

*A small country with a great past faces the new challenge of Africa
Benin, the mystery of modernity
It was a terrible and powerful kingdom, called Dahomey. Then it became only the
Slave Coast. Here was born Vodoun (voodoo), the religion of spirits that could do
nothing against the law of the strongest, sanctioned by history written by Europeans.
Here came the twentieth century while they still made human sacrifices. But today
Benin is one of the most liberal countries in black Africa, able to solve the problems
affecting the entire continent: the relationship between tradition and modernity, the
ones between town and countryside, and especially between wealth and poverty.*

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"Despite the justness of our cause and the value of our army, we could do nothing against the white enemy we praise the courage and discipline. (...) But the victory does not belong only to the armies that destroy their enemies. The man who, left alone, continuing the struggle in his heart is really victorious (...) Go, therefore, with a safe life and perhaps a new freedom. Go, unknown heroes of a tragic epic that ends. Farewell, soldiers, farewell". With these sad words of farewell, King Gbehanzin, last true descendant of the kings of Dahomey, gave himself to French, by refusing to sign the surrender and by accepting the betrayal of his brother Agboliagbo, dummy king in the hands of the new white masters, who were about to completely seize the Black Continent (1894). The new century buried in exile (Gbehanzin in Martinique and Algeria, Agboliagbo in Gabon) a dynasty of twelve kings who ruled Dahomey for three centuries.

The twelve kings of Dahomey, courageous and ruthless leaders, imposed terror on their subjects, lived in a horrible blood and death-soaked beauty, obsessed by power, family intrigues and a religion, the origin of the voodoo, they were awed by. They felt absolutely on a par with their European colleagues, with whom they exchanged gifts and information, by sending ambassadors and organizing skulduggery on a global scale. The most profitable and shocking one consisted of exporting men, importing weapons: the slave trade. For a long time the warrior kings, locked in their palaces in Abomey, the capital of the kingdom, deluded themselves of being able to handle a game that, from the beginning, was too big for them: at the end, only the shame of having contributed to the largest mass deportation of the human race, having sold their brothers to feed an impotent power. For Europeans, the usual moral duplicity, the usual hypocrite vision of a civilization that claims to be universal, but it is designed for a select few whites (and often not even for them).

Men like beasts: crammed, chained, branded (the property must be protected), sold by weight and ready to replace and integrate oxen, horses and donkeys in the fields, or trained as bears and monkeys, and always with the paraphernalia reserved to the animals: whips, straps, chains, collars. And this happened while the Enlightenment shined, while the principles of the French Revolution conquered Europe, even as communism was enunciated, as soccer and rugby were already played. The slave trade ended especially because it was no longer convenient. The "tragic epic" that ended was perfectly embodied by the figure of Don Francisco de Souza, known as "Chacha". Legendary Brazilian adventurer, he was sent to Dahomey (which was the Slave Coast for Europeans) by the governor of Bahia in 1812, to reorganize the slave trade. Don Francisco loved the risk, and always between glory and death, arranged a fatal alliance with the king Guézo to organize his army, the slave trade and the production of palm oil.

The dynamism of De Souza (so called "Chacha", "fast" in fon language) contrasted with the centuries-old slumber hot and humid Africa, full of malaria and seemingly immovable. Don Francisco and his wealth were sucked down, and he lost his roots, his identity, not belonging to the new hostile land, dreaming of a return to Brazil that never arrived. He died poor and alone, renegade by all the people he had enriched, branded as evil slave-driver, got rid like a relic to be ashamed of, with an amazing horde of children. He was the Viceroy of Ouidah, the sacred city of

voodoo, and his title inspired the homonymous book by Bruce Chatwin, the great travel writer (in addition to the film "Cobra Verde" by Herzog).

But Africa seems to have an ancestral memory, which remains in the chromosomes of its children even as it has never been set in the books. In Ouidah, past and present mingle just like History and Legend, Magic and Religion, Sacred and Profane, Good and Evil. Here is the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, beautiful in its decadence, looking with a little superiority at the Python Temple, the patron of the city, sacred place of voodoo. Facing each other, the religions of the whites and the blacks, the God of the winners and the god of the losers, united in the indissoluble bond that experts called "religious syncretism" and for Africans is just the sense of the sacrum they never lost, because it is the essence of life itself. "The cult of voodoo was banned only in years of Revolution," said Modeste, young guide of Ouidah. The Revolution years are those of the dictatorship of General Mathieu Kérékou, almost twenty years (1972-1991). Like many other African countries, Dahomey knew the modernist obsession of the communist regime and became the "People's Republic of Benin" in 1975. Starting over, clearing the past, building history on the spotless pages of the future: this is an unlikely operation anywhere, absolutely impossible in Africa. "The Revolution has had only two merits" - says Tolomé Laurent, 37, engaged in cooperation in the agricultural sector - "First, it brought a sense of the state, authority, in total Benin anarchy, then it created a feeling of national unity, overcoming ethnic differences. For the rest, it was only an inefficient and corrupt dictatorship, like any dictatorship". You can add another positive aspect: Kérékou has always avoided bloodshed, he has never ruled by criminal methods. This should not be a merit, normally, but just think that Benin borders with Nigeria of the massacres and Togo of the ruthless dictator Eyadema, in the same region of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast.

The short history of Benin from the independence (1960) to the advent of Kérékou looks like a farce, a theatrical comedy of political power. Five coups, all bloodless, one of whom described by Kapuscinski in his latest book, "The Soccer War": it was November 1965, President and Vice President of the republic were involved in an endless dispute that paralyzed the country. At some point, each of them tried to stop the other, but the only one with a little of power was the general, who had already deposed the first president of the republic two years earlier, threatening him with a mortar while the president retired to his palace. The general imposed on the two to resign and appointed a new government.

The three political leaders (called Maga, Apithy and Ahomadegbé) got rid by the military, came up for the presidential re-elections five years later. But since the votes, including fraud and threats, were equally divided by three, candidates decided to practice the presidency of the republic by turn, two years for each one. At the beginning of the second "turnover" mandate, Kérékou called a halt to the farce and decided to set the former Dahomey, renamed Benin, according to the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Indeed, textually, according to the principles of "scientific socialism". Some nationalization followed (few, because there is not much in the country to get under the State control), mandatory gatherings, organization of farmers into collective farms, co-operation with the Soviet Union and China. Kérékou, who was a man from the North of the country, was able to give a national structure to Benin, overtaking by intelligence the traditional supremacy of the South (Fon and Yoruba ethnic group). Someone (France?) even tried to nip it in the bud, with a coup of mercenary paratroopers led by the famous Colonel Robert "Bob" Denard, who also devoted himself to the various coups in the Comoros. The attempt was rejected, Kérékou got the reputation of being tough (definitely he was a true born political animal). But if the political and military structure of Benin held, the economy was falling apart.

Thus, Marxism or not, Kérékou was forced to knock on the cruel doors of the International Monetary Fund, because the state was going straight into bankruptcy. But the cares of the IMF is mostly worse than the disease: the granting of credits is tied to the application of "measures of structural adjustments", which invariably are dropped on the weakest ranges of the population, while governments get enmeshed in the perverse mechanism of debts, and so they become increasingly dependent on their creditors. Kérékou failed to change this course, cuts in welfare

spending, and the salary payments in fits and starts made the population furious.

It was 1989: a historical revolutionary year, the beginning of the end for the communist regimes in Europe. The advent of democracy, the victory of freedom. But there was something illusory in the triumphalism of the moment, as it turned out later, especially in certain countries (the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia). There were some obscurities, some contradictions. Popular participation, for example. The riots that have shaken many African countries in those years were more impressive than those of many Eastern European countries, although much less publicized. The demand for better living conditions was behind the rebellion. The actors: no-paid teachers and students in terrible conditions and without future opportunities. The desire to emerge, to free themselves from poverty went well with the anxiety to express themselves, to criticize, even to throw stones against the Presidential Car (unheard gesture in the golden years of the regime). The desire for democracy is something great and confused.

Too often it was said, by paraphrasing Chirac, that Africans are not mature for democracy. One could instead argue otherwise, without falling too much in the paradox: the Africans are too mature for democracy. Perhaps because they have already seen all, and more. A Beninese who has the good fortune to be 60, had a grandfather who told him of the terrible Amazons and of 400 wives of the King from Abomey, of human sacrifice and slavery in America: he became a French citizen by force, by studying an unfamiliar language and by learning in school the history of "our ancestors, the Gauls", while his father was sent to the slaughter in Europe to fight an unfamiliar war, and returning to his homeland he was still subject to forced labor. Then, the independence, the promise of development, of a bright future, which never arrived, came. Thus, there was the revolution, all comrades in the name of "scientific socialism", they could not practice voodoo, but the Marxist president appointed minister a Mali feticheur named Cissé, his spiritual adviser, then accused of bankruptcy. That was the time of democracy, full of new promises and words full of the usual rhetoric that African intellectuals mastered better than anyone else.

For this reason the pragmatism of the common African, much more informed than you think (often much more than common European, especially in relation to the economic and cultural possibilities) is impressive, even shocking in the naturalness with which he systematically sees the dirty side of policy, the mere game of interests and power. So there is a lack of idealism, but it is hard to blame him.

The process of democratization in Benin was so spectacular as paradoxical. Suffice it to say that Kérékou, the dictator, is now the president of the republic by the will of the sovereign people, after being sent home by the same popular vote. All began with the convening of the national conference in 1990, reluctantly accepted by Kérékou. The representatives of "prime movers" of the nation must prepare a new constitution, leading to the end of the regime and finishing with free elections. The mediator in this delicate transition was an extraordinary man, a man of faith: Isidore de Souza, archbishop of Cotonou. Once again, the past returns mysteriously, as if to redeem himself: De Souza is a descendant of Don Francisco, the slave trader. He was born just in Ouidah, the voodoo capital, the port of slaves, which saw the return of many children from America, particularly Brazil and Haiti, as if to complete the triangle of spiritualism. Isidore de Souza, for many people the true father of Benin democracy, is the guarantor of unity and peace, because the contrasts between opposition and Kérékou were very hard: the general is reluctant to leave, his opponents want him in jail.

To manage the Government at this constituent stage is called an economist, Nicéphore Soglo, World Bank executive, who had worked abroad for many years. Violating the commitment made with the national conference, Soglo decides to run for the presidential election of 1991. For the Western press is already the standard-bearer of democracy, the brave representative of the liberal opposition that challenged Kérékou, the Great Dictator. His victory, by no means triumphant, is exalted in the world (so to speak); the French press says that Benin has become "a beacon of democracy" in Africa. Kérékou gives way, defeated but not vanquished.

The election "match clou" with Soglo starts: in the following election, in 1996, Kérékou takes his revenge, in the general amazement of the few Europeans who follow African affairs, and repeating

the success in 2001, while Soglo cries scandal for frauds, and he refused to participate in the balloting. How was this strange game of alternation possible, so typical as any "mature" democracy? Certainly not in terms of European analysts, who judged as normal the victory of Soglo the "good" and as unexplained the return of Kérékou, the "bad" if not for the lack of maturity of the Beninese voters. Instead the opposite is true, just listening to the people of Benin (what Europeans do not seem to ever deign to do, in African countries).

Seen from the African point of view, in fact, the story has completely different connotations, certainly at the limit of the paradox (but this is also the continent of magic and mystery). Well, results are not quite sure: the only certainty is that in the last election Kérékou cheated, and in Benin everyone knows that, although probably the final verdict would not have been different. Many people think that the story of alternation could also have been written backwards (Kérékou would have won in 1991, Soglo in 1996) according to an African political logic, certainly strange but not irrational. Here is the unofficial version of the facts: Kérékou was a definitely hated despot, but he did not deserve to be turned out badly for at least three reasons: first, he did not use force to be in power, showing great wisdom; and secondly, he never helped too much the people of North because they were "his" people; and thirdly, if he got rich, he did not in a blatant way, and at least he never flaunted his wealth (and in Benin humility is one of the most appreciated qualities). And considering Soglo. He represented the change, and certainly he revitalized an economy that was about collapse. But who for Westerners was the "champion of freedom", the exponent of famous civil society, ruled in an arrogant and authoritarian way, he let that his wife and son used his party for what they wanted, he humiliated the real protagonists of the democratization process and snubbed students; he exasperated his ethnic background, speaking only fon on many occasions and directly referring to the history of the kings of Abomey, a city that gave him birth, and finally he was unable to improve social standards at all, despite the good economic growth. Yet it was possible that he ruled five years, given his capacity as an economist, and so several people had voted him in spite of everything. In spite of everything. These two words are crucial in Africa. In Benin there is a democracy, "despite everything". And the real protagonists of democracy, "despite everything", are farmers. The men and women of the countryside, the "unknown heroes" of the nation, much more than the brave defeated soldiers of King Gbehanzin. Because Benin, like the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, was and is a rural country. The heart of the Black Continent lies in the fields, forests and savannahs. In the cities there is often only the sick product of a suffered modernity. The illusion of wealth close at hand, for example. What changes a hopeful brilliant student in short time in the umpteenth corrupt and inefficient politician or bureaucrat. Or what pushes many beautiful girls to look for money at night, in clubs and pubs that are the same all over the world. All wearing makeup and dressed in the latest fashion, with the phone in their bag, able to use a digital video recorder and be semiliterate.

In the countryside, the illusions burn between one harvest and the other. The alternative is or the export products (the so-called cash crops) or the products intended primarily for food (food crops). For Benin, the options are: cotton (the only real income to the balance of payments, together with the palm oil); or corn (or cassava or yam). The government has always favored, for obvious reasons, the production of cotton. There is the usual structure of the State that buys the cotton on credit and sells it in the international market. But people having bet on cotton, this year, have not yet seen a cent, and it is highly likely that some officials have sold the product under the counter. If the State was not enough, there are always the harsh laws of the market: just see the frightful price reductions on cocoa and coffee, which have brought the Ivory Coast on its knees. Better is bet on consumer products for internal use: no one dies by hunger in Benin, as it is happening in very advanced Argentina. Better is, especially, rely only on themselves and the communities of villages, without offending ideological disputes between liberalism and statism. "One of the principal problem for farmers - says Andrea Rinaldo, a volunteer of LTM (Laity Third World) association - is access to credit. These are often not huge sums to buy seeds and fertilizers for example, but crucial to obtain sufficient harvests; for this reason we have created the CREP, petty credit cash managed at village level". The success of these small rural banks has been extraordinary (a confirmation of

the experience of Grameen Bank by Mohammed Yunus in Bangladesh). The loans are unfailingly repaid in most cases, the deposits increase, and one tries to make money from money already in the first small non-agricultural investments. Women, with their petty marketing, as much as men, are the protagonists of this informal economy. To become a member of a CREP (Caisse rurale d'épargnes et des prêts) it takes about 2,500 CFA francs (about 4 euros) for the registration, and a deposit of, at least, 5,000 CFA francs to get a loan up to three times the paid amount; women pay more because their business is commercial and not agricultural: at least 15,000 CFA francs (25 euros) for up to 50,000 CFA francs (80 euros). Negligible amounts, for our pockets, but very important in the life of Beninese families (the average "city" salary is around 100 euros per month). "A big increase in agricultural production has been brought by the introduction of animal traction," says Rinaldo. The plow pulled by oxen instead of a hoe: this was the revolutionary change for many farmers in 2002. At the dawn of the third millennium these are the things that really matter, maybe now they begin to understand it: small concrete steps forwards for the poor majority, not spectacular acquisitions for the tight rich range of population. Another ongoing initiative in the countryside, more difficult to achieve, is about adult literacy. Having only 37 percent of adults able to read and write is yet another paradox for a country that was placed first by Reporters sans frontières for press freedom in Africa (and 21th in the world, much higher than Italy). In short, with all its poverty and its problems, Benin has been going on. In January there is a large voodoo convention in Ouidah. Forty virgins will bring water from the sacred river, along the "road of the slaves" to the No Return door, overlooking the Atlantic toward Brazil. Waiting to meet its own future, Africa continues to resist, resist, resist.

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