The Fixer

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The Interview

The embassy interview is an applicant's moment of truth—when the consul decides whether to give the visa and when, if they imagine the slightest deception, they will put the applicant through the paces. The challenge for consuls is that they have little to draw on in accessing the truth about a candidate's identity beyond the documents in hand and the affect of the person standing before them. When a consul suspects malfeasance, they resort to trick questions and knowledge tests, the answers to which will decide whether an applicant receives their coveted papers.

The interview takes place at a window at the embassy, a separation wall between consul and applicant whose camera and fingerprinter capture the applicant's biometric features. With other hopefuls waiting in the wings, and the vice-consul chattering away with another would-be traveler at the adjacent window, and the futures of everyone in the room hanging in the balance, this is a space of considerable anticipation and anxiety. The words spoken here—their sincerity, their believability—mark the difference be-

tween an imagined life of abundance abroad and one of unending precarity at home.

SELF-FASHIONING

It should not be surprising that Kodjo spends a significant amount of time and energy grooming clients for the interview. Indeed, prepping clients beforehand has become something of a trademark, and many who are not his own applicants also find their way to his office, recommended by others. He coaches them not only about interview protocols—where to present their money and documents when they arrive at the embassy, what questions to expect from the consul—but also about interview demeanor and affect.

Kodjo typically begins by giving a client couple a week to study a list of questions the consuls might ask during the interview (to test their truthfulness): When were you born? When was your wife born? Where did you and she first meet? How many siblings does she have? Their names and professions? What marriage gifts did you give your wife and her family? Her favorite food? When did you get the baccalaureate? Kodjo then calls the couple to his office and drills them, staging a mock interview, taking one aside and peppering them with questions, then the other—all in an attempt to simulate the embassy interview.

After making sure they have mastered the standard questions, he counsels them in self-presentation and interview affect. Possessing an air of confidence and certainty about one's responses is important, but he insists they shouldn't respond too quickly or self-assuredly to each question. Otherwise the consul might imagine they've been coached. Some spontaneity is always good, even some hedging. When both members of a couple were asked separately how many people came to their wedding, the wife responded 150, while the husband paused and said "over 100," Kodjo thought the latter an ideal response. Because the husband was in the ballpark and perfect agreement between the two might have aroused suspicion, his hesitation, even the small inconsistency in answers, lent credibility.

Responses in the negative—"I don't know"—should be avoided at all cost. They undermine believability, and it's better to hedge and attempt an answer, even if it's slightly off. A seamstress client replied "no" when the consul asked whether she could embroider a baby truss, and she later failed the interview. Kodjo was certain that her negative (albeit honest) response was a key to her failure—because it raised doubt about her claim that she

was indeed a seamstress (in this case, she *was*). He also felt it likely that his client knew more about baby trusses than a US consul and, if pressed, could get away with fudging it.

On some topics Kodjo offers more substantive advice. At a pre-interview prep session I attended in summer 2012, he quizzed the "husband" on what marriage gifts he had given at their *fiancailles* (engagement). When the young man began with the money gift for the parents-in-law (50,000 CFA francs [$100]), Kodjo responded that he should open with the more important (and pricier) gifts for the bride—the Wax and Super Wax African print cloth, the head wraps and purses and shoes and underwear, the soft drinks and alcohol—and only later mention the (less important) monetary gift for the parents-in-law. Disappointed not only with this response but also with the entire interview, Kodjo then added that he had more work to do—that he "didn't yet have a passing grade."

Kodjo also counsels clients about what to wear to the interview. They should dress to their station: if university students, dress like students, the young man in slacks and a collared shirt, the woman in skirt and blouse or *complet* (three-piece African print), this latter his preference; professionals (schoolteachers, accountants) are instructed to dress as they would at work. But a dress code warning: because most of Kodjo's winners are male, with the woman's family financing the operation, she is usually of higher social standing and has more expensive clothes. Thus she needs to "dress down" for the interview, not wear high-end Wax that would betray their class difference and immediately tip off a Togolese interviewer. Another dead giveaway would be for the girl to pay the interview fee when they arrive at the embassy. It may be her money, but if the boy is the selectee, he's the presumed financier—and when in public, Togolese men pay for women, not the other way around.

Apparently not all interviewees have learned the secrets of self-fashioning. One of the consuls regaled me with stories she had heard of applicants that were so wide of the mark as to lose all credibility. Some spouses she had interviewed were from different ethnic groups and spoke no language in common. Some had dates on their application that didn't match those they'd given during the interview. Another had resided outside the country during the date of the couple's "wedding" in Lomé. Another was married to someone long deceased—though she tried to claim that he had died after she had registered for the lottery. Another couple showed the consul honeymoon photos with the Rocky Mountains in the background (claiming this was

where they spent time on their getaway), photos the consul could tell right away had been shot in a studio in Lomé or Cotonou.

Kodjo counsels couples to spend as much time together as possible before the interview. The better they know each other, the better they'll likely perform, both when presenting as a married couple and when responding to surprise questions about the other. But he also warns that they should resist any romantic involvement. "This is a business relationship first and foremost. Falling for each other might only complicate things [especially if it doesn't work out] and put all at risk."

When I stopped by his office in August 2010, he was with a female client who had come to complain that her visa spouse had been making unwanted advances. Things were now so strained between them that she had locked him out of her hotel room in Ouagadougou—the capital of Burkina Faso, where they had gone for the interview—and made him sit alone at the back of the bus on the twenty-four-hour trip back to Lomé. "The tension in the relationship could ruin things for them," Kodjo said. "It will make the embassy interview much more difficult. Consuls follow their instincts about visa applicants as much as their answers to questions. It will be apparent right away that this couple doesn't get along, which could prejudice the entire case."

In chasing down dance partners—matching winners to financiers' family members—Kodjo must also be mindful of body type and age. In a case in the late 2000s he had difficulty finding a match for a short male client and had to settle for a woman who was six inches taller. Not ideal, because Togolese frown on such mismatches—if anything, the male should be taller—but in this case the couple made it through. Togolese husbands are also expected to be older than their wives. A woman who is even a year or two older than her husband might set off alarm bells at the embassy—especially with Togolese staff.

Another example of the cultural common sense Kodjo must draw on in prepping couples for the interview: Few Togolese would marry if the man was not already employed. Thus Kodjo must invent a work identity for married clients, especially if they are university students. "If it was the US consul alone doing the interview, I wouldn't have to always think in Togolese terms, and my job would be so much easier," Kodjo offered. "There's so much about Togolese culture the consuls don't know. But since a Togolese interviewer will question my clients first, I have to always think as a Togolese."[1]

The cultural savvy Kodjo brings to his métier—the fact that he understands that cultural training is crucial to the task ahead: that couples need to be aware of dress code, marital dos and don'ts, the hierarchies of value in a system of marriage gifts—are something else that sets him apart from others. He has a keen anthropological sensibility, when it comes to not only Togolese but also US culture, and he delights in discovering differences between the two—which is no doubt one of the reasons I felt drawn to him from the beginning.

When I arrived an hour late for a session with him one afternoon, he chastised that I'd "become Togolese" before riffing on the euphemisms his compatriots use to buffer their habitual tardiness—"Je suis en chemin" (I'm on my way), "J'arrives" (I'm arriving), "Je suis proche" (I'm nearby), "Je suis devant le portail" (I'm at the front door [of your house])—all of which really mean to expect them sometime in the next few hours.

I witnessed a nice touch at a pre-embassy interview session at Kodjo's office in summer 2011. In discussing the soon-to-be-interviewing couple's wedding bands—for Kodjo, an obligatory purchase—the boy asked whether it would be worthwhile to have their names—("Sophie-Bruno")—engraved on the inside of the rings. Kodjo had never thought of that before but found it to be a brilliant idea. It was unlikely that the consul would ask to see their rings, he said, "but you never know. And if a consul did, it's the sort of unexpected gesture that could clinch an interview and ensure a successful outcome."

NOVELTY AS AUTHENTICITY

Kodjo is constantly on the lookout for, and indeed finds considerable pleasure in discovering, what he refers to as *nouveautées* (novelties). In 2006, when a friend returned to the States for a few weeks, he gave him money to purchase a digital camera for taking client photos for the online application—but he insisted the camera also have video capability. "Why video?" I asked. "Because the consuls like things that are new and different. They get tired of seeing the same wedding photos every time—the ones on the court or church steps, the photos from the party afterward, the honeymoon pictures. Because they've seen these many times before and are so similar from one couple to the next, the consuls will easily begin to doubt a couple's authenticity. But imagine a couple showing up with a video of their wedding or their honeymoon. No one's ever done that before, and I know the consul will fall for it."

Here, I realized, was not only a perceptive assessment of consul psychology, and one that was surely correct, but also an astute albeit counterintuitive insight into the way in which the category "authenticity" operates in this domain: namely, that the authentic (a true marriage, a real couple) might be known by its divergence from the norm, by its difference or uniqueness; thus, paradoxically, that novelty itself could be seen as authenticating, as sign of the real. But consider: authenticity for Euro-Americans is often figured—in culture, in art (Steiner 1994)—as synonymous with that which is old and culturally normative, not with the new and different. Not so for love, it seems. Real love is measured, at least in this instance, by its uniqueness and deviation from the norm.

Kodjo brings the same insight—the assumption that redundancy suggests in-authenticity, and its flip side, that an original (love) might be identified through its divergence from the norm—to the "first romance" stories he crafts for married couples heading to the embassy interview. Couples are often asked where they first met (and implicitly took a liking to one another). To prepare them for this question, but also to gain deeper familiarity with his clients, Kodjo asks them to narrate their life stories, and then suggests a first-encounter narrative. "If you leave it to them," he said,

> most will say they met on the beach in Lomé at one of the Sunday happenings. But that answer is too common and predictable. Since she's heard it so many times before, the consul will be suspicious or she'll quickly lose interest. I want my clients to hold the consul's attention, to have her imagine this couple falling in love, so that they become real for her. One way is to offer a story the consul's never heard before. All the better if it comes from what really happened to one of them, as their telling will make it more believable.

FIRST LOVE

"Here's one I came up with the other day for a couple going for the interview. When I was listening to the girl's life story, I asked how she met her first boyfriend. She said she was fifteen when he started coming to the house to tutor her older sister. They began flirting and eventually became sweethearts. I thought 'perfect'—this is how you will say you and your husband met. It's a fresh story, surely one the consul's never heard before."

And another first-encounter scenario, a more carefully hatched one—

deliberately located outside Lomé because the boy was from the north and the girl from the south[2]: "The couple was riding together in a *quinze places* [a fifteen-seat minivan], returning to Lomé from Kpalimé [two hours north, near the border with Ghana]. The bus broke down and everyone got out, waiting for a mechanic to arrive. Sitting by the side of the road, this couple began talking and struck up a friendship. When they returned to Lomé, they exchanged phone numbers and began seeing each other."

And another, this one derived from the girl's everyday life: "She sold *sotabi* [distilled palm wine] in the market for her mother on Sundays. One day, a handsome boy walked by and ordered a drink. He returned the next week and they flirted. Soon they were seeing each other and eventually got married."

While unique, the stories must be fully believable: "natural" and "quotidian," Kodjo opined. The advantage of drawing on real life experience is not only that the telling will be more credible but also that if the consul suddenly decides to veer into uncharted territory—to ask about selling palm wine in the market—the girl will be able to respond with ease.

Kodjo offered an intriguing observation about the Lomé consul in charge in 2016: this consul also liked to ask a couple where they first met—but when both parties were standing before him, not after separating them. Kodjo's interpretation: the consul's query was not so much instrumental (helping him decide whether the couple was being truthful by seeing whether they gave the same answers) as anthropological (he was curious about Togolese cultural life and took the opportunity to learn more). A perception on Kodjo's part that was both charming and tactical.

In 2015 things tightened up at the embassy in Lomé, and Kodjo decided to send a few of his couples to interview in Abidjan. Each interview began with the consul asking why they were living in Cote d'Ivoire, a question Kodjo had anticipated. Applying first principles—that differences matter—he invented a slightly different arrival narrative for each. One woman said her husband had come to live with family there, and that she had followed him after passing her exams back in Lomé. Another couple had been invited by the husband's aunt. A third moved there just before the April presidential elections in Togo to escape the violence that elections often bring, and now, living back in postelection Lomé, had returned to Abidjan for the interview because that was where they had first applied.

LE BARBU

Kodjo also warns couples about the Togolese man, *le barbu* (the bearded one), who works in the embassy's fraud unit and conducts preliminary interviews, during which, in the case of a pop-up, he attempts to detect real from fake couples. He's "very smart," one of Kodjo's clients commented, "and he'll try to rattle you. He likes to get up and pace around the room, then he leaves and returns to say that your wife told him something different—just to see how you'll react. Since he's Togolese, he knows all our secrets. *Il est dur* [he's a tough one]."[3]

Kodjo was particularly upset at the way an inept client fell into the trap of le barbu in summer 2009, despite prior warnings. At one point during the interview, the hirsute interrogator left the room, then returned and told the young man that he had just spoken to his wife and that she had revealed that theirs was not a real marriage. The bearded one offered the boy an out, however: if he told the truth, he would give him the visa, while denying his "wife" because he, not she, was the lottery winner—at which point the boy promptly spilled the beans. When they went before the consul she confronted the two of them with their different stories—the wife had not in fact said theirs was a fake marriage, insisting under intense pressure that it was real—and the boy realized he'd been had. This client showed up in tears at Kodjo's office two days later, saying he wanted to bring charges against the bearded one for "lying and entrapment." But Kodjo had little sympathy. He felt that he had warned the client in advance of precisely this mode of hard-nosed interrogation and told him he had no one to blame but himself.

The bearded one was also known for asking an interviewee to describe the apartment where he and his wife live—the placement of furniture, the color of the curtains, the brand of the television or electric fan—and mid-interview to ask whether they have the keys so that they might do a site visit. Anticipating such, Kodjo moves his couples into a room or apartment—often that of a family member—a month before the interview. He makes sure the furniture conforms to that of newlyweds with limited means and hangs family and honeymoon photos of the couple on the walls. He also tours the neighborhood to alert neighbors that someone from the embassy might show up to ask questions about the couple.

On one such occasion—though this after, not during, the interview—the other member of the fraud unit, a young Togolese woman, tried to visit the apartment of an interviewing couple, but she arrived just after a heavy rain

and her small car was unable to traverse a mini-lake in front of the house. A neighborhood resident reported that she returned an hour later in one of the embassy's four-wheel-drive vehicles. This time she was able to navigate the water and, once on the other side, toured the neighborhood, where she received confirmation from residents that the couple had long-standing residence. They got their visas.[4]

Another house visit didn't go so well for a couple. Entering the courtyard of the apartment complex where the winner and her husband claimed they were living, the embassy's fraud officer greeted a woman tending a charcoal fire and asked where they might find the husband of the one she was with—to which the surprised woman responded that the girl "wasn't married." Visa denied.[5]

THE RIGHT TO CITIZENSHIP

As final encouragement before they go for the interview, Kodjo tells his clients that, having been selected in the lottery, they have a right to their visa and to US citizenship, and that no one can take it away. If they stand strong and show courage, they will get their visas.

A fascinating moment for me occurred at such a pre-interview pep talk in June 2011. Kodjo finished by telling the couple that they, not the consul, held the "truth" about their case. The embassy knew nothing about them, he said, except what was written on their forms and what they would say during the interview. "The entire case is in your hands." This view that the world they constructed and performed in words constituted the truth about their world—that no external proof existed, nothing outside of or beyond the documents, that all was relative to that which they performed in words and affect—struck me as flawless in its logic and fully in step with postcolonial West African times, and as representing sage advice for the challenge ahead.

This moment also helped make sense of a puzzling statement by Kodjo several years earlier. In 2005, when the embassy sensed, perhaps for the first time, that there was hustling going on around the lottery, the ambassador went on Togolese television to warn against visa fraud and to say that going forward the consulate would assume that all who came for the DV interview were lying and fabricating identities, and that the burden was on the interviewee to prove that they weren't. Despite my own astonishment at this presumption—that an interviewee might be considered a fraudster until proven innocent—Kodjo was positively pleased with the ambassador's

statement, saying that it confirmed what he had assumed about the process all along and played to his strength: namely, that it was the responsibility of those being interviewed to present all the right "proof-of" papers—high school diploma, marriage certificate, papers of professional affiliation, and so on—and that if they did they would be granted visas. Thus, too, that the consulate would have to catch the couple in a lie or an inconsistency for them to be denied. In which case, it is up to Kodjo to prepare an airtight case, for which he is famous: to present a married couple with a perfectly believable and consistent story and documents to match. "If that's their charge, I should win every time," he added.

LOCAL INTELLIGENCE

Kodjo has eyes and ears all over Lomé. The judge who marries his clients lets him know when one of the consulate's fraud officers shows up to check winners' marriages in the court registry. Residents he puts on notice in the neighborhoods where his clients "live" also inform him if someone from the embassy shows up to ask questions. (The report of the consulate's fraud officer trading her small car for the embassy's all-terrain vehicle came from a neighborhood resident.) His own clients, and those of other visa brokers, are in and out of his office all day long, and DV chatter is constant. Other fixers get in touch when they have tips to pass on or when seeking advice. The anthropologist who interviews people inside the embassy is also a potential source of information. As mentioned earlier, Kodjo once asked whether I knew when a particularly difficult consul was going on vacation, so that he could send clients to interview when the more visa-friendly vice-consul was minding the shop. There's also the Lomé rumor mill, which is constantly pumping out information about the lottery.

Most of Kodjo's most important intel comes from interrogating clients after the embassy interview. When they leave the embassy they typically go directly to his office for a debriefing. Which consul interviewed you—a man or woman? young or old? What did they ask? How did you respond? Were they aggressive or nice? How was their French? Did you meet with the bearded one? What did they tell you at the end of the interview? All this is not only for his own edification but also to calm their nerves and help them read the signs, for he is able to tell better than they whether it was a normal interview or whether there were flash points—and whether they might expect the visa.

A couple fresh from the interview who came by his office in 2011 assumed they'd failed because the form handed to them at the end of the interview said, "This office regrets to inform you that it is unable to issue a visa to you because you have been found ineligible to receive a visa under the following section(s) of the Immigration and Nationality Act." Certainly a reasonable inference on their part. But Kodjo assured them that was the form given to all interviewees and that the phrasing simply meant that the embassy had to check further the couple's documents before proceeding. (They received their visas.)

Kodjo is sometimes also called on to correct misinformation given by the embassy to clients. In 2013 a man who had declared his wife and children on the application but went solo for the interview received his visa. He was admonished by the consul that if he wanted visas for the rest of the family, he would have to bring them to the consulate by August 30—only a few weeks later—and pay their interview fees. Distraught over how he might find so much money in such a short time, he consulted Kodjo, who immediately recognized that the embassy was in error, that the date was actually the end of September, not August. This additional month gave the man enough of a window to raise the necessary cash. But note that Kodjo is here performing embassy business—and apparently knows the rules better than some of his embassy counterparts.

CONSULAR TEMPORALITIES

Kodjo pays special attention to two consular cycles. One is that of the interview season at the embassy, which runs from October to October. After being selected in the May lottery (for applications submitted the previous October), winners with low case numbers begin interviewing in October. The interview period remains open for a full year, moving through those with low case numbers first, then on to those with higher numbers, before closing at the end of the following September.

Kodjo feels it matters when a couple interviews because their chances are high at the beginning and the end but more challenging in the middle. With a low case number (in the first five thousand), a couple can interview early (November–April) and is likely to get through, even a pop-up. At the end of the consular year—in August–September—chances are also good because end-of-the-year backlog (and a State Department rule that all lottery visas must be issued by the last day of September) means that dossiers tend not to

receive the same level of scrutiny as those scheduled for May–August. He may ask them to defer until early September, especially when he has a couple he's unsure of (one that isn't too sharp, one he thinks might buckle under consular scrutiny), in the hopes of sneaking them through.

While this strategy—waiting until September—worked for him for several years, things turned in 2013. Cases that piled up at the end went untreated and applicants were never called to fetch their passports. After waiting several months, these applicants returned to retrieve their passports and were greeted at the embassy with a simple, crushing "je suis désolé" (I'm sorry), without further explanation. But then things changed back again in 2014, with all cases vetted by the end of October, which Kodjo attributed to the arrival of a new set of consuls.

The other periodicity is that of the two-year rotation of individual consuls as they move through their posting, and the way in which they change over time as they grow into and out of their jobs. "Consuls are often more sympathetic at the start of their terms, giving out many visas," Kodjo claims. "Then they get harder, and some, like Brown and Decker, become mean because they think all are trying to scam them. When that happens few will get their visas, whether they're legitimate or not. But there are exceptions; Maria Espinoza was consistent all the way through, and so was Mr. Ball." "So you'd rather send someone early in a consul's term?" I asked. "Yes, that's the best time."

Kodjo pays acute attention to this consular ebb and flow, sometimes adapting cases midstream. In summer 2011 he had several interviews scheduled for Cotonou, but things tightened up there, and his intel suggested that the consul was at the end of his term. Kodjo quickly asked clients to request a transfer of their files to Lomé, giving as the reason that they had moved back home. He'd never done this before mid-case, but both times the strategy worked.

IMPROVISING STRATEGY

A string of Kodjo's cases in the late 2000s presented new challenges and required special attention. This because more and more winners were bringing pop-up partners to the interview, and the consulate was cracking down on marriages it assumed were fraudulent.

With this tightening at the embassy, Kodjo decided that instead of sending both spouses for the interview, he would try the winner alone—not only

to reduce the chance of detection presented by interviewing one spouse in isolation from the other but also to break the monotony of the parade of couples before the consul. This went against embassy rules, however, which mandated that all those listed on the application (winner, spouse, children) must present themselves at the embassy on the day of the interview.[6] The excuse Kodjo invented for his client was that his sponsor in the States had fallen on hard times and could only host a single person; Kodjo hoped that a sympathetic consul might make an exception. The consul took the bait but nevertheless asked whether the applicant could provide proof of his claim—for which Kodjo produced an email, appropriately backdated, from the States-side host stating that he was unable to care for the interviewee's wife right now. The consul considered this adequate and awarded him the visa. (Within a few hours, word was out on the street that Kodjo's client had succeeded in going through solo, with calls pouring in asking what was his "secret.")

While successful, this small triumph, this go-it-alone strategy, also opened a new set of challenges. Most critically, Kodjo had to convince a financier in the States—who had already paid a significant sum of money, including Kodjo's service fee—that it was in their interest to forgo a visa for their family member for the short-term and to trust that the winner would later put in the request to bring that family member over. Further, they had to think ahead to what might be asked of them at the time of the request (two to three years down the road). Surely the consul would request all the same proof-of-marriage documentation and any other evidence that might prove their relationship was real. Kodjo thus instructed the young man who went through solo to send periodically from the US emails to his "wife" with affectionate messages: "*Chérie* I've arrived . . . I miss you terribly," "I think of you every day and want you by my side. I am looking for work so that I can buy you a plane ticket." The winner also sent money to his wife via Western Union, with instructions to archive all receipts—a move that Kodjo thought would constitute particularly strong proof that their marriage was real.

Again, the tactic worked. After two years, the husband petitioned the embassy and his wife was granted a visa. Even Kodjo was surprised at the rapidity with which she acquired hers and thought it might have been influenced by the fact that the man had filed his request after enlisting in the US Army.

While the strategy of sending a spouse solo worked for Kodjo that time, it proved more troublesome in a second case in 2008, one in which he also

thought it wiser to send only the man for the interview (but further complicated by the fact that he thought the girl was not quick on her feet and would have a hard time handling trick questions at the interview, even in easier times). The States-side financier was distrustful from the start, suspecting that Kodjo might be trying to hustle them by selling the file she'd already purchased to another. (Her worry was not entirely baseless, as Lomé's sidewalk radio that summer was filled with rumors of just such sale and resale. Indeed, as described in more detail in chapter 4, Kodjo himself had detected several false winners' letters.) After several trans-Atlantic phone calls, the financier remained unconvinced and wanted Kodjo to speak further with "family members" in Lomé. Kodjo agreed and three men showed up at his office one afternoon, "brothers" of the young woman, to discuss their sister's case. After two hours Kodjo seemed to win them over, and they told him he seemed to have their sister's best interests in mind and that sending his client alone for the interview made the most sense. Just then, a friend of Kodjo's walked in and recognized one of the visitors as an undercover officer—at which point the latter admitted that he had been hired by the family to investigate whether Kodjo was trying to scam them. In leaving, he reiterated that he hadn't detected any wrongdoing on Kodjo's part.[7]

Despite this small triumph for Kodjo, the financier in the States nevertheless forced Kodjo's hand and insisted that both husband and wife (winner and beneficiary) go for the interview together; she was able to get her way because it was her money financing the interview. Needless to say, they failed. When I saw him the next day, Kodjo felt particularly badly for the winner, who, he said, had a right to his visa and was only denied because of the imprudent actions of another.

During 2007–2008 Kodjo had to attend to an additional change to embassy protocol. Because of the high rate of perceived marriage fraud, the consulate announced that it was closing the window on adding a spouse to a dossier after the initial application. Kodjo knew this went against DV rules and against the spirit of American ideas about marriage—that you might fall in love and marry at any time—but he adjusted to this change by continuing to add spouses after the initial application and backdating their marriages to the small window between the original application and receipt of the letter from the State Department announcing their selection. Again he was successful, and all of his clients went through that year.

To draw out a theme that has been implicit, culture is in play throughout the interview process, informing perceptions on both sides and crucially influencing those decisions made by consuls about applicants. This is true not only in the more obvious sense that consuls need to familiarize themselves with unfamiliar cultural practices and situations—Togolese marriage protocols and gifting practices, West African school and workplace habits—but also in more subtle ways.

One of the Lomé consuls told me it took her several months to realize that when a Togolese woman responded to a question by avoiding eye contact, it didn't mean she was hiding something but instead that she was looking away out of respect. This consul also said it took time on the job to learn that one of the State Department's stock questions used to root out fraudsters (posed first to one spouse, then the other)—"What side of the bed do you sleep on?"—made little sense to Togolese. They don't divide the bed the same way every night as do (many) middle-class Americans.

Another commonly asked question that doesn't translate: "What is your spouse's favorite color?" Togolese generally don't have a favorite color. When I've asked friends in Lomé, they say they appreciate many colors, and they would likely respond to such a question with whatever color they are wearing that day. ("Today, I have a smart red outfit on and my preferred color is red; yesterday, I wore a blue shirt that I also like . . .")

But culture informs consular practice in another way as well—a cultural goes-without-saying, largely inchoate and unacknowledged, that lies at the heart of consular reason and is decisive in determining visa outcomes: whether one has been honest or truthful on the application. Before conducting this research I would not have identified not lying as a core American value alongside the usual suspects—individualism, autonomy, self-reliance, freedom, work ethic, innovation, entrepreneurialism. But now, at least in the context of determining future citizenship at the consulates, truth-telling seems to me as important as, if not more important than, other cardinal values. And more important than whether a candidate fulfills the qualifications satisfying specific work or educational criteria decided upon by Congress when it established the DV Lottery.

To wit, during the visa lottery process, if you lie about your identity on the application, you're out. If you lie during the interview, you're out. If you

falsify a document, you're out. If you answer a question differently than your spouse—the presumption being that you're lying about your relationship—you're out. And if you fibbed once, it's assumed you'll do it again: One lie and you're out. No second chances, no citizenship.

I asked one of the consuls whether a couple I know who tried to game the DV Lottery one year (with both husband and wife applying under a false identity) but then applied the following year as themselves—a true case, described in more detail in chapter 3—could be forgiven for their prior indiscretion? "That would be hard, I don't think so," he replied.

"But why?" I pressed. "They're a real couple, legitimately married for many years, and only assumed the identity of another the first time because they thought that would be their one chance at a visa. Little did they know that the wife would be selected the following year." "If they lied the first time," he replied, "you imagine that they could be lying again. It's hard to ever again trust someone after they've lied to you." (So whether you can trust someone [not to lie] is now the index to becoming a citizen? And what of all those US tax evaders? What of Donald Trump?)

But what if we think of lying less as moral failing and more as practical reason? Namely, that people might deploy untruths about themselves for pragmatic reasons: to be able to pay the interview fee, because they want to make a better life for their family, because they know that acquiring a visa might be the difference between life and death. Such is life today in the postcolony, with bare survival constantly in question.[8]

Note, too, that for Togolese, telling small lies or diversionary tales is often a way of protecting oneself and one's secrets. When a Togolese friend traveled to the US to visit family, she told no one about her trip except her husband and children—none of her close friends, no one at work—only mentioning to her fellow employees the day before leaving that she "would be away for a while." One of Kodjo's winners made him swear that he would not tell the winner's brother, who lived around the corner from Kodjo's office and stopped in daily, that he had been selected in the lottery, cooking up an elaborate ruse as to why he was spending so much time in Kodjo's office.

When I have asked Togolese why they feel compelled to conceal, to protect secrets, they've responded that they're worried about jealousy and spiritual attack, that they don't want others to imperil their journey. Among other things, this sensibility strikes me as a way of carefully marshalling

one's energies for the trip ahead, of cultivating one's preparedness and avoiding having to spend energy on the pettiness and jealousy of others. But all this requires the telling of partial truths.

A Togolese friend likes to chastise me for revealing things about myself or others that she considers best left unsaid. "You Americans reveal too much," she says. "When you tell others too much about yourself, it usually comes back to harm you." Togolese are masters of indirection, of circumlocution, the feint, the small lie. They answer potentially invasive questions with "I don't know," "They didn't tell me," "I'm going somewhere," as a way of safeguarding secrets and protecting self.

Indeed, I would venture to say that the value Americans place on truth-telling is matched by the value Togolese place on its opposite: artful deception. But if speaking indirectly is discursive norm among Togolese, how to judge the moral fiber of someone during an interview when, for US consuls, its opposite—transparency/honesty—is of paramount value?

My point here is not that consuls should check all of their cultural baggage at the door and open up the DV Lottery to every confidence trick and identity fabricator. As someone born and bred in the US, I understand all too well that deep cultural wellspring from whence their marching orders come. Just scratch the surface of the national psyche: not only is not telling a lie one of the ten commandments, but this verity also gets recited, mantra-like, as if the moral core of two of our most famous presidents, George "I cannot tell a lie" Washington and "Honest Abe" Lincoln.

But we do need to understand that when Togolese visa lottery applicants invent false identities, or engage in faux marriages, or tell small lies at the interview, it is not out of some great moral failing. It is often for the most pragmatic of reasons—to pay the bills, to feed a family, to conjure a future out of a precarious present—*but also perhaps because they want US citizenship too much*. Moreover, many have told me that once on the other side—under different circumstances, when they are able to put bread on the table—they will ruthlessly follow the laws of the land if for no other reason than that they know they have to safeguard their cherished papers and avoid deportation at all cost.

Do we really want citizenship tests to rely more on truth-telling than on someone's job readiness, or their work ethic, or on those other core values that animate the American spirit? I know someone who's as smart as they come, the most creative of entrepreneurs, an innovator by nature, rule-

respecting in the extreme—in short, possessing all the qualities of Americanness pure. But because Kodjo helps Togolese seek a better life abroad, and occasionally to falsify their papers in order to do so, he'll never get the visa or the citizenship that he covets more than anything else. Something in this picture doesn't quite add up.