



THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF THE HISTORY: THE BENIN'S AGGRESSION ON 16th JANUARY 1977 AND THE MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS

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Abstract

The People's Republic of Benin was the target of an armed attack on Sunday, 16th January 1977. This attack was carried out by international mercenaries, both European and African, together with some Beninese elements exiled by the military-marxist regime in place in Cotonou. Aided by France and some states of its African pre-square, mercenaries landed in Benin in order to end a regime that the capitalist states considered incongruous.

But the revolutionary government did not fail to defend its regime even at the price of heavy sacrifice. This coup that caused material and human losses profoundly marked the history of the Beninese revolution. The Revolutionary Military Government has decided to consecrate the victims as martyrs of the revolution. A monument was even erected in their hometown. The memory of these martyrs was immortalized and celebrated. There was a worship of the martyrs: become emblems of the revolution, they are sung, adulated and presented as a revolutionary model of bravery to emulate. But beyond the national recognition that has been given to them, the Military-Marxist government has used this memory as a rallying and reviving element for the regime that was losing ground. In this paper, the creation of martyrs memory by the Military Government would be investigated according to Beninese newspapers and numerous theses. Also, this paper would shed a light to common process of the creation of collective memory around the world, by the example of The People's Republic of Benin.

Keywords

Aggression, Benin, Martyrs, Memory, Military Revolutionary Government (MRG)

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TARİHİN ARAÇSALLAŞTIRILMASI: 16 OCAK 1977 BENİN ÇATIŞMASI VE KURBANLARIN HATIRASI

Öz

Benin Halk Cumhuriyeti, 16 Ocak 1977 Pazar günü silahlı bir saldırının hedefi oldu. Bu saldırı, Cotonou'daki askeri-Marksist rejim tarafından sürgün edilen birkaç Beninli ile Afrikalı ve Avrupalı uluslararası paralı askerlerce beraber gerçekleştirilmişti. Kapitalist devletlerin uyumsuz olarak nitelendirdiği bir rejimi devirmek üzere Fransa'nın ve bazı komşu Afrika ülkelerinin de yardımıyla paralı askerler Benin'e indiler. Fakat devrimci hükümet ağır kayıplar vermesine rağmen rejimi savunmakta başarılı oldu. Bu darbe can ve mal kaybına sebep oldu ve Benin Devrim Tarihinde kayda değer bir iz bıraktı. Devrimci Askeri Hükümet darbede hayatını kaybedenleri devrim şehitleri olarak ölümsüzleştirmeye karar verdi. Hayatlarını kaybedenlerin memleketlerine anıtlar dikildi. Şehitlerin hatıraları anıldı ve ölümsüzleştirildi. Bir dönem şehit tapınması görüldü: Devrimin sembolleri haline geldiler, şarkıları söylendi, aşırı derecede övüldüler ve örnek alınması gereken cesaret timsalleri olarak sunuldu. Fakat onlara sunulan milli kabulün ötesinde, güç kaybeden Askeri-Marksist rejim tarafından toplanma ve güç kazanma unsuru olarak kullanıldılar. Bu makalede, çeşitli tezlere ve Benin gazetelerine göre şehitlerin hafızasının oluşturulması incelenecektir. Ayrıca bu makale, dünya genelinde kolektif bir hafıza yaratılma sürecine, Benin Halk Cumhuriyeti örneğiyle ışık tutmaya çalışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Benin, Devrimci Askeri Hükümet (DAH), Hafıza, Saldırganlık, Şehitler



INTRODUCTION

The aggression of January 16th, 1977 appears as a major event in the post-colonial history of Benin, in that it represents a unique phenomenon. However, little attention is paid to this part of national history, probably because of its recent character and the emotional burden it continues to bear. Forty years after this coup, the victims formerly vivacious memory seems to be thrown into oblivion and their Memory recalls only a vague memory to the best informed citizens. Heuristic research also shows no particular attention to this past which in reality continues to influence national political life today. For example, in the historiography of Benin, only two thesis of graduation are specifically dedicated to it. To this end, we invoke the work of Emmanuel Ohin, who analyzed the "Influence of the aggression of 16 January 1977 on Benin's international relations" (1989). More precisely, the Master's thesis in History by Mr. Hyacinthe Zannou, "Benin Facing the Aggression of January 16th, 1977: The Ins and Outs of a Tragedy" studied the factors and consequences of the phenomenon. Of course, other scientific works by both national and foreign authors interesting in Benin's political history have, at the turn of an analysis addressed the question. Jean Pliya, *History of my country, Benin* (1993), Samson A. Adjagba, *Political history of Benin of Independence 1960 at the national conference of 1990* (2002), Jean Establet, Mathieu Kérékou, *The irremovable President of Benin* (1997), Félix A. Iroko, *President Mathieu Kérékou: an extraordinary man* (2001), Robert Cornevin, *The People's Republic of Benin, from the origins to the present day* (1981), to quote only those. But in all these works, the memory of the victims nevertheless remained without being really addressed.

An aggression is "the sending by or on behalf of a State of armed gangs or groups, irregular forces or mercenaries engaged in acts of armed force against another State (...), or the act of engage substantially in such action¹". Thus, the coup against the State of Benin on 16th January, 1977 should be designated as an aggression. As proof, the mercenaries not only constituted an irregular army but also because they intervened in Benin, an independent and sovereign State, with the complicity of several African and European States, among others. The memory of the victims is the collective affect related to the memory of the soldiers and civilians who died during this aggression. This memory itself offers a varied field of study and interpretation. Here, this affect results from a social construct that the government had sought to print in the psyche of peoples. As for the political instrumentalisa-

¹ General Assembly of the United Nations (UN), Resolution 3314 of 14th December 1974, Article 3, paragraph (g).



tion of this memory, it is the fact that the political power had used the death of these soldiers as an instrument of propaganda to consolidate its power and extend the influence of its regime. In such an enterprise, the invention of national heroes was primordial. Anthony Smith² describes the role that the heroic myth can play in the memory of a nation. In this regard, he explains that the heroes provide models of virtuous conduct, their deeds of valour inspire faith and courage in their oppressed and decadent descendants". According to him, the epoch in which they flourished is the great age of liberation from the foreign yoke, which released the energies of the people for cultural innovation and original political experiment. This corresponded well to the claim of the Revolutionary Military Government (RMG), which posed itself as Benin's liberator of the yoke of imperialism. Similarly, he intended to build a new society under the banner of socialism.

The purpose of this article is to present the issue of this memory for the power in place. Its chronological framework extends from the date of this event and covers the rest of the revolutionary period that is to say until 1989. Our problematic is articulated around some questions. What happened on 16th January, 1977? How was the memory of the martyrs born? What place had it occupy in the collective consciousness? How has the military-Marxist government had managed it? The answers to these questions constitute the fundamental contribution of this article. However, this armed aggression is not an event that appeared *ex-nihilo*; it was the result of a socio-political conflagration that made it. It allows itself easier to be understood better through the political events that preceded it. In order to account for this phenomenon, which is unique in the political history of Benin, from independence to the present day, it is more appropriate to go back to the root of the events that plunge into the military coup of 26th October, 1972, five years previously. The consequences of this coup d'état are equally of interest for the completion of this article.

Most of the documentary sources that enabled me to write this article are the archives of the national press. They have been supplemented by using of some graduation dissertations and others printed works, all addressing the same theme from various angles and interests. We deplore the lack of oral sources which are considered nowadays as essential sources for the history writing, especially concerning a subject that deals with memory. However, this did not prevent this work from being carried out. The combi-

² Anthony (D. S.), *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 296.



ned usages of the different documents that I have had in our possession have enabled me to achieve the results that I present here.

1- ON THE ORIGINS OF THE AGGRESSION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BENINESE REVOLUTION

Warning Signs of Aggression: The Coup d'état of 26th October 1972 and its Aftermath

Dahomey³, on 26th October 1972, the young officers of the Military Revolutionary Committee (GMR) overthrew the presidential council⁴ and took power. This military coup, the fifth coup in this young state, became independent only on 1st August, 1960, would change the whole political situation of the country. Indeed, by this political hold-up, the military junta put an end to twelve years of chronic political instability, instability that earned Dahomey the sobriquet "*sick child of Africa*". What is more, it opens a new page of Dahomean policy by the new policy of orientation in which the Revolutionary Military Government (RMG) committed the country: the revolution. As early as November 30th, 1972, the R.M.G., in a long speech to the nation so-called Speech-Program⁵, unequivocally displays its revolutionary intentions in the face of the world. "*It is a matter of definitively liquidating the old policy through the men, the structures and the ideology that bear it*".⁶

This means that nothing will be the same as before. Indeed, in these prolegomena to the "*new policy of national independence*"⁷, the leader of the junta, Battalion Chief Mathieu Kérékou, has challenged imperialism and the various previous governments by questioning their inability to rule the State power and the consequences of political instability, the fragmentation of the political class whose avatars are regionalism, ethnicity or tribalism. He concludes that the fundamental characteristic and the primary source of the backwardness of our country is foreign domination. The history of this domination is that of political oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation, the blossoming of inter-regional and inter-tribal contradictions. The coup d'état of 26 October 1972 "*marks a radical break with the past and begins a new policy of national independence whose the basis and finality remain the*

³ Dahomey is the old name of Benin. We will come back on it.

⁴ Following the instability that characterized the political life of Benin in the aftermath of independence, it was decided that the three political leaders who share the legitimacy of political power will take turns rotating the country, each for two years inner a presidential council. It is sort of a presidential system with three presidents, the triumvirate, which some people had ironically designated "the three-headed monster".

⁵ This speech was called Speech-Program because it contains the broad lines of the policies envisaged by the junta.

⁶ Daho-Express, 1er décembre 1974, (December 1, 1974) «"Goho national policy speech" », p. 14.

⁷ This is the theme of the military junta to describe the policy it intends to conduct. *Idem*.



*interests of the Dahomean people and its own personality*⁸". The Speech-Program envisages reorganizing the country in all its different sectors, social, economic, political and cultural, through the main orientations of its action for the well-being of all the Dahomean people.

November 30th, 1974 marked the second major turning point of the Dahomean revolution. In the vein of the new policy of national independence, the Military Government took another step, which described by Jean Establet as the Goho's surprise⁹. Quite surprisingly for the international community, in this case the Western bloc, the speech delivered by the President of Dahomey, Mathieu Kérékou, at the emblematic place of Goho¹⁰ sounded like a thunder. On the second anniversary of the Speech-Program, President Kérékou made a major speech, known as the Goho Square's speech. This discourse, by tracing the history of the African peoples in its darkest episodes, from the slave trade to European colonization - but also their fierce resistance against oppression - crystallized on an eminent point of the RMG's new policy. "...for all these reasons," he said, "and convinced that these are the profound aspirations of our militant people, we solemnly proclaim on Saturday, 30th November, 1974, that the new society where it will be good to live for each Dahomean and every Dahomean, will be a socialist society"¹¹.

According to the President Kérékou, the building of a socialist society in Dahomey is a historical necessity. Thus, from this date, all the acts, all the behaviours and all the thoughts of the people of Dahomey must tend towards its realization in the facts. In this sense the discourse said in essence that the revolutionary philosophy, the philosophical foundation and the guide of the revolutionary action of Dahomey is Marxism-Leninism. Coming from a former French colony, after only twelve years of independence, which on the one hand in an overheated international context of cold war between the liberal democracies and the Soviet bloc, and on the other hand in a sub-regional context where France kept all its influence, this discourse, this ideological choice of this small country of about 112 600 km² with its population of 3.000.000, appears at the very least bold, presumptuous and rash. This choice is all the more serious in that it appears in the sub region as

⁸ Idem, *ibidem*.

⁹ Jean Establet describes this political orientation choice as Goho's surprise. Goho being the place where this speech was delivered. Establet (J.), Mathieu KEREKOU, *L'inamovible Président du Bénin*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997.

¹⁰ The choice of place of discourse is significant. The place Goho is the place where king Behanzin surrendered the 25 of January of 1894 to the French General Alfred Amédée Dodds. This square is located in the city of Abomey, capital of the kingdom of Daxome, in the center of the present Republic of Benin. Danxomé, in French Dahomey lent its name to the independent state (we shall return to it). Behanzin was a great resistant to French colonization. It will be solemnly proclaimed national hero later by the Revolutionary Military Government.

¹¹ Daho-Express of 1st December 1974, p.14.



the only country to go against the pre-established order by the former metropolis, France, and posed a risk of possible contamination.

Moreover, another fact came to corroborate the independence choice of the military-marxist regime. Indeed, after the colonial conquests, the colonial Administration decided to give the name of colony of the Dahomey to the whole of the lands that has been conquered between the German Togo and the British Nigeria. As the kingdom of "*Danxomé*", in French "*Dahomey*", had opposed the longest and fiercest resistance against the colonial penetration in this space, the name "*Dahomey*" has come to designate all the occupied territories. It was homage from the conqueror to the vanquished¹². Thus, the country gained independence under the designation of the Republic of Dahomey.

For the Marxist government, Dahomey is a colonial name drawn from the sources of feudal ideology, the other enemy of the revolution, which did not help unify the peoples of the country. Arguing that there were existed in the present space of Republic of Dahomey different political organizations, the RMG deduced that this name "*Dahomey*" does not come from an internal choice or a qualitative mutation in the "auto dynamic historical" process of constitution a kingdom or a pre-colonial empire in this geographical region. Therefore there are no objective reasons to maintain it. The revolutionary government then changed that name. For the regime, it was a question of giving a new name to the country which does not recall any vexatious content because it has rid of all prejudice. On the occasion of the third anniversary of the Speech-Program, the Head of State's speech of 30th November 1975 established the new name for the country. From this date, it was called as Benin, in its full designation, the People's Republic of Benin (PRB).

The name of "Benin", for its part, echoed a brilliant civilization that would have existed in the West African sub-region before the colonial invasion. For the RMG, this name is an essential element of unification of the different peoples of the country. Moreover, this speech did not only make a new name for the country, but also the birth of a new political party, the single party, avant-garde and main political body, the People's Revolutionary Party of Benin (PRPB). With the birth of this party, all elements of aut-

¹² At the height of the colonial conquest, although his kingdom was occupied, King Behanzin of the Danxome was impregnable. He chose the Maquis. In a report addressed to his hierarchy, General Dodds, who led the French campaign against the Danxomé, did not conceal the esteem in which he held his adversary: "Poverty and hunger will complete the work begun by force if Béhanzin or His entourage do not themselves decide quickly to seek a way out of their present situation by returning to our hands. It is only up to the government to set the conditions for this surrender, as they are acceptable to an adversary whose courage and energy must be recognized". Then we understand the motivation of France to give this name. Cf Comevin (R.), *La République Populaire du Bénin, des origines à nos jours*, Paris, G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1981, p.348.



horitarianism were gathered. The unique thought that the revolutionary apparatus imposed in the name of national unity led to the witch-hunting.

The revolutionary power distinguished two opposing classes: in the one side the revolutionaries, the virtuous who are opposed to the class of the reactionary bourgeoisie, in the other side. If the first class essentially designated the military¹³ and some civilian elite benefiting from the junta and the people so much evoked, invoked and practically unobtainable, the second antagonist class is that of the reactionary opponents. It is designated by the coalition of national counter-revolutionary forces, allegedly actively supported by imperialist powers. This included members of the former regime who were from the outset designated as enemies of the revolutionary state. The reactionary bourgeoisie is also any other citizen who does not share the aspirations of the new ruling class. From then on, it was an open war between the two camps. It was the beginning of a political purge, a struggle against the counter-revolution, by the necessity of consolidating power; the era of the great political exile for the protesting citizens, those who are considered as the "traitors", "*the enemies of the revolution*"¹⁴

According to the Revolutionary Minister in charge of Information and National Orientation, Martin Dahou Azonhiho, "*the counter-revolution is those who think badly of the revolution. We have to reconvert them, he has continued. "But if we do not succeed, if they continue, we must actually liquidate them on the ground ... Our revolution does not want to be bloody uselessly. But in purity one can kill for a noble cause. It is the instinct of preservation. If you do not kill your enemy, he will kill you"*¹⁵. This situation led to the repression of the country's political, economic and intellectual forces in the name of the fight against corruption. To this end, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) were set up to detect and denounce opponents. Thus Beninese politicians, economic operators, religious and intellectuals were persecuted and stripped of their possessions¹⁶. In the end, the policy of the struggle against the counter-revolution was the source of discord which provoked a home of exiled opponents. These served as a springboard for foreign elements, France and its African henchmen, hostile to the Beninese revolution involved in

¹³ President Kerekou himself regards the army as the model of patriotism and national consciousness.

¹⁴ Ohin (E.), "The Influence of the aggression of 16th January 1977 on Benin's international relations", 1989.

¹⁵ Daho-Express of 7th February 1975, n°1598.

¹⁶ Zannou (H.), "Le Bénin face à l'agression du 16 janvier 1977 : les tenants et aboutissants d'une tragédie", mémoire de maîtrise en Histoire, Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Faculté des Lettres Arts et Sciences Humaines (FLASH), Département d'Histoire et d'Archéologie (DHA), 2015, p.13.



the aggression¹⁷. In parallel with the counter-revolutionary repression, an internal struggle had begun within the military for the control of State power. In February 1973, President Mathieu Kérékou exploit a military coup attempt to get rid of the army officers in competition with him for control of power¹⁸.

The RMG crossed the Rubicon when it decided, in its logic of new policy of national independence, to call into question the French neo-colonial order. The first visible anti-French act of the Marxist regime dates back to the supposed attempted coup d'état in February 1973. The government attributed the responsibility for this attempted coup to a well-known foreign power, namely France¹⁹. A year later, the socialist option accelerating the effect of things, the RMG proceeded to a series of nationalization of foreign companies operating in the territory of Dahomey. Thus, in 1975, the State's participation was strengthened in the Société des Ciments du Bénin SCB (50% of the capital vs. 25%) and in the Cotton Industry Company of Benin SOBETEX (49% vs. 13%). The SOBRADO brewery, a subsidiary of the French group SOGEPAL, was nationalized in June 1975 with the electricity company SBEE, which was bought back in 1973, and the cotton ginning factories that were subtracted from the CFDT in 1974²⁰. In the field of commercial banks, the time is for the fusion; all foreign commercial banks are unified and gave birth to Banque Commerciale du Bénin (BCB). At the same time, the government increased its share in the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO). In addition, "The local subsidiaries of the Paris Insurance Union (UAP), the French Insurance Group, the General Insurance Company of France and the Mutuelle Générale de France were merged to give birth to the National Society of Insurance and Reinsurance (SONAR)"²¹ on December 3rd, 1974

This policy of questioning the levers of neo-colonialism, in a country where France has, with the complicity of some local compradors, taken in hostage all economic life despite the country's independence, is not likely to

¹⁷ On the African plane, the Dahomean revolutionary experience was badly perceived and aroused mistrust, while on the international level, the rapprochement of the Dahomey of the socialist bloc did not leave the opposing camp insensitive. A reaction was to be expected.

¹⁸ For this purpose, several senior army officers were arrested and imprisoned, Colonel Alley, the alleged brain of the coup, and other officers, Major Ibrahim Chabi, Lieutenants Alphonse Houndegla and Romuald Kitoyi, and Chief of Battalion Jean-Baptiste Hacheme. They will spend more than 10 years behind bars where some will find death as Houndegla and Chabi.

¹⁹ Cornec (J.), 2000, *La calebasse dahoméenne ou les errances du Bénin : du Dahomey au Bénin*, tome 2, Paris, L'Harmattan, p. 327.

²⁰ Godin (F.) 1986, *Bénin 1972-1982 : la logique de l'Etat africain*, Paris, L'Harmattan, p. 43, cité par ZANNOU (H.), "Le Bénin face à l'agression du 16 janvier 1977 : les tenants et aboutissants d'une tragédie", op.cit., p. 10. Zannou (H.), op.cit., p. 14.

²¹ Zannou (H.), op.cit., p. 14.



rejoice Paris that scrupulously watches, through the African cell of the Elysée, on the slightest inclinations of its former colonies to move away from its "field" or to change its established rules. It is evident that, like Icarus, the revolutionary regime which ventured too close to the burning sun of the neo-colonial prebendary system, the French, ran the risk of seeing the wax of its wings melt. Pretexts would not fail.

Back on the Kovacs affair: The Trojan Horse for the GMR

It is an open secret that the Beninese revolution, begun as a result of the military coup of 26th October 1972, reinforced by the objectives of the Speech-Program delivered on 30th November 1972, the ideological choice of Marxism-Leninism on November 30th, 1974 and the change of the "colonial" name of the country, Dahomey, into Benin followed by the creation of the People's Revolutionary Party of Benin (PRPB), November 30th, 1975, did not agree by everybody. There are much opposition to this new situation. More visibly, they are two kinds of opposition: Beninese citizens, victims of the policy of the struggle against counter-revolution and international capitalism, France in this case, which suffered setbacks in its positions which it considered as an acquired in one of its bastions.

But the most pernicious of the contradictions comes from the ranks of the revolutionary soldiers, a contradiction exacerbated by a military-politico-financial affair in which private interests, intimately and inextricably, are linked to those of the State: the Kovacs affair. Indeed, the ideological turn of the regime caused a stir in the heart of the RMG For example, Captain Janvier Assogba, one of the actors of the 1972 coup and minister of rural development and cooperation within the RMG, marked his clear opposition to the Marxist option. He considered that "the coup d'état of 26th October, 1972 was not made for the benefit of Marxism-Leninism and the RMG should not be devoted to some so-called ideologues"²². But if the ideological choice marked the disagreement between the revolutionary regime and one of its barons in the person of Captain Janvier Assogba, it is rather the hints of the Kovacs affair that motivated the latter's action.

The Kovacs affair, which dates back to 1972, put into action the Dahomean political milieu and the Hungarian businessman Kovacs, who saw his goods stuck at the port of Cotonou²³. To facilitate the release of these goods, Mr. Kovacs would have given to Mathieu Kérékou, by a middleman²⁴, a

²² Iroko (A, F.), 2001 : *Le président Mathieu KEREKOU : un homme hors du commun*, Cotonou, Les Nouvelles Editions du Bénin, p. 150.

²³ Cotonou is a Port city, economic capital of Benin.

²⁴ This is the business lawyer, the Benenese Borna Bertin.



sum of 35million FCFA²⁵. In that time, Kérékou was the aide of camps of the Benin's former President Hubert Maga²⁶. In the vein of the coup d'état of 26thOctober, 1972, Kérékou became President. He named his companion, Captain Janvier Assogba Minister of Finance. Yet, we know that Assogba was not in favour of the socialist orientation that President Kérékou gave to the revolution at Goho Square in November 1974. Having become Minister of Finance in 1973, Captain Assogba was made aware of the existence of this case of bribery. Then he tried to agitate this affair to confuse President Kérékou in his revolutionary ardour. He blamed the head of State for corruption.

On 17thJanuary, 1975, a hand-written document signed by Janvier Assogba was put into circulation, bringing together the various letters addressed to the Head of State, Mathieu Kérékou by Mr Kovacs. They are in fact defamatory leaflets to denounce corruption and weaken the socialist regime. In short, this case will have sufficed as *casus belli* so that on the night of January 21st, 1975, a fraction of the Dahomean Armed Forces (FAD), heavily armed commanded by the Captain Janvier Assogba, moved in direction of Cotonou to overthrow the Revolutionary regime and its leader²⁷. But the blow was stolen²⁸; his principal author arrested, punished by sixty (60) days of fortress arrests, and then was relieved of his duties²⁹. For Martin Dohou Azonhiho, spokesperson for the R.M.G., it was clear that "it is neither the Kovacs affair, nor the reputation of President Kérékou, but it is because of our program of new politics of national independence and our socialist orientation. The Kovacs affair is a big deal, and imperialism could hardly find anything better than to exploit it and thus attempt to question the integrity of the first leader of our Revolution, Comrade Mathieu Kérékou"³⁰. This

²⁵ FCFA is the currency of the old French African colonies. At that time, 1972, 1F (Franc, French currency) equivalent 2 FCFA. Nowadays, it relates to Euro. 1Euro= 655.9293 FCFA.

²⁶ Hubert Coutoucou Maga was the first president of Benin (1960-1963). He was removed by military coup, then returned to power again (1970-1972).

²⁷ Daho-Express of 24th January 1975, n°1588, p. 1.

²⁸ Captain Assogba was betrayed by Major Alladaye who promised to resign the head of state. The rebel was invited to speak with the president at the palace where he was arrested. But, there is an official version of the facts recounted by the official journal, the main organ of the propaganda of the Revolution. The newspaper is surprised by Captain Assogba's military choice. He writes in substance: "In addition, Captain Assogba, by hierarchical procedure, requested the convening of a meeting of the National Officers for the purpose," he said, "of shedding light on what he calls" the grave matter concerning the head of state ". Anxious to bring the truth to an end, the Head of State acceded to the request of Captain Assogba, who was received this morning on 21 January 75 and summoned all the officers in garrison at Ouidah, Cotonou and Porto-Novo the same day at 5 pm to a meeting at Camp Ghézo. All the officers summoned were present at the appointed hour. But, curiously enough, the initiator of the meeting, the one who had serious revelations to the Assembly, Captain Assogba, had not come. Even more curious is that around 7 pm it was to be learned that Captain Assogba with the Supporting Subgroup Units based in Ouidah and placed under his command marched on Cotonou. Daho-Express of 24th January 1975, n°1588, p.6.

²⁹ Idem, ibidem.

³⁰ Daho-Express of 7th February 1975, n°1598, p. 8.



attempted coup was the first manifest reaction of the counter-revolution. It sounds like an alert, a prelude to the aggression of January 16th, 1977.

2- THE COURSE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF AGGRESSION

2-1- The Forces Involved and Their Motivation

Two major forces were the lever of the armed aggression that Benin experienced on 16th January 1977. They result from the policy of national independence of the RMG and its will to revolutionize all the layers of the population. First, the strongly nationalist, independence-oriented positions, often directed against the Western powers, adopted by the Beninese leaders exposed them to the thunderbolt of imperialist power. Then, political exiles, victims of the struggle against the counter-revolution, have formed a nucleus on which the foreign powers (West States) are grafted to get rid of an incongruous regime that has become too embarrassing.

On the one hand the rapprochement of Benin with the socialist bloc, its positions on international issues and the risk of contamination that it represented in this African sub region exasperated the capitalist world, in this case France that wishes to collapse the regime. As one can read in one of the documents abandoned by the fleeing mercenaries: "the study of the situation of Benin since the takeover of Kérékou has led some of its nationals to the certainty that there was a need to put an end as soon as possible to this experience. The current regime, conscious of its own excesses and "irreparable" commitments, has no alternative but "flight ahead", encouraged in this by the most committed progressive countries on the continent, and indeed elsewhere. The result is the increasingly accelerated adherence to this "Club" of African countries claiming Marxism and anti-imperialism strongly supported by the USSR and Cuba. If nothing were done to stop this trend, Benin and Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, will soon constitute a solid stop on the Algiers-Conakry-Brazzaville-Luanda axis, to mention only the essential in this great west half of the African continent. An action in Benin aimed at putting an end to the slide of the current regime towards the East would prevent the ruin of the country and would have a psychological effect, perhaps direct on some African heads of State inclined to compose very far with the Marxists whatever their reasons: prudence or ideological conviction. A victorious action would give the Marxists themselves the notion of a limit to their thirst for expansion"³¹.

³¹ Ehuzu of 28th February 1977, n°342, p. 3.



On the other hand, the political exiles of the regime clustered around the Front of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Dahomey (FLERD³²) were ripe for action. As evidenced by another document left by the aggressors: "In summary of the various studies made, the opposition officials concluded that almost all the necessary and sufficient conditions are now met to bring down the current regime with the maximum chance of success; the means at their disposal have been the subject of a complete analysis, only a small "push" would be necessary to forge the instrument of victory"³³. In addition to France, they had other supporters who were essentially French-speaking African countries belonging to the French sphere of influence, which offered political asylum to these opponents and which did not welcome Benin's shift towards the socialist camp³⁴. It was the joint action of these two forces that resulted in aggression. Thus, for all these reasons mentioned, the principle of action being retained, the approach consists in defining what it will be and the means, in the most general sense of the term that it claims. It is therefore under the benevolent eye of France that the members of the FLERD will go in search of the means to realize their coup.

2-2- The Course of the Aggression

The aggression of 16th January, 1977 was organized and carried out on the basis of a contract concluded on 5th November, 1976 between the FLERD and the French army colonel Gilbert Bourgeaud³⁵. At the material time, he was in charge of the Presidential Guard and technical advisor to the Gabonese head of State. He was responsible for recruiting 90 European and African mercenaries for the coup. European mercenaries, numbering 60, have been recruited in various countries such as France, Belgium, Sweden, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), etc. They form the Foreign Intervention Group (GEI). They are for the most part former soldiers trained in the use of weapons and accustomed to this type of operation. For this, they needed only rehabilitation to arms.

As for the African mercenaries, they are mainly Beninenses and Guineans recruited in Senegal by the officials of the "Regroupement des Guineens à

³² The Dahomey Liberation and Rehabilitation Front (FLERD) were created in 1975 by Emile Dertin Zinsou, former president of Dahomey overthrown in 1969, a political exile in France for his disagreement with the revolutionary government. Officially, the objective of the front was the liberation of Benin from the Marxist dictatorship. But in fact, Zinsou still had the ambition to regain power. He was joined in his project of national liberation by other political exiles.

³³ Ehuzu of 28th February 1977, n°342, p.3.

³⁴ These are the majority of Francophone African states, notably Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Gabon and Morocco, who saw the socialist experience of Benin as a bad example, a cancer to be destroyed.

³⁵ By the documents left by the fleeing mercenaries, it is established that their leader was Colonel Gilbert Bourgeaud alias Colonel Morin. In fact, it is Bob Dénard, whose real name is Robert Dénard, a former soldier of the French army, specializing in mercenary practice for the benefit of his State, especially in Africa from 1960. He had already operated such an Act in the Republic of the Comoros, in September 1975.



l'Extérieur (RGE)''³⁶; In Côte d'Ivoire by Beninese political exiles Amadou Tchinninand ex-chief officer Marc Soglo. They will be trained for a maximum of 45 days or at least 30 days. Their training and formation are placed under the guidance of European officials. All of these mercenaries constitute the OMEGA force. The elements of this force were therefore disembarked in Casablanca and transported to the base of Benguerir, in Morocco where their training was assured³⁷.

On the eve of the aggression, on 15th January, 1977, the mercenaries left their base in Benguerir with a load of war material, on board of a DC 8 aircraft from which they were transported to France-Ville in Gabon. In Gabon, where they landed at seven o'clock in the afternoon, they changed their aircraft, the DC 8 into a DC 7 cargo ship. It was after this transfer of logistics and personnel that they headed to Cotonou where they landed at 7:03 am, three (3) minutes late. Here is the organization of the mercenary army: a staff of five (5) members including two (2) civilians (Gratien Pognon and Amadou Fousséni Tchinnin), 4 fighting groups (Group support-coverage 25 members—West coverage group 9 members - Blue group 29 - Black group 24). That is to say a total of ninety (90) mercenaries and two (2) leaders of the FLERD called to take the power after the coup³⁸.

Again according to the documents abandoned by the routed aggressors, the operational phase of the aggression "in its broad outline, susceptible of modification according to the situation of the enemy" presented itself as a follow-up. Initially, 30 to 60 minutes after the OMEGA force is landed, it will be broken into three (3) active groups plus a reserve group remaining in the vicinity of the landing site and having custody of "Vector". These active groups deal simultaneously with the Presidency of the Republic which must be attacked and occupied; the military camp, also to attack, occupy and control; the residence of K that must be attacked and neutralized K³⁹. At the second stage, which would last 60 to 90 minutes, it is necessary to look for

³⁶ The Rassemblement des Guineens de l'Extérieur (RGE) is formed on the occasion of the arrest of Diallo Telli, a political opponent of the Peulh ethnic group, on the pretext that Sékou Touré's regime is biased, Peulhs, so we must take action against him. As can be seen, the leaders of the opposition are therefore of the Peulh ethnic group: Sy Sawane and Siradou Diallo. It is on this ethnic basis, among others, that these opponents in exile in Dakar will mobilize young people for aggression a regime friendly to that of their executioner. It should be noted that the Guinean revolutionary system was very much in solidarity with that of Benin; just by observing the frequent visits of Guinean President Ahmed Sékou Touré to his Beninese counterpart Mathieu Kérékou. Moreover, the Minister of Information and Ideology of Guinea was a Beninese, Senénonn Béhanzin. Everything contributes to make believe the Guinean opponents that a collapse of the Beninese regime by ricochet would bear a hard blow to that of Guinea.

³⁷ Ehuzu of 15th March 1977, No. 353, "The whole truth about the armed aggression of 16 January". Report of the special joint session of the Central Committee of the PRPB, the Revolution Nation Council (CNR) and the MRG, p.6. The financial aspect of the operation was not taken into account in this work, for the sake of brevity.

³⁸ Idem, ibidem.

³⁹ "K" for Kérékou.



available political leaders in the western part of the city (East limit of Lagoon) in order to neutralize them and occupy the premises of the PTT, the Police and the radio station. In a third plan, 120 or 180 minutes at the most, the whole of the city had to be controlled; Radio station exploited to carry out a psychological action on the populations. Eventually a curfew would be triggered. Possible elements rallied are framed and used for the maintenance of order.

At this point, the team nominated by the FLERD would have to be presented. The group in reserve would be responsible for its security. In the fourth stage, the mercenaries would seek by all means to control the big cities of the south of the country, Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Ouidah. This control would be facilitated by the exploitation of the radio which will have made known the new team. The fifth and final stage of the operation, which would last a few days, will be the effective control of the entire territory with the establishment of new authorities delegated by the new power. The new mission of the mercenaries, after the blow is to occupy the entire national territory, to ensure the safety of the new president and to proceed with the purification and restructuring of the national army in sight⁴⁰.

It was therefore provided with such a plan that the mercenaries disembarked in Cotonou in the early hours of the morning of Sunday, January 16th, 1977. But this plan did not work as perfectly as it had been elaborated; it even messed up. Admittedly the aircraft, the DC 7, landed, without permission from the control tower, the mercenaries in a row were quick to action attacking some strategic targets without being able to seize them. But it was without counting with the vigilance of the RMG and its militants.

The gendarmes guarding the control tower of the airport, under heavy fire from the attackers, gave the alarm before dispersing, which enabled the Benin Armed Forces to organize the retort. The head of State, Mathieu Kérékou, in a call on the Radio of the Revolution invited "all the activists of the People's Revolution of Benin" to the resistance: "Consequently, every militant of the Revolution, wherever he is, must consider himself and behave like a soldier committed to the front within the sacred battle to save the fatherland in danger. We are appealing patriotically to the CDR and all the local authorities of our democratic and popular revolution to develop and reinforce the massive response to the enemies of the Beninese people"⁴¹.

President Kérékou himself did not hesitate to take the reins of resistance, sustained in this task of national defense by a presidential guard acqui-

⁴⁰ Ehuzu of 15th March 1977, n°353, op.cit., p.8.

⁴¹ Ehuzu of 16 January 1977, special number n°311, p.1.



red for the revolutionary cause, contrary to what the mercenaries believed. The Beninese Armed Forces, headed by President Kérékou, with the help of the North Korean military elements who accompanied their deputy prime minister and foreign minister attending a congress in Cotonou, repulsed the mercenaries after nearly three hours of fighting. The aggression of 16th January, 1977 was a failure, as recognized by the mercenary leader himself, Bob Dénard: "If I consider that it a military exploit to have landed in a hostile country, more than seven hours in a town of three hundred thousand inhabitants, holding an entire army in breath and exfiltrated without serious losses, for the rest, it is a bitter failure.⁴² » The causes of this failure are numerous and beyond the scope of this work, however the damage of this aggression is considerable.

2-3- The Cost of the Aggression

The material and human means used to perpetrate aggression, the importance of the arsenal abandoned by the mercenaries in their rout, clearly testify to the degree of violence of the latter. Thus, limited damage, both material and human, was deplored. In his declaration to the people following the attack, President Kérékou gave an update on the damage it had caused: "our airport, the television house, the Congress Hall, the Croix du Sud Hotel, The new Embassy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the buildings of the Council of the Entente, the new headquarters of the Treasury, the Palace of the Presidency of the Republic, the 40-unit building, Benin Social Security Office (OBSS), as well as the Military Camp, were the buildings that suffered the most from this wild and cowardly aggression"⁴³. Being the target No. 1 of the assailants, the Palace of the Presidency of the Republic was particularly affected.

The loss of life was greater. At the height of the crisis, did not President Kérékou invite all the people, wherever they were, to consider themselves as soldiers to defend their country in danger? Citizens came out of their dwelling, who, with simple hunting rifles, who with machetes or cudgels to confront more armed mercenaries. This situation has resulted in numerous casualties among the civilian population. There were also deaths, missing persons and wounded. But the best known and celebrated of these victims are seven (7). These are Warrant Officer Tossou Migninnavo, 1st Class soldier Alassane Kassim, Private Class 2 Lassissi Yessoufou, 1st class Constable Thotho Paulin, Customs officer Dabapa N'tcha Pascal, Bambotché Abiodu-

⁴² Denard (B.) et Fleury (G.), *Corsaire de la République*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1998, p.437.

⁴³ Ehuza of 20th January 1977 « Declaration of President Mathieu Kérékou », n°315, p. 1.



nalias Basile, Worker at the National Transit and Consignment Company (SOMATRAC), and Comlan Sylvain, an electrician worker.

President Mathieu Kérékou assessed the total damage to 6 billion CFA francs. It is on this basis that he initiated a diplomatic offensive, on the one hand for the recognition of this aggression as such and on the other hand for the reparation of the damage caused by it. To this end, messages of support and sympathy were addressed to the Government of Benin by all the progressive groups and States of the continent and the world. Signs of solidarity were even observed through donations, both in cash or kind, to allow the Benin State to face, somewhat, the damage. Meanwhile, the Western world adopted a sceptical attitude towards this aggression which was considered as a machination of the Marxist-militarist government to further harden the regime and eliminate its enemies from inside and outside. In the end, aggression strengthened the patriotism of the Beninese citizens who were beginning to grow weary of a regime whose real designs they were unaware of. While reinforcing the prestige of President Kérékou, it provided a standard for the revolution, a revolutionary model to be emulated by the population through the homage and remembrance of victims now considered martyrs of the revolution.

3- THE MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS: BETWEEN HOMAGE AND POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALISATION

3-1- National Recognition for Victims: Birth of the Martyrs' Memory Myth

The victims of the aggression of 16th January, 1977 were given the right to recognition, to a national homage commensurate with their sacrifice for the defense of the revolution. In its February 1st, 1977 issue, the editorialist of the *Ehuzu* newspaper, the Revolutionary Propaganda organ, wrote this: "*Independence, dignity and national sovereignty, the October road, the democratic and popular revolution, this is the just and noble cause of our laborious militant people since 26th October, 1972. It is in defense of these revolutionary ideals of our dear country, the People's Republic of Benin (RPB), in their determination to fight until the supreme sacrifice, victorious and worthy sons of the Fatherland and the Beninese revolution fell on the field of honor, on January 16th, 1977*"⁴⁴. Thus, in order to honor and immortalize the memory of those valiant "sons of the Fatherland and of the Revolution", the Central Committee of the People's Revolutionary Party of Benin (PRPB) decided to pay them a solemn homa-

⁴⁴ Ehuzu of 1st February 1977, n°323, Editorial «Eternal glory to our martyrs» p. 1.



ge, by organizing national funerals. On January 31st, 1977, at the Sports Hall of Cotonou, a funeral wake prayer was held in memory of the illustrious departed⁴⁵. On the following day, on the 1st of February, the national funeral was held. Meeting in the early hours of the morning at the Cotonou II sports stadium, where their mortal relic were exposed, the entire revolutionary galaxy, members of the Central Committee of the PRPB, RMG members, workers, militants, in a deep recollection, have paid a final and solemn homage to the worthy and valorous sons of the country, who died for the preservation of the country.

In his funeral oration on the occasion, the Head of State proclaimed that their memory will remain forever engraved in the memory of the Beninese revolutionary people whose worthy sons they have shown themselves to be. That's why a national mourning was declared from the 1st to the 6th of February in their honor. Throughout the national territory, flags have been lowered to half-mast. The Catholic Church seems not to be apart from the revolutionary fervor. On the eve of the end of the week of national mourning, on Saturday, 5th February, members of the government, activists, friends and relatives of the deceased attended a Mass in memory of the martyrs at Notre Dame de Cotonou Church. During this ceremony, jointly led by the apostolic pronoun Isseberg and Monsignor Adimou, archbishop of Cotonou, the sermon of the prelates did not evade the political demand of the moment. "*We must prepare ourselves now to consolidate our national independence,*" warned the prelate, Monsignor Adimou, after recalling the revolutionary directives contained in the funeral oration of the Head of State⁴⁶.

The national recognition for the victims was not limited to national homage and prayer during religious services. It was prolonged in the advantages associated with their profession. Thus, the first national conference of the PRPB gathered at the palace of the Presidency of the Republic from 8th to 16th August 1977, adopted important resolutions for them. The second point of these resolutions have disposed that: "*In consideration of the services rendered to the Beninese nation, they shall be advanced on an exceptional basis, each in his profession, and shall enjoy the advantages of all kinds connected with such advancement*"⁴⁷

What is said is done. The Council of Ministers of 21st September, 1977, under the proposal of the Head of State, adopted exceptional promotions

⁴⁵ Idem ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ehuzu of 7th February 77, n°327, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Ehuzu of Friday 17th August 1977, n°464, p. 6.



for the benefit of the martyrs⁴⁸. The Warrant Tossou Mizinnawo Mathieu was promoted to the rank of captain; Petty Officer 1st Class Alasane Kassim, ex-Constable Thoto Paulin, promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, and second-class soldier Yessoufou Lassissi. The former Customs officer N'TchaN'po Dabakpa Pascal is received to the rank of Lieutenant. As for civilian militants who had fallen under the mercenaries, the occasional worker Bambotché Abiodun Basil was promoted to the rank of 6th category specialist. In accordance with the principle of national recognition of martyrs, the Council adopted a draft order for the payment, from 1st January to 31st December 1977, of the increased salary or balance, and possibly family benefits, to those entitled of the illustrious disappeared. Beyond all national recognition, it is clear that the memory of the victims has become a means of propaganda in the hands of the revolutionary government. It was officially instituted

The ceremonial around the victims led to a process of crystallization to give rise to a cult of the memory of the dead. This has resulted in an institutionalization of this memory which very soon became for the Marxist government a means of controlling populations.

In the logic of institutionalizing the memory of the victims, the president Mathieu Kérékou sets the tone from his funeral oration of January 31st, 1977. Indeed, on the occasion of the awake prayer for the victims, the chief of the State presented them as "immortal martyrs" of Benin and Africa. By putting them in this historical register, he hoisted them on the pedestal of African heroes who fought the Western imperialist until the sacrifice of their life for the freedom of their people. Thus, the victims are designated as the faithful continuators of the works of Béhanzin, Bio Guera and Kaba, these national heroes of Benin. In addition, he conferred on them the epithet of "martyrs": from victims they became martyrs. This semantic change is not trivial. It prefigures an officialization of the memory of the victims by the political power. It was therefore a first step in this direction.

The second step in the process of legalizing the memory of the victims was the government's effort to elevate them to the national order of merit and to immortalize them. It is fitting that the first conference of the People Party of the Revolution of Benin (P.R.P.B.) decided in its first point that: "*all militants, civilian militants and militants in uniform victims of the imperialist aggression of Sunday, 16th January, 1977 are cited to the order of the nation with the attribution of the order*"⁴⁹. But this conference goes further, in point three and

⁴⁸ Ehuzu of 22 September 1977, n°489.

⁴⁹ L'ordre national du Bénin est un ordre honorifique béninois qui récompense le mérite personnel pour les bons et loyaux services rendus à la Nation.



four, by ordering that a monument be erected in memory of these immortal heroes and that the day of 16th January is declared national day of the martyrs of the Benin revolution⁵⁰.

Indeed, the culmination of the mechanism of immortalization of martyrs was the erection of the monument which was dedicated to them. Over an era of 12,500 km², bronze statues representing the martyr soldiers were made, with the help of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea. For President Kérékou, this monument *"will represent forever the memory of the martyrs of January 16th, 1977 and of all the heroes of our fatherland"*⁵¹. The monument was inaugurated on 16th January, 1979, on the occasion of the second anniversary of the aggression. Inaugural speech, lighting of the flame of the martyrs, *"so that their glorious and eternal memory remains alive among the revolutionary people of Benin"*, punctuated this ceremony of inauguration during which President Kérékou declared: *"Then from now on, Tuesday, 16th January, 1979, all the activists of the Revolution of Benin, generations present to the future generations, will respectfully bow to the foot of this imposing monument and historical masterpiece, a true symbol of victory, honor, grandeur and eternal glory of the invincible people of the People's Republic of Benin"*⁵².

To emphasize the importance of the memory of the martyrs as a revolutionary symbol, January 16th has retained as a national holiday at the expense of August 1st, the day of independence. Every year, it is organized on January 16th the day of the martyrs. The celebration includes the installation of revolutionary activists, heads of diplomatic and consular missions, central authorities, members of the government, members of the institutions of the Republic (Supreme Court, members of the Revolutionary National Committee (CNR), members of the PRPB, Central Committee). Then came the president who, after the military honors, made a troop review followed by the wreath laying and the lighting of the Martyrs' flame. The most important moment of the ceremony remains the speech of the head of State and the military and popular parade. After which a reception is offered to the mass organizations participating in the parade. A match of football match closed perfectly the day.

The cult of martyrs that resulted from the combined process of national recognition and the institutionalization of the memory of martyred victims will not be without impact on the populations. Worn by the power in place, the memory of martyrs met an almost total adherence within the people.

⁵⁰ Ehuzu of Friday 17th August, 1977, n°464, p. 6.

⁵¹ Ehuzu of 10th January 1979, n°823, p. 8.

⁵² Ehuzu of 17th January 1979, n°825.



3-2- The Memory of Martyrs in the People Consciousness

In its desire to propagate the new socialist ideology of the State among the people, the military government tried to arouse the memory of the martyrs in the collective consciousness. Thus, through various propaganda methods, the memory of the martyrs gradually became rooted in the popular consciousness. One of these methods was the oath⁵³ made in the name of the people to the martyrs. The regime tried skillfully to exploit the psychology of the mass. The oath made to the martyrs is a pact with the dead and constituted an alliance with the missing still present among the living, according to the African mentality. In this sense, this oath to the dead took its most sacred character. And the masses rarely betray the sworn faith⁵⁴.

This oath, on the one hand, by castigating international imperialism, "*local servants in his pay*" and "*traitors to the cause of fighting Africa*", on the other hand, celebrates the memory of the martyrs who "*went to the ultimate sacrifice*" in defending the noble and just cause of the Beninese people and its revolution "*by pouring*" their blood into the sacred struggle to defend the mistreated homeland "*He reiterates the heroism of these soldiers that he is*" in the glorious tradition of Béhanzin, Bio Guera, Kaba, and other intrepid heroes who were able to resist stubborn resistance to the foreign invader. "Above all, the oath invites the Beninese people to respectfully bow to the memory of the martyrs and to draw in their "*pain all the energy necessary to bring the revolutionary action to an even higher level*". Through it, the people swear to fight the enemy until his last retrenchment and to defend to the last drop of his blood the "*democratic and popular revolution*".

As a result, gradually, the memory of martyrs occupied an important place in the collective consciousness. It developed among the popular masses what should be called the movement of martyrs of 16th January. Folklore seized it and even in the most remote hamlets of the country, one sung the glory of the martyrs dead for the homeland. Each ethnic group tried to find in its own language a word to describe the mercenaries, enemies of the nation. In music, traditional and modern, songs have been composed and sung in honour of the martyrs⁵⁵. January 16, the anniversary of the aggression, is the perfect opportunity for demonstration for these popular groups or individuals who emulate the celebration of martyrdom.

⁵³ "People's Oath to the Martyrs", Ehuzu of Wednesday 2nd, February 1977, n°324, p.2.

⁵⁴ Glèlè (M.A.), *Naissance d'un Etat noir, L'évolution politique et constitutionnelle du Dahomey, de la colonisation à nos jours*, Coll. «Bibliothèque, de droit et sociologie africaine et malgache, t. IV, Paris, Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1969, p.92.

⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbuFMLTxcZo>: One Hour of Beninese Communist Music. The official modern music is performed by the National Gendarmerie Orchestra which sings the praises of the regime.



Among the youth, the memory of the martyrs had a poetic aspect. The lyricism to which it gave birth is particularly fruitful. This is how a hymn was dedicated to the martyrs. This work of an activist, Mr. Zoffoun, extols the bravery of the martyrs "*fallen gloriously on the field of honor*" braving "*the vile mercenaries*" to defend "*the sacred land of Benin*". While exhorting the population to "*never betray radiant way consecrated by their blood*," the anthem encouraged the people of Benin to fight until the final victory "*under the invincible banner of our party the PRPB*." Better still; the Central Committee of the Party adopted this hymn that sung every anniversary of the aggression.

In the same way, several poems were composed in honor of the martyrs. We will comment only one among these several works, the most engaged in our opinion. Released from the pen of Mr. El-Hadj Adamou Amzat, the poem entitled "*To the Martyrs of 16th January, 1977*"⁵⁶ is an ode to the glory of the victims. The author has not failed, as agreed henceforth, to rank among the national heroes the martyrs whom he describes as "*immortal fighters with magnanimous hearts*". It is in these terms that the poet called all the people, especially the youth to the revolutionary commitment as the martyrs:

*"Like you, we are inflexible militants
To who the mercenaries and the powers of money
Cannot make change Orientation
Neither Option nor revolutionary Determination
To build in the African land of BENIN
The Great and Gentle Socialist Society"*

The intention of Mr. El-Hadj Adamou Amzat for the martyrs goes beyond the national borders of Benin. He tried to universalize the model they represented by writing: "*You are the rainbow with universal refraction*".

Finally, the dramaturgy did not miss this literary festival whose martyrs are the subject. In Natitingou, the big northern city in the Atacora department, during the second anniversary of the aggression, the theatrical troupe "The Black Memories" presented a play entitled "*the aggression of 16th January*"⁵⁷ in a tribute to the martyrs. This theatrical play portrayed the circumstances of the aggression, highlighting the brilliant victory of the national army over the attackers. It ended with a tribute to the victims presented as martyrs and heroes of the revolution. Aware of the influence of the memory of martyrs within the population, the government made it an ideological battle horse to strengthen its socialist regime.

⁵⁶ Ehuzu of 17th December, 1979, n° 1058, p.4.

⁵⁷ Ehuzu of Thursday 18th January, 1979, n° 826, p.1.



3-2- Ideological Usage of Victims' Memory

Marxist power has found in the victims of 16th January, 1977 that it made martyrs a revolutionary ideal for its cause. During his funeral oration of 1stFebruary, the head of State, Mathieu Kérékou, designated the victims as "*the martyrs of the revolution*". This expression is indicative of the political usage that the memory of the victims will be used. For the military-Marxist regime, the soldiers fell precisely for the triumph of the socialist revolution. For it, serving the people and the revolution, it is indeed a glorious historical mission whose "*true activists of the Beninese revolution*"⁵⁸ have so much worth, and exemplary, that their merit is immortal. Symbol of patriotism, revolutionary banner, martyrs have become the model for the militant population of Benin.

It is just what President Kérékou called the people for in this speech addressed to the martyrs: "*Our militant comrades fallen on the field of honor and whose we commemorate memory represent, by the supreme sacrifice of their life, the symbol of the unwavering fidelity of all our militant and hard-working people to its historic commitments of 30th November, 1972, 30th November, 1974 and 30th November, 1975*"⁵⁹. In fact, the speech in honor of the victims of aggression was addressed to the people. In its publication of Monday, 7thFebruary, 1977, the editorialist of the *Ehuzu*⁶⁰ increases the mink of the head of State. He stated: "*their imperishable memory must consequently be transformed into each of us in revolutionary action of an ever higher level. And thanks to this powerful force based on the invincible principles of Marxism-Leninism we should be able to develop even more thoroughly the movement of the masses in progress*".

Similarly, during the inauguration of the monument of the martyrs, the president did not forget to invoke the "glorious and immortal memory" of the martyrs to live among the entire Beninese people, all the generations of Benin, draw daily, in their beautiful and total example of supreme sacrifice, their devotion, their courage to pursue victoriously and to perpetuate the revolutionary struggle⁶¹. Through the invocation of the memory of the martyrs, the objective is to put the people at the service of the revolution. Quite rightly, in his speech commemorating the second anniversary of the aggression, President Kérékou recommended that : "*The best way to honor and perpetuate the glorious memory of all our Immortal Heroes who bravely sacrificed their lives for this just, noble and sacred cause, is to pursue resolutely daily and*

⁵⁸ Ehuzu of 1st February, Op.cit

⁵⁹ Ehuzu of Wednesday 2nd February, 1977, n° 324, p.4. These three dates represent the major stages of the reforms initiated by the revolutionary power. They are called "the three glorious".

⁶⁰ Ehuzu of 7th February 1977, n°327, p.1.

⁶¹ Ehuzu of Wednesday 17th January 1979, n° 825.



tirelessly, the struggle for the correct and diligent execution of the four permanent tasks of our democratic and popular revolution, all tasks assigned to the entire Beninese nation, by the Central Committee of our vanguard Party, the Party of the Popular Revolution of Benin⁶²

The memory of the martyrs was also used to mobilise citizens for the benefit of the Party-State, the PRPB. The President's speech of 16th January, 1980 stated that *"this third anniversary must be an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to our vanguard Party and its Central Committee⁶³".* Also on the fifth anniversary of the aggression in 1982, he said that *"to honour forever the memory of our martyrs of 16th January, fallen under the criminal bullets of mercenaries, we must mobilise and organise ourselves more, under the banner of our vanguard Party, the People's Revolutionary Party of Benin, to carry out all the tasks involved in the irreversible development and total triumph of our Revolution. (...) It is at this price, and only at this price that we will succeed in breaking all the chains of the revanchist international imperialism to forever immortalise the memory of the martyrs of Sunday, 16th January, 1977⁶⁴»*

In addition, the memory of martyrs was also used for the moralization of public life. Therefore, it was recommended that *"every member of the Party, every agent of the State, every member of the mass organization and every citizen must commit himself to honor the memory of the martyrs of the revolution, by committing himself every day more importantly in the fight against corruption, liberalism and waste in order to make our institutions an effective weapon for the realization of the economic and social program ...⁶⁵".* As well as civilian and military citizens, unity of thought and revolutionary action was demanded in the name of the memory of the martyrs. That's at least what President Kérékou recommended on the second anniversary of the coup: *"To eternally honor your memory (of the martyrs) means for our heroic People's Armed Forces and for all the people of Benin, to redouble their vigilance in the consequent pursuit of the Revolution by setting themselves henceforth of war for the permanent defense of the homeland in danger⁶⁶".* This recommendation to the revolutionary vigilance in the name of the memory of the martyrs was reiterated in the message of the fifth anniversary: *"To remain faithful to the glorious memory of our Immortals Martyrs, every militant and every militant of the Beninese Revolution,*

⁶² The Beninese revolution, for its success, has set itself four permanent tasks, namely: 1-fight for the national production; - the struggle for national construction; - The struggle for ideological, patriotic and generalised pre-military formation; - the struggle for the defence of the Motherland and for the Revolution. Cf. Ehuzu of Wednesday 17th January, 1979, n°825, p. 6.

⁶³ Ehuzu of Tuesday 15th January 1980, n°1076, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Ehuzu of 15th January, 1982, n°1585, pp.1-4.

⁶⁵ Ehuzu of Friday, 17th January 1986, n°2664, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Ehuzu of 17th January, 1979, n°825, p.4.



*must improve every day more its social practice, redouble and strengthen its determination and its revolutionary vigilance, in order to detect in time and fan any attempts to question our great revolutionary movement of national liberation of October 26, 1972*⁶⁷ ". At last, the martyrs symbolize independence and national liberation, their recollection reminds "*forever the fierce will of the valiant fighting people of Benin to exercise in full its national rights over its lands, its wealth and in the International life*⁶⁸".

Apart from the anniversary celebrated every year and the lyricism of which the memory of the martyrs is the object, another aspect of the political recuperation of martyrs memory consists of a kind of pilgrimage which the head of the State makes at the burial sites of the victims. Every time he went to a part of the country from which one of the people concerned came, President Kérékou did not miss what was now a national tradition. As evidence, on Thursday, June 9, 1981, the President made a stop in the town of Comè where Captain Tossou Mathieu was buried to pay him a new homage. It is always an opportunity to make a speech in the direction of the consolidation of the revolution. "*The example of those who gave their lives for the freedom and dignity of all the people of Benin must convince us of the rightness of our struggle for real independence in all areas*"⁶⁹, he said. The same was true of the presidential tour in Sakété on Thursday, 20th August 1981, during which the president paid tribute to Bambotché Abiodun Basile, who was buried in the town where he visited the grave. The President called him a symbol of devotion, courage and sacrifice, while reassuring that the worthy sons of Benin will not forget him. "*May their example be followed for the defense and triumph of the noble ideals of our democratic and popular revolution*"⁷⁰ he concluded. Obviously, President Kérékou was well aware of the dividend that provides to himself and to his regime this cult of the memory of martyrs. That's why he never missed an opportunity to revive it.

Ultimately, the evocation of the memory of the martyrs responds to a paucity of republican virtues in favour of the revolution: loyalty model to follow, accomplishment of revolutionary tasks, national independence, mobilization around the Party for a unity of action and thought, citizen awake to denounce plots against the revolution, the fight against corruption, strengthening institutions, etc. As a result, the manipulation of the memory of the victims has strengthened the patriotism of Beninese citizens who were

⁶⁷ Ehuzu of Monday 18th January 1982, n°1586, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Idem.

⁶⁹ Ehuzu of 13th July 1981, n° 1456, p. 15.

⁷⁰ Ehuzu of 21st August 1981, n°1489, p. 13.



becoming tired of a regime whose they did not know the real objectives. While reinforcing the prestige of President Kérékou, the aggression of 16 January 1977, by its victims, provided a banner for the revolution, a revolutionary model for the population through the cult of the memory of martyrs.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, we note that several reasons were at the basis of the aggression of Benin on Sunday, 16th January of 1977. They are mainly of political order even if they present some social flaws. The Revolutionary Military Government is not fooled. Its spokesman expressed it in this way: "It is because of the important successes achieved by our people since it has embarked on the road of revolution which leads to socialism that the aggressiveness and the barbaric fury of international imperialism and its allies of internal reaction and exile, the perpetrators of the perfidious armed invasion of which our country was the victim of mercenaries on 16 January 1977.⁷¹ ». Assaulted, the regime did not fail to retaliate. The procrastination of the conspirators, but also and especially the decisive reply of the Beninese Armed Forces (FAB), aided by their counterparts from North Korea, made possible to overcome the mercenaries who were repulsed without being able to reach their objective. But the aggression, due to its violence, caused a lot of material and human damage. Its main victims who are the subject of this article have been sacred martyrs of the revolution and have benefited from this fact with all the honour and tributes due to such a rank. These martyrs, who can be deplored in several respects, have been of certain manner benefit to the military-Marxist regime. By losing their life to defend the nation, the martyrs revived the regime and provided it with an alibi for its hardening. Despite the damages giving to them and their family, the advantage of their death mainly went to the revolutionary regime which became galvanized, manipulating their memory as a key element of its propaganda.

Today the monument for martyrs still exists. It is even the most important monument to the dead of Benin. To this end, it receives all the official events of the country. As for the memory of the martyrs, it seems to be extinguished with the Marxist regime that carried it. Thanks to the National Conference held on February 1990, which enabled Benin to go back from the socialist to the capitalist regime, it was decided that the place of the martyrs should be designated the place of remembrance. Some argue that these martyrs are the martyrs of the revolution and not of Benin. Anyway, it cle-

⁷¹ Ehuzu of 20th January 1977, n°315, p. 1.



arly appears that at some moment in Benin's history, citizens have given their lives to defend their homeland in an aggression which looks like a colonial reconquest war. We can also say that the reactions which had enacted by the military-marxist government of Benin are the same with other countries' reactions against such attempts. For example, after the 15th July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the Turkish government has declared all dead citizens as martyrs. Definitively, in Bénin, the memory of the martyrs marked a period of patriotic fervor which strengthened national unity.



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