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# From Communicative Silencer to Responsive Listener: Participation and Public Dialogue in Benin

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FROM COMMUNICATIVE SILENCER TO RESPONSIVE LISTENER:

PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC DIALOGUE IN BENIN

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*The people are intelligent and have centuries of experience. Draw out their strength.  
Listen to them.*

-Xavier Institute, 1980:11

This interpretive research project explores the issue of participatory communication (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999) within the particular Beninese context of public dialogue (Buber, 1923, 1970; Cissna & Anderson, 2002, 2004; Spano, 2001). To assist the interpretation, the combined reading of the two literatures of participatory communication and public dialogue results in the framing of the metaphor of “participatory public dialogue” applied to the historic National Conference of February, 19-28, 1990, the famous public dialogue that initiated the democratization underway in Benin (Fondation Friedrich Naumann, 1994; Adamon, 1995). With “participatory public dialogue” as a guiding metaphor, and the National Conference as a case study, the research interprets the communicative praxis (Schrag, 1989) of the participants in public dialogue (Buber, 1923; Deetz, 1999 see also Gadamer, 1975) and focuses particularly on the intellectual elite. The interpretation makes the case that in spite of its democratic peaceful transition considered on the continent as a laboratory of political transition (Banégas, 2003), Benin is a case of a culture of silence (Freire, 2000) where the privileged small minority of intellectual elite locally called *Akowé* (Vittin, 1989; Banégas, 2003) play a role of communicative silencers. That is, their

communicative participation in the nation's dialogic life (Flecha & al. 2003) consists of a communicative praxis of "systematically distorted communication" (Habermas, 1974; Deetz, 1992, 1999, 2004) that silences the illiterate and underprivileged majority and disqualify them from democratic participation while strengthening the culture of silence.

The thesis of the research emerges from this interpretation of the communicative life of this West African nation. This dissertation claims that through unreflective practices, the *Akowé* (intellectual) elite have silenced persons, communities and the external world (Deetz, 1999). From a reflective reading of their unreflective practice framed within a model of participatory public dialogue emerges an ethical responsibility to become a "responsive I" and a "communicative listener" of the "silenced communities." The metaphor of "responsive I" (Arnett, 2004) operates a major change of orientation for the "communicative silencer" by placing on the privileged "I" an ethical call to become a "responsive I," that is, "my brother's keeper" (Levinas, 1999). The "responsive I" (Arnett, 2004) underscores a preeminence of responsiveness over the "egocentric autonomous subjectivity" (Burggraeve, 2002, 50). Conjointly, the metaphor of "communicative listener" frames a communicative ethical call for the "responsive I." As a "communicative listener" the "responsive I" gives preeminence to listening over telling (Fiumara, 2002; Pinchevski, 2001) and

contributes to “participatory public dialogue” by listening to the “silenced communities.” This dissertation suggests then that democratization requires that “communicative silencers” hear the interpretive call to become “responsive listeners.”

The dissertation concentrates on the particular local experience of Benin with a specific focus on the historic “National Conference,” locally known as “La Conférence des Forces Vives de la Nation,” held in Cotonou (Benin) on February 19-28, 1990 (Fondation Friedrich Naumann, 1994; Adamon, 1995). The research takes the “National Conference” as a case study of public dialogue because in the popular conscience of the Beninese people, the “National Conference” represents the wellspring of the democratic experience (Adamon, 1995 and Banegas, 2003). The research is locally situated and by the same token, the overall argument in the dissertation is set as a disagreement with some modern aspects of liberal democracies and modernization.

For these reasons, the research presumes and relies on the democratization process underway in Benin, and the aim of the general introduction to the entire research consists in making explicit this presumption. The introduction proceeds as follows: after briefly discussing the ongoing democratization in Benin, the introduction argues that this interpretive research finds its significance in its communicative contribution to the strengthening of

the young democracy, and finally, the introduction reviews the argument of each chapter.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION: “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN BENIN

*It is in the nature of democracy that is a process, not an end; an ongoing experiment, not a set of fixed doctrines. Its ideals, unless we repossess them generation to generation, fossilize and become little different from any other ideology. The ‘Open Society’ is a society without closure, a society open to challenge and criticism. When a nation announces ‘the work of democracy is finished!’ it is democracy that is finished. Under these circumstances, anyone -any nation –wishing to reinvent democracy must proceed with caution. To invent it takes patience and wisdom and depends on conditions that change from one country to another and from one era to another.*

Benjamin R. Barber, *Three Challenges to Reinventing Democracy*, 1996.

This work of an interpretive call to responsibility for the “communicative silencers” to become “responsive listeners” of “silenced communities” intends to strengthen democracy in everyday life for many in Benin through communicative participation. Accordingly, this introduction situates the dissertation within the social, political and historic context of Benin first and then within the specific interpretive framework that guides the research.

### I. Strengthening Democracy

The study takes place in, depends on, and aims at strengthening a fragile democracy, sharing in Benjamin R. Barber’s (1996) conviction that to reinvent democracy, “it takes patience and wisdom and depends on conditions that change from one country to another and from one era to another.” In Africa, scholars refer to this process of reinventing and strengthening democracy as *democratization* (Ossebi, 1995). Benin is well involved in such an experience of

democratization, and the fact that on the continent, the nation's exemplary democratic transition in 1990 has made it known as a "democratic laboratory" (Banegas, 2003) does not make its democratization any easier. Besides the fact of its youth, Benin's democracy is fragile in that it is personality-driven. That is, democracy has not changed the postcolonial politics structured around "big men," based on "clientelism" and a rent system resulting from a lack of institutionalization of power (35).

The interpretation of the limits of the democratic experience in Benin (Banegas, 2003) and the interpretation of its dialogic possibilities indicate that the historical moment is ripe for a daring call to responsibility. Previous historical periods in the life of the nation did not provide a context for heeding such a call. After the independence from France in August 1, 1960, the nation then called Dahomey experienced 12 years of social and political instability. At the rate of a coup d'état almost every other year with weapons sounding louder than the logic of reason and the voice of conscience, the time was not ready for the few Europeanized intellectuals called "Evolués" in French and "Akowé" in the local languages to hear a call of their ethical responsibility in the communicative life of the nation. On October 26, 1972, a last coup d'état led by Matthieu Kérékou turned Dahomey into a socialist and militarist dictatorship and the name of the nation changed into Benin. For 17 years, a few revolutionaries and dignitaries of

the unique party of PRPB (Revolutionary and Popular Party of Benin) exploited, oppressed, imprisoned and killed the people and squandered the resources of the land. Back then, it would have appeared naïve to address an interpretive call to revolutionary dignitaries to become “responsive listeners” of the “silenced communities.” Yet, against all odds and expectations, a highly surprising “public dialogue” called “National Conference” initiated in 1990 a peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy. Since then, Benin has been experimenting with democracy through a constitutional framework, representative institutions and regular elections. Still, in the life of a nation, 14 years of democratic experience is young. If industrialized nations are still learning democracy after two to three centuries, it is necessary all the more for a young democracy to work at becoming stronger. The research situates itself in this fragile and young democratic environment and its significance is in its connection with this fragile democracy.

From Benin’s local historical perspective, the collective conscience, aided by the experience of the past, possesses the available resources to understand and distinguish between solving social and political crises with coup d’état, firearms and revolutions on the one hand and peaceful transition and democratic public dialogue on the other hand. If any historical moment allows for a call to responsibility, it is the historical moment of democratization begun peacefully yet painfully as the people agreed to talk to one another during the nine-day

historic conference. The significance of this research is to offer, through interpretive readings, appropriate metaphors to help understand that democratization, particularly from a point of view situated within a communicative praxis orientation to participatory public dialogue, depends on the quality of participation of many, if not all, in the very midst of undeniable diversities and differences.

Although the National Conference is a major political invention (Eboussi Boulaga, 1993) and a historic achievement, as a one-time national dialogue, the Conference is just a start of the “democratic renewal.” Everyday public dialogue with broad participation is necessary to assure the viability of the democratic society. The episodic democratic elections that Benin has organized with fair success since 1990 are noticeable accomplishments. Yet a meaningful democracy (Barber, 1989 & 1996) requires a continuously participative society. In every democracy, professional politicians, experts and elites play a leading role in formal discourse, public procedures and official decisions. Still, their legitimacy depends on their capacity to listen responsively to the people. Consequently, this research offers an interpretative invitation to the intellectual elite to listen to the “silenced communities.” The research gathers impulses mainly from Buber’s phenomenological anthropology, Freire’s humanism and Levinas’s phenomenology to offer a set of interpretive metaphors including responsibility

(Levinas, 1998, 1999), listening (Fiumara, 2002), participation, culture of silence (Freire, 2000), communicative praxis (Schrag, 1989), “between,” dialogue (Buber, 1963, 1965, 1996) and public dialogue (Cissna & Anderson, 2002, 2004). With the help of these concepts, this interpretation frames the following metaphors: communicative silencer, responsive listener and participatory public dialogue. The hope is to offer an interpretation of communication that compensates for the shortcomings of modern liberal democracies (Mouffe, 2000) and modernization projects, which hold the right of the individual to the detriment of “what holds society together” (Anderson et al., 1996) and favor juridical, institutional and technical vocabulary and the expressive power of language to the detriment of the its listening dimension, that is, the “other side of language” (Fiumara, 2002).

## II. Interpretive Listening

The research adopts an interpretive framework that resists the fashionable cynical tendency of blaming all the evils of Benin, and for that matter of Africa on the intellectuals (Bayart et al., 1999; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). Without giving into the despair of “afro-pessimism” that gives up on hope, without succumbing to the temptation of “nativism” (Said, 1993a) that falls back on a romanticized tradition, the research assists and incites the silenced-silencer *Akowé* (intellectual) elite to argue dialogically with the “dominant society,” particularly on ways of thinking and acting about issues of broad participation and participatory

communication (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999) in a liberal modern democracy (Mouffe, 2000). For this reason, the dissertation is a hermeneutic endeavor that invites the *Akowé* (intellectual) elite for an interpretive journey with thinkers whose work and life have engaged Western heritage in a “corrective conversation” (Arnett, 2004, 81). In addition to the insights on dialogue and participation coming from Paulo Freire (1997, 2000, 2001, 2002), who himself belonged to a “dependent society,” the research interprets the dialogic philosophy of Martin Buber (1996), the ethics of responsibility of Emmanuel Levinas (1998) and the philosophy of listening of Gemma Fiumara (2002).

Consequently, the research adopts as a method a “hermeneutical thinking through” (Serequeberan, 1994) of the lived communicative experience of the *Akowé* elite, a “man captivated by dogmas” (Gadamer, 1975), the dogmas of westernization and modernization. In the Third World post-colonial condition of “a culture of silence” (Freire, 2000), the interpretation calls the intellectual elite described as a *communicative silencer* to become an “experienced man” (Gadamer, 1975), that is, communicatively a *responsive listener* of and to the *silenced communities* and the historical moment. This hermeneutic reading of lived experience inspires the *Akowé* elite to find words that help better name and transform his world (Freire, 2000). A project of *Conscientizacao* (Freire, 2002) or hermeneutic consciousness (Gadamer, 1975) as it is, the method is enriched by

Buber's philosophical anthropology of dialogue able to describe and prescribe (Stewart & Zedker, 2000) not the agency of the intellectual or his psychology, but his "life of dialogue" (Friedman, 1960) as sensitive to the "between" (Buber, 1963) and engaged in a communicative praxis that distinguishes the ethics of responsibility (Levinas, 1998) and the philosophy of listening (Fiumara, 2002) from the egocentric "effort to be" (Levinas) of Western philosophy. As such the framework of this anthropological philosophy of dialogue is a "hermeneutics [that] is prepared to wed itself to the discipline of listening" (Fiumara, 2002, 30). This is a crucial methodological point that needs further comment.

In *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, Gemma C. Fiumara (2002) conceives of this hermeneutics wedded to the "discipline of listening" by contrasting it with traditional Western epistemology. The tradition of Western thought she charges, in a tone comparable to Levinas, is a "logocentric system of culture" (18) with a conception of "divided logos," that is, an excessive fascination with "saying" to the point that "listening," the other side of language, has now "become too alienated from the assertive tradition of saying" (9). Fiumara goes on to discuss the domination, colonization and arrogance of the logocentric culture framing "the entire world" as its "celebrated science-power equation is revealed in the coincidence of technological development and social-political hegemony" (19). In this logocentric culture spread worldwide in which

Benin is relegated to “a culture of silence,” epistemology is centered on a rationality that “surreptitiously absorbs all knowledge claims with the ultimate result of silencing any ‘illogical’ voice that might be heard in the course of the debate and which might create links that we regard as unnecessary” (45).

Contrary to this “logocratic terrorism” (45) of “a non-listening language” (47), “interpretive listening” (42) goes beyond epistemological “‘conflagration’ or ‘raging fires’ of ‘pride’” (45); it goes beyond the analytical detachment that splits the individual, in occurrence the intellectual elite, who knows from the one who lives; it goes beyond academic elaborations that have “the tendency to become an end unto themselves, to forget the extent to which they are interwoven with the development of the human condition, and to branch out into increasingly defined and watertight compartments” (46). Interpretive listening “impoverishes us from a ‘rational’ point of view because if we seriously engage in paying heed we may even come to a state of helplessness and disorientation. To the *power* of epistemological tools accounting for what is familiar and mimetically reproducing discourse in accordance with certain basic meta-rules, interpretive listening responds with the *strength* to cultivate “the habit of paying heed to formerly unheard-of messages, voices, clues” (42).

Levinas’s project of interpreting *Otherwise than Being* that formulates for the “privileged I” a radical responsibility for the Other (1998, 96) belongs to those

“formerly unheard-of messages.” As a communicative articulation of this Levinasian responsibility-for-the-other, the current research seeks to interpret not the saying of the *Akowitz* elite about participatory communication but the unfamiliar clues of his listening. On such unusual turf of the communicator becoming the listener of the silenced communities, the research resorts to interpretive listening precisely because “we assume a hermeneutic position when we do not completely understand the experience that we are faced by” (42). Throughout the five following chapters of the dissertation assumes that hermeneutic position.

For everyday democratization to foster broad participation (chapter 1) and public dialogue (chapter 2) within the dialogic society of Benin (chapter 3), the social subjects of *Akowitz* (intellectuals) have the ethical responsibility to become aware of the fact that their hegemonic control of monologic participation turns them into communicative silencers precluding the emergence of the voices of the illiterate and underprivileged majority of the culture of silence (chapter 4). The last chapter advances the claim that the consolidation of the democratization process in Benin requires that this awareness be followed by a double change of orientation: from the privileged “I” to the responsive “I” and from the monologic speaker that strengthens the culture of silence to the “communicative listener” that encourages dialogic participation. As a whole the interpretation listens to the

clues to first reach a critical awareness of the intellectual elite as communicative silencer and then to frame the intellectual elite as a “responsive listener” in “participatory public dialogue.”

## Chapter 1

### PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AND THE POWER ELITE

*The needles, targets, and audiences of communication and development models combined with self-righteousness, titles, and insecurities, perhaps sprinkled with a dash of misdirected benevolence, often renders “experts” a bit too verbose and pushy. Perhaps this is because it requires much more imagination, preparation, and hard work to have dialogical learning. It is far easier to prepare and give lectures. However, there is possibly a valid reason why we have two ears, but only one mouth. Communication between people thrives not on the ability to talk fast, but the ability to listen well. People are voiceless not because they have nothing to say, but because nobody cares to listen to them.*

Servaes & Arnst, *Participatory Communication Research*

The literature of participatory communication (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999) is an undertaking of professionals of communication and experts of development who critique their own silencing power in order to foster the participation of the “silenced communities” (Freire, 2000) . Chapter one relies on this scholarship to unveil what participatory communication reveals about the power elite in the communicative life of the democratization underway in Benin. A set of metaphors such as participation, participatory communication, “monologic participation” and “dialogic participation” points to the significance of the issue of participation in communication. The chapter makes the case that in a democratic context, “elitist democrats,” professionals and experts have the silencing power to mask their “monologic participation.” Without denying the significance of democratic representation and the existence of inequality of

power and expertise, “dialogic participation” assures that the broad participation of all social subjects contributes to strengthen democracy and produce sustainable social changes. The chapter defines different types of participation that inform the specific focus of the research on participatory communication.

### I. Participation

Participation refers to a variety of social processes occurring in different contexts, including development projects (Tandon, 2002), democratic institutions (Nylen, 2003) policy planning (Schmalz-Burns, 2002), research methods (Servaes & Arnst, 1999) and communication practices (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999). Not only does the concept generate various theoretical developments and practical applications, but it also aims at diverse objectives. To some scholars, participation is a means to reach a certain goal, that is, the process of involving participants in order to assure the success of a common action. To other researchers, participation is an end in itself (Servaes, 1996, 15). It is little wonder, then, that scholars diverge widely on the definition of the concept. Shirley White (1994) captures the existing diversity of applications, goals and definitions of participation when she describes it as a kaleidoscopic concept that changes colors and shapes. This kaleidoscopic concept resists “the eagerness for labels and encapsulated definitions” (Gumicio, 2000, 8). The dissertation embraces the complexity of the idea of participation while focusing on the communicative

dimension of the concept. Concretely, this translates into a four-part discussion of participation that balances texture with focus. The first part offers Paulo Freire's definition of participation. Then the three following parts discuss the application of participation to the context of democracy, development and decision-making. Carrying on the insights developed at this point, the fourth part focuses on participatory communication.

#### A. Paulo Freire and Participation

Freire's understanding of participation brings forth the importance of social and historical subjects. Second, under his view the issue of participation marks a disagreement with modern democracy (Mouffe, 2000) and modernization projects (Moemeka, 2000). And third, Freire indicates the limits of the concept. In the foreword to *Participatory Communication* (White, Nair & Ascroft, 1994), Freire defines participation as a "basis for democracy" (12). Participation considers men and women as social beings, historical subjects with diverse interests, opinions, and wills, who have the "right and the power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis" (12). Freire (1994) situates his discussion of participation within the knowledge of serious disagreement with some aspects of liberal democracies and modernization that threaten both "developed" and "developing" nations by changing historical subjects into subjugated objects. For him, participation is an existential theme

that challenges the tendency of modernization to dehumanize men and women with “the technical and administrative rationality of market, capital, and private property” (12). Conceptualizing men and women as social beings and historical subjects, participation questions the “success” of liberal democracy and modernization achieved at “the expense of the values historically won by mankind, such as sovereignty of men and women over things, the self-government of society, the human ability to transform existing reality and to create a new one” (12).

All the while, Freire warns that if liberal democracy and modernization have their limits, participation is not a panacea either (13). Theory and practice must constantly infuse and temper participation with the reality of local soil to improve the feasibility of participation as “an organic ingredient of democracy” (Freire, 1994, 13). The applications of Freire’s ideas of participation have generated numerous theoretical elaborations and practical initiatives such as participatory research (Tandon, 2002), participatory development (Chamber, 1997), participatory democracy (Barber, 1984; Nylén, 2003), participatory decision-making (Heinelt et al., 2002) and participatory communication (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999). The latter application of participatory communication constitutes the focus of the current research project. In order to provide the research with a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of participation, the

following three sections illustrate and expand upon Freire's definition in three consecutive applications of the concept including participatory democracy, participatory development and participatory decision-making. For each type of participation, the discussion indicates the significance for participatory communication leading to a last section squarely focused on participatory communication.

### B. "Elitist Democrat" and Participation

The literature of participatory democracy reveals that participation helps challenge the hegemony of elites in democratic contexts. First, the section introduces the concepts of "thin democracy" and "elitist democracy," and second, the section describes the alternative that participatory democracy represents. The third point develops between language and participatory democracy, a connection that will later prove helpful in understanding participatory communication.

Participatory democracy represents a set of democratic ideas and practices that emerged from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a promising alternative to "thin democracies" (Barber, 1984). In "thin democracy," the responsibility of advancing public goods rests in the hands of elected representatives, technical experts and news media, while public political participation is practically reduced to going to the polls to vote and answering opinion surveys (Spano,

2001). The thinness of democracy is only a particular manifestation of the paradoxes of modern liberal democracy (Mouffe, 2000) against the grain of which Freire understands the importance of participation. Nylen (2003) describes a kind of thin democratic system particularly insightful for the current research: "elitist democracy." In elitist democracy, various elite groups compete "for the prize of 'taking over' the State or portions of it, offering clientelistic bargains – patronage in return for support –to other networks of political and economic elites and to organized nonelites (e.g. urban labor), while strictly forbidding autonomous social movement or political representation outside of elite-dominated party machines and State-run organizations" (Nylen, 2003, 16). Nylen gives some illustrations of elitist, thin democracies from both the American and Brazilian societies. Similarly, Bierschenk and Sardan (2003) offer strong support for their claim that in Benin, clientelism, patronage and elitism continue to stifle the participation of the non-elite in political process.

Contrary to these thin and elitist democracies, participatory democracy works with the conviction that "citizens should govern themselves at least in some public matters at least some of the time" (Spano, 2001, 26). Participatory democracy is a "strong democracy" inasmuch as it favors public judgment, what Barber calls "public seeing," by developing "a form of political consciousness that will enlarge the understanding and the sympathies of interest-motivated

individuals and transform them into citizens capable of reassessing themselves and their interests in terms of the newly invented communal norms and newly imagined public goods” (173). Participatory democracy envisions politics “as a way of living – as, namely, the way that human beings with variable but malleable natures and with competing but overlapping interests can contrive to live together communally not only to their mutual advantage but also the advantage of their mutuality” (Barber, 1984, 118). In search for mutuality and participation for the many if not for all, participatory democracy is not exactly an alternative, but “a complementary set of inclusionary institutional reforms that could help harness the 'social capital' inherent in citizens politics everywhere and, thereby, revive some of contemporary democracy’s lost luster” (Nylen, 2003, 12).

To this end, participatory democracy has a stance on political language that is particularly interesting for this research. Barber (1984) explains that “through participatory deliberation and ongoing public talk [language] contrives to define and redefine the crucial terms that we use in turn to define and redefine our lives” (157). Barber explains that participatory democracy combines “public seeing” and public talking in a way that balances adversary politics and deliberation by nourishing “the mutualistic art of listening.” While “liberal democrats tend to value speech,” to the detriment of listening, the “strong

democrat” (175), that is, the participatory democrat, “will strain to hear what makes us alike [and] will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good,” without losing sight of the undeniable differences (175). In his political communication, the participatory democrat is an empathetic listener who “becomes more like his interlocutor as the two bridge the differences between them by conversation and mutual understanding” (175).

In sum, the above discussion of participatory democracy contains the insights to help see participatory communication as a communicative alternative to “thin democracy,” “elitist democracy,” clientelism, patronage and bargain. The strength of participatory communication depends on its capacity to favor “public seeing,” public talking and the “mutualistic art of listening” amidst diversities and differences. Participatory development and participatory decision-making have additional insights to bring into understanding participatory communication.

### C. Professionals of Development and Participation

This section has two significant reasons to recall the articulation of the concept of participation in the context of development. In addition to showing another dimension of the kaleidoscopic nature of the concept of participation, the writings on participatory development have demonstrated an ironic

contradiction in the project of participation itself. This ironic contradiction remains a critical reminder for the current investigation as a whole.

First, in its kaleidoscopic nature, the concept of participation has helped development scholars address some important shortcomings of their projects for social change. In the context of development, the concept of participation has emerged, beginning slowly in the 1980's, as a solution to the ineffectiveness of externally imposed, donor-driven, expert-oriented and top-down forms of researches and projects for social change (Chambers, 1983, 1992, 1994a, b, c, 1997; Tandon, 2002; World Bank, 1994). "The broad aim of participatory development is to increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalized peoples in decision-making over their own lives" (Guijt, 1998, 1). To this end, participatory development considers as central to development projects not the donor's or the outsider's mandate, but the knowledge, perspectives, skills and priorities of the people whose lives are affected by development interventions. But then again, who has the power to claim that the participation of the people is crucial in development process? The participatory development literature has pondered the question and has pointed to an ironic contradiction plaguing the honorable search for participation.

This ironic contradiction constitutes the second point that the current research retains about participatory development. That is, the people do not have

the power to articulate their own right to participation – experts have that power on their behalf. Scholars have remarked that in their applications of the ideas of participatory development, development professionals “are actually still engaged in the construction of a particular reality – one that at root is amenable to, and justifies, their existence and intervention within it” (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, 15). The ability of academics and practitioners to sustain the participatory development discourse is indicative of the power they possess. This line of thinking has led Chambers (1997) to ask ironically, ‘Whose reality counts?’ Warning that often, the reality of the people only counts as a pretext for further domination by experts and donors, Cooke & Kothari (2001) and their collaborators entitled their edited volume with the provocative question: “Participation: The New Tyranny?” Pushing the critical questioning to an extreme in a deconstructive framework, and working out of a slightly different scholarly context, the post-colonialist scholar Spivak has asked: “Can the subaltern speak?” (). She goes on to argue that “any discussion of subaltern consciousness is always inter-mediated by scholars who can never know the subaltern, and hence the latter cannot speak” (Mohan, 2001, 157). In her essay, Spivak destabilizes textual representations and posits the “Third World Woman” as a signifier who has no position of enunciation and is unable to represent herself.

This research considers seriously the above questions. However, the research disagrees with Spivak's position, which offers critique but no solution. In addition to its political deficiency, Spivak's argument is self-defeating because of her assumption on the exclusively expressive nature of language, logos and rationality to the detriment of "the other side of language" – the listening side (Fiumara, 2002). It should come as no surprise that in the horizon of Spivak's argument, there is no room for listening.

The current research addresses participation's ironic contradiction, which inspires in some case a self-defeating deconstructive critique. The research is mindful that participation can become a pretext for disguised or overt tyranny. Still, the research maintains that participation is worth pursuing. From a communication perspective, the ironic contradiction can be addressed by recalling the ethical duty that privileged elites have to listen to the "subaltern" and the "Third World Woman" who constitute along with other marginalized and underprivileged those described by this research as the "silenced communities." The research does not ask: "Can the silenced community speak?" The research begins with the assumption that by their very existence, the "silenced communities" are already speaking no matter how compromised are their position of enunciation and their capacity of self-representation are. Consequently, this research raises and addresses the following question: Can the

elites, professionals, experts and others who already have a position of enunciation listen to the “silenced communities”? One final application of participation discusses the concept in the context of decision-making and helps bring forth the practical importance of participation.

#### D. Experts in Policy-Making and Participation

Similarly with participatory democracy and participatory development, participatory decision making demonstrates that the effectiveness and sustainability of policies depend less on the mandate of professional policy makers than on the participation of those whose lives will be affected.

Heinelt et al. (2002) define participation as “a means to legitimize the decision-making procedure” in order to produce “better results.” This is the case for at least two reasons: participation is a democratic right and a practical means for better outcomes. First, participation results from the natural rights of the citizens in democracy. “Those who are affected by a decision also have to be given a right to participate in the decision” (Heinelt, 2002, 17-18). Second, “those who are given the right to participate might have the relevant knowledge to help produce better results,” because through their involvement, they might have the potential for innovation, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of policies (Schmalz-Burns, 2002, 59). Admittedly, the noble goal of participation is difficult to translate into reality. Yet, as a legal right of citizens and a practical means for

sustainability, participation becomes necessary for “curing the structural shortcomings of representative institutions” in democratic decision makings (59).

To those who tend to believe that the discussions of participatory decision making and participatory development are reduced to the context of developing nations, it may come as a surprise that Heinelt et al. (2002) are working in the context of the European Union. Still, this research quotes their contributions for an even better reason. They argue for participatory policy making in the complex system of the emerging European Union because of its “dispersion, polycentricity and fragmentation” (59). For sure, from the point of view of scale, the European Union is almost a whole continent, while Benin is just a small nation. Yet, Benin and its 6.7 million people (INSAE, 2002) have their share of dispersion and fragmentation due for example to the existence of more than 110 political parties, more than 9 different categories of ethnic groups and languages (INSAE, 2002), not to mention the strained relations between Western influences and local worldviews. The existence of representative institutions and democratic legality in Benin is a good start that guarantees at least in theory the right to participatory decision and policy-making for all.

The young democracy has felt very quickly the need of “curing the structural shortcomings of representative institutions” by seeking through the process of decentralization ways of providing local collectivities with “more

freedom” and “more democracy” (Laleye, 2003, 48). In *Economie et Société: d’Hier à Demain*, [Economy and Society: from Yesterday to Tomorrow], a collection of articles edited by Hountondji (2000), a number of authors have demonstrated that the inefficacy of economic policies from 1960 to 1989 has not changed in the years following the 1990 adoption of neo-liberalist economy and democracy. These authors are calling for the development of a culture of solidarity based on ever broader consensus and participation, a stronger collective conscience and public ethics (254-255). Following in their steps, the interest of this research in participatory communication is to recall along with participatory decision-making that the effectiveness, innovativeness, and sustainability of projects for social transformation depend on the quality of participation of all citizens. In the U.S., in Brazil, in the European Union, in Benin or anywhere else, experts can design and decide the best projects with professional standards, but the lack of participation of those whose life will be affected compromises the efficiency and sustainability of social transformations.

At this point of the discussion, participation emerges as a kaleidoscopic concept with texture facilitating a deep description of participatory communication. As a communicative dimension of participation, the following interpretation of participatory communication retains from Paulo Freire (1994) that participation does not posit the participant as a reified agency or

psychological subject. Participants are retrieved from the dehumanizing forces of modernization and modern democracy to enjoy their right and power to intervene in the social order as social beings and historical subjects. The quality of a communicative interpretation of participation will depend on its capacity to maintain this disagreement of participation with modernity. While modern democracies tend to produce “thin democracies” and “elitist democracies” with clientelism and bargain systems controlled by elected representatives, technical experts and professional of news media, while modernization theory tends to engender top-down development projects and take participation as a pretext for tyranny, participation can still call on social subjects to develop “public seeing,” public talking, the “mutualistic art of listening” (Barber, 1984) for the very sake of sustainability.

To focus now on the communicative application of participation, the insights gleaned so far help distinguish two metaphors: “monologic participation” and “dialogic participation.” The “monologic participation” represents from a communication point of view the distortion of participation by modern democracies and modernization, whereas “dialogic participation” constitutes an alternative that has the potential of strengthening the process of democratization.

## II. Participatory Communication

So far, the discussions highlight the importance of participation in making democracy strong, development sustainable and policy-making efficient. The insights gleaned from these different applications prepare the chapter to focus on the concept of participatory communication, which is the development of the concept of participation in communication. The section proceeds as follows: after a discussing the definitions of participatory communication, the section offers a distinction between “monologic participation” and “dialogic participation” within participatory cocommunication.

#### A. Definition of Participatory Communication

Similarly to participation, participatory communication counts a multiplicity of applications. In *Making Waves*, Gumucio (2001) has documented 50 cases of African, Latin American and Asian countries experimenting with participatory communication in projects as diverse as community radio; participatory video; popular theater, puppets and dance; community internet centers and village phones. These projects share common preoccupations equally captured by the terms participation and communication. “Communication and participation are actually two words sharing the same concept. Etymologically the Latin *communio* relates to participation and sharing” (Gumucio, 2001, 33). The combination of these two etymologically redundant terms serves to put into focus the central preoccupations of participatory communication. This research

project is particularly interested in building on the capacity of participatory communication to challenge modern conceptions and practices of communication, which lose sight of the idea of sharing in communication and tend to conceive of participation as a monologic process controlled by the elites, the experts, the professionals and the intellectuals. Throughout this entire work the concepts of participation and participatory communication refer to this idea of sharing.

This section on participatory communication organizes the challenges and the hopes in this idea of sharing around two consecutive metaphors: “monologic participation” and “dialogic participation.” The option of looking at participatory communication with the qualifiers of “monologic” and “dialogic” is ironic in the first case and redundant in the second case. “Monologic participation” indicates from a communication point of view the ironic contradiction in some modern conceptions of communication that claim to be participatory while being monologic and hegemonic. “Dialogic participation” makes emphatically explicit the dialogic nature of participation and participatory communication and points at the crucial role of dialogue in democracy. The discussion that follows distinguishes successively “monologic participation” and “dialogic participation” in participatory communication.

#### A. Monologic Participation

The metaphor of “monologic participation” describes the limits of modern conceptions of participatory communication and points at the call for a genuinely “dialogic participation.” The interpretation of “monologic participation” suggested here distinguishes as its existential context the metaphor of “culture of silence” or “world of silence,” as its dominant concept the idea of modernization, and as its communicative illustrations some modern communication theories centered around effective transmission. The argument developed here does not reject the importance and value of monologue in human life; Buber acknowledges that not all of life is dialogic, and monologue, as well as technical dialogue, is, at times, appropriate. For this project, the assumption remains that when practices move too far toward the monologic side of the narrow ridge, a corrective is needed, particularly in developing democracies. Monologue, even in such contexts, will still have a place, but should not be the only mode of discourse. Even more to the point, this reject assumes that participation requires multiple participants taking part dialogically in a project greater than each individual participant. Therefore, if monologue is useful sometimes, it has no place in situations of participation. The suggested metaphor of monologic participation points to a misunderstanding of participation or an inconsistency in the practices of participation.

1. “Monologic participation” in “a world of silence”

“Monologic participation” is the mode of participation in the existential condition of the Third World that Freire (2000) describes communicatively as “a world of silence.” According to Freire (2000), the Third-World “being a world of silence [it] is still unable – not because of any ‘ontological’ incapacity, for such a thing does not exist – to assume the posture of one who ‘has a voice,’ of one who is the subject of his choices, of one who freely projects his destiny” (2000, 11). After World War II, nations and nationals in sub-Saharan Africa have gained the status of independence from their colonizers. Yet they have not assumed the posture of subjects who have their own voice, make their own choice and project their own destiny. They are still part of the Third World, a “world of silence” (Freire, op. cit.) dependent on modernization models that understand communicative experience as “effective transmission” (Deetz, 1999), “diffusion of innovations” (Rogers, 1983); “technological transfer” (Schramm, 1964) and strategic manipulation (Habermas, 1984). This research project is particularly interested in the connection between the silencing practices of transmission and the Third-World condition of pseudo-participation. A brief discussion of modernization would be helpful to understand the roots and the extent of the problem of effective transmission creating pseudo-participation in a “world of silence.”

## 2. “Monologic participation” and modernization

“Monologic participation” and its existential context of emergence which is a “world of silence” are both products of the modernization project. In the Third-World countries like Benin, the post-war and post-colonial period proved to be a time of enthusiastic and imperialistic implementation of modernization through development, liberal democracy and mass media. Truman’s “fair deal” (1949) and the United Nations’ Measures for the Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries (1951) put into motion a modernization program conceived as the westernization of the newly independent Third-World nations (Moemeka, 2000). With the confidence coming from the success of the “Marshall Plan” in rebuilding the World War II-devastated Europe, American scholars like Lerner (1958) and Rogers (1962) applied the modernization model to developing nations. This modernization consisted in the conviction that with “the passing of traditional society” (Lerner, *op. cit.*), the backwardness and the shadow of Africa would be entirely replaced with Westernization.

In modernization, participation is a process beginning with “media participation” and resulting in “political participation.” For modernization, “media participation” is advertising campaigns affecting individual attitudes for the purpose of effectively transmitting to developing countries the Western vision and values of “psychic mobility,” “empathy,” urbanization, literacy, free press and political participation. In turn, political participation refers to citizen

participation in representative democracy and party processes, particularly voting (Almond and Coleman, 1960; Pye and Verba, 1965) The dissenting voices have done little to challenge modernization models. Talking about modernization, observers still remark today that “it is extremely hard to escape the feeling that we are still looking at the same old thoroughly sugar-coated dominant paradigm now with participation rhetoric” (Ascroft and Masilela, 1994, 280). These modernization models compromise participation because they lead to an instrumental conception of communication and a “technocratic dissolution of the political dimension” of society with the expert replacing the citizens and technical, scientific solutions taking the place of political decisions (Barbero, 207). In the Third World, which is “a world of silence” (Freire, 2000), participation is monologic because by virtue of modernization, experts and professionals silence the citizens and scientific solutions to social problems silence political decisions. In spite of criticisms and challenges, modernization remains a dominant theory. It is now suitable to recall the main criticism of modernization: dependency theory.

### 3. Monologic Participation and Dependency Theory

The first criticisms leveled at modernization models appeared initially in studies of economic dependency. To emphasize the marginalization of the majority of developing countries, scholars such as Paul Baran (1954) and André

Gunder Frank (1967) demonstrated that underdevelopment does not originate in the backwardness of traditional societies as modernization theorists claim. To the contrary, underdevelopment is the obverse side of development:

*The capitalist countries had become "developed" by exploiting their colonies for centuries. Such economic exploitation had left the colonies with narrowly specialized, exported oriented primary production structure managed by an elite which shared the cultural lifestyle and tastes of the dominant classes in capitalist states. This elite continues to perpetuate the rule of ex-colonies; hence a kind of neo-imperialism still prevails.*  
(Kumar, 1994, 84)

Growing beyond the economic context, the essential contributions of dependency theorists continue to appear in works like *Culture and Imperialism* (Said, 1994), pointing at an enduring global system with the developed countries at the center and the developing nations at the periphery (Frank, 1967). This struggle against dependency is becoming more difficult as the direct confrontation against a colonialist country with a geographically defined power is shifting into "a struggle for identity within a transnational system that is diffuse with complex forms of global interrelations and interpenetrations" (Canclini quoted in Barbero, 1994). From the perspective of participation, an international system of dependency disqualifies populations of developing countries from having a voice, from being subjects of their own choices (Freire, 2000). In sum, with communicative practices of transferring or transmitting Western values, modern technology, and liberal democracy to nominally

independent African nations, the preoccupations with participation are nothing more than monologic participation. In spite of the dependency challenges, modernization remains a dominant paradigm with communicative practices of control, diffusion and colonization (Deetz, 1999, 145). The literature offers numerous examples of those communication models.

#### 4. “Monologic participation” and communication theories

In *Media and Mediation*, Barbero (1994) lays out the critique of modern communication theories that can only induce monologic participation. The first group of examples of communication theories in this dominant modernization theory barely affected by dependency theory consists of psychological and behaviorist theories of mass media preoccupied with media effects (Katz E. & Lazarsfeld P., 1955; Lasswell H.C., 1948; McCombs M.E., Shaw D.L., 1972). The second type of examples includes semiotic and structuralist theories (Jacobson R., 1963; Saussure F., 1979; Barthes R., 1957) preoccupied with codes and text analysis that produce “meaning in a vacuum” because they erase social contradictions and reduce “the processes of communication to something immanent to the process” (Barbero, 204). The third set of examples are information theories (Shannon & Weaver, 1945), so preoccupied with fragmentation of communication, accumulation and classification of information

that they fail to deal with “the issues of information as a process of collective behaviour and the conflict of interests” (206).

The strength of these theories relies on their effectiveness in presenting messages, transmitting information, diffusing innovations and analyzing texts. But precisely, “to the extent that the external world or other person is silenced by the success of placing one’s position,” (Deetz, 1999, 151) these theories undermine the possibility of community participation “permanently built by all therefore belonging to all” (Bordenave, 1994, 37). Participation becomes monologic to the detriment of the external world or the other person who is silenced. The strength of these theories of communication is to conceive of systems of domination that place the power of decision-making under the control of planners, administrators, and the elites. “The level of participation of the people is that of being present to listen to what is being planned for them and what would be done unto them – this is definitively nonparticipatory” (Shirley White, 1994, 17), that is, monologic participation. Such a monologic participation is at home in the “world of silence” (Freire, 2000) that constitutes in “continuing conditions of silence of an illusory voice” (op. cit.). In contrast to “communication effectiveness [that] is based primarily on reproductive fidelity” (Deetz, 1999) and can only offer monologic participation, the metaphor of “dialogic participation” functions in this research as a conceptual alternative to

contemplate the possibility a communication based on mutual and dialogic understanding, productive of new meaning, and supportive of participatory democracy and decision-making.

### B. Dialogic Participation

Dialogic participation represents an alternative to the communicative focus of a modernization framework on effective transmission and monologic participation. Dialogic participation is grounded in a dialogic approach to and mutual understanding of communicative experience (Buber, 1970; Gadamer, 1975; Freire, 1970) that challenges a modern understanding of reality as measurable, objective and destined to manipulation by value-free technology and mechanistic transmission. In addition, dialogue has an understanding of humanity different from the modern view. Dialogue confronts modernistic conceptions of humanity as “an object, an entity formed by external forces, a passive body that reacts to external stimuli and influences in a predictable fashion” (Servaes, 1999, 20). Dialogue scholars such as Habermas, Gadamer, Buber and Freire offer various inflections of the difference between modern, monologic participatory communication and “dialogic participation.”

Within a dialogic framework, Habermas’ theory of communicative action (1984, 1987) and Gadamer’s concept of mutual understanding (1975) distinguish strategic uses of communication from a more basic communicative attempt to

reach mutual understanding. Working from differing conceptions of the dialogic process, they both emphasize the continual social formation of consensus in interaction beyond the intentions and opinions of the participants. From his point of view, Martin Buber, a leading voice among dialogue scholars, distinguishes the *I-It* relation of technical dialogue from the *I-Thou* relation of genuine dialogue. The *I-It* relation is impersonal and belong to a world to “be used,” while the *I-Thou* is personal and belongs to a world to “be met,” a world of encounter (Buber, 1958, 18). Freire (1970) subscribes to Buber’s theory of dialogue and develops a theory that stigmatizes the “banking” education system of modernistic transmission and suggests a pedagogy of dialogic communication. With his concept of conscientization or critical awareness, he highlights the importance of dialogue as a process of community development of self-actuated and self-determining individuals.

These scholars represent various disagreements with modernistic transmission and monologic participation. The current research relies on these scholars to frame the metaphor of “dialogic participation.” The following discussion concerns the meaning and the significance of “dialogic participation.”

The current research defines the metaphor of “dialogic participation” as a participation not in an impersonal, modernistic “world of silence” (Freire, 2000) with strategic manipulation (Habermas), but a participation in a personal world

of encounter where the *I* and the *Thou* (Buber, 1970) are self-actuated and self-determining historical subjects who work dialogically for community development (Freire, 2000) through a continual social formation of experience in an interaction that reaches beyond the intentions and opinions of the participants (Gadamer, 1974). The conceptual significance of “dialogic participation” consists in its capacity to pinpoint the dialogic requirement of participatory communication and for the strengthening of democracy altogether. “Dialogic participation” renews communicatively the hope of addressing the limits of modern thin democracies (Barber, 1984). In these democratic conceptions, elitist democrats, clientelistic representatives, and hegemonic experts turn participation into disguised tyranny and masked monologue. “Dialogic participation” represents an insightful contrast with the elites’ monologic participation that conceives the people as being passively “present to listen to what is being planned for them and what would be done unto them” (Shirley White, 1994, 17). “Dialogic participation” attempts to frame the move of the phenomenon from a monologue in which the people have no say to a dialogue in which the people and the elites become mutually *I* and *Thou* (Buber, 1970) or self-actuated and self-determining social subjects (Freire, 1994, 2000) with the right and the capacity to participate communicatively through speaking and listening in the community development. “Dialogic participation” breaks with the “culture of silence”

(Freire, 2000, 2002) and the community ceases to be silenced. As “dialogic participation” clarifies the communicatively silencing practices of the elites and technicians of goodness, it stresses the fact that for democracy to be strong (Barber, 1984) and for development and public policy to be sustainable (), all social subjects have the undeniable right and the indispensable role of dialogically taking part in the “public seeing,” the public talking, the “mutualistic art of listening” (Barber, 1984) and the collective action (Gumucio, 2001). That is, it belongs to all the members of the community to talk, listen and act collectively for the betterment of society. The communicative stance of “dialogic participation” is in stark contrast with that of “monologic participation.”

The dialogue scholars quoted here complement each other in challenging an orientation of communication (Carey, 1992) dominated by a non-participatory transmission that the research calls “monologic participation.” The work of these scholars contributes to show that the communicative problem of “monologic participation” goes beyond the restriction of communication to an effective transmission of information. The problem lies in the fact that a ‘successful’ presentation of one’s own meaning can limit rather than aid productive communication. “For to the extent that the external world or the other person is silenced by the success of placing one’s position in place of conflict with

alternatives" (Deetz, op. cit., 151) genuine participation is compromised. Which is why Paulo Freire (2000) calls the Third World and some quarters of the industrialized world a "world of silence," rendered unable "to assume the posture of one who 'has a voice,' of one who is the subject of his choices, of one who freely projects his destiny" (2000, 11). In short, not only does "monologic participation" conceive of communication as effective transmission of information, but in addition it results in colonizing and silencing communicatively the silenced community.

Quite to the contrary, thanks to dialogue, genuine participation allows "the ongoing process of creating mutual understanding through the open formation of experience" (Deetz, op. cit. 151). "Dialogic participation" represents a communicative orientation that strengthens "commonness," "communion," "community," and "communication" (Carey, 1992) without excluding the need for information sharing or I-It relations. In reality, "dialogic participation" includes a relative role for transmission of information. As a result, the dialogue process remains in tension with the transmission dimension of communicative experience.

Watzlawick et al. (1967) have demonstrated the existence of a tension between content or message and relationship in communication. Relationship is the context of communication and functions as a metacommunication for the

content. Bounoux (1995) elaborates on Watzlawick's tension between content and relationship and calls the former information and the latter communication (see also Pearce & Pearce, 2004). Carey's (1989, 1992) articulation of this tension is particularly interesting for this research project. Carey has illustrated in the American context the fact that the basic orientation to communication remains grounded in modernistic metaphors of effective transmission including "imparting," "sending," "transmitting," or "giving information to others" (15). Resulting from the dominance of the transmission view of communication, American culture and social thought are weak with regard to the ritual view of communication. For the ritual view is the opposite of the transmission view and understands the communicative experience with terms such as "sharing," "participation," "association," "fellowship," and "the possession of a common faith." This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms "commonness," "communion," "community," and "communication." A ritual view of communication is not directed toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs." (17) "Dialogic participation" does not highlight the "maintenance of society in time" to the detriment of social transformation. Likewise, it should not be reduced to its

critique of the modernistic conception of communication exclusively centered on effective transmission of information.

“Dialogic participation” envisions a participatory communication grounded on a genuine and democratic mutuality of participants. Because of its dialogic ground, this participatory communication becomes capable of transmitting information without silencing and is sensitive to the “commonness” of a community in a particular historical moment without stifling social transformation. The conceptualization of “dialogic participation” allows this research to sustain the communicative tension between sending, transmitting, or giving information on the one hand and on the other hand participating, sharing or communicating “shared beliefs.” Acknowledging the existence of these different inflexions about the tension within communicative experience, this research project adopts a dialogic framework because dialogue focuses directly on the responsibility of the subjects in participation process.

The discussion of participatory communication in chapter one considers a foreground issue for this entire research project: the communicative practice of elitist democrats, communication professionals and public policy experts. The articulation of the participatory communication suggests the distinction of two metaphors, monologic participation and dialogic participation. The chapters demonstrates that democracy serves as a pretext for elitist democrats, experts,

intellectuals and to become monologic participants who may have brilliant contributions but who, by successfully transmitting professionally packed information, end up silencing the external world and the other. Their silencing communicative practices compromise genuine dialogue, weaken democracy, thwart sustainable development and hinder effective public policies. The suggested metaphor of dialogic participation highlights the dialogic dimension of participation in order to move participation practices beyond the liberal democratic trap of privileging individual "rights" to the detriment of the common good (Deetz, 1999). To elaborate further this dialogic dimension of participation as requirement of "strong democracy" (Barber, 1984), chapter two explores the background question of the whole interpretive endeavor: "What holds us together?" The chapter claims that "public dialogue" holds together "dialogic societies" (Flecha & al. 2003).

## Chapter 2

### PUBLIC DIALOGUE:

#### “WHAT HOLDS US TOGETHER?”

*Community is the overcoming of otherness in living unity.*

Martin Buber

*About Easter of 1914 there met a group consisting of representatives of several European nations for a three-day discussion that was intended to be preliminary to further talks. We wanted to discuss together how the catastrophe, which we all believed was imminent, could be avoided. Without our having agreed beforehand on any sort of modalities for our talk, all the presuppositions of genuine dialogue were fulfilled. From the first hour immediacy reigned between all of us, some of whom had just got to know one another; everyone spoke with an unheard-of unreserved, and clearly not a single one of the participants was in bondage to semblance.*

*In respect of its purpose the meeting must be described as a failure (though even now in my heart it is still not a certainty that it had to be a failure); the irony of the situation was that we arranged the final discussion for the middle of August, and in the course of events the group was soon broken up. Nevertheless, in the time that followed, not one of the participants doubted that he shared in a triumph of the interhuman.*

Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 86-87

Chapter two takes Martin Buber's view on dialogue to interpret public dialogue. The interpretation develops the communicative dimension of "living together" (Chalvidan, 1995) in democracy as the necessary background context for a deeply dialogic understanding of participation and participatory communication. As the chapter asks "what holds us together?" it problematizes this "living together," and the investigation of the question evolves around three major metaphors: dialogue, public dialogue and *participatory public dialogue*. Out of Buber's philosophical anthropology of dialogue and Anderson, Cissna and

others' development of the concept of public dialogue (Anderson & Cissna, 1997; Cissna & Anderson, 2002; Spano, 2001), chapter two follows up with the argument of chapter one on participatory communication and frames the metaphor of *participatory public dialogue*. Rather than presenting an exhaustive description of public dialogue, the research employs this metaphor to focus the discussion on the issue of participation in public dialogue. Such interpretation of participation in the framework of public dialogue highlights both the foreground and the background of the communicative practices by which the intellectual elite silence the illiterate and the poor in the particular case of Benin. While participatory communication is interested in social subjects, public dialogue is particularly keen to consider what holds communities together in a democracy (Anderson et al., 1996). Democracy and dialogic communities depend then on individuals, citizens, and in the language of this research, dialogic participants engaged in the public space of "living together." The chapter has three sections that organize the discussion around three major metaphors: dialogue, public dialogue and participatory public dialogue. But before these three sections, a first one articulates the significance of the question "What holds us together?"

### I. What holds us together?

The chapter interprets public dialogue in order to gain some insight into what holds democratic societies together. Before the connection between public

dialogue and “what holds us together” becomes clearer, it is important to explore the question itself. Asking “what holds a democratic society together?” identifies the kind of democracies established in the last two centuries in the West and the implication for the democratization efforts underway in “Third World” countries like Benin. This first section of the chapter examines the connection of the question to the theory of modern liberal democracy and the second section argues that Buber’s understanding of dialogue has much to contribute to the debate.

#### A. Liberal democracy and “what holds us together?”

What makes democracy properly “modern” is, according to Chantal Mouffe (2000), the combination between democratic tradition and liberalism theory. “The old democratic principle that ‘power should be exercised by the people’ emerges again, but this time within a symbolic framework informed by the liberal discourse, with its strong emphasis on the value of individual liberty and on human rights. Those values are central to the liberal tradition and they are constitutive of the modern view of the world” (2). Within modern liberal democracy and other modern democratic conceptions such as representative democracy, constitutional democracy, parliamentary democracy, or pluralist democracy exists a contradiction between the liberal tradition of individual liberty and the democratic tradition of equality between governed and

governing. In other words, there is a contradiction between the rights of the individual and the power of the people. The current research confronts this contradiction by asking: what holds democracy together? Is it the “universalistic liberal logic” of rights? Is it the democratic conception of equality and the need to constitute politically a ‘demos’? Or is it a combination of the two? If so, what kind of combination?

The question is relevant for all democracies, not just young democracies. As Pierre Henri Chalvidan (1995) puts it, “the first problem of our modern democracies is to reinvent – not necessarily at the national level – a new space from which freedom can spring, that is, a new space of “*vouloir-vivre-ensemble*” [will of living together] supported by shared values. Young democracies in Africa must invent this space, while old democracies have to re-invent it” (Chalvidan, 1995, 68). In February 1990, a glimpse of such space clearly opened up powerfully enough to become the founding event that launched the impetus of the democratization process in Benin. The event, a nationwide public dialogue called the “National Conference” (Adamon, 1995), serves as the case study of this research. That public space from whence freedom sprang and where “democratic renewal” was sowed in Benin was and remains the near mythical scene of intense dialogic engagement between institutional powers, civil society and popular imaginary (Benegas, 2003, 153). The Conference constitutes what it

means for a people to come together through public dialogue. The current research builds on this event to point to what the democratic Benin, like every democracy, still needs to learn existentially: What does it mean for a democratic people to stay and grow together?

Numerous theories have attempted to answer this question. The chapter now examines three of these theories discussed by Mouffe (2000). First of all, the research disagrees with Carl Schmitt when he dismisses the possibility of liberal democracy to hold a society together. He claims that such regime is non viable, since liberalism negates democracy and democracy negates liberalism. That is, as it stresses the right of the individual, liberalism fails to account for equality between individuals and the participation of each in the constitution of the demos. In the meanwhile, as democracy emphasizes the power of the people, it tends to sacrifice the right of each individual. The second theory is Bill Clinton's version of "triangulation" and its European versions by Blair and Schröder. They project to create a "consensus at the center" by pretending to move "beyond left and right." Mouffe (2000) charges that they leave unchallenged the neo-liberal hegemony with its "dogmas about the inviolable rights of property [and] the all-encompassing virtues of the market" (6). And as they abandon the traditional fight of the left for equality and popular sovereignty, possibilities of power transformation become virtually impossible in a one-dimensional world where

right-wing popular parties can easily make significant inroads. The third theory, 'deliberative democracy,' seeks neither consensus nor mutual exclusion between liberalism and democracy. The two major advocates of this position, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, "believe that through adequate deliberative procedures it should be possible to overcome the conflict between individual rights and liberties and the claims for equality and popular participation" (8). However, each of them ends up privileging one tradition over the other: liberalism in the case of Rawls and democracy in the case of Habermas.

These three theories belong to the rationalist dominant perspective of modern democracy that has no other resources to resolve the liberty-equality dilemma of liberal democracy except the logic of exclusion or inclusion, leading to either/or resolution of the tension between equality and liberty. The research follows Mouffe (2000) in her insightful analysis to the point where she offers to go beyond the rationalist perspective in order to see the tension between liberalism and democracy not as a contradiction to be resolved but as paradox to live with productively.

*The tension should be envisaged instead as creating a relation not of negotiation but of contamination, in the sense that once the articulation of the two principles has been effectuated – even if in a precarious way – each of them changes the identity of the other. The regimes of collective identities resulting from this process of articulation are ensembles whose configurations are always something more than the addition of their internal elements. As always in social life, there is a 'gestaltic' dimension which is decisive in understanding the perception and behaviour of collective subjects. 10*

Instead of seeking to resolve the contradiction between equality and liberty the acknowledgement of the democratic paradox realizes that pluralist democratic politics consists in pragmatic, precarious and necessarily unstable forms of negotiating its constitutive paradox (11). The challenge for contemporaneous democracies then amounts to upholding the equality of all as well as the rights of each citizen and collective ensemble. At this point, the research part ways with the political theory of Mouffe to look for another theoretical framework to accounts for what holds a democratic community together in the paradoxical unity of individual right, group interest and common good.

#### B. Buber and "what holds us together"

The research adopts Martin Buber's anthropological philosophy of dialogue because of its poetic depth in interpreting the democratic paradox, the 'gestaltic' dimension in the perception and behavior of collective subjects, and the limits of modern rationalist perspective. Better yet, Buber's dialogue offers a combination of the descriptive and prescriptive perspectives which provides the interpretative inquiry with theoretical insights as well as practical "concreteness" in tending to abstract categories, but ever returning to the living I, the Thou and the happening of dialogue in a particular historical moment. The research adopts Buber's philosophical anthropology of dialogue because of its capacity to combine in the unity of contrary "breath and intensity into an integral unity of

life and thought” without sacrificing the “concrete complexity and paradoxicality of existence” (Friedman, 1960, 5). This inquiry brings to the fore the potential of Buber’s dialogue to interpret communicatively what holds together a democratic society. Although squarely communicative, the dialogic approach claims nothing short of a “way of life” and a “way of thought.” As Maurice Friedman puts it:

*I should venture to say that the vital need of our age is to find a way of life and a way of thought which will preserve the truth of human existence in all its concrete complexity and which will recognize that this truth is neither 'subjective' nor 'objective' –neither reducible to individual temperament on the one hand, nor to any type of objective absolute or objective cultural relativism on the other hand. Friedman, 1960, 4-5.*

Instead of a modern rationality of either/or and an illusory ‘happy middle,’ Buber’s ‘narrow ridge’ accounts for the paradox and even the “suffering” included in a democratic “living together.”

Among the communicative considerations of what hold communities together, some dialogue scholars have articulated the preeminence of dialogue over debate, argumentation or news media. Contrasting public dialogue with debate, deliberation, metanarratives, Plato’s a priori ideals and privatized therapeutic discourse, Arnett (2001) underscores the capacity of the integrative idea of public dialogue to hold in the unity of contraries both differences and points of commonality within the public domain and to keep the conversation going in the historical moment. Cissna and Anderson (2004) believe as well that

“modern media enable us to transmit messages more efficiently, but communication itself, as we are only too painfully aware, does not automatically improve” (202).

In *The Conversation of Journalism: Communication, Community and News*, Anderson, Dardenne and Killenberg (1996) argue that “in envisioning news-based democracy, Americans conceived the first version of what we have come to call an information society – a social order organized around the marketing of industrially manufactured cultural commodities.” They claim that although in the eighteenth century American newspapers and the postal system were instrumental in bringing together a continental democracy and in doing so attempted to prove wrong Montesquieu who had long assumed that a republican state must remain small, a social order imagined in the terms of “manufactured cultural commodities” and “manufacturing of consent” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) can never be genuinely democratic.

The evidence gathered here up to now leads to the conclusion that the fascination of young democracies with political deliberation and the press is not sufficient to bring together a society. Democratic societies still need a deeper understanding of the significance of dialogue and public dialogue. Cissna and Anderson (2004) argue with reason that dialogue is about to become one of the central questions for 21<sup>st</sup> century communication studies. And a growing number

of dialogic project illustrate their claim: the Public Conversation Project (Chasin et al., 1996), the National Issues Forum (Mathews, 1994), Study Circle (2002) and Public Dialogue Consortium (Spano, 2001) provide examples from the United States. The current research does not aim to follow these examples in developing a practical project of public dialogue in Benin. It focuses rather on a theoretical and background interpretation of a Buber-inspired dialogue for the public sphere of the democratization in Benin that may provide resources for a future project of this sort.

To understand the theoretical and background significance of public dialogue in holding a democratic society together and facilitating broader participation, it helps to recall a number of similar theoretical intuitions. The descriptive relevance and prescriptive power of Buber's dialogue extended into the public arena is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's intuition that language anticipates a community of language users, Chomsky's (1959) communal assumption of grammar and Habermas' ideal speech situation. It is reminiscent of Gadamer's ontology of understanding in which the hermeneutic situation points to the fact that the social character of the formation of experience precedes each and every expression. The point common to these different communication views is that members of communication communities "present an acceptance of the ideal [communication] as a background for each communicative act

performed. Even the most strategic act of self-interested expression takes place in a language community where presumptions of reciprocity and symmetry exist” (Deetz, 1999, 148). The project a Buber-inspired articulation of public dialogue is not a technique of debate, deliberation or journalism but a communicative background of lived mutuality between I’s saying Thou’s to each other and saying We together out of a common “betweenness” traversed by relation and distance. Though in everyday practice, a technical and monologic I-It dialogue happens more often than this genuine I-Thou interpersonal and public dialogue (Deetz, 1999), the later dialogue is the ideal communication of reciprocity and symmetry whose anticipation and presumption make any human communication possible and which carries within it the potential to hold democratic societies together. The chapter turns now to this task of articulating Buber’s public dialogue.

## II. Dialogue

This section on dialogue acknowledges first the existence of multiple dialogic voices and then interprets the interpersonal framework of Buber’s dialogue and finally shows that his philosophy extends beyond the interpersonal framework to offer insights into the public domain (Arnett, 2001).

### A. Dialogic voices

Around the works of dialogic primary thinkers such as Buber, Freire, Bakhtin and Gadamer, dialogue has attracted so much interest in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that there are almost as many usages and approaches as there are scholars (Stewart & Zediker, 2000; Cissna & Anderson, 1998b). Some scholars organize these various perspectives on dialogue into two groups: prescriptive theories and descriptive theories (Stewart & Zediker, 2000). The descriptive perspective understands that human existence is inherently dialogic with social, relational or interactional features. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) understands dialogue in this sense and so do social constructionists such as Gergen (1994) and Shotter (1993a and 2000). Martin Buber (1923) and the scientist David Bohm ( ??) have a prescriptive approach that accounts for “dialogue as an ideal to be striven toward or a goal to be achieved as an outcome of considered and ethically-freighted choices (Stewart & Zediker, 2000, 227). Although later Stewart, Zediker and Black (2004) introduced some nuances in the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive accounts, the distinction proves helpful in the context of this research because it shows the particularity of Buber’s dialogic voice among the others and its significance for this research.

This research adopts Buber’s philosophy of dialogue for the main reason that, more than the other primary dialogic thinkers, Buber combines prescription

and description in a "unity of contraries" (Friedman, 1960). In the terms of Stewart & Zediker (2000) and Stewart, Zediker & Black (2004), Buber bases his prescriptions on descriptive accounts, that is, the prescription of how things ought to be and the description of the way things are. This research relies on Buber's emphasis on the "concrete," the "existential situation," the "historical moment" as well as the ethical and the ideal. This interpretive endeavor follows the paradoxical impulses of description and prescription of Buber's anthropological philosophy that points to the twofold orientation of human beings. In the first orientation, humans experience "encountering" in "instrumental, objectifying, monologic or I-It ways" (227). In the second orientation, humans experience "encountering" in immediate, mutual, dialogic, or I-Thou ways. Although the two orientations exist in Buber's historical moment, the *I-It* is dominant and he spent his life calling for the *I-Thou* relation. Considering "the way things are" in Benin in this historical moment dominated by "monologic participation" and a "culture of silence," the research frames a call for an *I-Thou* relation, a call particularly addressed to the intellectuals called *Akowé*. For the research to situate Buber's dialogue in the community life of Benin, the following discussion comments on the interpersonal framework of Buber's philosophy and then the discussion brings to bear the ideas in this philosophy that leads Buber's dialogue beyond the interpersonal framework.

## B. Buber and interpersonal dialogue

As indicated earlier, typical work addressing of Buber's dialogic theory addresses his phenomenological description of man's twofold orientation articulated in his 1923 seminal work *I-Thou*: the orientation of *I- It* and the orientation of *I-Thou*. The *I-It* orientation is a subject-object relation in which the *I* objectifies another person or other beings by knowing and using them. The *I-Thou* orientation is a dialogic meeting whose meaning is found in neither one nor the other of the partners, nor in both added together, but in the interchange. This twofold attitude is based on the ontology of the 'between' because "all real living is meeting." In the first essay that begins the collection entitled *Knowledge of Man*, Buber adds two important principles to his anthropology: distance and relation. In dialogic life, the distance allows dialogic partners to be confirmed as independent individuals and the "entering into relation" is mutual confirmation, co-operation and genuine dialogue between an individual self and others as independent as him. The goal of dialogue is then "completing distance by relation" (Friedman, *Knowledge of Man*, 21).

These interpersonal expressions of *I-It*, *I-Thou*, *between*, *distance* and *relation* point poetically to a life, as Maurice Friedman puts it, "a life of dialogue." The research follows Buber to understand dialogue as a "life of dialogue," as opposed to a set of techniques. For Buber, "genuine dialogue" can be either

spoken or silent. Its essence lies in the fact that "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing living mutual relation between himself and them" (Friedman, 1960, 87). Dialogue is a life of living mutual relation and the effort to gain insight into this life requires not only a theoretic effort, but also an existential engagement, a courageous walk on a narrow rocky ridge. "I have occasionally described," explains Buber, "my standpoint to my friends as the 'narrow ridge.' I wanted by this to express that I did not rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed" (Between Man and Man, 1947). This research acknowledges this narrow rocky ridge and hopes to engage the intellectual elite in Benin with it because it is faithful to the concrete complexity of life particularly in the public domain where the following section places Buber's philosophy of dialogue.

### C. Buber beyond interpersonal dialogue

Although no documentation shows Buber using the term "public dialogue," he has developed his philosophical anthropology beyond an exclusively interpersonal framework. His essays "What is Man" and "What is Common to All" demonstrate his conviction that "only men who are capable of

truly saying *Thou* to one another can truly say *We* with one another". The *Essential We* is equally as important as the *Thou* because "Man has always had his experiences as I, his experiences with others, his experiences with himself; but it is as *We*, ever again as *We* that he has constructed and developed a world out of his experiences." It is as a *We* that men has built "a common world of speech and a common order of beings." The relation between the *Thou* and the *We* testifies to the fact that Buber's dialogic philosophy realizes such an insightful connection between interpersonal relation and community relation. The focus of this research on community dialogue or public dialogue does not lose sight of the significance of interpersonal dialogue. Works like Arnett and Arneson's *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community Hope and Interpersonal Relationships* (1999) have contributed to demonstrate the necessary connection between interpersonal and community dialogue. In the same sense, this research combines the two literatures of participatory communication and public dialogue in an attempt to show, as Buber says, that only men and women who are capable of truly saying *Thou* to one another can truly say *We* with one another. At this point it is sufficient to show that while being ceaselessly interpersonal, Buber's dialogue transcends the interpersonal context, which justifies the consequent development of public dialogue.

### III. Public Dialogue

This third section of the chapter discusses first the ongoing elaboration of Buberian understanding of public dialogue by contemporary dialogue scholars. The second point of the section goes back to Buber's concept of the *between* to offer the contribution of this research to a Buber-inspired understanding of public dialogue. The third point brings to the fore the implications for the democratic society of a Buber-inspired conception of public dialogue. The fourth and last point signals that the challenge is still ahead for a fuller development of a theory of public dialogue from Buber's philosophy.

#### A. Definition of Public Dialogue

Scholars such as Anderson and Cissna (1997), Cissna and Anderson (2002), Arnett and Arneson (1999), and Arnett (2001) and Spano (2001) have developed for public contexts Buber's theory of dialogue. Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson (2002, 11) situate their understanding of public dialogue against the backdrop of ongoing intellectual conversations when they claim:

*Our position rejects Buber's early belief that media and publicity intimidate dialogue, but affirms the position he took later, after his illuminating public dialogue with Rogers. Our position rejects the one sketched by Lippman's efficient bureaucracy of planners in favor of the messier process by which Dewey trusted communities to talk a future into existence by fits and starts. When a space somehow is cleared for dialogue and when sincere communicators expect and invite it, we glimpse futures that could not have been available or even imagined beforehand. Sometimes that space will be relatively private and interpersonal, such as family dispute or a therapeutic relationships, sometimes quasi-public, such as classroom interaction, a church committee, or a corporate training*

*session, and sometimes as fully publicized as a school board meeting or a legislative hearing covered by local or national journalists.*

In spite of Buber's justified fear that publicity can compromise the genuineness of dialogue and against the hegemony of a Lippman-like enclave of professional elites technologizing public opinion (Hauser, 1999), public dialogue unfolds as a messy activity that *trusts* the ability of "communities to talk a future into existence by fits and starts." In this definition, the possibility of public dialogue is, as it must be, a matter of trust informed by realism and hope (Cissna & Anderson (2002). The ways "communities talk a future into existence" is not limited to speech. Cissna & Anderson (2004, 196) add that public dialogue "identifies the attitudes with which participants approach each other, the ways they talk and act, the consequences of their meeting, and the context within which they meet." As a basic form of democratic conversation, public dialogue enables the participative inclusion of the complex array of communication patterns, cultural frameworks and moral orders that exist within a pluralistic community at any given time (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Strike, 1994). In public dialogue, participation calls each member and diverse communicative patterns and moral orders "to be a part, take a part, and have a part" (Bordenave, 1994, 37) of a "conversational society" (Anderson & al., 1996). The concept of public dialogue points to a quality of attitude, talk, and participation indispensable to make, for instance, the act of voting meaningful, to invigorate the public sphere

and to give democracy its very existence (Matthews, 1994 quoted by Spano, 2001). To the freedom to speak, public dialogue joins “the responsibility to listen and the right to be heard” (Spano, 2001).

In sum, public dialogue is the communicative “living together” of a pluralistic community that faces its differences and disagreements (Arnett, 2001) and still secures broadly the freedom to speak as well as the responsibility to listen and the right to be heard. “Public dialogue” is the seedbed of a new democracy and the lifeblood of a strong one, and it appears to become particularly significant for democratic communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This research believes that this theoretical insight is timely relevant for the Beninese democracy born in the public dialogue of the National Conference. The ontological reality of the *between* in public dialogue has potential to become a key interpretive concept in understanding public dialogue in Benin.

### C. The *Between* of Public Dialogue

The *Between* is the ontological site where the “mutual confirmation” of human beings. This mutual confirmation in the *between* is better understood in the event that Buber calls “making present.” In *Martin Buber and the Eternal*, Friedman explains that making the other present “means to imagine, quite concretely, what another man is wishing, feeling, perceiving, and thinking. It is through this making present that we grasp another as self, that is, as a being

whose distance from me cannot be separated from my distance from him and whose particular experience I can make present" (Friedman, 1986, 55). That is, as an ontological site, the *between* is also a distance – the distance of the other from me and my distance from the "other." Because my distance and the other's are not separate, they constitute the between, which for this reason is also called the "interhuman." In this ontological *between* and *interhuman* of distance, relation and concrete presence through mutual confirmation, the following realities find their meaning: subjectivity, human sciences, subject-object relation, language and even society and state.

For Buber, subjectivity does not emerge from "man's relation to himself," which is a psychological development evolving within the soul of the individual. Subjectivity is the "Self-becoming" of each individual and happens as Buber says "in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other" (Friedman, 1986, 55). The dialogic understanding of subjectivity is crucial in Buber's entire anthropological philosophy and it is similarly central to public dialogue. "The fundamental fact of human existence, according to Buber's anthropology, is man with man. When two individuals 'happen' to each other, then there is an essential remainder which is common to them but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each. That remainder is the basic reality, the sphere of 'the between,' of 'the

interhuman'" (55-56). Without denying the subjectivity the possibility of a difference secured by the movement of distancing, the *between* is the space beyond the dialogic subjectivity. Yet in this space of "man with man," the dialogic subjectivity finds the ground of dialogic development and the protection against the narcissism of "man's relation to himself." The connection between the dialogic subjectivity, the *between* and public dialogue becomes apparent when Buber says: "only men who are capable of truly saying *Thou* to one another can truly say *We* with one another." For Buber, public dialogue "happens" when by virtue of the *between* holding them together, in distance and in relation, dialogic subjectivities say the "essential *We*" with one another.

The significance of the *between* and dialogic subjectivities for public dialogue requires an awareness of the central role of anthropological philosophy to a Buberian understanding of public dialogue. Buber is critical of human sciences in so far as they each treat one aspect of the human –the sociological, the economic, the political, the historical, or the psychological. According to him, "if they are to be understood as *human* sciences, they must recover their grounding in that human wholeness and uniqueness which is found in the recognition of the varieties of peoples, the types, and characters of the human soul, and the stages of human life" (Friedman, 1996, 15). For instance, this human wholeness and uniqueness is lacking when the idea of public dialogue is reduced to "public

opinion” by political philosophers and to public debate or argumentation by speech act professors. By contrast, Buber’s anthropological philosophy guides the focus of this communication research to tend to the people and communities of Benin in their communicative concreteness. This holistic capacity of dialogue makes it a viable alternative to modern rationalism as it refrains from imposing an either/or logic on life and embraces the concrete complexity not through facile inclusion or the “happy middle,” but with the courage of the narrow rocky ridge. As such, the research is a philosophical anthropology of the dialogic man, a philosophy of “man with man” (Buber), a “philosophy of the interhuman” (Friedman, 1996, 16) in Benin. The significance of the *between* in anthropological philosophy does not stop with its consideration of the wholeness and uniqueness of “man with man” in Benin. The *between* also calls for this study of public dialogue and the subject conducting this research to be dialogic.

Buber believed “that science itself was based upon Thou – actual intuitions of Thou, but the elaboration had to do with the It” (Friedman, 1996, 5). In this sense, this current anthropological endeavor does not find satisfaction in the unavoidable *I-It* relation that any intellectual enterprise induces. It searches for an existential orientation toward the *Thou*, the *Thou* of silenced communities with whom the research calls the intellectual elite to do research as a way of humbly accepting to be in respectful dialogue. The validity of such a research lies

in the “making present,” in the “happening,” the “unfolding,” the “rising” of the *I-Thou* relation. As Friedman (1996) puts it, this existential orientation begins with the philosophical anthropologist: “only if as philosophical anthropologist one is a problem to oneself can one understand the human as a problem to itself” (16). The researcher conducting this interpretive research is a problem to himself and auto-addresses himself critically when the research calls for the *communicative silencer* or the *monologic participant* to become *responsive listener* of the *silenced participants* in *participatory public dialogue*.

In the light of the centrality of *between* in understanding dialogic subjectivities, anthropological philosophy and the philosophical anthropologist, the current research takes on the challenge to point to a public communication that does not polarize, politicize or instrumentalize the process of dialogue. The significance of *between* in a Buberian understanding of public dialogue helps describe and call for the happening, the unfolding, the rising of a public dialogue able to account for a strong democracy where the confirmation of the individual and the “elemental togetherness” of the dialogic community are not a contradiction but a productive paradox:

*Where the dialogue is fulfilled in its being, between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve and are free of the desire for semblance, there is brought into being a memorable common fruitfulness which is to be found nowhere else. At such times, at each such time, the word arises in a substantial way between men who have been seized in their depths and opened out by the*

*dynamic of an elemental togetherness. The interhuman opens out what otherwise remains unopened.*

If one were to count the ways this “interhuman opens out what otherwise remains unopened,” one cannot stop at the dialogic subjectivities “seized in their depths” or the dialogic communication in which the “word arises in a substantial way between” these dialogic subjectivities. Buber-inspired public dialogue reconfigures the current conceptions of society.

#### D. From ‘egocentric model of society’ to ‘dialogic society’

To flesh out more clearly the happening of public dialogue, the interpretation now moves to the large scale of society. Buber acknowledges that “this phenomenon is indeed well known in dialogue between two persons; but I have also sometimes experienced it in a dialogue in which several have taken part.” He narrates the example quoted in length at the beginning of the chapter. In his essay “What is Common to All,” he also explores the importance of the interhuman in the Western civilization and in ancient Eastern civilizations as well.

Buber’s entire life of dialogue, captured in the paradox between the I-It and the I-Thou relation, signals that his conception of dialogue is up against a totalizing modern world view. Modernity has created a “world of I-IT” whose societal version has been called “the technological society” (Jacques Ellul, 1964) or the “egocentric model of society” (Levinas). Interpreting Levinas, Burgraeve

(2002) explains that the Western philosophy has founded an ontological nature of the ego understood as the "effort to be." This ego struggles for autonomy and free self-development and when it meets the world and other egos, it needs to "comprehend" them by aggressively totalizing them. The ego draws the others into the project of its own existence, which is aimed first and always at freedom and liberation for itself. This leads to a self-interested, or egocentric model of society, grounded in the "economic, totalizing will to freedom, of the autonomous ego" (Burgraeve, 2002, 57). The "egocentric model of society" can only see a contradiction between the freedom and equality as evidence by liberal democracy. This modern conception of society explains as well what has been called the "black man's burden" (Davidson, 1992).

Not only are the African societies and nation-states emerging from the colonization rooted in the authoritarian tradition but more important, they are rooted in the "acceptance of the legacy of colonial partitions, and of the moral and political practices of colonial rule in its institutions" (162). The burden of Africans is the incapacity to move away from this localized "egocentric model of society" that continues in a global world, to make them victims of a "new period of indirect subjection to the history of Europe" (10). Bratton and van de Walle (1994) give the following accurate picture of the situation. In most African societies, certainly in Benin,

*the chief executive maintains authority through personal patronage, rather than through ideology or law... relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system and leaders occupy bureaucratic offices less to perform public service than to acquire personal wealth and status. The distinction between private and public interests is purposely blurred... personal relationships... constitutes the foundation and superstructure of political institutions. The interaction between the 'big man' and his extended retinue defines African politics, from the highest reaches of the presidential palace to the humblest village assembly. (Quoted by Paul Ahluwalia, 2001)*

The situation of the African version of an “egocentric model of society” has led to the crisis of the ‘nation-state’ of the descriptions of “criminalization of the state” (Jean-Francois Bayart & al., 1999). On a similar note, Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999), who defend the thesis of “disorder as political instrument” used by leaders, believe that the root of the African crisis is a crisis of modernity and “this crisis of modernity is rooted in the deep history of the societies in which it is taking place” (xviii). The point of the current research is to frame at least for the *Akwoe* (intellectuals) who belong to this group of “big men,” the theoretical background conditions for a communicative call of “corrective conversation” (Arnett, 2004, 81) with the Western modernity and its “egocentric model of society.”

The discussion of Buber-inspired public dialogue offers this theoretical background condition. Some current intellectual transformations favored the move from an “egocentric model of society” toward “dialogic societies,” because “dialogue is penetrating social relations from international politics to coexistence

within homes" (Flecha & al., 2003, 128). "Dialogic societies" are not dialogic because they reached the perfection of public dialogue, if such thing exists. They are dialogic because they are penetrated by "dialogic transformations," which constitutes an emerging change of orientation from the modernization framework of "destructive imposition" on the other – the other person, culture or people. Contrary to the "cultural or personal imposition" of modernization, dialogue "enables the equality of difference to come to fruition, allowing different people to live together in the same territory enjoying equal rights that will reinforce rather than weaken their respective identities" (131). "Dialogic societies" are partially historic transformation and partially theoretic propositions. By framing "dialogic societies," dialogic scholars recognize that "what we have achieved so far is far from what we still aim to achieve. But it is precisely this tension that makes dialogue more forward. When we reach what we are proposing today, this distance will remain, because by then we will be proposing even more egalitarian and democratic goals" (131).

#### D. Dialogue: the challenge ahead

Commonly, many people use the term dialogue with banality and access to dialogue in public is still rare and represents "a significant challenge to our culture[s]" Cissna and Anderson (2004, 202). The challenge is due to the fact that "contemporary life in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is often characterized

either by a cynicism that says that dialogue is, in fact, impossible and ephemeral, or by sunny optimism that presumes that dialogue is little more than warm and friendly with each other..." (202). Notwithstanding these difficulties in seeing the significance of dialogue, scholars believe that dialogue has a role to play in "an increasingly and necessarily pluralized society and in an era of persistent conflicts and disagreements across ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual preferences, as well as ideological, economic, power, and status distinctions." This reality of social fragmentation mandates that in interpersonal relationships, in families, in groups and organizations, in neighborhoods and communities, within whole societies and between peoples and nations, we learn the potentials of dialogue "to facilitate public talking and listening, even when participants do not initially identify with, or even like or respect, the particular persons or positions they confront" (202). In sum, the current research share the conviction that John J. Pauly describes saying: "I think of dialogue as a fine word for humans' deep, persistent, and self-reflexive attempts to come to terms with the world and one another" (2004, 246).

#### IV. *Participatory Public Dialogue*

The three first sections of the chapter have laid a sufficient background to allow this last section to bring together the insights gleaned from the double literature of participatory communication and public dialogue by suggesting the

concept of "*participatory public dialogue*" as one capital guiding metaphor for this research project.

This research strengthens its theoretical base by situating itself in both the literature of participation and of public dialogue. The discussion of the meaning of participation in public dialogue marks the scope and the background context of this research project. While there are good reasons for studying, for example, the participants who in Benin benefit from media access, vote competence, education and health care assistance, the present exploration focuses on the participatory communication of the citizens who keep the conversation going in the public arena.

Freire's participation of historical subjects living on organic soil and exercising their right to intervene on their social world is consonant with a number of scholarly developments covering multiple of dimensions of participation. In terms of scholarship, the broader context of this research project includes the literature of "participatory communication" (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999), "participatory democracy" (Baber, 1984; Bordenave, 1994; Spano, 2001) and "democratization of communication" (White, 1999). The specific scope of the research restraints itself to participatory communication in public dialogue in the context of Benin. The theoretical and practical center of these diverse scholarly projects rests in the conviction that with participation "citizens should govern

themselves at least in some public matters at least some of the time” (Spano, 2001, 26). Echoing Freire’s disagreement with liberal democracy and modernization, these works constitute a constructive alternative to “thin democratic” systems (Barber, 1984) in which public political participation is limited to going to the polls to vote and answering opinion surveys. In “thin democracies,” the responsibility of advancing public goods rests in the hands of elected representatives, technical experts and news media (Spano, 2001). In contrast with “thin democracy,” participation calls for a dynamic society, a communal society “permanently built by all therefore belonging to all” (Bordenave, 1994, 37). In this literature, community participation is “a valuable end in itself as well as a means to better life” (Figueroa & al. 2002, see also Sevaes, 1996 and Deetz, 1999). However, the literature is not a unified body of theory that specifies a precise determination of these ends and means, because of the diverse contexts or local soils (White, 1994; Gumucio, 2001). Yet, researchers tend to posit participation as a communicative orientation (Carey, 1992), a “shared ideal” (Deetz, 1999) moving beyond the colonial, patronizing or authoritarian “idea of some leading the struggles for others” (Servaes & Arnst, 1999, p. 109). Within this diverse literature of “participatory communication” (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999), and “participatory democracy” (Spano, 2001) this research project adopts precisely the framework of public dialogue (Spano, 2001;

Cissna & Anderson, 2002, 2004). The next definitional discussion of participation attempts to offer an additional focus to the concept within a dialogic framework.

While the literature has articulated participation in the contexts of democracy, development and decision-making, the current research sets out to interpret the participation of social subjects in the communicative context of Benin interpreted with a Buber-inspired conception of public dialogue. This research is then an interpretation in participatory communication, but its particular angle of contribution consists of bringing forth the dialogic impulse in both participation and communication. Efforts of participation are self-contradictory when “monologue participants,” that is, elitist democrats, 2003), clientelistic representatives, hegemonic experts and *Akowé* (intellectual elite) turn participation into disguised tyranny and masked monologue resulting in a “culture of silence,” a “world of silence” and a “silenced community.” To the contrary, genuine participation requires “dialogic participants” who belong to a personal world of encounter where the *I* and the *Thou* (Buber, 1970) are self-actuated and self-determining historical subjects who work dialogically for community development (Freire, 2002) through a continual social formation of experience in an interaction that reaches beyond the intentions and opinions of each participant (Gadamer, 1975). This dialogic impulse of participation already available in the literature calls for a deeply dialogic understanding of

communicative experience; such are the scholarship and initiatives of “public dialogue.”

For the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the renewed interest in “public dialogue” and particularly the Buberian approach advocated here appear as a communicative background alternative to monologic dominance of technical communication, informational society and news-based liberal democracy, which only offer thin accounts of what hold society together. “Public dialogue” is the communicative “living together” of a pluralistic community that faces its differences and disagreements and still secures broadly the freedom to speak as well as the responsibility to listen and the right to be heard.

“Participatory public dialogue” highlights the dialogic nature of participatory communication with the distinction of “monologic participation” from “dialogic participation.” Additionally, “participatory public dialogue” adds to public dialogue the qualifier of “participatory” to draw attention to the issue of participation in public dialogue. The particular interest of this research project in public dialogue underscores how the quality of public dialogue depends on a genuine and democratic participation by the members of the dialogic community. Likewise, in “participatory public dialogue,” participation is not limited to the defense of the right of the individual to the detriment of “living together,” as it is the case in neo-liberalism and “egocentric model of society.” To

the contrary, participation relies on the communicative background of “public dialogue.”

Additionally, the metaphor of “participatory public dialogue” enables chapter one and chapter two to frame the central question of the entire dissertation. What is an alternative to unreflective practices of “systematically distorted communication” (Deetz, 1992, 1999, 2004) and “culture of silence” (Freire, 2002) unintentionally cultivated by professionals, experts and intellectuals in democratic communities in search of “participatory public dialogue”? In other words, given the indication that *Akowé* (intellectual) elite inadvertently preclude the “silenced communities” from democratic participation into public dialogue, what communicative solutions are conceivable? The following chapters conceive of a communicative solution that frames the *monologic participant* as *communicative silencer* to whom is addressed the call to become a “*Responsive I*” and a *communicative listener*.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE: A PUBLIC DIALOGUE IN BENIN

*We now need to be faithful to Him [God] by working hard in a spirit of sacrifice and the love of neighbor. These are pillar-virtues indispensable to build a strong and beautiful nation. I testify that these virtues inspired at various degrees the representatives of the people during the National Conference. For now on, may they inspire at the highest degree the people of Benin for the edification of a solid and beautiful Beninese nation.*

Archbishop Isidore de Souza, Chairman of the National Conference

Chapters one and two interpret the scholarships of participatory communication and public dialogue in order to prepare this research to theoretically investigate two major questions: “what communicative praxis *by* intellectuals?” and, considering the background of this communicative praxis, “what holds us together?” As the metaphor of *participatory public dialogue* attempts to capture the complementary dimension of the two foreground and background questions the focus of this dissertation reads as follows: “In what holds us together, what communicative praxis counts and what communicative praxis is silenced?” With the clarity of focus offered by the metaphor of *participatory public dialogue*, chapter three limits the scope of the investigation to a case study, the historic public dialogue called “National Conference” (Les Actes, 1994 and Adamon, 1995). This chapter asks thus, “Considering the lived experience of the National Conference interpreted as a public dialogue with dialogic participation, what communicative praxis counts in Benin?”

Through the exploration of the question, the chapter claims that the political invention of the National Conference constitutes a locus of historicity to investigate participation and dialogue in Benin. The chapter organizes the discussions into four points: first the definition of National Conference; second, the significance of historicity for the Conference; third, the discussion of the growing scholarship on the Conference; and fourth, contribution of this research as a dialogic interpretation of the National Conference.

### I. Definition of National Conference

The following material defines the historic event called National Conference in Benin. It belongs to the three subsequent sections to tease out this definition from different angles as they interpret the historic event as a case study for this research on *participatory public dialogue*.

The National Conference officially called “*La Conférence des Forces Vives de la Nation*,” [the Conference of the Living Forces of the Nation) is an exceptional public dialogue that took place on February, 19-28, 1990 in Cotonou, Benin (Fondation Friedrich Naumann, 1994; Adamon, 1995; Banégas, 2003) to instill a sense of hope to a nation engulfed into the darkest abyss of despair and poverty by 17 years of General Matthieu Kérékou’s oppressive Marxist dictatorship. The Conference “was a historic moment in the life of a small Third World country which, as ‘things were falling apart,’ allowed reason and intelligence of heart to

win over selfish interests and instincts in order to save everything anew" (de Souza, 1994). "We won over fatality!" declared Albert Tévoédjrè during his closing speech to the Conference (Les Actes, 1990). Such exclamation has entered the popular consciousness as a common acknowledgement of the Conference's significance (Banégas, 2000). A truly defining moment it was. A defining moment it remains. In the public's conscience, the Conference stays an emblem of national pride in near mythical proportion. Nearly fifteen years after it took place, the National Conference kept a mythical significance in the popular conscience. Richard Banégas (2003) noticed as did this researcher that people frequently refer to it as the origin of "Democratic Renewal" in Benin.

One of the participants, Paulin Hountondji (1993) captures perceptively the principle of the Conference in the following *a posteriori* definition:

*National Conference is "a grand public debate, which allows every segment of the population, social actors, decision makers and organized groups -political, economic, or religious- the opportunity to evaluate together in contradictory fashion, the performance of the regime while the whole nation witnesses through live radio diffusion and television broadcasting. On the premise that each social partner accepts the principle, this public debate becomes an alternative to violence and physical confrontation as it turns into verbal expression the anger accumulated in people's heart."*

The National Conference effectively gathered 493 representatives of political formations, religious communities, trade unions, professional associations, regional organizations, farmers, artisans and Beninese abroad (Adamon, 1995).

Through the live broadcasting on the state-run radio and television of the proceedings, the entire population of 6 million (in 1990) experienced collectively a verbal expression of their desire of revenge and anger, accusation and fear, confession and reconciliation. The broadcasts transfixed populations in surrounding Francophone countries, most of which will organize their own National Conference following the Beninese model with different degrees of success. The transition to multiparty democracy set in motion by the National Conference was arguably one of contemporary Africa's most successful (Campbell, 1999).

In coherence with this definitional discussion, this research concentrates on the National Conference and interprets the historic public dialogue according to Buber-inspired conception of public dialogue. The interpretation affords the claim that the Conference is the most significant experience of public dialogue in the history of the nation, which holds some interpretive keys to understanding the nation's communicative praxis. The following section describes the nation that invented the National Conference.

## II. Benin and its National Conference

The National Conference affords the research a case study of nine days in the life of the nation. This limited span of time, is embedded in the context of a nation with a "longue durée" (Mbembe, 2000, 16), a long history, of which the

nine days of National Conference constitute a representative echo. This section presents selected elements of the history of Benin to help make the case that the nature and outcomes of the National Conference were shaped by its embeddedness in the particular history of the nation.

The immediate impetus leading to the Conference was the dying dictatorship of Matthieu Kérékou. By force, he seized power in October 1972 and halted the endless cycle of coups d'état and political instability that have always characterized the first years of existence of the country first known as Dahomey, which became independent from France in August 1, 1960. Over the years, the people grew restless under the General's socialist dictatorship. At the end of the 1980's national and international pressure was mounting and the regime was inexorably eroding: bankruptcy, dissidence within the military, students' insurrection, demonstrations by unpaid government employees, popular disenchantment, hardened relations with France. This internal crisis erupted against the backdrop of an international context traveled by geo-political transformations evidenced by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Campbell, 1999, Houngnikpo, 2001).

With their exogenous and endogenous dimensions, the causes of the 1989 crisis in Benin reach far back beyond Kérékou's coup d'état in October 1972. The internal situation of the country then called Dahomey was already chaotic in the

years (1956 through 1972) immediately preceding and following the independence in 1960 (Akindès, 1996). “The country was deeply marked by all the problems of a society in crisis political (successive coups d’état), social (regionalism and nepotism) and economic. The drama of the Beninese society was one of the relation between a people and a “modern” State entrenched in the contradiction of an ongoing auto-determination and a historicity charged with a heavy pre-colonial heritage” (46). For instance, the pre-colonial kingdoms of Abomey, Porto-Novo and the Bariba kingdom resurge respectively in post-colonial political leaders such as Justin Ahomadégbé, Sourou Migan Apithy and Hubert Maga. The diversity and rivalry of old kingdoms, regions and ethnic groups continue to keep the society torn. In the post Conference era of pluralism, politicians and the multitude of political parties -120 and still counting –appeal to tribal loyalties failing to devise a national political platform.

Postcolonial Benin gives the impression of a society experimenting with the exaltation of new commencements as well as the discovery of its own vulnerability. The colonizer is gone leaving behind a land sowed with enigmas and withholding some of the keys indispensable to resolving them. In the postcolony understood here as the period after colonization (Mbembe, 2000), society does not have to suffer the colonial forms of humiliation, despise and condescension. Yet, having now to take its own responsibility, the society ignores

what it is as a society, what it wants, or where to start because it is a society oriented for the main part outward (Hountondji, 1997).

Although Matthieu Kérékou had convened the National Conference, participants declared their decisions would be binding, not advisory, and stripped Kérékou of most of his power. The Conference flanked the President Kérékou with Nicéphore D. Soglo as a prime minister during the period of transition. During this period, a national referendum approved a new democratic constitution in December 1990, permitting presidential elections in March 1991, in which Nicéphore Soglo a former World Bank administrator, overwhelmingly defeated Kérékou (Adamon, 1995).

Between that first democratic presidential election in 1991 and this late date of 2004, much has happened. The technocrat Soglo lost his reelection attempt to none other than the former military dictator, Kérékou, now in power for his second term. This gave the impression that the new democratic era is going backward and that the strong “emotions” of the Conference (de Souza, 1994) may well be dissipating. Nevertheless, the nation has regularly completed relatively democratic elections –legislative, presidential, and even the first local elections in 2003. If numbers are any indication, Benin has moved from a single party state during the years of Marxist Revolution to 110 political parties in the current era of pluralism –nothing short of an excess. The temptation of excess

also produced unparalleled exploration of the newly found freedoms of speech and opinion. To date, the media landscape comprises two TV stations, 36 radio stations, 43 periodicals and 17 daily papers for a readership less than a million people (ODEM, 2001).

Yet, a small minority of Western-educated elites still control public affairs and any hope of participative “strong democracy” (Barber, 1984) and economic prosperity for the many belongs to a “horizon of expectation [that] withdraws from us faster than we can advance toward it” (Ricoeur 1990, 213). Although the National Conference leading to the creation of constitutional and institutional framework for democracy has not evolved into a habitual public dialogue or practices of sustained common actions, it remains the major guiding reference in the collective consciousness (Banégas, 2003). That is, the National Conference constitutes one of the rare occasions the national community experienced dialogically its collective history for itself as opposed to obeying to colonial or neocolonial “command” (Mbembe, 2001) coming from outside. In fact, the dialogue of the National Conference is a public example of the “communicative praxis” framed by Schrag (1989) as a texture of discourse and action experienced *by* someone, *for* someone and *about* something. From the *between*, the Conference is then a temporally and situationally lived experience textured with discourse and action *by* the people of Benin, *about* Benin and *for* the the people of Benin. By

tending as such to what emerges as their *between* the Beninese develop a critical conscience about their lived experience. The contribution of this research to the scholarship on the National Conference comes from the capacity of the Buberian anthropological philosophical dialogue to read the signs of the kairotic moment emerging out of the Beninese *between*. Before any feather developing, the following section gives account of the prevailing interpretations of the Conference.

### III. Interpretations

The choice of the National Conference as a case study is based on the opportunity it offers to explore the communicative participation of the intellectual *Akowé* in public dialogue in Benin. As it turns out, the kind of literature available about the Conference is indicative of the communicative praxis of the *Akowé* in a culture of silence where they have the exclusive monopoly of literature production and consumption. After a remark on the nature of scholarship in a culture of silence, the section discusses the scholarship of the Conference by focusing on the following successive themes: the external factors, the local actors, the local dynamics and the models of interpretation.

#### A. Scholarship in a Culture of Silence

The tragedy of a culture of silence is the inability of a culture to speak itself, to find its own words in order to transform its own world (Freire, 2000).

However, as it opts to interpret the National Conference as a public dialogue, this research shows that with the Conference, Benin was able to speak its own word, no matter how timidly. Unfortunately, most of the studies of the Conference are conducted as a scholarship marked by the culture of silence. They fail to tend to the dialogic event of a communicative community finding its own voice and experiencing its own endogenous historicity with a fuzzy clarity. That is, they fail to account for the emergence of a genuine and spontaneous *between* that is a social formation in the unity of contraries (Friedman, 1996) of a communicative reality that goes beyond the intentions and opinions of the participants (Deetz, 1999, 146). To understand the limits of the scholarship of the National Conference, it is necessary to keep in mind the limitations the culture of silence places on scholarship.

In his account of the postcolonial situation Mbembe (2000) convincingly points out that discourses and practices of social transformation in various disciplines such as politics, development, economy and mass media are controlled by “theories of social evolutionism and ideologies of development and modernization” (7). He goes on to explain:

*Mired in the demands of what is immediately useful, enclosed in the narrow horizon of “good governance” and the neo-liberal catechism about the market economy, torn by the current fads for “civil society,” “conflict resolution,” and alleged “transitions to democracy,” the discussion, as habitually engaged, is primarily concerned, not with comprehending the political in Africa or with producing knowledge in general, but with social engineering. As a general rule,*

*what is stated is dogmatically programmatic; interpretations are almost cavalier, and what passes for argument is almost always reductionist. The criteria that African agents accept as valid, the reasons they exchange within their own instituted rationalities are, to many, of no value. What African agents accept as reasons for acting, what their claim to act in the light of reason implies (as general claim to be right, avoir raison), what makes their action intelligible to themselves: all this is of virtually no account in the eyes of analysts. 7*

The inadequacy of this kind of scholarship to comprehend the “political” in the fundamental sense of living together in Africa constitutes a serious concern. From a communicative perspective, it is a scholarship of a culture of silence because it creates a world of systematic and pervasive silencing of the intelligibility in the action and speech of the Africans for themselves and for others.

Considering specifically the interpretations of the National Conference, Eboussi Boulaga (1993) has warned of the limits of the culture of silence. In his landmark essay, *Les Conférences Nationales en Afrique Noire: une Affaire à Suivre*, he has warned that in order to let unfold the potential of the National Conference, its interpretations must avoid what he calls a “preemption of its meaning” (1993, 19). In the most part, the interpretations of the National Conference have not been able to resist this “preemption of its meaning,” this silencing of its intelligibility. Besides the works that chronicle the proceedings of the Conference (Fondation Friedrich Naumann, Gbado, Adamon, 1995), the discussion now focuses on the works that offer interpretations of the Conference, organizing the

ideas around external factors, local actors, local dynamics and models of anthropological interpretations.

### B. External Factors

Some commentators deem simple a myth the historical significance of the National Conference in Benin and the ensuing democratization process. This myth leads the people to believe that the nation invented the National Conference, while in reality the Conference was imposed on Benin from the outside, namely from France, its former colonial metropolis (Akindès, 1996). For sure, France's habitual meddling in Francophone Africa's internal affairs has something to do with the organization of the Conference. To support this contention, researchers have quoted an official correspondence between President Matthieu Kérékou's chief of staff and Mr. Guy Azais, the ambassador of France in Benin during the period of the deep social and political crisis leading to the National Conference (Adamon, 1995). This official correspondence dated December 7, 1989, made it clear to Kérékou that the French party requires and offers to finance a constitutional reform and the organization in February of the following year of some kind of national convention or "*Etats Généraux*" (States General; 22-23). This direct influence of France in the organization of the National Conference makes plausible the case that the Conference was nothing else than a renewed and more subtle form of the same exogenous historicity that

continues to dominate “time as lived” (Mbembe, 2000), discourse and action in post-colonial countries.

Most of the writings on the National Conference are good at showing that the event of the National Conference participates in Africa’s “exogenous historicity” dominated by Western times and rhythm of life (Bayart, 1993). They connect the National Conference and the 1990’s democratization movement in Africa to the “collapse of the Cold War that deprived most African regimes of international patrons who desired to use them to pursue geopolitical goals” (Karp & Masolo, 2000, 176). According to this interpretation, the 1990’s winds of democratization in Sub-Sahara Africa have blown from East Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet block. In the same line of interpretation, in the emerging post Cold War world order, democratization became a condition for financial assistance led primarily by the World Bank and the IMF. The exaggeration of these external international factors supports the view that France is the determinant instigator of the organization of the National Conference of Benin.

The preemption of the meaning is not only possible through a strategy of interpretation from outside, however, but also from within. Therefore, it is as important to discuss the preemption from the outside as it is to interpret it from within, because the description of the culture of silence and of the *Akowé*

(intellectual) elite as communicative silencer is connected to both external factors and local actors.

### C. Local Actors

The interpretations of the local actors of the National Conference concern themselves with numerous questions worth investigating. How representative are the 493 participants of the Conference? How democratic is their choice? How problematic is the fact that during the proceedings, the intellectual *Akowé* control the discussions, as most of the peasants and artisans are unable to speak French and do not know anything about issues such as constitutionality or economic policies? Notwithstanding the importance of these concerns, the interpretations of local actors are fraught with a serious oblivion as the following discussion suggests.

When social commentators discuss the roles of local actors in the organization of the National Conference, they quickly pit one group of social actors against others. As the examples discussed below demonstrate, these social commentators share the either/or logic of rationalist and modern thinking, whereas the dialogic framework of this research moves beyond such restriction in an attempt to account to the paradox, complexity and concreteness of public life.

In *La Démocratie au Bénin: Bilan et Perspectives*, Philippe Noudjenoumin (1999) provides a very telling example of this positioning:

*A purely discursive or semiologic reading of the democratization process in Benin limited to the dominant spheres leads necessarily to an over-determination of the role played in the transformations occurred in our country by Kérékou, the Head of State and by political personalities like Bishop de Souza, the Chairman of the Conference. This approach is very frequent among the political scientists and constitutionalists who dominate the world is a scientific lie [...] The advent of democracy or pluralism in Benin is the fruit of a daily struggle intense and unwavering by a civil society led during that period by the Communist Party of Dahomey (167).*

This argument deserves serious attention as it goes beyond a simply communist point of view to point to the phenomenon of mutual silencing existing in various forms of interpretations that strengthen from within the culture of silence.

As he critiques the “discursive or semiologic” reading of the Conference, the invocation of the struggle of the civil society and the peasantry serves Noudjenoumin as an interpretive pretext to claim the significance of the role played by the leadership of the Communist Party. There is no need to dispute the claim that in the events leading to the demise of Kérékou’s government, Communists were engaged in inciting various clandestine insurrections against the regime they call pseudo-Marxist. But the point to be contested here is Noudjenoumin’s implication that Communists alone hold an exclusive monopoly on understanding the solution for the nation’s crisis, without any

vision for a political and participatory invention of a community solution. This goes to show something that Noudjenoumin has overlooked in his analysis: the leadership of the “Partie Communiste du Dahomey” (PCD) is not outside of what the author calls the “dominant spheres” of influence. If anything, his strategy of interpretation mirrors the political radicalism of the Communist leaders who set themselves off against the other leaders, to the point that when, almost the whole of Benin sent, albeit hesitatingly, representatives to the Conference, The PCD remained the sole exception to claim adamantly that the Conference is a dupery, “un marché de dupes” (Noudjenoume, 1999). It is tempting to dwell on the contradictions of the PCD and its advocates. After its absence at the Conference and the democratic transition, the PCD has significantly lost its local political relevance in spite of Communist advocates of the types of Noudjenoume. However, it amounts to a mutual silencing to counter-attack Noudjenoume’s critique with another critique of the same nature.

What is the point of distributing blames or settling scores among local actors as long as the analyses are unable to interpret the historical moment of the Conference with its intelligibility and its meaning? The point in consideration here is not that authors hold different points of view in the interpretation of the Conference. Besides their contradictory ideologies, those who belong to the “dominant spheres” often fail to put to the service of the Beninese *between* their

ability of scholarly production of the type of Noudjenoume's volume or this dissertation. Because they fail to tend to a *by, about* and *for* in their scholarly endeavor, they silence each other and the "silenced communities," which is particularly unable anyway to access let alone participate in an academic elaboration. Although a critical assessment of the roles played by social, political and religious actors in Benin's peaceful transition to democracy is useful, interpretations typically fall short of accounting insightfully for the fact that the Conference brought together in a novel public dialogue a mosaic of Beninese from different walks of life and political persuasions both adversaries and strangers. Missing then from the literature is the interpretation of the historical moment that emerged bigger than separate fractions with no one able to claim its sole ownership or authorship, while it challenges everyone to rise to the occasion.

For sure, there are many things wrong with exaggerated blame or grandiloquent praises of Kérékou or Bishop de Souza, or the Communist Party of Dahomey. That other National Conferences, such as that of Togo, which have failed in their attempt to imitate the Conference of Benin has sadly proven the danger of excessive although justified accusations and blames of one another and chiefly of the regime in place. The crucial point here is that the National Conference is not about who is right, not even who did what or who invented

the term “Conference National des Forces Vives de la Nations.” The scholarship on the Conference cannot be about whose interpretation wins the war of academic argument. The National Conference is about what it means to keep the conversation going about the nation in spite of differences, contradictions and doubts. The scholarship on the Conference should be about keeping alive the spirit of the Conference in the *between*. By failing to do this, the interpretations of the roles of actors in the National Conference suffer then from a problem of misdirected phenomenologic focus of attention. As opposed to a focus of interpretation on personal or ideological agenda, the dissertation points to an articulation of the *by* of scholarship that acknowledges the limitation its situatedness in the culture of silence while focusing on the *about* and the *for* of the research. In addition to the discussion of the local actors, the interpretations of the local dynamics at work in the organization of the National Conference suffers from the same misguided focus of attention.

#### D. Local dynamics

The discussion in the literature of the local dynamics at work in the National Conference gives a clear indication of how determinant is the phenomenologic focus of attention, that is, as Eboussi Boulaga (1993) puts it, “the look” projected on the Conference, “the orientation of eyes and thoughts” (16).

One illustration of this comes from a text worth quoting in its original French as it illustrates how a misguided phenomenologic focus of attention ends up silencing the local dynamics of tradition, culture and society.

*Par cette tendance à l'extension incontrôlée, la tradition se pose en s'opposant au changement. Le pari de l'avenir consiste à en limiter l'expression. Il ne faut plus laisser la culture africaine, dans ses manifestations primaires, gérer le progrès; c'est plutôt de l'inverse que naîtra un autre type de société. Au plan politique, par exemple, elle ne peut pas aider à la consolidation des libertés démocratiques si on ne lui fait pas violence. Elle a une force de résistance nuisible à la nécessaire adaptation des sociétés face à la modernité; raison pour laquelle elle doit être domptée et politiquement réorientée.*

*As it tends to extend without control, tradition posits itself in opposition to change. The challenge of the future consists in limiting its expression. For the birth of a different type of society, African culture, in its primitive manifestations cannot control progress. It should be the other way around. At the political level for example, African culture is unable to consolidate democratic liberties without undergoing violence. It has a capacity of resistance harmful to the indispensable adaptation of societies facing modernity. This requires that African culture be tamed and politically reoriented.*

One would have hoped that such deliberate project of blatant violence on the African social and cultural dynamics originated from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Truman's Fair Deal speech, which after WWII, launched the vast modernization project of "under-developed nations." A *tabula rasa* of their tradition was the condition *sine qua non* for these nations to become modern. As it turns out unfortunately, the author of these lines is the sociologist Francis Akindès (1996, 211) writing in the series of the influential Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

This is unfortunate because in his volume, Akindès acknowledges the importance of historicity, of local construction of democracy and even of endogenous culture, which goes to show that the challenge of interpretation in a culture of silence does not depend on the kind of ideas one proffers only. It is a problem of “orientation of eyes and thoughts.” What is problematic in Akindès’ interpretation is not the content of his work but its failure to account for a *by*, *about* and *for* situated in and constituting a Beninese *between*. Besides the noted inconsistencies in his argument Akindès’ phenomenologic focus of attention is misguided. As a result, the National Conference becomes for him a simple mirage as his interpretation is unable to account for the intelligibility of the local dynamics at work in the National Conference.

#### E. Models of Interpretations

In addition to the ways of interpreting external factors, local actors and local dynamics, the various approaches or models of interpretation of the Conference demonstrate a profound malaise in the understanding of the Conference. Some researchers compare the National Conference of Benin with the one in Togo (Houngnikpo, 2001) or with the one in Niger (Frère, 2000). Other interpretations compares the Conference to other historical references such the French *Etats-Généraux*. Due to the philosophical anthropological perspective of this Buber-inspired interpretation of public dialogue, the following discussion

interprets first the anthropological models of interpretation of the Conference and then focus on “palabre,” an example of anthropological interpretation (Banégas, 2003; Bidima, 1997)

### 1. Anthropological interpretations

Banégas (2003) claims that the public space actuated by the Conference is less concerned about institutional arrangements or formal procedures of deliberations than it is about political imaginery. For him, to understand the Conference without “preempting its meaning,” the interpretation needs to become a symbolic analysis accounting for the power of evocation and the mythical significance of the Conference. To date, Eboussi Boulaga has given according to this author, the most profound, albeit incomplete, example of such analysis.

In his landmark study of the Conference, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (1993) considers the Conference as a founding act and resorts to anthropology to suggest frames of interpretation that he invites future researchers to develop, including feast, game, therapy, “palabre” and initiation (145-161). Eboussi Boulaga’s intuition is worth a studied attention. For him, the National Conference is not a technique of public deliberation easily imitable or repeatable. The National Conference does something novel to the African discomfiture that comes from the loss or break-down of the mythical-ethical nucleus (Ricoeur

quoted by Eboussi Boulaga, 1993), which from within a culture or civilization provides laws, institutions, and behaviors with their proper meaning and inner logic (163). The National Conference is a “commencement” or a “recommencement,” an invention or a reinvention of this mythical-ethical nucleus of African cultures faced with the historical challenge of modernizing without denying themselves. This challenge of the relation between tradition and modernity has been badly handled by the postcolonial situation, the modernization projects and the development programs in which local traditions and cultures are considered as the causes of underdevelopment and must be annihilated. The National Conference opens up to the reinvention of the endogenous nucleus as it puts up an intense dialogue by the people of Benin for the people of Benin and about Benin (172). To illustrate the potential of an interpretation learning to resist the preemption of the Conference’s meaning, the discussion now focuses on the understanding of the Conference as a “palabre.” This serves as a prelude to the public dialogue approached advocated here.

## 2. Palabre

Researchers claim that African pre-colonial political systems had as part of the mythical-ethical nucleus some inclusive and participatory features that could have modeled post-colonial Africa differently (Bidima, 1997; Banégas, 2003; Hazoume, ). One example is the practice of public communication called

“palabre” in Francophone Africa and “palaver” in Anglophone Africa (Houngnikpo, 2001, 86). “Palabre” is the Spanish “palabra” (word) that in French is used as the derogatory term for the word “parole.” In French-speaking Africa, *palabre* has been used to designate a verbal confrontation between adversaries who gather with the community around the “tree of palaver” (l’arbre à palabre) for peaceful resolution of conflicts involving land disputes and domestic arguments (Banégas, 2003, 165; see also Bidima, 1997).

Of course, the National Conference did not gather the entire national community of Benin around a tree and the grievances, although they include personal conflicts and ethnic tensions, reach a national proportions and touch the very question of the survival of the nation itself. Contrary to the practice of old, the palabre of the National Conference took place in a hotel with 493 representatives deliberating according to some Western-like rules and procedures developed for the occasion and speaking in French for the most part (Fondation Friedrich Naumann, ; Adamon, 1995). Besides, none of the 40-some cultures comprising the nation resonate with palabre, which in its classical form is a Bantu practice rather than a Beninese one. That is, invoking the concept of palabre to interpret the National Conference requires an important reserve. It is important to warn against overgeneralizations of the type made by Houngnikpo

(2001) who claims about “palabre” that “when Benin came up with the idea of National Conference the leadership was simply going back to history” (86).

As far as a relation to history is concerned, the palabre of the National Conference only pulls from some cultural heritage (Eboussi Boulaga, 1993) reclaimed for a communicative invention that meets the challenges of a specific historical moment of Benin in 1990. This evolving cultural residual is shared differently by most African cultures and other oral cultures and consists in the belief that a community can talk and act together its way through crisis. In this restricted sense, the popular conscience in Benin resonates with palabre as belief and practice of the performance of public conversation. The Conference and its scholarship (Banégas, 2003) have invoked additively another local cultural practice, that of “going to ajalalassa.”

When the Fon people from Abomey (Benin) “go to ajalalassa,” the family meet in the family room to talk over grievances and crisis and by doing so believe they contribute to social cohesion (Banégas, 2003). With the interpretive keys like palabre or ajalalassa, the core of any interpretation willing to avoid the preemption of Conferenc’s meaning needs to account for a whole nation finding a way to come together, with its members facing and engaging each other dialogically. The National Conference is a new kind of palabre, a new kind of “jalalassa” that surely resonates with the cultural heritage without fearing to

borrow some Western procedures of deliberation to invent dialogically a communicative practice that meets the historical moment. The adaptation of the evolving cultural residual that materialized in speeches and even in the erection of public monuments after the Conference is the “ajalala zin,” the ritual jar. “Ajalala zin” is a powerful metaphor that directs the focus of attention, not on the participant in communication, but on something else, which is between them while being of them. This visualization of a between in communication justifies the choice of a Buber-inspired interpretation of public dialogue to capitalize on the insights of “palabre” and “ajalala zin” while supplementing the limits of the interpretations of external factors, local actors and local dynamics of Conference. Additionally, the interpretation of the Conference as a public dialogue will be required to take a stand on issues of justice, equality, and pluralism in the National Conference.

Because they place the focus of attention on the power of the word shared and the common jar of the community, palabre and “ajalala zin” already have the potential for accounting for justice, equality and pluralism in the Conference (Banégas, 2003). They liberate to some extent the possibilities for contradictory debate while they still carry inequalities in societies with feudal traditions. For example, Banégas says: “What is crucial in the palabre, is to reconstitute the game of reciprocity in the exchanges that are major in the foundation of socio-

political order” (168). He adds in accord with Eboussi Boulaga that the word that engages has a constitutive role. Consequently, it is not enough to keep the conversation going, but a conversation that engages the participants and struggle as on a rocky ridge between justice and pluralism, equality and social order. A conversation that does not sacrifice social order to the justice of the individual, neither sacrifices some individual to the maintenance of social order in a society that was hierarchical and monarchal in the pre-colonial time and is still led by the “big men,” who are “monologic participants,” according the metaphor developed in this research.

Anthropological frames of interpretation could be better at avoiding the preemption of the meaning of the Conference if they account for its emergence of happening as a community communicative invention for a specific historical moment. Because this research suggests that a philosophical anthropological interpretation of a Buber-inspired conception of participatory public dialogue affords an even more insightful occasion to pay heed to the National Conference, the following section interpret the Conference as a public dialogue.

#### V. The National Conference as a Public Dialogue

The interpretation of public dialogue in chapter two has provided the research with the theoretical tools able to suggest a novel interpretation of the National Conference as a public dialogue conceived according to Buber’s theory

of dialogue. The research relies on the definition of Kenneth N. Cissna and Rob Anderson (2002, 11) who draw their conception of public dialogue from Buber's work. They suggest that such public dialogue rejects the position

*sketched by Lippman's efficient bureaucracy of planners in favor of the messier process by which Dewey trusted communities to talk a future into existence by fits and starts. When a space somehow is cleared for dialogue and when sincere communicators expect and invite it, we glimpse futures that could not have been available or even imagined beforehand.*

They go on to explain that such public dialogue can happen between two people, within a small group or a whole community. The interpretation offered here describe the National Conference according to five main features of a public dialogue in a first section. In a second section, the interpretation develops in depth the Buber's *between* of the Conference as a public dialogue.

#### A. Features of Public Dialogue

In this first section, the discussion develops five different dimensions of a Buber-inspired public dialogue and demonstrates the insight they bring into "interpreting otherwise" (Manning ) the National Conference without preempting its meaning. These features of public dialogue include public dialogue as a messy activity; trust, hope and realism in public dialogue; and public dialogue that talks a future into existence.

##### 1. Public Dialogue is Messy

First, the National Conference is a public dialogue unfolding as a messy activity that develops a trust in the ability of the national community to talk a future into existence by fits and starts. In spite of the presence of sophisticated rules of procedure, in spite of the election of a presidium with Archbishop Isidore de Souza as its chair, in spite of the creation of three committees dealing with economic and social issues, culture and education, and constitutional issues (Fondation Friedrich Naumann, 1994), the debates turn out to be poorly orderly, without direction and at times outright confused. By the third day of the Conference, the tongues silenced for 17 years of dictatorship were gathering up the courage to speak out. The subsequent denunciation of Kérékou's regime can be described as anything but a choreographed public dialogue. Increasingly, participants are fuming in all directions, denouncing corruption, tribalism, violation of public and civil liberties, deficient educational systems, fraudulent banking systems, censure of the media, meddling of the military in public life, meddling of the State in the judicial powers and the exclusion of women from public life (5).

Then on February 24<sup>th</sup>, the fourth day of the Conference, the discussions take a bold turn. They challenge the mission of the Conference intended by Kérékou to be nothing more than a consultative meeting allowing him to appease the anger of the oppressed population and providing him with concrete

suggestions to put an end to the national crisis. To Kérékou's surprise and much to the anger of his loyalists, most of the participants consider the idea of turning the Conference into a Constituent Assembly with the capacity to decide for a new legitimacy (6). At this point, the tension in the Conference hall rise to its highest level. Kérékou has already forbidden the Conference to go in that direction. Now, the former president Maurice Kouandoté, known during the early years after the independence as a specialist of coup d'état, gives the assembly an ultimatum of two weeks to carry on a coup de force and storms out of the Conference. Justin Ahomadédé, another former president, asks the Conference to take seriously Kouandoté's threat. On behalf of the military, the colonel Vincent Guézodjè opposed as well what he calls coup d'état. It goes without saying that fear and panic seize the assembly and trickle down to the whole nation. In the height of the suspense of the intensive day of Saturday, February 24, no camp holds for sure the strings of history.

## 2. Public Dialogue of Trust, Hope and Realism

The second feature of a Buber-inspired interpretation of the Conference as a public dialogue shows that, although at times the National Conference comes dangerously close to bloodshed, it manages to have some kind of trust in public dialogue informed by realism and hope. This makes the difference between the National Conference of Benin and all the other subsequent National Conferences

in Togo, Niger, Gabon, Zaire (then), Congo between 1990 and 1991 and Tchad later in 1993 (Akindès, 1996, 61). It is unrealistic to think that all the participants trust each other during the debates. The evidence points rather to the fact that in spite of all the fears, threats and the tanks in position of combat in from the Hotel Aledjo-PLM, the Conference as a whole never lost trust in the process of public dialogue.

In fact, on that Saturday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, when talks become serious enough for the Conference to exceed its simply consultative mission by becoming a sovereign, constituent assembly, Kérékou makes an unexpected appearance into the Conference hall. On that night, at 10:40 P.M. he has a private conversation with the Chair of the Presidium, Archbishop Isidore de Souza. The only thing he allows to be known after the private conversation with the prelate was his reminder to the assembly to focus on economic rather than political issues. However, it looks at this point, like nothing is going to deter the determination of the participants to the Conference. On Sunday, February 24 called "Victory Sunday," the participants vote on what they called the sovereignty of the Conference with the exception of the 17 voices of representative close to Kérékou and his Socialist Party. At that historic moment of the proclamation of the sovereignty of the Conference, the audience breaks into applause and chanting.

A voice begins signing the national anthem, “Enfants du Bénin debout,” and the whole Conference joins in singing:

*Children of Benin get up  
Freedom, at the first ray of the dawn  
Sings with a resounding voice  
Children of Benin get up*

The assembly stands up unified in spite of the dignitaries of the now obsolete regime seated to express their disagreement.

Later that day of “Victory Sunday,” Kérékou makes one more appearance in the Conference hall and declares:

*If this is a coup d'états, your decisions do not engage us. We cannot resign. You can destitute us. We cannot use public means to oppress the people. We cannot write a Constitution in the blood. It is about time to put an end to coups d'états civil and military. I cannot envision a resignation. Some people may be of the opinion that we have betrayed. In the name of the Bible, in the name of Jesus-Christ, be enlightened. May the Holy Spirit be with you. (10)*

Besides the fact that this professional military man has never had the best public speaking skills in his 17 years as president, this declaration shows him even more confused than usual. No one knows for sure what to make of it. At the very least, this remark means that Kérékou, who has the military force at his disposal, and in spite of rumors of dictators from nearby countries willing to back him in an eventual use of force, is allowing the Conference to proceed. The suspense remains about the final outcome of the proceedings. The participants only have to hope for the best continue their work of public dialogue. However, the truth of

the matter remains that a dictator who loses his legitimacy can still resort use of force if he still controls the military as does Kérékou. The Conference takes the precaution of providing Kérékou and his regime with some guarantee, such as the clause of the amnesty given to him. The Conference flanked Kérékou with a Prime Minister, Nicéphore Soglo, elected by the participants to oversee a year of transition during which a new democratic Constitution will be written and the first democratic presidential and legislative elections will be organized. Without the power of force, the Conference holds onto the trust in dialogue to combine the hope for a democratic renewal with realism and completes its work in ten days. The suspense lives on until the closing of the Conference when Kérékou proclaims these historic words:

*Today, Wednesday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1990 we call to witness the entire people of Benin to affirm solemnly our engagement to put into action in realistic manner all the decisions of the National Conference of the Living Forces of the Nation (Fondation Friedrich Naumann, 1994, 111).*

By these historic words, the National Conference makes history according to the account of most participants. The entire nation of Benin resists the temptation to seize the weapons and methods of violence and learns to talk its way into a democratic future. [I see how you are employing trust, hope, and realism here. Can you return again to the scholars in conversation with your project and lend their perspectives more intensely and deeply to what is described here? Just a

couple of paragraphs that permit their work to texture and frame this description would be helpful.]

### 3. Public Dialogue Talks a Future into Existence

The third feature interprets the Conference as public dialogue that talks a future into existence. The ways “communities talk a future into existence” is not limited to speech. Cissna & Anderson (2004, 196) add that public dialogue “identifies the attitudes with which participants approach each other, the ways they talk and act, the consequences of their meeting, and the context within which they meet.” The interpretation of the National Conference as a public dialogue is different from a study of conversation, speech act or public address.

As a public dialogue, the National Conference is a foundation of dialogic invention, a basic form of democratic conversation that thrives less on the expertise of the few than on the trust in a dialogue enabling the participative inclusion of the complex array of communication patterns, cultural frameworks and moral orders that exist within a pluralistic community at any given time (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Strike, 1994). In public dialogue, participation calls each member and diverse communicative patterns and moral orders “to be a part, take a part, and have a part (Bordenave, 1994, 37) of a new Benin emerging as a “conversational society” (Anderson & al., 1996). It is this participatory

feature of the public dialogue that this work captures with the metaphor of *participatory public dialogue*.

### B. The Central Feature of Public Dialogue: the *Between*

The central feature that this research takes from Buber's theory of dialogue is the concept of *between*. The following discussion connects *between* with the scholarship of the National Conference, then with the "common world of speech and beings" (Buber) and finally with the historical moment.

#### 1. *Between* and Research on the National Conference

Buber's anthropological philosophy of dialogue guides this communication research into an interpretive listening of the intellectual *Akowé's* communicative praxis in *participatory public dialogue*. As such, the research does not focus on the subjectivity of the *Akowé*, but on their communicative praxis interpreted out of the *between* of "man with man" (Buber). By virtue of the *between*, anthropological philosophy is a "philosophy of the interhuman" (Friedman, 16) in Benin. Buber believes "that science itself was based upon Thou—actual intuitions of Thou, but the elaboration had to do with the It" (Friedman, 5). That is, the I-Thou relation of genuine dialogue exceeds scientific methods because its horizon is limited to an I-It relation of technological dialogue. The preemption of the Conference's meaning (Eboussi Boulaga, 1993) is prevalent in the literature because of failure to pay attention to this distinction. The

“happening” of public dialogue at the Conference is based upon actual intuitions of Thou but the academic exploration necessarily establishes a technical relation with such genuine dialogue. The interpretive listening is offered in this research as an approach able to pay heed to the *between*. Following Buber, the research interprets the public dialogue with metaphors that only “point the way” to an *I-Thou* reality that exceed the language, although language itself contributes to the experience.

The interpretive listening that pays heed to the *between* does not aim at the construction of knowledge as a goal sufficient in itself. As Buber states, "I have occasionally described my standpoint to my friends as the 'narrow ridge.' I wanted by this to express that I did not rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed" (*Between Man and Man*, 1947). The public dialogue of the National Conference requires an interpretive endeavor that *meets what remains undisclosed*. It is the view of this research that the comfortable position on the broad upland of a system has led most of the researches on the National Conference to preempt its meaning, preferring a series of sure statements. The contribution of this research is to place itself on the

"narrow rocky ridge" for an interpretive listening (Fiumara) with no sureness of expressible knowledge.

## 2. The Between as Common World of Speech and Beings

Buber, the *between* is an ontological site of the *interhuman* crossed by both relation and distance between the *I* and the *Thou*. The relation between the *I* and the *Thou* never comes to a fusion, not even in the most genuine dialogue. At the same time, however, the distance of *I* from *Thou* does not mean a separation of one from the other. As such, this double movement of distance and relation constitutes the *between*, which for this reason is also called the "*interhuman*." This ontological *between* and *interhuman* is distance, relation and concrete presence through mutual confirmation.

In the extension of the *between* of into public dialogue, the *I-Thou* is expressed and experience as a *We*, the *Essential We*, in a way that interpersonal dialogue and public dialogue reinforce each other mutually. For Buber, "man has always had his experiences as I, his experiences with others, his experiences with himself; but it is as *We*, ever again as *We* that he has constructed and developed a world out of his experiences." It is as a *We* that men have built "a common world of speech and a common order of beings." The *between* in public dialogue is the ontological site crossed with the double movement of distance and relation and out of which emerge the common world of speech and the common order of

beings. The country of Benin drawn on the map by the colonizers has never felt a sense of *We* as it does through the public dialogue of the Conference. The incredible passion (de Souza, 199?) felt by a people coming together through public dialogue is well captured when people refer to the Conference saying: “we have won” [nous avons gagné] (Adamon, 1995). The National Conference is a public dialogue that affords the participants and the nation the possibility of tending to the *between* emerging in their midst as the “win over fatality.”

The Conference has illustrated a public dialogue interrupted or cumulated with intense interpersonal dialogue, such the crucial dialogues between Kérékou and the Archbishop Isidore de Souza. This connection between interpersonal and public dialogue (Arnett and Arneson, 1999) inspires this research to combine concerns with participatory communication and issues of public dialogue in an attempt to show as Buber says that only men and women who are capable of truly saying *Thou* to one another can truly say *We* with one another. It seems clear that during the National Conference, technical and monologic I-It dialogue takes place more commonly than a genuine I-Thou interpersonal and public dialogue. But the key to the Conference is to understand that in spite of the more common I-It dialogue a *between* emerges with and out of moments of *I-Thou* dialogues. In fact, *I-Thou* in the *between* constitutes the ideal communication of reciprocity and symmetry whose anticipation and

presumption make any human communication possible (Deetz, 1999) and which carries within it the potential to hold democratic societies together. It is the emergence, the happening of this ideal genuine dialogic communication that most research on the National Conference has failed to account for. Researches fail to *meet what is still undisclosed* because it is more than the procedure put in place during the National Conference, it more than the speeches and even more significant than the democratic laws and institutions that emerge from the transition period following the Conference. The public dialogue is a “happening” of a historical moment. Without understanding and experiencing this historical moment all the gains of the Conference will be lost.

### C. The Historical Moment in the *Between*

This interpretation places the *between* of the Conference against the backdrop of the historicity of a post-colonial Africa that remains victim of the violence and imperialism in “Western philosophy” (Levinas, 1999) and the “uncompromising nature of the Western self and the active negation of anything not itself” (Mbembe, 2001, 12). Africa stands out more than any other region “as the supreme receptacle of the West’s obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of “absence,” “lack,” and “non-being,” of identity and difference, of negativeness –in short, of nothingness” (4). Central in this “unreality” of the continent is the absence or lack of what Bayart (1993) calls the “true historicity of

African societies.” This is not to say that the West carries solely the blame of postcolonial Africa’s problems. As Mbembe explains further, the fact of the matter is that ever since the fifteenth century contact with Western explorers and subsequent colonizers, “there is no longer a 'distinctive historicity' of these [African] societies, one not embedded in times and rhythms heavily conditioned by European domination” (9).

During this temporally and situationally endogenous public dialogue *by* the Beninese, *for* the Beninese and *about* Benin (Schrag, 1989), the experience of historicity was not so much a linear free flow of speech, action and lived time as it was a number of fleeting epiphanies describable as glimpses in visual metaphor, traces in topographic metaphor, occurrences in temporal metaphor and echoes in audio metaphor. In Buber’s terminology, this historical moment represents a happening of genuine *I-Thou* encountering in the *between* of public dialogue. The Conference itself describes this dialogic meeting as a crucible (*creuset*), meaning a metaphoric locus to fire up –like a metal molded into a fire – and transform the nation for a “renewal.” Better yet, the Conference recuperated and reinvented an analogy originally attributed to the Abomey King Guézo ( ): If all the children of the country were to plug the holes of the punctured calabash (jar) with their fingers, we will save the nation, as the calabash can hold the water that refreshes us (Adamon, 1995).

The dissertation argues that within the undeniable dominance of exogenous historicity (Akindès, 1996; Mbembe, 2000), the public dialogue of the National Conference creates fleeting glimpses of historical moments occurring as moments of genuine dialogue “textured” with words and deeds (Schrag, 1989) and experienced *by* the people of Benin, *for* themselves and *about* Benin. This is a humble claim focusing pointedly on traces and glimpses heavy with the past brought to bear in the present and pregnant with new possibilities. Humble claim, fleeting reality, yet powerful enough to mark the national conscience, to represent a turning point in the history of Benin and set in motion the wind of democratization in Africa in the 1990’s.

The *between*, the *I-Thou*, and the “happening” of historical moment points to democratic experiences that do not find adequate expression in scholarship marked by a culture of silence.

## CHAPTER 4

### COMMUNICATIVE SILENCER AGAINST PARTICIPATORY

#### PUBLIC DIALOGUE

*Où trouver des hommes nouveaux?* Adamon, 1995

*Democratic communication presupposes the extreme of two situations. The first situation is relative to the relation between dominated languages and dominating languages. The second situation concerns the behavior between the illiterate population and the literate, that is, those to whom education provides the skills necessary to understand and dominate their living condition through writing and reading.*

Marc Laurent Hazoume, 1996

The theoretical awareness about the critical roles of participatory communication and public dialogue that chapter one and chapter two bring to the interpretation of the National Conference of Benin (chapter three) reveals that the initial invention of Benin's "democratic renewal" and its ongoing democratization process find their inspiration and explication in the *between*. That is, the *between* of the common "calabash" (jar) water, symbol of the living together of the national community. According to an old analogy reinvented by the National Conference, the punctured calabash is still able to contain the common living water provided that all the children of the nation patch its holes with their fingers. The participation of the constitution of the *between* is then situated in this acknowledgment of the holes and breaches of contradictions, differences and conflicts. The foreground consideration of the intellectual elite's

communicative praxis is dependent on this background of *between* made of dialogic coming together of differences. Notwithstanding the historic National Conference and the “democratic renewal,” the chapter claims that the character of the elite *Akowé* is a communicative silencer whose communicative praxis compromise participatory public dialogue by silencing the silenced majority.

For sure, in the democratic Benin, the drawing and the adoption of a democratic constitution is remarkable. The installation of democratic institutions of check and balance is a milestone confirmed by episodic presidential, legislative and local elections. Yet, beyond or underneath this democratic institutional achievements, the public dialogue invented by the National Conference needs to become an everyday dialogic as opposed to being confined into a constitutional script, calcified into hollow institutions or ritualized into passing electoral dramas. When the question of broad participation in this dialogic life is insightfully raised as does this research with its metaphor of *participatory public dialogue*, the focus of the research concentrates on the most preeminent participants, the powerful and the elites. From their midst, chapter four concerns itself particularly with the intellectual *Akowé* and shows that in spite of the democratic environment, their communicative praxis turns them into “communicative silencers” of the “silenced communities.”

The chapter shows first that every democracy tend to have its elites who are against it. Then in a second point, the discussion place within the acknowledgment of this democratic contradiction detailed as a “culture of silence” (Freiere, 2000) the different characters including those who silence and those who are silenced as together they tell the particular communicative story of the national community. Consequently, the third section of the chapter focuses on the particular character of the *Akowé* (intellectual) elite. Then the fourth section describes the *Akowé* elite as the communicative silencer. Finally, the fifth section describes the *Akowé* elite in the case study of the research as it interprets the silencing communicative praxis of the communicative silencer during the National Conference.

### I. Elites against Democracy

The research focuses for sure on the Beninese intellectuals, locally called *Akowé*. The chapter considers them precisely in their communicative control of the articulation of social meaning in the young democracy. This discussion relies on a critical understanding of democratic participation and searches to foster public dialogue. Such a specific scope of the investigation echoes though a wider problem in democratic experience. Every democracy, from ancient to modern times, carries a tension between the proclaimed right of the people to reign and the privilege of the well positioned to rule (Sagan, 1991). That is, “elites against

democracy!” charges Good (2000). The discussion of the chapter develops as a consideration of the disguised and unreflective opposition of the elites to democracy. For this, the section revisits first the Greek democracy, then liberal modern democracy.

In the democratic Athens, power was in the hands of rich elites (like Pericles and his fellow slave-owners) who treated other power holders with democratic deference. Although Athens’ agora and ekklesia and their public debates constitute today the paradigmatic case of direct democracy, these elites did not allow “the great majority of slaves, foreign workers, or women to enter the exclusive circle of open discussion and majority voting” (Singh, 1992 45). In his *Politics*, Aristotle explains: “the devices by which oligarchies deceive the people are five in number... the assembly, the magistracies, the courts of law, the use of arms, and gymnastic exercises.” All democratic societies have their legislators, bureaucrats, generals, sophists and sports, who dominate the people. Modern liberal democracies are no exception.

In modern liberal democracies, Walter Lippman (1922) and John Dewey (1927), Habermas (1989) and Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), arguing from antagonistic perspectives, make the common observation that the dominant voices exclude the majority lacking technical, institutional, or financial resources. This means that Aristotles’ legislators, bureaucrats, generals, sophists and sports

have their similarities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-industrial societies, with elites pushing their way into the charmed circle of representative democracy. “Lipperman-like enclaves of technically educated elites” (Hauser 1999, 27) and the wealthy reduce democracy to a “democracy of the few” (Michael Parenti, 1980), to “corporate colonization” (Deetz, 1992), to image and symbol control (Jamieson) and “hegemony” (Gramsci). This research describes this phenomenon of hegemony in democracy with Freire’s concept of a “culture of silence” for three reasons. First the “culture of silence” is an existential situation of domination more acute in “dominated societies,” such as Benin. Second, Freire’s description suggests the situation exists as well in “dominant societies.” Third, the concept points insightfully to communicative dimension of this hegemony as a phenomenon of silencing.

This situation has led Good (2000) to assert that “from the handsome, smiling Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, the saintly Nelson Mandela, the seemingly benign Thabo Mbeki, and Festus Mogae,” the problem with culture of silence is not chiefly of a technical and practical kind, but derives instead from the active opposition of the democratic leaders. He calls it “elites against democracy.” This active opposition of “elites against democracy” is according to the communication perspective of this research, a “systematically distorted communication” by “communicative silencers.” In the specific context of Benin,

the *Akowé* (intellectual) elite constitute the character of the “communicative silencers.”

## II. Characters

In addition to presenting the culture of silence and communicative silencing as a democratic problem common to ancient, and modern, old and young democracies, the seriousness of the question becomes even more apparent as the research takes the issue to the development experts, the elitist democrats, and professionals. They are the intellectual elite who play the major roles in the life of the nation and as they put their knowledge and expertise to public service, they are limited in their conception and practice of communication to being communicative silencers. The following interpretation of the intellectuals considers first the characters that tell the story of the culture of silence. Second, the interpretation describes the silenced characters, and third, it describes the silencer character in this culture of silence.

### A. Characters and Culture of Silence

The discussion describes the intellectuals as a character type among many other types. According to MacIntyre (), “individuals” and “social roles” embody differently cultural values: the former by way of their subjective intentions and the later through objective social functions. Character type expresses and embodies cultural values by fusing the individuals and social roles. A character

“furnishes them with a cultural and moral ideal.” The research finds interesting not only MacIntyre’s description of character but also the connection he works out between character types and the culture they shape. The author indicates that “what is specific to each culture is in large and in its central part what is specific to its stock of characters” (28). According to the context of MacIntyre’s essay, characters of the aesthete, the manager, the therapist and the bureaucrat illustrate what is specific in modern western culture. In the context of this interpretation character types such as the *Akowé*, the Graduate without work, the “Third World Country Woman” (Spivak) and the “Vidomègon,” that is, the child in slave work (Agossou, 2000) tell a particular story of a culture of silence of a nation engaged in a democratization process.

Among these character types that point to what is specific in the Beninese culture of silence that compromise the strengthening of democracy and broad participation in public dialogue, two distinctions are possible. The first distinction consists of a group of characters with a communicative praxis that generates and controls the silencing in the culture. They are a privileged minority of citizens who are higher up on the social ladder because they control the power to articulate social meaning (Barbero, 1993) and cultural truth (White). The second distinction consists of characters who, contrary to the first group, make up the underprivileged communities, victim of this culture of silence.

## B. Silenced Characters

The lower levels and the bottom of the social ladder feature the majority of underprivileged who are illiterate and/or poor and for that reason tend to make up the character type of the silenced communities. In the dialogic life of the young democracy, some people are able to say more than others. This per se is not unique to Benin and actually it is not problematic as representation, hierarchy or even inequality always exists in the most democracies. The interest of the research consist rather in finding ways to point to the fact that as a matter of participatory public dialogue the majority is systematically rendered unable to participate in dialogic life. The description of this silent majority includes a certain number of characters.

The silenced communities include for example the “Third World country woman” (Spivak), the peasant, the “Vidomegon,” that is, the mistreated child (Agossou, 2000), the illiterate city-dweller. While they make up the majority of the poor and illiterate population, they constitute heterogeneous communities crossed by inequality. That is, among silenced characters some are more silenced than others and some can silence others while ultimately they are silenced by those who control at least internally the power of enunciation in a culture which is itself a culture of silence.

The silencing of characters and communities explains the fact that “movements or tendencies for popular change face crippling difficulties” (Good, 2002). The role of the African masses has been reduced to that of mute accompaniments – ‘paid extras’ at best – in the crowd scenes organized by the kleptocrats. Their induced muteness has made it very difficult, almost impossible, for any concept of citizenship to develop. The silencing results in the ‘weakness of the social formations’ on which the state rests. But this is profoundly a two-way affair, an interrelationship in which the rulers play the determinant role. Corrupt and autocratic elites have a deeply debilitating affect on the mass of the people. Autocratic elites foster popular passivity, and perpetuate themselves more comfortably upon it. Silence is the hand-maid of elitism and ultimately the cloak of tyranny, even when an electoral politics exists. The democratic experience of Benin has demonstrated that once the initial excitement of the National Conference and the peaceful transition has weakened, public opinion awakened to the reality that the new ruling elites of the democratic context had the potential to be just as autocratic as their colonial and dictatorial predecessors.

### C. Silencer Characters

The silencer characters are the ones who have the power of knowledge, position and resource to become “communicative silencers” of the “silenced

communities," the uneducated majority. In the colonial era, they were the "évolués" (evolved, "Frenchized") who demonstrated a remarkable success at European-style education, which, in turn, became a passport to administrative service in bureaucracies throughout the French-ruled West-Africa. For this reason, the colonizers qualified Dahomey as "le Quartier Latin de l'Afrique" (Latin Quarter of Africa) in reference to the famous "Quartier Latin" of Sorbonne, a place of social meeting and academic stimulation for French intellectuals (see Campbell, 39 and notes). From 1960 on, the "évolués" took over the control of the Western-style administration of the newly and rather nominally independent nation. Today, these educated still refer with pride to their nation as "Quartier Latin de l'Afrique." Local languages use the Yoruba word, "Akowe" (the one who knows how to write the letter, the paper), to name them, indicating that their character types have taken on such distinctive forms in the collective consciousness even among those without Western-style education. It is possible to distinguish a certain number of types including the military, the "diplômé sans emploi," the "fonctionnaire" and the intellectual elite.

First, the military is a character type of variable level of education enjoying a high visibility due to the presence of military officers virtually everywhere in the nation and because of their uniforms and other militarist rituals during training sessions and official parades. More importantly, with stories of numerous coups

d'état from the 1960 through 1972 and the 17-year long militarist regime of General Matthieu Kérékou, the character of the military has played a major role in the life of the nation, although the military has retracted from political involvement since the democratic renewal of the 90's. However, with a job situation of 40% unemployment (PNUD, 2003) many young Beninese dream of a military career because of the usually steady paycheck, if not for anything else. By contrast, the character of "diplômé sans emploi" is without job and without paycheck.

Second, the "diplômé sans emploi" is the graduate without work. Most educated young people identify in spite of themselves to this character that embodies very strongly how education and development fail to deliver on their promise of a better life. Particularly, the character illustrates very sadly everything that is wrong with the education system. Colonizers created the French school to groom local office clerks for colonial needs. Today, the Beninese school has basically become a machine producing the unemployed (Hountondji, 2000, 226). In these conditions, the character of the "diplômé sans employ" is not a cultural ideal to which the youth aspires, but rather a social nightmare in which end the dreams of those who represent the future of the nation. The character spends years and resources to buy into the project of modernization without at the end nothing to show for it but French language, modern clothing, manners

and cell phone to compensate the lack of success with the illusion of being *branché*. This appearance helps them save face and draws the admiration of their illiterate relatives in the village, who sometimes say “*diplômé sans emploi*” with a note of irony. Another character is the “*fonctionnaire*.”

Contrary to the “*diplômé sans emploi*,” the “*fonctionnaire*,” the government worker is a character type that bought into the Westernization project and has a job and a salary to show for it. Typically, the occupation does not usually imply productivity or creation of wealth. Many *fonctionnaires* may well have the qualifications for their positions, but they get hired usually because they have connections, while the “*diplômé sans emploi*” remains unemployed in spite of their qualifications because of job scarcity and also because they have no connections. With organized labor unions, the *fonctionnaires* have proven to be very powerful politically. When they go on strike, they can paralyze the government as was the case in the national crisis leading to the National Conference. The contrast between them and the characters of the “*silenced communities*” is that the underprivileged has no such political power except their votes, which are besides, routinely manipulated by politicians.

Although all the precedent educated are vaguely referred to as intellectuals and *Akowé*, the interest of the research focuses on the elite among the intellectual *Akowé*. The elite constitute the character the most consummate in the

process of westernization, which usually includes advanced university degrees, often from foreign academic institutions, with a variety of professional expertise. These intellectual elites tend to occupy senior positions in public administration, politics, civil society or in private practice of their profession. They are the ones talking all the time on behalf of the people. While the other characters included in the Western educated group are all “communicative silencers” at different degrees the research focuses particularly on the elite among the “intellectuals” who can afford the activity of research and academic conceptual formation. To these elite among intellectual *Akowé*, the discussion now turns.

### III. *Akowé*

The characters telling the story of Benin’s culture of silence represent a continuum going from the poorest illiterate villager, the most silenced among the silenced characters whose world has little modern influence to the *Akowé* elite, those Western educated intellectuals who, albeit a seemingly perfect “white mask,” remains physically and metaphorically “black skin” (Fanon) to some extent. While the inequality of participation in the dialogic life of democracy compromises the strength of democracy, the character of *Akowé* is the communicative silencer per excellence with the most pronounced extraversion and the strongest silencing power.

The *Akowé*’s political competence and social visibility is in contrast with

the fact that they constitute a very small minority. They are only 1% of the population according to Igué (1999). La crème de la crème among the educated, these *Akowé* bear titles like “leaders,” “elites,” “intelligentsia” or “intellectuals” as they belong to the “privilegenstia” in the word of a Sudanese novelist (Nuruddin Farrah). They are an elite group of privileged dominating the majority of the common people. They are teachers, professors, professionals, military officers and lawyers. Since the beginning of the young democracy in 1990, they have founded 110 political parties ( ). It is important to keep in mind that the exclusive monopole of privileges finds explanation in the rent system characteristic of the post-colonial conditions and the advantages made available by literacy and modernization.

The *Akowé* control powers and privileges because of a combination of the following three characteristics. (1) Knowledge: they are educated in Western school with more or less advanced degrees. (2) Position: they are higher up in the social ladder because of a professional career and/or political appointment and/or a business venture. (3) Resources: they are well off without any evident proof of personal production of wealth. For these reasons authors have blamed African intellectuals for “the criminalization of the State” (Bayart et al. 1997), for “*la politique du ventre*,” that is, “politic of the belly” (Bayart) and for “political instrumentalization of disorder” and chaos (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). The

professor Ayittey (1999) stigmatizes the incapacity of African intellectuals to use their book knowledge to help solve the continent's monumental problems while they seem content incompetence kleptomania.

In sum, Benin has a small minority of intellectuals who control wealth, knowledge and position. They dominate the economic, political and social scenes. They control discourses and communicative actions of all types: political, mass-media, civil society, organizational, development project, public administration, even traditional power structure (there is a spreading phenomenon of intellectuals becoming traditional chiefs). They are public communicators who articulate undemocratically the "cultural truth" (White, 1995) and social meaning (Barbero, ) in a society whose political life is organized around powerful, rival intellectuals and "big men" rather than social and political theories. This is why they are communicative silencers.

#### IV. Communicative Silencer

The suggestion of the metaphor of communicative silencer indicates that intellectual elite who control the articulation of social meaning creates silencing as they go about what they see as their patriotic duty. Consequently those who are believed to be silent because ignorant are framed as such not because they are but because they are not listened to.

The interpretation of the Akowe elite as a character type indicates that he is an

embedded agent in a standpoint (Harding, year) or narrative (Arnett, year) of Western education and privilege. Here lies a serious pitfall, which is the mistake of condemning the intellectual elite while remaining oblivious of the ground on which they stand, the story they share or the culture of silence they embody. The revolutionaries of Kérékou's socialist regime did not understand this distinction when in the 1970's, they stigmatized and ridiculed the *Akowie* elite as "*intellectuals tarés,*" that is ignorant intellectuals. Soglo, the first democratic president and his regime did not understand this distinction either when in the 1990's they were calling for a new leadership practices by a new kind of men (*les hommes nouveaux*) without articulating clearly the necessity of change in the background story. The distinction to keep in mind is this: it is not so much the *Akowie* elite as person as much as it is the ground on which he stands, that is problematic. To consider and condemn the *Akowie* elite as a disembedded individual would be counterproductive and would lead to the repetition of the same mistakes consistent with the philosophical error made by the West and with which this research is at least partly concerned. Consequently, with its focus on the intellectual elite, this research interprets in this culture or grand the call to responsibility for these intellectual elites. I will place responsibility on the *Akowie* as a group representing a character type, for intellectuals have embraced this model of thinking, and a call to responsibility, to an eventual change in

orientation, must be in a vocabulary the Akowe can hear.

#### A. Culture of Silence

A culture of silence is a culture unable to experience a genuine dialogue internally within itself and externally with other cultures because it is incapable “to assume the posture of one who ‘has a voice,’ of one who is the subject of his choices, of one who freely projects his own destiny” (Freire, 2000, 11). This incapacity is not “ontological” because such a thing does not exist, writes Freire. It is due to the existing conditions of domination. This condition of domination evolves in a twofold pattern.

*On the one hand, the culturally alienated society as a whole is dependent on the society that oppresses it and whose economic and cultural interest it serves. At the same time, within the alienated society itself, a regime of oppression is imposed upon the masses by the power elites that in certain cases are the same as the external elites and in others are the external elites transformed by a kind of metastasis into domestic power groups. Freire, 2000, 9*

The culture of the alienated society is a culture of silence externally and internal. Externally, the “metropolis society” prescribes its word, thereby effectively silencing the alienated society that is not worth of being heard. “Meanwhile within the alienated society itself, the masses are subjected to the same kind of silence by the power elites” (Freire, 2000, 9).

The concept of culture of silence accounts for both the exogenous and the endogenous factors of domination and silencing. Describing this phenomenon as

a culture as Freire does is particularly insightful. As such, France, the main metropolis society of the alienated society of Benin does not really need anymore to be actively meddling into the national affairs of its former colony. The citizens, the institutions and the social practices in Benin have been so deeply socialized into the domination that they have internalized and naturalized this culture. This culture is the result of “the structural relations between dominated and dominators” (44) – internally and externally.

The concept becomes a key interpretive tool for this research because of the description of the silencing phenomenon marking this culture a phenomenon internalized to the point of becoming naturalized. Freire explains that “understanding the culture of silence presupposes an analysis of dependence as a relational phenomenon that gives rise to different forms of being, of thinking, of expressions, those of the culture of silence, and those of the culture that ‘has a voice’” (44). The culture of silence situates the communicative silencer in a structural greater whole and local context, in the global and the national where in the different forms of being, thinking and speaking, the elite *Akowé* is communicatively silenced by the metropolis and while he carries over the dirty work he becomes the local silencer of the alienated mass. It is important to point out that the most silenced citizens in the silenced society is able to turn at least

occasionally into silencer of somebody else. However the epitome of the silenced that turns into a silencer is the elite *Akowé* as communicative silencer.

The elite *Akowé* is the character in the society that controls the power of position, knowledge or education and resources. As communicative silencer he is the linchpin and the hinge of this relational and structural phenomenon of silencing that is as local as it is global. In the communicative praxis of the communicative silencer resides the paradigmatic case of understanding this silencing in being, in thinking and in speaking that makes it impossible for the silenced society and its citizens “to assume a posture of one who ‘has a voice,’ of one who is the subject of his choices, of one who freely projects his own destiny” (11). The concept of communicative silencer is not stigmatizing the inevitability of occasional acts of communicative silencing interpersonally and in public dialogue due to the fact that human beings are not perfect and the ideal *I-Thou* dialogue is not possible all the time. The suggestion of the concept of communicative silencer is pointing to the systematic characteristic of silencing in a culture of silence. To show this, the discussion now resorts to the description of systematically distorted communication by Habermas and Deetz.

### B. Systematically Distorted Communication

The *Akowé* elite is the prime actor responsible of a “systematically

distorted communication” that compromise the strengthening of democracy born in the public dialogue of a historic National Conference that opened a breach of hope and change into the existing culture of silence.

Taking his cues primarily from Gadamer and Habermas’ ideas about the necessity of a normative ideal of participation in democratic conception of communication, Stanley Deetz (1992, 1999) describes the practices and conditions of domination that preclude dialogic production of meaning for participative democracy. He develops the concept of “systematically distorted communication” in the corporate context (1992) and in the context of communities and societies (1999, 2002). Undoubtedly, asymmetry and hierarchy are not by themselves problematic. They characterize some relations such as parent-child and teacher-student relations. Yet, even here, arbitrariness and abuse are unwarranted. Different from those inevitable asymmetric relations, “Systematically distorted communication” comes in many shades, but it is mainly a communicative background problem.

On the surface, “systematically distorted communication” is strategy, manipulation, and instrumental uses of communication. That the *Akowé* elite possess the knowledge of French language, Western culture, modern technique and professional expertise does not make them systematic communicative silencers right a way, but shapes their practices in distinctive ways. The

philosophical framework that forms their expectations for communication and participation orients the *Akowé* toward the social and political world in ways that make participation by the majority difficult. Their communicative praxis becomes systematically distorted and centered on “reproductive communication” as preferred approach as opposed to “productive communication.” For Deetz, “reproductive communication” is a communication of pure transmission similar to the “banking system” (Freire). From the perspective of participation in public dialogue developed by this research, the communicative silencer is a “monologic participant.” Meanwhile “productive communication” generates integrative activities and new meanings through participative mutual understanding. The *Akowé* elite contribute to such communication as “dialogic participants” among others in the terms of the participatory public dialogue framed by this work. The systematic characteristic of the communicative silencer’s communicative praxis depends then on whether the communicative background is reproductive or productive.

While full participation as normative ideal is un-fulfilled in most communicative acts, it is an ethical background requirement for democratic communication. “For to the extent that the external world or other person is silenced by the success of placing one’s position in place of conflict with alternatives, the capacity to engage in conceptual expansion and reach open

consensus on the subject matter is limited.” In Deetz’s description, “systematically distorted communication” produces a silencing of the external world and of the other person, to the point that this distortion or silencing becomes “invisible constraint” to communicative acts and is disguised as natural and self-evident (1999). One good example is the process of disqualification.

In every democracy, these invisible background constraints render self-evident and natural the disqualification of certain groups and the marginalization of certain discourses leading to “the rendering of the other unable to speak adequately, including processes of deskilling” (1999). Disqualification is the “discursive process” that excludes individuals, groups and subject matters skewing the development of mutual understanding (189). “Socially produced notions of expertise, professional qualifications, and specialization are central to disqualification. They further reproduce themselves by proclaiming who has the capacity” to qualify them or to question them (189). This one example indicates that “systematically distorted communication, then, is an ongoing process within particular systems as they strategically (though latently) work to reproduce, rather than produce, themselves” (187). In a young democracy that has at its beginning invented itself through public dialogue during the historic National Conference and needs to continue producing itself dialogically, systematically distorted communication coming in its benign form

of reproductive communication constitutes a fatal erosion to democratic living together, even more so when it is invisible.

The most important contribution of communicative silencer that makes it central to this research concerns its insight into a very specific kind of domination. Contrary to a dictator or tyrant, the communicative silencer is situated admittedly in democratic context. Meanwhile, dominant liberal democratic theories and practices insufficiently dialogic are imported from the North and uncritically imposed on the silenced majority resulting in strengthening the culture of silence and in unveiling the character of communicative silencer as an “elite against democracy” (Good). Likewise, from within the culture of silence, the sources of the silencing phenomenon are not only exogenous and Western. And the communicative praxis of other characters can be silencing as well. However, the *Akowé* elite is the hinge of reproductive communication and the linchpin of the communicative silencing. His privileged situation makes the communicative silencer unavoidable in understanding and dealing with the culture of silence. For this reason, his attachment to the North gives the communicative silencer additional justification to share into the horizon of the ego of the Western philosophy deconstructed by Levinas.

### C. Communicative Silencer as "Egocentric Autonomous"

The relation between the communicative silencer and the culture of silence is that of a mutually constitutive influence between the social actor and his cultural background. They reinforce each other through systematic distortion of communication to the point that beyond the strictly communicative dimension, the culture of silence becomes the soil of cultivation of a specific subjectivity. While individualism exists in Beninese cultures before and beside the Western silencing influence, the intellectual elite become communicative silencers because they bought into the "effort to be" (Levinas) of Western philosophy with an "egocentric autonomous" subjectivity. That is, a "self-emancipating ego necessarily allergic to the other, precisely on the ground of its effort to be, which manifests itself as relentless and unending struggle toward *self-establishment and self-development in self-responsibility*" (Burggraeve, 2002, 50) (Reading from TI and DEHH).

In the horizon of the ego, "knowledge appears as power or more specifically as power over one's fellow person. The ego's passage from distinct, separate individuals to a freedom obtained by means of the idea of others *in general* means not only that ego understands them -no doubt in all innocence -but also that it takes them in hand, controls them, possesses them, suspending their freedom without actually depriving them of their real difference (DEHH) 59. This serious implication of knowledge as power of totalization and destructive

com-prehension of the other and of the world is even more destructive in the culture of silence. It put the intellectual elite in the most awkward position in his navigation between the external factors and local dynamisms of silencing as his subjectivity of ego-centered autonomous pretends and is expected to bring the light of enlightenment into the "darkness of Africa." Meanwhile, what he brings in fact is the fire of destruction, silent disruption with invisible traces –no doubt in all innocence. It is crucial to bear in mind the capacity of destruction of the Western "effort to be." The following example of the Heidegger controversy illustrates the risks hidden in Western philosophy. Heidegger embodies the Western ego-centric autonomy with the most pervasive and allusive contagion.

Levinas discusses the case of Heidegger's connection to Hitlerism. The significance for this interpretation amounts to a warning that Hitler and more insidious, Heidegger are not a chance event, an *accident de route* in "axiology of being." When talking about the "Heidegger controversy" as it has come to be called people claim without proof that there was an explicit connection between Heidegger's ontology and Hitlerian racism. According to Levinas, that may not be the case. He goes on to offer a reading more nuanced and more poignant all the same. For him, the "Heidegger case" manifests how the "diabolical" is "malicious" and "intelligent" because "it infiltrates wherever it wishes" (CCH 83). And this infiltration can find its way into a thinking without being noticed. "In

this sense, the diabolic can take hold of a thinking without calling attention to its contagion. Thus, while there is no explicit connection between Heidegger's ontology and Hitlerian racism, one can not rule out the disturbing possibility of a hidden, unwilled but no less real affinity between the two" (Burggraeve, 61). Considering Heidegger's sympathy for the National Socialism expressed in 1933 while he was the Rector of the university of Freiburg and in 1936 in Rome; considering his silence about the extermination camp in the 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*, published after his death, Levinas asks a terrifying question. "But to remain calmly silent about the gas chambers and death camps, does this not testify -all poor excuses aside -to a mindset completely closed to all sensitivity and thus in agreement with the horrible? (CCH 83).

The point here was not to demonize the West or the North. It is however an attempt to challenge the intellectual elite. Since it is from the West that they bring theories and ideas that fascinate the culture of silence, it was crucial to ponder about their awareness of the "malicious," the "diabolic" that infect subjectivities in the culture of silence not as a chance event, but as a constitutive part of everything good that the West has to offer. The next section illustrates how the malicious infect the National Conference without calling attention to its contagion.

##### V. Interpretation of the Conference

In the trajectory of their development, cultures of civilizations reveal their genius through a set of achievements through which they participate in their distinctiveness in the human race. The Greek among other things, have given democracy to the humanity and the Romans have perfected the codification of laws. According to Eboussi Boulaga (1993), Benin has given the human a model of political peaceful transition with its National Conference. The historic significance of this public dialogue is not contestable. Yet, the malicious contagion of the Western forces of silencing have insidiously compromise the effort of the Conference to break the culture of silence, making the Conference a mixt blessing. The interpretation discusses first the imagery of the whole report and then focuses on three different kinds of metaphors or central concepts.

#### A. The Imagery of the Report

During the official closing ceremony on February 28, 1990, the Professor Albert Tevoedjre, the spokesperson delivered to the participants of the Conference and to the whole nation following live on radio and television, a summary report acclaimed for its rhetorical power. The report functions rhetorically to offer the nation's standpoint and clarity of vision, at least to those who speak French and to the diplomatic representations that the discourse addressed in English and in German. The following excerpt is an evocative summary of the nation's consciousness of its journey through history not only

after 17 years of oppression, but all together after 30 years of independence from France.

“You have said and I remind you,” declared the spokesperson, indicating his attempt to interpret faithfully the discussions, intentions and emotions of the Public Dialogue. His interpretation of the public dialogue provides the evidence that the nation through the participants had some awareness of the silencing of the other and of the subject matter. He speaks the voice of a silenced society when he says:

*‘Money is our master no more.’ In fact, turning the back to our history and geography, to our arts and skill we refuse to grow from our being and our resources. Preferring the immediate gain of a few to the long term of everyone, we chose to broaden momentarily the small circle of the privileged and we continue to stifle the energy of the majority. Turned into our master, money dictated to us all sorts of extravagance, wickedness and excess. Because we want money by all means, we put ourselves in the danger of sacrificing our authentic culture, our freedom, our sense of respect and our family values.*

In the case of Benin, the silencing that Freire describes as silencing in the being, the thinking and the speaking comes in terms of silencing of “our” history, geography, arts, skills and resources. That the long term common good is sacrificed for the immediate gain of a few is a form of silencing as well. And the report continues:

*Verres and Cartilina loomed up from everywhere and we were lacking in Cicero who would denounce the scandals accumulating. Nero established himself with ever more arrogance, which meant the hour of martyrdom has come...We became assassins of our own values. Once Abel disappeared, we could no longer sleep.*

*The eye lit up in the night of our shame and let us to the National Conference of the Living Forces of the de la Nation.*

The beauty of the imagery reveals and conceals by the same breath. It reveals a clear understanding of the role of the intellectual elites who are the Beninese Cain, Nero, Verres and Catilina. However the imagery conceals the effect of silencing as the images used do not speak to the majority of the people.

### B. Abel

The official report invokes *Abel* to characterize the victims in Benin. There are three dimensions to *Abel*: the powerless, “our own values” and our “we.” First, the victims are all the powerless “martyrs” that the Beninese Neros and Cains have exploited, sent into exile, imprisoned, tortured and murdered. “We continue to stifle the energy of the majority.” Along with this silenced and martyred majority, *Abel* is secondly the personification of “our authentic culture, our freedom, our sense of respect and our family values” that we have sacrificed. More inclusively and more insightfully, the third dimension of *Abel* is the ‘we’ as in “we refuse to grow from our being and our resources.” The assassinations and the stifling of the energy of the majority turn out to be the martyrdom of the national collective being. For sure, during the extremely intense debates of the Conference the ‘we’ functions as a rhetorical device to coop with the understandable risk of excessive finger pointing that would have jeopardized the hope for peaceful reforms, given the fact that no matter how weak, the

oppressive regime was still in power during the Conference. More than a rhetorical tactic, the martyred *Abel* as *we* is reminiscent of Buber's "*between*" and "essential We-ness," the interhuman locus of communal responsibility that makes the Conference a public dialogue for reconciliation, not a trial for the condemnation of *Verres, Catilina, Nero* and *Cain*.

### C. Verres, Catilina, Nero and Cain

Verres, Catilina, Nero and Cain are personifications of the "small circle of the privileged," who are "arrogant" and "assassins." They are Beninese versions of infamous figures in Roman and Biblical stories. Caius Verres was a late Antiquity Roman of noble birth, but notorious for his crimes and exactions in the civil war and in the offices he held. Lucius Catilina was an equally dubious Roman politician infamous for his conspiracy to attack and destroy Rome by the use of force. Remembered in history as a cruel Roman emperor, Nero ascended to and fell from the imperial throne in the midst of criminal intrigues, only to die in disgrace (Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities). Before Verres, Catilina and Nero, Cain in fourth chapter of the book of Genesis has personified fratricidal jealousy in human consciousness. The Conference and its report invoke these figures to name metaphorically the dignitaries of the dying socialist regime and other accomplices who have perpetrated all sorts of fratricidal and public crimes. The *Akowé* elite occupy a preeminent position among them.

#### D. Cicero

While “Verres and Cartilina loomed up from everywhere we were lacking in Cicero who would denounce the scandals accumulating,” says the report. Historically, Cicero was the leading prosecutor against both Verres and Cartilina. Here, Cicero is the figure of those *Akowé* elite who belong to the small circle of privileged, and yet use their professional skills and their position as public officials to denounce scandals and correct wrongs. Such figures were lacking before the Conference and are still lacking. The Conference is doing Cicero-like work with the notable difference that it is less a trial than it is a public dialogue.

As a public dialogue, the Conference is a placing of the victims of violence and the perpetrators of violence in a dialogic relation, which removes the focus of attention and care from either to place it on the between that is communicatively emerging. However, for all its success, the Conference remains caught up in a logic of a culture of silence. While a Cicero-like Albert Tevoedjre reminds the nation that we “have turned our back to our values,” he invokes foreign historical figures like Verres, Catilina and Nero with whom the illiterate majority and even some literate cannot identify. This results in a sad irony: while Cicero-like intellectuals denounce the Verres and Catilina and defend Abel, their systematically distorted communication makes them communicative silencers who disqualify Abel from democratic participation.

### E. The eye of conscience

The eye of conscience is the central metaphor that makes the Conference look less like a trial for condemnation and punishment and more like a public dialogue for reconciliation and for “democratic renewal.” The eye of conscience is the guilt from which Benin’s Cains and by extension Verres, Catilinas and Neros cannot run away. The report quotes extensively the Victor Hugo rendition of the biblical story entitled “Conscience.”

*Cain, sleeping not, dreamed at the mountain foot.  
Raising his head, in that funereal heaven  
He saw an Eye –a great Eye, in the night,  
Open, and staring at him in the gloom.*

*... As he went down alone into the vault;  
But when he sat, so ghost-like, in his chair,  
And thy had closed the dungeon o’er his head,  
The Eye was in the tom, and fixed on Cain.*

(see full text in appendix)

The “*eye of the conscience*” becomes the source hidden in the individual and public consciousness from which springs, hesitant and fragile, the signs of guilt, shame, hope and reconciliation: “Once Abel disappeared, we could no longer sleep. The eye lit up in the night of our shame and led us to the National Conference.” [ ] As politically unrealistic or irrelevant as the “eye of conscience” may appear, its importance became clear in the night of February 21, 1990 when the dictator Kérékou himself, probably not without some political calculations, pronounced a

now historic confession in front of Conference: "We have come here *to make our confession*...We must not betray Africa. If this conference fails, Benin will fall into chaos...If the option for Marxism-Leninism has divided the children of this nation, is it a crime to challenge it? ...*I am ashamed of myself*" (emphasis added – Adamon, 1995, 56).

One relevant question to ponder is that if the confession is not just a pure political calculation, then why only now? Why feel guilty now? The answer lies in the fact a historical moment has occurred, which is that which is dialogically emerging from within and puts a conscience into question with the authority of powerlessness. The "eye of conscience" is reminiscent of Levinas' (A & T 105) phenomenological description of the face, "that possibility of murder, that powerlessness of being and that authority that commands me: "Thou shall not kill." Levinas' face or the National Conference's "eye of conscience" is "all weakness and all authority." The *between* is a site of the interhuman previously described but it now appears as well that it includes the tumb and all hiding places where the eye of the conscience relentlessly follows all the guilty consciences and can convert them into responsibility.

## Chapter 5

### FROM COMMUNICATIVE SILENCER

#### TO RESPONSIVE LISTENER

*Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.*

Paulo Freire, 1970, 2002, 61.

*Dialogue not only means awareness of what addresses one, but responsibility. Responsibility, for Buber, means responding -hearing the unreduced claim of each particular hour in all its crudeness and disharmony and answering it out of the depths of one's being.*

Maurice Friedman, Martin Buber and the Eternal.

*We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than others.*

Dostoyevsky

The significance of this interpretive endeavor consists in unveiling the communicative participation of the intellectual in the dialogic life of Benin as a communicative silencer. Additionally, this chapter begins to flesh out a suggested communicative alternative for the communicative silencer with the metaphor of *responsive listener*. The chapter articulates first the phenomenological change of orientation from the autonomous ego-centered position of the communicative silencer to an ethical position of a responsive "I." The following sections work to articulate the communicative implication of such change of orientation with the metaphor of communicative listener. Finally, the third section articulates the metaphor of *responsive listener*.

## I. From Communicative Silencer to Responsive I

The articulation of a different kind of communicative praxis for the communicative silencer requires an entire change of orientation, understood here as a phenomenological focus of attention. The shift includes first a new appreciation of the hermeneutic situation by a historically effected consciousness and second, a new orientation toward responsibility.

### A. Hermeneutic Situation and Consciousness

In his essay on the National Conference, Eboussi Boulaga (1993) discusses the “hermeneutic situation” of those members of the silenced society who are without autonomy, the ones this research calls the “silenced communities.” According to Eboussi Boulaga, the silenced ones “are characterized not according to what they possess, not according to who they are, but rather according to what they lack, and what someone else makes of them, according to their dependence on someone else” (22). This hermeneutic situation of the silenced ones deprived of a position of enunciation echoes Spivak’s deconstructive question discussed in chapter one in an attempt to illustrate the irony of non-participatory élan in researches and projects of participatory development, participatory democracy and participatory communication. “Can the subaltern speak?” asks Spivak provocatively. In terms of its contribution to the debate over participation projects constantly turning non-participatory, this research, centered on

participation into public dialogue, refuses to speak on behalf of the subaltern, the “Third World Woman,” the silenced. The research refuses to add one more volume to the long list of works that study if and how the silenced, Spivak’s subaltern, speaks and participates.

The research interprets otherwise the scholarship of participatory communication informed by a Buber-inspired conception of public dialogue and operates two related shifts in focus. On the one hand, the phenomenological focus of attention shifts away from the silenced to the silencer. On the other hand, the focus moves beyond speaking to center on listening. In stead of asking “can the silenced speak?” the interpretation asks “can the communicative silencer listen?” As the interpretation places the question of inquiry on the communicative silencer, it embraces the assumption coming from the dialogic framework. The research assumes that no matter how poor, illiterate, underprivileged, or voiceless he is, the silenced speaks at the very minimum by his or her very existence. The dialogic framework affords such assumption because dialogue is as much about listening as it is about speaking. In this historical moment of excessive and exclusive focus on the “freedom of speech” (Deetz, Grim & Lyon, 2003, 58) and on the expressive dimension of language (Fiumara, 2002), the research pays heed interpretively to the responsibility of listening and welcomes the unsettling consequence of navigating with a

“nocturnal map” (Barbero, 1993) in uncharted waters,. In its difficult task of framing dialogically with and for the communicative silencer a communication focused primarily on responsibility and on listening, the research works with pioneers such as Buber, Levinas and Freire to glean clues and insights into interpreting the historical moment of the National Conference and the lived experience of the *Akowé* elites.

The historical moment and the lived experience of the *Akowé* elite shape his hermeneutic situation. While their hermeneutic situation deprives the silenced ones of their capacity for enunciation, the hermeneutic situation of the communicative silencer assures for him a hegemonic control over enunciation. Logically, the communicative silencer frames the silenced and his enunciation or participation, while simultaneously solidifying the culture of silence. This explains the communicative praxis of the communicative silencer. That is, the character of the intellectual elite is a communicative silencer when his “hermeneutical consciousness” (Gadamer, 1998) reduces the hermeneutic situation to a “methodological sureness of itself.” In that case, the metaphor of the communicative silencer framed by this research is reminiscent of Gadamer’s depiction of the “man captivated by dogma” (362).

The intellectual elites are not the only human beings or Beninese citizens capable of domination and silencing. Besides the truism that inequality and

injustice are universal and perennial problems, the illiterate and the poor are capable of and do silence and oppress each other to be consistent with the discussion of the culture of silence (Freire, 2000). The difference in the case of the intellectual elite, though, resides in the intellectuals' captivity to the dogmas of modernization, westernization, liberal democratization, and associated phenomena. This captivity of theirs explains their position of linchpin in the culture of silence and their role of hinge between the external and internal dimensions of this culture of silence.

In opposition to the "man captivated by dogma," Gadamer points to the "experienced man." In contrast to the hermeneutical consciousness of the former marked by methodological sureness of this consciousness, Gadamer describes for the latter a "historically effected consciousness" marked by "openness" and readiness for experience. The "orientation toward openness" (370) of the "historically effected consciousness" deepens the understanding of a hermeneutic situation where the interpreter does not control the silenced ones neither dominates the historical text with the "methodological sureness" of his research question. The hermeneutical consciousness that is historically effected welcomes the other and the historical text that "put a question to the interpreter" (369). Such was the case at the National Conference.

In spite of its flaws, namely the monopoly by the intellectuals, the historical moment of the public dialogue and the “face” of decades of suffering and oppression “put a question to the interpreter.” Historicity effected the consciousness of the communicative silencer to hear “the unreduced claim” of that hour, of that historical moment “in all its crudeness and disharmony and answering it out of the depths of one’s being” (Friedman). In such historical moments dialogue reveals itself as “awareness of what addresses one” and the responsibility to that address. Friedman adds that this responsibility for Buber means responding.

Among the philosophers who develop such sense of responsibility, Levinas stands out. The unfolding interpretation of the *Akowé* (intellectual) elite’s communicative praxis relies on his philosophy to articulate the call to responsibility emerging from the hermeneutic situation when the hermeneutical consciousness of the communicative silencer is effected by historicity for an “orientation toward openness,” that is, the liberation from the captivity of dogmas for the openness to experience (Gadamer).

#### B. Communicative Silencer and Orientation toward Responsibility

The argument of this research concerns the communicative praxis of intellectual elites unveiled by this research as the communicative silencer working as the linchpin in a culture of silence where the poor and the illiterate

are communicatively silenced. However, in spite of a culture and a horizon of experience marked by captivity and silencing, the historical moment of a public dialogue during the National Conference carries for all and particularly for the communicative silencers a call for an “orientation toward openness.” This call is not just an intellectual issue or a communicative reality. It reaches the depths of one’s being (Friedman). When the *Akowé* elite hears history, he cannot be the same. The familiarity of his captivity to dogma and methodological sureness lose their comfort when history enters them and when the face of the other emerges.

#### 1. Responsibility-for-the-Other

The crucial task of this research as a whole is not only to define conceptually responsibility in the abstract, but to engage dialogically the *Akowé* elite in a way that they pay heed to the call of responsibility. This interpretation of the Levinasian philosophy of responsibility keys in on an understanding of responsibility before and beyond interest, justice, and guilt.

In his 1982 conversation with Philippe Nemo, Levinas states: “I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does not matter to me, is met by me as face” (Levinas, 1998, 95). Responsibility situates the intellectual elite, the communicative silencer in the site of “what does not even matter to me” and yet “is met by me as face.” Levinas realistically

acknowledges that “usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself” (96), for one’s deeds, one’s interests. Such is the conception of responsibility by the *Akowé* elite who are only concerned with their interests, their pockets or “their part of the cake,” according to the popular expression. Given the fact they control the articulation of social meaning, the framing of public issues and the making of policies, their part is always the lion’s share. Democratic constitution and regulations or institutional arrangements do not lead to a different sense of responsibility. In a culture of silence with all-powerful communicative silencers, the democratic living together requires Levinas’s articulation of responsibility situated beyond “what matters to me.”

This Levinasian perspective also situates responsibility before justice. “I am responsible in principle, and I am so before the justice that distributes, before the measures of justice” (Levinas, 1999, 106). This is deliberately excessive et pour cause! For all justification for such excess, Levinas adds, “It is concrete, you know! It is not made up! When you have encountered a human being you cannot drop him” (106). The other so strongly calls the I into responsibility such that even if there are possible considerations of justice or injustice from the point of view of the I, the other is still “met by me as face” (Levinas, 1998, 95), without deliberation. “A responsibility prior to deliberation, to which I was exposed, dedicated, before being dedicated to myself” (Levinas, 1999, 105).

Responsibility before self-interest and before justice is additionally responsibility beyond guilt. It is the responsibility of one who is not guilty, who is innocent, but who paradoxically can never say "I have done all I could!" (106). The paradox of the innocent called to responsibility is completely apparent when Levinas quotes Dostoyevsky: "We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others" (1998, 98, 101). That is, the call to responsibility is a placing of guilt on the innocent. At this point, it is important to situate the call to responsibility with the face and then to explicit the posture of the I.

First, responsibility before and beyond self-interest, justice and guilt comes from the face. The face, "that impossibility of murder, that powerlessness of being and that authority that command me: 'Thou shalt not kill.'" Levinas explains that what distinguishes the face in its status from all known objects comes from its contradictory nature. "It is all weakness and all authority" (Levinas, 1999, 104-105). Responsibility-for-the-Other is the face in its authority of weakness and powerlessness saying "Thou shalt not kill." The description of the face of the other from which originates responsibility posits the I as a being in responsibility-for-the-other. The I is in an ethical position of posture for the other. Responsibility-for-the-Other is the I, "I, more than others" responding, "'Here I am,' or 'Send me' toward the other" (105).

The excessive character of this radical articulation of responsibility is all too obvious. With Levinas, the research enters deliberately into a radical interpretation of responsibility with what the philosopher himself describes as “extreme formulation” (1998, 97). The significance of Levinas’s philosophy of responsibility for this research concerns the possibility of interpreting the responsibility of the I, not as an ego-centric I, but the I-for-the-other, the disinterested I that “feels” the responsibility of “I, more than the others” to become “my brother’s keeper.” This sense of responsibility-for-the-Other comes with the potential of producing tremor and reverence in the I, in the communicative silencer. Along with the I-for-the-other, the interpretation affords the possibility of accounting for the authority coming from powerlessness, the authority of weakness in the culture of silence. That is, the silenced “Third World Woman,” or the silenced child kept into slave work and commonly known in Benin as “Vidomegon” still has a face. No matter how disfigured, desperate and emaciated is this face, the weakness and the powerlessness of the concrete face still have a peculiar kind of authority crying out “Thou shall not kill” and summoning the communicative silencer into responsibility.

The National Conference has heard this authoritative voice of weakness and powerlessness. On behalf of all the participants to the Conference and by extension all the Beninese citizens, Tévoédjrè poetically recalls in his general

report for this Conference that once Abel was murdered, the eye of the conscience opened and led the nation to the National Conference. He echoes thus, in a very Levinasian tone, the emergence of a theme that most writings and discourses on political transition, democratization, development, or social change fail to account for. The scholarship of the National Conference (Banégas, 2003; Noudjenoume, 1999) provides the clearest example of this oblivion as it usually silences themes such as the eye of conscience echoing Levinas's responsibility-for-the-other. If the National Conference has succeeded in breaking through the culture of silence in order to provide to the culture a shot at speaking itself through public dialogue, the ensuing interpretation and development of Conference have been lured back into the silencing still prevalent. "Thus, the specific particularity of the African situation is regulated to oblivion" (Serequeberhan, 1994, 34; see also Barbero, 1993). The *Akowé* elite has a crucial role to play in this situation and this research presents him or her with an interpretation of the hermeneutic situation in which the temptation of communicative silencing and the call for the election of the responsive I are intertwined as weed and flower.

## 2. Election of the Responsive I

According to Burggraeve (2002, 101), the responsibility-through-and-for-the-Other immediately invokes the idea of "election". "The putting into question

of the ego by the Other is ipso facto an election, an ordering to a privileged place on which everything depends but which is not at all an ego". The idea of election is like an awakening to the Other and in many ways mimics the logic of sense-bestowal described in *Totality and Infinity* (Drabinski, 2001, 185). It is this privileged place of election and sense-bestowal on which everything depends, which is usually difficult to account for. At the National Conference of Benin, the historical moment of the public dialogue, this privileged place has emerged.

The I put into question by the Other in a form of election or sense-bestowal "is not at all an ego." According to Arnett (2004), it is a "responsive I." Levinas and Buber frame an insightful sense of "I" shaped in response, not in agency. "Neither rejects the notion of I; each attends to a responsive construction that moves from individualism to responsible attentiveness to the Other and the historical situation" (Arnett, 2004, 76). The responsive I emerges from the election before and beyond self-interest, self-actualization, justice, innocence and deliberation. The historical situation of the National Conference and the ensuing democratic renewal "elect" the communicative silencer as "responsive I" called to responsive attentiveness to the Other. This election emerging from the historical situation frames otherwise the subjectivity of the responsive I.

Levinas describes an alienable identity of subject. "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself

for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me" (Levinas, 1998, 101). With Levinas, this research embraces this radical understanding of the subjectivity of the responsive I. There is here a peculiar orientation and focus in welcoming the election. When Levinas goes as far as saying, "I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo," he adds, "but only me! My 'close relations' or 'my people' are already the others and, for them, I demand justice" (99). It is strictly for the I that the election from the historical moment emerges. Levinas explains that his "extreme formulas" must not be taken out of their context.

## II. From Responsive I to Communicative Listener

The preceding discussion of the responsibility-for-the-other from which emerges the subjectivity of a non ego-centered "responsive I" constituted by attentiveness and responsibility to the other and the historical moment creates an ethical condition and orientation for a communicative praxis centered on listening rather than on silencing. Then again, as hermeneutic situation and hermeneutical consciousness have been interpreted otherwise, as responsibility has been interpreted otherwise, the concept of listening calls for an interpretation otherwise.

The kind of listening required in the communicative development of the responsibility-for-the-other is articulated against the backdrop of the kind of listening that belongs to the culture of silence and can only reinforce the

communicative praxis of communicative silencers. These listening theories reflect “the tendency of communication studies to follow the lead of cognitive psychology in viewing communication (and listening) as a product of a thinking *individual*” (Purdy, 2000, 47). This understanding of listening concerns itself with listening effectiveness and distinguishes measurable stages of listening behavior including, in the case of HURIER behavioral model, elements such as hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding (Brownell, 1996, 35). This research takes note of the phenomenological descriptive turn in listening study (Purdy, 2000) and relies on the Fiumara’s (2002) whose philosophy interprets listening as “The Other Side of Language,” as opposed to the “logocratic” and expressive understanding of language.

Fiumara’s “philosophy of listening” is developed against the backdrop of “a culture that in some respects has by now rendered itself torpid, can generate a vast ‘philosophical’ production concerning expression and, comparatively, very little work on the process of authentic listening” (177). Fiumara makes the case that this paucity of listening constitutes a very profound lack in the Western philosophy and culture:

*We could, in fact, construe that the absence of a philosophical analysis of listening is not a culpability of any particular orientation, since the phenomenon might be considered as the peak of a desperate and silent need, an interrogative that is too disquieting for western culture as a whole. In the dizzy affirmation of our **logos** there is hardly any ‘logical’ space left for the ‘hidden’ but essential tradition of listening. It is, in any*

*case, un-thinkable that listening be revealed as philosophical dimension,  
since it is, by now, too alien to the tradition based on expressive language.  
(Fiumara, 2002 29)*

This desperate and silent lack of listening in the Western philosophy, culture and language produces a “non-listening perspective” of a “logocentric” and “logocratic” rationality that “surreptitiously absorbs all knowledge claims with the ultimate result of silencing any ‘illogical’ voice that might be heard.” She adds that this silencing is prone to conflagration or “raging fires” of pride (45). The communicative silencer has much to gain in matter of critical awareness by pondering this Western “form of logocentric terrorism” (45).

As a hinge between external Western and now global sources and the local causes of the relational structure described as culture of silence, an irreplaceable responsibility lies on the communicative silencer. His participation in the democratic living together requires of him an ethical decision between remaining silenced and captive of the Western dogmas and “logocentric terrorism” or to become the Responsive I for the silenced ones and for the silenced culture. Because the causes of the culture of silence are numerous and shared, the solutions toward a culture of dialogue are multiple and require of all citizens to become dialogic participants. However, the focus of this research on the *Akowé* elite as communicative silencer reveals for him an irreplaceable

responsibility-for-the-other silenced, which communicatively means a responsibility to listen.

The responsibility emerging from the silenced face crying out with his authority of weakness and of powerlessness, the communicative confirmation happens in understanding the productive power of listening. "In our concern for listening a demand for change is made upon us – indeed, almost a demand for mutation. Unless we are prepared to become in some way different from what we are, listening cannot be understood properly" (165). If the demand for change should be placed on anyone, it is on the intellectual elite. More precisely it is on "I, more than the others." In this necessity lies the possibility of change, the possibility of creating a culture that can say its own work, a culture of listening.

*"If we cannot listen properly, it seems that we can no longer share in "creative thinking," and that we must confine ourselves more and more to circulating within a given repertory, or arsenal, of terms and standard articulations, which can be summoned up each time in mnemonic fashion; almost a pledge to comply with standard ways of mirroring and with reproductive thinking. The inhibition of growth begins to make itself felt, however unhalting the progress of knowledge, when thought rigidifies into the imitative reflection of current epistemological metastructures." 167*

The listening needed is one that "serves to enhance the *creation* of language and the growth of the speaking person, thus freeing humans in the making from the forced role of users and imitators of whatever language happens to be most effectively propagated in the market." (167). While everyone is silenced to different degrees in the culture of silence, the intellectual elite is the speaking

person par excellence that is called by the historical moment to help move the culture of silence to a cultivation of listening. "Listening can be a support to the hermeneutic effort whereby we seek to establish a relationship between our world and a different 'world,' between our own attitude and a different attitude which seems to be pursuing 'unthinkable' aims and using untranslatable language. No formative discourse can be 'normal' in the sense that only the force of something which is 'alien' to us, and to which we choose to expose ourselves receptively can draw us out of a restrictive paradigm" (168).

### III. Toward the Metaphor of Responsive Listener

The *responsive listener* is the intellectual elite who has come to discover that the tendency for elite to control the sovereignty of the people in every democracy –ancient and modern – is even more pronounced in a culture of silence where the strengthening of democratization depends heavily on the kind of communicative praxis his participation brings into the dialogic life of the society. The first step toward becoming *responsive listener* is the critical awareness of the *Akowé* elite about his role of communicative silencer that comes with a continual attentiveness to the systematically distorted communication silencing the other and the common world. The *responsive listener* welcomes the call to responsibility for listening to the silenced members in order to strengthen the dialogic life of a society breaking gradually the culture of silence through a

dialogic cultivation of listening. The *responsive listener* is the intellectual democrat elite who hears the call to the responsibility of listening from the authority of powerless and weakness coming from the face of the silenced other and the historical moment. The *responsive listener* “feels” the responsibility of listening as a responsive I that says “I more than the others.” It is a move away from an “individual” embedded in a Western, transmission model or narrative of participation to a responsive listener embedded in a Levinasian ethical narrative of responsibility for the Other.

#### A. Responsive Listener: a Way of Thinking

The communicative praxis of the *responsive listener* engages a way of thinking different from thinking in the culture of silence, that is, what Freire calls “thinking correctly”. “Thinking correctly is, in other words, not an isolated act or something to draw near in isolation but an act of communication. For this reason, there is no right thinking without understanding, and this understanding, from a correct thinking point of view, is not something transferred but something that belongs essentially to the process of coparticipation. If, from a grammatical point of view, the verb to understand is “transitive,” in relation to a correct way of thinking it is also a verb whose subject is always a coparticipant with the other.” All understanding, if it is not mechanistically treated, that is, submitted to the alienating care that threatens the mind and that I have been designating as a

“bureaucratized” mind, necessarily implies communicability. There is no knowing (that is, connecting one thing to another) something that is not at the same time a “communication” of the something known (unless, of course, the process of knowing has broken down). The act of a correct way of thinking does not “transfer,” “deposit,” “offer,” or “donate” to the other as if the receiver were passive object of facts, concepts, and intelligibility.

To be coherent, the educator who thinks correctly, exercising as a human subject the incontestable practice of comprehension, challenges the learner with whom and to whom. Thinking and Schrag’s by, for and about.

#### B. Responsive Listener: a Way of Speaking

The metaphor of *responsive listener*, because it aims to give priority to listening over telling in the communicative praxis of the *Akwoé* elite, tends to give the impression that the intellectual elite has no right or responsibility to speak. To the contrary, the metaphor is suggested to the communicative silencer who already controls the articulation of social meaning. As Mouffe (2000, 15) has put it, “no amount of dialogue or moral preaching will ever convince the ruling class to give up its power.” The aim of this research is to convince the intellectual elite to give up their power to articulation of social meaning in the Beninese culture of silence. The metaphors of responsive listener only attempt to invest the speaking of the intellectual elite with responsibility and listening for the strengthening of

the young democracy through a continued search for a broader and meaningful participation

Freire (1997) helps understand the significance of a speaking invested by listening. "If we don't learn how to listen [...] in truth we don't really learn how to speak. Only those who listen, speak. Those who do not listen, end up merely yelling, barking out the language while imposing their ideas. The one who is a student of listening implies a certain treatment of silence and the intermediary moments of silence" (306). He goes further to explain that those who speak democratically need to silence themselves so that the voice of those who must be listened to is allowed to emerge. "I lived the experience of the speech of those who listened and I perceived that educational work that must follow required creativity as well as humility. It is also a kind of work that implies taking risks that those who have been silenced cannot take" (306).

Likewise, the responsive listener is the intellectual elite who has become aware of his communicative responsibility in the culture of silence and who attempts to take upon himself the risk to speak with creativity, "a risk that those who have been silenced cannot take" (Freire, 1997, 306). The responsive listener understands that as the institutional arrangements in the place in the culture of silence usually give him the opportunity to speak for or on behalf of those who have been silenced, he also has the responsibility to speak with them in order to

help the culture of silence become a dialogic society that speak its way into a better future.

“Little Goodness” or Limits of the Metaphor of *Responsive listener*

The limits of responsive listener as a suggested alternative to communicative silencer come with the fact that the metaphor is a question of responsibility. The National Conference has proved that in the nation of Benin the authoritative call coming from weakness and powerlessness has received an answer, according to the report that claims that the eye of the conscience has raised from the tomb and led “us to the National Conference” (Tevoedjre, 1994). That such phenomenon is powerful enough to become the near mythical origin of the nation’s democracy should not let us to forget that it is comparable to the phenomena that Levinas calls “little goodness” (1999). He defines “little goodness” with a quote worth citing from Ikonikov:

*Thus there is exists side by side with this so terrible greater good human kindness in everyday life. It is the kindness of an old lady who gives a piece of bread to a convict along the roadside. It is the kindness of a soldier who holds his canteen out to a wounded enemy. The kindness of youth taking pity of an old age, the kindness of a peasant who hides an old Jew in his barn. (108)*

The National Conference is a national community experiencing dialogically that kind of little goodness. The call to responsibility for the communicative silencer to become responsive listener is a call to engage in the practice of little goodness

as a communicative need for the strengthening of democracy. Here lies specifically the limit of this call.

The metaphor of responsive listener should never lose sight of “the impossibility of goodness as a government, as a social institution” (Levinas, 1999, 107). The idea of responsibility captured communicatively by the metaphor of responsive listener belongs to a realm different from the writing of a constitution, the institutional establishment of rights and duties, the official and procedural deliberation required by democracy. While these dimensions of a democratic life are necessary, they require along their side the existence in everyday life of “little goodness that cannot be organized as government or social institution. If democracy needs help, it is because its conception has been reduced to episodic elections, voting machines, etc. The reinvention of democracy by every society in every age that Barber calls for needs Levinas’s reminder that “any attempt to organize human fails.” The communicative praxis of the responsive listener is a little goodness that can be called for and pointed to, but that cannot be organized or institutionalized. The call for responsive listening connects the communicative praxis of the intellectual elite with the little goodness that made the National Conference successful.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION: "POINTING THE WAY"

The interpretation of the participatory public dialogue in Benin unveils the ethical necessity for communicative silencers to journey toward becoming *responsive listeners* because the possibility of breaking the culture of silence and constructing a dialogic life depends heavily on it, although the broad participations of many citizens becoming dialogic participants is a necessity as well. Such understanding of participation points to the necessity of a constant reinventing of democracy (Baber), particularly in a culture of silence.

The historic experience of the National Conference has proven to Benin and to those countries that have at least at some point look up to Benin's peaceful transition as a model for political transition that the breaking of the culture of silence is possible and democracy depends on silenced world being able to find a posture to say its own word.

The limitations of the Conference widely discussed in the literature prove how difficult it is to break through the culture of silence. As the interpretations of the Conference has failed to understand the public dialogue that happened, the aftermath of the Conference has been losing the possibility of continual invention of the democracy as the initial public dialogue has made it possible. As a

consequence, the democracy of Benin has become like any other struggling democracy.

The interpretive listening attempts in this work hears the echo of the “hidden” and point the way to an interpretation otherwise of democracy, of responsibility, of public dialogue, of participatory communication.

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