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**I am Beninese but Vodún is not my culture**

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a movement to return to African cultures. In Benin, this return is, according to some, a "return to Vodún". The aim of this paper is to provide clarification on this subject. The objective is not to question Vodún. The time for demonising cultures and religions is over. Rather, it is to make it clear that Vodún cannot be understood only as a culture but also and inseparably as a religious heritage, and as such, cannot be attributed to those who have not received it or who do not adhere to it. To this end, our reflection elucidates firstly the context of the emergence of the said movement. It then analyses the worldview on which Vodún is based, examines Vodún itself as an all-encompassing reality and then the cultural phenomenon as a dynamic reality. Finally, it proposes an alternative way of looking at the said return to African cultures.

## 1. Context of the emergence of the "return to African cultures" movement

Africa's encounter with the West took place in a context of conquest and domination. The missionaries, who did not come a priori<sup>1</sup> to establish a political and cultural hegemony, could not however detach themselves sufficiently from the demonising and satanising representations of the indigenous cultures in order to implant Christianity. This contributed to the inferiority complex and contempt for their own culture among the colonised and evangelised peoples. Western culture was the model to be imitated since endogenous cultures were described as barbaric. With the proclamation of independence, a certain awareness of one's own identity was born among the colonised, an awareness that has continued to grow since then thanks to the numerous socio-anthropological studies and research on the harm caused by the cultural domination of which indigenous peoples were victims. In such a context, the movement of return to African cultures that has been gaining ground in recent years does not lack relevance. From an anthropological and psychological point of view, it is an attempt to recover the lost self and to redefine one's identity disfigured by a falsified intersubjectivity<sup>2</sup>. But the question is: to which culture do we want to return? Is this culture Vodún, as we are led to believe, or rather a worldview that, without being exclusive to Vodún, is capable of understanding and explaining it, while remaining open to other forms of religiosity? Is Vodún ultimately the father of such a worldview or rather a product of it?

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<sup>1</sup> Barthélemy Adoukonou writes: "Father Aupiais (of the Society of African Missions - SMA) said, during the electoral campaign that was to take him to the French Assembly as a deputy for Dahomey and Togo: *I have never ceased to be a missionary and a colonial*. And France was not mistaken in dedicating a memorial to him on his death, on which we read that he always knew how to unite the twofold civilising and Christian mission of France." Barthélemy Adoukonou, *Jalons pour une théologie africaine, essai d'une herméneutique chrétienne du Vodún dahoméen, tome I : critique théologique*, Paris, Dessain et Tolra, 1980, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Such a movement of return or restitution is well supported, on the one hand, by the initiative without noise or ideological fuss of "Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent" (1956) and, on the other hand, by several initiatives and documents of the Catholic Church. To be convinced of this, it suffices to read the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions "Nostra Aetate", which positively reconsiders the beauty and richness of non-Christian cultures that were previously disregarded (cf. NA 2).

## 2. Is the worldview on which Vodún is based exclusive to it?

Vodún is based on a panentheistic monotheism<sup>3</sup> and a cosmo-theandric vitalism<sup>4</sup>. Monotheism is the affirmation of the existence of a unique, transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator God. Panentheism (pan = all; en = in; theos = God) states that God is greater than the universe and that the universe is contained within Him, that the divine interpenetrates the universe and at the same time extends beyond it. Monotheism and panentheism combined assert the existence of a creator God who holds in his hands all that he has created, surrounding it while being distinct. This doctrine is found in several sayings of the peoples of the Gulf of Benin (Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, Togo). For example, the Fons say: 'Nũ bí dọ Mǎwũ sí' or 'Nũ bí dọ Mǎwũ ló mɛ̀', expressions abbreviated in the vocable 'bǐdòsési' (everything is in the hands of God). This conception is also referred to as "dialectical panentheism"<sup>5</sup>. The epithet 'dialectical' expresses the relationship of belonging and distinction, of presence and transcendence, between the Creator and the creation. In pure panentheism, on the other hand, God is not seen as the creator, but rather as the eternal force that animates the universe. Yet the worldview underlying Vodún asserts the existence of a Creator God. According to the philosopher André Lalande, vitalism is a "doctrine according to which there exists in each living being a 'vital principle', distinct both from the thinking soul and from the physical-chemical properties of the body, governing the phenomena of life"<sup>6</sup>. The adjective 'cosmo-theandric' indicates the harmony of the cosmos, man and the divine, in short, the harmony of all the real. Cosmo-theandric vitalism thus means that communion with all the real is at the service of life, and in order to strengthen the vital force, the harmony of the whole must be cared for. It is on such a worldview that most African Traditional Religions, including Vodún, are based. But not everyone who shares this worldview necessarily shares the Vodún religion. On the contrary, this worldview can accommodate any religion, as is the case here. Thus, there are Beninese who are Christians or Muslims, having integrated the Christian or Muslim faith into this worldview. The proof that one can share this worldview

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barthélémy Zinzindohoué, *Le fait religio-culturel Vodún, sans la psychose. Semence d'inculturation chrétienne*, Cotonou, Les Editions IdS, 2016, p. 21. Cf. Mèdewalé-Jacob Agossou, *Christianisme africain. Une fraternité au-delà de l'ethnie*, Paris, Karthala, 1987, p. 80-81.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mèdewalé-Jacob Agossou, op. cit., p. 86-89.

<sup>5</sup> Samson Takpé, « *West African Vodún Cult and Christian Liturgy* », dans Kiss Gábor (éd.), *Abstracts of the 10th Jubilee conference of junior theologians and doctorals students*, Budapest, 2020, ISBN: 9786155586552, p. 137-139.

<sup>6</sup> André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, Vol. 2, Paris, PUF, 2010.

without being a follower of Vodún is that everything that has just been described is also found in other forms of religiosity throughout the world. The cosmo-theandric vision, for example, is found among certain peoples of Asia and the Amazonia<sup>7</sup>. And the person who officially supported the doctrine of panentheism and then coined the concept was neither a follower of Vodún nor a Beninese nor even an African, but a German philosopher called Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, in his work 'Vorlesungen über das System der Philosophie' (1828). In sum, the worldview on which Vodún is based is not exclusive to it, and therefore does not imply belonging to Vodún, which is presumably philosophy, religion and culture, all at the same time.

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<sup>7</sup> See the post-synodal apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, especially the numbers 71, 73 and 81.

### 3. Can Vodún be abstracted from its religious dimension?

I was born into a Christian family that communicated to me the Catholic faith integrated with a worldview similar to the one described above (one cannot postulate that it is "the same worldview" in view of the essential differences that I will highlight below!) The discovery of the traditional African religions existing in our region came much later, religions that worshiped deities such as Ògú, Shàànkpònón, Abúlúsí, etc. I heard the name "Vodún" during my formation in the seminary and understood it to refer to a form of endogenous religion in the south of the country. With research, I came to understand that the term is used as an umbrella. Barthélémy Zinzindohoué writes: "Vodún designates a venerated and adored divinity. It also defines the whole social, psychological and supernatural structure born of this popular religiosity<sup>8</sup>." Vodún is therefore both culture and cult in an inseparable way<sup>9</sup>, because our people, and therefore also the people of southern Benin, do not understand "Vodún" without its religious dimension. The terms "Vodúnno" and "Vodúnsì" have no other meaning than religious and cultural. Vodún cannot therefore be taken, without its religious dimension, only as a culture or a philosophy. This would be speculation and abstraction, an abstraction that would have nothing to do with the reality or the concrete experience of our people. The words Vodún and Òrìshà, as well as the realities they designate, have an intrinsic religious connotation. If Vodún, like other endogenous religions, is understood by our people as a religious phenomenon or religious heritage, why would we want to attribute this religion to those who do not profess it or this religious heritage to those who have not received it? I am neither of Vodún nor Òrìshà culture<sup>10</sup>. Even the alibi that we (Beninese or Africans) share the same worldview remains, beyond all relevance, a generalisation that generates confusion. For: 1) Can someone who was born into a Catholic Christian family, was baptised the next day in that same faith, grew up and was educated there, really have the same worldview as someone who was born and raised in a Vodún family? 2) Can people who have adhered - if sincerely - to religions based on different worldviews really still have the same worldview when there is a big difference between the two religious systems? 3) If we do not worship the same God (Christians worship the Trinity-God, others do not) and

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<sup>8</sup> Barthélémy Zinzindohoué, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> As I will explain later, this compenetration of religion and culture is not related to Vodún alone. It is a phenomenological and sociological fact.

<sup>10</sup> This is explained in more detail in the conclusion.

do not believe in the same Saviour (for Christians, there is no other Name that saves besides Jesus, cf. Acts 4:12), if our conception of the relationship with the other is not the same (the insistence of the Christian religion on love for the enemy is like no other), if we do not defend the same ethics or morals, if we do not have the same eschatology, are we really in the "same worldview" with such substantial differences? Basically, it is the awakening of the African conscience that seeks its foundations and its deep identity. And the surest element of identification is the cultural, which - in Benin, in Africa as in the great civilisations of history - is difficult to separate from the religious<sup>11</sup>. But then, because of this interpenetration, such an undertaking would have to take account of the lessons of history (unless one wanted to go down the wrong road again) and not give precedence to the postulate of a certain collective subconscious-unconscious that is differently perceived over the consciousness that must motivate and govern the lives of contemporary African populations. At this stage, it is important to answer the following question: is our cultural identity to be sought in the vestiges of our history or rather in the precious treasure of our present existence?

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI., *Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 2017, p. 49.

#### 4. Is cultural identity a fossil, culture a museum and cultural research an archaeology?

The term 'culture' has been the subject of much controversy among social scientists, especially since the 'cultural turn', a movement that began in the early 1970s and whose aim is to make culture the centre of contemporary debates by advocating a meaning-oriented understanding of culture. In this context, the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, in his book "Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien" (The Transformation of the theories of culture), developed a typology of the concept of culture<sup>12</sup>, which he summarised in his other book "Kreativität und soziale Praxis"<sup>13</sup> by distinguishing between a normative cultural concept, a holistic cultural concept, a cultural concept derived from the theory of differentiation, and then a meaning-oriented or significance-oriented concept of culture. After elucidating the typology, he shows the limits of the first three approaches for the current development of human societies and cultural sciences. Stefan Lüddemann and other researchers will largely agree with this<sup>14</sup>. In short, culture is that net of significances, that network of meanings which governs the specific form of being and acting of a group and which is constantly updated through the processes of communication and the interactions of history, so that culture remains a dynamic production of values and generates the identity of the group through its capacity to give it meaning and its ever-present relevance for each of its members<sup>15</sup>. Now, what makes sense today to a human group did not necessarily make sense to their ancestors, and vice versa. And so, when we speak of cultural research, we are not primarily talking about a work of archaeology but about a heuristic and hermeneutic task. It is about the culture of the group and not the culture of its ancestors. Recourse to the past in this context is only needed for the understanding-construction of the present and the prospects for the future. The cultural identity retains from the past what makes sense for the present and is able to lead further. Culture is thus conjugated in the present tense, even if it has a present perfect (which makes

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien. Zur Entwicklung eines Theorieprogramms*, Göttingen 2000, p. 66-90.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, *Kreativität und soziale Praxis. Studien zur sozial- und Gesellschaftstheorie*, Bielefeld 2016, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stefan Lüddemann, *Kultur als Lesbarkeit. Ein Vorwort zur Neuauflage*, dans : *Kultur. Eine Einführung*, 2e édition revue et complétée, Wiesbaden 2019, VIII.

<sup>15</sup> Samson Takpé, *Inkulturation der Liturgie angesichts der gegenwärtigen Dynamik der Kulturen und Gesellschaften* [The inculturation of the liturgy faced with the current dynamism of cultures and societies], Canonical licenciate dissertation at the Theological Faculty of Trier, Trier, 2020, p. 16.

it possible to know where one comes from without having to dig up the rubble) and a future (which makes it possible to know where one is going without having to flee from the responsibilities of the present). This is how the dynamism of culture articulates past, present and future on the one hand, and harmonises stability and movement in a dialectical relationship on the other. All this reasoning can be applied to Vodún and Òrìshà. And if in this exercise, the cultural subject remains dissatisfied with the meaning-making (always subjective apperception), he is entitled to say: "I am not of Vodún culture! I am not of Òrìshà culture!"; a stance that should ultimately reorient the current debates.

## **5. The return to African cultures must be a rediscovery of human virtues and a promotion of life**

In my opinion, the return to African cultures, which should not be a counterproductive work of archaeology, if such a return is to unite us, cannot be a "return to Vodún" but first of all a "dialogue with Vodún" on the basis of the virtues it recognises and promotes<sup>16</sup>. According to Barthélémy Zinzindohoué, "the virtues of sincerity, honesty, fidelity to one's word, the sense of the sacred, respect for the state of consecrated life (...), the respect due to things and people to whom one owes respect, the price attached to the lives to be safeguarded, the aspiration to a life lived in fullness and, in short, the mystique of radical obedience to the 'laws of life', are all values strongly supported by the religion and ethics of Vodún<sup>17</sup>" and which can unite us for a sincere and edifying dialogue. Furthermore, African cultures are multi-millennial reserves of wisdom that can be found in names, adages, proverbs, tales, maxims, sayings, panegyrics, etc. From this perspective, everyone can work towards learning and transmitting this wisdom, and even exporting it to other peoples, languages and nations. Another angle of dialogue is linked to the vitalism and anthropology of life that characterise African cultures<sup>18</sup>. It is about the revaluation of life and human promotion. I think this is an important axis. If African cultures are truly life-centred, if they promote life and want to strengthen it, they should start by creating better living conditions to provide for the basic needs of every African - food, clothing, shelter, health care, education - as well as other human needs such as the need for security and protection, freedom and understanding, love and affection. And for this, Africa and Africans today do not lack potentialities. The challenge is to discern these potentialities and to develop them so that a new Africa can be born. I dream of this new Africa<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> It is especially at this level that all Beninese, whatever their religion, could find themselves. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to find that the very people who are fighting for a return to Vodún do not always make more worthwhile these values.

<sup>17</sup> Barthélémy Zinzindohoué, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Cegnanou Louis Hondocodo, *Repères culturels et religieux en Afrique. Dialogue avec Saint Augustin*, Trèves, Éditions Paulinus, 2001, p. 411-415. Soede, N. Y. (2011). *Conception africaine de la vie et du temps*. *Théologiques*, 19(1), 13–25. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014178ar>, p. 14-17. Heyer, R. & Kabasele Lumbala, F. (2011). *Théologie africaine et vie*, *Théologiques*, 19(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014177ar>, p. 8-12.

<sup>19</sup> This is the reason for the proposal in the appendix of the "prayer for the renewal of Africa".

## **Conclusion**

At the end of this brief journey, it must be reiterated that the present reflection is a position that does not engage a human or cultural group. It remains subjective and personal, based on freedom of expression. This is what justifies the tone and the excessive use of the first person singular: I AM NOT FROM THE VODÚN CULTURE NOR THE ÒRÌSHÀ CULTURE. This assertion does not deny intercultural influences in the age of glocalization. But an influence is far from a belonging. I READILY ACCEPT TO BE TOLD THAT I AM OF ITCHA CULTURE, YORUBA CULTURE, BENINESE CULTURE OR AFRICAN CULTURE. We don't say of Greeks that they are of Zeus culture or Hermes culture, because the cults of Zeus and Hermes exist in Greece, we say rather that they are of Greek culture. Nor do we say of the Romans that they are of the Jupiter culture or the Neptune culture, because the cults of Jupiter and Neptune exist in Rome, we say rather that they are of the Roman culture. In short, the hope is that the current impulse to return to African cultures will take more account of the dynamic character of cultures, that they will assess the relevance or not of the heritage of past times for present generations and that they will commit themselves above all to improving the living conditions of our populations. These are real challenges for Africa today!

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## PRAYER FOR THE RENEWAL OF AFRICA

God of our Fathers, you who sent your Son to give us life and life in abundance, we bless you for your plan of salvation for Africa. Look with compassion on your people who are plagued by underdevelopment, social injustice, ignorance, terrorism and violence in all its forms. Bind up the wounds of our history. Give us the grace of religious and political regeneration. Give us leaders according to your own heart. May a new, free and happy Africa be born of your goodness. And may your worshippers, your scattered children, from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, bring to you again offerings that please you (So 3:10).

Lord Jesus Christ, you who, with Mary and Joseph, found refuge in Africa at the time of persecution (Mt 2:13-21) and who was helped in your holy Passion by our ancestor in faith, Saint Simon of Cyrene (Mk 15:21), remember your beloved land in these difficult times, and listen to the cry of African families in distress. As with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), reveal yourself to all as Redeemer and Saviour. May Africa find refuge in your merciful Heart. Instead of the blood of so many innocents spilled on our land, may your Precious Blood flow, which alone saves and gives life.

Spirit who blows from the four winds to give life to the dry bones (Ezek 37:1-10), blow on Africa to form a new people. May a new spiritual tradition be affirmed, made up of remarkable human values, and generating a "political condition that aspires to the highest expressions of the human spirit and to the highest forms of social life" (Paul VI in Kampala).

Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of the Word, Our Lady of Africa, may the Lord work wonders for us through your prayer. Thus, your African daughters and sons will eternally sing with you: "Magnificat, the Lord has done wonders for us, holy is his Name!"