Reflections on Identity in Four African Cities

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4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present profiles of two capital cities on the western coast of the African continent, namely Libreville in Gabon and Lomé in Togo. It is mainly descriptive and covers the following topics:

- an overview of city development during the twentieth century,
- an outline of formal institutions of local government in these cities, and
- their separate population and linguistic profiles.

The first section of the chapter comprises brief histories of each city. Libreville is treated first, since data show that it was founded in 1849, significantly earlier than Lomé, which dates from 1877.

4.2 Location and brief history

Libreville

Libreville is the capital city of the Republic of Gabon. The Republic of Gabon, a French-speaking country, is located in Central Africa. It borders to the north-west on Equatorial Guinea, to the north on Cameroon, to the west on the Atlantic Ocean, and to the south and east on the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville). Gabon covers 267,667 square kilometres, most of which is dense tropical forest, interspersed with savannah, and fed by a river network of which the Ogooué is the most important. The country is administratively divided into nine provinces, which are further divided into districts (détartements) and municipal areas (communes). The provinces are numbered according to an administrative order from one to nine. Province number one is called Estuaire, whose main city is Libreville. In the Estuaire province, Libreville
is located on the right bank of the Komo river estuary. The city and its environments occupy about 16 000 hectares on the northern shore of the estuary. Hills dominate the central part of the land of Libreville, whereas the north and the north-east are made up of plains. These hills and flat valleys produce physical constraints that determine the social geography and have orientated occupancy of the land of Libreville (Ndong Mba, 2004: 60). Libreville, which means free town or city in French, takes its name from the settlement organised by the French navy in August 1849 for 50 freed adult slaves and two children of Vili origin from the Congo who had been rescued several years before from the slaving ship Elizia (Gradinier, 1994: 204).

These newly arrived residents were given plots of land and huts in the Komo estuary between the lands of the Mpongwe, the Agekaza-Glass and the Agekaza-Quaben clans. The French colonial post (which was later moved to higher ground nearby – the so-called Plateau), the residence of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, and St. Peter’s Church also came to be known under the name Libreville, and ultimately the name was applied to all the settlements on the right bank of the estuary. Libreville first served as capital of French Equatorial Africa until the function was moved to Brazzaville in 1904. In 1960, when the Republic of Gabon – with its current borders – attained independence, Libreville became its capital and rapidly developed into an important commercial centre.

**Lomé**

Lomé is the capital city of the Republic of Togo. The Republic of Togo, a Francophone African country, is located in West Africa. It borders to the north on Burkina Faso, to the west on Ghana, to the south on the Atlantic Ocean, and to the east on the Republic of Benin. Togo covers 56 800 square kilometres and is one of the smallest countries in West Africa. Most land in Togo is found on a large plain, which stretches out to the north. This plain is traversed by a single mountain range. The country is administratively divided into five regions, which are further divided into districts (préfectures) and municipal areas (communes). The regions are often named according to their respective geographic characteristics. Thus, the Savannas region in the North is covered by large savannah and plains; the Kara and Central regions are in the centre of the country and made up of mountains; the Plateaux region is characterised by mountainous plateaux; the Maritime region in the South is the sandy littoral zone containing the estuaries of a number of rivers. Lomé, in the Maritime region, is located on a sandy bar at the mouth of a lagoon of the same name (Lomé lagoon). The name of the city might have come from the presence of shrubs called ‘alo’ in Ewe language: Alo-mé meaning ‘in the midst of alo’ (Marguerat 1992: 4). Founded in 1877 (Marguerat, 1985), Lomé owes its existence as a city to the displacement of a number of African merchants and
European trading houses to the Togolese coast from the Dahomey coasts during the second half of the nineteenth century (Haan, 1993: 58). First colonised by Germany and then by France, it was the south of Togo that enjoyed a measure of economic development (Haan, 1993: 5). Togo also became independent in the 1960s, and Lomé has remained the capital city since that event.

4.3 Local government

Local government in both Libreville and Lomé involves municipal institutions, namely the Municipality of Libreville and the Municipality of Lomé. Attention will be given here to their organisation, their rights and responsibilities, and to municipal services.

The city of Lomé was established as a municipality in 1932, while Libreville became a municipality immediately after its foundation. Its first mayor, M. Mountier, in fact, was one of the freed slaves mentioned above. Though legislation in both countries has been promulgated with a view to strengthening local government, the new institutions so established – that are spelled out below – are largely without real authority and tend to play the role of decentralised central state bodies. This dependent role is due to the fact that the two municipalities lack resources – there are no city-based rates and taxes collected and the absence of independent financial income robs city councils of legal authority to act autonomously. In the case of Lomé, for example, constitutionally provided legal and financial autonomy cannot be used due to the absence of financial resources, while, in Libreville, legislation promoting devolution of authority to city level (loi sur la decentralization) that has been passed some time back has yet to be fully implemented.

**The Municipal Council of Libreville (Conseil Municipal de Libreville)**

Libreville is administered by an executive mayor (Maire Central) elected from and by the 98 councillors (conseillers municipaux) of this Municipal Council. They in turn are chosen in a citywide election organised at ward level by residents. Six deputy mayors are also elected, and a secretary-general, appointed by the state, assists the mayor. The city is also divided into six districts (arrondissements), which are administered by a district mayor and councillors representing wards within this district.

**The Municipal Council of Lomé**

The city of Lomé is also administered by a mayor who is appointed by the central government and a secretary-general appointed, in turn, by the mayor. The city is divided along geographic lines into five districts (arrondissements), each of which
is represented in the council by nine district councillors, selected in a citywide election organised at ward level by residents. These nine district councillors participate in District Councils in each of which a deputy mayor is elected to act as lead councillor. The councils of the city of Lomé currently play a consultative role in city affairs – the central government takes binding decisions.

_Municipalities with little power_

Both cities find themselves with councils that represent their residents but wield little real authority. In Lomé, for example, the municipality plays no role in monitoring urbanisation, in city planning, in land planning, in housing policy, or in the planning or supply of social services. In Gabon, the City Council of Libreville is not involved in the decision-making process for their city, which is guided by the central Ministries of Planning and Development Programmes, of Housing, Town Planning and Land Register, and of the Interior, Public Security, and Decentralisation. Accordingly, since both councils are not involved in decision making and decision taking, they do not feel bound to conform to these decisions. This leads, in turn, to continuing problems of accusation and counter-accusation regarding responsibility for planning and service delivery issues in these cities.

4.4 City development in the twentieth century

Since the early 1980s (when a major economic crisis took place in Togo), Lomé’s informal economic sector (including _taxis-moto_ and hawking) has been growing rapidly as the formal sector shrunk. It is one of the African capitals with the lowest (per capita) municipal budgets (Nyassogbo, 1998), a financial situation that leads to severe difficulties in the delivery of sustainable basic services to urban residents. According to Danioue (2004),

> Lomé has been known for a long time for the absence of social spatial segregation. [Socio-economic] differentiation between neighbourhoods is difficult to establish as poverty lives next to wealth in the same neighbourhood and beside a nice villa, one can find an unfinished house or a house inhabited by low income residents. (Danioue, 2004: 8)

Accordingly, shantytown landscapes are largely absent in Lomé although, in the last decade, due to increased land speculation in the centre of the city, low-income households have tended to settle on the periphery. If social segregation is still limited in Togo, urban dwellers tend to settle according to their ethnic community
Demographic profiles of Libreville and Lomé

(François, 1993). While old inhabitants of Lomé have been granted property rights from the commencement of the colonial period, more recent urban migrants have decided where to settle by using ethnic and linguistic networks. A family is helped by kin to find a plot. Most recent migrants from the north of the country, for instance, occupy city space to the north of the Laguna (a principal wetlands area in the centre of the city) where land is cheapest. Voluntary neighbourhood differentiation of this sort has been accentuated in the last decade after the rise of ethno-regionalist tensions during the height of the 1990–1993 political crisis when members of the president’s ethnic group were expelled from some neighbourhoods.

Lomé has a population of one million inhabitants (Danioue, 2004). There are 37 ethnic groups, speaking about 30 languages in the country (Lebikaza, 1997). These language groups may be categorised into two main families, the Gur group in the north and the Kwa group in the south (Takassi, 1983). The major ethnic groups are the Ewe (23.19 %) (a southern ethnic group), the Kabiye (13.79 %) (the president’s ethnic group from the north), the Ouatchi (10.30 %), and the Tem (5.75 %) (1981 Census). Lomé, which is located on the coast, includes a population made up of 70% of the ethnic group Adja-Ewe (Danioue, 2004). As a consequence, Ewe-Mina (Mina being a form of Ewe) is ‘the commercial language of South Togo’ and of Lomé (Lebikaza, 1997: 157).

Libreville is the political and administrative capital of Gabon, while Port-Gentil is its economic capital (Ndong Mba, 2003). While Gabon has one of the higher per-capita incomes in Sub-Saharan Africa, income inequality is very high and finds clear expression in the structure of residential areas. Socio-economic spatial segregation is high in Libreville and, according to Bissielo (2001), 80% of Libreville’s population live in under-equipped neighbourhoods, the ‘matitis’. Migrants’ access to the city is facilitated, as in the case of Lomé, by using ethnic and family networks (Kwezi Mikala, personal communication, 2004) so that neighbourhoods dominated by one language group still characterise the city’s landscape.

Gabon has a population of 1.2 million inhabitants (Census 1993), including 200,000 foreign migrants (mostly migrants from neighbouring African countries and about 15,000 French expatriates). Its territory covers some 268,000 square kilometres (Idiata, 2002). There are 62 ‘linguistic entities’ (parlers) in Gabon (Kwenzi Mikala, 1998), most of which include less than 10,000 members and which can be regrouped in ten bigger groups due to mutual understanding. The vast majorities of these languages belong to the Bantu linguistic family. Fang forms the largest language community and is spoken by 30% of the population. Ipunu and Inzebi are the two next largest language communities in the country (Idiata, 2002). Libreville itself has a population of 420,000 inhabitants, representing some 40% of the country’s total population. In contradistinction to Lomé, there is no city vernacular language in Libreville. The Fang form the largest minority language
community (38%), and are followed by the Shira Punu (28%) and the Nzebi (12%). It is worth noting that 24% of Libreville’s population is of foreign origin, thereby increasing the likely use of French as a vehicular language in Libreville.

### 4.5 Conclusion

Gabon is a richly endowed country – oil, manganese and uranium – with a tiny population; unclear borders with Cameroon; and next to the highly unstable and conflict-ridden Congo Brazzaville. Togo on the other hand is a small, poor country, sharply divided on a North/South divide. McGowan (2004: 11) has argued, recently, that the scramble for Africa during the second part of the nineteenth century deeply influenced the nature of both Gabonese and Togolese societies.

Gabon and Togo were both colonies of France, although for different periods of time – 1839 to 1960 for Gabon; 1918 to 1960 for Togo. France’s African policy was to maintain the closest possible links with its former colonies after 1960 via cooperation agreements covering culture, economics, politics and military/security relationships. Both Togo and Gabon signed such ‘accords de cooperation’ with France. As a consequence, good relations with France remained both countries’ most significant foreign policy relationship. This willingness to work very closely with France has produced real benefits for the ruling elites of both countries, but not for the people.

Both cities have experienced rapid growth over the past thirty years, in-migration particularly from the north of Togo in the case of Lomé and migration from various regions of Gabon and from neighbouring countries in the case of the more affluent city of Libreville. This dimension should accordingly be added to the demographic profiles drawn of these two cities. A summary of some of the primary features of these profiles in tabular form brings this chapter to a close.

**Table 4.1: Demographic, ethnic and linguistic profiles of the two cities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population (census year)</th>
<th>Lomé</th>
<th>Libreville</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 million</td>
<td>420 000</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant ethno-linguistic groups (% in city)</th>
<th>Lomé</th>
<th>Libreville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adja-Ewe (70%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fang (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabiye (20%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shira Punu (28%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nzebi (12%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International language and (Lingua Franca)</th>
<th>Lomé</th>
<th>Libreville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French (Ewe)</td>
<td></td>
<td>French (French)</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent urban in-migration (post-1995)</th>
<th>Lomé</th>
<th>Libreville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant in-migration from non-Ewe-speaking North</td>
<td></td>
<td>Significant in-migration from throughout Gabon and cross-border</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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