

DEFINING THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIVES OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITY IN THE FATICK REGION, SENEGAL, AND THE MONO REGION, BENIN

Erick V.A. Gbodossou, MD

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been ever-increasing interest in traditional medical practices in general, and specifically as regards their social, healing, ritualistic, religious, and spiritual dimensions. History reminds us that, with the advent of the Cartesian system, local practices have been divided, ridiculed, and repressed through oppressive laws. Despite the *progress* of science and technology, modern medicine is now experiencing setbacks worldwide.

There are several deficiencies in Africa and the third world, among them:

- the lack of sufficient medical and paramedical staff;
- the lack of satisfactory laboratories and paraclinical test facilities;
- the lack of satisfactory logistics and equipment;
- the prohibitive costs of medical services.

The Western world realizes that technology has been going at a pace which is far too fast for *Man* in his psychological, religious, and spiritual dimensions to keep up with. Modern medicine de-humanizes *Man* and involves him in controversial practices. Across the world, whenever a scientist develops a *theory of knowledge*, some logic must found the laws of it. Whatever it is we want to understand about this world has to be molded in abstract concepts and abstract laws. However we need to forsake this kind of conceitedness, for nature abhors being locked up into such theories. We can only have a grasp of nature through images, symbols, rhythms, and sound. Therefore, we are not the ones who command the way in which nature should offer to be understood. We can only guess how nature may unveil itself for us to read its signs. In studying the anthroposophical dimension of spirituality, one can notice that our usual ways of thinking, along the lines of the materialistic mode, which may be valid in the study of the dense, physical plane, are of no avail when we deal with the spiritual levels. We need to build on this first

observation and take it into account urgently in order to get closer to our understanding of *Man* as a global and vivid *Whole*. The physical body can merely be understood from the physical world; whereas the subtle body, the body of formative forces or spiritual body, must be understood from the ethereal, spiritual, and cosmological world whose laws are quite different from those of the physical world.

Following the epidemiological and socio-anthropological surveys which were carried out in Senegal and Benin, we will try in this study to expose Africa's viewpoint as regards those specific areas. On the one hand, we will see what Africa's contribution might be and consider how to prepare the Western world to welcome that contribution on the other hand. PROMETRA has had the same concerns over the past two decades and has been working at promoting traditional medicine, as well as ways in which African spirituality and religions impact the evolution of mankind and the world. Our project aims at bringing about a more judicious approach on the part of health professionals both in the U.S.A and Africa, utilizing religion and spirituality in the treatment and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities by means of deeper insight and research into the African experience.

AREAS OF STUDY

The study covers two West African countries, viz. Senegal and Benin, with specific focus on the regions below:

1. the Fatick region in Senegal
2. the Mono region in Benin.

Several reasons lay behind the choice of these regions. Despite the development of their history, from the times of explorers to the current economic expansion, through slavery and colonization, both regions have been able to safeguard their tradition, cultures, religion, and spirituality. The project location in Senegal is quite significant for PROMETRA has been operating there since 1971, pulling all the local healers together into a pyramid-like association. The association now has 500 members and is officially recognized by Senegalese authorities. PROMETRA has also been collaborating with healers and leaders of the cults of Voodoo, Tchango, Babalao, Candomble, Zangbeto, and Kouvito. There certainly is no need to remind anyone that Benin is the cradle of the Brazilian Candomble, the Haitian Voodoo, and the Cuban Santería. Moreover, the *Communauté Nationale du Culte Vodou du Bénin, CNCVB* (National Community of

the Voodoo Cult of Benin), which is recognized by Presidential decree, is a member of PRO.ME.TRA., now a non-governmental organization.

RELIGION

In all cultures across the world, religion is a concept which is only applied by and to mankind. It is one of the basic components of the elements of which man is made. According to African philosophy, the human being is a *Whole* composed schematically of five elements:

- The Physical Element
- The Psychic Element
- The Moral Element
- The Spiritual Element
- The Mind Element

The third element, the *Moral*, is the religion of man. This is where the difference between man and animals lies. This is obvious: the human being is the only creature capable of malice for no reason.

Therefore, there is a need for something to stop this innate aggressiveness. It is usually said, “The Devil dwells in religions, the criminal in jail” In Africa, there exists a multitude of religions but their symbolisms, rituals, and practices are characterized by a certain commonality as though they derived from a common source. This is the reason why, in our definition, we refer to *Religion* rather than religions. In his work *Cosaan*, Reverend Henry Gravrand appropriately wrote that the African religion in general is based on the personal and/or collective transcendence of sacred nature (1993). The initial data will be regrouped around three attributes of transcendence. Transcendence is both life and source of life.

1. It is communication: by means of symbols it becomes close and accessible.
2. It is participation: it creates among all beings in the universe a community of destiny.

Transcendence is Life

Life is a dynamism which is transmitted by the transcending power to animate material and spiritual organisms throughout the duration of their cycle. This definition deals with the origin, nature and cycle of life.

Origin: Life comes from personal and/or collective transcending power which creates and renews energy in the cosmos, endlessly.

Nature: Life is energy which animates a material or spiritual autonomous organism endowed with qualities proper to its kind.

Cycle: Life is a dynamism of cyclical character, susceptible to energy reinforcement or loss.

According to Lalaye, life originates from the sacred and makes of the person a sacred treasure.

The Nature of Life

Life is a dynamism which allows the being to emerge into existence according to the nature of the species. Life is perishable energy for material beings, but imperishable for spiritual entities. In the middle of the 20th century, Rev. Placide Temples brought into Philosophie Bantoue a new answer to a new question: the concept of *Vital Power*. A being is power. He is, in order to be power. The nature of life is not limited to a dynamism of fertility, growth, and intense communion with the other. It also requires physical and mental health, as put by Memel Fote: "life and health, life and abundance go hand in hand". Hence the importance of health preserved and recovered through healing (Temples/Fote in Gravrand 1993).

The Cycle of Life

All life in the universe is cyclical: movement of the stars, days, seasons, menstrual cycles, and animal or vegetable reproduction cycle ... African philosophy represents life in a cyclical form. Man is perceived in this huge movement of life, which derives from transcendence. The cyclical movement takes place in two main phases:

- A descending phase characterized by a loss of vital biological, but not spiritual, energy.
- An ascending phase of the cycle characterized by essential times allowing people to strengthen their vitality. The source of vital energy, transcendence, constantly procures vital reinforcement. So do other entities in their turn: the family which takes care of the young sprouts entrusted to their experience and care.

The matrilinear clan is the largest entity and the most likely to help its members in any situation. The ancestors living in the beyond are an integral part of the clan, since the same shared life flows through the body of the living and the dead. The latter use their mediatory and secondary, but always efficient, power in favor of the living who extend ethnicity from the beyond. There exist essential times allowing the youth to reinforce their vitality:

- Baptism
- Circumcision
- Initiation
- Marriage

Transcendence Is Communication

Transcendence is communication because it is immanent in the world. The sacred is in daily life, the human body, the tree with strange shapes, animals, ant-hills, etc. It is a passage of the supernatural through the natural. Through the religious, the world is perceived as a *Great Whole* where everything is structured on the basis of a common finality. The Great Whole extends into two dimensions: the visible and invisible. The visible dimension has several levels of existence: human, animal, vegetable, and mineral. In each of the levels above, beings have a material support as well as a spiritual element. The latter, the *spirit* of the visible beings, is to be distinguished from the invisible beings likely to occupy them momentarily as a meeting place with the living. A snake can be the support of an ancestral spirit: *Pangool* among the Sereer, *Dan* among the Popo. He can nonetheless make use of his own spiritual being.

The invisible dimension comprises:

- the Supreme Being;
- intermediary beings between the Supreme Being and humans; and
- the other spiritual entities.

There is no absolute separation, rather continuity and compenetration linking the visible and invisible dimensions. There is only one being in the world for the Popos and Sereers and the structure which comprises both aspects, material and spiritual. This general world structure reproduces itself at the level of each being, which possesses an outer aspect and an inner content. Man is like grass. The Popo and Sereer vision of the world will be better grasped when the hierarchical structure of the whole reality is examined. Above the Universe, there is the personal transcendence. Intermediary beings exist on the ontological level and that of action and man is located at the junction of the visible and invisible. Animals, plants, minerals, etc. are all actors in man's adventure.

Contrary to the religious Hebraic thought, where the absolute transcendence of *Yahweh* is the guiding idea of the Old Testament, the Popo religious idea – *Yahweh* – or Sereer *Pangool*, perceives the Supreme Being as immanent of His creation. According to these cultures, man has three essential means to communicate with spiritual powers:

- the Word: the power of the speech
- the Rhythm: the power of movement
- the Symbol: the power of the image.

Through the combination of the three powers, man plays his role as head of the cosmic adventure bridge, by way of poetry, dance, and magic. These different elements contribute to the creation of several rituals allowing for communication with transcendence.

Transcendence Is Participation

The whole life of the African spirit is perceived as participation in a transcendent dynamism. Participation brings about a fundamental and vital unity, and interdependence among beings, due to their common source of energy, emanating from transcendence. This has two implications. On the one hand, there is a generalized parenthood among all of nature's elements. Nature's laws are thereby attenuated or annihilated through magic and religious techniques, that is, by means of the sacred. Hence one can observe cases of bilocation, levitation, split personality, or metamorphosis into an animal. On the other hand, man claims that he himself enjoys immanence with nature, which allows him to play a preeminent role in the cosmic adventure. He is not, and this is no secret to him, the first source of Transcendence, rather the main user and caretaker in so much as he can manipulate the sacred. To say that transcendence is participation is to enunciate a truth. The sacred and vital energy spring from the transcending being and run throughout the material cosmos, the human beings and spiritual entities. Given this communal participation in transcendence, African thought believes in an intimate link between man and his environment. Thus, he keeps dynamic relationships with the mineral, vegetable, animal, and human world. Furthermore, he keeps dynamic, active, and passive relations with the triple environment surrounding him, that is the cosmic, the social, and the sacred.

- Relationship with *air*
- Relationship with *fire*
- Relationship with *water*
- Relationship with *earth*
- Relationship with *trees, animals, Pangools, Yabweh, etc.*

Such different relationships mean a great interpenetration within the group. The African art of living is participation, the deep communion with the other, and the horizontal as well as vertical groups. This kind of participation is as vast as possible. It surpasses groups actually brought together to expand and grow into the Cosmos.

SPIRITUALITY

According to the Larousse dictionary, spirituality is “the quality of that which is spirit. Spirituality of the soul for instance”. The genuine traditional African can differentiate perfectly between the image of himself and the very image he is to represent. He therefore accepts the idea of Man as a *Great Whole*. Indeed, according to philosophical, sociological, anthropological, metaphysical, and cosmological viewpoints, human nature is a *Whole*, with regard to that which is earthly (natural), extra-earthly (supernatural), and cosmogonic. Reduced to its simplest expression, the *Whole* has five basic elements.

1. The Physical
2. The Psychic
3. The Moral
4. The Soul
5. The Spirit

The moral has just been defined as *the religious* dimension of Man which can be compared to a need to constrain Man’s innate aggressiveness. We have dealt with this need as a way of being, based on the three attributes of Transcendence: life-communication-participation.

As far as man’s five basic elements – the physical, psychic, moral, soul, and spirit are concerned – it is important to underscore the fact that these are not separate entities. Actually, a seamless inter- and compenetration exists among them. The fifth element of this *Whole* is the great Spirit made up of smaller spirits which are known and present several levels. Furthermore, the African family is composed of horizontal and vertical families.

- The horizontal family is made of the father, mother, aunts, uncles; brothers, sisters, children; grand-children, living grand-parents, nieces, cousins, etc.
- The vertical family descends from the founding ancestors to the future descendants.

In this sphere of influence, the spirit plays, among others, a cementing role and has, at the individual and collective stages, many categories or levels.

The First Level Spirits

These are the spirits of the deceased ancestors. According to the African philosophy, the dead are not dead and reincarnation is a deeply held belief. Africans believe that death is not an end in itself; it is like a closing

door. There is an opening door to each closing door and people are subject to this back and forth movement because human nature is a *work in progress*. It has to evolve toward something better. The cycle of one's life being short, in order to perfect himself, man needs to participate in a number of experiences. There exist *Abikou* experiments among the Popos in Benin and the Sereers in Senegal which make one believe that, before one was born, one was already living. The experiment is carried out on women said to have *cursed uterus*, that is women who experience miscarriages or stillbirths continuously. At the third stillbirth, prior to the burial, the elders perform a ritual and make a mark somewhere on the child's body. Some time later, the mother gives birth to a child named *Abikou* bearing the same mark. This child does not die at an early age.

Another experiment leads to the belief that death is not the end. The experiment is carried out solely by a Sereer Family called Samelle. The latter lives in a small village at Diouroup, 140 kilometers from Dakar, the capital city of Senegal. The Samelles are human beings, just like ourselves, who play an intermediary role between the living and the dead. For example, someone dies without leaving a will. On his way to the other world, he visits the Samelle, leaving him with a message for his family of buried money under such a tree, or a white horse lent to such a person, etc. On their mission, the Samelles are dressed in red and never wear shoes. They never use any means of transport regardless of the distance. When they get to the dead person's house with their small drum under their arm, they deliver the message of the deceased, which always proves to be true. Most of the time, the Samelle's message is so rapidly delivered that he is the one who first informs the family about the existence of the corpse in the room. Up until now, the Samelles have always been buried in the trunk of a baobab, a big tree of the Sahel region. Thus, the first level is comprised of the Spirits of the dead.

The Second Level Spirits

These are the spirits which govern the world. This is the level where spirits consult one another to impart to the world and human beings the movement, giration, cycle, and primal energy without which no life is possible.

Obviously, despite the progress made in science and technology, not a single laboratory in the world can establish a biological difference between an organ from a living human and the same organ from a corpse! That is because the only difference between the living and the dead lies in the energetic nature guided, among others, by the 2nd spiritual level.

Science is still far from forecasting the weather with any precision beyond 72 hours! If, on the earthly level, we are so technically well advanced, we must acknowledge, factually, how far behind we still are spiritually, still delving in ashes! At least, with regard to certain civilizations.

The Third Level Spirits

This is about a coherent and well-ordered repositon of universal science, knowledge, and memory. The 3rd level is usually called *Morphic Resonance*. It is a kind of collective memory. No science in the world can prove that there exists a memory center in the human brain. In fact, the human memory is outside the individual. It is exogenous to his physical manifestation. Some cerebral neurons might play the role of a transistor connected to the collective memory. The internet network is a technological achievement which is based on similar principles. Unfortunately, the latter uses reasoning which remains a source of errors. In the Internet network, each user puts there what they hold for the truth from hypotheses and starting points for thought which are often narrow and shallow. We are too well aware today of what has become of some of yesterday's affirmations or discoveries!

Some master mediums called *Saltigui* among the Sereers of Senegal and *Bokonon* in Benin can, through some rituals, communicate with the 3rd level and make predictions which prove true over several years. As a matter of fact, a Saltigue during Khoye (a public prediction session) can predict the date of the first rain, the number of rains through the year and in his village, the quality of the season, possible epidemics, etc. The 3rd level reigns over people's collective memory after it has *filtered* and *sieved* it.

The Fourth Level Spirits

This deals with a group of 256 spirits which are well known, codified, classified, and studied within an African science called *Fa*. The latter is common in the geographical area spreading from Ghana to Nigeria through Togo and Benin. This West African area covers the former Popo-Adja Empire. *Fa* is *Afa* among the Popos, the Minas, and the Pedas; *Ifa* among the Yorubas; *Ofa* among the Gouns, and *Fa* among the Fons. The difference in names, which varies from ethnic group to ethnic group, changes nothing in the symbolism, ritual, science, and instruments that allow the Bokonon to access the Kpolih or spirits. Some use *Fa* as a geomantic system dealing with the 256 spirits to predict through the oracle to enlighten an individual, a group of people, a community, or a society. There exist 16 major spirits represented by signs. The 240 minor

spirits are the combination of major signs amongst them. The 4th spirit level is a very large domain which can be the subject-matter for further studies. There is a need to clarify the fact that each individual enters the world through one of the 256 spirits no matter what the color of their skin is.

The different levels of spirit so described are an integral part of man. It is man's spirit which remains the fifth element of the *Whole* we are. The *Whole*, as already said, is connected to everything, whether natural, or supernatural, or cosmogonic. This connectedness is also insured by other Spirits.

The Other Spirits

The other spirits are immanent in what could be called Primal Spirit. God's first breath or the Great Universal Architect's breath makes the primal Spirit. *Primal* for being primordial; primal for being *First*. According to African myths, the primal Spirit gave *birth* to the other four master primal Spirits of life's primordial elements.

1. Master primary Spirit of *Airs*
2. Master primary Spirit of *Waters*
3. Master primary Spirit of the *Fire*
4. Master primary Spirit of the *Earth*.

The entire genesis of life on our planet comes from these primeval elements, themselves deriving from Primary Spirits and engendered by the *Primal Spirit*. This is why, at its core, African philosophy holds that all people, all living creatures originated from a common source and have got to move, according to the duration of the cycle related to their species, towards that very same source. Spirits herein referred to as *the other spirits* are the cement between all the creatures of the universe and plunge them into a community of origin and destiny.

THE PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

The notion of disabled person, that is a diminished person, is a notion which does not exist in African tradition, at least in the geographical areas the study deals with. It could not be otherwise since the notion of disability is concerned with both the physical as well as the mental. Africa considers the person as a whole, a great whole stretching toward the *primal* source, towards the Héréhéréli say the Bambaras, Tantin according to the Popos, Totodji according to the Minas; N'Kon say the

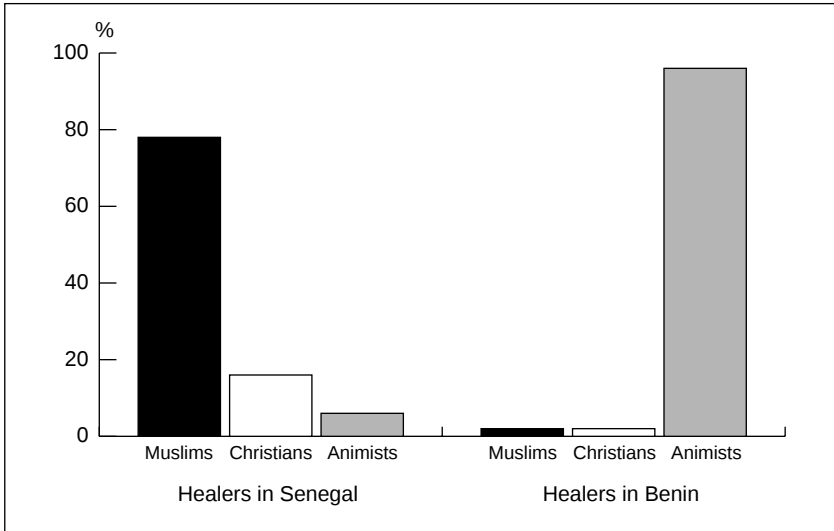
Fons and Gouns; the Wolof use the concept Ndial-Been; the Sereers using Mberadon-na.

The word *handicap* has been imported into Africa. The word objectifies a person, which is contrary to the African framework of thought in a very fundamental way. If, at all, it exists in Africa, it is primarily with regard to the task, the religious and spiritual mission of the individual vis-a-vis his community. Indeed, a woman, for example, who does not show any physical or mental alteration, no matter how beautiful she might be, can be considered as diminished due to her being *sterile*. This defect is reason enough for her to be rejected by her own. Legend has it that God made the woman and said, "Men can die henceforth, life will continue on earth." Thus the woman has, among others, the mission of procreation. Failure to fulfill this divine mission is perceived more as a *handicap* than the case of a woman suffering from the aftermath of polio as long as she is multiparous.

- *Some disabled enjoy a great deal of respect from their community*
- *Some disabilities are a source of fortune*
- *Some disabled are messengers*
- *Some disabled are a necessity*
- *Some disabled may not live with other people*

The persons surveyed via the questionnaire have been selected on the basis of the census lists of the total number of persons living with a disability and the total number of healers in the relevant areas. People caring for disabled persons have been selected after identification of persons living with a disability. Overall, a questionnaire was used with 877 healers (717 men and 160 women) living in Benin and Senegal. The quantitative questionnaire interviewed a total of 347 (178 men and 169 women) persons with disabilities, 295 in Senegal and 52 in Benin. The questionnaire addressing people in charge of disabled persons was applied to 305 men (55 %) and 246 women (45 %), that is a total of 550 persons (468 in Senegal and 84 in Benin). Interviewed persons living with a disability are either blind or physically challenged. The number of people in charge of disabled persons was higher than that of persons with disabilities. This is due to the fact that some disabled persons (minor children, deaf and mute persons, mentally challenged ones) were not interviewed while people caring for them were.

Table 1: Distribution of Healers according to Religion and Country



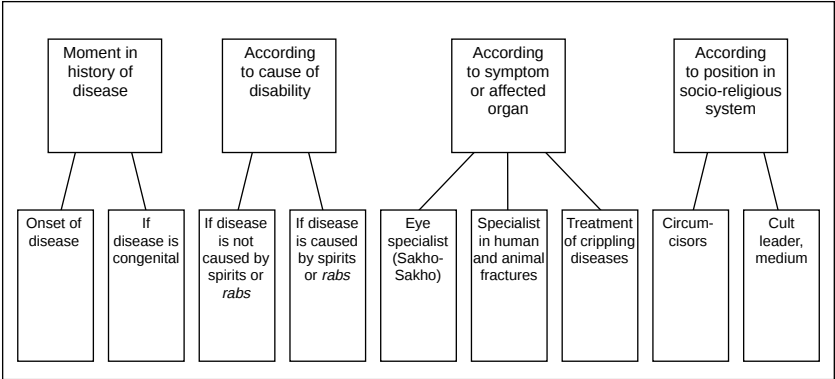
Just as is the case within the general population, polygamy is predominant among them; usually, their educational level is low. However, in the Benin sample, there is one healer who had higher education. Healers we have interviewed say they have treated various types of spastic, physical, or mental disabilities over a relatively long period of time. One of them declared: “I’ve been treating disabilities for over 20 years now.” Another one said: “I have a 39-year experience, treating disabled persons; I have dealt with all cases.” Some are quite willing to talk about some of the cases they have treated: “Twenty-three years ago, I cured 4 male disabled persons who had not been able to walk for over 6 years.”

The Types of Healers Met

Analysis of interviews we have conducted with healers reveals the existence of different types of healers according to a typology which is mainly based on the following criteria:

- type of disability, affected organ, symptoms identified;
- origin or cause of disability;
- moment in history of the disease.

Table 2: Type of Healers and Types of Disability



As regards the history of the disease, two interviews indicated that the healers involved only treated disabled persons at the very start of the disease. They had no competence for long-lasting or congenital disabilities. One interviewee indeed declared: “I treat mentally disabled persons at the onset of the disease.” Another one insisted: “I only treat non-congenital blindness.” In most cases, healers define themselves in relation to the cause of the disability. For a number of healers, only when the cause is not natural but mystical or occult can they intervene. Many of them have made declarations similar to the following: “I can treat any type of mental or physical disability caused by a spirit”; or “I can treat certain types of disabilities caused by spirits (*Rabs*) which paralyze, reduce, or misshape the lower limbs of individuals.” For some healers, the field of expertise is determined by the means available to them. A healer who can benefit from the intervention of spirits can also treat disabilities caused by those same spirits: “I treat mentally disabled persons who are under the power of the spirits (*Rabs*) who can be neutralized by the *Tuur*.”

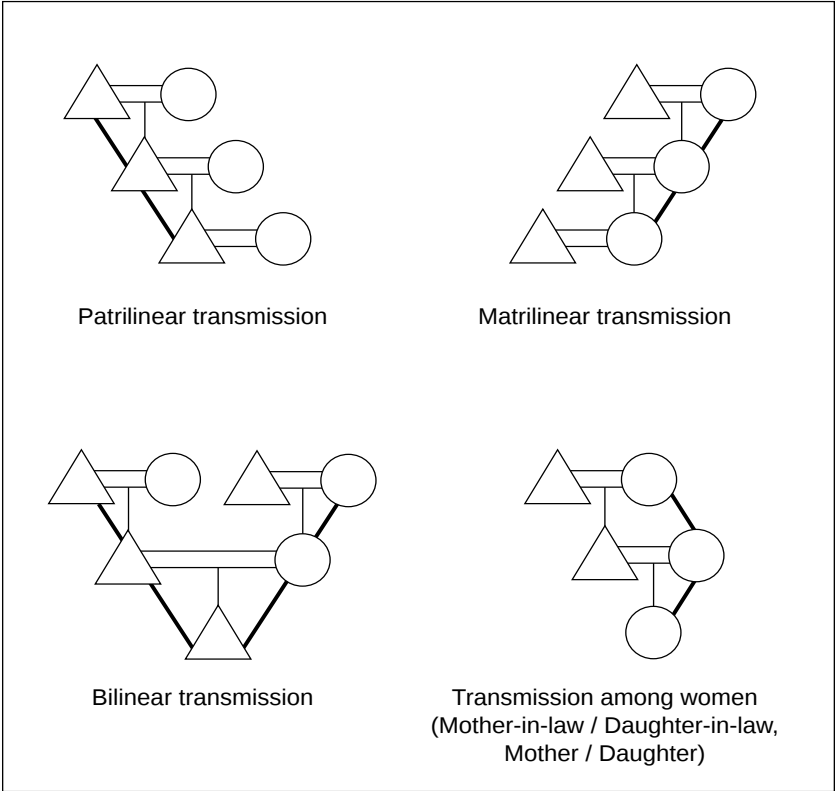
Sources of Wisdom

Healers often declare that the wisdom which helps them treat persons with disabilities is a gift inherited from their parents. In certain cases, inheriting the wisdom means inheriting the cult of the ancestors. Thus, assuming the responsibilities of caretaker of the cult upon the death of the predecessor coincides with reception of wisdom. However, transmission of the wisdom through legacy is subject to rules which are beyond the control of humans. Only spirits of ancestors can allow such trans-

mission. Thus, the ones transmitting their wisdom choose among potential recipients the person most suited – morally, intellectually, mystically, and spiritually – to be accepted by the ancestors. Clearly, the spirits of ancestors also give signs allowing the best choice possible among potential candidates: “My sons can inherit my wisdom but it all depends on the way I behave toward the cult of ancestors ... Before I pass away, the heir to my wisdom will be revealed to me.” Sometimes, the choice of the spirits is commanded by a special relationship they maintain with the recipient. When that occurs, they enter into direct communication with the person and inform them of the specific activities they have been chosen for. The following account falls into that category: “The spirits decided to endow me with the secret of mediumism. They kept jangling the clatter of cowries in my mind and ordered me to practice as a medium. The spirit (Rab) delivers the messages through my performance.”

Some interviews reveal wisdom genealogies which take up matrilinear or patrilinear lines. Thus, regarding patrilinear lines for instance, a Senegalese healer declared: “My wisdom is a legacy of the Sañaaneem lineage. I am the eleventh heir of our lineage wisdom.” Similarly, still another one summed it up in these words: “I inherited my father’s wisdom; he himself inherited his from his father who had inherited the same from his own father. Overall, there are 9 ancestral healers in our family.” Likewise, some women healers testify to their matrilinear lineage: “I inherited my wisdom from my grandmother; I am caretaker of the cult. This is a legacy of my maternal lineage.” Another woman said: “I inherited my wisdom from my mother. I will take up her role when she dies as caretaker of the cult and medium.” However, filiation modes do not exclude one another because a bilinear transmission is also possible: “I inherited my wisdom from both my father and my mother; my wisdom is a legacy of my two lineages.” Moreover, the legacy is not just a matter of direct parenthood; some relationships through marriage also participate in the transmission. The following account is quite clear: “My father’s mother used to treat this type of physical disability. My mother inherited the wisdom and passed it on to me to ensure it would stay within the lineage.”

Table 3: Modes of Wisdom Transmission



In our interviews, we have learnt that wisdom transmission is linked to totemic relationships whereby a founding ancestor was entrusted with certain kinds of wisdom by an animal. “In the beginning, our wisdom was revealed to us by wild animals, specifically by a gorilla,” said one healer. For some healers, wisdom is acquired as a counter gift, a sort of compensation for a pain or a painful sacrifice. “My wisdom is innate. My mother was childless for some time and my grandmother consulted a healer. My mother brought me to life thanks to two horns and a few incantations. I did not go anywhere to learn my job. I was born with my wisdom and the Rab taught me the rest.”

For certain healers however, wisdom is endowed by the astrological sign under which they were born. For this Benin woman healer for

instance, her wisdom lies in her ontological relationship with the star of wisdom: "I was born under a star of knowledge and wisdom. I did not have to learn, my star bestowed it to me upon my birth. As I get older, I find the way." But in most cases, legacy of the wisdom is associated with an apprenticeship which completes the initial source of knowledge. "The legacy always goes with apprenticeship. When you have a child, you transmit the wisdom to him/her so that they can take up after you." Another healer explained that he was a wrestler: "Part of my wisdom comes from the marabouts who cared for me, the other part is from my father."

Apprenticeship comes from several sources, the most frequently quoted ones being the following: Sources requiring journeys. It is the case when a healer says: "I have also traveled to increase my knowledge with other masters." Another one said: "I went as far as The Gambia to increase my knowledge." In Benin also, other sources of knowledge are sought outside of one's lineage or community. Reference is often made to an elderly person or cult leader. Thus a woman healer declared: "I had my apprenticeship with my maternal grandmother." Another interviewee from Benin explained: "We had our apprenticeship with the elected chairperson of the Vodonon Cult community of Benin. He taught us a lot." Yet another said: "I went to study with my grandparents, namely my grandfather."

Other sets of interviews indicate that the main transmitters of wisdom are persons who are in touch with the religious power, such as the marabouts, or with various other fundamental elements of nature: woodcutters with the vegetable realm; hunters with the fauna; or the Jogomay, master of the waters. One interview thus revealed: "I have also learnt from marabouts or other wise people; among them are Ma-Ansu of Silmang; Sëriñ Baara Silla, my marabout, Seex Juuf, my grandfather in Mbaamaan." Another interview gave the following details: "Amadu Buso is a hunter from Jowal who taught me a great deal; Bira Mbuus, a hunter from the Casamance region was also my master, as well as Yaya Diba, a Socé from Bounkiling. My fourth master is Jogomaay, from Ngothieline." However, whatever the form through which the healer received their wisdom, the latter seems to ultimately depend on God. The wisdom may be acquired or innate, inherited or learnt, but ultimately it is mostly influenced by the ancestors and the spirits who participate in the selection of the person elected to receive the wisdom. Yet, interviewees declared that such intervention is not, in itself, independent of God.

Social Representations and Interpretations

The analysis of the qualitative data we have collected shows that the disability is generally described not as the result of a long process but rather as a sudden phenomenon occurring unannounced. The mother of a disabled girl thus declared: "My daughter would suffer some fits from time to time. We used to take her to the hospital. One day, she fell off the bed and has been limping since then." Several interviews indicated that the disability occurred at the same time as or following cataclysms or events which at first seemed to stem from ecological phenomena or daily social or religious activities. A blind woman thus explained: "I became blind in my teens. One day during the peanut trade season, I was at the warehouse when suddenly a piece of dust got into my eyes. They started swelling and bleeding. I've been blind ever since." Sometimes, human actions occur concomitantly with the appearance of the disability. One woman told us the story of her sister: "When she was born, only one of her eyes was valid. One day, one of my brothers, who was also very young, threw a mango fruit at her from the mango tree. The mango broke her other eye and she turned completely blind." This account sounds very similar to that of another disabled person who said: "Only one of my eyes was valid at birth. As I was playing with my twin sister one day, she threw a stone which hit my valid eye. I was five years old then and have been blind ever since." Some interviews indicate that the disability occurred in a physical or social environment interviewees highlighted. A spastic woman thus declared: "One day, when I was still a baby, my mother put me down in a crowded public square. Suddenly, I got scared, my hand and my foot could not function anymore and I was believed to be about to die because of the unbearable pain."

In interpreting the causes of the disability, interviews have shown that the events or phenomena associated with the occurrence of the disability are virtually never viewed as being unique. There actually is a chain of causality which leads to the acts, events, or backgrounds associated with the disability being, in turn, determined by a series of causes relating to different ontological levels. Thus the dust that entered the young girl's eye and blinded her is a mode of existence or movement of one of a living dead *Qonopaaf*. In most of the interviews, there is an articulation of events associated with a set of causes we can put into four categories:

- the protective spirits *Rabs* who, by nature, have special ties with the individuals, families, or lineages; humans communicate with the *Rabs*, namely through the ancestral cult (*Tuur*) and renew their alliance with the spirits. Such an alliance must be permanent and based on faithfulness;

- the evil or dangerous spirits: they have no special relations with human individuals, families, or lineages. They may however establish occasional, limited alliances with humans;
- the evil spell provoked by human actions when someone resorts to mystical or occult means to hurt an individual, their family or descendants. One healer thus said: “We human beings are capable of malice and we can actually cast an evil spell on somebody to disable them”;
- God is also considered to participate directly or indirectly in the advent of the disability.

The causality related to the protective spirits *Rabs* underscores the conception according to which the Rab reacts when the special relation established with an individual or a group of individuals is broken due to a violation of the rules guiding the relationship. This occurs namely when a social or totemic prohibition is trespassed or when the practice of the required cult is abandoned. In Benin, it is believed that the spirits of the Voodoo may afflict with dementia some persons whom they are actually supposed to protect because the latter have been found guilty, through their attitudes and behavior, of a breach of the alliance established with the spirits. During the transmission process, the Rab may involuntarily cause the disability of the recipient. Interviews reveal that, if the weight of wisdom the Rab is to transmit to the elected person is too heavy, due to the latter’s physical, moral, or spiritual capacities, they may fall sick and be disabled.

The intervention of evil spirits often happens during an encounter which is generally described as being fortuitous because the man has violated the holy places in time and space, while those places are prohibited or viewed as dangerous. The mother of a disabled boy thus confessed: “Rumor has it that the spirit of the Bakojunga holy places caused my son’s disability.” In trespassing upon a sacred place, the person may commit a serious offence against the spirits and thus provoke their revenge. A blind man thus explained: “I was on my farm and I fell down a tree. In fact, the tree was the dwelling of a Djinn. I burnt up the tree and, as a result, two or three offspring of the Djinn died. According to healers, the Djinn made me blind as revenge.”

The disability may also be caused by evil spirits who like acting with malice. In this case, people believe it to be Satan’s *Seytaane* doing. Similarly, supernatural man eaters *Dëmm* may also provoke the disability of a person if they fail to eat them. Moreover, there are several relationships with articulation between the protective spirits *Rab*, the evil spirits, and the evil spells humans cast on others. The evil spell cannot be operational

unless used in conjunction with the participation of the spirits. One healer revealed: "There are some Rabs who are on good terms with Satan and they are paid by human beings. It is even possible to turn your own Rab against you and into an enemy. Rabs receive as a compensation some oxen, horses, or even human beings sometimes."

Similarly, divine or religious causes are mentioned in various ways. For instance, some persons with disabilities believe that their condition is a divine punishment because they failed to respect a religious prescription. One of them said: "My disability is a sign of destiny. In the past, I used to climb the baobab tree to pick up some fruits and everything went fine. My disability occurred the day it should have occurred, that is on Sunday, 19th or 20th of March, 1995, when I fell off the baobab. This was the fasting period, I was not fasting and Sunday is a day for rest, I was not supposed to work. So, when I fell, I immediately knew that it was a punishment from God."

The will of God is also mentioned as the main cause determining all other causes. A key informant thus said: "There are diseases which fall within the province of God and others which come within that of spirits, be they protective or human wizards; but only if it is the will of God will the diseases falling within His province occur."

However, some interviews explicitly deny the intervention of spirits and Rabs, considering only a natural (biological) cause. Even in this strictly naturalistic interpretation mold, God is viewed as the ultimate cause of the phenomena which happen along the lines of natural processes.

Reference to God sometimes leads to the thesis according to which a disease is an ordeal God imposes on us to test the solidity of our faith. This ordeal participates in relations of necessary balance which allow happiness to come after suffering, the former indeed even being a prerequisite for the latter. A healer thus declared: "Phenomena fall within the province of God, happiness as well as suffering. Both are part of the life of each individual. There is no suffering without happiness and vice-versa. One cannot be happy everlastingly. The sea has high tides and low tides, and the shade under the tree is not there all the time."

Similarly, sending a disability onto a person is often considered as some sort of *sacrifice* which is meant to protect the community from even greater adversity. In certain cases, a disability occurs when a person or a family enjoy privileges such as wealth, power, etc. which place them in a higher position than the rest of the community. The ordeal (Nattu) that God places in the face of an individual is also integrated in a logic of interpretations which assumes that all that happens to the individual was

due to happen. “Man’s fate is pre-established, while in the mother’s womb. God may act through a Djinn or a Rab, or through a wizard. A person may fall accidentally from a tree but it had all been decided upon by God from the very beginning.”

REFERENCE

Gravrand, Henry (1983): *Cosaan: Les origines*, Paris: Nouvelles Editions africaines.