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*Section: Psychiatry of Children and Adolescents***Legba, the Adolescent of Voodoo in Benin: Role in Social Regulation****Émilie FIOSSI KPADONOU¹, Anselme DJIDONOU², Sègbédé ALIGBONON³, KPADONOU G T⁴, Philippe KINOO⁵, Thérèse AGOSSOU⁶, Jean Yves HAYEZ⁷**

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Abstract:

Divinities (voodoos) are a common reality in Benin. Lègba is a particularly familiar divinity in the central and southern parts of Benin.

Objective: analyze the possibilities of using the role and attributes of Lègba while carrying out psychiatric therapy teenagers.

Method: Observations, together with guided discussions were carried out between 2009 and 2012 with 25 resource persons in the Beninese towns of Porto-Novo, Ouidah, Abomey, Zogbodomé and Cotonou.

Results: Lègba is the messenger, guide and interpreter for other voodoos; he keeps guard over the border between the world of the gods (spirits) and that of humans. His name expresses “pulling down and breaking; pursuing, killing and destroying; reconstructing”. Lègba is the phallic god of the Fon tribe in Benin; his sexual organ, in full erection, is exposed with an exaggerated length. He is often found in houses, but especially at the thresholds of homes, road junctions, market centers and at the entrances of towns and villages. Lègba is said to be very intelligent and cunning; full of ideas on vengeance, perseverance, insight and shrewdness; full of force, ardor, violence; and dreadfully aggressive.

Discussion and conclusion: Given his position and status, Lègba is unavoidable despite his behavior which is rather disturbing in several aspects. He is an expression of force, life, serenity, organization and communication. He reassures the youths, exculpates sexuality and brings about a feeling of security on issues of virility. As such, a good understanding of the role and characteristics of Lègba can be useful in therapy, especially in situations where simple words cannot explain certain behaviors (of the patients or their relatives) which then need to be readjusted or deciphered otherwise.

Keywords: divinity, behavior, sexuality, security

1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Benin is a country in Sub-Saharan Africa with a great diversity in language, culture and worship life for which places like houses, markets, villages, streets, but most especially road junctions are used by the living as well as the dead; humans as well as the gods.

In such a context, the ordinary Beninese sees before him a wide range of references, choices and possibilities; however, there arises the need for self protection, a good behavioral code and a good sense of analysis in order to avoid inconveniences, punishment, disorder and disasters. These locations are places of festivities, leisure, worship and rites, but equally of several constraints and ordeals.

Lègba is a familiar divinity in Benin, being very close to households and receiving people at the entrance to villages and market places.

A good number of clinicians in the towns are no longer aware of the role and practices linked to these divinities which however still play a very important part in the beliefs and worship life of the people. Yet, in therapy, mentioning the name of the divinity and recalling his characteristics and behavior does help to render behavioral disorders in children and adults less dramatic and obtain the collaboration of parents in their management. Lègba possesses a highly teenager-like character, but nevertheless, remains highly accepted and appreciated. Therefore, if the parents understand, tolerate and even integrate Lègba into their daily lives, why would they not do same for the concerned children and teenagers?

However, a therapist cannot make good use of an indicator if he himself does not fully understand its meaning, and this is the motivation of our work: who is Lègba?

The aim of the research described here was thus to better understand this divinity, in order to be more at ease and to evoke his name with some "authority" during our consultations, not as a therapeutic tool in as such, but as a facilitator in the process, a kind of metaphor of what a child or teenager could be going through. With some families, the evocation of Lègba helps to instill a certain feeling of connivance, especially as is often the case, when some families rise up in defiance of psychiatrists and psychologists and their so-called "western" knowledge. That explains why we need to know who or what is being evoked if we choose to do so and hence, the reason for this work.

2. FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

Having realized that in the central and southern parts of Benin, the main entrance of every market carries a representation of the Voodoo Lègba, we set out in a research team to find out the meaning behind the person of this divinity to the ordinary Beninese. We sought the knowledge of people visibly aged about 50 and above, whom we encountered as we moved around our study area. The study lasted for three years, from June 2009 to June 2012, and involved 25 resource persons in Abomey, Zogbodomé, Ouidah, Porto-Novo and Cotonou. The sorting was manual and the data was matched following the major trends in the responses. The following results show the responses obtained in this study.

3. RESULT

3.1 Origin and Meaning of Voodoo

The various resource persons did respond to our questions, the first of which was on the origin and meaning of the term "voodoo". "The human being has always been puzzled by fundamental questions such as the origin of the human species and that of the world as a whole. In a bid to satisfy his curiosity and quest for knowledge, stories bearing on such issues have often been put up. Such myths fill up the gaps on the human understanding of life. It is in this wise that the name Voodoo originated in ancient Daxomè (read as "Danhomey", which became known as the Republic of Benin in 1975). Voodoo signifies something whose depths are imperceptible, unfathomable and difficult to explore".

3.2 Meaning of Lègba, some traditional maxims

The responses to our second question gave us a clearer view of some terms and traditional maxims.

Lè signifies: reverse, overturn, turn back in order to (re)do something;

Gba has two possible intonations: a commanding note (obligation), in which case the "a" is given a downward intonation when pronounced, signifying to "break, smash, render into pieces, demolish, destroy, knock down, or wreck". On the other hand, when the "a" is given an upward intonation, it signifies to "build or construct".

Lègba could thus mean "knock down and break, overturn, hunt down; reconstruct".

Though Lègba is feared, even dreaded, it is made known however that his power is limited. For

example, "lègba do so xwéto do a", it is said, meaning "Lègba's phallus is no match to that of the master of the house". This saying has a parallel in the biblical verse: "no pupil is greater than his teacher; no slave is greater than his master..." [1].

3.3 Representation of Lègba and ceremonial regalia of his followers

For the respondents, Lègba is the phallic god of the Fon tribe in Benin, same as *Eshu* (short form of *eshu-èlègbàra*) of the Yorubas in Nigeria. He has a life-size, roughly human form, and sits on a throne under a tree with a wide open mouth and eyes fashioned with shells or cowries. He has two large eyes in order to see everything, and see very well. His eyes are clearly visible and widely open, what instills fear. His sexual organ is often made of wood, exposed, exaggeratedly long and as if in erection.

Lègba sometimes takes the form of a conically shaped mound of earth, carrying at its base and in a forward direction, a raised phallus which is clearly visible as a lump of soil strewn with chicken feathers and sprinkled with palm oil or a mixture of animal blood and palm oil. His queer appearance borders on indecency, and he is found in specific locations. He can sometimes be found in houses, but often, he is placed at the threshold of homes, road junctions, in market places and at the entrance to towns and villages.

We were told that for ceremonial outings, the followers of Lègba, called *Lègbassi* or *agbossi* wear a skirt, a shirt and a cap woven from raffia, dyed dark red and decorated with cowries and small mirrors. They carry a representation of the phallus in their hands. The red color and the phallus are always present.

3.4 Role and terms

We were informed that Lègba is a messenger, guide and interpreter of other Voodoo gods/divinities; he is the guardian of the border between their world and that of humans, between their territory and that of the living. As the story goes, Lègba was closer to other Voodoos than he was to humans. Seeing that the human world was less well off than that of the Voodoos, he went forth, stole fire and knowledge from them, then came here below to transmit it to humans. Lègba guards and watches over households, streets, road junctions, markets and gateways to towns and villages (*To Lègba*). He is the keeper of medicine and of knowledge. He points out and lights the pathway for humans to follow, and receives their

offerings in the first instance. In ceremonies dedicated to voodoos, his name is often mentioned first. Lègba ensures the protection of persons, objects and breeds.

In the person of Lègba are found both positive and negative traits.

On the positive side, Lègba is reputed to be very intelligent and cunning, full of ideas on vengeance, perseverance, insight and shrewdness. He is gifted with a lot of force and ardor, and is dreadfully violent and aggressive. He makes use of this violent attitude when he engages in fights with his protagonists, whom he rough handles mercilessly. He also takes possession of initiates in a violent manner. It was revealed that Lègba has neither associates nor friends. He acts alone, takes full responsibility for his actions and savors his exploits.

He seems to be always able to foil any wicked plans from the gods, keep off sickness and death from the house, see to the proper functioning of markets and prevent the intrusion of incarnated bad spirits into households. *Lègba* can convert evil into good, give money, children, jobs and other goodies to those ask him.

However, it is also said that Lègba can transform good into evil, thus, his vengeance is dreaded by humans. He is capable of initiating a coalition of all spirits and all sorts of calamities against a person, a household or a family.

3.5 Sacrifices: objects and codes

It is known that Lègba expects emoluments in return for his services. His kindness is purchased through a daily libation of "ja", a mixture of water and corn flour. On important occasions, he is offered an animal sacrifice during a ritual.

As a matter of preference, he is often honored on market days, either in the morning or in the evening, but never at midday. The animal to be sacrificed to Lègba is presented to him as soon as it is unleashed, then its tongue is cut off and placed on Lègba's phallus. The offering is declared accepted by Lègba when the animal remains calm, without struggling or attempting to escape, else, the offering is rejected. In the latter case, the reasons for the refusal would have to be sought and some prerequisites fulfilled before the animal is slaughtered, without which the sacrifice would be useless. To pay tribute to Lègba, a chicken is required (or its young, preferably a male, though a female can be used, but it must be an adolescent, never an adult). "Akassa", simple corn flour paste or corn flour paste prepared with palm oil is also

required. He loves “vê” (a mixture of corn flour and palm oil which could be salted or not), water and palm oil (often called “red oil”). Lègba does not accept palm kernel oil (which is a kind of brownish oil). The most outspoken of the resource persons opined that “Lègba never touches alcohol or pepper”.

4. DISCUSSION

Benin and the Voodoo pantheon

The conception of Beninese traditional religions is based on a philosophy of polytheism. God the heavenly father is everywhere, in everything and in all things. However, with him and at his service, are found several divinities grouped into Voodoo [2]. Each of these divinities has their specific territory, most often respected by the others, in a rather well coordinated arrangement and organization. Concerning the roles and attributes, there are several divinities, for example, the one in charge of thunder, *Hèviosso*; the one who protects blacksmiths, *Gou*; and the divinity in charge of prosperity, *Dan*. There is also *Sakpata*, the divinity of the earth (said to be in charge of eruptive diseases, especially smallpox); *Tohosou* who placates parents, especially mothers of children with disabilities; and others, including *Mamiwata* and *Lègba* [3, 4]¹. Although Voodoo has its origins in Benin, its practices have spread worldwide. The town of Ouidah, the cradle of Voodoo, was one of the biggest ports used by slave traders in West Africa. The people who left or passed through ancient Dahomey did preserve some of the rites and practices which they took along with them where there went. As such, a number of Beninese traditional beliefs are presently found in the Caribbean Islands (Haiti for example), Brazil and several other parts of South America.

Myths attempt to use traditions in order to explain moral and metaphysical troubles (mysteries), the concordance or discordance with reality notwithstanding.

In Benin, all that “produces phenomena which are difficult to explain...” is venerated [5]. In any case, time is needed in order to draw (*doun*) from a well whose depth is unfathomable (*volivoli* or *vo* in short form) and unforeseeable, and patience is required if there has to be any hope of drawing a bit, a little bit of its rather distant, uncertain water.

At several levels, this patience enables a certain resilience which favors recovery for blacks (in Africa or elsewhere), even in cases of sometimes very serious pathologies [6].

Studies have shown that belief, spirituality and/or religion positively impact psychological stress and to a certain extent, help in its prevention [7].

Lègba: Representation

Lègba is represented as an ithyphallic personality. The male sexual organ, the penis, is often considered as an instrument of aggression, a weapon [8].

The symbol is also found elsewhere out of Benin, for instance, in the Roman Pole, the Celtic god identified to the god Mercury, is sometimes represented with three penises (see picture below).

Myth, serenity, security and self-confidence

Lègba enables adolescents and youths, as well as adults, to find a certain measure of self-confidence. The role of a phallic god attributed to Lègba is not due to the size of his sexual organ, but to his role as a guide for the youths in the rather disguised and little talked about world of sexuality. Nietzsche reminds us that “the images of a myth must be invisible and omnipresent tutelary spirits propitious to the development of the adolescent soul” [9]. Lègba reassures teenagers and youths on their sexuality. For adults, Lègba exculpates sexuality and instead enables a feeling of security as concerns virility through his erection which is without any worries or distress. This completely unperturbed erection is possible in the adult’s erotic space. “Without myths, a culture is dispossessed of its natural, sound and creative force. Only a horizon studded with myths can perfect the unity of an entire epoch of culture” according to Nietzsche [9].

¹ An example on the use of voodoo names and characters in pedopsychiatric consultation was developed in a previous article: E. Kpadonou, Ph. Kinoo (2007), *Valeur Vodoun ou la famille restructure, Enfances/Adolescents*, no 12, 2007/2

Myths are necessary for some organization to exist between individuals as they constitute the basis for signification and communication. Myths have a remarkable psychological impact [10]; they have therapeutic virtues for the spirit; they dissolve distress of a metaphysical origin, temporarily or permanently: they thus play a role of liberation. Devoid of myths, the human being remains in eternal want, continuously digging and searching for a few roots [10].

From the viewpoint of the Beninese however, the Voodoo divinities, though they exist, do not replace the Christian God; he still reigns supreme.

Function, communication, strength and symbolism

Given his position and status, both humans and other Voodoos cannot do without Lègba. He associates with them depending on the context, for example, he comes together with *gou* (divinity in charge of war and metalwork) once his touchy nature is provoked [11].

For effective supervision, one has to be close, but not merge with the subject to be supervised: a certain distance needs to be kept between the two such that the features of the subject can be well appreciated. The crossing between several roads (road junction) is often associated with evil forces and witchcraft, but at times too, with intense positive forces.

As indicated by one resource person, Lègba never touches alcohol or pepper, elements that would trigger and raise his ardor, pushing him to carry out some malicious action with striking impulsiveness, especially given that he is very touchy.

During sacrifices to Lègba, the sacrificial animal's tongue is removed and placed on his penis. Without the tongue, how else can one talk about the phallus? With this act, all has been said and the talking rounded up.

The legs, the head, the lungs, the gizzard, the heart and the spleen of the animal are roasted in front of Lègba. All the parts of the animal which are not usually visible ("what is inside the stomach") are thus made visible and degraded, or at least, rendered harmless before Lègba.

The male sexual organ in full erection symbolizes power (strength). When Lègba refuses an offering, the whole process is stopped and a means of clearing the obstacle is sought. We can thus perceive the notion of dialogue, communication and conflict resolution.

The fully erect sexual organ is a symbol of virility and fertility; it enables procreation and hence, promotes life. Lègba being an ithyphallic divinity is the guarantor of conception. Thereafter, he ensures the survival of the thus conceived individual at the cost of offerings consisting of flour, water, oil, drinks and meat.



Tintinnabulum (en) Bronze Polyphallic [12, 13], with each branch-penis bearing a ring which serves as a bell carrier [14].



Grotesque: the Nain slave; bald, ithyphallic carrying two baskets made of baked earth, Myrina, 1st Century B.C. In Roman comedy, slaves are often represented with exaggeratedly large sexual organs [15].



Some photos of Lègba (Abomey – Benin)

CONCLUSION

Lègba depicts strength (creative power), life, serenity, security, organization and communication. *Lègba* enables communication amongst the living since he brings them together, disperses them; enables personal intimacy and creates networks; however, he also enables communication between the living and the dead. He facilitates communication between physical entities, social groups and spiritual beings. A liberating role is made evident in *Lègba's* mode of operation: he enables liberation from distress, albeit in a temporary or even fictitious manner. The use of the image and attributes of *Lègba* would enable the Beninese pedopsychiatrist to undertake a positive redeployment of parental support for teenagers who are victims of behavioral disorders. A good understanding of the attributes of *Lègba* has enabled us to decipher otherwise and thus, readjust certain behavioral patterns in patients and other persons in their entourage in our daily practice of pedopsychiatry. This consists of the use of positive elements from the cultural and worship life of the people. Similar dispositions can be investigated in other domains and would obviously constitute efficient therapeutic elements.

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