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Schirmmacher is granted an audience with King Mlapa VI of Togo in Togoville

(Bonn, 28.01.2025) During a visit to the capitals of the two West African countries Togo and Benin, Bishop Thomas Paul Schirmmacher also took a detour by canoe across Lake Togo for an audience with King Mlapa VI of Togoville. The two especially discussed issues of fighting poverty and of corruption in Togo and of the differences between Voodoo and Christianity.

“Togoville is a traditional village,” explains Simon Tovor, special advisor to King Mlapa VI, who helped show the Schirmmachers around. “It was here in 1884 that King Mlapa III of Togoville signed a treaty to become a German protectorate, long before Togo became a French colony. Even today, it’s easier to get to Togoville by wooden canoe across the lake than by the potholed road from Lomé that skirts the water’s edge. That is why the king sent you a canoe to cross Lake Togo.”



King Mlapa VI with Thomas Paul Schirmmacher © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher

Togoville is a town and canton of about 10,000 inhabitants in southern Togo. It is located on the northern shore of Lake Togo. It was originally called Togo. Like the country, the city is named after the lake.

The history of Togoville

In 1884, the German Gustav Nachtigal signed a treaty with the town's chief, King Mlapa III, in which Germany claimed sovereignty over what became Togoland and later Togo. The range of the geographical power and influence of the King was much less in relation to politics, then in relation to religion, being the head of Voodoo cults. Very early in World War I, the French and British took over Togoland and divided the country into French Togo and part of British Ghana, on paper as a League of Nations mandate. However,

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Titus Vogt (ViSdP)
Vorderer Kamp 52a, 25479 Ellerau
Tel.: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 06
Fax: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 07
E-Mail: info@bonn-profiles.net



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the royal line remained intact even after Togo gained independence from France and became a secular republic in 1960. While the current king was being educated for 18 years, there was a regency at the beginning of this century. He finally became king in 2018 under the name Fiogon Joel Kwassi Mensah Mlapa VI.

Religion in Togoville

Togo was a German “Schutzgebiet” from 1884 to 1916, a German colony that included the territory of present-day Togo and the eastern part of Ghana. In 1916, it was taken

over by France, which, as in all its colonies, tried to impose Catholicism on the country, despite France’s strict separation of church and state at home. This led to a long struggle between the followers of voodoo and the Catholic Church, which John Paul II tried to end. The center of the struggle was Togoville, which is still a prime center for the practice of voodoo and the education of Voodoo priests, with voodoo shrines and voodoo trees in every corner. Scientists come here to study voodoo because it is one of the rare places where an entire society, albeit small, lives around voodoo, as evidenced by the daily ceremonies around the market.



Togoville © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher

While the majority of Togo’s citizens identify as Christian, there are still many practitioners of voodoo, which is at the heart of the indigenous practice of animism, the belief in the spiritual forces of nature such as thunder/lightning or the powers of certain animals. There are spells cast by voodoo priests/ priestesses using these components, and anyone wishing to have some kind of voodoo intervention gets a shopping list from the priest and goes to the fetish market.

The cathedral of Togoville “Notre-Dame du Lac Togo” was built in 1910 by the Germans as a Lutheran church. When the French took over, they converted it into a Catholic cathedral, like they did with the Lutheran cathedral in Lomé. In the early 1970s, the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared on Lake Togo on November 7, and since then the canoe and the shrine have been a center for pilgrims as “Mary at the Lake”. In 1985, Pope John Paul II visited the cathedral, where the dock for his boat, which had to be built, can still be seen. During his visit, the Pope stated that he believed that belief in Mary and in voodoo could coexist and be practiced together, as voodoo also strives for

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the eternal. He said: “Christian charity demanded” acceptance of traditional practices that were “sane, just, true, beneficial, compatible with faith in the one God.” The church, he continued, wanted to avoid “prematurely throwing away the good grain with the bad.”

This is what the U.S. government writes about religion in Togo: “The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.7 million (mid-2023). According to the U.S. government, the population is 42.3 percent Christian, 36.9 percent traditional animist, 14 percent Muslim, and less than 1 percent followers of other religions. Roman Catholics are the largest Christian group at about 25 percent of the population, according to the Togolese Episcopal Conference. Protestants include Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Assemblies of God, and neo-charismatic movements. Other Christian groups include Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Nichiren Buddhists, followers of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha’is, and Hindus are among other religious groups in the country. Syncretic Christians include the Celestial Church of Christ, the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, the Apostles Revelation Society, and the Church of the Lord (Aladura). Individuals with no religious affiliation make up less than one percent of the population. People living in the south practice a mixture of religions. According to Savoir News, 52 percent of the population, including Christians, also practice Vodou. Muslims live mainly in the central and upper northern regions.”



The cathedral in Togoville © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher

To the west of the church is the Maison Royale, a small museum that houses Mlapa’s throne and various historical relics and photographs of his forefathers and their relation to the Germans and to other African kings, which the King explained to Schirmmacher.

In 1984, Germany sponsored a monument commemorating 100 years of German-Togolese friendship, depicting two women, one from Germany and one from Togo. It was inaugurated on the exact day of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the original treaty. Schirmmacher watched the ongoing renovation sponsored by the German government once again.

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- **Photo 3 and photo 4:** Togoville © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- **Photo 5:** Arrival by boat © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- **Photo 6:** Esther and Thomas Paul Schirmmacher on the boat © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- **Photo 7:** Monument commemorating 100 years of German Togolese friendship © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- **Photo 8:** The cathedral in Togoville © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- **Photo 9 and photo 10:** Interior of the cathedral in Togoville © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- **Photo 11:** Tower of the cathedral in Togoville © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- **Photo 12 and photo 13:** Voodoo in Togoville © BQ/Esther Schirmmacher
- Report on religious freedom in Togo 2023 by the US government:
<https://state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/togo/>
- Links on Pope John Paul II's relation to Voodoo:
 - https://www.traditioninaction.org/ProgressivistDoc/A_077_JPII_Voodoo.htm
 - <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/09/world/pope-in-togo-at-start-of-african-tour.html>
 - <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1985/08/08/Pope-John-Paul-II-greeted-by-thousands-of-chanting/4025492321600/>

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