

# DREAMING AGAINST THE GRAIN

By

Leonard Wantchekon

Princeton University

## INTRODUCTION

The dream nearly vanished just as it was about to be realized. My adventure seemed to be coming to a sudden end that day in December 1986 at 9:23 a.m. when, at the outpost of Idiroko, less than a kilometer from the Nigerian border, I found myself in front of an intelligence agent disguised as a police officer on guard duty. I knew him quite well; this “police officer” had picked me up several times at the headquarters of state intelligence also known as the Petit Palais or “little palace.” Now he was literally all that stood between me and the Nigerian border checkpoint that was my gateway to freedom. Did he recognize me? I avoided eye contact, and slipped five Nairas into his hand in lieu of identification, knowing that at any moment he could have me re-arrested. Miraculously, he waved me on. My heart was beating rapidly as I left him to cover the last 800 meters of dirt road that remained between me and Nigerian soil.

It was 10:04 a.m. when I entered the little town of Ajegunle with my guide, the brother of a friend whom I had asked to help me get to Lagos. I couldn’t hide my elation. I had just escaped after nearly two years of virtual hell—three months underground running from state intelligence officers, six months in the notorious torture chamber known as “the White House” in Guezo Barrack in Cotonou, one year in the inferno of Segbana Jail in northern Benin. My immediate reaction was pure joy, overwhelmed by the immensity of the moment. It was—or rather, I was determined to make this—the dividing line between my past and my future. My past, as a talented leftist college student who embraced the

cause of democratic revolution in Benin and nearly died in the process, and my future as an experienced pro-democracy activist in search of the realization of an academic potential that was all but dead.

It is true that my escape was relatively easy, but that didn't make it less trying on my nerves. Arrested July 18, 1985 and later deported to Camp Séro Kpéra at Parakou then to the Ségbana Jail in the outer northern regions of the country, I often had sudden, intense bouts of rheumatoid arthritis. After much finagling, I had obtained a temporary pass to receive medical care in the village of Alejo, in the Djougou district, close to the border with Togo. Once there, I was able to escape to the south before the secret police could make arrangements to stop me. From the coastal city of Cotonou, I tried to delay the military warden's inevitable fury by sending letters explaining that I had left Aléjo to seek better treatment, and promising to return to the prison as soon as my condition had improved. Three weeks later, the sham had obviously gone on too long. I phoned the Commander in another attempt to assuage his anger; this time he threatened me, making clear his realization that he had gravely miscalculated in giving me the authorization to seek treatment outside the jail. For him, however, it was too late. I had plans to leave the country the next day.

Despite my elation at my escape, my emotions were mixed. Through my actions, I had left my family accountable to the political police. They could be subject to reprisals, which had the potential to be horrible. I might also be responsible for the elimination of medical leaves granted from time to time to sick prisoners so that they could receive treatment. The prison conditions could worsen—conditions that were already difficult. But I had to leave. I couldn't hold out any longer against the refrain echoing through my mind, telling me to “escape, Leonard, escape”—a determination which had been growing and building to a crescendo in my head during the preceding six months.

In the bush-taxi which drove me to the Nigerian city of Lagos, a succession of images flashed through my mind. First, the May 6, 1985 student uprising that I helped organize. Then the torture sessions in July 1985, the massive arrests of members of the underground network of pro-democracy activists in October 1985, and details of life in detention. Next, my thoughts focused on Leonard Kédoté, a childhood friend with whom I experienced all the joys and especially all the pains of life, and who must at this point be in a corner of the cell baptized “Democratic Kampuchea” by the prisoners. The stream of images continued, one after another: Didier d'Almeida, Luc Agnakpé, Gaston Kokodé, Thomas Houédété, Daniel Djossouvi, Raymond Adekambi, Pierre Gnansa, Aboubakar Baparapé, Allassane Tigri, and many others. As I was daydreaming and totally unaware, I was robbed by the passenger seated next to me in the bush taxi. I had with me a blue overcoat with white and red facing that a friend, Gaston Kokodé, had given to me in December 1985 to protect me from the cold while we were sharing the same

cell in Parakou. I had been determined to keep this sign of friendship with me in exile, a remembrance of the attachment which bound me to my companions in prison. I was deeply hurt by its loss.

We arrived in the busy neighborhood of Oshodi in Lagos. The thick crowds, where tension and violence were common, created a wild, even diabolical atmosphere. I fought off a sense of shock, but I had no room for melancholy. It was time to stand and come to terms with the realities of life in exile. In spite of the physical and psychological depression which still held me and bound me, I felt I still had enough strength, and the desire, to bear witness and to carry on. Bear witness to my experience of political incarceration in the country of Benin, and carry on to a future that just recently had appeared non-existent.

A large portion of this memoir was written during the first months of my life in exile. It was originally intended to be a narrative of prison life, to help build international support for the campaign to free political prisoners in Benin in the late 1980s. But in the end, I did not want only to write a narrative about the horror of life in prison and torture in the hands of a dictatorial regime. I did not want this just to be a repository for anger and disillusionment, but rather, to become an outlet for hope and a celebration of perseverance. I decided instead to tell the positive story of democracy in Benin from my personal experience within the movement—the personal sacrifice and hardships, the organizational and political strategies that made political change possible. I am privileged to have been at the heart of this incredible journey.

Most people leave a gruesome political struggle battered and bruised to the point where they can only be, at best, a living museum, or if they are lucky, be considered a “legend.” I was fortunate enough to survive those bruises with enough energy to make my way to the faculty of Yale University and New York University, where I now have the opportunity to positively affect policy decisions in a democratic Benin through academic research. As a result, this book will not only be a look back at student uprising, torture, and escape from prison. It will also be about my experience as an immigrant, a student, and an academic in North America, and an opportunity to contribute my vision for Africa’s democratic future.