

Research Article

Thinking About Initiation: Spiritual Education and Cultural Identity in Benin

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Abstract

This article, based on an in-depth ethnographic study, highlights the essential role of initiation rites, such as Chakpanna, Ochoumaré, Monlou, Oro and Hunzizon...etc., in identity-building and social cohesion in Benin, drawing on participant observations and testimonials from social actors to demonstrate that they constitute a comprehensive traditional educational process. The study underlines the importance of transmitting ancestral knowledge, respect for tradition, solidarity and courage, which are essential to social cohesion and the preservation of Benin's cultural heritage, while exploring the interactions between the traditional education of initiation rites, informal family education and formal modern education, as well as the challenges posed by modernity. The study underlines the need for constructive dialogue between traditional authorities, government institutions and civil society to balance tradition and evolution, thus ensuring the transmission of initiation rites to future generations, while opening up promising research prospects, including comparative studies with other African cultures to better understand the diversity of these rites and their role in identity building in a changing world.

Keywords

Rites of Initiation, Traditional Education, Spiritual Education, Cultural Identity, Social Cohesion, Modernity

1. Introduction

In his famous speech delivered before United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Malian writer and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ declared: "In Africa, when an old man dies, it is a library that

burns" [1], thus emphasizing the crucial importance of the transmission of knowledge and cultural values across generations. This quote highlights the central role of initiation rites in black Africa, which are not limited to a simple passage to

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adulthood, but also represent essential moments of sharing and preserving ancestral knowledge.

Initiation in Beninese culture, particularly through the vòdún cult, is of capital importance as a rite of passage that symbolizes the link between the individual and supernatural forces. This process, deeply rooted in the tradition and spirituality of Benin, not only marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, but is also seen as a social recognition that strengthens community ties and promotes the transmission of ancestral knowledge. In a context of rich ethnic and religious diversity, initiation rites play a fundamental role in the spiritual education of younger generations, teaching them not only the precepts of their culture, but also their place within the community. These ceremonies, which vary from one ethnic group to another, are key moments of sharing and learning where young people acquire knowledge about their ancestors, deities, and community values, while helping to shape their cultural identity in a constantly changing world. It is to understand the multiple dimensions of initiation in Beninese culture that we undertook this study, thus justifying our research by the anthropological importance of examining initiation, particularly in a context where modern education struggles to integrate cultural and spiritual dimensions into the formal curricula of the State. It is essential to reflect on how initiation, as practiced in Voodoo convents and in many traditional societies, can be harmonized with contemporary formal educational systems through a holistic approach that establishes a synergy between spirituality and practical learning, while respecting and valuing local traditions.

By analyzing initiation from the perspective of spiritual education, it becomes evident that it plays a fundamental role in the construction of a solid cultural identity of the human person, particularly among young people, because the rites that compose it represent essential stages in their life journey, allowing them to connect with their heritage while adapting to a world in perpetual transformation. Thus, this article aims to explore the multiple dimensions of initiation in Benin, highlighting its crucial role in spiritual education and identity building, while analyzing how it can be integrated into a more global educational approach that values the cultural wealth of the country and responds to contemporary challenges. The interest of this study therefore lies in understanding the interactions between initiation, spiritual and cultural identity, as well as in their ability to evolve in the face of contemporary challenges while preserving the richness of Beninese cultural heritage. To explore the different aspects of initiation in Benin, this article draws on an illuminating problematic and adopts a rigorous qualitative methodology respecting the ethical principles of research through informed consent, in order to analyze its educational role in the transmission of cultural values, its impact on individual and collective identity, its interactions with other forms of education, as well as its evolution in the face of modernity, while emphasizing its importance in identity formation and discussing the implications for anthropology, with future research perspectives, including comparative

studies with other African cultures.

2. State of the Problem

Initiation, a universally widespread rite of passage, constitutes a fundamental pivot in the construction of the individual's identity. Beyond a simple transition from one state to another, it embodies a complex process of transmission of values, knowledge and beliefs, thus inscribing the individual in a temporal and social continuum. Initiation, as a fundamental rite of passage, turns out to be a complex ritual process where initiation rites play a crucial role in allowing the individual to temporarily detach himself from his usual social status. This detachment promotes a profound identity transformation before his reintegration into the community with a new perspective, as Turner [18] pointed out: "Rites of passage are antithetical to existing social structure and 'subjunctive' because they invite new possibilities".

Initiation rites, the subject of study of many anthropologists and sociologists, mark a passage from one state to another, often associated with the entry into adulthood. Durkheim [5] and Mauss [13] emphasize the social dimension of these rites, which strengthen group cohesion and distinguish the sacred from the profane. Van Gennep [19] proposes a three-phase model (separation, margin, aggregation) to describe these rites of passage. Malinowski [12] adopts a functionalist perspective, while Lévi-Strauss [11] considers them as symbolic languages, stating that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution [11]. Wach [20] is interested in the lived experience of these rites, while Labarrière [9] emphasizes their role in structuring lifetime, stating that "its place is in the foundational rhythms, in the most significant passages of life (birth, marriage, death), in the integration of a group". Cazeneuve [2] distinguishes between consecration rites and technical rites, stating that "the technical rites are based on consecration rites and 'direct the sacred power for the benefit of men, individuals, and groups'". Turner [18], in his work on rites of passage, highlights that these ceremonies mark a break with the past and an entry into a new status, a dynamic perfectly illustrated by initiation in Benin, which separates the initiate from his familiar environment, subjects him to trials and finally reintegrates him into the community with a new role and new responsibilities. Douglas [4] emphasizes the importance of symbols in rites, asserting that the objects, gestures, and words used during initiation carry profound meanings, enabling the transmission of values and beliefs that embed these rituals within a symbolic framework essential for social cohesion. She states, "rituals are a means of communicating the values of a society". Meanwhile, Geertz [6] insists on the cultural and interpretative nature of these ceremonies, affirming that initiation is not merely a set of practices but a way to make sense of the world and construct a collective identity. He notes, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun".

All these authors agree on the importance of initiation rites as

tools for social structuring, transmission of values and individual transformation. They thus constitute a fundamental element of human culture, allowing individuals to situate themselves in a social group and give meaning to their existence. For our part, we believe that initiation rites, as tools for social structuring and transmission of values, contribute significantly to the spiritual education and cultural identity of the human person, particularly of the younger generation, thus facilitating their individual transformation within the community.

Benin, rich in cultural and spiritual traditions, constitutes fertile ground for rethinking the role of initiation in the education of younger generations, because this practice represents a ritual process marking the passage from one state to another, thus modifying the ontological, religious and social status of the human person, trivially called individual. Indeed, initiation in many traditional Beninese societies involves a break with the past, often symbolized by an "initiator death", followed by a profound transformation and rebirth to a new life, as observed in Vodoun initiatory processes, thus recalling the resurrection of Christ who, after his death, offers a new spiritual life to his followers. This parallel underlines how these rites do not only mark a change of state, but also participate in a reaffirmation of spiritual and community values, allowing the individual to reintegrate into society with a new meaning and a renewed identity. In a way, this process in Beninese societies finds an echo in the puberty rites in Australia, where separation from the mother, initiatory trials and the revelation of myths lead to a symbolic new birth, just as the Orphic rites of ancient Greece and Hindu rites bear witness to the spiritual dimension of initiation, aiming at purification, knowledge of mysteries and access to immortality.

Thus, these various initiatory traditions, whether Beninese, Australian, Greek or Hindu, illustrate how initiation serves not only to integrate individuals into their community, but also to prepare them spiritually for their future, by offering them tools to navigate the complexity of life and by strengthening their social, spiritual and cultural identity. In Beninese societies, all ethnic groups combined, initiation is a fundamental pivot in the social, identity, and spiritual construction of the individual, integrating an ethnophilosophy that encompasses all the ways of "thinking," "acting," and "feeling" codified by the community, as Rocher [17] points out: "initiation rites are essential moments for the transmission of cultural values and the consolidation of collective identity". This implies that all social, cultural and religious practices are unanimously conceived and oriented towards ideals of socialization, education and integration of the individual. In this context, cultural practices of socialization, considered as initiation tests, contribute to the traditional education of the younger generations and are transmitted from one generation to the next, promoting their spiritual formation. This dynamic is perceived as a quest for the mental and spiritual consolidation of the changing spirit, aimed at awakening in the initiated additional individual capacities likely to pave

the way for the struggle for freedom, according to Guéhi [7], who states that "initiation is a mental training of the child facing the challenge of freedom".

Initiation, as a central rite of passage in the different Beninese cultural areas, plays a fundamental role in the socialization of the individual by instilling in him essential values such as solidarity, responsibility and the preservation of traditions, while promoting the development of his economic and cultural capacities to make him an influential actor within his lineage, clan, community, community or even ethnic group. In addition, initiation fosters intercultural relations and establishes contacts that strengthen mutual assistance, thus revealing its holistic dimension and making it a vector of social harmony, where all cultural and religious practices are designed to guide individuals towards ideals of socialization and integration. Initiation rites, as formative tests, are essential to the traditional education of the younger generation, allowing them to acquire the knowledge necessary for life in society, to develop their spirituality and to forge their cultural identity, while being part of a collective quest aimed at strengthening the community spirit and preparing them to meet the challenges of life while preserving the cultural heritage.

Thus, it appears clearly, from our ethnographic materials, that initiation rites in Benin, as central elements of culture, play a crucial role in the formation of the cultural and spiritual identity of individuals, thus illustrating the importance of initiation in the transmission of ancestral values and its capacity to adapt to contemporary issues while maintaining a deep link with the past. However, in the face of new evangelical and Pentecostal religious relations, Catholicism, as well as globalization and colonization, Beninese cultural authenticity is undergoing significant transformations. This raises a central problem: how do initiation rites influence the cultural and spiritual identity of individuals in Benin? This question opens the way to several emerging questions: how do these rites adapt to the influences of new religions? What are the consequences of globalization on these initiatory practices? Can initiation rites coexist with modern religious beliefs? How do younger generations perceive these rites in the current context? And what role do they play in strengthening cultural identity in the face of the pressure of global homogenization? These questions highlight the challenges facing initiation rites in a rapidly changing world. A plausible hypothesis would be that, despite these external influences, initiation rites in Benin manage to maintain their role as a vector for transmitting ancestral values while adapting to the aspirations of younger generations, thus integrating contemporary elements while preserving their traditional foundations.

3. Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an immersive qualitative approach, combining participant observation and semi-directed inter-

views, to explore initiation rites in Benin and their contribution to the identity formation of individuals within their communities. Drawing on a solid theoretical framework deeply rooted in the anthropological literature on rituals and socialization, the study examines the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of many initiation rites, highlighting their role in integration, the transmission of community values, spiritual and cultural identity.

3.1. Methodology

Any scientific research is based on a rigorous methodological approach, and within this framework, documentary research and in-depth field surveys were conducted to establish a solid database on which the results of the study are presented and discussed further. The study is based on a qualitative approach focused on participant observation and exchanges, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the social and cultural dynamics of initiation practices across Benin. This method encouraged an immersion in the communities' experiences, essential for grasping the subtleties of the initiation culture, ranging from the north to the south through the center of the country. In this perspective, in-depth documentary research on initiation rites in Benin was carried out by consulting libraries, documentation centers and online resources, which allowed us to familiarize ourselves with previous studies on the subject and to highlight the contributions of several influential authors including the Malian Bâ [1], the Senegalese Diop [3], the French Africanist Olivier de Sardan [16], the Kenyan Thiong'o [14] and the Franco-Beninese Hounyoton [8]. The respective works of these researchers highlighted the crucial role of initiation rites in African culture. Bâ highlights in particular the irreparable loss represented by the disappearance of these traditions, while Diop and Olivier de Sardan highlight their role in education and social cohesion. Thiong'o explores the link between rituals and postcolonial identity, while Hounyoton analyzes in depth the case of VidomεgŃnat in Benin in the identity and spiritual construction of children in Benin, emphasizing its importance in the initiation process. These studies converge in showing that initiation rites constitute a fundamental element of African cultural heritage, contributing both to the transmission of values and the affirmation of identity. This documentary phase allowed us to establish a solid theoretical framework for our analysis, which was deepened in the rest of this study. The ethnographic fieldwork itself, based on the principles of ethnography, began with a three-month stay (August to November), thus providing a total immersion in the societies studied. This approach was crucial to grasp the educational, spiritual and cultural aspects of initiation rites, as well as their role in community development and social cohesion. Participant observation was carried out at two levels: on the one hand, an extended stay in several localities such as Tchetti, Ottola, Doum è Sav è in the hills, Agouna, Assagba and Houto in Zou, Ouak éin Donga, Natitingou and Kouand éin Atacora,

Adjarra and Porto-Novo in Ou éné accompanied by exchanges with wise men and dignitaries holding traditional knowledge; on the other hand, interviews with young initiates (old and new) to understand their perceptions and the evolution of these practices.

Following this observation, 43 semi-directive interviews were conducted with informants selected using reasoned choice and snowball techniques, methods recommended in anthropology to ensure a diversity of perspectives and a wealth of qualitative data. These interviews were conducted in local languages such as Nago, Agoun, Àj á A žo, Lokpa, Ditammari and Bariba, thus allowing for an in-depth exploration of the meanings attributed to initiation rites. In addition to these interviews, life stories were collected from adults to understand the importance of rites in the spiritual and identity formation of individuals. This biographical approach made it possible to document the different dimensions of initiation rites and to offer a valuable insight into their role in Beninese society. The collected data were structured to facilitate effective analysis, and to do so, the thematic analysis methodology proved particularly relevant for processing the qualitative data collected. This approach allowed us to explore in depth the meanings, representations and discourses of social actors. The first step consisted of fully transcribing the interviews conducted in local languages into French, followed by a chronological and thematic organization of the observation notes. A thematic coding system, based on the research questions, the theoretical framework and the first readings of the data, was put in place to categorize the information and identify recurring themes. The analysis of the transcribed data and observation notes highlighted main and secondary themes emerging from the discourses and practices, with a particular focus on the meanings attributed to initiation rites, the values transmitted, the perceptions of the younger generations and the evolution of practices in the face of modernity. These themes were linked to the theoretical framework by drawing on the concepts of the authors mentioned above. Data triangulation was carried out by comparing information from interviews, observations and life stories to validate interpretations. The varied points of view of the actors involved in initiation rites were compared to ensure a more complete analysis. Finally, the results of the thematic analysis were synthesized and discussed in light of the theoretical framework, while being put into perspective with the existing literature on initiation rites in Africa. In conclusion, the methodology of this study, combining documentary research and ethnography, made it possible to explore in depth initiation rites in Benin, relying on a solid theoretical framework to analyze the underlying social and cultural dynamics.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

To analyze initiation, this study adopts a complex analytical framework that encompasses the spiritual, cultural and identity aspects of initiation rites in Benin. This framework

explores how these rites, as essential cultural practices, influence not only the personal identity of initiates, but also social interactions within communities.

By integrating the spiritual dimensions inherent to these rites, this approach highlights their crucial role in the transmission of cultural values and in the socialization process, while revealing their significant impact on the identity evolution of individuals and groups in Beninese society. This framework draws on anthropological theories of rituals and socialization, allowing us to explore how initiation rites, as fundamental cultural practices, shape not only the individual identity of initiates but also social dynamics within Beninese communities. Initiation is recognized as a fundamental process in the formation of individuals, acting as a vector for cultural transmission by enabling the transfer of values, knowledge, beliefs, and cultural norms. Bâ [1] emphasizes that "living tradition is a reality that engages man in his entirety", while Diop [3] asserts that "culture is the foundation of any society and the key to its development". Initiation also plays a crucial role in identity evolution, shaping individuals' cultural and spiritual identity while fostering their social integration and connection to their heritage, as Olivier de Sardan [16] emphasizes by stating that "initiation rites are essential moments for the construction of identity and the transmission of cultural values"; Thiong'o [15] further asserts that "initiation is a fundamental process that connects individuals to their culture and community". The specificity of the Vidomègnat is framed within this theoretical context, drawing on Hounyoton's [8] analyses regarding the "mise à òver" among the Àj à-Fò and Yoruba-Nagò peoples, revealing initiation practices that are both material and spiritual, shaping the identity of the child as further explored in his thesis. Finally, the anthropological approach adopted draws on the work of classical theorists such as Van Gennep [19], Durkheim [5], who emphasizes that "rituals are the means by which society expresses its collective consciousness," Mauss [13], who states that "the total social fact is a complex of interrelated social phenomena," Malinowski [12], who asserts that "the function of a ritual is to fulfill the needs of the individual and society," Lévi-Strauss [10], who highlights that "myth is a language that speaks to the structure of human thought," Douglas [4], who notes that "rituals serve to reinforce social norms and values," Geertz [6], who argues that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," and Wach [21], who posits that "the ritual act is a means of establishing a connection with the transcendent reality." This comprehensive framework allows for an in-depth analysis of initiation rites in Benin through the prism of socialization and spirituality.

4. Rites of Initiation in Benin: Exploring Chakpanna, Ochoumaré, Monlou, Oro and Hunzizon

Benin, rich in ancestral traditions, is the scene of fascinating ceremonies that shape the identity of its inhabitants.

Among these rituals, initiation rites stand out as essential passages, symbolizing profound transformations in the transition from childhood to adulthood. From Chakpanna, celebrating femininity and the nourishing earth, to Goja, a test of courage for young Peulhs, through Ochoumaré Monlou, Oro and Hunzizon, these ancestral practices, transmitted from generation to generation, invite us to discover a world where spirituality, education and social cohesion are intertwined. They reflect a profound wisdom and an intimate connection with the invisible world, while strengthening the sense of community. This ethnographic exploration highlights practices often little known and allows us to better understand the complexity and beauty of Beninese traditions, while highlighting their relevance in the face of contemporary challenges.

The Chakpanna rite, which evokes the nourishing earth and the preciousness of young girls, is an initiation rite rooted in the tradition of the Ilé and Ifè peoples of Tchetti, Doumè, Ottola, Djaloukou, Djaman and Kitipli in the municipality of Savalou and its surroundings, particularly in Bantè villages in the hills. Intended for girls aged 12 to 16, this rite marks the passage to maturity and takes place over several years, allowing for a gradual immersion in harmony with natural cycles. The rite takes place in a symbolic natural location, such as a sacred hill or the banks of a river, chosen according to local traditions. It begins with a separation phase where the young girls symbolically leave their childhood during a village ceremony, wearing distinctive traditional clothing. They are then taken to the sacred place to live in community under the guidance of the women initiators, where they explore nature, learn songs, dances and stories of the local cultural heritage, as well as craft techniques and knowledge related to motherhood. Spiritual development is also central, with meditation practices and rituals of offerings to local deities. At the end of this immersion period, a large festival is organized to celebrate their reintegration into the community, where they present the skills acquired and share their experience. This rite plays a crucial role in anchoring the young girls in their natural and cultural environment, developing their self-confidence and strengthening intergenerational ties within the community. By integrating local specificities and raising awareness of the importance of environmental protection, the Chakpanna rite prepares young girls to become responsible women while opening up to contemporary issues such as education and women's rights.

The Ochoumaré initiation rite, rooted in the fò tradition of Vodoun Dan, is intended for young girls aged 12 to 15, marking a crucial step towards maturity within the Ilé and Ifè communities of Tchetti, Doumè, Ottola, Djaloukou, Djaman and Kitipli. Spanning a period of 24 to 36 months, this rite allows for a gradual immersion in cultural and spiritual teachings, in harmony with natural cycles. It begins with a separation phase where the initiates leave their families to enter a convent dedicated to Ochoumaré, a sacred space symbolizing their passage into adulthood. Dressed in tradi-

tional clothing, they undergo a ritual purification to prepare for initiation. During their immersion, the young girls learn the rituals and ceremonies associated with the deity Ochoumaré discover related deities, and are initiated into the sacred songs and dances essential to their culture. They also receive teachings on reproductive and sexual health, covering topics such as puberty, menstrual hygiene, responsible sexuality, and methods of contraception and birth spacing, which is crucial in a context where these topics are often surrounded by taboos. In addition, they acquire practical skills essential to life as a housewife, including agricultural and craft techniques such as weaving and pottery, as well as knowledge of cooking, household maintenance, and motherhood, including childcare and family education. The rite also includes spiritual practices such as meditation and offerings to local deities, strengthening their connection with the spiritual world. At the end of the rite, a public ceremony celebrates their reintegration into the community where they present their acquired skills and receive a new name symbolizing their rebirth as responsible women. The Ochoumaré plays a fundamental educational role by transmitting cultural values such as respect for traditions, solidarity, and the empowerment of young girls. By strengthening their individual and collective identity, this rite helps to stabilize social peace within the community by preparing these young girls to become active and responsible members of society. Thus, these initiation rites are essential for the cultural and social continuity of the Nago groups in Togo and Tchettin in Benin.

The Monlou initiation rite or Awakening of the Agoun Spirit, which evokes both the territory and the spiritual connection with the voodoo deities in this country, is designed for young girls aged 13 to 15, a crucial transition period in Beninese culture. Spanning several months or even years, this rite takes place in a voodoo convent, a sacred and isolated place dedicated to a protective female deity. The rite begins with a separation phase where the initiates leave their family, wear white outfits symbolizing purity and shave their heads to signify their break with childhood. They are then initiated into the rituals of the Agoun deities, learning songs, sacred dances, and developing a spiritual connection with the spirits, while practicing divination and traditional healing techniques. At the same time, they receive practical lessons on life as a housewife, including cooking, maintaining the home, and caring for children. At the end of the rite, a public ceremony marks their reintegration into the community, where they present their newly acquired skills and receive a new name linked to their spiritual experience. This rite plays a vital role in anchoring the young girls in the religious tradition while preparing them to become responsible and active women within their community. By incorporating Agoun cultural elements, such as specific songs and symbols, this rite also reinforces the importance of female deities and ensures the oral transmission of knowledge by priestesses and older women in the community.

The Floraison initiation rite, inspired by the socio-cultural

context of the ò peoples of Mono and Couffo in southwestern Benin, is designed to mark the passage of young girls from childhood to adolescence, integrating educational, moral, reproductive and sexual health dimensions, as well as a religious and spiritual dimension. Intended for girls aged 12 to 14, these ceremonies take place over three weeks, spread over several months in an isolated and sacred space chosen by the elders and the initiating women. The rite begins with a separation where the initiates are removed from their usual environment and put on specific clothing. During the isolation phase, they receive educational teachings on local history and traditions, moral values such as respect and solidarity, as well as knowledge on reproductive and sexual health. They also learn traditional beliefs and connection to ancestors. At the end of the rite, the girls are reintegrated into the community in a public ceremony marked by song and dance, where they are given a new name symbolizing their rebirth as responsible women. This rite is orchestrated by elder women who pass on their wisdom and use local languages to value linguistic diversity. By integrating discussions on gender equality and girls' education, this rite allows the young girls of the mono to experience a harmonious transition to adulthood, preparing them to fully assume their roles within their community.

The initiation rite into the ORO cult among the Nago peoples of Savè, Saké, Adja-Ouèrè, Pobè, Kérou and Ifangni is a complex process that takes place in several stages, each laden with symbolism and cultural teachings. The initiation begins with a series of preliminary rituals where the aspirants, usually young men, are prepared spiritually and physically. Rituals include sacrifices to the ORO fetish, such as yams, red oil, and money, symbolizing gratitude and requests for protection. Initiates are also subjected to physical and psychological ordeals to test their courage and endurance. These ordeals may include whippings administered by elders, which serve to teach them resilience in the face of external violence. During these rituals, initiates also learn the social codes necessary to navigate their community. These initiation rites play a fundamental educational role by transmitting values such as bravery, solidarity, and respect for ancestral traditions. Young people not only learn to overcome adversity but also to strengthen their cultural identity while integrating the social norms of their community. Elders, as guardians of traditions, transmit their knowledge and ensure that the spirit of camaraderie is preserved during these ceremonies. In short, initiation into the ORO cult transcends the simple rite of passage to become a crucial moment of social cohesion and cultural continuity among the Nago peoples, symbolizing an important transition to adulthood and the acceptance of new responsibilities within the community. The Hunzizon initiation rite, centered on Achinan vodoun, is designed for young men aged 8 to 14 in the Ouémé region, particularly in the communities of Adjarra, Porto-Novo, Azowlissè and Adjohoun. This rite marks an essential step in the passage to adulthood, integrating cultural, spiritual and practical teachings that meet the expectations of the local population. The

rite takes place over several months, allowing for a gradual immersion in community traditions and values. The young initiates, called avossè begin with a separation phase where they leave their family environment to enter a sacred space dedicated to Achinan under the authority of a religious dignitary called hùnnongan. They wear traditional clothing, often dominated by white and red, symbolizing purity and strength. During their initiation, young men learn the rituals associated with Achinan, including songs and dances that are central to their culture. They also receive teachings about masculine responsibilities, including agriculture, crafts, and managing family relationships, while being made aware of the prohibitions of voodoo.

The Hunzizon rite plays a fundamental educational role by transmitting values such as respect for elders, solidarity and social responsibility. By reinforcing these values, the rite helps to forge the individual and collective identity of young men, enabling them to become active and responsible members of their community. In addition, this rite has a significant impact on social cohesion by promoting respect for traditions and stabilizing intergenerational relationships. By integrating practical elements related to daily life and strengthening ties with the spiritual world through Achinan, the Hunzizon rite prepares young men to face the challenges of adulthood while preserving the cultural heritage of their ancestors. In short, this rite meets the expectations of the population by offering young men a comprehensive education that combines spirituality, culture and social responsibility. Goja, practiced by the Fulani community in Borgou, is an initiation rite passed down from generation to generation, which plays a fundamental role in the education of young people and shapes the individual and collective identity of the Fulani people. A unique feature of Goja is the use of supernatural powers, where young men come into contact with nature to obtain protective plants. This rite takes place on special occasions such as the enthronement of traditional chiefs, weddings or harvests, and is carefully planned by the elders of the community. Preparations include communication to the community, traditionally through colas distributed in the villages and, nowadays, via community radios and social networks. On the day of the ceremony, the participants, beautified and supported by their families and young girls, consume a collective porridge, a symbol of solidarity, before entering the public square dancing to the sound of drums and flutes. The rite begins with demonstrations of dance and acrobatics, followed by clashes between participants armed with whips made from tamarind branches. Each participant receives three lashes, symbolizing important life milestones: the pain of birth, circumcision, and the passage to adulthood. Goja plays a crucial educational role in transmitting the Pulaaku philosophy, which values courage, honor, and responsibility. The initiation rite of Goja, by allowing young Fulani men to demonstrate their physical and mental strength through the endurance of lashes, marks their passage into adulthood, integrating them into the community with respect and social status, while strengthening social

bonds, solidarity, and the core values of Pulaaku. However, it faces challenges from modernity and other cultural influences that are changing its traditional practice. The kamun rite, or whip festival, is a key cultural event for the Lokpa people, located in the commune of Ouaké, Benin. Each year, this initiation rite celebrates the passage from childhood to adolescence and adulthood through ritual combats where participants, armed with whip and shields made of animal skins, face off in a display of courage and endurance. Preparations begin in the villages, with families mobilizing to celebrate this milestone. Fighters gather in the courtyard of the royal palace for parades and traditional songs, before engaging in combat governed by precise rules that illustrate bravery and resilience in the face of challenges. The kamun plays a crucial educational role by transmitting values such as courage, solidarity and respect for traditions, allowing young people to learn to overcome adversity while strengthening their cultural identity. The impact of this rite on individual and collective identity is profound, as the successful completion of this initiation symbolizes acceptance into the Lokpa community and marks the transition to adulthood, with the scars acquired becoming emblems of pride. However, kamun faces contemporary challenges, including the potential for violence in combat and the increasing influence of modern norms.

The Difoni initiation rite for men and Dikountri for women among the B éammarib é located in the Atacora ranges, represents a fundamental step in the social integration of individuals within their community. These ceremonies, which take place every four years, are marked by several ritual phases' rich in symbolism. These rites begin with a family preparation, followed by four days of spiritual ordeal during which the initiate is surrounded by his relatives, before joining the sacred Tata of the clan on the fifth day for a spiritual initiation that continues for another four days. The eighth day is dedicated to a festive phase where men participate in fights with whips, while women engage in ritual dances. The ceremony ends with a final shaving of the initiate's head and the presentation of a symbolic hat. These rites are of major educational importance by instilling principles such as bravery, mutual aid and honoring traditions, thus enabling young people to develop their resilience in the face of challenges while consolidating their cultural identity and adapting to the social expectations of their community. In short, the Difoni and the Dikountri are not only rites of passage; they are crucial for the social cohesion and cultural continuity of the B éammarib é marking a significant transition to adulthood and the assumption of responsibilities within the community. At the heart of the Bariba society of Kouand é a secret initiation rite shapes the identity of young men and prepares them for their future roles. Organized by elders and holders of ancestral wisdom, this rite takes place in an isolated place, away from prying eyes. It tests the physical and mental strength of the participants through symbolic ordeals and demanding challenges. Each ordeal represents an obstacle in life, each success a victory over oneself and a step towards

maturity. Over the course of the ordeals, the initiates acquire valuable knowledge about hunting, agriculture, traditional medicine and the art of war, transmitted orally by the wise. This rite marks their passage to adulthood, giving them a valued social status and a deep sense of belonging to the community. It guarantees the transmission of Bariba values, knowledge and traditions, thus ensuring the cohesion and sustainability of the group. The anthropological analysis of these different initiation rites studied in this research highlights their essential role as spiritual education, going beyond the simple passage from childhood to adulthood. These rites, structured and symbolic, follow a common pattern including a phase of separation from the profane world, a period of isolation and learning in a sacred place, and a reintegration into the community with a new status and responsibilities. Each stage is rich in symbols that mark the inner transformation of the initiate and his commitment to the values of the group. The educational role of these rites is essential, as they transmit essential cultural values such as respect for elders, solidarity, courage and responsibility, while teaching practical techniques related to agriculture, crafts and spirituality. The impact on individual and collective identity is profound: the initiate acquires a new social status and a stronger sense of belonging, ready to assume his responsibilities within the community. However, these traditional rites face the challenges of modernity, including the influence of formal education and imported religions. The need to adapt these practices to contemporary realities while preserving their spiritual essence represents a major challenge for the communities that practice them. In conclusion, initiation rites in Benin constitute a complete form of spiritual education that shapes the individual and connects him to his community while ensuring the transmission of a precious cultural heritage in a changing world.

The imprint of initiation rites on cultural identity, the various initiation rites in Benin, as described in this study, exert a profound influence on identity construction, social integration and community belonging, acting as true identity crucibles that shape the individual while weaving him or her closely within the collective. Initiation rites serve as identity markers by defining the individual's passage from one social status to another, from childhood to adulthood, and by inscribing the initiate in a system of values, norms and practices specific to his or her community. Social integration is a central objective of these rites, which prepare young people to assume their roles and responsibilities within the group by transmitting essential knowledge and skills to them. They reinforce the sense of belonging through the shared experience of initiation and the trials endured together, while affirming collective identity through the perpetuation of traditions, myths and symbols that define the group, which also reinforces the sense of pride and unity. Traditional education provided through initiation rites is clearly distinguished from formal education practiced in modern schools, as it is based on oral transmission, learning through experience and immersion in the cul-

ture through participation in rituals. Often complementary to informal education received within the family and community, this form of education sometimes interacts in complex ways with modern influences. Some communities seek to integrate elements of formal education into their initiation rites, while others strive to preserve their traditional character in the face of socio-cultural changes. The evolution of initiatory practices in Benin in the face of modernity is an observable reality, marked by socio-economic changes, urbanization, schooling and the influence of imported religions and the media, all of which have impacted traditional ways of life. Some rites have disappeared or been transformed, while others resist and adapt to new realities. Anthropological theories on rites and socialization, notably those of Turner [18], who highlights the notion of "communitas" created by rites of passage, and Van Gennep [19], who describes the three phases of rites of passage (separation, margin and aggregation), and many other authors mobilized in this study, offer valuable insights into social dynamics, the role of rites in identity construction and social cohesion, as well as the adaptations they undergo in the face of cultural changes. Ultimately, initiation rites in Benin are essential elements of the culture and identity of the populations, going beyond the simple passage to adulthood to represent a true spiritual and social education that shapes the individual while connecting him to his community. Their study allows us to better understand the complexity and richness of African cultures, while raising reflections on the challenges of transmitting traditions in a changing world.

5. Results and Discussion: Testimonies, Issues and Adaptation of Initiation Rites in Benin

The results of the ethnographic survey on initiation rites in Benin, which gave voice to young initiates, old initiates, wise men, guardians of tradition and political figures, reveal a deep understanding of the perceptions and contemporary issues related to these ancestral practices.

5.1. Diverse Perspectives on Initiation Rites

This section highlights the wealth of perspectives on initiation rites in Benin, presenting testimonies from young initiates, former initiates, sages and political figures. Young initiates like Kpégo (Hunzison) and Koki (Chakpanna), emphasize the importance of rites in their identity formation, their learning of traditions and their connection with nature. Kpégo claims to have learned to become a man, to respect elders and traditions. Koki, for her part, has understood the essential role of women in society. Older initiates, such as Okou (Oro), emphasize the difficult but necessary trials experienced during rites, which strengthen solidarity and resilience. Wise men and guardians of tradition, such as Maman Egbin (voodoo priestess) and Yotrokpa (Ditamari

traditional chief), insist on the fundamental role of these rites in transmitting ancestral culture, values and beliefs. They see initiation as a veritable “school of life”. Political figures, such as Madame Lafia (government representative) and Abdoulaye (deputy), recognize the importance of rites as intangible cultural heritage, while stressing the need to adapt them to modernity. Abdoulaye stresses the need to strike a balance between tradition and evolution.

5.2. Contemporary Issues and Ritual Adaptation

The testimonials highlight the importance of initiation rites in building identity, transmitting values and fostering social cohesion in Benin. For young people, these rites represent a crucial passage to adulthood, bringing about both physical and spiritual transformation. However, the adaptation of these practices to modern times is the subject of much debate. The central question is how to reconcile tradition and evolution while respecting human rights. A consensus is emerging on the inestimable value of initiation rites and the need to protect them. To this end, a number of adaptations are proposed, such as education, intergenerational dialogue and collaboration between traditional authorities, government institutions and civil society. These measures aim to guarantee the transmission of ancestral practices while integrating contemporary values, thus ensuring a balance between respect for traditions and societal evolution.

5.3. Roles and Functions of Initiation Rites

Initiation rites play a fundamental role in social structuring and the transmission of values, making a significant contribution to the spiritual education and cultural identity of young people. These rites symbolize a break with the past, marked by an “initiatory death” that precedes transformation and rebirth to a new life. This process evokes the resurrection of Christ, offering participants a new spiritual life and a renewed commitment to their traditions and community.

5.4. Challenges and Adaptations of Rites in a Changing World

Initiation rites in Benin are undergoing significant transformations as a result of globalization, colonization and the influence of new religions. This context has given rise to a debate on how to adapt these rites while preserving their essential role in the transmission of ancestral values. Indeed, these rites are not only instruments for transmitting knowledge and know-how, they are also crucial means of conveying moral and social values. It is therefore imperative to find a balance that respects traditions while integrating contemporary realities, thus ensuring that initiation rites continue to play their fundamental role in Beninese society.

5.5. Research Implications and Study Limitations

The study opens up exciting research prospects, including comparisons with other African cultures, in order to better understand the diversity of initiation rites, their role in identity building and the transformations they undergo in the face of modernity. The importance of preserving and transmitting this cultural heritage to future generations is also emphasized. However, the research has certain limitations. It is based on a qualitative approach, which limits the generalizability of the results to Benin as a whole or to other cultural contexts. Although the study included interviews with various actors, it is possible that certain voices and perspectives, notably those of marginalized individuals or cultural minorities, were not sufficiently represented. Furthermore, the focus on the cultural and spiritual aspects of initiation could benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the socio-economic and political dimensions. The subjectivity of the researcher may also influence the interpretation of the data; despite efforts to ensure methodological rigor, the qualitative nature of the research leaves room for a degree of interpretation. Although the study sought to respect the ethical principles of research, certain ethical issues linked to the study of traditional rites may not have been fully identified or resolved.

Finally, the rapid transformations of Beninese society mean that some of the data collected may become obsolete, requiring regular updating. The study could also benefit from more in-depth comparisons with similar research carried out in other African countries or cultural contexts, to gain a better understanding of the diversity of initiation rites.

6. Conclusion

The ethnographic study conducted on initiation rites in Benin reveals their capital importance in identity construction and social cohesion. The testimonies collected from young initiates, old initiates, wise men, guardians of tradition and political figures confirm that these rites, as “schools of life,” anchor the younger generations in a system of values, norms and practices specific to their community. They promote social integration, a sense of belonging and the transmission of ancestral knowledge. Participant observation and semi-directed interviews, conducted in different localities in Benin, made it possible to explore in depth the richness and diversity of these rites, such as Chakpanna, Ochoumaré, Monlou, Oro, Hunzizon and many others. The analysis of the data collected, in light of anthropological theories on rites and socialization, confirms the hypothesis that initiation rites in Benin go far beyond a simple passage to adulthood, representing a complete traditional educational process that shapes the individual while linking him to his community. The study highlights the complementarity between the traditional education offered by these rites, informal education within the family and formal education provided in modern schools. This analysis contributes to a better under-

standing of social dynamics, the role of rites in identity construction and social cohesion, as well as the necessary adaptations in the face of cultural changes. The study opens up exciting research perspectives, in particular through comparisons with other African cultures to better understand the diversity of initiation rites and their role in identity construction, while analyzing the transformations they undergo in the face of modernity and the strategies put in place to preserve and transmit this cultural heritage to future generations. The study provides valuable insight into the richness and complexity of African cultures, through initiation rites, true cultural treasures, which deserve to be protected, transmitted and adapted to contemporary realities in order to guarantee their sustainability.

Abbreviations

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Conflicts of Interest

In accordance with the requirements of transparency and scientific integrity, we, the authors of this study, declare that we have no conflict of interest, whether financial, commercial or otherwise, that could influence the results or interpretations of our research on initiation rites in Benin, thus guaranteeing the independence and objectivity of our work and ensuring the credibility of our conclusions.

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