

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Influence of vodou rites and initiation practices on incidence of early pregnancy in the maritime region of Togo

DOI: 10.29063/ajrh2024/v28i8s.13

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Abstract

Togo, like other sub-Saharan African countries, is not spared from the phenomenon of teenage pregnancies. Each year, on average, about ten cases of teenage student pregnancies are recorded in schools. Despite multiple efforts by the Togolese government and non-governmental organizations to stem this phenomenon, it still persists and is growing. This paper aims to analyse the influence of the Vodou workshop practice on the occurrence of adolescent pregnancies. The paper relied on analysis of 105 Key Informant Interviews in four villages in the maritime region. The results reveal that the Vodou rites and initiations practices constitute a major preventable factor in the causation of early pregnancies among teenagers in rural Togo. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 115-121).

Keywords: Early pregnancies; Rites and Initiations; Vodou; Maritime Region; Togo

Résumé

Le Togo, à l'instar d'autres pays de l'Afrique sub-Saharienne, n'est pas épargné du phénomène des grossesses précoces. Chaque année, en moyenne, une dizaine de cas de grossesses des élèves d'adolescentes est enregistrée dans les établissements scolaires. Malgré de multiples efforts déployés par le gouvernement togolais et les organisations non gouvernementales pour endiguer ce phénomène, il persiste toujours, et prend de l'ampleur. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser l'influence de la pratique du culte Vodou sur la survenue des grossesses des adolescentes initiées. La recherche est basée sur l'analyse de 105 interviews individuels conduites dans quatre localités dans la région maritime. Les résultats révèlent que les rites et initiations pratiqués dans les couvents Vodou constituent un facteur de prévention des grossesses précoces chez les adolescentes initiées. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 115-121).

Mots-clés: Grossesses précoces; Rites et Initiations; Vodou; Région maritime; Togo

Introduction

Early pregnancies and marriages constitute some of the problems that undermine the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, a region which had the highest prevalence rate of 6,114,000 births for deliveries among 15–19-year-olds in 2021¹.

Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that, approximately 12 million girls aged 15 to 19 and at least 777,000 girls aged under 15 give birth each year in developing regions². Togo, with 30.7% of young people aged 10 to 24, also makes significant contribution to the phenomenon of early pregnancies and marriages (RGPH, 2010)³. The report of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS4) in 2010 estimated that the teenage pregnancy rate in Togo was 30%. The statistics vary by regions within Togo. The MICS4

(2010 survey data³, suggests the proportion of women aged 15 to 19 years who had live births or are pregnant with their first child ranged from 12 to 26%. The Kara region had the highest percentages with 20 to 26%, followed by the Maritime region with 18 to 20%.

Data from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education recorded nearly 7,000 pregnancies among in-school adolescent girls (10-19 years old) during the 2012-2013 school year. Likewise, statistics from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education indicated that between 2014 and 2017, 8,833 cases of pregnancies were recorded among adolescent girls throughout the country. The situation, which spared no school level or educational region, was reported as follows: 1787 cases in high school, 6471 cases in middle school and 575 cases in primary school⁵. Also, as

publicly stated on January 10, 2022 by the Ministry of Primary, Secondary, Technical and Craft Education, 1,244 girls dropped out of studies due to pregnancy in 2021 in Togo⁶.

To further illustrate this phenomenon, studies have been carried out by researchers and institutions, notably the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2019, the Togolese Association for Family Welfare (ATBEF), and the Research Unit Demographic (URD) in 2018 and 2021. It appears from the study carried out by ATBEF and URD⁷ that there are several explanatory factors for this phenomenon, including family environment, lack of knowledge of contraceptive methods, and the perpetuation of rituals and traditional initiations consecrating “female or male maturity” in accordance to customs. This last factor, that is to say traditional rites and initiations, interests us in this article since our societies are largely influenced by traditional beliefs. The oldest tradition in the world is Vodou according to Ekoue Kossi (2021). Indeed, for this author, Vodou has been recognized since pre-Genesis as one of the oldest religions dating back to more than fifty-four million years⁸.

Vodou worship revolves around the worship of the God Mahu (or Mawu) through the deities represented by clods of earth, wood or rivers. Vodou worship is practiced through rites and initiations. Most of the initiation takes place over a short or long period (two months to three years) during which period, the initiates learn the practices of Vodou. Initiation takes place in a convent where both girls and boys undergo rites that would harm their development. Girls are sometimes victims of all kinds of sexual abuse.

In light of such a context, a question deserves to be asked: what influence do Vodou initiation rites have on the occurrence of early pregnancies among young girls?

We propose the alternate hypothesis that introducing young girls to the cult of Vodou or Vodouism protects them from early pregnancies.

The objective of this article is to analyze the influence of Vodou rites and initiations on the occurrence of teenage pregnancies in the age group of 10-19 years.

Methods

The data used are those from the documentary review and a qualitative survey carried out in May

2022 by ATBEF⁹ in four localities in the maritime region, namely: Kovié, Zalivé, Attitogon and Légbassito. The choice of these localities is a reasoned choice made within the project's intervention communities, taking into consideration the importance of rites and initiations.

We used qualitative research because it has the advantage that it encourages the participation of young people who hesitate to be questioned on themes of this type, and is not discriminatory towards people who cannot read or write. The study was carried out using a semi-structured discussion guide on the themes of the study. This guide was subdivided into three sub-themes including specific questions: i) knowledge and perception of Vodou rites and initiations, ii) influence of Vodou rites and initiations on the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health rights, iii) Multi-sectoral and community strategies coordinated and integrated likely to improve rites and initiations to prevent the occurrence of early pregnancies among adolescents.

Data was collected from 105 persons using two tools: in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussion. Individual interviews were carried out with traditional leaders (4), initiator priests (4), and initiates (4), while focus group discussions were conducted with members of the multisectoral framework (48), and young schoolchildren and out-of-school youth (45) whose age range is between 10 and 19 years old. The details are presented in Table 1.

The diversity of the choice of these targets is explained by the fact that these actors (education, traditional chieftdom, health, justice, traditional priests) operate in their field of competences but in a complementary manner to carry out actions, including the sharing of data and information and decision-making to achieve the objective of reducing the prevalence of adolescent pregnancies.

The research was evaluated by the Bioethics Committee for Health Research (CBRS), that provided ethical approval No. 003/2022/CBRS on January 25, 2022. We also obtained informed consent of the participants to conduct the interviews. All participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected.

For data processing, the information collected in French and Ewe were first recorded in a dictaphone and then transcribed. Subsequently, the content analysis, that is to say the answers provided by our participants, were grouped by items

Table 1: Targets interviewed and data collection tools

LOCALITY	EIA	FG	NARRATIVE	TOTAL WORKFORCE
Kovié	-Traditional chief -Initiator priest	- Young people in school and out of school - Multi-sectoral framework	Initiated	27
Zalivé	-Traditional chief -Initiator priest	- Young people in school and out of school - Multi-sectoral framework	Initiated	26
Attitogon	-Traditional chief -Initiator priest	- Young people in school and out of school - Multi-sectoral framework	Initiated	26
Légbassito	-Traditional chief -Initiator priest	- Young people in school and out of school - Multi-sectoral framework	Initiated	26
Total	8	93	4	105

Source: Made from field data May 2022

and key ideas and were extracted for the refinement and development of the paper.

Results

In this section, three points will be addressed: typology of deities linked to Vodou worship and actors concerned, practice of Vodou worship and link with early sexual relations among adolescents, and the benefits of initiations on the sexual and reproductive health of young girls and boys.

Typology of deities linked to Vodou worship and actors concerned

Table 2 presents an overview of the deities noted in the maritime region, their frequency, the different targets and actors concerned.

The deities identified in the table are worshiped through various practices in the localities of the maritime region. The targets are: boys and girls regardless of age. According to our informants, the initiation or rite is carried out at any age on people in whom the need has been identified. Those who carry out the act are generally the initiators, the priests or priestesses, the guardians of habits and customs, the adept parents, etc.

Practice of Vodou worship and link with early sexual relations among adolescents

In general, the practice of Vodou worship is often done in a convent where the training of followers takes place. This training is based on traditional education and is transmitted through words, unlike the pedagogy of modern school which is done through the transmission of book knowledge. Followers are supposed to know nothing a priori:

they watch, listen and imitate. It is a process of transmission of customs and traditions, namely everything relating to habits, traditional uses, collective ways of acting and thinking. They are taught to forget their past, because they are being reborn. It involves the initiates losing their names upon entry, the taking of a new name according to the oracle, and the uptake of spiritual function which constitutes their life program.

It is to be noted that initiation or learning differs from one deity to another. A common point in this process of initiation is the existence of numerous prohibitions and norms that initiates are required to follow and observe. Among these prohibitions is the sexual act. Indeed, during initiation, initiates are generally not authorized to have sexual relations. They are then subject to the control of the initiating priests who ensure the proper execution of these prohibitions. An interviewee in Kovié states as follows:

“There are ceremonies which require that the initiates sit on an earthenware pot, which will not break; but when someone among them has had sexual intercourse, the pot automatically breaks as soon as he sits on it. And with that, there are sanctions, fines and “reparation” ceremonies that they must do to be forgiven.

Excerpt from the individual interview with an initiate of around 35 years old

This prohibition of the sexual act during the initiation period is valid for both girls and boys.

The analysis of information collected in the field from the different targets (notably members of the multi-sectoral framework and young people in school and out of school) in Kovié and Aného allows us to reach the conclusion that initiation into the convent prevents adolescents from being

Table 2: Divinities and rites recorded in the maritime region

Typology of deities	Nature	Frequencies	Periods	Targets	Actors
<i>Togbuizikpui</i>	Ancestral rite It is the adoration of the ancestors	Every year	Any time of the year	Follower families	Priest, parents, guardian of tradition
<i>Hébiesso</i>	Divinity of the war	Every year	Any time of the year	Followers regardless of gender and age	Priests and followers
<i>Vodou Dan</i>	Deity represented by the serpent	Every year	Any time of the year	Followers regardless of gender and age	Priests, followers
<i>Axolou /Sakpatè</i>	Earth-bound deity	Every year	Any time of the year	Families who are fans of this vodou	Priest and followers
<i>Mami/Mamissi/ Mamiwata</i>	Water divinity	Every year	Any time of the year	Followers regardless of gender and age	Priests, followers
<i>Alafia / Thron Kpeto Deka</i>	Deity often associated with the fight against witchcraft	Every year	Any time of the year	Followers regardless of gender and age	Priests, followers
aƒan	Ancestral rite of geomancy	Every year	Any time of the year	Follower families	Priests, followers

Source : Field data, May 2022

initiated and freely indulging in sexual intercourse. They declare that any act or behaviour linked to sexual intercourse is severely punished within Vodou followers and towards the community.

Along the same lines, the majority of our informants in Attitogon claimed that initiates have strict prohibitions on sexual relations. A priest explains:

“Sexual relations are prohibited during periods of initiations before marriage ceremonies before the fetish, during periods of certain ceremonies and certain days of the week are reserved for the divinity. Those who violate this prohibition suffer punishment and pay fines to ask for forgiveness with a view to their purification. These rules and rigors force the initiates not to indulge in the sexual act if the conditions are not met; which protects them against early pregnancies. Likewise, these rules of conduct that the initiates inherit from the convent give them, whatever one may say, a line of conduct and prohibitions which can allow them to distance themselves from "irresponsible" sexual practices and be safe early or unwanted pregnancies/paternity.

Comments from the initiating priest aged around 60 years old in Attitogon

In Légbassito, in the opinion of the traditional chief and members of the multisectoral framework, those initiated into the Vodou cult are perceived as being the least exposed to premature sexual intercourse and the contraction of early pregnancies among adolescent girls.

In all, from the results of the data collected in these four localities, we can conclude that the initiation of adolescents into the convent protects adolescent girls against pregnancies.

However, some informants noted a few cases of pregnancies in convents, which according to them can be explained by envy and temptation since women and men are all gathered in the same premises. One respondent states:

"In the days of convents, girls/women and boys/men, of all ages, shared the same premises where temptations could lead them to the depravity which caused pregnancies in convents. But it should be noted that these were rare cases..."

Extract from the group interview with members of the multisectoral framework in Aného

We note that the Vodou cult does not involve sexual abuse that could lead to pregnancies. If sexual abuse

is noted and proven, it would be a human deviance inherent to any social microcosm which escapes official or community control, and which is therefore marginalized by development or management structures.

The benefits of initiations on the sexual and reproductive health of young girls and boys

According to information collected from the interviewees in the targeted localities, initiations have advantages on the sexual and reproductive health of young girls and boys. In Kovié for example, for the initiating priest, initiations provide better sexual health for young girls and boys. This is the first advantage of these initiations since they protect the initiates against all kinds of illness.

In Aného, according to the members of the multi-sectoral framework, the traditional chief and the initiate, the rites present strong advantages for the initiates in the sense that they are not authorized to perform abortions. Any initiate who attempts abortion is likely to lose his life.

In Attitogon, as an advantage noted by informants, initiation allows young people to have good manners, to behave well in life and to avoid certain practices that go against values: such as sexual depravity, theft, rudeness and others. For them, unlike the Christian religion where everything seems to be permitted, fetishes severely punish followers who break the rules and prescriptions. An actor in the multi-sectoral framework states:

“Initiated girls do not lead a life of sexual depravity; they do not prostitute themselves or steal, as others do nowadays, at the risk of perishing under the wrath of their fetishes, Since the latter do not like dirt and bad behavior. Respect for one's dignity, one's body and honesty are part of the principles of their divinity.

Excerpt from group interview from the multisectoral framework

Beyond the observance of the rules of life (respect for oneself and others, etc.) mentioned above and which are consistent with the teachings received during initiation and which can constitute an important lever for responsible sexuality, prohibitions on sexual practices during initiation constitute direct protection of young girls and boys against early maternity and fatherhood.

In Légbassito, according to several people from the multi-sectoral framework, the chief, the priest and young people in school and out of school, the rites present great advantages for the initiates. Here are some details on the benefits, noted by a member of the multi-sector framework.

“In certain convents, you must not sleep with a man for example, if you are in the convent of “YEBESSI” I give an example: if you are in the convent, you are not going to sleep with a man until you finish the ceremonies. And even if you are married, sexual relations with your partner are really regulated. It's not every day that you're going to have sex. It's also the same thing regarding “Vodou DAN”. And this is the cause of the fact that many Vodou followers do not marry. If you look at it, many “Mamissi” fans don't get married. Initiation will delay people's entry into marriage. For example, if we want to initiate you into Vodou, you yourself know that you are not going to get married as you want and your parents also know it. The initiate is in the convent until the priests decide on her marriage. You yourself cannot come in front of your parents at 14 and say that you want to get married. Who will give it to you?”

Along the same lines, the chef explains:

“Initiation protects children. Girls are not going to get pregnant quickly. Firstly, when we say that a girl belongs to Vodou, you yourself are a man, before you approach her it's quite a problem. Example: I have a friend who slept with a girl who belongs to Vodou. After this act, his penis swelled and a substance was leaking from his penis. My friend is a devout Christian, he spoke about it to the pastors who prayed with him without success. Finally, they returned to our African values. This is where it was revealed to him that he had offended a Vodou. He told himself that he goes to church and that he has not signed any pact with Vodou. But he too was forced to return to the convent to perform ceremonies. So, it's a good thing that can scare children and they won't get married quickly, which will allow them to avoid early pregnancies and therefore have a healthy sex life.

Comments from the chief aged around 57 years old in Attitogon

Analyzing the data collected, we note that initiation into the Vodou cult protects girls and boys from

early entry into sexual life. By strictly observing the rules and prescriptions, followers adopt a regulated and responsible sexual life and are less exposed to risks related to reproductive health, namely sexually transmitted infections (STIs), early pregnancies.

Discussion

The data from this research reveal that initiation into the Vodou cult protects young adolescent initiates from early pregnancies because initiates at the convent are required to observe sexual abstinence during their apprenticeship.

Few studies have addressed the rites and initiations of the Vodou cult and its effect on reproductive sexual health. However, the results of this research corroborate the work of some authors on the nature of the prohibitions linked to the sexual relations of initiates in the convent. Indeed, according to Koudolo¹⁰, periods of sexual abstinence are imposed on initiates in convents in southeastern Togo during initiation. It constitutes a sort of rule. The author indicates that, even if the initiation time is very short, a period of sexual abstinence is obligatory in order to acquire the purity necessary for future relations with the divinity. This period of abstinence can also last up to three years. The purity acquired through sexual abstinence is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of man's actions towards divinity.

In the same sense, addressing the education received in convents, B. Gilli emphasizes the prescriptions which are widely followed by the proselytes who, upon leaving the convent are generally respected people, are the subject of a fear for themselves vis-à-vis secular society and vice versa. Among these prohibitions, he noted the prohibition of speaking the profane language, of consuming certain foods, of having sexual relations. (B. Gilli cited by E. Ahiako)¹¹.

The authors Karola Elwert-kretschmer, Véronique Porra¹² in their work also mention the ban on sexual relations and the related sanctions. Violation of the sexual taboo during the initiation period results in severe sanctions for both priests and initiates. If a vodouisi⁷ finds herself pregnant during the initiation period, the priest is then forced to close his convent, is dismissed from his functions and beaten, whether he is the cause of the pregnancy or whether another man has had the opportunity to approach the vodouisi while he was responsible for

monitoring her. After having suffered corporal punishment, the vodouisi is excluded from initiation, which represents a very great opprobrium.

In their study on mapping the risks of early pregnancies in schools in the town of Atakpamé in Togo, Nossoukpoe, Sokemawu and Akibode¹³ came to the conclusion that girls of animist obedience who practice Vodou are less prone to pregnancies in school. They noted within their study sample that among the 28 girls of Catholic obedience, 10 had already experienced pregnancy in a school environment, i.e. 35.7%. Out of 15 Muslim girls, 2 experienced pregnancies during their school careers, i.e. 13.3%. Of the 7 Protestant girls, 1 has been pregnant once, or 14.3%. 4 out of 21 girls from other Christian religions (Assembly of God, Pentecost, etc.) or 19% experienced pregnancy before the end of lower secondary school. No girl of animist, practitioner or initiate of Vodou became pregnant within the sample. The authors conclude that sexual behavior would be more liberal among Catholic girls than Protestant and Muslim girls. Religious practices have a definite influence on the sexual behavior of adolescent girls in schools. The risks of contracting a pregnancy are increasing depending on whether the girl is Muslim, Protestant or Catholic, whereas they would be very low or zero for girls initiated or practicing the animist religion linked to Vodou.

Conclusion

The objective of this article is to analyze the influence of rites and initiations at the Vodou convent on the occurrence of early teenage pregnancies. The methodology used in this research is qualitative. Data were collected from 105 people in four localities in the maritime region of Togo. The results show that the practice of Vodou worship, particularly initiation into the Vodou convent, is not the source of early pregnancies among initiated adolescent girls. On the contrary, it protects girls from early pregnancies because they are forced during initiation to observe prohibitions related to sexual relations. As a result, initiation into the Vodou convent, in view of the data collected, presents several advantages for the sexual and reproductive health of the initiates. The education received at the convent allows initiates, even after leaving the convent, to have regulated and healthy sexuality.

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