrumah, nor the machinations of Cold-War politics, but rather from a purported intellectual deficiency of the political elites themselves, of which political clientelism was a leading expression.

Perhaps the best illustration of this evaluative dismissal in the literature comes from Victor Le Vine. In his book *Political Corruption: The Ghana Case*, Le Vine (1975) goes to great lengths to describe post-independence Ghana as a "culture of political corruption." In tracing the development of so profound a defect, Le Vine points to informal political networks, particularly patron-client reciprocities, that over time had become so well established as to constitute what he calls an informal polity, or parapolitical system. He writes, "By the time the informal polity develops, political corruption is already so widespread that a culture of political corruption clearly exists as a prior condition" (ibid, 9). An informal polity, Le Vine goes on to explain, "is difficult to describe precisely because, unlike the formal polity, it tends to be structurally amorphous and constantly changing… the network of relationships in the informal polity functions on a largely pragmatic, *ad hoc* basis" (ibid, 9). Such informal polities and what he construes as the corruption that they encourage, Le Vine warns, risk destroying the legitimacy of the state and thereby condemning Ghana to disastrous investments, the wasting of resources, and ultimately, political instability.

However, others soon offered alternative ways to understand what Le Vine means by informal polity. In an article published the same year, political scientist Peter Ekeh (1975) recasts formal polities and informal polities as, respectfully, civic publics and primordial publics. The primordial public, closely associated with social groupings and activities, naturally "operates on the same moral imperatives as the private realm" (ibid, 92). It is to this public that African people ascribe political legitimacy and thus owe their allegiances. Civic publics, by contrast, are composed of the personnel working through formal structures of government, but they do not serve as the foundations of legitimate governance, as political scientists uniformly presumed in the West. Ekeh points out that for postcolonial African states, civic publics are constituted by formal bureaucratic apparatuses originally established by European colonial governments, which based their legitimacy in ruling over African populations by both racist ideologies and physical violence (see Chabal 1992:172, Mbembe 2001). Due to this historical association, "the civic public in Africa is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public" (ibid, 92). Contra Le Vine, Ekeh argues that African citizens view the civic public, that is, formal government, as a bountiful resource to be exploited in order to meet the moral demands of the primordial public of which they are members.

For Ekeh, then, it is not local culture that is corrupt and thus threatening to government but rather the other way around. Oddly enough, Le Vine would actually come a bit closer to such a realization than his book might suggest. In a subsequent article, while describing the thoroughly clientelistic nature of informal African politics, he writes that "There is, of course, nothing particularly new in this pattern; in the African context of zero-sum politics, [clientelism] has almost the force of a moral imperative" (Le Vine 1980:662). Precisely, Ekeh might say.

Unfortunately, Le Vine did not pursue the implications of his own statement, nor did most political scientists working on the African continent.

Le Vine's treatment of clientelism as a symptom of a corrupt local culture might have been stark, but he was far from alone in his view. While Chodak (1973:413) clearly acknowledges that clientelism was "congruent with traditions such as relations of reciprocity, of sharing, of mutual help…" he nonetheless clings to his absolutist moorings by concluding that "in granting political offices, scholarships, licenses and credit to his clients, the patron breeds nepotism, favoritism, corruption, and injustice." Such hostility would prove to be the closest that most political scientists would come to appreciating Ekeh's fundamental insight. Ekeh's cogent analysis, with its holistic reading of colonial and postcolonial African history and relativistic orientation, Ekeh's cogent analysis directly opposed a potent and widespread ideological force.

By the 1980s, the normative denunciation of African clientelism by political scientists was in full swing (Le Vine 1980; Clapham 1982, 1985; Callaghy 1984, 1987; Jackson and Roseburg 1984; Joseph 1984; Sandbrook 1985; Boyle 1988; Chazan 1988; Bratton 1989). In an early contribution to what would serve as the foundation for the clientelism-as-corruption paradigm, Landé repositioned clientelism away from the illuminating heuristic proposed as recently as ten years earlier by anthropologists and political scientists alike, to a clear pathology. Subsuming clientelism under personal rule, Landé lamented:

> Personal rule is a distinctive type of political system in which the rivalries and struggles of powerful and willful men, rather than impersonal institutions, ideologies, public policies, or class interests, are fundamental in shaping political life. Indicators of personal regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa are coups, plots, factionalism, purges, rehabilitations, clientelism, corruption, succession maneuvers, and similar activities which have been significant and recurring features of political life during the past two decades (1983:421).

Clientelism had, in this way, assumed a fundamentally different meaning for political scientists. Prompted in part by contemporary geopolitical events such as the sustained rise of African dictators, the collapse of commodity markets, and the spread of Soviet influence throughout the continent, this condemnatory trend came to structure the more general understanding of African countries among political scientists, as well as among international policymaking bodies. Africa was becoming the most visible signifier for the paradigm of clientelism-as-corruption.

The decade of the 1980s witnessed a new disciplinal enclaving of the political science of clientelism literature. Political scientists had by this point produced a critical mass of scholarship that then allowed them to largely restrict their conversations to other political scientists (deGrassi 2009:109). Much of this exclusivity, I argue, stemmed from the specific interests of political scientists, namely a bottom-up model of political analysis that could facilitate empirical comparisons between countries. In the midst of this push, Foster's original kinship model fell into relative obscurity. Landé (1983:435) writes that while clientelism "in the 1950s and 1960s was rather marginal in most of the social sciences, [it] has lately burgeoned into a position of central importance." Such a view cannot be too surprising given the methodological critiques made of ethnographers by political comparatavists, and yet it is important to demonstrate not only the vast epistemological disconnect between these two disciplines, but also the dominance that political science had attained by the end of the 1970s, particularly regarding clientelism in Africa. By this time, anthropologists had simply moved on to other subjects, leaving a vacuum that political scientists quickly filled.

Analysis of the political science literature regarding clientelism in Africa finds, again and again, the same obdurate refusal that had compromised Le Vine's understanding of Ghana, to acknowledge an alternative political morality on the continent. In an otherwise insightful

analysis of the difficulties faced by postcolonial African governments in the 1970s and 1980s, Chabal (1992:176) writes that

> …the growth of a thriving patrimonial state further reduced the putative viability of good government. Since the legitimacy of the post-colonial state tended to depend on its capacity for patronage, it was inevitable that patrimonial criteria should prevail over criteria of effectiveness. This in itself may be acceptable insofar as there is a societal consensus on the need for states to be patrimonial. But where patronage becomes a political end, political expediency tends to prevail over good government.

In reading this passage, one might be prompted to ask how can political legitimacy become not just decoupled from the 'viability of good government' but opposed to it, or why patrimonial criteria and criteria of effectiveness cannot be one in the same. If there is indeed a societal consensus that states *need* to be patrimonial, thus implying a moral prescriptive, are we not well beyond such an arrangement being merely *acceptable*?

This ideologically induced interpretive blind spot is, again, widespread in the political science literature regarding Africa. In an erudite discussion of constitutionalism in African states, Amissah worries that

> A social system that requires the more fortunate to take care of the less fortunate, and has an adopted political system that widens the concept of the extended family to include members of a whole supporting constituency, makes it difficult for those in positions of responsibility (and on fixed salaries) to match their obligations with their means; it thereby reduces their resistance to temptations to accept illegal considerations to supplement their salaries. Many persons elected or appointed to high political office have little to fall back on in private life and yet are more conscious of the limitations on their tenure of office and the liability to removal at any time without notice. Add to that plain human greed, and the problem of corruption in public offices reaches unacceptable levels (1986:42).

Here again, one finds the implicit condemnation of practices by local government officials that are clearly incompatible with a Western-style bureaucratic separation of person and office. And yet, much like Le Vine's acknowledgment that this incompatibility "has almost the force of a moral imperative," one can find in Amissah's description a recognition of what is obviously an alternative notion of political morality. And yet, seemingly unsettled by the mere possibility of cultural relativism, Amissah closes ranks by appending, however abruptly, "plain human greed" at the end of his description to ensure that his ideologically driven problematizing holds. Here again, one finds the hegemony of a universalized clientelism-as-corruption paradigm stifling alternative interpretations.

At this point one might well wonder why Western scholars had spent more than a decade demonstrating the great utility of a kinship model conceived by a Latin Americanist and then applied productively to both Europe and Asia, thereby facilitating worthwhile insights into those places, only to then be used as a pathologizing optic to further catalogue the lack of meaningful progress toward idealized Western democratic models in political situations across the African continent. While it is probably the case that such a shift was inevitable, given the decontextualizing effect of narrowing the scope of inquiry to formal political realms, why did such a shift originate among political scientists working in Africa? Had not anthropologists already initiated that shift to an exclusive (read aholistic) concern with *political* clientelism in Asia? Why had this negative view of clientelism not started there?

For a number of Africanist scholars, the answer is unfortunate but familiar. For the entirety of Western history, Africa as an idea has represented disease, savagery, and corruption (Bayart 2009:2; see also Wai 2012). To this day, "'Africa' continues to be described through

lacks and absences, failings and problems, plagues and catastrophes" (Ferguson 2006:2). More specifically, for Mbembe (2001:8):

> African politics and economics have been condemned to appear in social theory only as the sign of a lack, while the discourse of political science and development economics has become that of a quest for the causes of that lack. On the basis of a grotesque dramatization, what political imagination is in Africa is held incomprehensible, pathological, and abnormal.

Political science has certainly played a part in this disavowal of African political experiences. But so too has anthropology (Ferguson 2006:2). The difference, according to Mudimbe (1988:72-73), is that whereas anthropology as a discipline had begun by structuring its knowledge in close parallel to Western modes of existence, thereby understanding human difference in terms of evolution, by the 1920s it had started to at least attempt to conceptualize human differences on their own terms. Foster's kinship model, with its holism and relativism, had set out to do just that, and to great effect, whether in Mexico, Sicily, the Philippines, or India.

Political science, by contrast, has not waivered from its Eurocentric and evolutionist perspective (see Mamdani 1996). And so, with the entry of political science in the 1970s, with both its ethnocentrism and its seeming preoccupation with Africa, effectively rendered clientelism in Africa as an "absent object, an absence that those who try to decipher it only accentuate" (Mbembe 2001:241). So long as political science seeks to make of clientelism a comparativist model that can portray patrons and clients in one country in terms of another, or more accurately, all patrons and clients in the terms of Western-style democratic theory, such studies will

> …repress otherness in the name of sameness, reduce the different to the already known, and thus fundamentally escape the task of making sense of other worlds.

> It is more than a matter of methodological limitations. This limiting ethnocentrism testifies to a kind of epistemological determinism (Mudimbe 1988:72-32).

It was this development in the clientelism literature, from a holistic and relativist exploration of difference to a normative condemnation of it, hastened by entry of political scientists, that has had the most profound effect on the condemnation of deviance from the democratic definition of politics that many subsequent scholarship has implicitly agreed upon when discussing clientelism. For the next several decades, the discipline would steadily expand both its study of clientelism on the African continent and its criticisms of what it studied. Over time, the clientelism-as-corruption paradigm would become so dominant in the literature as to largely become assumed, purportedly accounting for political instability (Berman 2002), warlord violence (Reno 1998), the intensification of crises (Srgyrl 2000), lagging democratization (Diamond & Platter 1999), and failed democratization (Bratton and Van de Walle 1994). Observing this suspiciously broad range of political pathologies, Ottaway (2003) has described clientelism in the literature to be "an ill-defined code word for the political ills of the [African] continent."

Africanist anthropologists, meanwhile, had also begun to consider clientelism on the continent, but their early work did not conform to the consensus among political scientists, that clientelism was merely a pathology of western democratic governance. Indeed, throughout the 1980s, the scholarship of Africanist anthropologists reflected the holism, relativism, and appreciation for non-political contexts that had made clientelism such a useful anthropological model two decades earlier. Cohen (1981), for instance, utilizes the explanatory framework of clientelism to account for the ascendancy of ethnically homogenous Creole elites in Sierra Leone. Magel (1981) provides a rich description of the patronage relationship between Wolof

gewel, or griots, and their *jambur*, or benefactors. Jambur, Magel explains, provide their gewel with often lavish accommodations, good food and fine clothing, and in exchange the gewel publically recite the accomplishments of their patron families, but also serve as moralizing figures who censure their patrons for improper behavior. Essential to Magel's relativistic portrayal of this relationship is an informant's description that builds on Mandinka conceptions of society as a single, living body, in which every member has his or her own function. Barnes (1986) vividly portrays the ways in which people in Mushin, a Lagos suburb, drew on the historical conventions of baba-isale, a local moral framework of patronage to create a polity in the midst of rapid and overwhelming urbanization. As Mushin quickly grew from a cluster of villages to a city of over 1.5 million people, local people consistently drew on *baba-isale* in their pursuit of political power.

By the 1990s, however, anthropologists studying African clientelism would start to agree with the clientelism-as-corruption paradigm (Gilman 2001). This transition among Africanist anthropologists from Foster's original acceptance, and hence understanding, to later contributors' Western normative denunciation can be found perhaps most clearly when comparing the earlier and later writings of Bayart (1993; 1999). Bayart's first major publication, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (1993), applied Braudel's historicist paradigm of *la longue durée* to explain the widespread presence of bribery, gatekeeping, vote buying, and other violations of Western democratic governance in postcolonial African states. These regimes, Bayart argued, followed local conventions in which elites are essentially concerned with securing access to material wealth for their clients. In a political paradigm that Bayart terms "the politics of the belly," ordinary citizens expect their leaders to use their office for private gain, but they expect

them also to redistribute much of what they accumulate by such means. In these instances, Bayart stresses, politics and economics are sometimes indistinguishable from one another.

Bayart's classic work led to a paradigmatic shift, a rethinking of the forces driving post-independence African politics. Like the early contributors to the anthropology of clientelism literature, Bayart stressed local contextualization, in this case historical contextualization, to explain local practices in local terms. Bayart was, however, only partially faithful to Foster's original model of clientelism. On the one hand, the force of Bayart's argument derives from his careful analysis of political history, as he argues that one can only understand postcolonial African nation-states in terms of their shared historical heritage of government and economics, as opposed to the alien terms of their former colonizers. Bayart does not, however, consider African clientelism in holistic terms, that is, he does not incorporate social contexts outside of the formal political sphere, such as courting, childrearing, ancestral worship and other religious practices. Indeed, throughout *The State in Africa*, Bayart seems to perceive this or that African political elite quite exclusively as *homo politicus*, with little if any consideration of non-political contexts.

On the other hand, and more serious still, Bayart remains morally neutral regarding his larger arguments, neither condemning African political activity nor presenting it in a relativistic light (Clapham 1994). At no point does Bayart explicitly state that for African people, what Westerners would condemn as bribery or embezzlement might actually be experienced as moral (even morally obligatory) acts. While this oversight was somewhat minor for the purposes of his first book, the consequences of this shortcoming were strikingly apparent in his second book, which he co-authored a mere six years later.

The Criminalization of the State in Africa (1999), which Bayart co-authored with a historian and a political scientist, examines the further proliferation of bribery, embezzlement of

public funds, and nepotism over the course of the 1990s. In this book, Bayart's avoidance of taking an explicitly relativistic stance concerning his argued *longue durée* of African political forms fundamentally compromises his analysis. Rather than present these practices as occupying a conceptual and moral grey area born of the historical interplay of two fundamentally different socio-moral frameworks, that of Africa and that of the West, Bayart runs roughshod over his analysis by applying the straightforwardly moralizing notion of "criminalization," and solely because such practices violated Western legal standards of behavior. Refusing to adopt a relativistic stance in this way ultimately culminated, perhaps unavoidably, in a morally absolutist position. This failure to fully conceptualize African experiences on African terms was, I argue, indicative that the clientelism-as-corruption paradigm was spreading to much of Africanist anthropology.

Bayart's rejection of anthropological relativism was not so much original as typical of the time period. Richards (1996:51-52), for instance, conceptualizes the Sierra Leonean civil war as the consequence of "a patrimonial state running out of resources (especially resources to support education), emergence of rural slums in diamond districts, and the agrarian failures of an urban—(and mining)—biased development policy." While Richards' emphasis on internal dynamics is quite insightful on its own terms, he nonetheless categorically elides external factors such as Western agricultural subsidies, an unregulated diamond trade, or the aftershocks of structural adjustment, which, along with other countries located throughout the African continent, required Sierra Leone to significantly reduce its social services to its citizens, including education.

Since the 1990s, the clientelism-as-corruption paradigm has gained ascendancy among anthropologists, particularly in Africa. De Smedt (2009), for instance, identifies political

clientelism as a key factor in post-election violence that rattled Kenya in 2007. In an over-simplification of Kenyan post-independence political history, De Smedt proposes a direct causal relationship between clientelist redistribution and political violence, disregarding the multiple examples of political clientelism existing with either no link to violence in the broader literature or with a negative effect on violence (see Arriola 2009).

Despite this preponderance of anthropological scholarship supporting the clientelism-as-corruption paradigm, however, other contributors have produced insightful ethnographic analyses by maintaining the holism and relativism of Foster's original model, producing insightful ethnographic analyses. McCauley (2012), for instance, argues that the clientelist paradigm can account for much of the recent spread of the charismatic Pentecostal movement in Ghana. The emergence of Pentecostal church leaders, McCauley argues, fills a void left by the patrimonial state's inability to provide social welfare while simultaneously emulating its clientelist organization. Charismatic Pentecostal churches can, by following the conventional clientelist logics of ordinary Ghanaian men and women in a new, utopian guise, account for both changing social values tied to the global financial crisis of 2008, and the socially disruptive effects of increasing urbanization. McCauley's compelling argument derives from his holistic examination of clientelist logics on their own terms, as opposed to the incompatible terms of a normative Western bureaucratic framework, as found in much of the political science literature.

Other scholarship has directly contested the clientelism-as-corruption paradigm. In a survey of African governmental organization that directly challenges De Smedt's (2009) assertion regarding the causal link between clientelism and state violence, Arriola (2009) demonstrates that clientelism can actually makes a country *more* stable, not less (see also Médard 1998; 2002). Arriola demonstrates that cabinet enlargement, a practice in which heads of

state invent new cabinet positions to offer to key elites as clients, actually increases both political stability (avoidance of coups and civil wars) as well as extending their tenure in office. Instability and violence, Arriola goes on to argue, derives not from clientelism but from poverty.

Careful, engaged anthropological analyses such as these, which again remain faithful to Foster's holistic and relativistic model, can go further to serve as a corrective to the Western modernist projections so common in the political science literature. For instance, in the wake of the so-called Third Wave of Democratization (Huntington 1993) that swept much of the world in the early 1990s, the topic of civil society became exceedingly popular as researchers carried a Western concept into emergent democratic spaces. In Benin, for instance, political scientist John Heilbrunn lauded civil society for the success of the National Conference, organized to facilitate a transition from a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship to Western-style multiparty democracy. In neighboring Togo, by contrast, civil society was largely absent or at least inert, and thus its own National Conference was not successful.

Contesting this Western modernist portrayal, political scientist Kathryn Nwajiaku (1994) argues that civil-society groups in Benin were formed only in the months that directly preceded the National Conference, and thus could not have had the political effect that Heilbrunn attributes to them. Explaining Togo's failed National Conference, Nwajiaku offers a rather familiar story in pointing to Togolese dictator Gnassingbé Eyadema's cozy relationship with French political and economic elites, interested as they were in the country's bountiful phosphate deposits. Beninese President Matthieu Kérékou, with no such natural resources to extract, had to face the demands of his citizens.

Moreover, in the second round run-off of Benin's inaugural presidential election of 1991, while victor Nicephore Soglo did carry a full 67 per cent of the final vote, 80 per cent of that

number came from the densely populated South, where he was based. Meanwhile, his losing opponent, President Kérékou, received no less than 93 per cent of the votes in the less-populated north, where he was born (Nwajiaku 1994:443). Such results reflected a more general electoral system in which "the most successful candidates appeared to be those with the largest network of clients" (ibid, 443). Despite Kérékou's regional support, Nwajiaku explains that "In 1989, Kérékou's position as head of an effectively bankrupt state, in which the networks of his former patrimonial base had collapsed, meant that he was forced to accept the sovereignty of the Conférence Nationale…" (431). As with many countries supposedly swept up in Huntington's Third Wave, the notion of civil society proved more of a projection from the outside rather than a reality on the ground.

In the specific case of Benin, close ethnographic analysis rather suggests a clientelist system at work. The holistic and relativistic study of clientelism, of the kind that marked the anthropological literature as a whole throughout the 1960s and still, if infrequently, continues today, consistently offers insightful and compelling analyses of the social lived worlds shared by patrons and clients. In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate that both holism and relativism are essential components of applying properly anthropological analyses to clientelism. Eliminating holism, as Asianist anthropologists did in the 1970s, or even implementing it only partially, as did Bayart in the 1990s, leaves unanswered questions about moral appropriateness. Eliminating relativism, as political scientists have done throughout their treatments of clientelism, actively trains a criminalizing optic on the phenomenon. Eliminating both simultaneously essentially disables an understanding of clientelistic practices as understood by the people who practice them.

In the remaining four chapters of this dissertation, I consciously incorporate both holism and relativism in my analysis of clientelism as it exists in Beninese lived worlds, including but not limited to formally political contexts. Following Bayart's *long durée* argument, I first turn to the long documented history of present-day southern Benin, beginning in small-scale settlements and continuing through the rise of the kingdom of Dahomey, the French colonial period, and the post-independence era.

Chapter Two:

History

This chapter examines the long local history of southern Benin as observed by missionaries, travelers, slave traders, colonial governors, and scholars both Beninese and from elsewhere, but also as passed down through oral traditions recounted to me by local specialists over the course of my fieldwork in Abomey, the former capital of Dahomey. Following the example set by anthropologists studying Mediterranean clientelism in the 1960s, I argue that it is only by understanding the local history of southern Benin that one can come to a holistic understanding of contemporary Beninese clientelism.

In this chapter I make two principal arguments regarding Beninese history. First, I claim that the basic relational logic of clientelism has structured Beninese experiences of politics for over three hundred years. Political figures, whether village leaders, rulers, or post-independence government officials, but not colonial governors, have long related to their followers primarily as patrons. Clientelist redistribution has long been how Beninese govern themselves, and it is according to this social and economic convention that contemporary citizens' frame their expectations of government. Clientelist redistribution and not Western-style preoccupation with policy debates constitutes the core of the Beninese experience of politics, and this fundamental difference derives to a significant degree from this particular shared history.

Second, I claim that the position of this fundamental continuity in the larger regional contest has nonetheless changed markedly over time. Following Gregory's (1982) classic distinction between gifts and commodities, I argue that Beninese clientelism is as its core configured according to a gift economy in which reciprocally dependent actors exchange inalienable possessions and thereby create qualitative (read: personal) relationships between

givers and takers, a configuration that emphasized the circulation rather than retention of wealth. What I term *gift-clientelism* originated in small-scale relatively autonomous lineage villages, configured according to a wealth-in-people paradigm in which the generalized future labor capacity of dependent clients constituted the primary store of economic value for patrons. In this lived world, politics, economics, family relations, and ancestral worship were all indistinguishable aspects of the same social totality of community, in which the practical logic of clientelism provided the larger relational frame.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, local political organization in present-day southern Benin elaborated a small-scale village-based model of gift-clientelism: localized hierarchical redistribution and personal, ongoing, face-to-face accountability. Over time, some of these village settlements grew in size and their engagements with one another, responding in part to increasing trade with Europeans. By the late sixteenth century such growth had consolidated in two confederations, Hueda and Allada, amalgams of several different lineages, each lineage representing a semi-autonomous village. Although significantly larger in both population and territory than villages, these confederations supplemented, but did not replace, the continuing underlying political arrangement of lineage villages.

For several decades in the mid-seventeenth century these flexible confederations functioned quite efficiently, meeting local needs for coordination to distribute imported foreign goods and supply commodities that European traders would accept in exchange. And yet, the gift-clientelism relationships through which these confederations operated were incapable of growing beyond the personal interactions that constituted them. The larger that these confederations grew, the less personal interactions could provide for cohesion, and in this way the increasing scale of these confederations increasingly compromised their political viability.

Access to the transatlantic slave trade during this period greatly exacerbated local political instability by superimposing separate and competitive trading relations with European suppliers, allowing some to grow in numbers and wealth faster than others. By the late seventeenth both confederations of lineage villages, configured according to gift-clientelism, were on the verge of collapse.

It was during this time of profound political instability that a new polity, Dahomey, a military regime, emerged in the north and quickly expanded south by conquering and thereby incorporating the confederations of Allada and Hueda and hundreds of their constituent lineage villages. This rapid consolidation followed a modified form of the lineage village model that responded to the stresses of the Atlantic commercial economy successfully by emulating it. Whereas the earlier model had been modulated according to gift-clientelism, the rulers of Dahomey reconfigured this new model according to the operative logic of the Atlantic commercial economy, using massive quantities of imported goods acquired by capturing neighboring people to sell as slaves to the Europeans, to produce a paradoxical political form I call *commodity-clientelism*. Again following Gregory (1982), this new model involved reciprocally independent actors exchanging alienable material possessions, thereby creating quantitative relationships between things, a configuration that rewarded the accumulation of material wealth.

Dahomey's innovation of commodity-clientelism did not replace the gift-clientelism of the lineage village model but rather layered this novel practice and attending logic onto the old. For the military regime itself, commodity clientelism paradoxically represented a means by which it could continue to meet the socio-moral obligations of gift-clientelism despite serious challenges brought by the intrusion of the Atlantic commercial economy, namely the

commodification of dependents, just as Gregory (1982) describes the gold mining economy of Papua New Guinea.

While Dahomeian warlords orchestrated the capture and sale of slaves and distributed the imports to their political clients as a means of claiming legitimacy, in part through claiming royal descent from Allada, and like the semi-autonomous lineage villages and confederations before them redistributing imported material wealth to their clients, Dahomey added a revolutionary element to legitimacy: monetized payment. This innovation, I argue, was the result of local interpretations of the socio-economic forces driving the Atlantic trade. From the perspective of the lineage villages, the Atlantic trade initiated the region into an immoral labor regime through sudden and intense experiences of violence—slave raids and warfare—introduced by new military technologies such as the musket, cannon, and later, rifle. All of this militarization and materialism was driven by an emergent global capitalist economy, itself centered on monetized payment. The Atlantic trade had significantly disrupted the old, face-to-face political model of the lineage village and personalistic networks crisscrossing the region. To absorb the radical overlay of the Atlantic trade, the political regime of Dahomey internalized what it correctly interpreted to be its operative logics, against physical violence and pay-offs.

For a regime founded on slave raiding and dedicated to assimilating populations of dispersed territories through warfare, might meant right, and Dahomey celebrated itself its victories as a militaristic state. Every year, the king of Dahomey added to ceremonial public redistribution the public execution of war captives in mass spectacles of decapitation meant to impress the ruthless violence of its commanders upon both its subjects and enemies. This strategic display of overwhelming violence brought a radically new notion of legitimacy in the region, one that came from local experiences of the transatlantic slave trade.

Equally radical was the notion of political legitimacy through payment. In the Fongbe language, to become a village leader is to "attach one's head," that is, to bring social order to the community internal to it: a literal embodiment. By contrast, to become the powerful, brutal external authority over villages as did the rulers of Dahomey comes rather from the belly; to assume rulership over Dahomey is expressed as both “eating” and “paying for” the polity. Whereas a *toxosu* is charged with curtailing the individual desires of village community members, or in other words, to mediate local conflicts, the title of the Dahomeian ruler, *axosu,* means "to close the debt" that the subjects presumably owe through monetary payment. Together, these changes represented a pronounced shift in the meaning of clientelistic redistribution, from that of gifts circulated according to social obligation to that of commodities given from above to and thereby indebting subjects below.

Whereas lineage village redistribution was couched on the side of the wealth-in-people social paradigm, following the commodification of political relations in the region Dahomean *axosu* reframed redistribution as canceling the often invented debts of their subjects, thereby creating a notion of debt owed to him. And indeed, as Dahomean subjects told European travelers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "my head belongs to the king because he paid for it." And yet, through a number of administrative innovations, the Dahomean kings ultimately distributed far less than the *toxosu* of lineage villages, that is, accumulating material wealth as opposed to circulating it.

Lineage Villages

Both now and in the past, most Beninese people have lived in small-scale villages[6]. Beyond the present-day urban centers of Cotonou and Porto Novo and the regional capitols of Bohicon, Lokossa, and Ouidah, the majority of contemporary Beninese still live in rural communities of fewer than 1,000 people. To this day, few rural people in Beninese pay taxes or have licenses for their cars or motorcycles, despite ongoing efforts by the national government to incorporate them as Beninese citizens. Indeed, most Beninese live quite independent of the state. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, local elected officials serve primarily as conduits for needed infrastructure projects such as schools, clinics, and roads. Like their forbears, contemporary Beninese villages can be understood as semi-autonomous, as each district is overseen by a "chef d'arrondisement," or district chief.

The lineage village constituted the earliest form of political organization in what is now southern Benin (Herskovits 1938:3; Manning 1982:25; Bay 1998:44). These communities generally consisted of no more than three hundred people, including affines, clients, and slaves, and were organized into a single corporate kin group, configured patrilineally, its members claiming descent from a common ancestor (Law 1991:70; Ronen 19xx). Neighbors were affines and affines were neighbors. Social organization was markedly hierarchical (Bay 1998). Presiding over each village was a single *toxosu*[7], or leader, a role held by hereditary eligibility. As Herskovits (1938:10) has emphasized, the *toxosu* "stands more in the position of conciliator than judge; he is more arbitrator than ruler" (see also Horton 1976:85).

[6] In 2013 the World Bank estimated that 53.79% of Beninese people live in rural communities. This figure represents a steady decline over the last few decades, with over 80% of Beninese living in rural communities as recently as the 1970s.

[7] *Toxosu*, means "village ruler"; *tonukwe* stands for "village-before"; *xaga* means "quarter-chief." I conscientiously avoid the term "king," given the many Western connotations.

The balancing act of head and belly described in the previous chapter first emerged in the social context of a lineage villages headed by a *toxosu,* or again village leader. *Toxo*, or village, literally means "belly of the country," as it is here in a given locale where human beings, the only beings to have bellies in this sense, congregate. It is here that individual drives, desires, and hungers inevitably comingle in often dangerous social tension. *Su,* however*,* means "to close," thus to be the *toxosu* means to effectively "close the belly of the country," that is, to bring to an end the otherwise endless desires, urges, longings, and hungers of the people in a village.

This control necessarily pertains to heads. To submit to another person is to *jó ta nú me*, literally, "to deliver one's head" to them, and to enthrone an individual as a *toxosu* is to *bla ta nu me*, to "attach head for someone." As the head symbolizes wisdom, intelligence, and human sociality, to symbolically deliver one's head and attach it to a leader is to give him the responsibility for peaceful and orderly sociality. Whereas a social gathering is known simply as a *tagbesò*, or head-gathering, in which it remains unclear to whom do the heads belong, in a properly ordered *toxo*, or village, it is the *toxosu*, who again is a mediator and conciliator responsible for ending conflicts and maintaining sociality, who controls the heads of all community members. To deliver one's head to a *toxosu*, so that he may effectively close one's belly, is essentially to count on him to be intelligent (again, to have all one's head, to exist in the head) for the good of the village as a whole.

Within lineage villages, economic production followed a familial model centered on agricultural subsistence supplemented by hunting and fishing (Manning 1982:25). Cultivation consisted of sorghum, millet, yams, oil palm, and rice (Norman 2008:22; Law 1991:34). Storage of food was quite limited, for it rotted quickly in the sweltering tropical humidity. Technology was manual and thus labor-intensive. For these reasons, people tended to store wealth primarily

in other people, or more specifically, their future labor capacity (Miller 1988:40-47; Guyer 1995; Guyer and Belinga 1993). In this "wealth-in-people" paradigm, people exchanged food and other basic necessities for future labor obligations. As this region was relatively lighted populated during this period, each human being constituted a rare container of value, and people thus were sought after by communities.

When a particular hunt or harvest proved fruitful, the members of a community involved in its production gave the bounty to the *toxosu,* who then redistributed to members of the community, even those not directly involved in its production. To reciprocate for these gifts, community members offered to the *toxosu* that that which, again in a manual-technology, labor-intensive social grouping situated in a tropical climate, was the most enduring possession of his recipients: their future labor.

In this way, a *toxosu*'s ability to accumulate wealth arose from the collective abilities of his fellow villagers, for whom he had in the recent past provided, to farm, hunt, and fish in the future. "A wealthy man," Miller writes, "increased productivity by organizing and controlling people…by aggregating human dependents…[which was] the most efficacious means of increasing production (1988:43; see also Vansina 1990:251). Over time, this strategy of redistributing food and other essentials led to relative food security, higher human fertility, yet more indebted community members, and so on.

Life in this period was, however, often precarious. Endemic tropical diseases like malaria, dysentery, and typhoid diminished life expectancies. Infant mortality was high. Infertility, a bad harvest, a drought, or an epidemic could severely reduce village populations (Mann 2007:69). Famine and warfare created further instability for many, driving some

communities to collapse altogether, its members forced to disperse in search of food and security with others more favored.

For the *toxosu* of thriving communities, such challenges also brought opportunities for yet further wealth accumulation stored in the future labor of refugees, migrants, and survivors of destroyed or collapsed villages (Obayemi 1985; Mann 2007:69). *Toxosu* who oversaw food surpluses would thus redistribute such bounty beyond the circle of established members in their villages. Strangers, foreigners, and hangers-on, desperate for food and shelter, accepted these gifts, and in doing so gave right over their future labor to their newfound provider. In this way, outsiders became new assets in these lineage communities, serving the *toxosu* as both new assets and valued insurance against future catastrophes. In a region marked by relative low population, Myers and Kopytoff (1977:14) observe that

> *What is striking in all of this is the overwhelming impression that there was a supplier's market. Strangers seeking patrons were welcomed; orphans or abandoned children were wanted; captives, unless dangerous or unmanageable, were eagerly sought.*

This wealth-in-people relational paradigm, which offered to weary refugees the security of a new sense of belonging, coupled with the dangers beyond the village, prompted these new arrivals to abide by their assurances.

In other words, the earliest political economy in present-day southern Benin operated according to a gift-clientelist model. Patron-client ties, founded on asymmetrical gift exchanges of food and shelter for future labor, constituted the practical, moral, and conceptual foundations for politics long before the emergence of political systems on larger scales (Law 1991:70). The *toxosu*, or village leader, acted as a wealthy patron, redistributing food to village members, his clients. In such a context of valuation and belonging, community was synonymous with both

economics and kinship. Every village member constituted a receptacle of value, and all belonged to the patrilineage or were affiliated outsiders who had later joined the group. All who were dependents of the *toxosu* were his *toxosusi*[8], or dependents, and this term functioned as the most essential designation for village membership. Biological descent mattered only in the case of the hereditary office of the *toxosu* itself, but even in this context was negotiable.

To enter into such a social ordering differed fundamentally from general Western notions tied to the transatlantic slave trade (Miers & Kopytoff 1977). In this lineage village model, slaves were not objectified and dehumanized commodities to be sold, bought, and forced to work for the private benefit of their owners. Indeed there existed no commodity-centered market to trade such alienated labor units.

Rather, slaves were simply outsiders who, like other clients, were ultimately incorporated members of communities in which they played a defined social role, differentiated not by their lack of rights or even personhood, as with slaves in a chattel model, but rather by the specific rights that other community members had over them. While slaves were initially strangers, that is, possessing no social relationships in their new surroundings, these communities invested great effort in absorbing them:

> *In most African societies, 'freedom' lay not in a withdrawal into a meaningless and dangerous autonomy but in attachment to a kin group, to a patron, to power—an attachment that occurred within a well-defined hierarchical framework. It was in this direction that the acquired outsider had to move if he was to reduce his initial marginality. Here, the antithesis to "slavery" is not "freedom" qua autonomy but rather "belonging" (Myers & Kopytoff 1977:17)*

[8] The suffix *–si* refers to all dependents, including wives and children, however children are further distinguished by the suffix *–vi*.

This arrangement worked for both slaves and for the communities in which they were entering. After all, as wealth was stored in the capacity of others to perform valuable work, in order to insure against drought, famine, infertility, and war—the very calamities from which new outsiders were fleeing—villages incorporated migrants, refugees, strangers and hangers-on as new community members.

Marriage linked together lineage villages in alliance, but according to a clientelist logic (Manning 1982:22; Levi-Strauss [1949] 1956) Herskovits (1938:301) explains that for Fon people, the two most essential marriage categories were legitimate and illegitimate, a distinction determined by the presence or absence of bridewealth, that is, gift exchange. Here again, patron-client relational logics structured local social ties. People configured marriage patrilinealy and patrilocally.

In this wealth-in-people relational context, bridewealth was partially meant to compensate the bride's patrilineage for the loss of her as a laborer, that is, as a future producer of value. It was also, however, through the sociogenesis intrinsic to gift exchange, a means of establishing a bond, and through that bond an alliance between the two groups.

Conventionally, a young woman's father approached a prospective groom and proposed to him on his daughter's behalf. Following Mauss's second obligation of gift exchange, to receive, the prospective groom could not reject the father's advances, but would instead have to go to great lengths to avoid the offer by inventing a credible excuse for not accepting and avoiding the party entirely. If the groom did accept, he would then soon make an official visit to the patrilineage of his future bride, joined by two women and two older men of his own patrilineage. He would give to her father a number of ritually designated gifts, including a sack of millet, cloth, bamboo tinder and other firewood, and local alcoholic beverages. The father of

the bride distributed some of these gifts to the principal members of the patrilineage but reserved the millet for the mother of the bride and the alcohol for the ancestors of the patriline. The future groom was also required to bring subsequent gifts of firewood to the mother of the bride, and assemble the *dokpwe*[9] to which he belonged in order to work the fields of the bride's father, and to repair the thatch roof of his house if needed.

Throughout the unfolding of a conventional "legitimate" marriage, gifts and obligations created hierarchical relationships between not just the groom and bride, but between multiple members of their respective patrilineages. Through such processes the bride, a member of one patrilineage, transitioned to that of the groom. And yet, the process remained ongoing, as the husband must contribute to the funeral expenses of all the members of his wife's lineage. This responsibility, Herskovits emphasizes, is so great that the penalty to perform them is immediate divorce (1938:304). If the wife contributes to the social life and overall well being of her husband's lineage, then when she dies she will be buried in their compound. If not, at her death she will return to her own lineage. Again, legitimate marriages are judged so because of the continuing relationships created between lineages, facilitated by the asymmetrical exchange of bridewealth and other obligations.

Toxosu typically had several wives, a marker of high status. Polygamy was a widespread practice, and anyone, male or female, could have as many wives as he or she could support. Herskovits (1938:318) describes how successful market women would not uncommonly marry other women to increase both their wealth and status, a practice also documented in Nigeria (Amadiume 1987). These female husbands would arrange with male genitors to produce children who would belong to her and her patrilineage. In all cases, marriage and reproduction constituted

[9] A local work group composed of 6-12 men of the same age.

a central means to producing wealth, as again, wealth was stored in people; adoption of refugees and other strangers complemented this process.

Life in lineage villages emphasized ancestral worship, further developing the clientelistic model of social organization. Upon the death of all lineage members, survivors would bury the body within the walls of a lineage compound, either in a separate hut or in the floor of living spaces. In the case of *toxosu* and other members of renown, whether a skilled hunter, warrior, or diviner, living descendants exhumed, decapitated, and reburied their bodies, placing their heads on an altar located in a small house in the center of the village. They would then perform a number of elaborate rituals over the course of the next several months, meant to deify the ancestor. Once they had done so, descendants would worship their heads on the altar, offering sacrifices of food, drink, and animal blood in hopes of securing good fortune in rains, harvests, pregnancies, and the accumulation of more dependents, and wisdom to properly order social life. Here again, heads represented wisdom, intelligence, and the capacity for peaceful and orderly social life, worshiping the heads of ancestors represented a pragmatic elicitation of such abilities from the world of the dead.

Members venerated the dead and thanked them for life, good fortune, and fertility, evidenced by seasonal rains, abundant harvests, and pregnancies, both animal and human. To both show their appreciation and facilitate future exchanges, living descendants presented the dead with offerings of food, drink, and the blood of sacrificed domestic animals, typically chickens and goats. Food and drink created commensality with the departed even if the dead could not actually enjoy them; the dead could only consume blood, which gave them life force and rejuvenation. In this process, the *toxosu* was particularly important, for it was only he out of the entire patrilineage that knew the right ritual acts to perform and the right words to say, so that

the ancestors would understand the gestures and be pleased by them. In this way, the *toxosu* of the patrilineage acted as a mediator between the world of the living, in which he was the most prominent patron, and the world of the dead, to which he was but a humble client.

The importance of venerated ancestral heads is difficult to overstate. As discussed previously, for Beninese of this period, like those of the present day, the head symbolized a person's individuality, his or her personality, and general disposition toward others. The head symbolizes proper socialization, harmony, and even luck, as these attributes are what together assure an orderly social life within the patrlineage, that is, within the village as a whole. The head further signifies intelligence and wisdom, for to be intelligent and wise is to be well socialized, to know how to please other lineage members, both living and deceased, and to diffuse conflicts when they arise. Divinized ancestors had, of course, already managed to preserve such ordered sociality, evidenced by the very existence of their living descendants.

Venerating the heads of one's ancestors in this way carried a potent symbolism: remembering, honoring, but also seeking guidance from the ancestors' personalities, temperaments, intelligence, wisdom, and general abilities to mitigate conflicts. That the *toxosu* was, through both his descent and his ritual aptitude for redistribution across the barrier that separated the worlds of the living and the dead, the best communicator with the ancestors, gave him a potent legitimacy in the eyes of other village members.

Toxosu were understood to occupy a middle position in a social hierarchy that encompassed everyone in their community, both living and dead; these village patrons represented intermediaries between the world of living people and the world of the ancestors. This central importance of ancestors is crucial for understanding patron-client relationships in southern Benin before the rise of states.

Typical of all patrons, divinized ancestors provided resources for their clients; as cosmological actors, these resources invariably involved things beyond the control of even the most powerful human agents, specifically female fertility, the rains that brought both water and food, and good fortune. Offerings of material wealth balanced these reciprocal relationships, substantively from patron to client and tokens from client to patron. Within families, husbands and wives made regular sacrifices to their family ancestors for the fertility they believed they received from them, whether that of agricultural fields, livestock, or of family members themselves

Ancestors provided the living with good fortune in other forms as well. Among family members, people sought the assistance of ancestors for success in agricultural harvests, trading or other business, and political maneuverings. Such dependence was replicated in every lineage, where descendent devotees prominently displayed ancestral shrines, as they did in agricultural fields and sacred forests, reserving these spaces for client devotion to their spiritualized patrons. The goodwill of the ancestors, then, required that patrons conform to socially and morally prescribed relationships with both the ancestors themselves, and with their clients—their living subjects—all within the bounds of a larger community for which the ancestors were ultimately responsible.

Village Confederations

Over time, lineage villages grew and contracted as they responded to abundance and scarcity, peace and war. Some villages faded into obscurity due to endemic disease, famine, conflict, or infertility, their survivors migrating to communities that would welcome them. In other cases, successful villages combined with one another to form confederations, and through

subsequent hunts, harvests, births and incorporations of outsiders, some of these confederations grew relatively populous (Law 1991:70). Although larger in population, these emergent states were in terms of political organization no different than lineage villages: authority was concentrated in the *toxosu* of each village. Political authority was thus decentralized, with the confederation's ruler regularly competing with the other heads of the constituent village lineages for power.

The development of trade greatly facilitated these developments in political composition (Monroe 2003:80). Already by the sixteenth century, populations had started to move beyond subsistence and self-sufficiency to establish a monetized economy and a number of decentralized markets (Manning 1982:8-9). Although the wealth-in-people relational paradigm of valuation still predominated locally, regional economic relationships came to rely on material currency, which took the form of cloth and cowry shells. Commerce with the first European merchants through the Atlantic trade in the region brought new crops and prestige items (Monroe 2003:82). Trade ushered in a new mode of production—commodity exchange—that came to coexist with the earlier familial model of agricultural subsistence. Through trade, some polities increased rapidly in both size and material wealth.

Much of this transition in economic organization had to do with scale. In the wealth-in-people, gift-clientelism model of lineage villages, the future labor capacity of one's dependents could not be separated from the dependents themselves, and dependents simultaneously constituted village communities. The solidarity and loyalty crucial to the gift-clientelist model of rule derived from daily, face-to-face interactions, and thus could only be scaled so far. Commodity exchange, in which wealth derived not just from the uses of a holder of value but that holder's ability to be exchanged, mediated economic relationships between villages.

The introduction of commodity exchange into settlements in this region inevitably enacted changes in social organization. In the wealth-in-people paradigm of the lineage village, the primary vessel of value was again the human being, for it was his or her future labor potential that would sow and harvest fields, fetch water, and build homes and villages. To this economic regime centered on human use value, the introduction of a commodity economy represented a new metric, one of human exchange value. While chattel slavery of the kind known to the New World did not yet exist in the region, commodity exchange did introduce a crucial valuational precondition to this later development.

The largest of the confederations to form in this region was Allada. The city of Allada served as the capitol, and was located some 80 kilometers north of the Atlantic coast. Allada emerged as a polity far larger than a single village in the early sixteenth century due to the confederation of several local lineages, a development that posed a new problem in terms of political legitimacy. Political authority in this region had long been hereditary, succession being restricted to a single patrilineally defined lineage (Law 1991:74). Whereas a *toxusu* had presided as leader over a single village, once these villages had started to combine to form confederations, which of these multiple *toxosu* was to be the leader of the larger community newly formed? How could one leader claim authority over another?

The lineage village model of political organization offered no answer to this new dilemma. And so, to overcome this problem, the early rulers of Allada introduced a new way of thinking about political legitimacy: royalty. In an effort to shore up the support of their subjects and thus counteract the instability intrinsic to confederations, the rulers of Allada claimed descent from Tado, an early state located to the west of present day southern Benin in what is now southern Togo. Beyond Allada ruled powerful monarchal states such as Oyo and Benin in

present-day Nigeria, each with many regional offshoots, and so the idea of a royal lineage was already a familiar if somewhat foreign concept to those living in non-state communities. Tado, according to local discourses, was one such offshoot of Oyo; its own legitimacy ultimately came from elsewhere as well. Allada merely introduced this idea of royal descent locally, thereby setting some people above and apart from all others. The success of such a move is understandable considering local political logics, for indeed, the positions of the *toxosu* and other village leaders had themselves been hereditary.

One of the largest tributaries of Allada was the smaller polity of Hueda. Located in what is now southwestern Benin, along the coast, Hueda was positioned far closer to the embarcations of European traders than Allada. Hueda's palace at Savi was located no more than ten kilometers from the coast, compared to eighty kilometers as with the palace of Allada. By this time Allada's political power, coupled with its political ideology of legitimacy through descent from Tado, was so great that the ruler of Hueda claimed legitimacy through direct descent from the royal family of Allada. The imported notion of royal descent was now reproducing itself locally. But, like Allada, Hueda was a loose confederation of several local communities, with "often divergent and competing interests inherent to such a decentralized network" (Norman 2008:49).

Marriage in these confederations was little changed from that found in lineage villages. Marriage continued to create alliances between villages, and in this way facilitated the forming of confederations. As in lineage villages, *toxosu* typically had several wives, but typically no more than five or six (Herskovits 1938:312).

Ancestral worship remained a central aspect to daily life, as it did in the lineage villages, but each village venerated their respective ancestry, with little emphasis given to the ancestry of the confederation leaders. Describing Allada in 1670, French trader Delbee, while

acknowledging that the *vodun* (or again deity) of the Allada royal family, a crocodile, might be considered the *vodun* of the entire polity, he nonetheless summarized that the people of Allada "have properly speaking no religion…since there is no worship, and it is certain that these people have none: temples, prayers, and sacrifices are unknown to them" (Law 1997:81). From Delbee's vantage point, that of a public spectator, there was existed ideological apparatus to unite royal subjects as such, even if in the component lineages of the polity, there was most likely a great deal of prayers and sacrifices. In Hueda, the python Dangbe represented the *vodun* of the entire polity; but as in Allada the worship of this state *vodun* did not take the form of a regular public event. The ruler remained a distant figure, as did his *vodun*.

Both polities practiced human sacrifice at royal funerals, which seems to have been an addition to the funeral practices of lineage village. Such sacrifices typically involved no more than three or four victims and consisting of wives to the deceased ruler and a few servants (Law 1991b:72; 1997:81). As with the post-mortem decapitation of heads and consistent with gift-clientelism logic, what mattered was the quality of individuals persons, and not the quantity. In other words, one's personal relationship with both disinterred heads and sacrificed people were what mattered. Within this socio-cultural logic, sacrificing a stranger or placing his or her head on an altar simply would not have made sense.

Warfare mirrored the decentralization observed in both administrative and religious life. In battle, troops did not fight as a single unit, but under their respective provincial governors (Law 1991:100). Not surprisingly, perhaps, these same governors regularly made war upon one another with no regard to the opinion of the ruler (Law 1991:75).

Soldiers kept whatever spoils of war that they could find, most commonly captives, whom they either sold or enslaved themselves. One of the greatest trophy for soldiers were the

decapitated heads of enemy soldiers. Law (1989:406) reports that each solider was "careful to put [the heads] in his home in a prominent place to make his bravery known to his posterity." Here one sees a significant variation of the ancestral practice of head veneration. Whereas in lineage villages, descendants made prominent in spaces dedicated to the dead the heads of their forebears in order to ask for good fortune, now soldiers made prominent in spaces dedicated to the living the heads of their vanquished enemy as proof of their own good fortune and valor. While the specific meaning attached to this new practice are lacking in the historical record, it seems clear that this new approach to heads reflected a new aesthetic of violence and conquest emerging out of the increase in local warfare and slave raiding. But again, quality mattered over quantity; it was the relationship that each soldier had with his vanquished foe – hand to hand combat – that created the value in his decapitated head in the first place.

During the first several decades of the early sixteenth century, Allada established a booming trade entrepot with coastal populations as far west as Ashanti and as far east as Benin, in present-day Nigeria. Its most lucrative trading relationships, however, were with European merchants. In exchange for ivory, local foodstuffs such as palm oil and yams, and cotton textiles, merchants in Allada acquired prestige items and new agricultural goods, such as New World maize, which grew well in the local tropical climate. Monroe (2003:84) explains that through trade with Europeans, the royalty of Allada acquired and monopolized the wearing of imported European cloth, which by distinguishing them from commoners, further underwrote royal authority. Legitimacy based on an ideology of royal descent was thus symbolically conveyed by the wearing of foreign cloth.

Allada had sold slaves to both other polities in the region and to Europeans beginning early in its history; slaves from Allada are documented in Peru as early as the 1560s (Law

1997:87). This commerce remained, however, relatively minor compared to the export of foodstuffs and artisanal products. "Slavery," Manning (1982:9) writes, "while not unknown in the Bight of Benin, was not yet the basis of a separate mode of production: slaves were a part of the familial, commodity exchange or mercantile sectors." It was not until the 1630s that the rapid expansion of Brazilian plantations created a similarly expanded market for human beings (*ibid*:9).

Allada spread its influence beyond its eponymous capitol through a tributary system in which smaller polities, much of them lineage villages, regularly gave gifts of material wealth in recognition of Allada's regional dominance. This tributary system extended all the way to the Atlantic coast, thus granting it direct access to European traders. Allada did not, however, maintain direct administrative control over these smaller polities, maintaining only loose supervision over both local governments and local economies (Monroe 2003:80). After the ruler of Allada, the most powerful figures in the polity were not subordinate members of the royal dynasty, but rather rival village lineage heads acting in the capacity of provincial governors. For Law (1991:84), "the most senior of the chiefs outside the palace exercised considerable power, in effect *sharing political authority with the king*" (My emphasis). Such a decentralized distribution of power would ultimately threaten the larger cohesion of the polity. But, for the moment at least, Allada's status in regional trade remained dominant.

Despite these claims of royal descent, however, neither Allada nor Hueda bore much resemblance to centralized polities; both were rather structured as confederations of lineages villages (Monroe 2003:46-47; Norman 2008:59). Law (1987:325) writes that in Allada, "effective royal power was circumscribed by the fact that property in land and office was vested in the component lineages of the state rather than in the ruler." In Hueda, Norman (2008:71)

writes, internal divisions were a "defining characteristic" of the polity. So disorderly was the Huedan central government that, as an anonymous Frenchmen in the 1710s observed, it failed to manage even local intrigues:

> *disputes between chiefs arising from adultery were settled by fighting between those involved, without any reference to the king, a noted civil war between the Gogan and the Aplogan in particular having arisen in this way* (Law 1991:91).

Allada and Hueda, two confederations of multiple lineage villages, each with its independent *toxosu*, grew to prominence over the course of the sixteenth century in present-day southern Benin. Their good fortunes were, however, about to change.

The transatlantic slave trade fundamentally transformed the polities in this region. The new and unprecedented demand for slaves was so great that it prompted both Allada and Hueda to invent new institutions to satisfy it, most notably warfare, raiding, and kidnapping. French trader Barbot (1732) noted in 1682 that the when the region was a peace, there were few slaves available for sale, but when polities were at war with one another, one could acquired over 400 slaves in a matter of weeks. Such practices, driven by European slave trading, brought immense material wealth to both Hueda and Allada. But they also brought severe instability to the region, as the two state powers warred with one another but also assaulted and often destroyed unincorporated villages in the process (see Perbi 2004:28). The growth of the slave trade was indeed so great that Europeans traders started to refer the region as "The Slave Coast."

Initially, both Allada and Hueda were able to maintain a certain level of control over the slave trade by centralizing distribution from its central market of Allada and Savi, respectfully.

Over time, however, the sheer volume of the trade came to favor Hueda, as the Huedan capitol was far closer to the coast. As Hueda's commercial fortunes came to surpass that of Allada the rulers of Hueda became increasingly defiant of Allada's political dominance (Ajogbin 1967:67). So too did Allada face increasingly serious internal threats. "Throughout this period," Monroe (2003:46) writes, "Allada's power rested largely on the ruler's ability to centralize control over the import of European luxury goods, as well as the export of slaves." As long as European trade was large enough to provide such luxury items in exchange for slaves but small enough to control, Allada flourished.

In virtually all respects other than population size and territory, the confederations of Allada and Hueda represent outgrowths of the lineage villages, functioning by the same essential political logic of gift-clientelism. As in the village, legitimacy in these polities centered on descent and material redistribution (Law 1978:321; Akinjogbin 1966:16). As in the village, Akingjobin (1966:15) has stressed, subjects "regarded the state as a larger version of the family, with the king standing in the same relation to his subjects as the father to his children."

Ultimately, the form of political organization represented by both Allada and Hueda, that of a loosely-structured confederation, attempted to project the small-scale lineage village model onto a much larger polity in an increasingly unstable historical period (Akinjogbin 1966:8). Such a model suited small-scale polities quite well, for again, a *toxusu* was more of an arbitrator than a figure of formal authority (Law 1987:325). But as Law has emphasized, "this kin-based and decentralized form of political organization proved incapable of containing the strains imposed by the rise of the slave trade," (Law 1978:321).

The Rise of Dahomey

The period of the late seventeenth century in present-day southern Benin brought profound political instability to the region. The intrusion of the Transatlantic slave trade devastated the confederations of Allada and Hueada already rendered vulnerable by their own rapid growth and the inability of the lineages village, configured according to of gift-clientelism, to adapt. And yet, it was precisely during this time that a new state, Dahomey, emerged and quickly grew to one of the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful polities in all of West Africa; it was in unprecedented violence and disorder that Dahomey thrived. Within short order, Dahomey conquered Allada in 1724 and Whydah in 1727, and went on to secure a near monopoly on the selling of slaves to European traders in the area, one that lasted in the 1850s. Such a development introduces a rather fundamental paradox to local history. How was it that a state could emerge, expand, and prosper in a political setting in which all other polities were retracting, declining, and sometimes collapsing altogether?

To account for this paradox, in this section I argue that Dahomey essentially reconfigured the relational logic of gift-clientelism according to the operative logic of the transatlantic slave trade, producing what I term *commodity-clientelism*. In the lineage village model, *toxosu* gifted to community members food, water, and shelter, for which recipients would reciprocate with gifts of labor, loyalty, and praise. Following Mauss (1922), such exchanges created social relationships between the transactors.

The rulers of Dahomey transformed this logic, retroping clientelist redistribution as impersonal commodity transactions that indebted subjects to the regime. In place of the *toxosu*'s moral obligation to asymmetrically reciprocate the gifts of labor, loyalty, and praise he received from his clients, the rulers of Dahomey, called *axosu* or "he who closes the debt," reframed their relationships with their followers as commercialized debt obligations. Like the capitalist system

into which the region was entering, the *axosu* of Dahomey was charged by their ancestors with a sacred duty to continually expand the regime (Bay 1998:40). In short, Dahomey thrived in this politically unstable period because it successfully adapted the linage village model to a newly commodified world. One can most productively think of the innovative Dahomeian system as a local folk model of encroaching global capitalism.

On the Slave Coast, in which the forced capacities of human beings to produce agricultural surplus constituted a central element to this expansion, incorporation necessarily proceeded through warfare, slave raiding, and kidnapping. For both local political figures and foreign traders alike, new economic possibilities and their attending political implications stimulated rapaciously acquisitive self-interest. Their combined efforts had, by the mid-seventeenth century, torn apart much of the old social order, one based on a co-existence of small-scale villages and village confederations that shared a common political organization, were often linked together by tribute, and legitimated themselves according to both the ability to redistribute and widespread accepted notions of patrilineal descent.

The mythical founding of the military regime of Dahomey signaled a revolution in local political philosophy and practice, one that reconfigured the logic of gift-clientelism according to capitalist thinking. Early in the seventeenth century, Dahomey was a marginal polity to the north of Allada, which, like other small communities in the area, endured regular raids at the hands of Alladan slave traders (Bay 1998:42-43). It was in the middle of this instability that Dahomey managed to grow in area and population, both by conquering surrounding villages or making tributaries out of them.

One such tributary, Gedavin, was ruled by a figure named Dan. According to myth, the axosu Dakodonu had asked Dan if he could build a house upon his territory. Dan agreed. Over

time, more and more Dahomeian followers came to live on Gedavinian land, and Dakodonu asked Dan for more and more land to build more houses, closer and closer to Dan's own residence. Dan then protested, saying "Have I given you so much land and yet you want more? Must I open my belly for you to build your house upon?" Dakodonu then killed Dan, and proceeded to disembowel him and establish a new polity within his belly, thus turning his exaggerated protests into the founding of a new polity, Dahomey, or in the Fongbe language, "In the belly of Dan" (Skertchly 1874:86-87). From its inception, the axosu of Dahomey were charged by their ancestors with the sacred duty of expanding the realm indefinitely.

To my reading, the founding myth of Dahomey signaled to both Dahomeian subjects and rivals that this new regime operated according to a novel and dehumanizing logic: capitalist accumulation. Throughout the myth, the driving force of the developments between Dakodonu and Dan is the former's unending desire for more land. Dan then attempts to reason with Dakodonu that he has already given to him much of his land, more than what the conventional rules of gift-clientelism require. In a pointed criticism of Dakodonu's appetites, Dan then asks if he should open his belly, that is, should he both destroy his own body, unthinkable in a wealth-in-people economy, and allow Dakodonu to "build his house," his realm, *in the dismembered belly of another person*, which according to the metaphorical dialectic of the belly and the head, stands as a powerful metaphor for the unmitigated satisfaction of limitless human desire. Given the local historical context of the seventeenth century in present-day southern Benin, in which slave-raiding and warfare, promulgated by rapaciously acquisitive self-interest (the belly), had destroyed much of the social order (the head), one can read Dan's protest in metaphorical terms as a sharp moral critique.

And yet this is precisely what Dan does. Worded differently, Dakodonu openly violates the head—the rules of acceptable social behavior that ensured community well-being in a gift-clientelism frame—in order to satisfy the rapacious desires of the belly, or to borrow from Adam Smith, rational self-interest. Speaking through symbols, Dahomey is thus founded on the logic of commodification; Dahomey thus proposes to rule *by the belly alone*. The mythical founding Dahomey in this way represents a direct violation of conventional gift-clientelism political logic through the violent destruction of the conventional bearer of value: clients.

The early *axosu* of Dahomey did not so much originate this violation of gift-clientelism in its founding myth as emulate local actors, namely slave raiders, whose campaigns of raiding represented a relatively new though widespread local economic practice, and valorize commodification as a philosophy of political rule. Well before Dahomey had begun telling this story of its origins, people in the region had begun to commodify other human beings, including their own dependents, that is, to value them for what they could receive in exchange for them, alongside what use they found in their future labor capacity, thereby transforming the local institution of indigenous slavery (Myers & Kopytoff 1975) into an emergent and globally-connected institution, that of chattel slavery.

This significant economic shift created incentives to capture, that is, to accumulate other people, and to sell them in exchange for material wealth, and in this way led to an explosion of slave raiding and warfare, of which an early Dahomey had been a regular victim. I argue that the early *axosu* of Dahomey studied the contours and logics of this new economic system, grasped them, and emulated them to great success.

Through commodification, the *axosu* of Dahomey created a fundamentally different relationship with their subjects than had the *toxosu* of lineage villages discussed earlier in this

chapter. Whereas village community members figuratively *gave* their heads to the *toxosu*, that is, willfully submitted to him, for which according to the local moral economy of asymmetrical reciprocity the *toxosu* would provide them with food and security, Dahomean axosu *purchased* the heads of their subjects. In the Fongbe language, to assume the Dahomeian throne is to *xò Danxomè*, that is, "to buy Dahomey." Dahomean subjects clearly understood this new logic. Writing in the 1770s, a French traveler observed that

> Every [Dahomean] individual is brought up in the idea that his head belongs to the King; so he is not surprised when he is condemned to lose it, he regards this misfortune as a debt which he is discharging

Writing in the early 20th century, the French colonial governor Le Hérissé cites a praise-poem honoring the *axosu* Wegbaja, for having "bought the heads on our necks" (Le Hérissé 1912:161). Law (1989:407) observes that Dahomean *axosu* referred to the principal direct tax levied on their citizens as *takoué*, or "head-money," and speculates that the term served to further acknowledge the axosu's rights over his subjects' heads.

This notion of rulership legitimated by purchase was wholly new. While commodity exchange did exist in the confederations of Allada and Hueda, it remained secondary to the moral economy of gift-clientelism and the wealth-in-people paradigm according to which it operated. In the lineage village model that had pre-dated the confederations, commodity exchange was absent altogether. But, even when it had emerged, commodity exchanges had never before applied to rulership. For Dahomey this novel concept was essential. Law (1989:407) writes that

> *As Le Herissé perceptively remarks, in Dahomian thought political sovereignty was equated with rights of ownership, Dahomey being the property of the king. Among the Dahomian king's titles was that of Ayinon, or Owner of the Land. The kings of Dahomey were absorbed into the kingdom, not merely by force of conquest, but also by purchasing the land (with its tutelary deities) of each conquered community. This purchase was ceremonially re-enacted at the installation of each new king, who symbolically 'bought Dahomey' by a distribution of cowries (600 cowries, at the accession of King Behanzin in 1889) to the subordinate chiefs.*

Law goes on to clarify that while the idea of the *axosu*'s ownership of the realm was not original to Dahomey, most likely coming from the Yoruba state of Oyo to the east, what *was* original was the idea that one could transfer such rights through purchase. Whereas installing a *toxosu*, again *bla ta nu me*, was to "attach one's head for someone," here one sees something very different: the wholesale purchase of a rulership, or put differently, the operative logic of the Transatlantic slave trade reproduced in an innovative local notion of sovereignty. Further suggesting a capitalist origin to this idea, a local oral historian in Abomey once reported, while recounting the ceremonial reenactment of purchase at the installation of a new *axosu*, that he would throw coins to the gathered crowds at his enthronement. When ordinary people put these coins in their pocket, they would magically reproduce by themselves.

Emulation of one's enemies would make sense given what scholars know about Dahomean military strategies but also Dahomean culture. Bay (1998:22) describes the

Dahomean religious practice of vodun as "pragmatic and eclectic," that "the ultimate test of a vodun, whether ancestral or popular, was its efficacy… Dahomeans were always on the alert for deities of proven capability." Bay goes on to explains that

> *Dahomean leaders eagerly looked to friends as well as enemies for innovations that they considered efficacious or simply interesting; not only new goods, but technology, dress, art forms, foods, offices, and titles were tried, adopted, and sometimes discarded (Bay 1998:24).*

Slave-raiders from Allada, spurred by new economic opportunities created by European traders beginning in the 1640s, had unquestionably figured among the more formidable of Dahomey's earliest enemies. It is thus unsurprising that early Dahomean *axosu* would have looked to slave-raiders in a desperate attempt to identify the secret of their power.

To communicate to a non-literate society this new paradigm of political rule represented by commodity-clientelism, the Dahomean *axosu* held an annual spectacle of redistribution at the gates of the royal palace in Abomey, which he called *hwetanu*, or "annual head business." The *axosu* required that at least one representative of every lineage village in the polity attend. These representatives brought their taxes but also gifts, typically food, to the *axosu* as a sign of their thanks.

The *axosu* would enter the spectacle with his royal entourage: ministers, generals, assistants, servants, his hundreds of wives and children, and slaves, a powerful display of the many dependents living in the royal palace. The axosu would then climb a wooden stage erected for the occasion and publically reward his advisors with European prestige goods such as

tobacco, liquor, silks, and carpets (Polanyi 1966:34). The *axosu* would then reward the soldiers in the Dahomean army with slaves, and go on to throw to all of his subjects food and cowry money.

Apart from the access to European trade goods that slave-trading provided, in economic terms the Dahomean redistribution of *hwetanu* was not fundamentally different from that of the *toxosu* in lineage villages as considered at the beginning of this chapter. In both cases, material wealth flowed inward to the *axosu* and then back out again. What was different was the scale that the slave trade allowed, but also the protocol: whereas in lineage villages, both gifts to and from the *axosu* were made publically, at *hwetanu,* the *axosu* de-emphasized if not altogether concealed gifts made to him, whereas gifts from the axosu to his subjects took the form of a massive spectacle, "staged with a view to the utmost effect" (Polanyi 1966:34). It was in this way that the *axosu* could sustain this notion of debt. Ideologically speaking, the *axosu* of Dahomey did not so much *asymmetrically reciprocate* for the many taxes levied on his people, even if in reality this was the case, as *redistribute* wealth from the Atlantic slave trade, thus building debts among them.

This revolutionary political paradigm did, however, carry a significant risk, one that the Dahomean *axosu* would have to acknowledge: *toxosu* presiding over lineage villages who failed to honor the social protocols of gift-clientelism faced the wrath of their ancestors in the form of famine, infertility, and other misfortune. Flagrantly violating the complex interrelationships represented by the rights in people paradigm, as the very founding of Dahomey had done with the violent death of Dan, would ordinarily aggravate the ancestors and thus invite destruction.

To account for the dangers sure to follow such a disruption to the conventional understanding of the proper relationship between living descendants and divinized ancestors, the

early *axosu* of Dahomey rather ingeniously manipulated the relationship itself. Villages had venerated lineage forbearers through gifts of food, drink, and sacrificial animal blood. The confederations of Allada and Hueda had added the dimension of killing human beings, but only at the funerals of deceased *axosu* and only to offer assistance in the his journey to the Land of the Dead. In these rites, only a handful of people were killed and all bore a close relationship to the *axosu*, either a favored wife or loyal servant.

Dahomey modified these pre-existing local practices, most fundamentally by transforming the killing of human beings from a small and intimate one-time provisioning of a royal entourage for deceased *axosu* to a yearly public spectacle, large in scale and centering on the execution of hundreds and sometimes thousands of war captives, slaves, and criminals.

To my reading, while the killing of living beings for the sake of deceased *axosu* evinced continuity with well-established ancestral veneration in the region, both the altered profile of those to be killed and the significantly larger scale of the event fundamentally transformed the nature of the exchange, and by extension, the relationship between the living and the dead. Whereas both the veneration of ancestors in lineage villages and the rites for royal ancestors in the confederations had followed a gift-economy logic, focusing on the *quality* of the relationships between the living and the dead, measured in terms of social intimacy—favorite wives of the axosu, preferred servants—the yearly mass execution of hundreds of captives, criminals, and slaves followed a new logic, that of commodity exchange, in that the new focus was on the *quantity* of human sacrificed.

The local adoption of commodification as a political strategy allowed Dahomean *axosu* to overcome the instability that had plagued Hueda and Allada. As discussed in the previous section, whereas these confederations fought as a separate divisions in warfare, in Dahomey all

soldiers were members of a centralized fighting force directed by the *agaow*, or Dahomean general, on behalf of the *axosu* (Bay 1998:105). The *axosu* of Dahomey themselves related to their soldiers primarily as buyers. At the end of a military campaign, Dahomean soldiers would sell to their *axosu* both living captives and the heads of their enemies killed in battle. Soldiers were thus motivated by their belly, that is, their economic self-interest to fight on behalf of the Dahomean *axosu*.

What is perhaps most interesting about this shift from gift-clientelism to commodity-clientelism represented by the innovations of Dahomey is the paradoxical observation that by violating the social obligations constituent of gift-clientelism, the axosu of Dahomey were ultimately able to meet those obligations, if in a different way. Bay (1998:3) notes that Dahomey

> guaranteed its citizens basic rights and access to means of livelihood, providing order and protection while demanding specific responsibilities. Dahomeans were able to meet their fundamental material and spiritual needs…"

This description sounds a lot like lineage villages under a *toxosu*. This preceding model, however, had ceased to be feasible due to the instability brought by the conflict and violence caused by the Atlantic slave trade. As Sahlins (1992:23) has argued in the context of indigenous people first encountering capitalism, "the first commercial impulse of the local people is not to become just like us, but more like themselves." Here, in Dahomey, the *axosu* of the regime seem to have accomplished just that.

And yet, the new concepts that developed through the Dahomean *axosu*'s adaptation of the lineage village model to the violence and instability of the Atlantic slave trade directly

implied a downside: for one's own dependents to prosper, another's dependents would necessarily suffer. In a world rendered violent and instable by the Atlantic slave trade, it was *only through the trade's systematic dehumanization* that *axosu* could meet the social (read human) obligations of the gift-clientelism model. To survive in a commercialized world, meeting the obligations of gift-clientelism necessarily adopted a zero-sum dimension to it.

Dahomey's commodity-clientelism persisted until the invasion of French forces in 1890. Fighting raged on and off for two years, culminating in the Battle of Abomey in 1892, in which France soundly defeated Dahomey. Absorbing Dahomey into its colonial possession of French West Africa, the French sent its *axosu*, Behanzin, into exile in Martinique.

As did the rest of the francophone West Africa, most of the people of Dahomey endured violence and forced labor regimes, as the occupying colonial authorities attempted to *mettre en valeur*, or make profitable, their possessions. Dahomean elites, meanwhile, responded to the new invading force as they had with rival states in the past: by intermarrying in order to create ties of kinship and cooperation (Bay 1998:310). Many converted to Catholicism in order to access formal education, thereby becoming *évolués* in the French colonial system.

The political structure of present-day Benin began to emerge in the early 1950s, in response to the newly-written constitution of the French Fourth Republic, which first provided for the representation of Dahomean people in the French National Assembly. During this transition, the *évolués* of present-day Benin transitioned into the political elite of a newly-formed post-independent country, Dahomey. While adopting the name of the former military regime that had preceded French rule, the nation-state of Dahomey also incorporated the kingdom of Porto Novo and the sparsely populated region directly north of Abomey. In this way, independence forcefully brought together hundreds of lineage villages, confederations, and other polities

representing over sixty different languages. The three largest self-understood polities, clustering around the cities of Abomey, Porto Novo, and Parakou, emerged as the principal political actors. Each city organized into its own political party: *Union Démocratique Dahoméenne* (UDD) in Abomey, *Parti Républicain du Dahomey* (PRD) in Porto Novo, and *Mouvement Démocratique du Dahomey* (MDD) in Parkou. Each party related to the newly-established nation-state as a resource to extract. Over the ensuing sixty-five years, different political figures and political parties would come and go, but the three-way balance of power between these three cities has essentially remained the same.

Chapter Three

Daily Clientelistic Practices

This chapter examines the widespread presence of clientelist relational themes in the daily social lives of Beninese women, men, and children. These local and informal clientelistic themes follow a moral framework of asymmetrically reciprocal gift exchange, which following Gregory (1982) is centered on reciprocally dependent actors exchanging inalienable possessions and thereby creating personal relationships between them, a configuration that emphasizes the circulation of wealth. Ordinary Beninese thus practice *gift-clientelism*, a moral economy composed of favors and debts, largesse and obligations, gifts and loyalties, presents and praise.

In this chapter I look to social domains outside of the formal political sphere to articulate the gift-clientelism that structures ordinary daily life as a means of properly contextualizing commodity-clientelism as it is practices found within the political sphere, an analysis that I conduct in chapter four. In this chapter I examine the daily lived worlds of Beninese men and women in an effort to articulate the clientelist logics that figure centrally in structuring and reproducing their shared social experiences. The ongoing formation of patron-client relationships in this social context is driven by strong valuations of both eclecticism and pragmatism, which parents communicate to their children from an early age. I go on to articulate clientelist social patterns in daily life, from social greetings to dress to the layout of homes.

I begin with a series of observations of Beninese child rearing and demonstrate that before the age of five, most children are bodily integrated into both clientelist relationships and their operative logics, and both as patrons and as clients. I then turn to social life more broadly, and follow the general contours of daily interactions, their repertoires of address, comportment,

and clothing styles, to further articulate the prevalence of clientelist logics. Across these different domains, the logic of clientelism structures Beninese lived worlds.

Clientelism in the Beninese Life Cycle

Clientelism constitutes the primary and fundamental socio-moral logic for people living in southern Benin, structuring relationships between parents and children, ancestors and descendants, politicians and voters, siblings, friends, lovers, spouses, bosses, colleagues, and outsiders. In this section I follow the general social themes of clientelism as they arise over the course of the Beninese life cycle.

Children in southern Benin are born as clients into a pronounced hierarchical framework. During the first several months of life, Beninese newborns are more or less extensions of their mothers' bodies. Nursing occurs throughout the day and night, as most women sleep with their infants next to them. Family members, particularly grandmothers and aunts, provide much assistance to the mother during this time, but in terms of the infant's direct experience, it is focused mostly on the mother. When not nursing, babies spend much of the time attached to the lower backs of their mothers, secured by a *pagne* or cloth wrap. It is in this way that babies accompany their mothers virtually everywhere, whether around the housing compound, to neighborhood shops and food stalls, to the market, and atop motorcycle taxis. It is quite common to see a woman hand wash clothes, haul water, pound yam, prepare meals, and other daily chores with an infant secured to her back.

During these first few months, however, other family members and intimates begin to assist in carrying the baby, particularly older siblings and cousins. Such regular assistance constitutes a central practice of all Beninese children, if somewhat more so for girls than for

boys. Girls carry infants more frequently, and they commonly use a cloth wrap to secure them; boys, by contrast, only carry babies old enough to reliably grasp onto either their shoulders or their clothing. Indeed carrying babies is so symbolically important for young girls that starting around the age of two, they sometimes attach a plastic doll, typically bought second-hand in the market, to their backs in emulation. Already by the age of one, both girls and boys begin to assist their mothers by carrying younger siblings. I often found it astounding how young children could handle the weight of younger siblings or neighborhood friends not much younger than themselves, and with alacrity and nonchalance. That some children were carried well after learning how to walk suggests a social logic beyond pragmatism is also at work. Although babies sometimes protested when taken away from their mothers, for the most part they readily accepted being passed from one caregiver to another.

An infant's earliest experiences of caregiving, whether washing, feeding, or simply being held, acquaint them with a great number of benefactors, including parents, siblings, cousins and other lineage members, but also neighbors, fellow church members, and other adults, thereby introducing them to the basic social and moral logic of clientelism. Specifically, it is during this time that young children implicitly learn that although their parents and older siblings are their primary providers, that virtually anyone older than them is a potential benefactor. Unlike Western children, who tend to fixate quite exclusively on their mothers and other central caregivers, when Beninese toddlers cry for attention, they are almost as likely to accept comfort from a distant family member as they are their mothers. The difference is both subtle and striking.

Such intense community involvement goes beyond mere doting, as the level of a child's participation does not decline over time, but rather increases. Around the age of five, Beninese

children begin to run errands for adults. While it is close family members—a parent or older sibling—who send children on such errands the most frequently, it is quite common for other adults to also use their services, even from children whom they did not know. Again and again during my fieldwork, when a collaborator needed a small item from the market, whether matches, cell phone credit, or AA batteries, or food from a local street vendor, they would catch the attention of the closest child in the vicinity, not uncommonly a child who happened to be walking by on the street, in order to "send a little one," who without exception attended to their needs.

Adults commanded such services as opposed to requesting them, and yet the comportment of the children regularly signified alacrity and dutifulness. During fieldwork, I initially thought that the apparent eagerness of errand-runners derived from self-interest, as some collaborators would reward the child with a small amount of money upon their return. I later discovered, however, that this practice was rare. The eagerness of errand-runners came rather from the fulfillment of a social obligation, one that further integrated them into local social networks comprised of possibly beneficial relationships with local patrons.

Although rare, some adults did give small amounts of money to errand-runners. Children could not, however, keep such gifts for themselves; their parents made it known that they expected the money. When I asked why this was the case, collaborators said that children do not know how to spend money wisely. Through the regular practice of errand running for both family members, the same community members who take part in their caregiving, and to a lesser extent all adults in the general Beninese population, children further develop the general intuitions and contextual framings according to which patron-client relationality is created, maintained, contested, and again made anew. Taken together, the specific contours of Beninese

childrearing coupled with the daily experience of errand running seem to prepare children for a clientelist world.

Although they enter as clients, within the first few years of life, children also begin to relate to other children, particularly younger siblings, as patrons. Beyond physically carrying babies, children are often charged with other aspects of childcare, including feeding, washing, and general vigilance. Rather than structure their inchoate social existence in exclusive reference to parents and other adult caregivers, infants also come to position themselves in reference to older children as well, and according to age. Age establishes one's place within a family hierarchy (see Bay 1998:13). It is age, rather than generic social categories such as "adult," "child," and "baby," that organizes Beninese social life. Indeed, when describing Beninese social life, such categories are inapplicable: in the Fongbe language, the predominant language in the south, there exist no direct translations for such categories. An adult is simple a *me*, or person, but so too can this term describe a child. More commonly, however, people refer to a child is a *vi*, a gender-neutral term for son or daughter that is typically followed by a possessive suffix, indicating his or her parent or benefactor. Interestingly, Beninese regularly extend the term *vi* to clients, just as they commonly extend the terms "papa" and "mama" to particularly generous patrons. The implicit logic of clientelism thus finds further expression in the basic ontological categories of the predominant language in southern Benin.

The figure of the older sibling figures prominently in the lives of Beninese children. Whether in feeding, washing, punishing, or sending children on errands, older siblings are far and away the most involved with childrearing save for the parents themselves. Such a family structure has a practical dimension to it; Beninese families are often quite large, with four or five

mouths to feed, and sometimes more. Moreover, illnesses and traffic accidents not uncommonly rob children of one parent (though rarely both), and so help from older siblings is often needed.

For Beninese families, it is not enough for older siblings to serve as exemplars for their little brothers and sisters, or to protect them when they are in a dangerous situation. Rather, older siblings are directly implicated in every aspect of raising younger siblings; such responsibilities together constitute an unspoken expectation of parents and other family members. Older siblings are, if they are able, expected to supplement the incomes of parents should their means fall short of adequately feeding and providing for all family members. So too are they expected to help with studying and homework. Aunts and uncles, or rather, the siblings of parents, are also generally expected to contribute money if needed, but their assistance is just as likely to take the form of a job opportunity or, in the case of a niece or nephew living in extreme poverty, fostering. Moreover, such obligations are felt far less strongly than those of siblings.

Just as younger siblings receive care from older siblings much in the same way as they do their parents, so too must they obey their commands. Until young adulthood and often beyond, Beninese children are expected to follow the orders of both their parents and their older siblings and without questioning the reason. It is perhaps most helpful to think of older siblings as quasi-intermediaries in a pyramid of patron-client relationships that together constitute an extended family, one that typically involves aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents more than does the American nuclear model. Parents are patrons to all of their children, their clients, and yet within this framework, older siblings are simultaneously clients to their parents and patrons to younger siblings. So too are cousins, although to a lesser extent. Parents, and to a limited extent older siblings are as patrons expected to provide for the needs of younger family members. In

exchange, children (or younger siblings) are expected to be obedient and loyal, and to speak highly of their parents (or older siblings) when in public.

Formal schooling further contributes to the ontological development of patrons and clients, and to the implicit socio-moral logic according to which these emergent categories of actor interrelate. Ostensibly, Beninese schools follow a quantifiably meritocratic regime of grades and grade point averages, just as in France, after which the educational system is modeled, and for that matter the United States. Students with higher marks are far more likely to attend university.

And yet, there also exists a particular comportment among teachers and principals that can only find explanation in a clientelist frame. Over the course of primary and secondary schooling, instructors pay a great deal of attention to the general aptitudes, the strengths and weaknesses, of better students as a means of identifying and then cultivating potential future patrons. Part of this process consists of identifying those students who, generally speaking, perform the best across the disciplines of math, science, French, and history, although it is not at all uncommon for certain deficiencies in one subject to be overlooked if compensated for in others.

Equally important, however, is a student's personality, specifically, their social orientation, that is their ability to connect and be liked by their peers. To encourage the more socially competent high-performing children, teachers favored them with special help, not just extra tutoring and additional preparation for the culminating *baccalaureate* high school exam, but in the case of students from poor backgrounds, went so far as to find benefactors to sponsor their schools fees. They also inflated their grades when needed. In secondary school, when academic performance mattered for college scholarships, teachers would ensure that favored

students had desired grades. As an English teacher affiliated with Peace Corps, before I started my graduate studies, I was regularly amazed and often frustrated by what seemed to me an unfair system. What I did not understand at the time, was that the teachers were operating according to a different socio-moral framework. As one teacher explained to me:

> *You are always looking for smart children, of course. But that is only part of it, you must understand. So what if you have some little genius who is smarter than everyone in say, math, smarter even that the teacher? Those kids exist! But what if they don't know how to talk to other children? What if they bury their nose in a book instead of playing with everyone else on the soccer pitch? What good is that child for everyone else?*

For Westerners, such a perspective might seem strange coming from a teacher, as the sentiment seems to value fleeting popularity as much as academic excellence, if not more so. And yet, according to this perspective, formal schooling functions not just to educate all children while objectifying identifying the more gifted and talented, but to simultaneously identify the better socialized. Doing so is essential according to a clientelist mentality. The same teacher continues:

> *Say you reward and encourage that same little math genius. And he goes on to university, and then gets a nice job with the government or with an NGO. Do you think one day, with his juicy salary, he's going to come back here, to the village where he was born, and feed all of the children who have nothing to eat? That*

same kid who never played on the pitch, never had a lot of friends? Never. He won't even come back to feed his own cousins!

Schooling in southern Benin functions not just for formal instruction, but through the informal comportment of teachers, helped by administrators and local benefactors, also functions to identify and encourage future patrons. In this frame, social acumen figures just as prominently as intellectual ability, and indeed, in a way serves to wrest control over it. In this way, I argue, formal education in southern Benin parallels quite closely Guyer's (1996:13) observation of child rearing in much of West and Central Africa, which represents

triage into those who will be favored, through education, fosterage and other training, and those who will be gradually sidelined, [which is] a function of post-natal social and cultural processes where capabilities and potentials are identified and tracked…manifest inequality exists within families on the basis of personal promise in life…children are produced and treated as wealth.

This wealth is, however, understood less individualistically and more in a communal way. Beninese people raise children in what Guyer correctly identifies as "manifest inequality," and yet in a social and moral context dominated by clientelistic themes and expectations, such inequality serves not as the violation but rather as the *precondition* of seeing to the needs of all. Teachers, administrators, and parents all favor some children over others, but with such favoritism also comes the moral expectation that the favored will ultimately provide for the less so once they have acted on their capabilities. These informal alterations of formal schooling, I

argue, builds directly upon the clientelist themes communicated to children through the sharing of childcare responsibilities and the institution of errand running. Throughout the Beninese experience of childhood, one gradually but continuously absorbs, in a largely intuitive way, the socio-moral logics of clientelism well before one has any experience with the formal political sphere.

By the time they enter young adulthood, Beninese men and women have spent their infancy, childhood, and adolescence slowly absorbing but also enacting the implicit social logics of clientelism. Although they entered the world as a client to their parents, extended family, and neighbors, already by early childhood they have also experienced firsthand the role of patron by being an older brother or sister, a cousin, a helper to childcare providers, and a playmate in the schoolyard. Formal schooling further develops these clientelist themes by favoring those children with demonstrated talents and capabilities, intellectual but also social. As the primary school teacher warned, a poorly socialized child, however bright, offers little to his or her community and thus should attract little community investment.

Beyond schooling, Beninese youth utilize these same clientelistic logics as they navigate their wider social world. For those who end their formal schooling before the completion of secondary school—the majority of Beninese—their understanding of clientelistic exchange guides them through a broad range of employment opportunities. Many youth, particularly those in rural locales, work in agriculture, whether planting, harvesting, or processing. Some work on land belonging to their family or lineage, whereas others labor for landowners in exchange for a negotiated percentage of the yield. In either case, young farm workers act in the capacity of clients, as their superiors generally provide for their immediate needs—food and water—while simultaneously relying on their labor.

Apprenticeship, another instance of clientelistic practice, serves as the predominant relational frame for young workers outside of agriculture. Youth typically hang around a specific workshop, hoping to perform simple errands as a means of demonstrating their motivation and abilities. Indeed, it is quite common to see youth as young as eight years old hovering around a mechanic's shop, joking with other youth and occasionally offering to perform simple tasks for the owner. Over time, established mechanics, tailors, hairstylists, electricians, market vendors, and other business owners all take on young assistants who, through their typically unremunerated labor, acquire the experience needed before starting their own enterprises. Here, the clientelistic relation takes a similar modality as found in farming: the owner, or "patron" as called by his apprentices, provides food and drink but little else besides work experience, while dependent on the labor of his or her "assistants."

The process of finding a mate follows clientelistic themes as well. Beninese youth widely claim that women "attract," "draw in," or "call forth" men with their beauty and their personality. As would-be patrons in a budding relationship, men spend a significant amount of time and effort containing their lover, in the sense of following and scrutinizing her associations, often to the point of jealous obsession. After having sex, it is conventional for men to leave money on the nightstand as a symbolic gesture that they, as responsible patrons, could provide for a family in the future; the more money given the more powerful the gesture, but this amount is entirely up to the discretion of the man. Such exchanges differ fundamentally both in context and in protocol from prostitution, which by convention involves a payment explicitly negotiated and before the act.

Marriage contributes significantly to the larger institutionalization of clientelistic logics in ordinary Beninese life. In Herskovits' (1938) detailed ethnography of Fon social life, he

conceptually divided the many forms of Fon marriage—thirteen in all—into two main types: legitimate and illegitimate. Legitimate marriage, represented by the most widespread practice of *akwénúsì*, "money-with-woman," involved the giving of bridewealth from the family of the groom to the family of the bride (1938:300-333). Bridewealth originally consisted of agricultural produce like millet and grain, *sodabi* and other kinds of liquor, and labor in the fields of the father of the bride. Over time, as southern Benin became integrated into the global capitalist system through the Atlantic slave trade, tobacco, textiles, liquor, and other imported prestige items made their way into bridewealth prestations. At the very minimum, bridewealth had to compensate for the loss of a daughter and lineage member: her labor output and other contributions to the larger group. Particularly wealthy grooms would, however, add yet more bridewealth to increase the prestige of the union. In all cases, the marriage was understood to united two lineages, providing a definite social context for mutual aid. In these arrangements, the giving of bridewealth secured for the husband control of any children born in the marriage.

Historically, legitimate Fon marriages were quite diverse in their arrangements, and yet all shared a clientelistic theme of giving wealth in exchange for control over other people. Fon understandings of bridewealth were quite transactional; in the marriage variation *asidjôsi*, or "woman-give-back-woman," if a man seduces a woman who is already engaged to another, that is, someone who has already started the marriage payments, then the second man must compensate the first for whatever has paid up to that moment, in order for his own proposed marriage to be considered legitimate. In the *adomevodídà*, or "stomach-empty-marriage" variant, it is not the groom who gives bridewealth but rather his male friend. In exchange, the married couple is obligated to give the first-born daughter of their union to the friend.

Illegitimate marriages, known as *xadudô*, or "friend-custody," involved no payment at all. In these arrangements, the union was not between two lineages but rather two individuals. Because the husband had not given bridewealth, he enjoyed no control of the children born to the marriage, again quite clearly following a clientelistic logic. [add a little more here].

Marriage has, however, changed in the eighty years since the time of Herskovits' writing in the 1930s. And yet, despite these changes, the original clientelist emphasis on asymmetrical exchange persists. Perhaps the most notable change has been the economic decline of southern Benin, first through the extraction of agricultural surpluses by the French colonial government and later through the economic disaster of the Kérékou dictatorship, structural adjustment policies, and the injustice of the contemporary international cotton industry. Despite these changes, however, Fon people still place great emphasis on brideswealth. Falen (2009) finds that although the practice of giving bridewealth has declined significantly in recent decades, the percentage of legitimate, *akwénúsì* marriages has stayed about the same. Many Fon husbands simply delay the exchange of bridewealth to a later date, when they plan to have acquired the necessary resources. Years and even decades can pass before the payments are made. Despite this delay, the father nonetheless enjoys full control over his children and the status of being married legitimately. And yet, should a serious marriage dispute arise, the wife and her family will waste no time reminding the husband that his payments have yet to be made, thus bringing the legitimacy of his marriage into question. In southern Benin, so important is the idea of a legitimate marriage based on exchange that even economically unstable couples at least lay claim to it.

Families that do achieve economic stability typically expand, whether through polygamy or fostering, and not uncommonly both. A husband who by his own economic activity provides

for all of the material needs of his wife and children will often pursue a second wife, with particularly wealthy men going so far as to pursue a third wife. Some wealthy men, however, merely claim to pursue an additional spouse, as the statement acts as a cover for sexual encounters outside of his marriage. In my experiences, co-wives get interact with one another quite positively or with significant tension, depending on their individual personalities. What uniformly brings tension and often conflict, however, is a household with insufficient resources. Over the past few decades there has, however, emerged a social stigma to polygamy, particularly in urban centers, as such practices do not conform to a Western-influenced notion of social progress and modernity. For some, polygamy is simply unacceptable. But again, for those who do support polygamy, the crucial question is whether the husband can afford the practice.

Families further pursue expansion through fostering. Fostered children typically consist of nieces and nephews, cousins, and other children in either the mother or father's lineage, who because of poverty and rural isolation have no reliable access to food, water, or formal education. Fostered children can also consist, although less commonly, of close friends of family members, orphans, and neighborhood children from difficult family situations. More prominent families foster such children for as little as a week or until they reach adulthood, depending on the circumstances.

Clientelism as Strategy, Clientelism as Structure

It is early in the morning, just before sunrise. I've taken my motorcycle out of the housing compound and parked it on the street, and am securing my backpack to the seat with

bungee chords. As I do this, my neighbor Estelle is gingerly sweeping the entire compound, gathering dirt and dust. Estelle is nine years old and lives with her family in the apartment next to mine.

As I pick up my motorcycle helmet and put the key in the ignition, Estelle runs up to me and asks me where I am going. I tell her that I'm driving to Cotonou, about a four-hour drive to the south. Her eyes light up and she says, "You should bring me Nestle chocolate." It was early in my field research and I was not yet accustomed to children approaching me and making direct requests; I was further amused that she knew precisely what kind of chocolate that she wanted. While one can buy several French brands of chocolate at various stores and market vendors in Bohicon, like a lot of products from the old metropole the quality is rather poor. Most Beninese in Bohicon strongly favor American brands, which are only available in Cotonou and at a premium.

I return from Cotonou three days later. As I hoist my motorcycle over the threshold to the housing compound, Estelle runs up to me smiling and asks, "*Ete a hen nu mi*?" or "What have you brought me?" While to a Westerner this might be a somewhat pushy way to greet someone after a long trip, for Beninese it is quite common and not at all problematic. Indeed, the phrase "What have you brought me?" is, along with and "It is you," "You have arrived," and "It has been three days [since I last saw you]," one of the most common greetings in Fongbè for this specific social context. To Beninese, there is nothing presumptuous about such a question, in part because there is no hard and fast obligation to bring anything. Except for one's closest intimates—a spouse, a parent, a child, who do have a general expectation of largesse—bringing

gifts is solely up to the discretion of the traveler[10]. And yet, one never knows. Maybe *this* time, there is something to be had, and thus one should always ask.

"What have you brought me?" Estelle repeats as she, now joined by her siblings and their friends, clusters around me. Since Cotonou I had been balancing a second bag in my lap as I drove, the straps interlaced through my arms, and as I park the motorcycle in the compound I dismount somewhat awkwardly. One of the children grabs the bag—for which I am initially grateful—but then opens it and starts to search through it. The Nestle chocolates are somewhere inside. "Hey, stop that! Give that to me," I snap. Of course, I feel somewhat awkward scolding the child, for in Fongbe, travel gifts carry a special designation: *agbankan*, which when translated literally means "to search through the luggage," thus describing precisely what the child was just now doing. The child's acquisitiveness is thus not only sanctioned by local social norms but chartered in local language. So too, however, is my scolding, judging at least from watching Beninese adults in similar situations.

I set aside my bags, motion for Estelle to stay with me while telling the other children to leave the compound, which they do. I open the bag with the chocolate and her eyes widen. "Now, you have to promise to share with your brothers and sisters." She nods. I give her the chocolate and she runs into her family's apartment.

The next day I'm sitting in a hammock in the compound while listening to the radio when I see Estelle's seven-year old brother, Raymund. I ask him, "Did you like the chocolate?" He seems mystified, and so I tell him that I gave chocolate to his older sister, and had told her to share some of it with him. Apparently he had received nothing. His confusion quickly transitioned to sadness, and he begins to cry. Estelle quickly appears to tend to him, but he

[10] I did not, of course, learn this nuanced point until well into my field research. For the first several months of my fieldwork, I went to considerable lengths (and expenditure) to always return from trips with chocolate, pens, high quality batteries, lighters, and several bottles of *sodabi*.

angrily refuses her attempts to console him, but instead demands his share of chocolate. I then ask her about the chocolate. She says nothing.

Later that night I'm drinking *sodabi* with Estelle and Raymund's father, Maxime. In an assumed avuncular role, I recount the story. Maxime listens carefully, a look of both amusement and frustration on his face. "You are a generous neighbor and the kids like you. But next time, please give the chocolate to me. Here, it is like that." Maxime went on to explain that although I had told Estelle to share with her siblings, that instead of giving the chocolate directly to them, she rather gave it to Rosine, her mother, who then redistributed the chocolate to their children. Rosine did not, however, give anything to Raymund, as Raymund had, along with his friends, recently killed a neighbor's chicken by throwing rocks at it. Maxime and the other fathers had subsequently collected money to compensate the owner for the loss. When redistributing the Nestle chocolate to her other children, Nadine had reminded Raymund that because of the chicken he would get nothing. Reading the frustration on his face, I then asked Raymund if my attempted equal redistribution complicated the punishment of his son. "Well, yeah. It does. He's a little one; he doesn't know the difference between right and wrong. The chocolate would have told him that everything is fine when it is not." For a moment Raymund then studied my face, obviously perplexed.

From this simple domestic experience, many of the major contours of daily clientelistic social practices in southern Benin come to the fore. First, it is clients who initially compel patrons to redistribute to them. Whereas much of the anthropological literature suggests that patrons are the primary actor in clientelistic practices, in southern Benin I consistently saw the opposite. Indeed, much of the daily life of a poor Beninese is dedicated to either the discovery of new patron relationships or the careful maintenance of preexisting ties.

Second, clients occupy a dense network of kin, affines, friends, rivals, and other relations the navigating of which requires significant negotiation and finesse. The elicitation, reception, further redistribution, or abstention of patronage constitutes a prominent site for the creation, maintenance, and reconfiguring of local social relations.

Third, patrons exert their agency in these relationships by giving more to some and less (or nothing at all) to others, and by doing so attempt to structure local social life. Central to patron practice is the knowledge that they must constantly compete with other patrons for the loyalty, praise, and labor of clients. While clients elicit, patrons contain.

Beninese adults and children alike regularly ask those of higher social statuses for gifts and favors, as demonstrated in the beginning of this scene with Estelle's direct request for Nestle chocolate. Moreover, this convention is explicitly written into the Fongbe language. Not only do people regularly greet traveling kin, friends, and other intimates with the question, "What have you brought for me?" but the elicitory nature of clients finds further expression in the term for travel gift: *agbankan*, or again "search through the luggage." Such expressions both suggest and articulate an implicit charter for the client-driven elicitation of material wealth.

In daily social life, poorer men and women express their clientelistic agency most commonly through greetings and informal small talk. When wealthier individuals stop by a poorer neighborhood, it is common to see people in the street wave to them, or whistle at them and smile with markedly greater frequency than with people of the same or lower social status. Other neighbors physically approach wealthy visitors, smiling and often bowing as they do, typically offering themselves for a possible handshake. All of these forms of greetings, my collaborators reported, provided opportunities for material redistribution.

It must be stressed, however, that this pragmatic function of greetings is but one aspect, that both clients and patrons value greetings not merely as potential vectors for asymmetrical exchange but also for their social cohesion and for the effervescence that they engender. In the minds of my collaborators, these multiple aspects are indistinguishable, imbricated so tightly at the very foundation of daily social life as to fold into one another.

Clients further create situations of possible asymmetrical exchange by taking walking tours of their neighborhood or quarter, actively seeking new opportunities by being constantly on the lookout for possible benefactors. Virtually every moment of social life is, to a certain degree, oriented to the search for new benefactors and the careful balancing of social relationships accordingly.

Beyond these walking tours, ordinary Beninese have come to rely quite heavily on cell phones to further mediate their regular elicitations. Cell phones in southern Benin are almost exclusively pay-as-you-go, with a minute of call time costing the caller (but not the answerer) anywhere from one to three dollars, depending on the network. With such high rates, most Beninese are very careful with their usage.

Starting around seven in the morning and going until after ten at night, people ring potential benefactors anywhere from once to five times a day. Those who can afford ten seconds of connection time will wait for an answer and then greet the prospective patron, ask about his or her family, their health, and their job, and go onto briefly express a pleasantly just as "have a nice day" before abruptly hanging up. Most clients, however, cannot afford ten seconds, especially if they have five to ten prospective patrons in mind, and so they rather "beep" them, that is, ring them for two to three seconds in order to both solicit attention and have their number register on the recipient's phone, but without having to pay for a connection.

These phone greetings, both calls and beeps, occur in a steady rhythm throughout the day, somewhat increasing around three in the afternoon, that is, at the end of the daily rest period, and then falling back down until around nine at night, when they pick up again and for about an hour. Somewhat wealthy patrons, I found, rarely picked up these calls, and only occasionally called back the numbers. Acknowledging this low rate of success, one client nonetheless maintained that through such greetings "a big person knows that you are thinking of them and not someone else. That matters eventually." Extremely wealthy patrons, by contrast, were actually more likely to pick up such calls, a seeming paradox that I will address later in the chapter.

As I write this dissertation, living in the United States with two years having passed since I completed my dissertation fieldwork, I still receive phone calls—and even more beeps—from a handful of collaborators. Most such calls are at odd hours when I am asleep, due to the seven-hour difference in time zone, and so I rarely pick up. Over time, it seems, my collaborators have somewhat changed their strategy. In the fall of 2015, about eighteen months since my I completed my fieldwork, a close friend texted me that his sister had died and that he could not afford the burial expenses. I sent him some money via Western Union. A month later, another collaborator, whom I knew was in regular contact with the first, also texted to report a difficult time and asked for money. Using texts is not very common in southern Benin, as they also cost money to send. After several months of beeps had provided nothing, however, my collaborators seemed to take a different approach. My research assistance favors emails, sending me about once a week, just to say hello and ask about my family. Whether when acting in southern Benin or when eliciting wealth from outside, clients constitute the central actors in local patron-client relations.

One must, however, also stress that clients do not pursue patrons in a social vacuum. Rather, both groups must constantly negotiate their social surroundings, filled as they are with other clients and other patrons. Such negotiations are critical for successful navigations. When, for instance, I gave chocolate to Estelle, she was forced to weigh my explicit directions to share with her brother Raymond versus her general understanding that she must first give all of the material wealth that she came upon to one of her parents, coupled with her knowledge that Raymond was at that time in trouble, and thus should not be given chocolate at all. Raymond, for his part, understandably doubtful that Estelle's following of protocol would serve his immediate interests, rather strategically conformed his implicit moral expectations to mine, that is, an American understanding rooted in equality, in order to further facilitate acquisition, thus his tantrum when he did not receive chocolate.

Clients are always navigating these complex networks of relations. When making the rounds of their daily neighbor walks, clients are of course focused on finding new benefactors. And yet they are careful to maintain good relationships with other clients whom they pass, waving to and greeting virtually everyone they see. As one collaborator explained,

> *You are always keeping an eye open for a rich person, obviously. But at the same time, you never know who among your neighbors might have just found a windfall, so it is important to maintain a relationship with them, so that they might in turn help you out in those situations. Even if they don't share with you, they might tell you where they received their good fortune, and so you yourself can target them. Also, you always have to guard against jealously and witchcraft. So yes, generally you greet everyone you see.*

So too, however, must patrons navigate these networks. In a social world in which a colonially-imposed notion and practice of contract is implemented at best fitfully and irregularly, and thus experienced with deep suspicion by many Beninese, the social convention of patron-client relationships offer security but also opportunity.

Patrons exert their agency in these relationships by giving more to some and less (or nothing at all) to others, and by doing so attempt to structure local social life. Patrons, my findings demonstrate, devote significant time, thought, and effort to not only what or how much they distribute to clients, but also which persons will ultimately constitute their clientage in the first place. This patron-client dynamic, visible on a daily basis in every home, compound, market stall, and restaurant, in short, throughout Beninese social life, readily conforms to Wagner's classic formulation: clients elicit while patrons contain.

For their part, patrons devote their activity not only to what they redistribute and to whom, but also to the expected social consequences of such actions. For Nadine, the mother, the differentiated redistribution of chocolate provided a powerful opportunity to teach her son Raymund a lesson about morality and general social normativity. The selective distribution of candies, chocolate, toys, and other pleasure-bringing indulgences was equally important in the correct socialization of Beninese youth.

Clientelist Logics in Daily Life

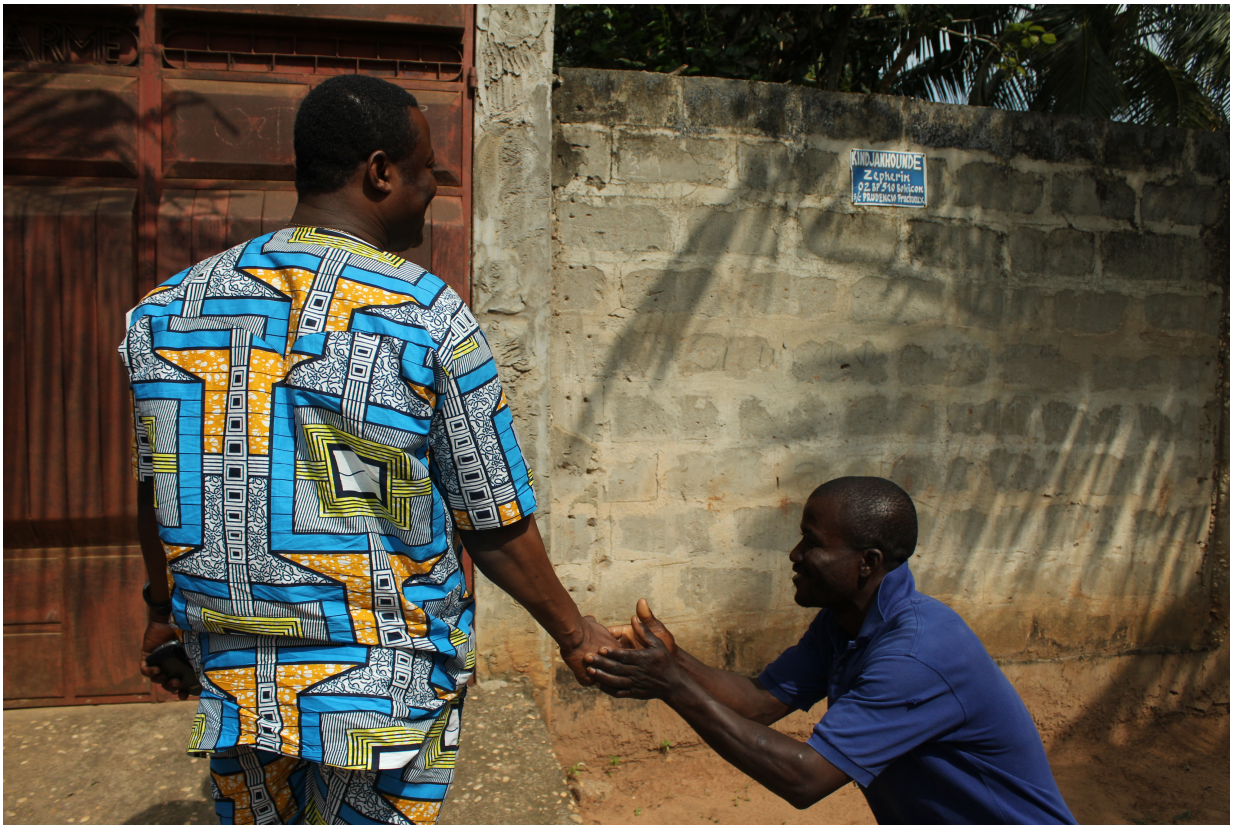
As children, Beninese men and women are introduced into a social world significantly ordered by vertical relationships created by the asymmetrical exchange of material goods for loyalty, praise, and labor. The lessons communicated through both the regularly shared tasks of

caregiving and equally distributed instances of corporal punishment—the fundamental distinction between patrons and clients, the great benefit and great pain that patrons can provide—are regularly dramatized in ordinary Beninese social life, starting with social greetings. Through the specificities of address, timing, and body comportment, greetings communicate a great deal about the hierarchical contours of social life in southern Benin. Most typically, it is patrons who ostensibly greet clients, and not the other way around, although in reality it is clients who go to great lengths to set the stage, as it were, for the greeting.

When a patron first becomes visible, such as by stepping out of a car or walking into or out of a building or compound, clients consistently stop what they are doing to approach patrons. And yet such an approach cannot be too direct or obvious. In order to avoid annoying their superiors, clients are mindful of a host of variables. Is the patron speaking with another high status person, either in person or on the phone? If so, then clients will politely wait for an opportunity to initiate the preparation without interrupting. When the time is right, clients will approach the patron but will not extend their hands but rather wait for the patron to do so. When shaking the hand of a patron, clients typically grasp their outstretched right hand with both of their hands.

Collaborators reported that using two hands is reserved either for patrons on all occasions or for dear friends and family members whom one has not seen for an extended amount of time. In both cases, the two-handed greeting communicates a particular appreciation and even a reverence for the relationship.

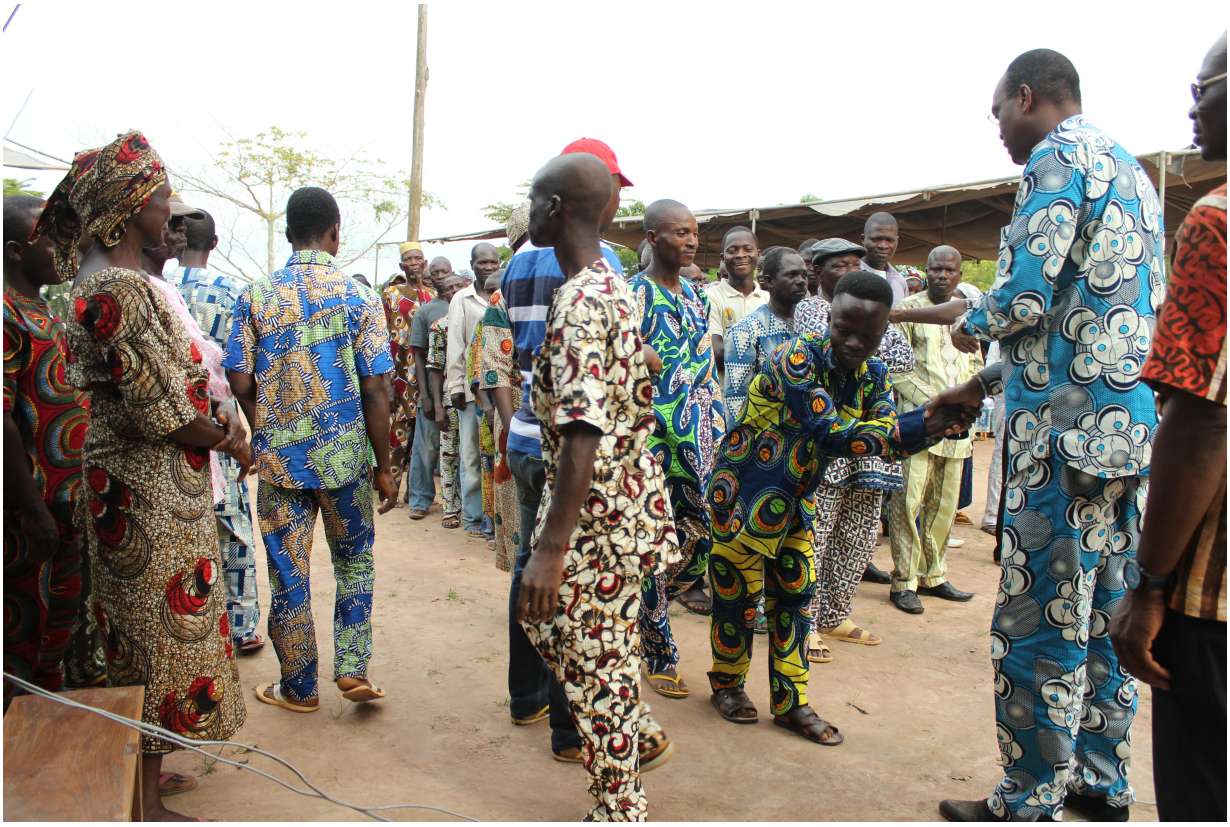
Clients also make themselves smaller than their patron by bowing as they greet, most often by kneeling but also by utilizing stair steps and ramps when available. Does the patron seem to be in a particular rush? If so, then clients might wave at them with both hands rather than



Picture 1: Upon his arrival, a political elite greets a client just outside the former's family compound.

stop them to shake their hand. Most often, clients will look up at their patron and smile as they shake their hand, but when greeting a particularly important or generous patron, clients will bow their heads and look to the ground as a way of glorifying their superior byrendering themselves, for that moment, a social non- person. This theme is consistent with historical accounts from the nineteenth century. Burton (1863:45) reported that when subjects greeted the king during rituals such as *xwetanu*, or Annul Customs, they would sometimes cover their faces with dirt in order to further debase themselves and thereby honor the king. I argue that in greeting a particularly powerful patron, contemporary Beninese men and women follow a similar logic by looking down to the ground.

Through their bodily comportment clients consistently evince rigidity, which communicates that they are making a great effort to properly follow social protocol in greeting a



Picture 2: Beninese presidential candidate Lehady Soglo, son of former Beninese President Nicephore Soglo, meets with campaign volunteers during a political rally held outside of Abomey in June 2013.

superior. Patrons, by contrast, are at ease. Their movements are slower, less elaborate, smoother, and more casual than those of clients. Patrons are not uncommonly busy speaking to others, particularly on the phone. I often saw clients back away from them in such instances in order to not disturb them, then the patron signaling to them that they would greet them while not interrupting their discussion, and then the client proceeding with a full and sincere greeting to be met with the patron's halfhearted and distracted return greeting. Clients can, however, release such rigidity depending on social signals provided by the patron. If, for instance, the patron goes beyond basic protocol to ask specific questions about the client or his or her family, then the tonality of the entire conversation instantly changes: the client relaxes, and the two typically go on to have a brief though intimate exchange.

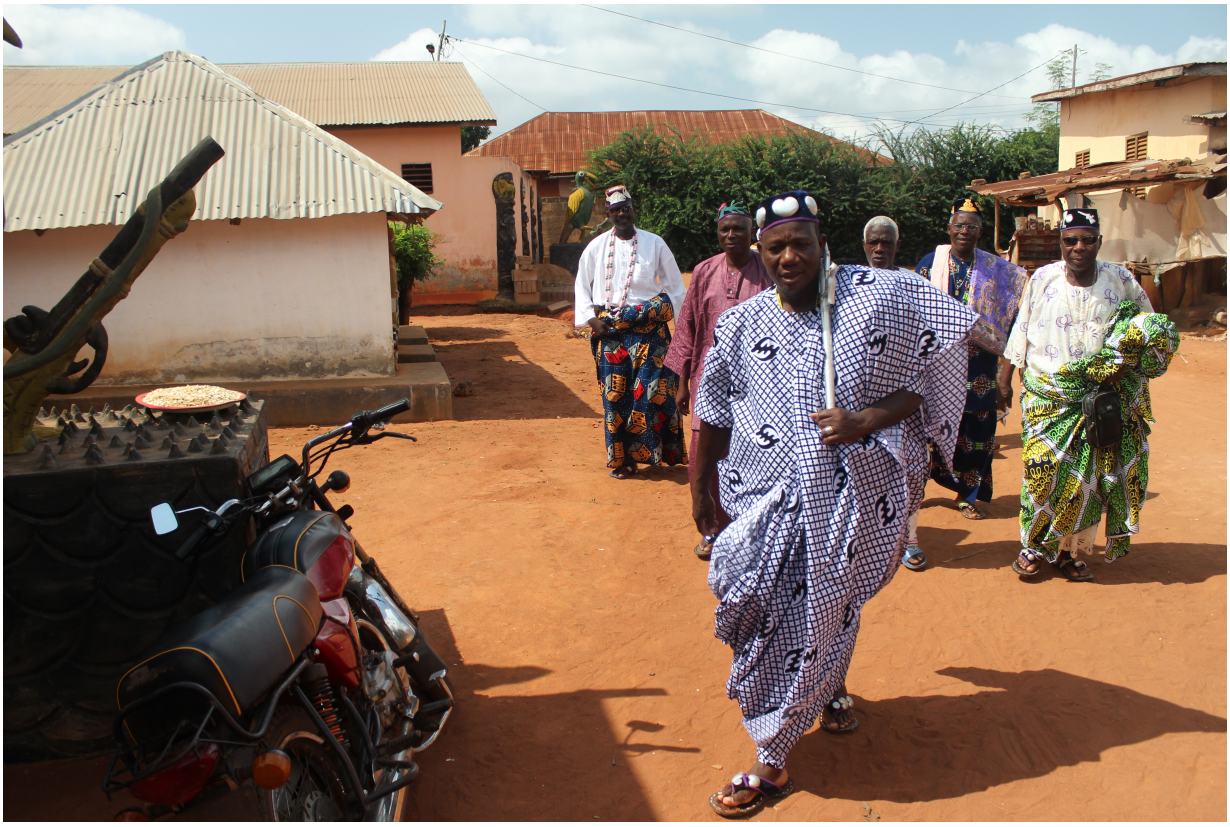
Beyond social greetings, patrons and clients are visually distinguishable in public by dress, hygiene, and general comportment. In terms of dress, social rank is directly indexed to the quantity of visible cloth, its quality and its cleanliness. Lower ranking people, many of them farmers and ambulatory vendors, are clients to most and patrons to few, typically their own children who are also clients to more wealthy aunts and uncles. Lower ranking people often wear second-hand, loose-fitting polos or t-shirts rendered either tan or dark brown by their demanding work. Many farmers are habitually shirtless, and typically wear second-hand athletic shorts and inexpensive plastic flip-flops. Lower ranking women often go shirtless as well, particularly in more rural locales. For dental hygiene, in the morning men and women chew on strips of wood and spit out the fibers as they soften and break off.

Above them in rank, members of the middle class, whether market vendors, tailors, metal smiths, or mechanics typically alternate between the dress of farmers and *boumbas*, a conventional style of dress that consists of a tunic and pants for men, a full-length dresses for women, made of brightly colored imported cloth. Those in the middle class are just as often patrons as they are clients. For both genders such outfits typically pair with black or brown leather open-toe sandals. Most daily *boumbas* are for men simple with short sleeves, and for women have simple necklines. Cloth for most *boumbas* is typically inexpensive, costing a few dollars a meter, and the quality is often low. Handcrafted embroidery, which can be incredibly elaborate (and expensive), along with long sleeve tunics for men, is for both genders typically reserved for formal occasions such as weddings, funerals, and special religious observances. Women are likely to have short and simple hairstyles, not only because of the high price of tressing, a beautifully intricate art of hair dressing found throughout West Africa, but because many tressing styles render the head less conducive to carrying objects, such as basins for

hauling water, grain, or various merchandise. Male clients have their haircut less often than patrons and are less likely to shave on a daily basis; it is not uncommon to see one-week stubble. Middle class people typically chew strips of woods but complement the habit with Western-style toothpaste and toothbrushes as their means allow.

Patrons, by contrast, wear either *boumbas* of expensive, high quality material or Western-style business suits and ties. Again, there exists an unstated though unmistakable correlation between social rank and the quantity, quality, and cleanliness of clothing. Whereas farmers, both men and women, wear very little clothing, again often going shirtless, and members of the middle class typically wear simple *boumbas* of inexpensive low quality, patrons regularly wear expensive cloth, and plenty of it. The price of expensive cloth can be five to six times the cloth typically worn by middle class people.

Male patrons often wear a "trois pieces," or *juhlabo*, in which they add a flowing robe of matching material to an embroidered long sleeve *boumba*, with the seam of the robe running down the shoulders. The robe often interferes with using one's arms, and so patrons regularly crank their shoulders from down and back to up and front, with their
arms outstretched, in order to bunch the robe on top of their shoulders. The result is a dramatic and even aggressive gesture, one that young children, particularly boys, often emulate in both mockery and awe once a patron has left their surroundings. As an alternative to the *juhlabo*, male patrons, particularly *Da* lineage heads in Abomey, convey their wealth and status by balancing a carefully folded meter of the same expensive, untailored cloth on their shoulder. Some patrons go beyond the small amount of folded material to far larger amounts twisted and wrapped around either their legs or wastes, sometimes throwing such material over their shoulders. I did observe



Picture 3: A *Da*, or lineage head, wears a conventional *boumba* but with several meters of excess close thrown over his shoulder, visibly conveying wealth.

women doing the same, but only during *nyijiyi,* or "mounting the bull" ceremony in Abomey. Higher-ranking men and women typically wear closed-toe black or brown leather shoes,except for *Da* who wear ornate sandals that index Dahomean royalty. Men typically have their hair cut once a week and shave every morning. Some wear a mustache but most are clean shaven; beards necessarily indicate followers of Islam, who are relatively uncommon in the south. For dental hygiene, few patrons chew on strips of wood as they instead prefer toothpaste, toothbrushes, and even mouthwash.

Female patrons convey their status not only with expensive cloth, but also with stylish cuts to their dresses that only an accomplished (and expensive) tailor can create. In public, they typically wear makeup and, increasingly, skin lightening creams. Women also typically spend large sums of money for tressing their hair, with intricate designs,

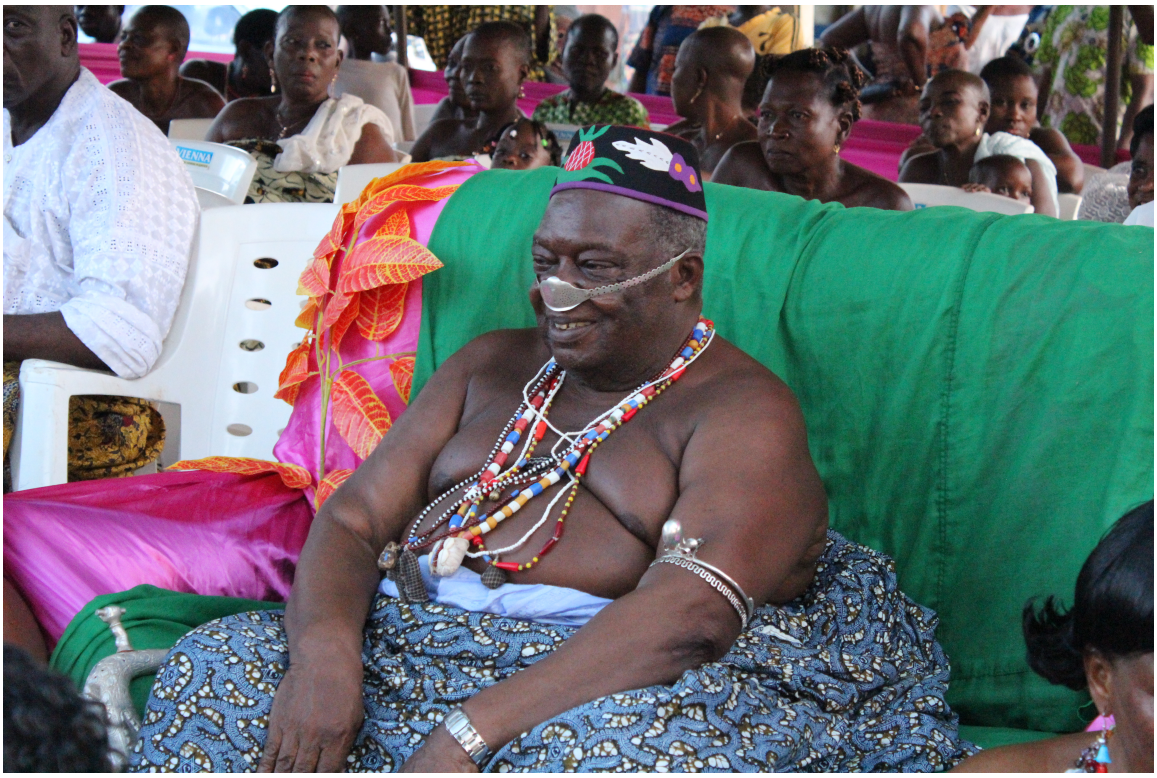
stunning in both their beauty and complexity, sitting on top of the head to convey the impossibility of carrying objects such as water basins. Both genders further convey their status with hats of different kinds. Different styles of men's headwear convey membership to either a religion, such as Vodun or Islam, or to a region, such as Abomey or Porto Novo. Women's hats, made of cloth, are often striking in their resemblance to crowns, and have a vague connotation to Christian church services, although this is not an exclusive distinction. Generally speaking, the higher one's status, the more likely one is to be a patron and less likely a client, and the more clothing, makeup, and accessories one will typically wear, and the higher the quality.

There does exist, however, a wrinkle in this seemingly straightforward dress protocol, in part because these rules seem to apply only in public. In private, something of an inversion seems to take place. Patrons rarely visit their clients in their homes, to the extent that such a visit usually bodes ill for the client: an outstanding debt or a social offense. Normally, it is clients who visit patrons, and at their homes. When clients do, they typically dress as well as they can afford, almost to the point of emulating their patron. Farmers will thus wear a *boumba*, if they have one, and middle class members will typically wear the nicest *boumba* they own, although they do seem to refrain from the *trois pieces*, as it directly and unequivocally indexes patron status. When clients visit their patrons, they usually meet in the latter's salon, where together they lounge on luxurious overstuffed leather chairs in air conditioning provided by an expensive wall unit, a large screen television often broadcasting France 24 or a local Beninese station in the background. While the client, dressed in his or her best, conveys a comportment of formality, the patron is invariably at ease, lounging with his or her feet on a table or footrest, with much of the expensive cloth cast aside, usually on the back of a chair. Male patrons are usually shirtless or

perhaps wearing a white undershirt, whereas female patrons typically wear either a bra or a simple t-shirt.

When I asked clients why they dressed up while patrons dressed down, they said that doing so shows respect to the patron. Strictly correlative, the dressing down of patrons signals the ease and informality of their privileged position. When I asked clients why the patron did not dress up in order to show respect to them, they invariably expressed surprise, with comments such as "To respect *me*? Who am I to *him*? He is someone who is known, a personality." In an intriguing parallel to Marx's fetishized description of capital accumulation, another collaborator said, "Little people, they must run everywhere to chase money. But big people? It is money who chases *them*, even as they are sitting comfortably at their house, even as they sleep in their beds."

And yet, there might be more to this private paradox than simple bodily comfort. In Abomey, site of the many royal palaces built by the rulers of the military regime of Dahomey, the "King of Abomey" is a public figure with a great amount of informal political influence in regional and even national politics. The present king, named Agoli-Agbo as he is a descendant of the last ruler of Dahomey, who reigned from 1894 to 1900, is always shirtless when he appears at various formal public events and rituals. Though bedecked in colorful necklaces, a special hat adorned with the symbols of Agoli Agbo's rule, a metal nose mask through which the king is said to breathe a more refined air, and a great deal of cloth bunched around his waste, the king never wears a shirt or tunic. When I asked my collaborators why this was the case, they said that "the king is reminding us who we are, that before Europeans came with their cloth, we were all shirtless." To my outsider's mind, there also seems to be a cyclical aspect to the hierarchy of dress and the positions in which different people find



Picture 4: Agoli-Agbo, the namesake of the last king of Dahomey, who reigned from 1894 to 1900, and current King of Abomey, the site of the Dahomean royal palaces. Notice that though he is wearing several necklaces and has plenty of cloth around his waist, he is shirtless.

themselves. The king is the only figure to appear shirtless in public, besides the poorest of farmers.

In terms of bodily comportment, clients or again, *mɛ pevi* or "little person" in Fongbe, often speak with soft voices and typically refrain from making eye contact with their *mɛ daxo*, or "big person." While patrons are often physically bigger than clients, owing mostly to a richer and more bountiful diet, they also habitually accentuate this difference but walking with either their chests or their bellies puffed up. Clients also know how to appear small and diminutive in public. When walking, clients often straighten their left arm behind their back while bending their right arm, also behind their back, at a right angle, with the right forearm crossing the small of their back to grasp the

elbow of the left arm. The head, somewhat strained by this position, is often stooped, looking downward. Such simple body language powerfully projects an image of subservience. When discussing this comportment with a close friend and collaborator, I tried the position myself and found it rather uncomfortable. My friend laughed as he watched and immediately said, "You are too big and too fat to do such a thing." Not only does this body language reduce ones visible presence in a clear display of deference, but also one has to be physically small to successfully assume it in the first place.

Beninese patrons and clients further distinguish themselves through their very different relationships to time. Generally speaking, people are quite casual in regard to time. People of approximately equal social status, with no kind of patron-client relationality between them, often agree to meet in general terms of morning or afternoon, and such a distinction seems to be related to the *repos*, or rest, which occurs roughly
between noon and three in the afternoon. Even if appointments are set for a certain hour, Beninese will typically come later by anywhere from half an hour to two hours.

Between patrons and clients, however, time is treated very differently. Patrons are typically late to visits with their clients and not infrequently fail to show up altogether while, conversely, clients are quite punctual when meeting their patrons. Because of this, it is quite common for clients to wait, sometimes for many hours, to see their benefactors, if at all. Patrons are habitually late in part because of their schedules. Patrons are typically busy with maintaining personal contact with both their clients, fellow patrons of their same status, and sometimes still greater patrons to whom they act as clients. And yet, they are quite careful in deciding for whom they will be late.

Once, when meeting for the first time a successful local businessman and deputy to the mayor of Bohicon, at his house, I was quite surprised by his availability; less than three minutes had passed between my arrival and check in with the security guard overseeing the house, and my warm welcome by the deputy himself. During my introduction, I started to describe my research project; the deputy politely interrupted me saying, "So you are a researcher? I was told you were an entrepreneur." Such a misunderstanding was rather common, in part because white (mostly French) businessmen regularly came through the city to pursue investment projects with the mayor, and in part because in the French language, relatively unknown *anthropologues* can be easily confused with well-known (and well celebrated) foreign *entrepreneurs*. After our initial meeting, the deputy escorted me to just outside the gate of his housing compound, and was visibly surprised that I drove a motorcycle instead of a car or truck. About a week later, when I met with the same deputy a second time, I waited for over forty-five minutes, a pattern that would continue for the duration of my fieldwork.

Making clients wait had yet another benefit, as I would learn late in my stay. I had come to know a local political figure quite well and as our relationship had become relatively informal, I once asked him directly about waiting for "big people." He said, equally directly, that waiting "makes the big person even bigger." I did not follow. He went on to explain that the more important a big person is, the more busy their schedules tend to be, and that everyone knows this. In order to exaggerate one's importance, patrons with waiting clients not uncommonly made clients wait longer than they otherwise would, and solely to leave a bigger impression. "When someone little is waiting for you," my collaborator further explained, "they're going to be thinking about you a lot, even if they're not happy about it. And that is what big people want – for people to think about them." He did, however, qualify the statement by saying that if the

client waits for too long, then they will become suspicious. Making clients wait, then, was something of an art.

And yet, as with dress, a kind of inversion seemed to take place as one reached the top of Beninese social hierarchy. The biggest and most well-known patrons, either incredibly successful businessmen or the most elite of political figures (and quite commonly both), made a point out of being punctual, and for all people at all times. It was paradoxically at the homes or offices of the biggest patrons that I waited the least amount of time, generally no more than ten minutes past the hour of our agreed meeting. Once, after a positive afternoon meeting with a prominent entrepreneur at his office in Cotonou, my field assistant and I had dinner together at our favorite restaurant in the city. Several beers into the conversation, I expressed my surprise that a man of such stature had walked into his office only five minutes late to our meeting, recalling the dozens of other meetings with far smaller patrons for which I had waited for over an hour. After a brief pause, my assistant smiled at me and told me that he had overheard the entrepreneur's secretary talking on the cell phone in the hallway, and had gathered that on the way to the meeting his car had broken down. Rather than be significantly late, the entrepreneur left his driver with the car, hailed a motorcycle taxi, and arrived at the office only minutes past the hour. I watched as my assistant's eyes seemed to glaze over as he reflected upon the events of the afternoon. "Such an individual is more than a big rich person and a great patron. He is a *mɛjɔmɛ*." While I had heard the term before, this was the first time I had heard my assistant use the term. Later in the dissertation I devote an entire chapter to *mɛjɔmɛ*.

In keeping with the general theme of scurrying clients and relaxed patrons demonstrated by social greetings, the former invariably traveled to visit the latter, either at their office or at their home. In the twin cities of Bohicon and Abomey, where I conducted most of my research,

particularly wealthy or important patrons divided their time between their local homes and separate residences in Cotonou, the economic capital of the country, about a four hour drive to the south. Many such people spent the week in Cotonou and the weekend back home.

Due to this schedule, for many prominent patrons Saturday mornings seemed to be unofficially reserved for meeting with clients. At such time the homes of high status patrons are bustling with relatives, neighbors, and other clients and often a palpable feeling of conviviality. The serving of *sodabi*, or locally distilled palm wine, is quite common. Clients as well as their friends gather either in a downstairs living room or outside but within the compound gate.

Inside spaces typically seemed more casual, even festive. Here, mostly men would gather close together on mats made of straw or plastic, and would often watch the news or dubbed Brazilian soap operas while passing around a bottle. They typically seemed relaxed and jovial, often playfully teasing one another. While Beninese men usually enjoy the company of their friends and neighbors, I was always struck by some other element that clearly intensified the shared mirth of those assembled.

In houses where clients instead gathered outside but within the compound walls, the mood was generally more sober. Instead of sitting close and joking with one another while watching television, outside clients would sit either in a row of plastic chairs or on a wooden bench and quietly gossip while watching neighborhood children play around them, with a relative of the patron, typically either a son, daughter, or cousin, would quietly pour shots of sodabi. Although less festive, one could nonetheless feel the same relaxed sense of ease and commensality as clients awaited to meet with their benefactor.

During this time the patron would sit in his salon and welcome clients one by one. His salon was invariably the most ornate in the house, and was almost always located on the top floor

of the house and often connected directly to an outdoor patio. Salons were beautifully decorated with pastel tiles that formed elaborate patterns on the floor. The walls were either themselves tiled or painted with rich colors and textures. On the walls hung generic oil paintings, either of bucolic European scenery or "ethnic" paintings that artisans typically sold to tourists visiting Cotonou. So too was there what looked like a desk calendar hanging on the wall, with the current year showing as well as the calendar's sponsor, often either the political party that the patron supported or a prominent local business, in both cases sometimes the patron's own. An invariably there was a large portrait of the patron himself, either an official picture as was the case with political figures, or an artist's rendering. High-end consumer electronics, overstuffed leather couches, glass top coffee tables and end tables, and a cabinet with several bottles of whisky and *sodabi* filled the room.

Such salons were typically much more ornate than the rest of the residence. Whether the quality of the furniture, the newness of the electronics, or the amount of decoration on the walls, there was a noticeable difference between these rooms and other rooms in the house, including the kitchen, and the bedrooms of the patron's children but himself as well, which clients never saw. Neither the spouse nor the children of the patron ever stepped foot in this salon, except to clean it, which they did with more vigor and with greater frequency than all other rooms in the house. When considered in tandem with conventions of greeting, dress, and waiting, the salon brings forth a number of general patterns to clientelist relationality in southern Benin. Most apparent, perhaps, is a binary correlation of patron : up :: client : down. As discussed previously, clients will bow and even take advantage of ramps and stair steps to make themselves smaller than their patrons, that is, they gravitate to a much lower position. When greeting a seated patron, clients ill crouch before them, deftly balancing their weight on the balls of their feet, in order to

Picture 4: During a political campaign rally, a volunteer organizer for the party squats before a prominent politician and widely celebrated patron as they warmly greet one another. Notice the money in the client's hands, which the patron had just given to him.

achieve a lower position. In Fongbe, again the most common terms for patrons and clients, *me daxo* and *me pevi*, big person and small person respectively, add another dimension to the basic up-down binary. So too does dress. Whereas patrons typically wear a significantly more clothing, that because it is loose-fitting makes them look bigger than they are. The julahbo, or *trois piece,* serves as the pinnacle of this basic trend. This patron-up, client-down differentiation is also writing onto body posture. As previously mentioned, patrons typically walk with either their chest or belly puffed out, which elongates the spine and makes them stand as tall as their height will permit. Clients, by contrast, typically walk with one hand grasping the elbow of the opposite arm, which naturally contracts the spine and lowers him or her into a stooped position.

This basic binary correlation is further written onto Beninese houses. Again, the

homes of prominent patrons are much larger than those of their clients, and the optimistic idea of consistent growth over time is reflected in the very process of home building, as roofs are generally built flat and with load-bearing columns and jutting rebar to facilitate the addition of future floors. Although the physical size of patron houses is much bigger, Beninese people virtually never refer to them in terms of size. Rather, they use the French term for upper floor—*étage*—to make the distinction. Again, it is the vertical dimension that people generally identify with patrons. Moreover, when clients visit prominent patrons in their homes, it is again and again to an upper floor where the patron's salon is to be found, and often attached to an external patio as to provide a sweeping view of people below.

Another general pattern to be found across these disparate aspects of daily life is ornateness. Both in their habitual dress and in the appearance of their salons, patrons connote a sense of refinement that clients do not share. Whereas clients are known for their rather casual use of clothing, patrons are regularly bedecked in elaborate and beautiful materials. As are their salons, with expensive tile, paint, electronics, furniture, and decorations all making for a powerful impression. While patrons are of course more wealthy than clients, I argue that there is something more to this distinction than mere conspicuous consumption. For one, patrons seem to emphasize not only expensive materials, whether in their salon or on their bodies, but they also stress the importance of splendor, and seemingly for its own sake. Second, the difference between the ornateness of the patron's salon and the other rooms of his house, which again are quite spartan, is stark.

Finally, there exists a significant degree of performativity related to the positionalities of patrons and clients. Many patrons prolong the waiting time of visiting clients in order, as was explained to me, to make them yet bigger in their eyes. And yet, paradoxically, patrons also seem

to perform the ease of their position, so important to cultivating a sense of awe among clients. While patrons are so powerful that money itself seems to pursue them, in reality I found particularly prominent patrons to be incredibly busy, with their government post or responsibilities as an businessman to be sure, but perhaps even more so with the cultivation and maintenance of scores of important relationships. Their high position seemed to permit them to answer phones in the middle of conversations, but at the same time, their phones seemed to be ringing almost constantly.

For their part, clients expended a great deal of energy and effort in assuming their social role as such. Whenever in the presence or even view of a patron, whether in greeting, meeting with them in their salon, or performing requested tasks, clients consistently performed a heightened sense of diligence in the hopes of pleasing their benefactors. When speaking one on one with their patrons, clients also tended to exaggerate the difficulty of their situation as a means of inspiring the patron to intervene on their behalf.

Such performativity interacts with ornateness in complex ways, as demonstrated by the inversions of dress that often happen in the salons of patrons when clients visit. Again, clients typically dress as well as their means allow, often wearing the highest quality and most formal outfit that they own when visiting important patrons.

They do this, I was told, in order to pay respect to the patron, particularly at his home and in his salon. Patrons, by contrast, in keeping with the supposed ease of their position, often lounged in luxurious but comfortable clothing, and not uncommonly dressed down to a white undershirt or no shirt at all. The public appearances of the king seemed, by contrast, to be of a distinct if related register.

Chapter Four:

Politics

This chapter describes local politics in southern Benin, with a particular focus on the political campaign of newcomer Paul Kenou, a high school principal running for the Zogbodomey City Council but with ambitions for higher office. Through Kenou's negotiation of local political clientelist networks I articulate the specific contours and general themes of political life in this part of the world.

I wait until this, the final chapter of the dissertation to discuss the formal sphere of Beninese politics because I required the preceding chapters to develop a conceptual approach that understands local political activity in local terms. In this way I intentionally depart from political science and its normative preoccupation with Western government models and their attending expectations.

And so, in order to properly understand Kenou's campaign in appropriate theoretical terms, I build on the previous chapters of this dissertation. In chapter one, I examined the history of southern Benin, and argued that clientelism has constituted the dominant political logic and practice in this region for the past three hundred years. I went on to argue that the core logic of Beninese clientelism is structured according to a gift-economy—what I call *gift-clientelism*—that first emerged as a moral, social, and political economy in small lineage villages and was marked by social interdependence and the circulation of value stored in people. This small-scale model began to break down as the basis for political organization as confederations of villages formed in the region, a decline exacerbated by the instability wrought by the intrusion of the transatlantic slave trade. It was in this precarious context that an emergent Dahomey reconfigured the practice of local gift-clientelism according to the workings of the slave trade to produce what I termed

commodity-clientelism, marked by the reciprocal independence of actors and the accumulation of value stored in objects. The transformation in practice effected by the Dahomeian state did not, however, destroy the logic of gift-clientelism, but rather utilized its moral, social, and political legitimacy in the eyes of Dahomeian subjects to validate Dahomeian rule. In this way, the Dahomeian state relied on the moral legitimacy of gift-clientelism while simultaneously reconfiguring its constituent practices in order to consolidate power.

In chapter two, I argued that political legitimacy is the product not of a purportedly universal, acultural, and explicitly rational calculation, but rather a culturally determined and implicitly rational intuition. To understand what a given social group experiences as politically legitimate, one must look to their common history and common culture, their shared past and shared present.

In chapter three, I documented the ways in which ordinary Beninese men and women perform the logic of gift-clientelism in a vast multiplicity of movements and social protocols, including daily greetings, differentiated habits of dress, the courting of lovers, the raising of children, and the worship of ancestors. I argued that it is in these many practices, gestures, and comportments that the logic of gift-clientelism is expressed and thereby reproduced. Moreover, it is from these daily practices that people come to form an intuition of morally legitimate behavior, which in turn informs their understandings of political legitimacy. Such practices together constitute the foundation on which local, intuited notions of political legitimacy are constructed.

This chapter synthesizes the arguments of the preceding chapters as a means of articulating a culturalist understanding of political legitimacy, and by extension, politics more generally. It is because of the high frequency of clientelist social logics in ordinary Beninese

lived worlds that most Beninese most of the time experience clientelism in the formal political sphere as legitimate. Political legitimacy emerges from the intuited projection of moral legitimacy onto questions of acceptable governance, whether those involving institutions, policies, or politicians. It is to the socio-moral domain of daily gift-clientelist experiences that local notions of political legitimacy directly if implicitly refer.

Political candidates thus campaign on promises of largesse, typically assuring the building of local infrastructure like schools and medical clinics, but also the paying of school fees and the provisioning of jobs. Some candidates go so far as to build infrastructure during the campaign season, promising yet more in the future should they be elected. Local people vote for candidates based on these promises.

And yet, although Beninese politicians seem to conform to this moral economy of gift-clientelism, in reality they rarely do, typically honoring only some of their obligations made to voters and only some of the time, typically the bare minimum that they calculate as required to prevent voters from turning to another candidate. Some elected officials ignore these obligations entirely. Such behavior, I argue, stems from the fact that political candidates conceive of votes not as gifts to be reciprocated but rather as capital to be exchanged in the political capital of Porto Novo, the economic capital of Cotonou, and for some, Brussels, Paris, and beyond.

Beninese respond to these betrayals by labeling as corrupt the offending politicians, but do not openly challenge the larger political system of which they are a part. Voters rather turn to other candidates who seem to honor the gift-clientelism moral economy, and the process repeats itself.

Political legitimacy, I argue in this dissertation, is an intuited resonance in the minds of ordinary citizens that derives from the extent to which a political figure, institution, or action

seems to conform to the implicit social logics that order the daily social lives of a given population. I further argue that because the perception of political legitimacy is based on cultural intuition as opposed to rational calculation, deception on the part of politicians offers immense benefit at relatively little cost, and is thus an intrinsic characteristic of politics. People intuitively perceive as politically legitimate those politicians and policies that *seem* to embody their own culturally specific moral frameworks. In southern Benin, ordinary people generally approve of clientelistic practices in politics because such practices *seem* to obey the same implicit social logics according to which they navigate their own lives.

In this way, this final chapter of the dissertation represents a culmination of my doctoral research as a whole. It is only through direct and continued reference to both the history of southern Benin and the ways in which clientelism as a practical logic permeates virtually every dimension of everyday social life that one can come to properly understand Beninese politics on its own terms.

In this chapter I follow Paul Kenou as he maneuvers through the lives of voters in his district and skillfully capitalizes on their hopes for a generous patron who might finally provide the basic infrastructure that they desperately need but that has eluded them with the last several elected representatives. Such hopes implicitly follow the moral expectations essential to the gift clientelism according to which Beninese have structured their lives for the last several centuries. Kenou, many voters claim, is different in that he abides by this local moral economy, as evidenced by his building of a school in his natal village, and will continue to do so as an elected official.

But, as I will show, Kenou is like many politicians in that he intentionally *exhibits* a fundamental orientation to this moral economy of gift clientelism while simultaneously casting

his private ambitions in terms of commodity clientelism, a set of practices and contexts according to which political officials count votes not so much as gifts to be publically reciprocated as capital to be personally invested. Ultimately I argue this system is corrupt, but by Beninese notions of political legitimacy and not by the standards of Western democratic theory. To ordinary Beninese people, many if not most of their elected public officials are corrupt not because they eat the state, but because they eat the state alone.

The Beninese Political Context of 2013-2014

When I entered the field in February 2013, Benin was experiencing profound political controversy, bordering on instability. In August 2010, a massive ponzi scheme had collapsed in the country, erasing the life savings of over 10,000 Beninese families; citing chummy pictures of President Yayi Boni with the still at-large perpetrators that local newspapers had circulated, many people openly accused the president of collusion. Despite this controversy, however, Boni won reelection a mere eight months later and in the first round, the first candidate to do so since the restoration of Beninese democracy in 1991. A significant portion of the population accused Boni of stealing the election.

Since beginning his second mandate, his last according to the presidential term limit, Boni had aggressively sought to change the constitution in order to abolish that limit. According to collaborators in Cotonou, Boni had offered $10,000 to each of the 83 members of the National Assembly to back his constitutional change. Many, however, had refused. Meanwhile, thousands of ordinary Beninese citizens had taken to the streets on a weekly basis in a "Red Wednesday" protest campaign that warned the President "don't touch my constitution." During this period, from late 2011 to early 2013, the government had reported several assassination attempts.

Whereas Benin had over the preceding twenty-two years developed a reputation for peace and stability in the region, Boni's efforts to hold onto power through constitutional change, a common move in sub-Saharan Africa that often preceded a slide into authoritarianism, seemed to many to threaten the country at its very foundations.

In February 2013 I arrived in the provincial capital of Bohicon, located about 115 km from Cotonou over a poorly maintained highway. From there I would launch field inquiries into a dozen nearby villages scattered throughout the province of Zou, and in Bohicon itself. By basing myself here, I had hoped to avoid the controversy of the national political stage. Over time, however, I would come to realize that Bohicon figured centrally in the ongoing drama surrounding Boni's efforts to hold onto power.

Beninese politics have long been divided on regional lines, between a populous though divided south and a relatively empty though unified north. In chapter two I described the three-way division of clientelist politics, represented by the cities of Parakou in the north and Bohicon and Porto Novo in the south, a configuration that emerged in the immediate aftermath of independence in the 1960s. Starting in 1963, these three population centers attempted to rotate control of the government between them, but disagreements led to the breakdown of this system a mere five years later. In 1972, General Matthieu Kerekou seized control of the entire country in a Soviet-backed *coup d'état,* and ruled as dictator for almost twenty years. In 1991, the transition to multi-party democracy brought these three cities back into prominence. Almost overnight, each city established a powerful new political party to see to the acquisitive interests of their respective constituents: the *Union du Benin du futur* (UFB) party in Parakou, headed by Kérékou; the *Parti du renouveau démocratique* (PRD) in Porto Novo, led by Adrien Houngbedgi, and the Rénaissance du Bénin (RB) in Bohicon, led by Nicephore Soglo. Soglo

won the election in 1991, and Kérékou stepped down. A mere five years later, however, Kérékou ran for president again, and narrowly defeated Soglo and returned to power.

Essential to Kérékou's success in 1996 was, in the second round runoff against Soglo, winning the support of Houngbedji in Porto Novo, which Soglo and his supporters considered to be a serious betrayal: a southerner had allied with a northerner against a fellow southerner. Kérékou repeated the same move in 2001. Collaborators explained that although the north was sparsely populated in the north, the south was hopelessly divided; all a northerner would have to do is keep RB and PRD from uniting against the north and the north would win every time.

In 2006, newcomer Yayi Boni, an economist who had headed the African Development Bank, had secured the presidency by doing just that. His new party, FCBE, had replaced Kérékou's UFB as the party of northern unity, and had like Kerekou secured the loyalty of Houngbedji's PRD. In 2011, RB, PRD, and several smaller southern political parties had decided that the north had dominated politics long enough, and had thus united to form unified southern party: UN, or *Unité Fait La Nation*, with PRD's Hounbedji at the top of the ticket to run against Boni and FCBE. Although most southerners claimed that Boni had stole the 2011 election, it was also well-known that many RB supporters had refused to vote for PRD Hounbedji because of past betrayals of their leader, Nicephore Soglo. The one constant over this twenty-year period of presidential elections was northern unity and southern division, which the north exploited to retain power in all but one election.

After 2011, however, Boni wanted to go further still in his consolidation of power. Beginning in that year, mere months after the presidential election, Boni launched a new campaign throughout Zou province, including Bohicon, in an effort to lure voters away from RB. Such a move was unprecedented in post-independence Beninese history. Conventionally,

political parties are heavily regional in both their origins and their campaign strategies. Within this framework, there existed a clearly if implicitly understood rule that parties did not encroach upon one another's home territory. During campaigns, parties begin by energizing their respective bases and proceeding to co-opt both allies and rivals alike, promising coveted ministries to the heads of each party to attract them. Boni, however, had taken to directly campaigning in the "fiefdom" of his arch rival, RB. It was an unprecedented and dangerous move, for it immediately presented an existential danger to RB. One of Boni's first moves was to co-opt Laurent Djisou, who had previously left RB after realizing that his own career could only continue to advance through a different path. Paul Kenou would come to associate himself with Djisou, and by extension, FCBE. Kenou were thus two southerners a northerner's push into the territory of the south's most powerful political party.

Paul

I sit at a table in the open air of the expansive courtyard at Chez Tanti on the outskirts of Bohicon. Ivoirian rap music pulses from an old speaker the size of a refrigerator positioned by the front entrance. Several flies appear on the table and I quickly cover my glass of beer with a plastic coaster to bar their access. I scan the tables in my vicinity and then look at my watch. Tonight I am meeting with Paul. He is late by almost an hour.

Paul is a principal at a high school in Bohicon. While Paul is comfortable with his professional life and his ability to provide for his two wives and six children, he has bigger plans. In the upcoming municipal election he will run for a seat on the Zogbodomey city council, representing his natal village of Zokou. Zokou is located about three kilometers to the south of

Zogbodomey proper, itself seven kilometers south of Bohicon, just off the national highway that connects Cotonou to Bohicon before continuing northwards.

Paul was an exemplary student in school, and from an early age. He performed well in his classes, and had grown accustomed to the praise of his teachers. At the end of each school year, Paul had received multiple awards, whether for best student in math, science, French, best attendance, and best overall student, even when he was not, by objective criteria, the most deserving of the recognition. Everyone in his village seemed to have agreed that he was powerful, and so many of his awards functioned as a kind of encouragement. After completing primary school in Zokou, Paul had, along with other children from the village, commuted on foot to the secondary school in Zogbodomey before moving on to Bohicon for his final two years, each move in his academic career necessitated by inadequacies in local educational infrastructure.

Without a secondary school of its own, most people in the village conclude their education after finishing at the local primary school, subsequently finding work as a local farmer, a bush taxi driver, or vendor in local markets. Paul, however, chose a path that would lead him beyond Zokou, a path that he would pursue by combining the financial support of an uncle, also from Zokou but living in Cotonou, with a natural aptitude for schoolwork and a great amount of ambition.

The commutes and moves had posed obstacles. Walking to Zogbodomey for school, Paul often went without food until returning home at night, and in Bohicon he had lived with a number of cousins, some kinder than others. Ultimately however, the moves had offered a distinct advantage given his future aspirations: he now had a dense and intimate network of, in his words, “brothers and sisters, papas and mamas, aunts and uncles,” all of whom he had known

since he was young, and in some cases, very young. “Here,” he often liked to tell me, “that matters.” Paul had continued onto the National University of Benin, a rare feat for someone from Zokou. Rarer still for someone of such attainment, he had regularly returned to visit the village ever since he had left.

Paul drives his motorcycle up to the concrete fence that separates the courtyard of Chez Tanti from the busy road. With his right shoulder he cradles his cell phone against his right ear, a mischievous smile on his face. He parks, glances at me, and then walks up to the table as he hangs up and then look at his phone. He says with a yet bigger smile, “What can I say? I was just on the phone with a big man in Cotonou. Big big big!” I smile and my eyes widen to emulate his.

Paul is regularly late to social events, whether with me or with other friends and associates of his same social standing. Over the many months I have known him, I have slowly gathered that Paul’ social calendar is incredibly full, averaging dozens of five minute face-to-face visits and scores of salutary phone calls. Paul’ social and political network, spread out between Zokou, Zogbodomey, Bohicon, and increasingly Cotonou, has become incredibly dense and requires hours of daily upkeep. Paul’ early experiences commuting to schools spread across the area had taught him the importance of keeping social network, and since that time he had steadily built a massive constellation of friends, benefactors, colleagues, and associates.

Political figures seem to have the largest networks of all, with hundreds of elected officials joined by thousands of power brokers, field operatives, leaders of opinion, and innumerable aspirants. In communities across Benin, local politics offers one of the greatest opportunities for the young and ambitious. “Here,” Paul liked to say, “people *eat* politics.” Whereas the state salary of a teacher was comfortable and that of a principal more so, government salaries in general are regularly subject to delays and even cancelations. “Everyone

knows that the state has no money. We don't talk about it but we all know." Politics, on the other hand, brings one into a symbiotic relationship with big business developments, whether cotton depots or major infrastructural projects like roads, sewers, and schools. Just three years prior, in 2010, the United States Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) had awarded Benin with a $300 million grant to bring the Port of Cotonou up to International Maritime standards. "Here, people *eat* politics," Paul repeats, almost giddy in excitement.

We drink together at the table in front of Chez Tanti. I ask him about his family, his health, his job, all standard questions meant to initiate conversation. He sets two cell phones on the table in front of him. A server places a bottle of beer, a glass, and a plastic coaster before him. He tilts the glass and pours as he recounts his day: exciting developments in his political campaign, an intrigue at the Presidential Palace as reported by a local radio station, and of course, the big man who had called him while he was driving over to the bar. Paul loved to talk about those stories the most. Just then, as if on cue, one of his phones lights up and starts to play an electronic tune. He looks at the caller ID and jumps up. "I'll be right back," he says to me before hurrying to the parking lot.

Paul had started his political career in rather bold fashion, a move that reflected his personality. Four years ago, while still a high school principle at a small public school on the outskirts of Bohicon, he had challenged Laurent Djisou, the long-standing incumbent, for the seat in the National Assembly that represented the department of Zogbodomey. While there were several local seats to potentially target, Paul had specifically challenged Djisou's according to a complicated and ambitious strategy. Paul had not actually wanted to defeat Djisou in the election, but rather to get his attention and thereby become his political client. Djisou had previously defected from RB, the party of former President Nicephore Soglo, by far the largest

and most powerful of the southern parties, to create his own party, EBB. More recently however, current President Yayi Boni's northern party, FCBE, had begun to openly campaign in the south, in RB's territory, an unprecedented, provocative, and risky move that figured centrally in Boni's larger scheme of winning direct support in the country as a whole. To facilitate this expansion, FCBE had sought alliances with southern politicians whose own constituents could bolster local support. Paul had calculated that FCBE's southern expansion would be successful, as the major southern parties were all hopefully divided. If FCBE were successful, and Paul he could become Djisou's political client, then the coming FCBE expansion would catapult him into a prominent political position.

Seizing this significant if dangerous opportunity, Paul had launched himself directly into a campaign against Djisou. And, in keeping with his plan, he had successfully amassed a considerable following. During the first round, he had secured no less than 7,000 votes, or about 20% of the votes in the district, which positioned him in third place. Djisou went on to a runoff with the second-place candidate, whom he beat decisively with 78% of the final vote.

But again, for Paul it was not the election that really mattered in the end, but rather what happened in its aftermath. Djisou was an established figure in Beninese politics, a presidential hopeful who had never run a real risk of losing the local re-election bid. But his popularity in his home district had diminished, as his general availability had steadily decreased over the past several years. Paul knew this. People needed to *see* their local representative, he often emphasized. Moreover, Djisou had yet to fulfill a number of campaign promises related to local infrastructure projects beyond his natal village.

Djisou's competition in the run-off election was a retired police chief several years older than Djisou himself. Paul explained, "He didn't need the police chief's votes – that man is old

and no one cares." He then paused, perhaps for dramatic effect. "He needed *my* votes." He smiled with pride. I then challenged him, "Why yours? You didn't get as many as the police chief." Paul then playfully feigned offense, "So what if an old man gets votes? People only voted for him to tell Djisou they were upset with him. Will they really get behind an old man? Never." Paul smiled. Voters tended to prefer the young, as they still have time to advance, through steady networking in Cotonou and Porto Novo, higher and higher in Beninese politics.

Djisou, it seems, had agreed. With weeks of his re-election, the deputy had invited Paul to stop by his house in Bohicon to drink *sodabi* and talk. "That is something you do at night," Paul explained. During the meeting, Djisou seemed perplexed and almost tickled that a young high school principal had managed to attract a full 20% of the initial vote. Djisou then went on to articulate a central paradox that, he assured Paul, afflicts all members of the National Assembly: one must spend a great amount of time in Cotonou and Porto Novo building alliances and mitigating rivalries with other government officials, so much so that one must spend less and less time in one's home district. Consequently, one loses touch with one's base, and one's popularity suffers, but so too does one's knowledge of the terrain in terms of general well being, concerns, and of course, political sentiment.

That was where Paul came in. Because he lived and worked in Bohicon but also regularly visited his natal village, Paul naturally had an ear to the ground. He could update Djisou with local developments as they arose. And while it was important that people—a lot of people—had voted for Paul, what really mattered was that they would again, or rather, they would vote for whomever Paul publically supported. Djisou wanted that support.

Paul, I would only later come to understand, was of such utility to Djisou because his regular interactions with ordinary people in the area followed closely the local social protocols of

gift-clientelism as described in previous chapters. Again, following Gregory (1982), gift economies are ultimately more about the social relationships created through exchanging objects than they are about the objects themselves; it is through relationships that gifts acquire much of their value to recipients. By this point in his career, Djisou was so busy networking in Cotonou and Porto Novo that he had little time for his constituents. Long-lasting relationships, created through years of face-to-face interactions, the solidarity of group celebrations, and the commensality of shared feasts, all of which that had propelled him to higher office, had faded. Local people understood that Djisou had become an important political figure, and thus could not spend time with them as they used to, but the nonetheless yearned for that personal connection with him, even if it were through a surrogate or junior associate. Paul filled that roll adroitly.

Trying to wrap my head around the situation, I asked, "Wait, so is Djisou your papa now?" I smiled in a bid for confirmation. From my understanding of the widespread use of kin terms to describe clientelist ties, the idea intuitively made sense. But Paul just looked at me strangely. "It's not like that," he said. His brow furrowed and he paused for a moment of reflection. By this point, Paul was well aware of my interest in clientelism in Benin. After a moment he said,

> *Say that I'm poor, really poor, with not even shoes to wear. I walk down the street to the mechanic – you know, where you take your bike. Say that I, Paul, approach him and ask him for something to eat. Unless I have a bad reputation, you know, maybe a thief or a brigand, he will probably give me something. But then I'll have to work for him, go on errands, fetch some motor oil, something like that. He, the mechanic,* he *is now my papa. But Djisou? It is not like that. It is just…not.*

Paul suddenly stopped in mid-sentence, a rare occurrence for him. He looked at me with a quizzical face; he seemed just as surprised as I was at his silence. For Paul, it seemed, his

relationship with Djisou could, from an analytical standpoint, easily be understood in patron-client terms. Only it couldn't, but for a reason that Paul could not himself articulate.

The explanation would rather come slowly over time, as my collaborators and I gradually pieced together a number of disparate social encounters according to their implicitly shared social logic. Once, over beers with Paul and his friend Gabin, I asked Paul if it had been difficult to move from the position of Djisou's rival in the race for the National Assembly to his supporting protégé. As with many of my naïve questions, Paul' first reaction was to burst out laughing. He then looked at Gabin, who despite his efforts at self-control, soon joined in. Paul went on to ask:

> *Why would it be difficult? In fact, you should understand that Gabin and I are friends, and we were both teachers before we first got into politics. We were both working in Bohicon, so of course we started with Rénaissance du Bénin (RB). I lost my first election and so I joined Djisou's party, EDD, which is allied with the President's northern party, FCBE. Gabin is originally from here, Bohicon, but I'm from Zokou (10 kilometers to the south). Whenever there is an RB rally in Bohicon, I come up to help him, to convince voters that he is the one for them. People matter more than words or promises. But when there is an EDD rally in Zogbodomey, Gabin comes down to help me!*

Within the realm of politics, then, the moral obligations of gift-clientelism according to which Beninese people lived their daily lives and structures their most intimate relationships did not apply. Moreover, this moral suspension does not necessarily threaten that moral economy. As Paul's example with his close friend Gabin demonstrates, one can actually maneuver within this amoral social context in order to actually fulfill the moral obligations intrinsic to gift clientelism. And indeed, in the final analysis that is what politics in Benin is at its most essential. It was not

despite the amoral sphere of politics *but rather because of it* that Paul could greatly help his friend Gabin get a leg up in the political arena.

My collaborators exchanged another look and started to laugh again; I couldn't tell if they were laughing more at the situation or my inability to understand it. "Wait, but don't other politicians at the RB rally, or for that matter other voters, know that you're also running for EDD in Zokou?" I followed Paul pupils as they rolled to the upper right corner of his eyes.

> *The politicians? Yeah, probably. But all politicians are like that. It is known. As for the little people, who vote? No, never. Listen, when I was campaigning around Zogbodomey for the National Assembly, I had a different message for every village. So did everyone else. The village needs a water pump? Oh, ok, then I've got a cousin who works for a German NGO that digs wells. A road? Sure, I know someone in the Ministry of Transportation. Who's going to follow me five kilometers down the road?*

Lying in politics, Paul went on to explain, was not an occasional tactic of last resort but rather *figured centrally* to the entire enterprise. For the purposes of strategy, one necessarily had to lie to one's enemies and allies alike. Paul did, however, set aside the higher-ups in EDD, his most recently adopted political party. When meeting with one's party superiors privately, face-to-face, he never lied.

But in public, he explained, one *had* to lie to one's superiors in order to support all the other lies circulating around.

Again, Paul went silent for a few moments. He looked off into the distance, and a playful smirk curled the corner of his mouth. "Well, only the *very best* politicians can lie to their superiors like that." He continued, "A great politician is like a mirror. When you look at him you don't see him, you only see yourself and what you want to get out of him. As long as that is what

you see, he can do whatever he wants with you." There was a sparkle in Paul' eyes as he told me this. It was this metaphor of the mirror, it seemed, that governed his relationship with Djisou. It was in their mutual interest to publically portray their relationship as father and son: for Djisou, the performed relationship presented him as a good patron; for Paul, the feigned relationship communicated to voters that one of the most powerful political figures in the area looked to him as his son, thus obligating him to "feed" him with juicy relationships with national and international figures, from which, the thinking went, resources would flow back down, that is, back to Zokou. In reality, however, Djisou was, as another politician, Paul's rival. There existed no trust or solidarity between them, and so, Djisou was not at all his "papa." And yet by all public appearance he was.

Here, embedded in the performed yet disingenuous father-son relationship between Djisou and my friend Paul, lies the essence of Beninese politics. For all elected public officials, it is essential to deceptively portray oneself as well-oriented to the local moral economy of gift-clientelism according to which local people structure their own lives, and by extension, evaluate political candidates. Men and women in Benin conceive of political legitimacy most compellingly and consistently with reference to patron-client relationships, their ideal form of social relationship that that has long served as the fulcrum of Beninese relationality. For this reason, the entire social domain of Beninese politics takes as its referent the gift-clientelist world of Beninese social life in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of Beninese voters, even if politicians regularly fail voters in redistributing wealth once they had secured their government positions. In public, Djisou *appeared* to be Paul's "papa," and it was true that he might very well provide Paul with future access to influence, power, and wealth through his political networks, Boni's northern FCBE party most of all. And yet, if such beneficence did come, it would in

reality never be the *gift* of a patron, but the calculated *investment of political capital* of a shrewd political strategist; if Djisou failed to provide any benefit to Paul, there would be no redress, of which Paul was well aware.

Today, Beninese voters occupy a precariously ambiguous political space, one that takes as its cultural and ideological foundation the moral economy of gift-clientelism but simultaneously operates according to commodity-clientelism. Every time a political candidate promises material redistribution on the campaign trail, wins election, and subsequently neglects his or her promises, an all-to-common progression in Benin, their success has been structured by the enduring tension between the gift and commodity forms.

At this point it might seem that Beninese political figures are mere culprits who generally deceive innocent local people in order to gain their votes. But it is important to stress that this is but half the story. Voters are both equally aware of the reality of their feigned performances, and equally ready to cynically play their part out of calculated self-interest. Once, at the national football stadium in Cotonou, the largest venue in the country, I had attended a political rally for a local politician who had taken green as his campaign color. At the rally, the candidate had distributed green t-shirts to the majority of the attendees, who quickly donned the shirts to demonstrate their loyalty. The candidate then distributed food, drink, and small amounts of money to everyone in attendance, which again, in this social context, serve as potent symbolic gestures conveying his willingness and ability to redistribute material wealth. The attendees, waving their arms and shaking homemade noisemakers, seemed devoted to his campaign.

After the rally had concluded, I was making my way to my bike in the parking lot when a flood of people rushed by me on their way to their own bikes or to hail *zemijohn* taxis on the street, many of them removing their green t-shirts to reveal matching yellow t-shirts underneath.

Some let out a laugh of mischievous glee as they did so. They were all headed to a second rally down the street hosted by the previous candidate's rival, who had taken yellow as his campaign color. His rally was starting soon.

Politics in southern Benin, it seemed, is widely understood by both politicians and voters as a social domain that takes its intuited moral legitimacy from its emulation of daily social life, specifically by performing clientelist practices. At the same time, however, it seemed just as widely understood that the implicit rules of the local moral economy do not actually apply.

There does exist, however, a rather glaring disadvantage in a political realm in which deception is the order of the day, for although many voters seem willing and able to play along with the deception game, as evidenced by the symbolically rich removal of green shirts to reveal yellow, they must nevertheless place a great amount of trust in candidates for whom they vote. After all, local voters ultimately rely on these candidates to secure and then redistribute needed material resources by extracting from their newly acquired relationships with business figures and government bureaucrats in the capital city. Many Beninese seem quite fatalistic about this significant downside.

There also exist, however, means of mitigating against such a risk. The most successful and widespread way of dealing with this anxiety regarding candidates, my collaborators unanimously agreed, was to vote for a "native son[11] of the village." All politicians are alike, collaborators stressed, in that they lie, a truism expressed in the common complaint, "The problem with politicians is that you can never see what is really in their bellies." And yet with

[11] According to my informants, native daughters do exist, but are exceedingly rare. By my informal count of Beninese politicians, less than three percent are female, and most of them are from prominent political families, such as Deputy Rosalind Soglo, wife of former president Nicephore Soglo. Such a gender division is a legacy of the French colonial period. As Edna Bay (1998) has documented, women played decisive roles in the state administration of the pre-colonial kingdom of Dahomey, including the *Kpojito*, or female reign-mate to the king. Herskovits (1938) reported the common practice of female husbands, in which a wealthy woman, usually a successful market trader, would pay a large bridewealth in order to attain (often multiple) client wives (see also Amadiume 1986).

native sons, the social dynamic is different. First, local people have known native sons for years, often decades, and in the case of elders, since he was born. It is thus far easier to read a native son, and to compare his words with his already established character.

Second, local voters find reassurance in the social obligations a native son has to his parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and other kin, who not uncommonly account for a sizable minority, and sometimes a majority, of local inhabitants. Politicians might ignore or even betray people from their language group, religious sect, and general region. One's natal village, however, is a different matter altogether, as relatedness does not emerges from an abstract linguistic, ethnic, or religious category, but is rather constituted by a vast constellation of face-to-face social exchanges accumulated over a lifetime.

Third, these same kin are in a uniquely privileged position to attack a native son with occult forces should these obligations go unfilled. As one collaborator explained, "How can you hit someone who is always far away?" Another claimed to have in his possession the personal effects of a different native son, who was currently away at the national university: clothes, an old cell phone, and a small bag of his hair taken from the town barber. Ordinarily such an admission would risk public accusations of dangerously malevolent witchcraft, and indeed I was rather shocked when the man said it, and with an almost brazen frankness. But in the context of a native son who, many community members hoped would one day return, the admission was neither scandalous nor even surprising. Correlated directly to the alarming moral suspension enacted by politics, the otherwise salacious act of sorcery carried no moral odium. For Beninese, the desperate predicament of voters both called for and excused desperate measures. Intimate relationships with a native son, materialized as they were in this instance by the keeping of old,

discarded personal effects, seemed to serve as an insurance policy in a precarious socio-political order. "With any other community," Paul later explained,

> *You can merely promise them this or that. But with your native village, you have to promise more, and you have to tell them, 'everything that I have will be yours; you will eat first.' It is still possible to lie to them, but it is risky. If you do, you have to remember what you say.*

In Benin, politics is a game of deception. Neither words nor charisma nor even knowing rich and powerful people, whether local, foreign, or otherwise, can overcome the particularly deep mistrust that people have of politicians. Only the power of kin obligations, located well outside the formal political sphere and concentrated most of all in the figure of the native son, can provide sufficient reassurance to wary voters.

Driving through small villages in the region, it quickly becomes evident just how important is this concept of the "native son." Communities of similar size, separated by no more than four or five kilometers, can vary substantially in terms of basic infrastructure. Power lines can skip over entire villages, as no one in that community possesses the appropriate knowledge, requisite relationality, and thereby the material resources to connect the village to the grid. Women and children carrying large pots of water over great distances is, of course, a iconic scene throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and yet in Benin, at least, such scenes also illustrate the fact that some communities have ready access to water pumps, wells, and cisterns, while others do not.

Native sons most visibly consist of successful businessmen and politicians, and often they are both, but also, native sons working as lowly government bureaucrats and even local

development brokers regularly secure widely needed infrastructure and other resources in this village but no that town, their natal community as opposed to another.

It was during this time that, while returning from an interview in a rural locale just outside of Zogbodomey, I passed by a village that clearly stood apart from the surrounding communities. At the local school one could see a new and freshly-painted building; electric lines spread throughout the town; at the center of town stood a large industrial water pump, surrounded by over a dozen women gathering water; and an elaborate concrete drainage system lined either side of the main road through town.

Out of curiosity, I stopped at a local restaurant to speak to the people gathered there. I started by complimenting the town's infrastructure, which, judging from their almost instant smiles, was a source of local pride for local people. I then explained that the surrounding towns had very little infrastructure by comparison, and then asked why, with a quizzical look on my face. A young man almost bragged, "It was all built by a rich man who is from here. The big house down the street, the one with the second floor – that's his house. He's in the National Assembly now. He brings good things here." I then asked for his name, although in that moment I probably could have answered my own question. "Laurent Djisou." I paused. In that moment, the greater socio-moral system that I had spent months carefully piecing together in my mind suddenly and quite powerful registered in my mind. Here, among the newly paved roads, the new school buildings, water pump, and drainage ditch, the social mechanism of the native son remembering his village had fulfilled the social obligations constitutive of gift clientelism for everyone in the community. Here, Beninese politics worked for its voters.

Reflecting on his failed bid to oust Djisou four years prior, Paul would later acknowledge that he should have started with his natal village. "Native sons reassure people. They're

comfortable with people they know." And yet, I found that both Paul and other political candidates were actually quite ambivalent about their natal villages. While one's village would be the most likely to support a candidacy, at the same time, the village maintained quite a bit of the power over that candidacy, through the implicit threat of removing that support if local demands are not met, but also from the general understanding that as both constituents and relatives, they could ask for more than could other voters. Lastly, of course, politicians feared the occult machinations of an unsatisfied or jealous relative.

For these reasons, Paul had initially tried to win election to the National Assembly, without relying on his natal community. For years he had networked with the locally powerful and the ambitious, and during his campaigning around the district he would almost always have these notable figures sit with him. The higher profile the better. "Sometimes it's not even you, but rather the people you can show everyone that you know." Going further and in a clever innovation that was all his own, Paul had also come to seek out foreigners, particularly white American Peace Corps Volunteers as well as Japanese NGO workers, and invite them to a "place of honor," seated next to him, as he campaigned in villages. Paul told me the following story only after he had come to know me very well, and on a night after we had both drank more than usual.

> *So it worked out really well, foreigners. You know what I did? You are not going to believe this. So most foreigners don't speak Fongbe, but that is what I mostly spoke to voters. That means I was free to introduce foreigners as internationally recognized engineers or directors of an international NGO. But they never knew it. They just stood there and looked important! The older the foreigner the better: the more serious they looked. And glasses. Glasses made it even better.*

Through such machinations, Paul had managed to attract a full twenty percent of the vote. But, however, in the end too few people were willing to vote for a young man who seemed to know powerful people but had not clearly demonstrated his willingness and capacity to perform the role of patron. The natal village, Paul ultimately had to acknowledge, was essential.

And so Paul returned to Zokou. Paul had only recently registered as a candidate for the Zokou seat on the Zogbodomey City Council, to be decided by the upcoming municipal elections. Paul had kept a close relationship with the people of Zokou ever since leaving for university outside of Cotonou. Beyond regular visits and frequent phone salutations, Paul had consistently paid for the annual school fees, about 15,000 cfa ($30), of a number of cousins in the community, since securing his first teaching job after university over ten years prior. As his income increased over the years, so too did the number of school fees that he paid. Such payments to extended family members are as common as they are expected.

Speaking to senior politicians, one a former government minister and the other a judge on the supreme court, it is not uncommon for officials at their level and salary to pay the school fees for several hundred students, all of whom are either related to them or living in their natal village, and to whom these officials collectively refer to as their "children." Of course, in such a social context there exists no fine distinction between blood relatedness and community membership, as the "children" reference demonstrates.

It is important to note that such continued involvement with and support of one's natal village does not necessarily mean that the benefactor has political ambitions. Indeed, over the course of my research I came to know a number of successful business people who redistributed as much as did successful politicians, and often more so. Some were more vocal about their generosity than others, but they chose not to convert their local prestige into a bid for public

office. Not every generous native son is a politician, but according to my collaborators, at least, every politician is, at least initially, a generous native son.

And so it was with Paul and his natal village of Zokou, a small community of less than six hundred people bordering National Highway Two, about three kilometers south of Zogbodomey. Zokou emerged in the 1980s soon after the national government constructed the two-lane undivided road. Farmers use the narrow paved shoulder of the highway to dry corn, and during the dry season young men stand on the side of the road holding up lizards, *agouti*, and other bush meat to sell to passing travelers. Many community members are truck operators or bush taxi drivers, and almost everyone has a direct relationship to the highway. A light haze hangs over the village, an amalgam of highway car exhaust, slash and burn agriculture, and piles of burning trash.

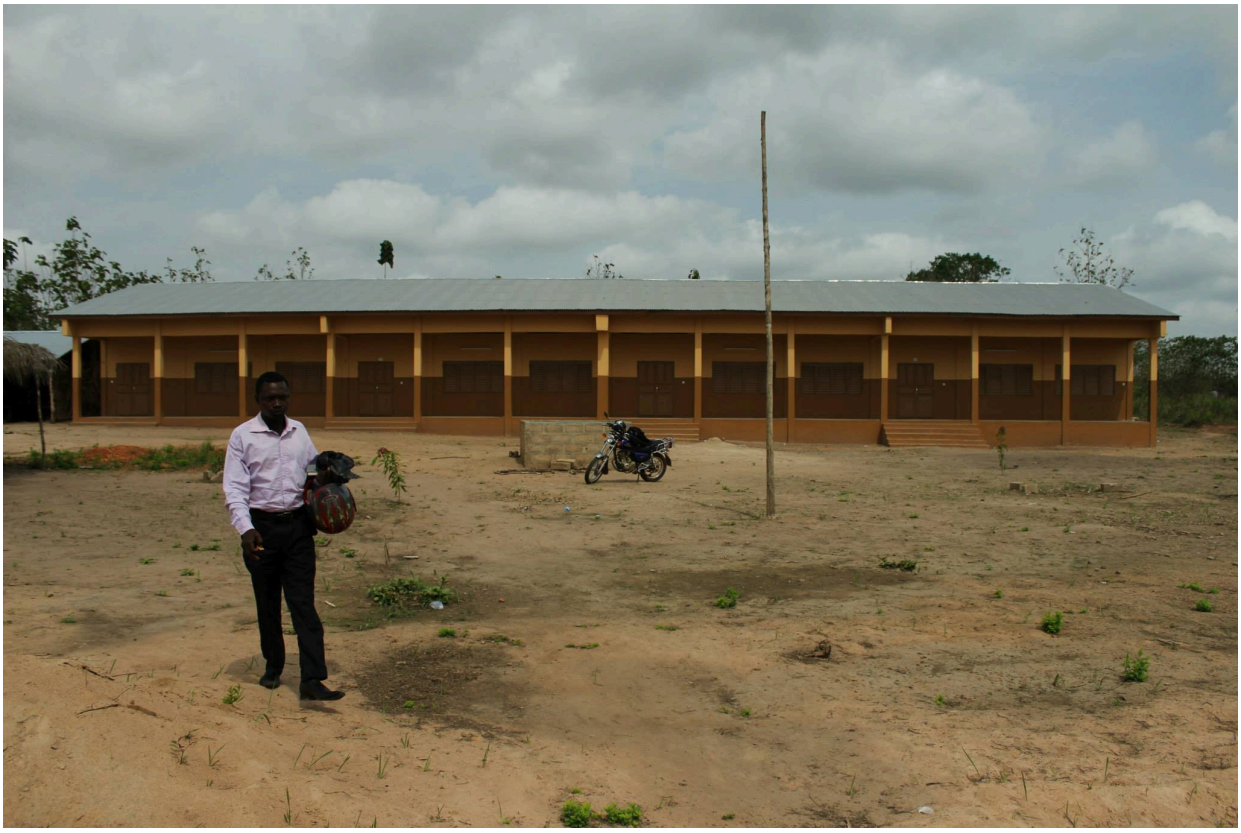
Adjacent to the highway also stands Zokou Elementary School, the campus dominated by a single, expansive concrete structure housing four large classrooms. It is Paul, community members emphasize, who brought the building to them two years ago. Before that, the overcrowded campus was limited to three small standalone structures each made of thatch and palm leaves, with additional classes meeting under nearby trees. Because of these infrastructural limitations, students wishing to attend middle school and beyond had to commute to either Zogbodomey or Bohicon, as Paul himself had done over two decades prior. Now, however, the classroom are no longer crowded, teachers utilize large chalkboards for lessons, and students can take sixth grade classes locally, putting off their migration to Zogbodomey by a full two years.

Paul, a high school principle in Bohicon, could not himself afford to have such a building constructed. Rather, Paul was rich in another resource, one that throughout West Africa is every bit as valuable as money: relationships (Miller 1986; Guyer 1992, 1996). Beginning early in his

adolescence, Paul had not only befriended hundreds of people, whether in his natal village of Zokou, Zogbodomey, Bohicon, or increasingly Cotonou, but he kept the name and number of each contact in an old and fraying spiral notebook. While teaching in Bohicon over ten years ago, Paul had come to know a colleague of his, Robert. Robert had a cousin who worked in the Ministry of Education, who eventually found an office job for him as well. Robert had advanced in the ministry, and since joined the committee that decided where to expand educational infrastructure supposedly based on demographics and other demonstrated need.

While population growth in the south naturally called for more infrastructure, the position of village in the complex negotiations of power political figures had a greater say. Speaking with Robert, Paul realized that President Boni was looking to expand his influence in the south, in order to weaken the power of his main opponent, Lehady Soglo, and his southern political party, *Renaissance du Bénin* (RB). Boni had already made inroads in this southern expansion by coopting a number of non-aligned southern politicians, many of whom were disaffected former members of Soglo's RB. Among these southern politicians was Laurent Djisou, to whom Paul had lost the previous election, but to whom he had subsequently pledged his loyalty. The circumstances were ideal.

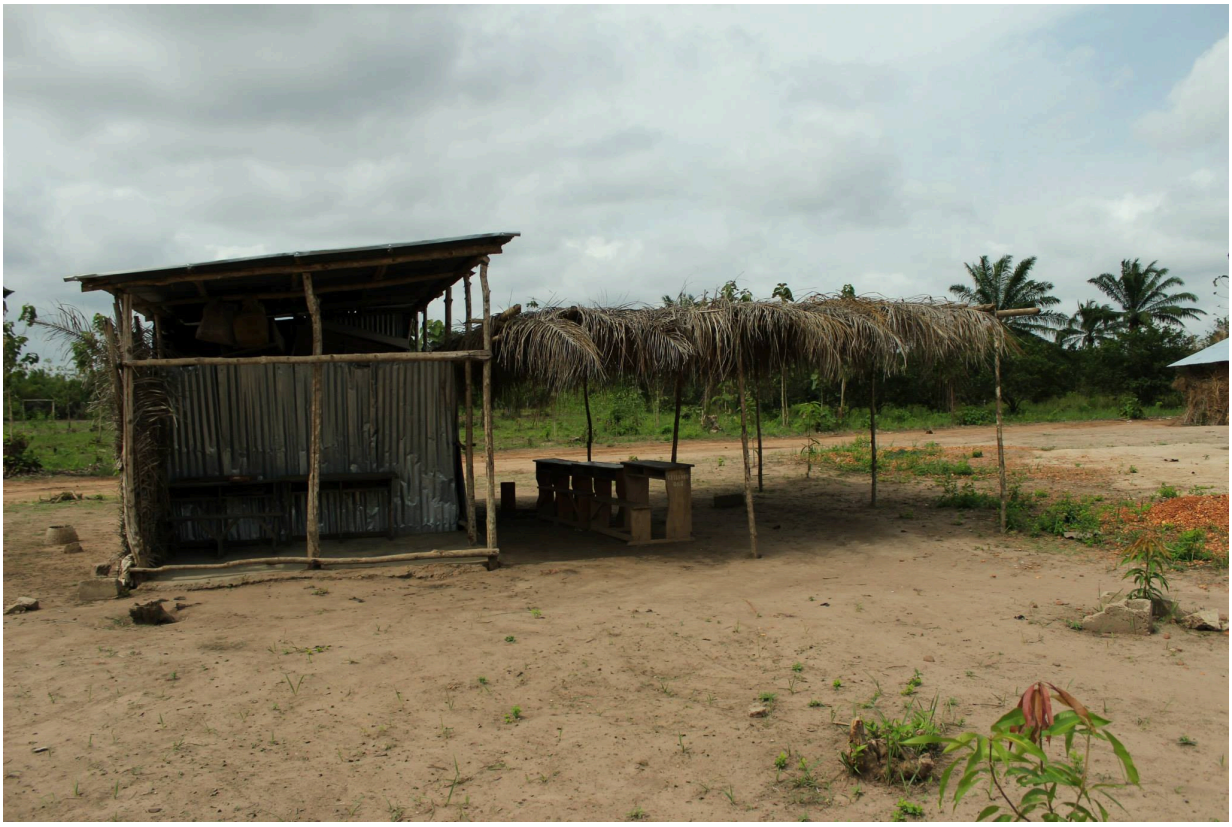
Paul quickly organized a number of informal meetings in Cotonou, bringing together Djisou, representatives of Boni's party (FCBE), community members from Zokou, and Robert, his friend at the Ministry of Education. With all of them before him, they petitioned for a new school. The FCBE representatives asked Paul directly whether he was born in Zokou, and if so, whether he had maintained a relationship with the community. Robert's superiors in the Ministry of Education then demanded some proof that building in Zokou would "be a good investment." Paul responded that he had challenged Laurent Djisou, also present at the meeting, for his



Picture 1: Paul standing in front of the new four-classroom school building in his natal village of Zokou, south of Zogbodomey, just off National Highway Number Two. Unable to afford such large infrastructure himself, Paul secured its building by the government by successfully lobbying both the Ministry of Education and FCBE, President Boni's northern political party. For FCBE, the school was part of a larger push into the southern department of Zou, long a supporter of FCBE's chief opposition, RB.

position in the National Assembly, and had attracted 20% of the votes in the first round. Having anticipated this question, Paul also stated that he himself had built one of the three classrooms, made of thatch and palm leaves. An outright lie, Paul later explained, but one that suggested, along with the votes he had previously received, that he was both motivated and showed potential as a future political figure. Ultimately they agreed. Here again, Paul cleverly utilized a social space that he in no way trusted: a government ministry, its offices located in the urban setting of Cotonou.

To hear Paul recount this story is to witness a talented political mind driven by both bountiful energy and great ambition, the ideal combination for young Beninese politicians. Once



Picture 2: One of three small classrooms made of thatch, palm leaves, and aluminum siding. Before Paul had secured government funding for the large school building shown in Picture 2, Zokou's local school was limited to these three provisional structures.

the plan for the new school was finalized, he emphasized, he knew that he would be elected to the Zokou seat on the Zogbodomey City Council. Paul assured me that such a gesture to one's constituents is essential to a successful political career. A gift to the community is what voters are looking for, and from a winning candidate it is what they expect. This gesture, coupled with his status a native son, again, virtually guaranteed victory in the upcoming election. Native sons who can, before the election, demonstrate both their ability and willingness to bring good things to their constituents are essentially unbeatable. Despite this larger certainty, however, Paul was nonetheless required to follow a conventional protocol in receiving the support of the people of Zokou. The general themes of this protocol, I argue, further illustrate the central importance of clientelism in Beninese social life, and through a mimetic process, Beninese politics as well. While voters unquestionably favor a native son who redistributes needed material resources, the

process is more intricate and symbolically rich than mere transactionalism; at least as important to the people of Zokou as the impressive new school building was the common knowledge that Paul had for over a decade paid for the school fees for his cousins.

Paul and I tour Zokou together. It is the first time in over a month that he has visited. A middle-aged woman, whom Paul indicates is his aunt, a successful vendor of imported cloth and an important figure in the community, warmly welcomes him. “Paul,
my son! It has been too long! And you have gotten fatter.” Paul smiles and embraces her. He has known her since he was a child. Later, Paul will explain to me that while the sentiment “you have gotten fatter” is a warm and generous way of saying that someone appears to be in good health, in the context of a previously established clientelistic relationship, the sentiment can also contain a more subtle stress: “you look like you have eaten well; don’t forgot that I would like to eat too.” The indeterminacy of her greeting matches the ambiguity of his position as a political candidate courting favor in his natal village.

We continue our tour of the community. Paul stops at every door, casually caressing the heads of children who pass by as he catches up with neighbors. In Fongbe, a neighbor asks Paul who is the white man with him. In almost a whisper, Paul says that I am an NGO worker and structural engineer scouting the area for a water pump.

Day tours represent an essential maintenance of Paul’ relationships with the members of his natal village and would-be constituents. But Paul must also come back to the village at night, to informally speak to the “leaders of opinion” in Zokou. The successful cloth vendor is one of them. Although the sun sets around seven, he cannot return until well after eleven, when most people have retired to their homes or at least to their walled compounds. Paul explains that, as

with his relationship with Djisou and other superiors in his adopted party, EDD, one is almost obligated to lie in public, during the day; but one is equally obligated to tell the truth in these private meetings, held as they are at night. But again, a particularly talented politician can lie even here, although the stakes are higher.

During these nighttime meetings with village leaders of opinion, political candidates must explain their political ambitions and the steps that they envision for realizing them. One typically drinks *sodabi*, locally produced distilled palm wine, or an imported liquor, often whisky or gin, during these meetings, both to add a sense of informality and ease to the gathering, but also to deter prevarication. Political candidates must also give money to leaders of opinion, to demonstrate both one's ability and willingness to redistribute, but also one's sincerity. The amount did not matter so much as the gesture itself, although it is generally understood that wealthier individuals should give more, and that larger sums are particularly convincing.

There exists also among community leaders of opinion in Zokou a profound ambivalence, itself the cause of a great amount of anxiety, regarding Paul, reflecting a more general tension experienced with all young and ambitious village sons. On the one hand, the fact that Paul had not only navigated his initial electoral defeat against Djisou, to the point of becoming his ally, networked so successfully as to reach the Ministry of Education in Cotonou, but ultimately combine those two feats in a sublime fusion that even involved President Boni's own party, such politicking could mean a great future for the people of Zokou. To that end, it was exciting to see him return a little fuller in the neck and belly. The further up he went, the more important urban elites and foreigners that he knew, the more promising was his future, and by extension, theirs.

And yet, at the same time, the higher Paul advanced and the more connected he became, the possibility that he would forget his natal village unavoidably rose as well. Again the commentary of Paul' aunt, "And you have gotten fatter," is not only ambiguous but also ambivalent. For while his increasing corpulence did increase the possibility that so too would that of the village, through new infrastructural projects to complement his four-classroom school building, it was by no means a guarantee. Everyone in the village knew of a cousin, a colleague, or a friend from another village that had been disappointed by ambitious rising stars much like Paul. Even the unspoken threat of occult punishment faced doubts. What if the village sorcery was faulty? What if Paul were to find, over the course of his networking, powerful forces in Cotonou that could counter-act or even reflect back their malevolent curses? For the people of Zokou, the causes of anxiety were many.

Ultimately, community members had little alternative. Paul could indeed be confident that, as a native son who had already redistributed greatly to his village, his election to the city council was assured. And yet, the social mechanisms by which this assurance was produced remains far more uncertain and prone to community-wide anxiety, for it is not so much that the village trusts its native sons the most, but rather, because of both the importance of kin-obligations and the threat of occult punishment, it distrusts them the least.

With his initial challenge to Djisou, Paul had learned the hard way that general voter suspicion of politicians must somehow be assuaged. Action, in the form of a gift to voters, counted far more than mere promises of gifts; kin obligations might not ensure trust in a native son, but it can go a long way into providing an insurance policy against future betrayal.

Paul's social world is, perhaps at its most fundamental, an ever-expanding one. In the courtyard of the bar, sitting at the table next to me, Paul effortlessly divides his time between

talking to me about local politics but also soccer, beer, and American movies, scanning the other tables and the vehicles that arrive or even pass by, SUVs most of all, and assessing the attractiveness of the waitresses in the bar's current employment. "Paul, don't you already have two wives?" "Yes," he says immediately, subtly rolling his eyes. He pauses for a brief moment. "But I am always looking for number three." With eyes both wary and attentive, he continued to scan the other tables at the bar, taking note of other patrons, at several points nodding his head upwards to casually greet someone. The server places a bottle of beer, a glass, and a glass cover on top of it to keep away the flies. Paul automatically pours a small amount, rinses his glass and throws it on the ground before filling it to the top. He takes a sip and breathes in a brief moment of relaxation.

His exhausting approach is, however, paying off considerably. Within only the past few weeks, his connections with the Ministry of Education had paid off yet again: they offered him a desk job at the central office in Cotonou. I ask, "But doesn't Djisou want you on the ground around Zogbodomey?" "Ah, Nathan, your heart is made of gold." He smiles mischievously and takes a swig. We both know that this job will offer the same kind of incredible networking opportunities as those afforded to a new member of the National Assembly, if at a lower hierarchical level. Schooling has long been a primary concern for Beninese people, making the Ministry of Education one of the most powerful (and consequently lucrative) ministries in the national government.

There were, however, risks involved with Paul' ongoing networking. Most risky by far was his association with Djisou, who, it was well known, had allied with northern President Boni's FCBE political party, greatly facilitating its efforts to encroach upon the home turf of RB, Soglo's party. Such encroachment of course posed existential threats to RB itself. For after all,

the district of Zogbodomey was positioned in the middle of the Zou-Collines department, the heart of Lehady Soglo's RB political party, again the primary opponent to President Boni. As discussed earlier in this chapter, in 2011 Soglo had formed an alliance with PRD, another fierce opponent to Boni, stationed in Gun-speaking Porto Novo, as well as a dozen smaller southern parties, in order to challenge the president's reelection. The alliance called itself "Unité fait la Nation," or UN, a clever play on the well-known English abbreviation for "Nations Unies." Through intense negotiations Soglo had agreed to let Adrien Hounbedji, the older and more experienced mayor of Porto Novo and head of PRD, represent the alliance.

The result was a landslide in favor of Boni, who, according to election results, received enough votes in the first round to preclude a second round, the only such occurrence in Beninese history. UN supporters were outraged, and widely accused Boni of fabricating the election results. For Boni's second inauguration in the political capital of Porto Novo, PRD supporters physically blocked his motorcade, leading to a confrontation with the army that only Houngbedji himself could diffuse.

Paul was indeed in a risky position given the FCBE's unprecedented push into RB territory. But his situation was riskier still given the nature of political alliances in Benin. In short, such alliances offered no protection. Political actors allied with one another solely out of expectation of personal gain. Mirroring the larger mimesis of politics itself, political patrons and political clients merely played their respective roles, emulating as they patrons and clients in ordinary social life.

With his promising new position in the Ministry of Education, its offices located in the heart of Cotonou, over the next few weeks I came to see less and less of Paul. He only managed to return to Bohicon every other weekend, and when he did he understandably spent most of that

time with his family. When I did manage to see him, his eyes were almost star struck as he talked about all of the big people he was meeting in Cotonou. His frustrations with Beninese politics and its incessant salutations seemed to have lessened, and much of this was due to the fact that Paul no longer felt the need to maintain all of the contacts that he had in Zogbodomey and Bohicon before his advancement to the ministry. Of course, this lightened load had been partially counterbalanced by evermore calls from community members in Zokou. Word had apparently traveled fast. While his new position in the ministry added yet more assurance to his bid for city council, it also meant yet higher expectations from their rising native son. Paul was looking forward to the coming election more than ever, but now for additional reasons.

On a day in early January of 2014 I had called Paul to check in. His phone was off, something that I had never before experienced. At the time, however, I was busy with a number of interviews in Abomey, and I remembered how excited he had been to meet more and more people through his new post. I continued to check in daily. After a week with his phone still off, I began calling our mutual friends, and then his relatives. Reaching his brother, I expressed to him my confusion, and asked where Paul was. His brother said quite directly that Paul was dead. I remember asking his brother to repeat that simple phrase; it took half a dozen repetitions for even the idea to register in my mind.

Paul had been living by himself in a small studio apartment in Cotonou, in an apartment building mostly occupied by other married men who, like Paul, had left their families elsewhere in Benin to work in the economic capital, returning on the weekends as their schedules allowed. The building superintendent had found Paul in his bed, seemingly asleep. Just the night before, Paul had eaten dinner with the superintendent and several other residents, and had seemed perfectly healthy.

Despite the mysterious nature of his death or perhaps because of it, in the many conversations, lamentations, and questions that followed among his family and friends, to my knowledge at least, the biological cause of his death was never discussed. His family did hold a divination on order to determine who was responsible; all I knew was that the family had disagreed as to how to interpret the findings. Without the resources to keep his body in a morgue, Oscar's family held his funeral within forty-eight hours. Over a hundred people came to his funeral, reflecting both his many friends and colleagues and the suddenness of his death. None of the attendees, however, were elected officials. Djisou did not make an appearance.

Over the several blurry and surreal days that followed, I contacted all of my doctor friends, and carefully went over the details of Paul' case. All of the American doctors whom I knew said something along the lines, "Nothing comes to mind. Sometimes people simply die and we don't know why, especially without an autopsy." It was during this time that I was interviewing Père Bernard, whom I discussed in the previous chapter, and through him I had come to know a Beninese physician. Speaking with me in private, the physicians said,

> *As a doctor I cannot say…but as a Beninese, particularly considering that your friend was involved in politics, my first hypothesis would be poisoning. While I will not go into details, I will say that I've seen these cases before and they are all quite similar. It is not uncommon here.*

I had asked all of the doctors I knew not because I was looking to complete my ethnographic portrait of Paul and his life, but because I was looking for closure. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the often unforeseeable outcome of ethnographic inquiry, that bizarre and sometimes jarring alchemy of intellectual questions and personal relations, in the end the doctor's answer provided significant intellectual insight but no closure at all.

Several weeks after the funeral, Gabin and I are back at Chez Tanti, where the three of us had spent countless evenings drinking bottles of La Beninesee while talking about politics and music and football. But now Gabin and I were silent, our conversation limited to occasional sighs and occasional glances at one another.

I had not seen Gabin since the funeral, and today he has with him a bible, a folder, and a spiral notebook. He explains that he has recently started to take classes at the catholic seminary in town, that it's something that he's wanted to do for a long time. Before, Gabin would openly and enthusiastically talk about his upcoming campaign for Bohicon city council, and of course, local politics more generally. Today he doesn't mention such things at all, and at some point I pick up the intuition not to ask.

Ivoirian rap music thunders from an old speaker the size of a refrigerator by the front entrance. For weeks now I had tried to make sense of Paul' death by recycling in my head old conversations and old stories, old rumors about politics that I had gathered from him and dozens of other collaborators over the course of fieldwork. One question in particular had plagued me from the beginning. I looked at Gabin and said

> *I have a question and it isn't about really about my research. I just need to know something, for myself. I've hung out with you two for over a year at this point. We've been to dozens of bars around Bohicon. With all these people thinking that I'm CIA or a spy, do you think that someone saw Paul with me and…did I do something wrong? Did I have a part in his death?*

Gabin seemed entranced by the little streams of bubbles traveling upward through his bottle of beer. For a moment I wasn't sure if he had heard me. Several moments passed. The Ivoirian rap music continues to blare from the old speaker, and yet it seems distant. Then, Gabin sighs, pauses, and says:

> *No, it didn't have anything to do with you…[pause] you see, this is why there are no atheists here. Because one must always, necessarily attach oneself to a divinity. Especially for the ambitious. Ok, if you're a coward, then really who cares, maybe you don't need a divinity. But if you are ambitious, the way Paul was, you have to attach yourself to something bigger than you. But he didn't do that.*

We were silent once again. Something about his words, cryptic though they were, satisfied me in that moment. Of course, the ethnographer in me wanted to ask for clarification. Was Gabin literally talking about divinities, or was this an indirect way of talking about the complicated political situation Paul had entered that ultimately cost him his life? It is a truism among anthropologists that ethnographers are most haunted by the questions that they didn't ask. But for me, there are also times when asking one more question would violate the sensibilities of the relationship from which the prompt originates. My consideration for my relationship with Gabin, and the difficulty that I could see in him in thinking about Paul in this way, prevented any further questions.

Although the question that I asked Gabin that day was a personal one as opposed to professional, in retrospect such a distinction ultimately proves rather meaningless. On the one

hand, as ethnographers we make unavoidably make the personal our professional concern, and this includes that which is personal for ourselves. On the other hand, what is professional unavoidably has effects on our personal lives. Moreover, what Gabin said is readily applicable to not only politics in Benin, but social life more generally. It is, of course, a precarious balance, but one that needs to be articulated.

Later the meaning of Gabin's words suddenly resonated with me: Paul had positioned himself as a client to Djisou, in the sense that he offered to Djisou his labor and his public praise, if not his loyalty. Djisou was not, however, really his "papa" because again, within the frame of commodity-clientelism, such support and solidarity only existed as a hollow façade. Divinities, by contrast, for Beninese exist in the moral economy of gift-clientelism, in which support and solidarity are integral components. Of course, as an implicit rule, no such solidarity exists in Beninese politics; every one is out for themselves. Gabin's bible, folder, and spiral notebook signified a longing not just for a relationship with divinity, but also the larger gift-clientelism frame that one necessarily abandons when entering politics. Gabin would go on to lose his bid for Bohicon city council. To this day he hasn't indicated a desire to run again and when he and I communicate, we no longer talk about Beninese politics.

Time passed. I came to spend more and more time in Abomey, a mere eighteen kilometers to the west of Bohicon, but a space that felt like a different and safer world. I would, however, occasionally return to Bohicon for small errands. One morning in early March I had just stepped out of a small electronics boutique located across the street from the Bohicon Elementary School. Hundreds of children, all wearing khaki uniforms, played in the schoolyard. I had returned to my motorcycle, parked on the street, and was busy rearranging the bungee

cords on the seat when I looked up to see a little girl who had quietly approached me from the schoolyard.

I looked at her eyes and I saw Paul. It was his daughter, Estelle. My face came alive and set aside my things and squatted to her level to talk to her. With what I only later realized was a rather coddling voice I asked her how she was, about her health, her family. She smiled briefly, politely, but did not take her eyes off of her sandals. I had played mancala with her at her home on several occasions, and her vivacious laughter had always caught me off guard. I looked at her now. That Estelle was not here, or at least very far away.

As I crouched there in front of her, next to my bike, I suddenly realized that I was talking to her as would an American and not as a Beninese, trying as I was to make a personal connection with her, to elicit an emotional response. I had even squatted to bring myself to her level, something Beninese adults rarely do.

I raised myself to a standing position, while she remained almost motionless before me. A long moment passed. I could see her occasionally looking to her side, past me, at something distant. A large truck barreled past us on the road. Then, without a thought coming into my head, I reached into my back pocket and fished out a green 5,000 cfa bill. I extended it to her, and told her to get something to eat. Without moving her head, she glanced up at me and then back to the ground. She curtsied and in a slight though ponderous voice she whispered “Merci, Tonton.” She ran back to the schoolyard.

Taking a step back from Paul’s life, one can articulate a definitive arch, one that starts with the gift-clientelism that structured his early experiences in his natal village of Zokou, transitioning into the commodity-clientelism that defines the realm of Beninese politics, and finally transitioning back to gift-clientelism in an interaction with his surviving daughter and a

grieving friend. Ultimately it was the mutual independence of political actors, or more specifically, the lack of mutual social obligations between patrons and clients, that left Paul vulnerable to RB, the southern political party facing the encroachment of Boni's northern FCBE party, facilitated by Paul's rise. It was this vulnerability that ultimately cost Paul his life. Had Djisou been a patron to Paul in the gift clientelism sense as opposed to the commodity clientelism sense, he would have offered Paul protection out of a sense of moral and social obligation. But he did not, as that was not the operative logic of their relationship.

But, gift-clientelism *was* the operative logic with his family and friends. Standing on the side of the highway with his daughter, slowly realizing her implicit expectation for money, my obligation to her, and, much later, the larger relational frame that structured the encounter to begin with, I hastily fished out a 5,000 cfa bill out of my pocket.

Conclusion

For decades, Western governments and multilateral institutions have viewed vote-buying specifically and clientelism generally as corruptions of Western democratic governance, and have attempted to change these practices through the launching of conditional aid assistance programs and multilateral anti-corruption campaigns in countries throughout sub-Saharan Africa. For decades these policies have failed.

In this dissertation I have argued that the cause of this ongoing frustration stems from the overlooked fact that while Beninese do agree with Western policymakers that the Beninese government is corrupt, *they are corrupt for different reasons*, and that, moreover, each reason stems from a culturally-specific framework. Stated differently and borrowing from the terminology of legal scholars, Beninese hold a culturally-derived *concurring opinion* with Western perspectives regarding corruption in the Beninese government.

For Beninese, politicians who misappropriate government funds and keep this money for themselves are corrupt not for misappropriating, as they are in the eyes of Western policymakers, but for not redistributing those funds to extended family and fellow members of their natal village, arrondissement, region, language, and ideally, country. One should eat the state, my collaborators would often explain to me, but one should never eat the state alone.

In this dissertation I have argued for a culturalist understanding of political legitimacy. In Benin, people widely understand clientelistic redistribution to be legitimate, but also morally ideal. Voters invest considerable time and effort in evaluating political candidates primarily in terms of their perceived likelihood to secure material resources from the Beninese state, typically through misappropriation, and to use those funds to directly benefit them. Beninese voters demonstrate little concern for a candidate's stand on social issues or ideological orientation. For

them, redistribution figures centrally; redistribution makes for both an effective and moral political figure; redistribution is what politics is and should be, and is what government figures are there to do. This is so because Beninese structure their own lives according to similar practices and their attending implicit social logics.

Beninese nonetheless agree that their political system has been deeply corrupted. Political candidates regularly make big promises regarding redistribution on the campaign trail, assuring voters that if elected they will build schools, medical clinics, paved roads, water wells, and other major infrastructure in their communities if elected. Relatively few of these promises come to pass. Once elected, politicians often busy themselves associating with other politicians, including members of the National Assembly and various government ministries, but also prominent local businesspeople and lobbyists. Through these networks many elected politicians secure bureaucratic positions or business contracts well before they face re-election, and in the process forget about the constituents entirely.

Local voters can at best hope for a partially responsive representative who will build infrastructure perhaps only in his or her natal village or neighborhood, perhaps radiating outward to a few surrounding communities, but stopping well short of redistributing to all constituents. As I discussed in chapter four, evidence of such partial redistributions dot the Beninese landscape in the form of well-apportioned towns—paved roads, new schools, medical clinics, water pumps—juxtaposed with communities lacking much if not all such infrastructure. In such cases voters reason with one another and with themselves that some responsiveness is better than none, and that perhaps if their elected politician rises just a little higher in the government, then he or she will redistribute more and to more people. Typically, then, they continue to provide electoral support.

More typical, however, voters face the disheartening reality that most of the candidates up for election have no interest in honoring the social obligations of gift-clientelism. In such cases, quite common in contemporary Benin, voters must play a tortured game identifying not bad apples, but rather the rare good one.

To account for this local form of corruption, I have further argued that there exists an enduring tension in Beninese clientelism, one between the moral economy of gift-clientelism and its cynically emulated and self-interested double, commodity-clientelism. Like *guanxi* in China, the social practices and attending logic of gift clientelism, a constellation of asymmetrical reciprocities, favors and favoritisms, social obligations and solidarities creating vast networks of informal mutual assistance, are widely practiced and widely legitimated by local people. But, also like *guanxi*, local elite actors who have mastered the practices and logics of global capitalism have altered the practice and for their own material benefit (Yang 1994:185),

Commodity clientelism mimics gift clientelism while simultaneously undermining it. Following Gregory's original distinction between gifts and commodities, within the framework of commodity-clientelism, political candidates value the social relationships created by giving (and often the mere *promise* of giving) not for their *use* but rather for their *exchange*. Through the mechanism of electoral politics, political candidates, focusing on the qualitative relationships between things as opposed to the quantitative relationships between people, are able to trade the commensality and solidarity created at campaign rallies for countable votes. The excitement and hope and collective joy of voter electoral support is in this way transmuted into tallies on election day, which politicians use as currency in the political capital of Porto Novo and the economic capital of Cotonou.

The commodity-clientelism practiced by successful candidates endures because commodity-clientelism sufficiently emulates the local moral economy of gift-clientelism so as to pass the largely intuitive evaluations of voters. As in many other places around the world, Beninese regularly campaign that politicians are untrustworthy, that they constantly lie, that the problem is that one cannot see inside their bellies, meaning that one can never know their true motivations. Such anxieties, I argue, derive directly from the difficulty intrinsic to reliably distinguishing between gift-clientelism and commodity-clientelism, but are further complicated by the sustained efforts of politicians operating in the latter frame to appear to be operating in the former. It is crucial to emphasize that Beninese view this all-too-common arrangement as corrupt because it violates their local, culturally derived understandings of political legitimacy, and not because it *also happens* to violate Western understandings.

Whereas Western political science has long claimed that people determine legitimacy universally and according to rational calculation of individual self-interest, I claim that people rather determine legitimacy particularly and according to cultural intuition. Put differently, legitimacy is *culturally subjective*, meaning that it depends on a particular cultural background that is comprised of shared history, shared social practices, and shared implicit social logics. Popularly elected governments around the world differ because their cultures differ; legitimacy is thus necessarily a relativistic concept. People identify as legitimate those political candidates, institutions, and policies that most resonate with their culturally derived intuitions regarding a proper social and moral life.

I have further argued that legitimacy is also *contextually subjective*, meaning that evaluations of legitimacy take individual and group self-interests into consideration. For this reason, the same individual can evaluate a particular action differently, as corrupt and as

legitimate, at different times depending on the immediate context and viewpoint and the relation to who is doing it.

Going forward

There exist a number of ways in which this dissertation lends itself to further expansion. I divide these future possibilities into two main categories: theoretical and ethnographic. Of course, further theoretical explanation will call for additional ethnographic data, which will in turn require further theorizing, and so on and so forth. It is, however, useful to articulate future areas of expansion as they presently appear to me.

Over the course of this dissertation I have advanced a theoretical argument about the ways in which people come to understand political legitimacy and by extension corruption. I have argued that people form their notions of legitimacy through cultural intuition, as opposed to rational calculation. People identify as legitimate those political candidates, institutions, and policies that most *intuitively* resonate with the practices and cultural logics that constitute their own social and moral experiences.

In this dissertation I have refrained from elaborating on intuition in theoretical terms. To my knowledge there currently exists no anthropological discussion regarding political legitimacy, and so by making a culturalist and intuition-driven claim, I merely intend to break new ground that future scholarship can explore. One possibility is to approach intuition through the theoretical gaze of affect theory (Deleuze & Guatarri 1987; Damasio 1994; Varela 1999; Clough and Haley 2007). As historian Ruth Leys (2011) has explained, affect theorists start with the premise that Western scholars have generally overvalued the role of rationality in politics, that the ways in which people actually form political perspectives takes implicit and subliminal

queues from their surroundings. My general argument, that people determine both political legitimacy and corruption according to a culturally-derived intuitive process, finds fertile ground in this conversation.

For the defense I ultimately decided to limit my chapter count to four, devoting them to a literature review of the anthropology of clientelism, history, daily social logics, and politics, respectively. This decision required that I set aside three additional chapters that, once properly revised, would together enhance the larger arguments that I have made in this research project. In the future I intend to convert some of these chapters into journal articles and ultimately to produce a book.

In a chapter devoted to ritual, I describe the three-day ritual process known as *ahanbiba*, or "the serving of drink," in which members of the same patrilineage gather to install the spirits of recently deceased members in an ancestral shrine and to venerate the ancestors as a totality. This yearly event, widely practiced through Benin but most common in the old royal capital of Abomey, follows a clientelistic protocol of performed deference and asymmetrical reciprocity. Based on a review of literature concerning the region (Le Hérissé 1912; Herskovits 1938; Law 1989; Bay 1998, 2008), it is apparent that Beninese have been venerating their ancestors in similar fashion for the last several centuries.

The three-day event begins in the evening of the first day, with the ritual of *sinmakpoje*, or "the fly does not fall inside the bottle," in which members of the patrilineage gather at the ancestral shrine, each member bringing a bottle of liquor to be shared during the weekend. The most common liquor is gin, due to its low price in local markets, to the widespread assertion that the ancestors prefer it, but perhaps also to the association of gin with the Atlantic slave trade, which for over two centuries brought great material wealth to the area. During the ritual of

sinmakpoje, the Dah notifies ancestral spirits that over the next three days their descendants will be with them and will be giving gifts to them. The Dah also presents to the ancestors all of the liquor to be consumed over the course of the next three days, laying each bottle on the ground "to sleep" next to the ancestors, reminding the ancestors that their descendants are there.

During *sinmakpoje* people drink a good deal together but do not eat together. It seems to me that this first night of the *ahanbiba* cycle is dedicated to pure sociality, both among and between descendants and their ancestors. Several collaborators take the name *sinmakpoje*, again "the fly does not fall inside the bottle," to mean that everyone is drinking together and so regularly as to leave little opportunity for flies to enter.

At the time of my dissertation submission, I am still developing an interpretation of the meaning of drinking in Benin with reference to the dialectic of the Belly and the Head. Drinking in Benin means sociality. Drinking alone is not so much taboo as the very idea is so strange and counter-intuitive as to attract little contemplation. At bars, restaurants, club lounges, and other public places where drinks are served, customers typically keep bottles of beer on the table in front of them until the end of their stay; it is not customary for wait staff to remove bottles as they are emptied. Collaborators explained that there is a status attached to this practice, as only relatively wealthy people can afford to drink large quantities of beer. They also said that "seeing the bottles in front of you remind you of the good time you're having with your friends." To drink is to experience the joy of togertherness.

Several collaborators told me that if a prospective groom is poor but nonetheless needs to provide bridewealth, that many of the more luxurious items—kitchen appliances, porcelain, silverware, as well as luggage—can be skipped, that the only essential item is liquor, and plenty of it, with the reasoning being "no one wants to have a wedding where no one talks to each

other." It seems to me that it is through the mechanism of inebriation that people can best facilitate the dialectical interplay of the belly and the head, that is, self-interest and community-interest. Individuals, my collaborators explain, always have their own self-interests and thus their own agendas, an unavoidable fact that necessarily leads to rivalries, jealousies, grudges, open conflicts, and other social tensions. People simultaneously acknowledge that group solidarity can solve many of these issues, but that due to stubbornness but also strategy, no one wants to let their guard down so as to encourage group solidarity. Alcoholic drinks, one collaborator stressed, "go down to your belly and then straight to your head." Drinking seems to naturally mediate the tension between the belly and the head. This interpretation is, however, currently underdeveloped and would most likely require additional interviews.

During the ritual of *ahanbiba* the Dah, or lineage head, carefully oversees the reception, preparation, and gifting of food, drink, and animal sacrifices to the ancestors, often to the point of ostensible micromanagement. The Dah follows a detailed protocol in which he announces to the ancestors which living descendants gifted what, as a way to encourage lineage members to give more. The ritual of *ahanbiba*, I argue, ultimately has a ripple effect beyond the patrlineage to influence the general orientation of Beninese people in their daily lives and logics.

In the clientelist entrepreneurship chapter, I follow Edward, a young and successful small business owner in Bohicon who opened a French-style bakery after having worked in a *boulangerie* in Lyons. After returning from France, Edward had struggled for several years in an attempt to raise capital by accumulating the profits from a market stall that he operated in Bohicon's central market, an idea that is popular among young entrepreneurs in Benin. Although Edward is a gifted salesperson, his individual effort to save money for his new venture were repeatedly frustrated, most frequently due to claims to his savings made by extended family

members, typically cousins looking for help or nieces and nephews who needed money to pay for school fees, but also his patrilineage's annual *ahanbiba* ancestral veneration series of rituals. After months of frustration, Edward began to reduce his assistance to family members and ultimately denied them such favors, a move that quickly lead to considerable controversies and other headaches with his family. During this time Edward became increasingly involved in a local Pentecostal church and went so far as to openly disparage his family for believing in what he claimed was the worshiping of evil spirits. Months later, when his father in law suddenly died in a traffic accident, Edward decided to pay for much of the considerable funerary expenses, as failing to do so would have threatened his marriage and relationship with his children. The funeral wiped out his meager savings.

Unable to save money on his own, Edward ultimately turned to an established local business owner for patronage, which is by far the most common way for fledging entrepreneurs to raise capital in Benin, despite the widespread celebration of individual savings, particularly by young entrepreneurs. Edward's patron was a successful restaurant owner, and through his assistance Edward was able to purchase a commercial mixer and other capital equipment essential to starting the bakery. His patron also brought Edward into his network of vendors and distributors, which greatly eased his entry into the industry. At the time of my dissertation research in 2013 and 2014, Edward had also begun to associate with the Bohicon mayor's office, who offered to local businesses similar clientelistic relationships in exchange for political support.

In this chapter I also follow a class of students at a local for-profit entrepreneurial college, and show how, despite a widespread ideology celebrating ingenuity, hard work and personal savings, most entrepreneurial students are eagerly seeking out patrons to provide start-

up capital, just as Edward himself had ultimately done. I showcase both Edward's bakery and the for-profit entrepreneurial college to demonstrate that clientelist social logics pervade Beninese practices of capitalism.

In the last of the three chapters, I study the figure of *mɛjɔmɛ*, or "actualized person." I ultimately decided to pull this chapter from the dissertation because my field data was incomplete; I was in the middle of conducting a series of interviews with several *mɛjɔmɛ* in the Zou province when I had to leave the country out of concerns for my safety. I would, however, ultimately like to complete this chapter.

Over the course of my fieldwork I noticed a curious inversion occurring over the life cycle of ambitious individuals, whether politicians, entrepreneurs, judges, or local *chefs d'arrondisement*. The ambitious would, in their youth, devote great energy to building themselves up as an existential singularity; part of the motivation for people to mark school buildings, medical clinics, and other large gifts to local people came from this urge to establish one's name their minds, to "make one's name travel." When setting appointments, ambitious individuals would also make others wait for them well beyond the set time, another strategy for "making people think about you." Such efforts at self-cultivation parallel reports from elsewhere on the African continent (Geyer 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Mbembe 2002).

Around middle-age, however, these same ambitious individuals would retreat from the public eye that they had previously so desperately sought. All of these figures continued to redistribute material resources to their local communities, but whereas before they had seemed driven by their ego and its obsession with notoriety, now these individuals seemed driven by genuine concerns for others. Whereas as ambitious youth regularly and intentionally made others wait, established personalities seemed to always be on time. A *mɛjɔmɛ*, then, emerges as a

paradoxical figure. On the one hand, *mɛjɔmɛ* closely conform to what Geyer (1996) as described as a *mfanmot*, a "self-realized existential singularity," an achievement facilitated by clientelistic redistribution towards the creation of "big men." On the other hand, notoriety is both necessary for the development of a *mɛjɔmɛ* but antithetical to his or her identity as such. In all of this, there seems to exist a connection between the paradox of the *mɛjɔmɛ* and the dialectical interplay of the belly and the head.

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