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In Remembrance of Slavery: Tchamba Vodun

By Dana Rush*

*Tchamba me so gbenye me nya senao
Tchamba me so gbenye bu.*

I come from Tchamba, no one understands my language.
I come from Tchamba, my language is lost.

*Mia mamawo kpo hotsui wo fle agbeto kodi.
Amekle nya ne noqanyi na ye looo. Elava kplom yi afiadi.
Bada bada nenoqanyi nam looo.*

Our grandparents were rich, and they bought people.
I am proud of who I am, though it risks bringing me troubles.
May bad luck stay far away from me.

Tchamba Vodun songs, collected in Vogan, Togo, February 8, 1999.

The Vodun complex known as Tchamba is a particularly strong spirit grouping along coastal Bénin, Togo, and into eastern coastal Ghana. Its name derives from an ethnic group and region in northern Togo, where people in the south actively sought domestic slaves centuries ago. This spirit grouping has been critical in the maintenance and proliferation of histories and memories of domestic slavery along the coast, and is sustained to the present in shrines, temple paintings, performance, songs, proverbs, and oral histories by the progeny of both domestic slaves and their owners. Tchamba Vodun has also been influential in bringing to the fore contemporary debates regarding the owning and selling of slaves and slave ancestry. Such discussions help Beninese and Togolese people address the multiple roles their ancestors played in both domestic and transatlantic slavery, as either the sellers or the enslaved.

Based on preliminary research conducted in Bénin and Togo in the late 1990s, this article gives life to slaves of generations past by exploring how the local significance of domestic

slavery and, to some extent, the deep-seated cognizance of the transatlantic slave trade, are embodied in the slave spirits of Tchamba Vodun.¹

Historical Background

Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, an estimated eleven to twelve million slaves were purchased in Africa by American and European traders; eighty percent of these slaves left the African continent between 1700 and 1850 (Lovejoy 1982:473-501). The town of Ouidah was a major embarkation point for slaves from the 1670s through the 1860s, accounting for over ten percent of all of the slave trade, over one million people (Law 2004:1-2). In the 1690s, the slave trade through Ouidah reached a volume of about ten thousand slaves per year, and in the years 1700-1713, the exportation number reached its all-time high of approximately fifteen thousand slaves annually, perhaps accounting for up to half of all slaves leaving the continent. Most of those exported were enslaved through capture in war. However, criminals, debtors, and domestic slaves also contributed to these large numbers (Law 2003, Lovejoy 1983).

The section of the west African coast between the Volta and Lagos Rivers was not only a major source of slaves for the Atlantic slave trade, but was also an area where domestic slavery was commonplace. Although there is uncertainty regarding the date that domestic slavery began, Le Hérissé notes that in the nineteenth century it was more common for Dahomeans to purchase slaves for domestic use from the interior northern region of contemporary Bénin, Togo, and Ghana than it was for them to receive slaves as gifts from the king (1911:52-53). Those from the king were likely obtained in warfare, and many were bound for the Atlantic trade, while Dahomean citizens who financed their own purchase of slaves from the north were participating in an entirely different exchange system than that of the transatlantic trade.

Thus, the overseas trade amplified the already established tradition of domestic enslavement. By the 1670s the English, French, and Danish had built forts in Ouidah to facilitate their roles in the slave trade, and in 1721 the Portuguese built a fort. The staff of the European forts was overwhelmingly African, though most of these slaves were not local in origin. A large number of the domestic slaves came from about three hundred miles north of the coast. Tchamba and Kabre peoples, from northern central Togo, seem to have been the most sought

after as domestic slaves in the south (Wendl 1999:114). In 1723, Ouidah's French fort reported a purchase of “[T]Chamba” slaves, in reference to this northern ethnicity (in Law 2004: 39).

Based on the long history of domestic slavery along this coastal region, it is accepted quite simply that when a family had sufficient money, the father would purchase one or more domestic slaves to work for his family. Bonifatur Foli, the primary Mina informant of Dietrich Westermann, the German authority on Mina/Ewe languages, likened the purchasing of slaves to capital investment: “When our forefathers bought a slave, this was just as if they put money into a bank account. If you buy yourself a slave and [s]he produces children, they will belong to you; they will till your fields and build houses for you” (1935: 127).

Semantic Considerations: the Term “Slave”

There is only one word in English for “slave,” and its meaning is unambiguous in reference to slavery in the Americas. Whether working in the house or the field, a slave in the American context was a person (or the descendant of a person) taken against his/her will from Africa, separated from his/her family, held in servitude as the chattel of another, and forced to work with no pay in a subservient relationship within a structure of master/slave. By contrast, words in the African context refer to varying types of enslavement or submission: “domestic slaves,” “slaves for export,” “slaves in chains,” and “pawns,” among others. Domestic enslavement existed alongside and overlapped with both pawnship and slavery for export. Through a thorough analysis of Melville J. Herskovits’s assertion that the distinction between pawning and domestic slavery in precolonial Dahomey was very clear, Robin Law demonstrates that this division was clear in principle (temporary vs. permanent servitude), but tended to blur in practice (Herskovits vol. 1 1938:84, cf. Law in Lovejoy and Falola 2003). Notwithstanding, the label of “domestic slavery” is limiting in that it is used to incorporate many types of associated though distinct kinds of domestic enslavement, including pawnship. Moreover, when the African terms for these various types are differentiated, a multifaceted picture of slavery emerges. These terms have very distinct etymological, connotative, and denotative differences in the dominant languages of Fon, Mina, and Ewe, in coastal Bénin, Togo, and into eastern coastal Ghana, respectively. Understanding that there are culturally defined, multivalent local meanings of the unidimensional English word “slave” will help in grasping the subtleties of what

I refer to as Vodun “slave spirits.” Either purchased to serve a family or as an adopted child, *amekplekple*, translated literally as “bought person,” is, in most circumstances, the best term to describe the type of “slave” who is venerated within the Tchamba Vodun complex. This type of “bought person” relationship is exemplified in a local piece of African francophone literature.

From the Foreign North: Félix Couchoro’s *L’Esclave*

In 1929, Ouidah-born author Félix Couchoro published his first novel, *L’Esclave* (The Slave), which to this day stands as an important contribution to African francophone literature. The novel is a passionate story of an inheritance dispute between a domestic slave, Mawulawoé, and his brother, Komlangan. Couchoro’s character of the “slave,” the relationships between the “slave” and the members of the family who bought him, and the social and economic milieu in which the story unfolds present a contextual backdrop for Tchamba veneration, referring directly to a domestic slave’s presumed origins, ethnicity, and ancestry.

In fact, the novel’s title is a misnomer. Mawulawoé is an indisputably “bought person,” not a slave in the meaning of that English word, as the following key passage indicates:

Komlangan’s father purchased eight-year-old Mawulawoé from far, far away in the northern region of Okou-Okou. The slave’s adorable face pleased his master so that he could not bring himself to disfigure it with the scarification of slaves. He named him Mawulawoé, which means “God will provide.” Nothing distinguished him from Komlangan with whom he grew up. They shared their games and worked together as brothers. . . . The boys grew into men and took wives. . . . At his deathbed, the father blessed his two sons, preaching to them his mutual affection. They closed his eyes for him (Couchoro 1929:81, my translation).

This point in the novel sets into motion the brothers’ fight over their inheritance. Komlangan, the birth son, claims that Mawulawoé, the “slave,” has no rights to their father’s estate. Thus Mawulawoé’s revenge begins and instigates multiple events that elicit love, jealousy, hate, and ambition, and that ultimately lead to multiple murders. In Mono Province, the theme of Couchoro’s *L’Esclave* is still current, and the ramifications of domestic

enslavement from the “foreign North” have a significant role in contemporary Vodun art and thought, specifically in Tchamba veneration.

When Couchoro mentions that Komlangan’s father purchased an eight-year-old child from “far, far away in the northern region of Okou-Okou,” he is referring to the more widespread name for the Nyantroukou ethnic group in northern Togo (cf. Cornevin 1962:44, 202-205).² Most of the domestic slaves brought to the south came from the same region as Mawulawoé, three-hundred miles north of the Atlantic Ocean. It is estimated that as many as three million people were brought to the coast, but much like Mawulawoé, not all of them were destined for the Atlantic trade (Piot 1996:30). Neighbors of the Nyantroukou peoples are Bassar, Moba, Taberma, Tchamba, and Kabre. The last two populations, however, Tchamba and Kabre peoples, seem to have been the most sought after as slaves (Wendl 1999:114). The terms *kabreto* and *tchambato* were used to designate Kabre and Tchamba enslaved peoples in the south (Wendl 114). However, only the name Tchamba, in association with domestic slavery, survives to the present in the south.³

The Spirits of Former Slaves: The Tchamba Vodun Complex

The name Tchamba is an ethnonym, the name of a spirit complex, and refers to specific spirits within this spirit grouping. A Tchamba spirit is either male or female, the latter of whom is often called Maman Tchamba and is usually regarded as either the wife or mother of a male Tchamba spirit. She is also known to guard the riches of the wealthy family who owned her. Although the spirits themselves represent slaves from generations past, they are venerated by *both* the descendants of those who were enslaved and those who owned slaves. The songs at the beginning of the article address both situations: The first song communicates the sentiments of a slave who finds him/herself in a foreign land where his/her natal Tchamba language is not understood. The second song is from the perspective of a descendant of wealthy slave-owning ancestors, who acknowledges the truth of his/her ancestry, but hopes that Tchamba veneration will bring forgiveness. Due to generations of intermarriage between families of slave owners and those who were enslaved, there is a complex entanglement within lineages. Complicating this further is the contemporary shame associated with being descended from either side.

Nonetheless, both positions of veneration call upon slave spirits to advise and help with contemporary problems.

Tchamba has been the subject of four short studies (Rosenthal 1998, Rush 1999, 2011 forthcoming, Wendl 1999, Brivio 2008). Tobias Wendl's study, "Slavery, Spirit Possession, and Ritual Consciousness: The *Tchamba* Cult Among the Mina of Togo," demonstrates how the dominant version of Mina history, which excluded the mention of domestic and transatlantic slavery, has been reformulated within Mina religious consciousness via Tchamba. According to Wendl, it is "the descendants of former slave masters who are afflicted by the spirits of their former slaves" (1999:111). Judy Rosenthal's study, focusing on Ewe Vodun in Togo, addresses Tchamba in terms of its "quasi-historical and . . . imaginary geography and genealogy of the slave trade with its attendant mixings of populations and lineages in marriage, procreation, and production of the sacred." She attends to this topic in the chapter entitled "Romance of the North," in her book *Possession, Ecstasy, and Law in Ewe Voodoo*. In her recent article, "Nos grands-pères achetaient des esclaves: Le culte de Mami Tchamba au Togo et au Bénin" (2008), Alessandra Brivio analyzes how Tchamba slave spirits evoke a mythical heroic past of both slave traders and slaves themselves, in terms of the ambivalence of current memories of slavery.

Reading the Visual: Tchamba Symbology and Ceremony

Within Tchamba Vodun, the visual marks people and spaces dedicated to the remembrance of slavery. The most important attribute of Tchamba veneration is a tri-colored metal bracelet. A person wearing this type of bracelet can be recognized as being affiliated with Tchamba, and associated with domestic slavery as either a descendant of slaves or slave owners (Fig. 1). Within Vodun practice, however, the same tri-colored metal bracelet may represent an entirely different spirit, completely removed from Tchamba veneration. Because of this, context and associated symbols are of critical importance in reading Tchamba iconography.

This tri-colored metal bracelet, called *tchambagan*, has a metonymic relationship to the shackles and irons used in the transport of slaves from the north to the south. *Ga(n)* is word used in Fon, Mina, and Ewe languages for metal itself, or something that is metal. Thus *tchambagan* translates as the "metal of Tchamba."⁴ According to collected histories,⁵ slave owners presented their slaves with such a bracelet to mark them as enslaved people. Then upon the death of a

slave, the family who owned him/her removed the bracelet (or in some versions, an anklet, or ring) and added it to a shrine dedicated to the family's former slaves in gratitude for their lifetimes of service.



Figure 1. *Tchambagan* bracelets for purchase at Vogon market. Photograph: Dana Rush, December 1999, Vogon, Togo.

The bracelet's three colors of metal (black, white, and red) are sometimes said to represent three different northern spirits. Black, represented by iron, is called *boublou* (stranger), and is known to be a turbulent, aggressive, excitable spirit who is associated with iron, thunder, and fire. White, represented by silver, is called *anohi* (a presumed Hausa spirit), and is known as a source of calm spirituality, associated with the rainbow. Red, represented by copper or bronze, is called *yendi* (a contemporary town in northeastern Ghana), and is known for its powers of healing and its association with the earth. These three spirits are likely a contemporary mixture of southern Vodun -- Heviosso, (thunder), Dan Aida Wedo (rainbow serpent), and Sakpata (the earth, healing and disease), for example -- with romanticized northern spiritual identities. Of course, these “northern spirits” do not really exist in the north. Wendl’s interpretation of the southern representation of “northern spirits” is that they are “projective transfigurations, by which Mina [Fon, Ewe] have articulated their own experience with the otherness of the people

from the north in symbolic and ritual terms” (1999:116).

Wendl explains that if a person learns, possibly through a divination, that s/he has a Tchamba spirit, s/he must begin to honor the spirit by purchasing two *tchambagan* as the initial components of a shrine. Similarly, I was often told that when a person learns of her/his Tchamba spiritual obligations, s/he is obliged to purchase a new *tchambagan*, add it to a generations-old shrine piled with old *tchambagan*, and then choose a replacement from among the accumulation of bracelets and rings to wear as a pronouncement of his/her newly affirmed Tchamba affiliation. Sometimes, I was told, a farmer will find a *tchambagan* while cultivating the field, digging a well, or constructing the foundation of a house. Such a find would be read as a sign that the family who owns the land used to own slaves. A family meeting would be called, divination would be carried out, and the family would begin to venerate Tchamba in gratitude for the service of the now deceased slaves. Depending on the divination, a family might be obliged to host a large Tchamba celebration as an apology for years of neglect, and as a harbinger of future commitment to devotion.

In most cases, after acquiring a *tchambagan* and learning of an obligation to a northern spirit, a Tchamba novice would also purchase a *tchambazikpe*, or wooden stool, to welcome the Tchamba spirit and to provide it with a seat. The stool is a direct reference to the role of the domestic slave to carry her/his master’s stool. Cowry shells are also important to a Tchamba shrine, in that they were the currency used to purchase slaves. Wendl stresses that “iron bracelets, wooden stools, and cowry shells are the focus of every Tchamba shrine, representing the slave as a chained person, a stool carrier, and a person who had been bought” (1999:116).

These and other symbols help identify Tchamba in mural paintings, which evoke histories, memories, and stories about domestic slavery. In these murals Tchamba is depicted in human form sometimes accompanied by a female, Maman Tchamba, known to be his mother or wife. These murals articulate slave status and foreign (northern, often Islamic) origins through their painted details. Metal bracelets, “northern” scarification markings, clothing, accoutrements, stools, cowry shells, Islamic paraphernalia including watering kettle and prayer beads, and “northern” food and drink are painted on the murals and included in shrines. Other items that may be included in shrines are textiles, chains, fez-like hats, and cloth that can be used to form a turban on a devotee, all of which refer to an imaginary place in the north. White chalk is often found in shrines as well and is sometimes used ceremonially. Yet despite all of the Islamic

symbology, most of the slaves in the south would not have been Muslim in origin. The incorporation of Muslim visual culture into Tchamba visual theology was likely based on Tchamba practitioners' twentieth-century observations of Islamized Hausa traders who set up trading posts along coastal west Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Ghanaian artist Joseph Ahiator has painted a handful of Tchamba temple murals throughout Bénin, Togo, and Ghana (cf. Rush 2008). His earliest Tchamba painting (Fig. 2), which he dates to the 1970s, shows Tchamba's mother on the left with a bowl of kola nuts, some of which she is giving to her son before he journeys. Kola nuts are a key symbol commonly



Figure 2. Maman Tchamba and Tchamba temple mural painted by Kossivi Joseph Ahiator. Photograph: Dana Rush, April 1996, near Lomé, Togo.

associated with northern Muslims, and used culturally as well as medicinally to suppress hunger, thirst, and fatigue. Between them Ahiator painted an Islamic watering kettle and a *tchambazikpe*, or stool, upon which are *tchambagan*, the tri-colored bracelets which Tchamba

also wears on both wrists. His hat is decorated with abstracted cowry shells. Both mother and son have northern-looking scarification markings on their faces.

Vertical facial scarification markings are pervasive markers of a northern identity, and play an integral role in contemporary Tchamba veneration. Along the same lines as the refusal of Mamulawoé's father to have his “son” scarified in *L'Esclave*, coastal people in general disapprove of northern facial scarification markings. A Mina proverb demonstrates the extent to which enslaved people did not want to draw attention to their facial markings, and in turn, their enslaved status: *Adonko mekploa fetridetsi o*, which translates as “A slave does not draw strings while eating okra soup” (Westermann 1905:122). The proverb is a direct reference to mucilaginous texture of cooked okra (*fetridetsi*), which, when lifted from bowl to mouth, produces long, thin, gummy vertical strings, similar to northern facial scarification markings. In the contemporary spiritual context, when a person is seized by a Tchamba spirit, s/he will draw, or have drawn by a nearby initiate, temporary chalk markings on her/his face to mimic northern scarification. Some adepts are said to go as far as to have real markings permanently incised on their cheeks, but I have never seen this. Alternatively, adepts may use charcoal to color their faces a dark black to represent a very distant, unknowable place; i.e., the north. The scarification markings are clearly “northern looking,” but in reality, they are often an amalgamation of various northern ethnic markings (Bariba, Logba, Dendi, Nyantroukou) combined to communicate the idea of a generalized northern ethnic identity.

In a painting from the late 1990s, Ahiator painted much of the same iconography, making Tchamba easily identifiable: tri-colored bracelets, a stool upon which the bracelets are placed (the corner of the stool can be seen on bottom left of image), a cowry-shell covered hat, and northern-looking scarification markings (Fig. 3). Ahiator added Tchamba’s wife and drummer to another temple mural located in Togo. The threesome is en route to the “north” (Fig. 4). Tchamba’s wife carries his stool upon her head, and is dressed and adorned in a “northern” style. The only explanation Ahiator provided concerning her draped cloth, the nose ring, and the six hooped earrings (3 on each ear) is that she is “northern.” Adornment in the south does not traditionally include nose rings or multiple ear piercings. Thus, identifying this type of adornment as “northern” likely reflects the fact that it is *not* southern. Much like “northern” scarification, “northern” adornment is an amalgamation of multiple types of northern ethnic body

ornamentation. To Ahiator, “northern” represents a vast conceptual realm offering a rich reservoir of symbolism.



Figure 3. Tchamba temple mural painted by Kossivi Joseph Ahiator. Photograph: Dana Rush, December 1999, near Lomé, Togo.



Figure 4. Tchamba with his wife and drummer temple mural painted by Kossivi Joseph Ahiator. Photograph: Dana Rush, November 1999, near Lomé, Togo.

Two Mama Tchamba mural paintings in Aneho, Togo show similar iconography. In Figure 5, Mama Tchamba functions as guardian for her family’s wealth, represented in the bowl overflowing with gold. She is adorned with a cowry shell-covered hat and gold jewelry, also attesting to the wealth of the family who could afford to own her. Once again, facial scarification markings refer to her “northern” identity and slave status. The Maman Tchamba mural in Figure 6 comes from a Mami Wata temple in Aneho, Togo. Here, Maman Tchamba is a conflation of a Shiva lithograph with Tchamba symbology. The wealth she guards is in the form of kola nuts. Mami Wata and Hindu chromolithography are discussed below.

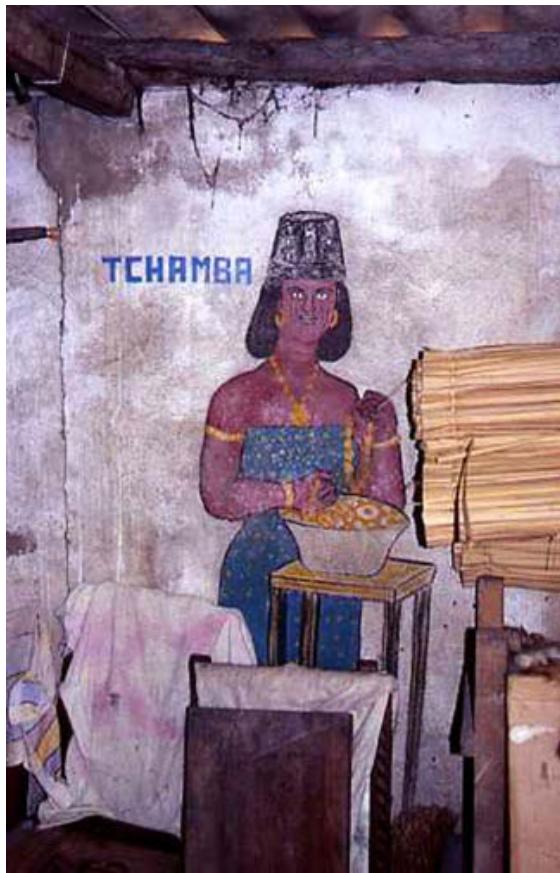


Figure 5. Maman Tchamba temple mural, with bowl of gold. Photograph: Dana Rush, April 1996, Aneho, Togo.

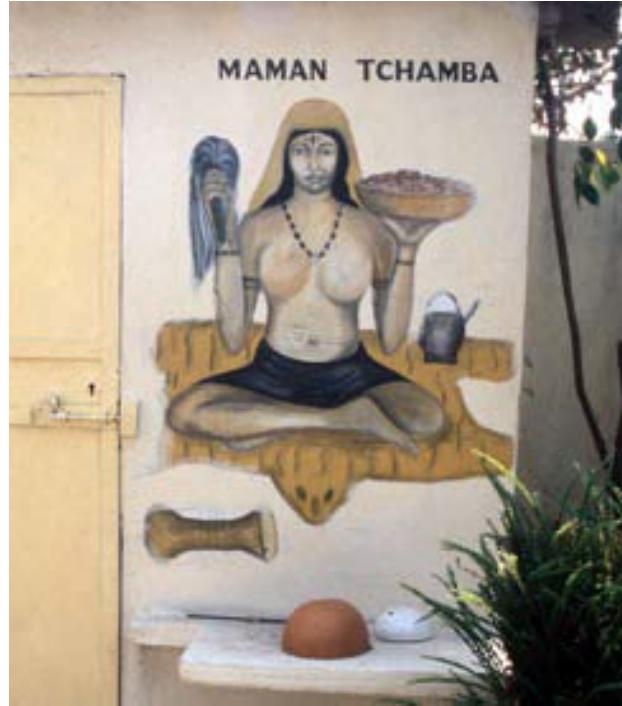


Figure 6. Maman Tchamba temple mural with bowl of kola nuts. Photograph: Dana Rush, January 2000, Aneho, Togo.

A Tchamba shrine might be near such a mural painting, but more often than not, the shrine is kept out of sight, to be viewed only for offerings on certain sacred days of the week. When I was fortunate to have access to old Tchamba shrines, photography was generally forbidden.⁶ There are many types of offerings given to Tchamba, but the ubiquitous favorites are *tchoukoutou*, a highly fermented northern Togolese millet-based drink; *tchapkalo*, an unfermented, sugar-sweetened northern Togolese millet-based drink; and kola nuts. Other offerings made to Tchamba and/or associated slave spirits are combinations of the following: gin; *sodabi*, a locally distilled palm wine; and *lina*, a corn drink that must be prepared by a postmenopausal woman. Other common offerings are rice, beans, yam, and manioc prepared together; corn, millet, or cassava products; and black chicken, black pigeon, and male goat. Sometimes there is a container of karité butter because on occasion, based on divination, a *tchambagan* must be anointed with this butter.

Along with bracelets, stools, and cowry shells as constituent components of a Tchamba shrine, sometimes there is a cement grinding stone, representing the slaves' duty to grind corn. In shrines maintained solely by former slave owners, there is often a "spirit sac" called *abehe*, which is said to have functioned as a type of bank account into which cowry shells were accumulated and stored. The Tchamba spirit Maman Abehe represents the matriarch who guarded the family wealth.

Tracing Tchamba Roots

Although precise details are hard to come by, contemporary stories circulating along this coastal area describe how people often learn of their slave ancestry. Most of these accounts follow a general format. The story usually begins with a group of young men, usually Catholic, walking around town. They pass a compound in which a Vodun celebration is taking place. One young man in the group stops walking and starts shuffling his feet to the *brekete* drumming rhythm, which is known to be from the north. He is then taken over by a Tchamba spirit, and starts speaking an unrecognizable language, also said to be from the north. The language is often referred to as "Hausa," the generic term for "northern." Some claim that Tchamba always sends a messenger to translate the incomprehensible communications from the ancestral north, while others maintain that the person in trance is truly speaking a northern language based on her/his northern ancestry manifesting itself via the will of Tchamba. Whether this is a form of xenoglossy (knowledge of a language one has never learned), glossolalia (speaking a language one does not know), or articulated mumbling is irrelevant. What matters is that Tchamba is connecting to and communicating with those who hold his spirit in a distant, decidedly foreign land. While shuffling his feet, the young man in trance might stop for a moment to draw scarification markings on his face from earth retrieved below his feet. Following this spirit encounter, the person who was in trance meets with a diviner who may prescribe Tchamba veneration.

Some people learning of their slave ancestry travel to the north in search of their roots and long-lost families. This search for family has haunting similarities to the growing popularity of heritage tourism, also known as "roots tourism," in which people of African descent in the Americas travel to former slave port cities such as Cape Coast and Elmina, Ghana, and Gorée

Island Senegal in search of the land of their own ancestry.⁷

In Lomé, Togo, the name Dogbe-Tomi was mentioned to me several times in relationship to a story – still in circulation -- of a girl who had learned of her slave ancestry, and journeyed north to find her roots. The following is based on a summary of my interview with Lomé resident Cécile Akpaglo:

In the early 1800s, the father of a very wealthy Ewe family sent a slave buyer to the area in and around Upper Volta (contemporary Burkina Faso) to purchase a strong, male slave. The slave was known by his surname Tomi. He served the Ewe family well, and grew up. Through his hard work and honesty, he became a well-respected man. He married into the Dogbe family and had children . . . time passed

In the 1950s, a young girl from the wealthy Catholic Dogbe family in Lomé, woke up one morning in trance. She took her school chalk and drew northern scarification patterns on her face and starting speaking in an incomprehensible language. Her father was worried so he took his daughter to a very well-respected diviner for a consultation. The diviner asked questions and consulted with Fa. The diviner also recalled that there had always been talk of a male Dogbe ancestor being of Burkinabe origins. The diviner advised the girl to go to Burkina Faso to find her family.

She traveled with her father to Ouagadougou. They learned that everyone in the family was dead except for a very old man. They went to meet with the old man who remembered his own grandfather telling him of slavery and tearing up when he recalled the sale of one of his own brothers to an Ewe family in the south. The old man's surname was Tomi. From that point on the family adopted the name Dogbe-Tomi, and began Tchamba veneration. The girl grew up, and when she died in the 1990s, the family went back to Catholicism.⁸

I also interviewed the daughter and granddaughter of an *amekplekple*, or “bought person,” named Tonyewogbe. The interviews were conducted in 1999 in the town of Adidogome, Togo. The last surviving child of the “bought person,” Adono Zowaye was a frail though vibrant elder at the time. Her youngest daughter Notuefe Zowayè (b. 1952) had just begun the process of Tchamba initiation upon the advice of a diviner. The following is a summary of their story:

In the late nineteenth century, there was a wealthy farmer named Kofi Zowaye.⁹ He had no wives or children. Because of his wealth and his desire to leave it to a beloved child, he purchased a baby girl from the north, whom he named Tonyewogbe. He raised the girl as if she were his real daughter, and kept her purchase a secret so that she would not feel “different” from other family members, even though rumors of her “bought person” status circulated.

Tonyewogbe married into the family and had 3 children, the youngest of whom was named Adono Zowaye. Tonyewogbe died when she was quite young, but Adono remembered that her mother had scars on her light-skinned face and stomach like nothing she had ever seen in the south. Adono thought her mother might have been Peul because of her light skin, her facial features, and her scarifications. While acknowledging that her own skin is quite dark, Adono pointed to her very straight nose and high cheekbones, claiming that she had features like her mother. She later learned that her mother’s scarifications were likely those of Kabre peoples in the north

Tonyewogbe was raised not knowing that she was a “bought person” until issues of inheritance cropped up. Her father wanted his daughter to inherit his estate, but once he died, his brothers refused to allow her to acquire the land and wealth of her father. Tonyewogbe never received much of what her father bequeathed to her, and inheritance problems continue to trouble her daughter, Adono, and her granddaughter, Notuefe, to the present.

Notuefe avoided Tchamba initiation for years, even though she knew through her dreams that Tchamba was calling her. Although she had begun Tchamba initiation at the time of our interviews in 1999, she was still gathering funds to continue the long and somewhat costly process. The discussions we had were emotional. At one point, Adono began crying about the ongoing divisive effect of the inheritance issues on her family in general, and on her daughter Notuefe in particular. However, since Notuefe began Tchamba initiation, things have been improving in her life. She has since become very proud of her own ancestry. When she prays, she claims that it is like her grandmother is with her; it makes her feel happy and brings her good luck. Her Tchamba shrine is quite modest, with only a *tchambazikpe* painted white and *tchambagan* (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Adono Zowaye with her youngest daughter Notuefe Zowayè in front of beginning stages of Tchamba shrine. Photograph: Dana Rush, January 2000, Adidogome, Togo.

As this story confirms, Couchoro's *L'Esclave* – with all of its drama and pain – is a “living story” in which the characters may change but the human downfalls of jealousy and greed continue to the present. Complications associated with “bought people” and inheritance have become even more nefarious in that stories currently circulate of brothers and sisters who isolate and identify as a “bought person” a sibling born of the same parents in order to deny that sibling a share of the inheritance.

Tchamba Remix

Tchamba is an old Vodun spirit based on domestic African enslavement. However, there is a new Tchamba spirit with contemporary meanings derived from the growing cognizance of the transatlantic slave trade. Tchamba appears to be increasingly associated with Mami Wata, the African water spirit-cum-seductress, in two ways. One retains a connection to domestic slavery: Because Mami Wata is associated with wealth and prosperity, some people relate the possession of Tchamba to the prestige associated with a family who at one time could afford to own slaves. That is, if one's ancestors had Mami Wata as a guiding spirit, they should have had enough money to have bought slaves. Tchamba is thus often regarded as a modern day sign of old

money. But in the other association, some Mami Wata adepts who venerate Tchamba hold that they have ancestors who were sold in the transatlantic trade. Those who claim this often say that other people worshipping Tchamba (usually other Mami Wata adepts) do not always have the spirit in their families.¹⁰

The open-endedness of Vodun allows for the development of a new type of Tchamba veneration in a Mami Wata temple in Godomey, Bénin. Although I was already familiar with Tchamba iconography, at first I was unable to identify the Tchamba shrine in this temple as it was marked by a Hindu chromolithograph (Fig. 8). Elsewhere I have explored how and why Hindu chromolithographs representing “India Spirits” have been absorbed into Vodun practice and local visual theologies (1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2009). In brief, elaborately detailed Indian



Figure 8. Hindu lithograph representing Tchamba in Mami Wata compound, Photograph: Dana Rush, March 2006, Godomey, Bénin

chromolithographs have been incorporated into the religious system of Vodun precisely because of the open-ended structures and richly suggestive imagery that allow them to embody wildly diverse ideas, themes, beliefs, histories, and legends in Vodun art and thought. The prints

themselves serve as both instructions and vehicles of divine worship; they suggest rules of conduct, recount legendary narratives, and act as objects of adoration. The humans, animals, foods, drinks, jewelry, body markings, and accoutrements within these chromolithographs have become sacred to the Vodun spirits represented.

In this case, the lithographic image is a recycled top portion of a calendar from “Société Nirankor” in Cotonou, Bénin. It depicts a scene in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in which Krishna (standing) imparts his teachings to his close friend Arjuna just before the start of the main battle in the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. Krishna, who is the incarnation of the god Vishnu, is a prince, but during the battle he serves as Arjuna’s charioteer (notice the chariot in the background, and behind it the two massed armies facing each other, ready to attack). Poster images of this scene are very common, but this one, according to scholar of South Asian religions Philip Lutgendorf, is somewhat unusual, in that Krishna appears in four-armed form. Vishnu is often depicted this way, but in *Bhagavad Gita* posters it is more common to show Krishna either in two-armed (normal incarnate human) form, or in his “Vishvarupa” or cosmic form.¹¹

The attributes of Vishnu -- four arms, diadem, mace, discus, and especially the trident -- are appealing to Mami Wata adepts venerating Tchamba because these accoutrements are associated with “India” and carry special prestige. Although this image looks nothing like temple paintings of Tchamba, it is described in this temple as being about a meeting not between Krishna and Arjuna but between Tchamba (standing) and a Fulani hunter in the desert in the north. The horse in the image is what distinguishes the locale as northern because there are very few horses along the coast. Tchamba’s favorite nourishments from the north, such as kola nuts, *tchoukoutou*, and *tchapkalo*, are interpreted as being present in the image. The trident that Tchamba (Krishna/Vishnu) carries is called an *apia* in Mami Wata veneration and is placed in the associated Tchamba shrine in this temple (Fig. 9).

When this particular Tchamba shrine is assembled outside for veneration, it contains neither the typical *tchambagan* bracelets nor the *tchambazikpe*, or stool (Fig. 10). The Mami Wata priestess presiding over this shrine claims that she had been having dreams of her ancestors being sold in the transatlantic slave trade, and in her dreams she always saw the “photo” (chromolithograph) of Tchamba. The background sound in all of these dreams was of incessant

drumming, thus she placed a drummer figure in her shrine as another manifestation of Tchamba. In this case he represents “Tchamba the Drummer,” who alerted the Mami Wata priestess to the history of her own family’s enslavement.



Figure 9. Tchamba shrine, inside, in Mami Wata compound. Photograph: Dana Rush, March 2006, Godomey, Bénin.

End Thoughts

While in Bénin in January 2007, I visited an old friend of mine, Tchabassi, the head Vodun chief in Mono Province.¹² On one side of his family, his great grandfather owned slaves, and on the other side, his great grandmother was sold in the transatlantic slave trade. He had already been interested in his family’s history in relation to slavery, but in the 1980s, when he found a *tchambagan* (slave bracelet) in the fields behind his house, both his personal and spiritual interests in slavery accelerated. Tchabassi maintains a private Tchamba shrine along with many other Vodun shrines in his compound. During this last visit, he reiterated something he said to me a decade earlier regarding Tchamba. He told me that members of any African



Figure 10. Parts of indoor shrine in Figure 9 reassembled outdoors. Photograph: Dana Rush, March 2006, Godomey, Bénin.

family living along this coast were, at some point in time, either enslaved or they enslaved people. He said that Tchamba is the Vodun of enslavement of any kind, anywhere in the world.

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Notes

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1 This article sets the foundation for the in-depth study I have undertaken during 2010-2011, to be expanded into a book. Although I learned of Tchamba in the late 1990s, a major impetus for pursuing this research further was my participation the international conference “Tales of Slavery: Narratives of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Enslavement in Africa” (University of Toronto, May 20-23, 2009). One of the main goals of the conference was “to seek out and explore newer methodologies, to find more African sources, and if possible, to look for the voices of the slaves themselves.” Participants from throughout the African continent, the United States, Canada, and Europe converged in this multidisciplinary arena to share their recent research on slavery in Africa. There was great enthusiasm toward exploring the under-documented sources of music, dance, proverbs, arts, and religions in order to collect living histories of domestic slavery. I thank Martin Klein, conference organizer and Professor Emeritus at University of Toronto, for affording me the opportunity to present this preliminary work. I extend my appreciation to conference participants for good feedback. I thank the Fulbright Africa Regional Research Program and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars for supporting fieldwork on this topic in Bénin and Togo during 2010-2011. Upon completion of

this research, the data in this article may need revision. Thanks also to Allen Roberts and Gregory Spinner for great suggestions and support.

2 The Nyantroukou, along with the Dassa, Holli, Ifé, Itcha, Mahi, and Oyo, are listed by Cornevin in a subsection entitled “Yoruba-speaking groups,” although he mentions that both the Holli and the Nyantroukou are “marginal” in the Yoruba collective 203 (Cornevin 1962:44, 202-205).

3 Perhaps the term kabreto has lost its currency in association with domestic slavery due to the thirty-eight year regime of late Togolese dictator Eyadema. Because Eyadema was Kabre, a southerner (Mina or Ewe) could have been detained, or worse, by Eyadema’s military if heard speaking badly about Kabre peoples. Eyadema’s son, Fauré Essozimna Gnassingbé, continues his father’s legacy after becoming president after his father’s death in 2005. At present, Kabreto means someone of Kabre ethnicity, and has nothing to do with slavery.

4 Many of the words I translate may not have exact origins in the ethnic groups to whom I refer. Because Tchamba crosses southern ethnic borders, some words associated with the Tchamba might originate in Mina, Ewe, or Fon, but are used in all three languages. I am not addressing tonal differentiations.

5 These histories were collected mainly along coastal Togo, and into southeastern Ghana in a series of interviews during December 1998 through March 1999. The interviews collected in Bénin were usually with people originally from Togo, but who had moved due to political unrest.

6 I did have one opportunity to photograph a few old shrines. Very unfortunately, this roll of film was unraveled and rendered useless by a curious youngster. I plan to reshoot these images and learn more about them, if granted permission.

7 Because I learned about Tchamba very late in my fieldwork, I was only able to document two family histories regarding ancestry, which are presented in this text. A large part of my upcoming research will be recording living histories and memories of domestic slavery, and peoples’ quests to find their places of origin.

8 Interview with Cécile Akpaglo, February 9, 1999 in Lomé, Togo. Although I tried, I was unable to meet with any members of the Dogbe-Tomi family. I was told that many of them had moved to Europe and only came back to Lomé periodically.

9 For some reason, the translation of this name was stressed repeatedly through the interviews. Thus, I will repeat them here: (zo = fire, waye = trick; “clever as fire”).

10 For a comprehensive anthology on Mami Wata, see Drewal 2008.

11 Personal communication, Philip Lutgendorf, May 27, 2007.

12 It is purely coincidental that his name resembles the name of the Tchamba Vodun.

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