

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Dictatorship and the Press in Henri Lopes' *Le Pleurer-Rire*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z95t30s>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 18(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Yewah, Emmanuel

Publication Date

1990

DOI

10.5070/F7181016848

Copyright Information

Copyright 1990 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

DICTATORSHIP AND THE PRESS
IN HENRI LOPES' *LE PLEURER-RIRE*

by Emmanuel Yewah

The claim that we need the press to "watch" for us in order that representative government can work rests on certain assumptions. One is the belief that power tends to corrupt. Those who have power, given the apparent propensities of human beings toward self-aggrandizement, will, if left unconstrained, arrogate more power to themselves in an ever-ascending spiral.

Hodges, "Defining Press Responsibility."

The press is a pervasive force in policy making. What is reported has an impact on the people, the processes, and policies of the government.

Linsky, "Responsible Journalism."

Louis Hodges opens his essay "Defining Press Responsibility: A Functional Approach" with the following words: "Everyone knows what responsibilities doctors have....Everyone knows the responsibility of lawyers....Everyone knows the responsibilities of educators, the clergy, accountants, and politicians;" but then he asks, "what about journalists?"¹

In his attempt to answer the question, Hodges identifies four major roles that the press is called upon by society to play. The first, he says, is political, that is, to "inform the citizenry of what government and what other centers of power are doing." He also attributes to the press the role of education, which "includes reporting on and promoting discussion of ideas, opinions and truths." The press also plays a utilitarian role in that it serves as "a conduit of information about what is happening." In other words, "it operates as the society's bulletin board." Hodges sees the press playing a social or cultural role as well. The press, in his words, "holds up a mirror to society and reflects the kind of people we are, shows our heroes and villains, recalls our shared values."²

The press may play these roles effectively only in those societies in which such discussions of ideas, opinions and truths are open and guaranteed by the constitution and are reinforced by those in power, societies in which there is a free flow of information, societies in which

which villains are protected because they belong to a certain class or come from the same ethnic group as the political leadership. The society Hodges seems to have in mind here is one in which there is no censorship of any kind. Based on those ideals, the only societies that come close to allowing the press to function as such are some liberal democracies.

It should be noted, however, that even in those democracies, some forms of censorship do exist. For, as Brasch and Ulloth report, "within the human spirit is the essential need to suppress information which is believed to be unfavorable, threatening, or untrue." They point out that "it makes no difference whether or not the people claim to be libertarian and democratic, the essential human trait of fear will dictate how people respond to information." Even those who claim "to oppose all forms of censorship," they add, "will allow certain items (e.g. pornography or racial defamation) to be suppressed for the sake of 'public good.'"³ The focus of this paper, however, is on the way the press, newspapers in particular, function in those societies in which nothing is guaranteed, especially freedom of expression. I am referring, of course, to dictatorships.

Given its wide and varied functions and its ability to shape public opinion in economic, social, or cultural issues and in politics, the press is a "pervasive force" in policy-making and can be a conservative organ in democratic, socialist and dictatorial societies. However, whereas a liberal democracy uses the press as a watchdog or as part of its system of checks and balances, a dictatorship uses the same medium to enhance its power. Both of these functions are conservative and their aim is in the one case to maintain and preserve the status quo, as in a democracy, and in the other case to enhance and maintain individual power against all odds, as in a dictatorship. In the latter situation the dictator and the press, or specific newspapers, can work hand in glove with one another for mutual survival, in which case the press does not represent its readership objectively, as Hodges seems to have suggested above. The alternative source of information for those readers is the foreign press that, writing from the kind of democratic context described earlier, can make its readership feel smug because it makes fun of Third World dictators.

There is much in Third World literature in general and in African narratives in particular that vividly portrays the kind of intricate relationship between the press and the dictator--call them odd bedfellows. In this context, it will suffice to mention very briefly one glaring example in Tchikaya U' Tamsi's *Le Destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku prince qu'on sort*, in which Nnikon Nniku, who has just taken over power in a military coup, has called a press conference to explain the reasons for the coup and to outline his

government's policies. But rather than helping the press to fulfill its functions as outlined above by answering their questions as clearly and as fully as possible, he digresses into a discourse calculated to inflate his own personality. While the press thinks it is setting the agenda in the press conference with such a question as "*votre predecesseur, on le constate, vous a laisse une belle pagaille. Avez-vous deja un programme?*" Nnikon Nniku uses the question rather to propose an ideology, "*le Nnikonnicisme,*" derived from his own name. As he explains it, it is

*régressivement le bien inaliénable du peuple Mutulufwa inextricablement uni dans la vie comme dans la mort....Le Nnikonnicisme est la symbiose structurell de deux éléments moteurs que je traduirai en langage simple: avec l'unité c'est la symbiose.*⁴

He cannot answer the questions put to him because, as mentioned earlier, he is using the conference to boost his own image, but more importantly, his inability to answer the questions may be due to the fact that, as a neophyte in politics, he has not yet learned the art, or rather the trick, of having questions and answers prepared in advance of a press conference, as is the case with some Second and many Third World dictators today. Furthermore, in some African traditional societies, such as the one from which Nnikon Nniku seems to derive part of his power, the leader, or actually the chief (considered a god and far removed physically from his subjects though spiritually pervasive) was answerable to no one but the other deities of his society. Calling a press conference shows that even though he says, "*je suis assis sur les os des ancetres,*" that is, though he is borrowing from his tradition, the impression he gives is that he is transforming that system by adapting it to the realities of his society today.

As stated earlier, the function of the press should be to serve the "citizenry" by informing them as objectively as possible on the political, economic, social and cultural events in their society and elsewhere. But the question is, as Everette Dennis aptly puts it, whether "the press is really the representative of the people or is it a usurper, a self-appointed representative pushing its own point of view rather than that of all of its constituents."⁵ In other words, can the press genuinely serve any interests other than its own? Inasmuch as liberal democracy uses the press to keep political figures and other centers of power from arrogating more power to themselves, one of the main interests of the press, it would seem, is survival. Such survival is made even more difficult in dictatorial societies where the dictator exercises absolute powers, one of its many manifestations being press censorship.

This real possibility for censorship has forced some newspapers to ally themselves openly with the dictator as a survivalist strategy. That is the case in Henri Lopes' *Le Pleurer-rire*, in which the local newspaper *La Croix du Sud* holds up a mirror to its society in ways that Hodges has suggested above in order to reflect its new hero, or actually its new villain, called, rather affectionately and authentically, Tonton Hannibal-Ideloy Bwakambé Na Sakkadé.⁶ The word Tonton is used affectionately to mean uncle or someone of a certain age, a wise man one can look up to, but today, and especially as it relates to political leadership, the word has come to take on those not-so-flattering connotations as absolute ruler, life president, le Grand Timonier, the Father of the Nation, Great Teacher of science and arts, and all other titles that convey the leader's omnipotence.

The name of the newspaper is significant and merits a brief comment. *La Croix* (The Cross) is owned and run by the Catholic Church, which means, of course, that besides playing all the roles of the press identified earlier, the newspaper also serves as a medium to disseminate spiritual and moral ideas in the society. Hence the link between *La Croix* (which brings Tonton to public life) and Tonton seems to suggest the spiritual origin of the latter. It also suggests that Tonton is a moral being, as in "*le nouveau président était un homme très pieux qui se rendait chaque dimanche à la messe, communiait à Pâques, à l'Ascension, l'Assomption, Noël et Saint-Sylvestre.*"⁷ Even Tonton's physical characteristics reinforce his spiritual or moral image. He is described by the newspaper as having

*un mètre soixante dix-sept, soixante quinze kilos, le visage impassible cerné d'un bracelet de poils cerclant des lèvres épaisses qui réclament fièrement leur négritude, fièrment il marche, la poitrine gauche rehaussée d'une énorme fleur de métal blanc.*⁸

The newspaper, however, carries its own cross since it may actually be "saccagé" by a decree of the dictator.

The other portion of the newspaper's title, *Du Sud*, seems to bring in a physical dimension which could include the economy and politics of the North-South dichotomy, in which the North stands for the economic exploiters of the so-called Third World, which is economically exploited, socially destitute, culturally and physically raped, and experimenting with various political systems. The space in question here is Africa, and that is where Tonton draws his political and spiritual powers. But we know that Tonton, like many other dictators, either shapes history or makes his own story through his acts, or else he is brought to life at an historically significant period. So it is no

coincidence in this case that the newspaper reports that Tonton was born in 1914, "*le jour et l'année où la France est entrée en guerre contre l'Allemagne.*"⁹

By linking his birth to an important date in world history, that is, the beginning of World War I, there seems to be an attempt to equate Tonton with those mythic figures who are born in extraordinary circumstances. However, linking him to world history, especially to the beginning of what was to be four years of massive human, material and environmental destruction, heightens the drama that he as a hero/villain will play; it also foreshadows his own destruction through his own follies in the same way that human follies led to destruction during the war. All that we know about Tonton so far has been given in the newspaper, *La Croix du Sud*. Thus one may say that Tonton has been created by that newspaper, and as its creation, the newspaper can work with him hand in glove.

It is the foreign papers *Le Monde* and *Gavroche Aujourd'hui* that, in keeping with their roles in the system of checks and balances and operating in the spirit of press freedom in liberal democracy, give their readers the other side of Tonton, since they are very critical of his actions. For instance, *Le Monde* describes the coup that brought Tonton to power as an ethnic struggle. The problem with interpreting this event as an ethnic struggle is that although it uses the notion of freedom of the press to express its views (coming, as it does, from a Western newspaper), one cannot help but question the underlying intentions. Is it not an expression of the lack of understanding of the realities of Tonton's society? It seems to reflect the kind of biased and irresponsible reporting about the Third World that is characteristic of the neo-colonialist and imperialist press. Ndiva Kofele-Kale makes this point very succinctly when he writes, "Indeed, Africa remains the only continent where 'tribalism' has been elevated to the status of a scientific paradigm and the ultimate source from which all explanations, justifications, and rationalizations of its socio-political reality are derived."¹⁰ An African *coup d'état*, he explains, "is described not so much in terms of the ranks of the officers who led it, as in terms of their tribal origins."¹¹ He sees this as a misplaced emphasis:

analyses of the competing liberation movements in Africa devote more space to their tribal following and less attention to their more important ideological differences on the nature of state power and how it should be used to resolve the continent's problems.¹²

Such a misplaced emphasis on ethnic struggle seems designed to undermine the basis of Tonton's leadership and must also be read as a

parody of a leader whose lofty ideals would lead us to believe, through the circumstance of his birth, that he is a man of the world, a giant, whereas he is, in fact, not even a leader of his whole country but only of his ethnic group, actually a dwarf. There is simultaneously construction of the image of the dictator by one newspaper and destruction of it by another. The aim of creating such an unstable or ungraspable image of Tonton seems to be, on the one hand, to inform the readers of the existence of such larger-than-life beings as Tonton, to raise their consciousness about the acts of such Genuses, and, on the other, to suggest that such beings and their systems of (mis)governance must never be allowed to perpetuate themselves, in spite of their incredible ability to "hold on to the booty of power," in the words of Soyinka, "through the gourd's narrow neck rather than unclench the fist and save themselves."¹³

If parody is one of the strategies that *Le Monde* uses to deflate Tonton, *Gavroche Aujourd'hui* does it by way of satire. This is especially true in its caricature of the Organization of African Unity Summit, hosted by Tonton, which, in the words of the participants and the many "*Genera Survivantica*," that is, the dictators, was "*l'art réaliste éducatif et militant dont l'Afrique avait besoin; . . . un spectacle bien préférable aux films karaté, de gangsters et aux kilomètres de pellicules de pornos qui envahissent nos écrans.*"¹⁴ There is, in the preceding statement, a rejection of all foreign influence in the area of arts and culture. Some of the statements also warn African writers whose "*poèmes étaient désespérément rédigés dans un charabia qui prétendait à l'inaccessible et dont les pièces de théâtre et roman se complaisaient dans un ton pleurnichard et subversif.*"¹⁵ All the dictators agreed that "*le Maréchal Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé [Tonton]. . . n'était pas seulement un grand chef d'Etat, mais aussi un artiste et un metteur en scène de tout premier plan.*"¹⁶ While these declarations to the press are meant to boost Tonton's image, *Gavroche* reads, in this well-choreographed drama à la Hollywood, an attempt to create a sort of fantasy world in which "*tout est pour le mieux,*" in contrast to the economic and political mess in the real societies over which Tonton and his peers preside. The credit to *Gavroche* is that it is able to read certain truths beneath the falsehood conveyed in the well-staged drama; such truths include political chaos due to lack of vision, economic mess due to mismanagement, and the aura of awe characteristic of dictatorial societies.

Tonton, as portrayed in *La Croix du Sud*, *Le Monde* and *Gavroche Aujourd'hui*, is an unstable sign. So far we have relied on the press to supply us with all the components that make up this construct called Tonton. Those components come from judicious background research. One of the most effective methods of getting such

data is through press conferences, as we mentioned earlier about *Le Destin*, or in interviews. It is in interviews that readers can learn firsthand about their heroes'/villains' public and private lives, depending on the judiciousness of the questions asked and the honesty of the interviewee's answers. However, in a dictatorship where censorship is prevalent and questions and answers have to be prepared and rehearsed prior to interviews, it becomes almost impossible to gain full knowledge about the dictator's life since he dictates the pace of the interview. Take, for instance, the interview conducted by Edward G. Tupman while Tonton is on an official visit to Geneva. The focus of the interview is supposedly Tonton's private life. The aim is to collect material to be included in a forthcoming book on a cross-section of the most famous personalities of the end of this century. The list is quite intriguing because it brings together a very disparate group of people in sports, entertainment, and politics, and some artists and intellectuals. It includes the President of the United States, the Belgian Prime Minister, Prince Sihanouk, Tito, the Shah of Iran, Brigitte Bardot, Picasso, Elizabeth Taylor, Mohammed Ali, Mrs. Pierre Trudeau, King Hussein, the King of Morocco, Emperor Bokassa, and Presidents Bourguiba, Amin Dada, Houphouet Boigny, Kenneth Kaunda, Siaka Stevens, and Senghor, .

It is not coincidental that the interview takes place in Geneva. Switzerland is politically non-aligned: it is a neutral territory. In addition, it is a foreign country for Tonton, which makes it a politically, culturally and physically unsafe space for him since he cannot exercise his absolute powers. Focusing on Tonton's private life is treading on an unsafe power space for the journalist. The interview becomes then a forum in which the interviewer and interviewee can work hand in glove with one another. The questions seem designed to reveal some of the weaknesses of Tonton. But rather than fall into the trap or avoid answering the questions as Nnikon Nniku did at the press conference, Tonton's apparently naive answers to some of the questions ironically reveal that he can be witty. For instance, when asked, "*pouvez-vous me citer vos violons d'Ingres?*" his answer is, "*non, pas de violon. Aucun. J'aime surtout les instruments de musique moderne.*"¹⁷ By separating "*violon*" from "*d'Ingres*" which together mean hobbies, Tonton turns the whole question into a joke, thereby downplaying the importance of the question.

The journalist, surprised by the answer or by the fact that he has been beaten at his own game, rephrases the question, "*quels sont vos hobbies?*" Tonton, apparently thrown off by the English word "hobbies," answers, "*ne comprends pas.*" The interviewer, seemingly in control, rephrases the question, "*vos dadas, si vous preferez.*" When asked "*quels genres affectionnez-vous surtout?*" Tonton hesitates and

answers, "*les dictionnaires, les encyclopedies*."¹⁸ The journalist's use of such slangs as "*violon d'Ingres*," "*dadas*," is meant to show that, in spite of Tonton's proficiency in formal French (at least, that is my assumption), his lack of understanding of informal street French may be a reflection of his being out of touch with the day-to-day use of the language and, by extension, out of touch with his society. For his part, by turning the question into a joke, Tonton may be asking what importance all these questions could be to his private life.

It is with this kind of mindset that, at some point during the interview, Tonton digresses into what he considers important, that is, the solitude of governance or, in his case, (mis)governance, an exposé on other leaders such as De Gaulle, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Kim Il Sung, and his concern or lack of concern for his people and humanity, all characteristic of dictators. As the interviewer reports, "*il n'avait pas le temps de songer à autre chose qu'à l'avenir. . . de l'humanité. Long exposé sur la conception du pouvoir*."¹⁹ While dictators present themselves to the outside world as redeemers, as peacemakers, and as having concerns for humanity, their vicious totalitarian domestic policies undermine the basic rights of their people, of the very humanity whose future they claim to safeguard. Through the digression Tonton sets the pace in an interview in which he was expected to be a respondent and focuses on the only life that he seems to have, his public life. For, as he reminds us, "*un chef n'a pas de vie privée. Pas de vie privée qui soit séparée de la vie officielle (il sourit). Sinon, on sombre lamentablement dans l'individualisme occidental (il rit)*." As a leader preoccupied with the well-being of his "*sujets, pardon ses citoyens. . . ses enfants. . . il est donc à leur disposition vingt-quatre-heures-sur-vingt-quatre*."²⁰ In many African societies the title "*chef*" has lost its meaning since it is widely used not only for people in positions of authority but also among friends. Its use here, however, is meant to convey Tonton's spiritual and political link to the chiefs in his traditional society. But unlike those chiefs whose powers and authority were legitimized by both their ancestors and their subjects, Tonton's absolute powers and authority have no legitimate basis.

As we mentioned earlier, the aim of the interview is to gather information about Tonton's private life, but what we get from the kinds of questions asked and the answers given is a dramatization of two power systems. On the one hand, there are political powers as exemplified by Tonton, and on the other, there are what we might call the powers in the word which the interviewer manipulates. Initially, one has the impression that the interviewer has an edge through the use of slangs that Tonton does not seem to understand. But when Tonton turns some of the questions into a joke or decides to focus on his public rather than his private life, he gives full meaning to the term dictatorship;

that is, a dictator controls all aspects of life including the word. It is he, in his position as decision-maker, who finally volunteers some information about his private life, a life dominated by his "*politique du bas ventre*," his strong sexual activities. Besides his seventeen legitimate children, Tonton is reported to maintain "*une population de femmes en résidence surveillée dans plusieurs villas. . . Les petites mamans, c'était pour sa vie privée.*"²¹ After this rather revealing information about Tonton's private life, the interviewer makes this fitting remark: "*Tonton. . . était un gaillard aux performances amoureuses bien au-dessus de la morale.*"²² Tonton is "*super-puissant*" in all aspects of life including his gargantuan abilities in love-making.

La Croix du Sud creates Tonton Hannibal-Ideloy Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé and endows him with physical and moral qualities. *Le Monde* and *Gavroche Aujourd'hui*, in keeping with the spirit of free expression, are very critical of Tonton's acts. Such criticism reveals other qualities that, brought together, help to create a balanced personality. The interview reveals Tonton's ability to dictate not only the pace of the interview but all aspects of life in his society. The interview therefore supplies the information to complete the construct called Tonton that we have been referring to as dictator. Such a construct, however, is unstable because inasmuch as the readers have to be aware of its existence, the author's message is that such constructs and their systems of (mis)governance must never be allowed to perpetuate themselves.

¹Louis Hodges, "Defining Press Responsibility: A Functional Approach," in Deni Elliott (ed.), *Responsible Journalism* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986), p. 13.

²*Ibid.*, p. 22.

³Walter M. Brasch and Dana R. Ulloth, *The Press and the State: Sociohistorical and Contemporary Interpretations* (University Press of America, 1986), p. 479.

⁴Tchikaya U' Tamsi, *Le Destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku, prince qu'on sort* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1979), p. 93.

⁵Everette Dennis, "Social Responsibility, Representation, and Reality," in Elliott, *Op.Cit.*, p. 107.

⁶If we substitute C for H in Hannibal, the resultant is Cannibal(ism) which is incidentally what some of our deposed *Genera Survivanica* were accused of. Sakkadé may be read as "*saccagé*" or "*saccadé*," that is, destroyed, which means that even though the construct may attempt to perpetuate himself through cannibalism, his act is bound to lead to self-destruction.

⁷Henri Lopes, *Le Pleurer-rire* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1982), p. 29.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹*Loc.Cit.*

¹⁰Ndiva Kofele-Kale, *Tribesmen and Patriots: Political Culture in a Poly-Ethnic African State* (University Press of America, 1981), p. 20.

¹¹*Loc.Cit.*

¹²*Loc.Cit.*

¹³Wole Soyinka, *A Play of Giants*. (Methuen, 1984), p. vii.

¹⁴Lopes, *Op. Cit.*, p.93.

¹⁵*Loc.Cit.*

¹⁶*Loc.Cit.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 282.

¹⁸*Loc.Cit.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Loc.Cit.*

²¹*Ibid.* p. 287.

²²*Loc.Cit.*