

BOOK REVIEW

Charles Piot with Kodjo Nicolas Batema. *The Fixer: Visa Lottery Chronicles*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019. 212 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$25.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1478003045.

Unlike other pathways to emigration to the United States, acquiring a Diversity Visa (DV) depends largely on luck. In fact, it is distributed through a lottery. In *The Fixer: Visa Lottery Chronicles*, anthropologist Charles Piot documents how Kodjo Nicolas Batema adds meaning and structure to this otherwise random process for his clients in Togo. Piot argues that the experiences of DV Lottery applicants in the small West African nation offer an important lens through which to understand the ordeals migrant-refugees have to go through to obtain the documents they need to “travel and reside in destination countries to which they are fleeing or have fled” (7).

As historians Benjamin Lawrance et al. (*Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees and the Making of Colonial Africa*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), Michelle Moyd (*Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa*, Ohio University Press, 2014), and others have shown, intermediaries played a powerful role in the making of the colonial state in Africa. Kodjo Nicolas Batema embodies the figure of the modern intermediary, operating as a “fixer,” whom Piot argues “lies at the heart of much of the West African migration story today” (9). From his tiny office in Togo’s capital, Lomé, Batema advises his clients from the beginning stage of applying for the Diversity Visa Lottery all the way through the interview process. With the help of Batema’s coaching, the visa winners expand, negotiate, and rearticulate relational systems to make emigration accessible for a greater number of people in their community (73). In the process, social institutions such as kinship and marriage assume new meanings and functions as the visa recipients devise creative solutions to pay for application fees, airfare, and additional costs associated with resettling in the United States. These types of arrangements, Piot points out, might be just as common in the U.S. as they are in Togo (175).

To highlight the dynamic relationship between Togolese people and the American embassy which oversees the visa application process, Piot introduces a dialectical opposition between the *Street* and the *Embassy* (25).

Drawing from the archetype of the clever underdog common in West African cosmologies, Piot characterizes Batema as a “modern-day trickster” who lives by his wits and cunning, outfoxing those who are stronger and more powerful (14). The dichotomy of street vs. embassy highlights the spaces that exist for Togolese people’s agency by revealing how the lottery winners navigate complex U.S. immigration policies and procedures.

This book has both personal and intellectual resonance for me, a Togolese exile who came to the United States through the U.S. Refugee Program. Togo has been under a military dictatorship for fifty-three years. This prolonged state of political crisis, combined with decades of economic decay, has forced a number of Togolese people to seek better opportunities abroad (43). For many, the Diversity Visa Lottery is their only path out of Togo. In the early 2000s, Togo had more visa lottery applications per capita than any other country in Africa (40). Consequently, readers might wonder about the unintended consequences that might result from some of the information revealed in the monograph.

Piot acknowledges and contends with the possible consequences that the monograph might have for Togolese people. In the introduction, he asks, “were my account to circulate widely, might it not inform, in ways that could harm West Africans, congressional debates about whether to continue the DV Lottery”? In short, he writes, “what is the ethical demand on the scholar-researcher in such an instance: speak or remain silent?” Piot takes these questions seriously, and after talking to African friends, scholars, and Batema himself, he ultimately decided to publish the book while taking steps to “anonymize cases and actors” (20).

“The Fixer” makes several important contributions to the scholarship on contemporary African migration. It highlights the ambiguities of citizenship in the post-Cold War context, the often fraught relationships between diaspora and homeland, and the push and pull factors of emigration in general. Scholars of Africa will appreciate how Piot combines his deep regional knowledge of Togo and his ethnographic expertise to highlight the larger global forces that shape the lives of migrant-refugees.

Still, the monograph’s theoretical conceptualization of Togolese people as inhabiting the “street” and the concomitant representation of people like Batema as “tricksters” requires further consideration. What would we find if we inverted this framework? What if the U.S. embassy officials were presented as the tricksters who constantly manipulate and undermine Togolese people’s efforts to extend their good fortune to their larger community?

Marius Kothor 

Yale University

New Haven, Connecticut

marius.kothor@yale.edu

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Lawrance, Benjamin N. 2003. "La Révolte Des Femmes: Economic Upheaval and the Gender of Political Authority in Lomé, Togo, 1931–33." *African Studies Review* 46 (1): 43–67. doi: [10.2307/1514980](https://doi.org/10.2307/1514980).
- Nesbitt, F. Njubi. 2002. "African Intellectuals in the Belly of the Beast: Migration, Identity, and the Politics of Exile." *African Issues* 30 (1): 70–75. doi: [10.1017/S1548450500006351](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1548450500006351).
- Sylvanus, Nina. 2013. "Chinese Devils, the Global Market, and the Declining Power of Togo's Nana-Benzenes." *African Studies Review* 56 (1): 65–80. doi: [10.1017/asr.2013.6](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.6).