

EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT: THE RIGHT TO IMITATE SACRED RITUALS - A COMMUNITY RIGHT GRANTED TO CHILDREN ALONE

Authors:

Leatitia Akplogan, ESGB/PASSERELLE, Porto-Novo, Benin

Roger Ouensavi, Groupement des Educateurs Spécialisés du Bénin



Throughout the entire region of the former kingdom of Danxomè local communities have remained reluctant to promote and respect the rights of the child ever since Benin ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. And yet, they do agree on not considering children's violations of traditions, rites, or worship as a sacrilege. For the past few months, a group of civil society organisations (CSO) active in the towns of Abomey and Bohicon has been benefiting from methodological support from the Benin platform as part of a contract between the METOKAN Association of Solidarity and Support, affiliated to Abbé Pierre's EMMAÛS INTERNATIONAL and the Groupement des Educateurs Spécialisés du Bénin (GRES-BENIN, Benin Group of Childcare Workers). At the end of the contract, the Maison des Enfants (ME, Children's House), on which building began in 2010 through the French Embassy's Social Development Fund for the Group for Research and Action in Human Development (GRADH), was up and running and community outreach work was stronger.

In this context, Saclo, a village which lies just before Bohicon when coming from Cotonou, is home to a strongly hierarchical and feudal community of around 1,500 inhabitants. On meeting children aged 6 to 14 in this little hamlet, which is home to the centre dubbed Maison des Enfants (ME), the team of street workers following the methodological assistance is both surprised and captivated watching the children playing of their own accord all day long. They were spread out in little groups of activity, playing freely, and it wasn't long before they started putting on a performance of all the age-old fetishistic traditions of their parents. Within the community, imitating sacred rites, worship and ritual dances is considered a fundamental taboo and has always been fatal for the uninitiated, whether they are native to the area or not. Why not children, then? Opinions and answers vary but all point towards one reality: socialisation, self-socialisation of younger generations. Indeed, when we spoke to a religious cleric, he replied, *"children only imitate what they have seen. There are sacred elements to worship that they are not aware of. When an adult does it, it is an act of provocation or wilful challenge"*. We also spoke to a

believer in “Sakpata” who said, *“a child learns everything by imitating. It is bewildering for a child to be prevented from imitating which is why we let them do it”*.

So, every Wednesday afternoon from 2pm to 6pm, in the village of Saclo, several groups of children meet for a wide range of group leisure activities based on imitating the rites and worship of endogenous religions.

For example, “Hwèdè” is a beat linked to the divinity “Heviosso”¹ used during cultural demonstrations in the run-up to ceremonial vigils, and is performed by children in the photo above. Children therefore have the right to imitate rites and traditional worship, unlike adults who are subject to community sanctions.

We have therefore not finished exploring the endogenous capacities of our communities to promote and respect children’s rights.

¹ God of Thunder.