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La République dynastique du Gabon

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The Dynastic Republic of Gabon

A Dynastic Republic?

In their brilliant eyewitness study on the last Gabonese presidential elections of 2016, published that year in *Politique africaine*, the cultural anthropologist Alice Aterianus-Owanga and her political scientist colleague Mathilde Debain made several passing references to dynastic style. They reported for example how President Ali Bongo after the death of his father—and 42-year president—Omar Bongo in July 2009, had “tried to break with an image of perpetuation of dynastic power by presenting himself as the candidate of youth and change” (Aterianus-Owanga & Debain 2016: 159). They described how the publication of investigative journalist Pierre Péan’s (2014) *Nouvelles affaires africaines* had cast suspicion on the validity of Ali Bongo’s birth certificate and thus his legitimacy as eldest son of the former president—a private family matter which became a public controversy in the presidential campaign (Aterianus-Owanga & Debain 2016: 161). They quoted Jean Ping’s 2016 speech announcing his candidacy for the presidency in which he decried the regime as “a dictatorship pure and simple in the hands of a family and clan” (*ibid.*: 166). They said that his unified opposition candidacy “comforted the Gabonese with an idea that a system of government besides the Bongo family was in sight” (*ibid.*: 170)—though Ping was the father of two children with Ali’s half-sister Pascaline and thus was a clan member himself (*ibid.*: 169). They told how it was in Haut-Ogooué—“the region of the family of Omar Bongo”—that massive voter fraud occurred which gave him his narrow victory (*ibid.*: 173), results that later were legitimated by the President of the Constitutional Council Marie-Madeleine Mborantsuo, a former mistress of his late father, and mother of two of his half-brothers (*ibid.*: 176), and who is, therefore, also a member of the president’s clan.

All in the family? Political kinship? References to “dynasty” are a familiar sight in the literature on Africa, with nepotism, internal family struggles, and succession being woven into the narratives of recent elections, almost as if

they needed no explanation, as if “dynastic rule” had already been explained by anthropological or sociological or political science theories, and was now simply a descriptive category to be employed, a commonplace political fact? Dynastic rule is not a specifically African phenomenon. One quarter of the countries around the world today have some kind a dynast as head of state or government (Fig. 1).

What is a dynasty? The word derives from *dynasteia* [Gk. “lordship”]. It denotes a succession of rulers who come from the same family. This conceptualization makes dynasty a subset of family, which is itself a subset of kinship (thus a subject proper to anthropology). But it also denotes a historical era (thus a subject proper to history), as well as being a news topic (thus a subject of journalism) and type of regime (thus a subject of political science). There is no interdisciplinary agreement on what should or should not be counted as a dynasty. I have chosen to follow the Dutch historian Jeroen Duindam (2016: 12) whose remarkable thousand-year historical survey of dynasties around the world (between 1300 and 1800) provides a broad enough definition of the term to include polities as various as chiefdoms, kingdoms, empires, and even dynastic republics: “Any polity governed by a ruler surrounded by relatives and a body of servant qualifies.”

As a historian, he did not attempt to “theorize” about dynastic rule, but he did identify seven common features to all dynasties around the world: (1) they emerged as an extension of kinship, when one clan or lineage imposed its hierarchical supremacy upon other descent groups, (2) hereditary succession was never universal, but (3) a ruler’s kin were always close to power, and (4) were served by a household of retainers and advisors, (5) in a palace which was a focal point of ritual and redistribution, (6) with a single figure of the monarch standing at the heart of the polity, governing as well as representing a totem, (7) roles which severely limited his freedom and complicated his personal relationships (*ibid.*: 4-5). He included many examples of traditional African kingship which he felt help to break down the false conceptual barriers dividing regions and cultures. “Why compare the sophisticated Chinese court, with its longstanding literary tradition, elaborate government apparatus, and exceptional scale, to a minor African polity,” he asks, “with small, non-literate populations?” (*ibid.*: 13). Because their divergent practices can be seen as part of a “common pattern.” To Duindam, the presence of dynasties today is really no surprise, for “dynastic power can be seen as a relatively constant factor in a changing world” (*ibid.*: 318).

Duindam’s findings are noteworthy because, despite its widespread existence, there is at present no scientific theory of “dynastic rule” *per se*. There are, of course, other theories used to interpret and explain dynastic rule

in Africa. The theory of “personal rule” by Jackson and Rosberg (1982) is one of them, a system in which the rivalries and struggles of powerful and wilful men, rather than impersonal institutions, are fundamental in shaping political life. Another highly influential theory is “neopatrimonialism,” which can explain this otherwise incomprehensible mixture of tradition and modernity in African states. Neopatrimonialism denotes a system whereby rulers use state resources for personal benefit and to secure the loyalty of clients in the general population. It is central to any teaching and conceptualisation of contemporary African politics. The term was first coined by Shmuel Eisenstadt (1973). It has been used in the literature on the “big man” in Kenya (Médard 1982) on “third world politics” (Clapham 1985) and “clientism” (Bratton & Van de Walle 1994). A recently edited volume by Bach and Gazibo (2012) has sampled clientelism (Van de Walle 2012), the rise of “godfatherism” in Nigeria (Albin-Lackey 2012), “warlordism” in Liberia (Bøås & Jennings 2012) and the function of a postcolonial state on a day-to-day basis in Niger (Tidjani Alou 2012) through the lens of neopatrimonialism.

While such neopatrimonial studies do offer a perfectly satisfying theoretical lens through which to see clan-based, third-world, authoritarian regimes, there is still something about dynastic style that escapes them. All dynastic republics may be neopatrimonial, but not all neopatrimonial regimes are dynastic. In order to explain the significance of this qualification, consider how all present-day “dynastic republics” (Fig. 1) display a common five-stage pattern. First, the traditional system of government, which had ruled the territory before, is destroyed. Second, a republic is established. Third, a founder captures state power through control of the military or security apparatus. Fourth, he then creates a political regime of personal rule. Fifth, a member of his family succeeds him to power. Beyond these observations it is difficult to generalize, for each country is unique, each power “configuration” (Elias 1991: 12) is a distinct network of social relations, each kinship group is culturally emic, and each political leader idiosyncratic. (Thus the need for historical-biographical method.)

It is this fifth stage—dynastic succession—which makes dynastic style a special subset of neopatrimonial rule. Most neopatrimonial rulers fail to transfer state power to their children. In Africa, rulers may capture state power and share it with their family members patrimonially. But only three have, so far, have managed to successfully transfer power to a second generation of their family (DRC, Gabon, and Togo) with one having power seized violently by a second generation clansman (Equatorial Guinea). And since such quasi-dynastic succession also occurs in democratic republics (Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, São Tomé) as well as in democratic “constitutional” monarchies

FIG. 1.— DYNASTIC HEADS OF STATE OR GOVERNMENT BY REGION & REGIME TYPE*

	Monarchy		Republic	
	Authoritarian Regime/ “Absolute Monarchy”	Democratic Regime/ “Constitutional Monarchy”	Authoritarian Regime/ “Dynastic Republic”	Democratic Regime/ “Political Family”
Europe	Liechtenstein	Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Monaco, Norway, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK		Bosnia
Middle East/ North Africa	Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE	Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco,	Syria	Lebanon
Sub-Saharan Africa	Eswatini [Swaziland]	Lesotho	Congo-Kinshasa Equatorial Guinea Gabon, Togo	Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, São Tomé
Asia	Brunei, Thailand	Bhutan, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia	Azerbaijan, North Korea Singapore	Bangladesh, Mauritius
Oceania		<i>Australia, New Guinea New Zealand, Samoa, Solomon Is. Tivatu, Tonga**</i>		Palau
Americas		<i>Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Canada, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, St. Vincent**</i>	Cuba†	Canada

* In 2018, over one quarter of all the states in the international system are ruled by family dynasties. Some are ruled by constitutional monarchs (including the fourteen Commonwealth Realms in which Queen Elizabeth II serves as the titular head of state) others by monarchs absolute. Some are governed by popular political families who come to office through democratic elections, others by autocrats who seem to have been born to rule in “dynastic republics.”

** *The Commonwealth Realms where Queen Elizabeth II is Head of State.*

† Raul Castro stepped down from the presidency on 19 April 2018.

(Lesotho), one should not simply reduce it to being a mere symptom of authoritarianism. It has its own style, with its own set of rules. In particular, the development of democratic “political families” in which several members related by blood or marriage are involved in democratic elections, puts the idea of neopatrimonialism as a necessary condition of dynastic style to the test (Yates 2016).

A family capturing state power in a republic seems the greatest expression of dynastic style. This is why this article will explore a case study “dynastic republic,” the Bongo family of Gabon, through the methodological lens of biography and family history, an approach to social science that has been championed by Robert Miller (2000) as a distinctive way of conceptualizing social activity. Biographical method may be useful to African studies because of the way it breaks out of disciplinary constraints which often prevent researchers from understanding one another’s concepts and terminology. A life is something everyone can understand. Those who want to move away from present-oriented journalistic “portraits” of rulers in power (one point in time) have been led to adopt this perspective, which covers whole lives or “biographies” (longitudinal time-series analysis), or studies of whole families across several generations (Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Bertaux 1995; Simeoni & Diani 1995).

The qualitative data on which this article will rely comes from a variety of sources. First are authorized biographies provided by the Bongo regime, being either interviews repackaged as autobiographies (Bongo 2001) or journalistic sketches (Hugeux 2014). Second, to balance these authorized versions, are more critical journalistic portraits, often painted with poisoned pens (Péan 1983, 2014; Otsemi 2007; Ndoutoumi-Eyi 2013; Glaser 2014). Third are works of national historiography (Barnes 1992; Gardinier & Yates 2006; N’Nah 2006; Ndombet 2009) which place the subjects in their larger context. Fourth are published memoirs (Delauney 1982; Foccart 1995, 1997). Fifth are monographs by Gabon country experts who are scholars of the human and social sciences (Bernault 1996; Obiang 2007; M’Bokolo 2009; Minko 2010; Aterianus-Owanga & Debain 2016). And last, are personal interviews conducted by the author himself over the past 25 years in his research and writing about Gabon. No courtier has yet received the paid commission to write the official biography of Ali Bongo, although his father Omar Bongo had several ghost-written autobiographical accounts published. Perhaps Ali Bongo does not want his personal life made public. Possibly he does not desire to re-open the can of worms his controversially documented origins have provided his opponents (see below). His childhood, for now, remains “life story” and not life history.

The Founding of the Dynasty: Omar Bongo (1935-2009)

The first stage of a dynastic republic is when a traditional system of government is destroyed. This lays the foundations for something new and different, an opportunity for ambitious self-made men to seize power from traditional elites or colonial authorities, as the case may be. The founder of the Bongo dynasty, Omar Bongo was born during late French colonial rule, in 1935, in Lewai—now Bongoville—in the remote and neglected rainforest region of the colony of Gabon (Gardinier & Yates 2006). Like the name of his birthplace which he changed to herald his origins, Bongo also changed his own name, more than once. In his youth he had been called Albert Bernard, in his adult years, Omar, and in his later years, when he was long in tooth, he had added Ondimba to his surname Bongo. Even his last name—Bongo—was something of an African mask for his mother, Jeanne Ebori, had never married his father, Basile Ondimba. There was probably no need to legally formalize Basile and Jeanne's relationship with a colonial marriage certificate given the resistance to the imposed system: "In her mission to civilize Equatorial Africa, France attempted to graft a system of matrimonial law onto societies whose social and juridical systems differed markedly from that of the metropolitan government" (Dobkin 1968: 390). Neither of his parents had registered the birth of the youngest of their twelve children. So he lived the first seven years of his life nameless, administratively speaking, until his father died in 1942, when he was a seven-year-old boy. Then his grieving mother took him to a village chief who felt pity for him, adopted him, and gave him his own name which was Bongo. The historian David Gardinier once told me that Bongo had later added his birth father's surname—Ondimba—during his twilight years to establish patronymic lineage to a father who had abandoned him (interview with author, Paris, 2005).

A typical founding father of a dynastic republic is a self-made man from poor origins.¹ Bongo's family was very poor, living in a wooden shack made

1. A look at the lives of the founders of the eight dynastic republics now in power illustrates this personality type. The founder of the Aliev dynasty of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliev, came from a destitute family of refugees from Armenia who lived in the poor Azeri enclave of Nakhicheven (WILSON 2013: 20). The founder of the Kim dynasty of North Korea, Kim Il-sung, was born in Chilgol, an impoverished village where "[s]uch things as fruit and meat were beyond our means" (KIM 1992: 7). The founder of the Assad dynasty of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, was the ninth of eleven children, born in the Alawite mountains of Syria, at Qurdaha, a peasant village which consisted of a hundred or so mud and stone houses at the end of a dirt road (SEALE 1988: 13). The founder of the Eyadéma dynasty of Togo, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, was born to poor Kabiyé peasants in the northern town of Piya, in what was then the poorest and least developed part of the French mandate of

FIG. 2.— THE BONGOS OF GABON

Source: D. A. Yates (2019).

out of bark with mud floors and a reed roof. The youngest of twelve children, he remembered his earliest years in Lewai as having been “coddled, cherished, and spoiled,” surrounded by already married big brothers, and by elder half-brothers and half-sisters. In all four African dynastic republics, varieties of polygamy have been practiced, providing a larger pool from which to select appointments. Bongo’s own father was polygamous. Obligated by his first wife to marry her niece, Basile had spawned a family of twelve children, of which Albert Bernard was the youngest. “I had brothers who were already married,” recalled the future president in his memoir: “I also had older half brothers and half sisters, for my father was polygamous. A somewhat complex and extended family. We lived as a clan.” (*ibid.*: 24). His idea of belonging to a large, extended family remained a constant throughout his life, and provided a basis for what is now called the “Bongo clan.”

An extended clan structure provides a kind of social security network for family members. When his father died, for instance, Bongo’s family council met and decided that the two youngest children, including Albert-Bernard, would join their eldest brother in Moyen Congo. This brother, named Basile (like his father) was a territorial guard who worked on the colonial highway linking Gabon to Congo. In 1942, both Gabon and Congo were part of French Equatorial Africa, whose capital was Brazzaville. It was at this time that Albert-Bernard attended primary school, quite late, at the age of ten:

In reality, I was never alone. That is the advantage of being part of a large family, a clan. When I arrived in Brazzaville, I was welcomed by one of my other brothers and, once again finding my family ambiance, I was able to return to my studies” (*ibid.*: 32).

Bongo earned his primary school certificate in 1952 and was admitted to Brazzaville’s technical high school where he did his remaining years of formal education. His francophone assimilation helped him find employment in the colonial services.

Togo (FEUILLET 1976: 45). The founder of the Nguema dynasty of Equatorial Guinea, Francisco Macias Nguema, was born in Mongomo in the deep interior of Bata, the least developed part of Spanish Guinea, where he and his nine brothers and sisters were left orphaned and had to sell themselves as day laborers to other families, the lowest of all positions, becoming the laughing stock of the village (NFUMU 2006: 12). The founder of the Castro dynasty of Cuba, Fidel Castro, while coming from a well-to-do family, was born out of wedlock at his father’s farm. After the collapse of his first marriage Castro’s father had taken his household servant, Lina Ruz González—of Canarian origin—as his mistress and later second wife; together they had seven children, including Fidel. At age six, Castro was sent to live with his teacher in Santiago de Cuba (CASTRO 2009: 45-48).

In a book of interviews given to a French journalist, published under the provocative title *Blanc Comme Nègre* (a play on the expression *blanc comme neige*, “white as snow”) Bongo (2001) insisted he had been arrested numerous times for public displays of disobedience, and by the time he went to the *lycée* he had acquired a reputation among his teachers as a rabble rouser. But this is doubtful, for he worked for the French army, in telephones and telecommunications, then later in military intelligence. His detractors say he was an agent for the Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage (SDECE, the French counterintelligence) and thus a collaborator who acted as their eyes and ears in the listening outpost at Brazzaville. Since his entry into military intelligence is one of the robust explanations for his rise to power, some effort must be made to reconstruct a more plausible story than his own. After being kicked out of high school—or perhaps dropping out?—he met a colonial officer named Naudy, the chief postal inspector, who, he said, gave him his job in telegraph and telecommunications in Brazzaville: “He’s the one who initiated me into freemasonry,” he declared in his memoirs (*ibid.*: 39). This may be key to unlocking the secret of his entry into French colonial intelligence as freemasonry, *franc-maçonnerie*, was a network for colonial recruitment (Augé 2005). In 1953, Bongo was inducted into the French National Grand Lodge. For the rest of his life, he remained a French freemason, a situation which would provide him with a useful network in the regional and Franco-African structures of interconnected French colonial and neocolonial *réseaux*.

Bongo’s rise to power and his subsequent 42 years in office were a climb up the ladder of French collaboration (Yates 1996, 2012). All republican dynasties in the world had some major external power supporting them.² Gabon only achieved independence in 1960 after signing a series of cooperation accords that ensured former African colonies would remain within France’s sphere of influence. In 1958, Charles de Gaulle had called for referendums for the constitution of the Communauté française throughout France’s African colonies. Voters were offered a choice between either establishing a new federation with a common nationality, senate, and president, or opting for total independence (the choice made by Sekou Touré of Guinea). Ratification offered a choice between an unequivocal “yes” or “no” on whether voters wished their territories to remain in his new community as autonomous republics. Gabon voted “yes” by 91.79%.

2. Jacques Foccart was behind the two *coups* by Gnassingbé Eyadéma. J. de MENTHON (1993: 134), who worked in the French administration of Togo from 1956 to 1961, said that, “more and more, the French distrusted Sylvanus Olympio, and wanted to get

That Gabonese voted favorably for this arrangement highlights some internal specificities regarding their relationship to France. Elikia M'Bokolo (2009: 16) has highlighted how many Gabonese suffered from a "fear of disappearing" as the colony had, at various points in its history, lost large parts of its territory (Woleu-Ntem, Haut-Ogooué) and its rich revenues drawn from forestry (*okoumé*) had made it, by far, the largest contributor to the AEF federal budget. Many Gabonese did not believe they had received a fair deal in confederation with their neighbors (*ibid.*: 21).

Success and failure of Gabon's nascent political parties reflected the different choices made by political elites to the 1958 referendum. For instance, the Bloc démocratique gabonais (BDG) of Léon Mba chose to collaborate with the Gaullists and voted "yes," thereafter receiving French financial, political, diplomatic and military support. But Parti de l'Unité nationale gabonaise (PUNGA) of René-Paul Sousatte and Jean-Jacques Boucavel, called for a "no" vote, and after losing the referendum, lost all influence outside its ethnic Punu base. Voting blocks out in the rural villages were constructed on the base of "big men," often family patriarchs or clan leaders.

rid of him." Moreover, "Eyadéma remained subject to France through all the length of his reign," said FOCCART (1995, vol. 2: 153) in his memoirs, "even during the Sarkawa period when he nationalized the [phosphate] mines, he knew he could never go too far in condemning 'French imperialism.' Later on, when we had some differences to settle, he told me many times, 'Listen, if France doesn't want me anymore, you only have to tell me and I'll leave right away.'" Heydar Aliyev came to power in Baku because of the overwhelming influence of Moscow over Azerbaijan S.S.R. and Nikita Krushchev named Heydar as the Azerbaijan Communist Party boss. Brezhnev promoted him to the Politburo, a fully assimilated Russian-speaking collaborator, a participant in the persecutions and purges, a part of the system. WILSON (2013: 77) attributes his ascent to Ali Tagi-zade, president of the Azeri S.S.R. Supreme Council but BOLUKBASI (2014: 53) attributes his rapid ascent to his boss, KGB chief in Baku, Semyon Tsvigun, a brother-in-law of Brezhnev who, when Tsvigun was promoted to Moscow as KGB Deputy Chairman in 1967, replaced him with Heydar in Baku. Russians originally established Kim Il-sung's regime in 1945. USSR backing let Kim build the Korean People's Army into one of the world's strongest revolutionary armies, officered by a solid base of Soviet-trained guerilla commanders who were experienced by their years of anti-Japanese struggle. After the Korean War, the Soviet Union was the main trading partner and sponsor of North Korea. Since then, China has filled that role. In Latin America and the Middle East, Soviet support offered to Cuban and Arab allies was military and financial. Fidel Castro received substantial Soviet military and economic aid (for example, the Cuban missile crisis). Hafez Al-Assad was a trained MIG fighter pilot, later armed by Russia, who also backed his son Bashar since the Arab Spring 2011, and remain decisive in maintaining him in office, providing his military force for victory over ISIS and others. The Kabila dynasty of Democratic Republic of Congo enjoyed American backing (MURPHY 2016), as have both generations of the Lee dynasty of Singapore, protected by the US Navy (DECK 2014: 169-173).

In a study of the emergence of single-party dominant rule in Gabon the political scientist Wilson-André Ndombet (2009) argues that the population at the time of independence was mostly rural, 85% peasants, who continued to live as they had lived during the colonial period, without radios or televisions, lacking education about modern democratic institutions, “and even when they did have a few snippets of information about the subject, they relied on those more amply informed and followed the directives of the more influential members of their respective political parties or the members of their own communities” (*ibid.*: 51). In Gabon’s peasant society, party militancy was not based, as in advanced democracies, on free individuals making voting choices for themselves, but rather on a much older system of collective thought:

Man, the individual, was defined by his family name and by his identification with a collective property (the patrimony of his family identity), submitting to its rights and obligations, never exercising his liberty to vote in a way that was isolated from his position in that cultural community (*ibid.*).

The second stage, common to most modern dynastic republics, is the founding of a republic³. This was accomplished in Gabon in 1960 when Léon Mba was elected as the first prime minister and Father of Independence. Mba centralized power around the presidency in 1961 and appointed Bongo as assistant director of his presidential staff. In his memoirs, Bongo (2001) claims that he was called back to Gabon by Mba because he had demonstrated his skills in protecting the territory of Gabon from the annexationist pretensions of Congo’s Abbé Fulbert Youlou during the 1958-1960 period leading to independence. This claim must be critically examined. Bongo had just been decommissioned from the French army and told to return to “his country,” despite not having lived there since his childhood, with only former French colonial officers as patrons to help him find his way in Libreville. So he diligently apprenticed himself to a shadowy French network of agents, soldiers and spies known as the *réseau Foccart*, named after De Gaulle’s advisor for African affairs, Jacques Foccart, who was an important financial contributor to the Gaullist political party, RPR, and who had been involved in the 1958 coup that advanced de Gaulle into the presidency during the murky “Events of May.” De Gaulle had rewarded Foccart by naming him his adviser for African Affairs (Bat 2018). It was Foccart who had pushed De Gaulle

3. Gabon, Togo, and Congo were all declared republics in 1960, replacing colonies and protectorates. Equatorial Guinea proclaimed its republic in 1968, replacing colonial Spanish Guinea. Democratic Republic of North Korea was founded in 1945, replacing the Japanese colony of Korea. Syrian Arab Republic replaced the French mandate in 1946. The Republic of Azerbaijan declared its independence upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

to break apart the two large colonial federations of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa before granting them self-rule. J. Foccart (1995) said that it would be easier for France to dominate a dozen smaller states. He also convinced his boss that Gabon would be especially easy to control because it was small and lacked roads.

Jean-François Obiang (2007: 77-109) argues that sometimes the interlocking of Gabonese and French interests led to an inversion of the relations of power, with African “client” states being able to influence their “patron” France. While cooperation accords did lead to “a blocked independence,” he argues, they also created conditions propitious to Bongo thanks to his subsequent longevity in office compared to his French counterparts which eventually enabled “the protected to become the protector” (*ibid.*: 211). Meanwhile, a manifest “hatred of the powerful” by the lower classes, founded on their painful memories of colonial occupation and the racism of the increasingly numerous “little white men” who dominated their extractive industries (Bernault 1996: 195-202) contributed to a popular uprising but failed coup against Mba in 1964, suppressed by French troops.

The third stage common to dynastic republics is when the founder captures state power through control of the military or state security apparatus.⁴ The story of how Omar Bongo became vice president, and thus the constitutional successor to President Mba, took place in 1964, when disgruntled military officers on 17 February staged a successful palace *coup*. They forced him to pronounce his abdication on the radio, then drove him to the forest and held him in detention, along with his 29-year-old Chief of Staff Albert-Bernard Bongo. But these young patriots had not counted on the French to intervene militarily to save their client. Foccart called a meeting in Paris the very next day with the head of the secret service, the directors of the Elf state oil subsidiaries, and the other French diplomats working in Gabon, where they

4. As army chief of staff, Gnassingbé Eyadema seized power in Togo on 13 January 1967. In the mid-1990s Laurent Kabila became leader of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire, marched on Kinshasa, forced Mobutu to flee the country, and installed himself as head of state in 1997. Kim Il Sung became a major in the Soviet Red Army and served in it until 1945, when the the Red Army entered Pyongyang and installed him as chairman of the North Korean branch of the Korean Communist Party. Heydar Aliiev rose up through the KGB ranks, becoming a deputy chairman of the Azerbaijani KGB in 1964, its chairman in 1967, eventually reaching the rank of major general, the basis of his being elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party. Fidel Castro formed a revolutionary group with his brother Raúl and Che Guevara, took a key role in the Cuban Revolution by leading a guerrilla war against Batista's forces from the Sierra Maestra. After Batista's overthrow in 1959, Fidel Castro assumed military and political power. Hafaz al Assad was a flight lieutenant in the Syrian Air Force who participated in the *coup d'État* of 1963 which brought the Ba'ath Party to

organized a military counter coup. French paratroopers landed at Libreville airport, seized the radio station, surrounded the officers in charge of the *coup* and forced them at gunpoint to surrender. In a single day in 1964, the *coup* was reversed. This was the decisive *sine quo non* external action which buttressed the regime. Without this intervention, the young Albert Bernard Bongo would have been deposed by the Gabonese people long before he could ever establish a dynasty.

Not long after being restored to power, Léon Mba was diagnosed with cancer, and during this time, Bongo's destiny ascended. "In fact," writes Nicolas Metegue N'Nah (2006: 189), "the last three years of Leon Mba's presidency were transitional years. Sick, the president started making numerous voyages to France in 1965, and already his succession was progressively starting to take shape." In 1966, he was flown to receive cancer treatment at Hôpital Cochin in Paris, where he was daily visited by Foccart as well as other members of his *reseau* who, recognizing the end was near, pressured Mba to amend Gabon's constitution to create an office of vice president to succeed him in the event of death. This was an institutional innovation because French-style republics have no vice presidents. Foccart also pressured him to appoint Bongo, who was waiting just outside in the hallway, as his running mate in upcoming presidential elections. To see how concretely the French intervened to install Bongo in power, Jacques Foccart actually arranged for a wheelchair to roll the dying Mba into an ambulance and drive him over to the Gabonese embassy, where Foccart's agents held a photo session of the president signing this *ad hoc* constitutional amendment (Péan 1983: 64-69).

It was a morbid spectacle. Yet that is how Bongo became Mba's final running mate and thus his successor. Foccart denied that he ever "made" Bongo. But completely beholden to Foccart, Bongo was someone who owed him loyalty, and had no independent base of power. In his memoirs, Foccart (1997: 223) claimed that during his interviews with the dying president, "Leon Mba had reflected upon the matter, and told me that he could not see anyone else succeed him except Bongo, his chief of staff, a courageous man, the only one who knew how to take responsibility and not simply hide behind him." Since outside the presidential palace and inner circles, the young Bongo was a total unknown to the general public, Foccart's men in Gabon presented him as Mba's running mate, not as his successor. Most of the Fang

power. The leadership appointed him Commander of the Air Force. Three years later, in 1966, Assad participated in a second *coup*, which toppled the traditional leaders of the Ba'ath Party and brought a radical military faction headed by Salah Jadid to power. Assad was appointed defense minister by the new government. Four years later, Assad initiated a third *coup* which ousted Jadid, and appointed himself as the undisputed leader of Syria.

would have preferred another Fang to succeed Mba, if they had understood that they were actually voting for their next president. Audiovisual media was still in the hands of the French, so the Gabonese were kept ignorant of their president's true state of health, and were misled into believing they were only re-electing Mba. This Mba-Bongo ticket, unchallenged, ended up taking 99.5% of the vote. Then Mba died, in November 1967, and thirty-two-year-old Bongo, a man recruited from French colonial intelligence, became the world's then-youngest head of state.

The fourth stage of dynastic rule in modern African republics is when the founder creates a regime of "personal rule" (Jackson & Rosberg 1982). One of the first things Bongo did after being elected president was to fill his presidential guard with individuals personally loyal to him. Comprised at first of Moroccan mercenaries and French foreign legionnaires, Bongo slowly filled his praetorian guard with his own ethnic Batéké.⁵

Next, he eliminated the post of vice president, thereby ensuring no one else could aspire to acquiring the presidency the same way that he had done. Last, he dissolved Mba's BDG party, and created a new single-party regime under his own Parti démocratique gabonais (PDG). Bongo's justification for establishing one-party rule was that Gabon could not afford a multiparty system based on ethnic or regional rivalries that prevented "national unity" which was necessary for effective government. But as he was the PDG's perpetual secretary-general, single-party dominance became his main instrument for wielding personal rule. Anthropologist Emmanuelle Nguema Minko (2010) explains how Bongo personalized his power in the PDG through what she calls the "unitary myth," a discursive strategy used by the president to "pardon" regime opponents for their "transgressions" (that is to say, their democratic challenges to his usurping of power). Through his calls for "national unity" in the form of a single party regime, Bongo tried to cultivate a sense of symbolic "guilt" in those who participated in the 1964 *coup*, offering them his pardon for their transgressions by allowing them

5. From 1970 to 1989, Bongo's brother-in-law Jean-Boniface Assélé, a Téké from the Haut-Ogooué, served as commander-in-chief of the national police forces. Téké remain predominant in the military and the state security apparatus today. On 10 June 2016, responding to Téké concerns, Bongo named Téké General Laurent Nguetsarato, to head the Conseil national de sécurité, the intelligence agency, and supervise security services inside the country, including the Direction générale de la documentation et de l'immigration, a police force run by Téké Célestin Embinga Loury, who had served for a decade under Nguetsarato. Bongo also promoted another Téké general, Paul Operha, to replace Jean-Claude Ella Ekogha as the new army chief of staff. For his part, Operha was replaced as army head by another Téké general, Roch Ongaga, who hailed from Bongo's mother's home village.

to serve his new PDG: new and perverse ideology Minko calls: “rancor as a form of government.”

The fifth stage of dynastic rule in modern African republics is the transfer of presidential power to a member ruler’s family.⁶ This would take a longer time to accomplish, in part because Omar Bongo would rule for so long (42 years), in part because his notorious sexual promiscuity created complex jungle liana of multiple dynastic lineages, leaving the question unresolved about which of his scions would become his legitimate successor.

Omar Bongo’s first marriage (a well-kept secret) was with a peasant woman named Louise Mouyabi Moukala whom he had met when he was still just a young intelligence officer stationed in Congo-Brazzaville (Akyeampong 2001: 487). No marriage certificate or official notice was ever published, but she was the one said to have given birth to his first daughter Pascaline. Not considered sufficiently cultivated by the French colonial officers with whom Bongo was then ingratiating himself, she was something of an embarrassment. His superiors in colonial intelligence told him to divorce her. As he became presidential material, he remarried an aristocratic Obamba woman named Marie-Joséphine who came from the royal Assélé family (Gardinier & Yates 2006: 37). Since Bongo had been raised in a village tributary to Obamba chiefs, this second marriage to an Assélé royal was something of a social arrival. But Joséphine was of higher social status than her husband. So even after he became the ruler of Gabon, in her eyes, he was still just a peasant, a social-status complex suffered by the self-made man. Joséphine’s brother, Jean-Boniface Assélé, later named the head of state security, would remain a stalwart of the regime in the Haut-Ogooué fief of the ruling clan. But problems in the presidential couple appeared as early as 1974 when a Haitian lover was mysteriously “disappeared” for having had an affair with her. Rumors were circulating that President Bongo was impotent, that his children were the fruit of his other family members, or had been adopted (Péan 1983: 192).

Rumors in the public imagination about the ruling dynasty were a symbolic struggle in which the powerless could have a voice. Excluded from genuine democratic participation by a single-party state which allowed no opposition, and which forced all associational life to be organized within the framework of the ruling PDG, the “rumor” (*“kongossa”*) became a social norm in the capital Libreville for the deliberation of events, of resisting apathy

6. Obiang Nguema succeeded his “uncle” Macias Nguema in 1979. Kim Jong-Il succeeded his father Kim Il-Sung in 1994. Bashar al Assad succeeded his father Hafez al Assad in 2000. Joseph Kabila succeeded his father Laurent Kabila in 2001. Ilham Aliiev succeeded his father Heydar Aliiev in 2003. Lee Hsien Loong succeeded his father Lee Kwan Yew in 2004. Faure Gnassingbé succeeded his father Gnassingbé Eyadéma in 2005. Raoul Castro succeeded his brother Fidel in 2008. Ali Bongo succeeded his father Omar in 2009.

(Ondo 2009). Since the official media organs of the state were all suspect of producing false news reports, the most fantastic rumors circulated, like the one of a woman resurrected by medicinal plants which cured every kind of sickness, or of the sexual relations of President Bongo with young girls, or of the strangely proximate deaths of the elder Bongo and his much younger wife Edith. According to Placide Ondo (*ibid.*: 77), “the absence of change, desired or awaited, contributed to reinforcing the supremacy of the Bongo family’s dynastic power in the social imagination, notably with the designation of Ali Bongo as PDG candidate and the succession of his father.”

Some people tried to verify these rumors. The French investigative journalist Pierre Péan (2014), in his controversial *Nouvelles affaires africaines*, claims that Ali is really a Biafran orphan adopted by Omar during the Nigerian Civil War. Péan’s thesis was controversial, but the birth certificate that Ali provided on the occasion of his first presidential election in 2009 (Péan provides a facsimile from the French colonial archives) is a patent fake, anachronistically listing his name as Ali (he was known as Alain before his conversion to Islam) and ending with Ondimba (a patronym not even added by Omar until much later). His purported schools in France had no record of him, until the Péan controversy arose. The Sorbonne had no record of his doctoral dissertation on the “Transgabonais Railroad” in its archives, until one miraculously appeared, after the controversy.

Bongo’s marriage with Joséphine ended in divorce in 1988, after which she became a popular singer and recording artist under the stage name Patience Dabany. To get rid of her, other family members have told me, the president bought her a big mansion in Beverly Hills where she lived with their four children. This was when their oldest daughter Pascaline Bongo received her university education in Los Angeles, perfecting her English, as well her knowledge of international finance (interview with author, Paris, 2005).

According to information that was made public in 2010, after the death of the patriarch, when the delicate matter of dividing up his fortune among his legal heirs came into light, Bongo had sired 52 recognized children. Among these were his eldest daughter Pascaline (b. 1956), Omar Bongo’s chief of staff, and eldest son Ali, Omar Bongo’s defense minister, and their two half-sisters Grace and Albertine Amissa (the latter committed suicide in 1993), all four scions of the “Ondimba” branch. They were his nuclear family, at one point, the “legitimate” children of Joséphine, his main lineage. There were two other publicly recognized younger children, Yacine “Queenie” and Omar “Junior,” born of his late marriage to Edith Bongo, daughter of Congolese dictator Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who were closer to their father in his last days, when their mother slept in the patriamonial ruler’s bed. Other step-siblings and

half-siblings sometimes bore Bongo's name, and sometimes did not. Most were the fruit of his famously promiscuous lifestyle. Sporting elevator shoes and red velvet capes in the 1970s, Omar Bongo fancied himself a ladies' man. But his practice of prolific promiscuity resulted in the spawning of a very large extended family, reproducing his own father Basile's complicated breeding pattern of siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, cousins, and uncles, not to mention the number adopted children, and in-laws linking different branches of the ruling clan through marriages.

President Bongo had converted to Islam in 1973 and made a pilgrimage to Mecca. That was when he changed his name from Albert-Bernard to El Hadj Omar. It is believed that this conversion was due to Gabon being an oil-exporting country. He wanted to join OPEC, then dominated by Arab member states, so it is often said that he converted to Islam for political reasons. The late Doris Ehazouambela (2012: 1) explained his conversion as political:

Through a political strategy of accumulation of power, El Hadj Omar Bongo-Ondimba became the *calife général* of the Muslims in his country. Through national emphasis on Islam, Gabon developed a multilateral cooperation with the rest of the Muslim world, as well as permitting the country access to petrodollars supplied by the Arab/Muslim states.

Following in his father's footsteps, Alain converted to Islam too, and changed his name to Ali Ben Bongo that very same year. Ali's Islamic conversion earned him favor in the eyes of his father, who appointed him head of Gabon's Muslim community. Ali's conversion allowed him to distinguish himself from his numerous siblings, step-siblings, and half-siblings.

It was said that President Bongo actually wanted his eldest daughter Pascaline to inherit the presidency. Robert Bourgi, for example, one of Omar Bongo's French lawyers, said that the president had told him, six months before he died: "Too bad Pascaline wasn't a man, or she would have been the one succeeding me" (Glaser 2014: 195). Omar had serious doubts about his eldest son Ali. "In effect, Omar Bongo had often regretted that his eldest daughter Pascaline had not been a boy," recounted one Gabonese journalist, whose book on dynastic rule led to his arrest:

According to two witnesses I consulted from the family, one day the "old man" made his two children sit down and he told Ali that he could inherit his bank accounts, his mansions, his cars, and all the rest, but not his power. He discouraged Ali from even trying to succeed him. Convinced that the Fangs would try to recover "their" power, Omar Bongo was not even sure that he or his clan would be spared the settling of accounts which happens so often in Africa. Foreseeing this risk, he proclaimed that André Mba Obame should be the one to succeed him (Ndoutoum-Eyi 2013: 60).

The “old man” denied that he had any desire to impose his eldest children on the country. In an interview given to Ziyad Limam in *Jeune Afrique* (16 March 2005), he insisted vehemently that “Here in Gabon we are not a monarchy or a hereditary republic, but a republic, and so I am never going to say, ‘People of Gabon, here is my successor!’” Yet, in addition to naming his daughter Pascaline as his presidential counselor, his son Ali as both minister of foreign affairs and later as minister of defense, other children also occupied positions of influence. Frédéric Bongo (b. 1970) worked for the intelligence services. Alex Bongo (b. 1969) ran a Masonic lodge, and the national internet regulatory agency. Fabrice Andjoua Bongo (b. 1975) who was born out of wedlock to Marie Madeleine Mborantsuo, president of the constitutional court, served as a government controller in the ministry of budget. Arthur Bongo, a pilot, worked for DGA Air Services, and his wife, Virginia, managed a holding company BGFI, in which his grandnephew Henri-Claude Oyima was the general director. One of his maternal nephews, Idriss Ngari, was a general in the army and served as minister of defense. Jean-Boniface Assélé (b. 1939) Bongo’s brother-in-law, was his chief of security for many years. Christian Hussein Bongo (b. 1968) a Téké of Obamba royal blood, born out of wedlock to Cécilia Ndjave Ndjoy (born Outouma Dabany), the younger sister of First Lady Joséphine Bongo. In 1999, he was named by his father to run the Transgabonais Railroad authority. His father subsequently named him to help participate in the creation of Gabon Airlines.

One recurrent feature of dynastic rule is the psychological family risk of sibling rivalry. The foundations of the psyche are laid in the earliest days of childhood, and psychological striving for recognition and consideration by the father underlie outward political rivalry. Alfred Adler (2009: 126) described how in the family constellation, birth order influenced the formation of personality: “No child likes to be the smallest, the least capable, all the time. Such a position stimulates children to prove that they can do anything. Their striving for power becomes markedly accentuated, so the youngest often grows up into a person desperate to excel.” Christian Bongo and Ali Bongo became involved in just such a fraternal public spat. Christian (who also converted to Islam and added “Hussein” to his name) is said to have coveted Ali’s high position as president of the Conseil supérieur des affaires islamiques du Gabon (CSAIG) the official organ of Islamic affairs, of which their father was the Calif. In 2005, Christian attempted to succeed his brother to that post. Soon after, he was rushed to the American Hospital in Paris, reportedly for an attempted poisoning. Then he was moved out of the line of succession, being horizontally promoted as general director of the state-owned Gabonese Development Bank (BGD) in 2008 (Péan 2014: 124-125). After Ali became

president in 2009, Christian ran the Guarantee Fund for Housing (FGL) under the Habitat ministry charged with providing loans for public housing projects. Involved in the dispute with Ali over the inheritance of their father's fortune with older half-sister Pascaline, he earned a reputation as one of the unhappier members of the ruling clan. In an interview with Vivan Forson of *Le Point* (8 Nov 2016), Christian-Hussein supported opposition candidate Jean Ping and called for a ballot recount in the Haut-Ogooué region, the Bongo family fief, where Ali had been credited with over 95% of the vote.

Congolese President Denis Sassou-Nguesso became so close an ally of Omar Bongo that he married his beloved daughter Edith Lucie to the aged Gabonese president in dynastic alliance between their two ruling houses. Edith was a graduate of the national institute of health science in 1989 and a medical doctor. Married to Omar Bongo in 1990, she gave birth to his last two legitimate children in 1991 and 1994. She was reported to have been quite close to her father, and played an important role in seeking Gabonese support for Sassou's return to power in the bloody Congolese civil war. But as she built her new branch of the ruling Bongo clan, her dynastic marriage upset the balance of power in the dynasty. Rivalry emerged about which lineage would inherit the patriarch's power and fortune.

Dynastic Succession: Ali Bongo (1959-present)

Then Edith mysteriously died in Morocco on 14 March 2009, followed by the demise of Omar in Barcelona on 8 June. They were forty years apart in age, and so there is something suspicious about the simultaneity of their disappearances. Official causes of death were kept secret. Senator Rose Francine Rogombé was quickly sworn in as interim president, following the formality of constitutional rules of succession in a republic. She refused to allow the PDG to hold primaries to choose a candidate for Omar Bongo's succession. Two days later, she announced that any ministers who intended to run in the upcoming presidential elections would have to resign from the government. Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong grudgingly resigned. Defense minister Ali Bongo did not. Rogombé did nothing about Ali's flagrant disregard of her announcement. She even decreed him to form an interim government in which he accumulated key posts of defense, security, foreign affairs, and finance minister. This may have violated the constitution because he was candidate for the president's office. But the Constitutional Council was presided over by Marie Madeleine Mborantsuo, one of his "aunts" (Tinasti 2014: 105-107).

Presidential elections had always been a formality in which PDG candidate Bongo won. On 6 July, the PDG political bureau held an emergency session in party headquarters to discuss their nomination process. The political bureau then waited 48 hours before making its official announcement that the ruling party candidate would be the former president's son Ali (Debain 2009).

Three of his father's barons declared their opposition to Ali's nomination. They said they would run as independents against him (Ndoutoum-Eyi 2013: 87-108). The most important was André Mba Obame, a Fang from the region of Woleu N'Tem. He was a tough self-made man like Omar Bongo who had made his reputation working with the young prince Ali in the so-called "Circle of Reformers." For 25 years they had been political allies. When Ali was minister of defense, Obame was minister of interior. Together their duo had a reputation as something to be feared, willing to curb the power of older party barons who, they said, were responsible for failed development while getting rich at the public's expense. So Obame's challenge revealed just how little support there was for dynastic rule by the Bongo son, even among loyalists heretofore considered his allies.

On 11 July, the government announced that it would start revising the electoral lists, under the supervision of candidate/minister Ali Bongo. Voter lists had long been a tool of voter fraud. After the last presidential elections in 2005, some 120,000 "ghost voters" had been revealed. But ignoring pleas by the opposition not to conduct this process in too great haste, the interim government announced a deadline of mid-July. False names, fake identities, dead individuals still inhabiting the lists, all slowed the process down. A week before the election, the interior minister announced an incredible 813,614 registered voters, out of a population of 1.5 million (Ndoutoum-Eyi 2013: 65). Not only was this unbelievably high, over 50% of population, but given high abstention rates, it suggested that the ghost voters had still not been removed. An independent electoral commission had been created, the National Autonomous and Permanent Electoral Commission (CENAP). When Ali presented his candidacy, in 2009, some 93 of the 120 commissioners were card-carrying members of his PDG party, and 77 came from his native Haut-Ogooué region. René Aboghe Ella, cenap's president, had already proved his partiality to the PDG by covering up fraud in the 2005 re-election of the patriarch. He proved just as useful to the son four years later (Debain 2009).

On 1 September, when all the ballot boxes had been transferred from the polling stations to CENAP, people were not surprised that the electoral commission did not announce results. Rumors spread that Ali Bongo had lost. On 2 September, René Aboghe Ella and the commission started reviewing 2,815 polling station reports, but for reasons that have never been adequately

explained, and were questioned by critical journalists, then stopped opening the sealed reports after reading only 300 of them, and announced Ali Bongo as the winner (Ndoutoum-Eyi 2013: 179). On 17 September, Mba Obame demanded the Constitutional Court to annul the elections, citing numerous violations. Since the president of the Constitutional Court was Ali Bongo's aunt, she waited a month before confirming his victory.

Does the Bongo regime really constitute a "dynasty"? Or is it rather a "tropical dystopia" in which the population imagines, in a literary sense, a dynasty (Bernault & Tonda 2009: 9). Is "dynasty" just a manner of speaking? Both through blood and marriage a large number of extended Bongo family members occupy positions of power. Appropriation of public wealth as family patrimony has turned their clan into one of Africa's richest. Sibling rivalry has, on more than one occasion, become important "high-stakes" state politics. Different lineages compete with one another at critical moments of succession. Most important of all, there has been a transmission of presidential power from father to son. Perhaps the critical test will come when Ali Bongo leaves office.

The abandonment of Ali Bongo by the most influential barons of his father's regime, including almost all of his father's former prime ministers, suggests that hereditary succession was not accepted as legitimate, and is a counterexample to Brownlee's (2007) theory that autocratic elites tend to support dynastic succession because it provides them with security in the face of a crisis of succession. After his first term in office (2009-2015), Ali was abandoned by his father's foreign minister Jean Ping who became his challenger. On 18 January 2016, opposition parties endorsed Ping as their unique flagbearer to oppose Ali in the presidential elections held on 27 August. These were closely contested. Ping probably won more votes. But the electoral commission declared that Bongo had defeated Ping by 49.8% to 48.2%, with an unbelievably high turnout rate of over 99% reported in the Haut-Ogooué, where 95.5% were reported as having voted Bongo. Thanks to this incredibly high turnout in the family fief (the national turnout rate was only 59.8%), Ali managed to garner enough extra ballots to claim victory, winning by the slimmest margin of 5,594 votes, out of a total registered electorate of 627,805 (Aterianus-Owanga & Debain 2016; Piot 2016; Tonda 2016; Yates 2017a: 246-247).

On the night of 4 September, the Constitutional Court upheld Bongo's victory and put an end to any legal challenges available to the opposition. Although lowering Bongo's disputed score in the Haut-Ogooué to 83.2% and the turnout there to 98%, the court increased his total vote to 50.7%, thereby giving him an electoral majority. Meanwhile Ping's score was reduced to 47.2% (Yates 2017a: 247). The Court's president Marie Madeleine Mborantsuo, was

an ex-mistress of Ali's father, and the mother of the budget minister, Ali's half-brother, Fabrice Bongo. This was the second time that the Mborantsuo Court had validated Ali's fraudulent election. In January 2018, the constitution was amended to remove term limits from presidential office, thereby creating the possibility for Ali to follow in the footsteps of his late father and become another president for life (Yates 2018).

But no man lives forever. In the fall of 2018, Ali suffered a stroke and was hospitalized in Saudi Arabia. His state of health was kept secret from the Gabonese people, as had the health of his predecessors, Mba in 1967, and Omar Bongo in 2009. His half-brother Frédéric, head of security, ran the country during his absence. His aunt Marie Mborantsuo refused to declare a vacancy in the office of the president, as required by the constitution. This raises the issue. Are the Bongos now preparing for yet another dynastic succession in Gabon? If so, will this be a fraternal succession, like in Cuba? Or to a filial, third-generation heir apparent? Within a dynasty, especially in polygamous societies, the role of the ruler's wives, their relative power, plays into the high palace politics of succession.

First Ladies are actors, both formal and informal, in the political life in Africa, a novelty that recognizes their social visibility in high state politics:

Because of the peculiarity of their position and function, it is also appropriate to regard them as symptoms that illuminate the political economies as well as the moral economies of states. Even more, they reflect the functioning of power in what may appear as a new moment in the political history of the continent (Messiant & Roland 2004: 1).

Accompanying Ali to his seaside presidential palace was the new First Lady Sylvia Bongo whose French family had moved to Gabon when she was 11. Although she is a white woman, much of her youth had been spent in Gabon, and she always felt at home in the influential Franco-African community. Her father, Edouard Valentin, is one of the powerful French businessmen in Gabon, someone who could walk into Omar Bongo's presidential palace. As one of the privileged French expatriates she enjoyed a golden childhood of private schools in Libreville and higher education in Paris. Receiving her diploma in business management, she returned to Libreville to work in Libreville's premier real estate agency, Alliance SA, when met Ali at a business dinner at a night club in 1988 and got married to him the next year. Sylvie Bongo converted to her husband's religion, even changing her name to Najama (which she no longer uses). Heiress to a family fortune, this First Lady has become a powerful actor in her own right, in a manner familiar to dynasties (Hugeux 2014: 166). She and Ali have two children, Nouredine

and Jalil, and an adopted son, Bilal, originally from Morocco. But there is no indication any of those adopted children are old enough or in a position to pretend to the throne. These children were sent to English public school at Eton (*ibid.*: 167) making them even more distant from the traditional Bongo family roots. Ali himself does not know how to speak his own native Téké language. These children are English mother tongue. Each generation of the dynasty has become more distant from the Téké people.

Malika Bongo Ondimba is the child of Ali's first marriage to a Franco-Gabonese *métisse* woman, Annick Aubierge Laffite Mouvagha. Malika is the oldest of his children, something like her aunt Pascaline, the elder half-sibling, educated, and ambitious. In 2010, she married the rich and promising Steve Dossou, son of Samuel Dossou, patron of Petrolin Group and a former special counsellor of Omar Bongo. In December 2013, Malika was elected mayor of the municipal government of Akanda, not far from Libreville. In 2018, she was elected a member of the PDG political bureau of the Djouri-Agnili department in Haut-Ogooué. This was in fact a plebiscite in view of the results of the election: 633 votes out of the 695 registered, or 91.33% of the vote. In October 2018, she was elected as a member of the National Assembly, officially taking no fewer than 99.19% of the votes in Bongoville, her family's eponymous stronghold (AFP 2018). There is no clear successor to Ali Bongo within the ruling clan. But she has hinted at her ambitions: "I have been mayor [of Akanda] for two years now and I do not want to stop because I have huge ambitions for Gabon. Why not a woman President of the Republic of Gabon in 2022?" (Shaban 2016).

Dynasty or Catachresis?

In 1982, a Gabonese popular singer Francis Bebey released a song, "King of the Pygmies," making fun of the Bongo clan's dynastic pretentions:

In our camp/there's a little man/who claims to be king/Everyone laughs when he says/
that his father was a king/Because everyone knows that in our tribe/there has never been
a king/We don't think that a crown/serves much purpose on hunting trips
F. Bebey, *Pygmy Love Song*, Éditions Makossa, New York, 1982.

With nepotism, internal family struggles, and dynastic succession at the highest levels, Gabon gives the appearance of a dynastic republic. But is it? A dynasty is a succession of rulers, often a system where power is held by a family for three generations or more, even a historical period during which they reign. Yet a republic is the people's thing, *res publica*, not the patrimony

of a ruler or his entourage. So dynastic republic seems oxymoronic, a manner of speaking, a trope; but a contradiction of terms. Ali Bongo's election to the presidency in 2009 has been called "dynastic succession," yet the principle of hereditary rule has not been enshrined in the constitution of Gabon, as it has been in the dynastic monarchies of Europe, Asia and the Middle East. His father had insisted vehemently that "Here in Gabon we are not a monarchy or a hereditary republic, but a republic, and so I am never going to say, 'People of Gabon, here is my successor!'" (Limam 2005). But his practice of nepotism (combining biological kinship selection with political coercion and reciprocal altruism), his favoritism based on kinship, is arguably the ultimate source of social behavior (Bellow 2003). Our modern republican laws prohibiting nepotism may prove to be an exception, not the rule.⁷ They have not even prevented family reproduction of political elites (Clubok *et al.* 1969; Kurtz 1989; Hansen & Garey 1998; Feinstein 2010; Hess 2016).

Does nepotism make Gabon a dynasty? We surely are allowed to use the language of dynasty metaphorically to describe nepotistic politics, and the past fifty-two years of Gabonese history may well be remembered by historians as "The Bongo Era." However, we should question if our descriptive data correspond to any model in a way that allows us to speak scientifically about a Bongo "dynasty" in Gabon? Or is that really just a mistaken figure of speech, a catachresis (from Greek "κατάχρησις," "misuse") in which a phrase is applied in a way that significantly departs from traditional usage, a paradox, however seductive, but the wrong word for the context?

Duindam identifies some common features of traditional dynasty which the Bongo clan seems to have been able to reproduce in Gabon. Dynasty emerges as an extension of kinship. In the case of Gabon, one lineage of Omar Bongo's descendants, I call them the "Ondimbas"—*e.g.*, Ali, Pascaline and their close siblings—have managed to impose hierarchical supremacy over their rival descent groups, such as the Sassous, and other illegitimate branches of natural children born out of wedlock. Omar Bongo may have formally denied that he ever had the intention of establishing hereditary succession, but his family has inherited billions of dollars of his country's wealth, as revealed by the *biens mal acquis* scandal, and if not literally inheriting have "acquired" through family connections, undemocratically, governmental power. Marc Ona (2012), decried in an interview with the *Financial Times* (5 June 2012): "To be independent, institutions have to be in the hands of the people. Here they are in the hands of a family. You cannot speak of democracy if it has been appropriated by a family."

7. In the United States, the Anti-Nepotism Bill of 1932 banned the hiring of relatives up to the third degree of consanguinity, but Congress repealed that law in 1937.

A dynastic ruler's kin, says Duindam, are always close to power. Ali Bongo's kinsmen occupy key posts, not only in the presidential palace, but in the ministries and legislative bodies, national and municipal, and even in the key judicial bodies. "The constitutional court," Ona (2012) reminds us, which has validated both Ali Bongo's election in 2009 and his re-election in 2016, "is led by a women who had two children with Omar Bongo." Served by a household of retainers and advisors, the presidential palace is a focal point of ritual and redistribution, with a single figure of the monarch, a "republican monarch" (Duverger 1974), standing at the heart of the polity. I mention Duverger's republican monarchy to suggest how such literary tropes, while useful as political critiques may not provide scientific classification in political science. "The true kings, traditional kings, hereditary kings, kings of royal blood have all disappeared," wrote Duverger (*ibid.*: 15), but even modern reigning republics "tend everywhere to take a monarchic form." A monarchical *form* is not the same as a monarchical *constitution*. It might perhaps be better to use another expression.

In sum, to speak of a "dynastic republic" is to challenge it politically. The loathing that many ordinary Gabonese feel and express towards those members of their ruling family who think themselves superior merely because they have inherited wealth and connections should not be brushed aside lightly. Nor is it clear that there is popular support for a third generation of the Bongo dynasty in Gabon. Precolonial societies which lived in the territory that is today Gabon were never organized into a single large national monarchy which could be used as a model. There were traditional monarchs like the Orungu *Agonwimboni*, the Mpongwe *Oga*, the Olamba *Aguekaza*, the Vili-Loango *N'Gange Mvume*, and the Téké *Makoko*, however, these traditional systems did not cover the present national territory, and what information we do have about them suggests they did not all strictly adhere to hereditary succession with male primogeniture. Hereditary succession does not have deep enough roots for Bongo to reform the constitution in that direction. But given his enormous family fortune and his other institutional advantages, nothing prevents Bongo from continuing to rig the republican game in his family's favor. For now, it is sufficient that he knows no term limits, and like his father, his siblings, and his daughter, enjoys the fruits of neopatrimonial, personal, and *dynastic* power.

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of quasi-hereditary “dynastic republics” is a new regional trend, raising concerns about the decline in democracy, government accountability, nepotism, and grand corruption. Second generation dynasts have ruled in Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Togo and Gabon and have been treated as exceptional, as aberrations, or theorized under other conceptual tools. In this article, we examine “dynastic style” in this case study of Gabon which employs qualitative life story and family history methodology to show how, with the help of the former colonial power, a kin group has established itself as a dynastic regime in a modern republic, corruptly achieving what is otherwise anachronistic primogeniture.

Keywords: Gabon, corruption, dynasty, nepotism, three-generation rule.

RÉSUMÉ

La République dynastique du Gabon.— L'apparition des « républiques dynastiques » quasi-héritaires est une nouvelle tendance régionale qui soulève des questions quant au déclin de la démocratie, la transparence et fiabilité des gouvernements, le népotisme et la grande corruption. Des dynastes de la seconde génération ont régné en République démocratique du Congo, en Guinée équatoriale, au Togo et au Gabon et ont été appréhendés comme des aberrations ou des exceptions, ou bien théorisés avec d'autres outils conceptuels. Dans cet article, nous examinons le « style dynastique » en utilisant la méthodologie de l'histoire de vie qualitative et de l'histoire de famille dans ce cas d'étude du Gabon, afin de démontrer comment, avec l'aide de l'ancien pouvoir colonial, un groupement de parenté s'est établi en tant que régime dynastique dans une république moderne, une primogeniture anachronique réalisée grâce à la corruption.

Mots-clés : Gabon, corruption, dynastie, népotisme, règne de trois générations.