

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Initiatory rites, sexual activity, and early pregnancies of adolescent girls in the savannah region of Togo: Views of canton chiefs, priests and initiates

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Abstract

Teenage pregnancy and marriage are major concerns in many schools in Togo, due to the large number of cases recorded each year by the Ministry of Primary, Secondary, Technical Education, and Handicrafts. The aim of this article is to describe the rites associated with early pregnancy and the perceptions held by the populations of Gando in the Savannah region. The study was based on documentary research and interviews with several actors, including initiating priests, canton chiefs, and young initiates. The results show that the rites: *Okpenkpen*, *Tkonte*, *Ignogues* have a link with early pregnancy, and the populations perceive them relatively well. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 185-191).

Keywords: Initiation rites, Sexual activity, Early pregnancy, Savannah region, Togo

Résumé

Les grossesses et mariages chez les adolescentes constituent une vive préoccupation dans beaucoup d'établissements scolaires au Togo en raison du nombre important de cas recensés chaque année par le Ministère des enseignements primaire, secondaire, technique et de l'artisanat. L'objectif de cet article est de décrire les rites ayant un lien avec les grossesses précoces et les perceptions qu'ont les populations de Gando dans la région des Savanes. Pour y parvenir, la méthodologie utilisée est basée sur la recherche documentaire et les entretiens avec plusieurs acteurs, entre autres, les prêtres initiateurs, les chefs de cantons et les jeunes initiés. Les résultats montrent que les rites : *Okpenkpen*, *Tkonte*, *Ignogues* ont un lien avec les grossesses précoces et les populations les perçoivent relativement bien. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [8s]: 185-191).

Mots-clés: Rites initiatiques, Activité sexuelle, Grossesse précoce, Région des savanes, Togo

Introduction

The problem of teenage pregnancies and marriages is becoming an international concern. Around the world, about one in five women aged 20 to 24 years give birth to a child before the age of 18¹. According to the Directorate General of Statistics and National Accounting: almost a third of women between 15 and 49 years of age have married or are in a common-law union before age 18 in Togo. Furthermore, 7% of these women were married before the age of 15². According to reports of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS4) 2010 and the Third Demographic and Health Survey of Togo (EDSIII) 2014, the adolescent pregnancy rate in Togo is estimated at 30%.

With the aim of helping to reduce the prevalence of early pregnancies and adolescent marriages, numerous studies have been carried out by institutions including the National Program for the Fight against Adolescent Pregnancies and Marriages (PNLGMA), the Togolese Association for Family Welfare (ATBEF), and the Demographic Research Unit (URD). Reports from the Ministry of Education between 2015-2021, indicate that cases of early pregnancies recorded in schools in between 2019 and 2020 by region were: Savannah 192 cases; Kara 246 cases; Centrale 490 cases; Plateau 641 cases; Maritime 387 cases; and Greater Lomé 342 cases³.

In the Savannah region, young boys and girls are subjected to initiation rites which are most often synonymous with male and female maturity. In

other words, these rites allow adolescents to enter the adult class. Consequently, these adolescents consider themselves as “adults”, and are relieved of sociocultural and religious prohibitions, and can freely engage in sexual activities. It is with this in mind that we were interested in rites and initiations in order to see their link with early pregnancies and the perceptions that populations about this connection. We raised the following questions: what link exists between these rites (*Okpenkpen*, *Tkonte* and *Ignogues*) and the prevalence of early pregnancies? How do the people of Gando perceive them? We began with the hypothesis that there is a link between initiation rites and teenage pregnancies, and that the populations in Gando have positive perceptions of pregnancies and initiation rites: *Okpenkpen* (exchange), *Tkonte* (convent), *Ignogues* (gris-gris).

The objective of this paper therefore, is to describe the rites linked to early pregnancies and to analyze the perceptions that the populations of Gando in the Savannah region have of these rites.

Methods

The methodological approach adopted was qualitative. The data used came initially from documentary research and secondly from the basic study of action research entitled: “multi-sectoral and transformative approaches to rites and initiations for rights in sexual and reproductive health of adolescents. The study was reviewed and approved in January 25, 2022 by the Bioethics Committee for Health Research (CBRS) with number 003/2022/CBRS. The action research was carried out in May 2022 by the Togolese Association for Family Well-Being (ATBEF)⁴. Two types of tools were used for data collection: in-depth individual interview guides (EIA) and discussion frameworks for group interviews (FG). Our interlocutors are mainly members of the multi-sectoral framework, cantonal chiefs, initiating priests, initiates, young people in-school, and out of school from the Savannah region. In total, 12 individual interviews (a canton chief, a priest and an initiate per locality) and 8 group interviews (members of the multisectoral framework⁷ and young boys and girls in and out of school) were carried out in four (4) Prefectures in the shown as shown in Table 1.

For data processing, the information collected was first recorded on a dictaphone and then

transcribed. Subsequently, content analysis was the method adopted for refining and reporting the article. In this method, the answers provided by our interlocutors were grouped by items and key ideas were extracted. Then, the coding of these strong ideas and their categorization. That is to say, in sections bringing together elements with common characteristics.

Rites and initiations

Okpenkpen/Pogalou (Exchange)

The exchange consists of exchanging young girls for marriage. It is a practice which brings together two distinct families which are part of the logic according to which “I give you my daughter and you give me your young daughter in marriage”.

Tkonte/Komont (convent)

Tkonte is an initiation in a convent where the neophyte must break away from his/her social environment to spend time in a convent where he/she learns or acquires new ways of living. This initiation is reserved for young boys, men, girls, and women.

Ignogues (gris-gris)

Ignogues is an ancestral practice which is observed among the Gangam and Moba of Gando. This allows its author to captivate the opposite sex so that they agree to have sexual relations.

Results

Interviews with the participants revealed the symbolic representations of procreation, the description of rites, initiations of adolescents, and their link with early pregnancies, and the perceptions that the different actors in the region have on the rites and pregnancies of adolescents.

The symbolic representation of procreation

In the traditional perceptions suggest that the fertility of a girl occupies an important place in the collective imagination of the population and the cosmogony. For our interlocutors, the world is twofold: the “visible” world which is that of men and the “invisible” world that is made spirits, gods, and ancestors. The birth of a child is often seen as the

Table 1: Characteristics of study participants

Prefectures	Municipalities	Localities	EIA	F-G	Stories	Total
Kpendjal West	Kpendjal 1	West Naki-Est	-Canton chief -Priest	-Members of the Multisectoral framework -Young Boys and Girls	Initiated	5
Oti	Oti 1	Mango	-Canton chief -Priest	-Members of the Multisectoral framework -Young Boys and Girls	Initiated	5
Oti-South 1	Oti-South 1	Gando	-Canton chief -Priest	-Members of the Multisectoral framework -Young Boys and Girls	Initiated	5
Oti-South 2	Oti-South 2	Takpamba	-Canton chief -Priest	-Members of the Multisectoral framework -Young Boys and Girls	Initiated	5
Total			8	8	4	20

product of a transfer from the invisible world to the human world. This perception remains sacred among the Gangan populations, to the point that when a woman who has not had a child, she is not buried with dignity when she dies. The words of an informant aged about 20 years illustrate this fact:

"...When you have not had a child before dying, even if you are rich, there will be no consideration at your death. Your funeral is not honoured and then you are quickly forgotten after your burial. If you are a woman, before burying you, we tear your stomach a little with a blade followed by these words: go and rest in peace, be no longer reincarnated sterile in our community.

Extract from a group interview with school and extracurricular young people aged 15 to 19 in Gando.

Rites and initiations, either passing or incidental, are seen as the process of social integration and the conservation of ancestral practices. For most informants, in their daily practices and beliefs, there are fertility deities.

Rites, initiations of adolescents

Okpenkpen/Pogalou (Exchange)

The traditional *Okpenkpen* practice brings together two parents who have the obligation to find a wife for their son. This practice is considered a loan for parents who have given birth to more boys. Whoever receives girls for his boys will have to repay them with his granddaughters or the daughters of a member of his family. Despite modernism and multiple awareness campaigns on forced marriages

and early pregnancies, the practice continues in Gangan and Moba countries in certain families because of an obligation to reimburse girls taken into marriage in the past. An initiating priest tells us the following:

"To avoid social imbalance, and especially since the decision to marry often fall onto parents, our great-grandparents initiated the exchange to give everyone in the community the chance to conceive or have a child whatever their status or physical condition. We are in a society where not everyone has the same opportunity; but if you have not had a child, your status does not matter; you would have lived useless in this world." Extract from an interview with the initiating priest, aged around 57 years old in Gando.

From this speech, it emerges that the priest recreates this practice as a mechanism for social balancing. The functioning of society seems to take priority over the consent of the girls concerned.

Tkontel/Komont (convent)

In the view of our informants, it is a traditional school where we learn good ways of living in society. This is evidenced by these words from an informant:

".... When you leave the convent, you are seasoned with the know-how and the know-how to live in the community. You respect elders a lot compared to an uninitiated person. Example: the initiates observe many principles in order to spare our society from all evil..."

Extract from an interview with an initiating priest, around 60 years old, in Gando.

Until today, for proponents of traditional religion, when a person is not initiated, they will never attend the funeral of an initiate. A non-initiate has no right to be buried accompanied by traditional drums. Indeed, women in the region who experience problems conceiving in their respective homes ask to follow the rites of *Tkonte*. At the end of this practice, the probability of conceiving is more or less strong according to our informants, with one of them saying:

“There are cases of exchange where the girl refuses to marry the man the parents propose to her for reasons of her status, her physical attitude, or because she does not love him. This girl is taken into the convent for initiation, and when she leaves the man becomes the best of all men who will seek to marry at all costs. Sometimes, she leaves the convent with a pregnancy from the gentleman in question. This suggests the complicity of the masters and mistresses of the convent who allowed the gentleman to perform the sexual act with the girl in the convent.” Extract from an interview with members of the multi-sectoral framework, aged approximately 30 to 50 years old, in Gando.

It should be noted that the stages and details of how initiations take place in the convent are kept secret by the initiating priests and priestesses. *Tkonte* for men and women, is the process of integration and initiation into community life, while for young girls, there remains a psychological and spiritual constraint to agree to marry the man that the parents impose on them. An insider explains as follows:

“...I was the subject of exchange with the other family in my refusal to comply where a husband was imposed on me, I was brought to a convent where I was supervised and educated by priestesses. When I left the convent I married the man I had refused to marry.” Extract from an interview with an initiate aged around 30, mother of four (4) children in Gando.

Ignogues (gris-gris)

Ancestral practices (*Ignogues*) are observable among adolescents for the purposes of a romantic conquest. For our informants, it is a little extra which

gives confidence to the author, reassures him in the belief in magic which forces events or which often obliges its victim to his desire due to magical manipulation. “Boys do this practice to conquer the hearts of the girls they want. Girls also do this practice to have men who have a little financial means at their disposal.” Extract from a group interview with students aged approximately 15 to 19 in Gando.

Rites and initiations linked to early pregnancies

In the savannah region, it was noted that the rites and initiations practiced have a link with the entry or not into the active sexual life of young adolescents. It should also be noted that with modernity, certain practices are reduced to major festivals, also having consequences in the active sexual life of the young girl or boy. In all this panoply, the emphasis will be placed on the major rites which continue to exist and which adapt to the demands of civilization. To this end, an initiating priest declares:

“The rites and all initiatory practices are a heritage from our ancestors. This is the reason for our existence. We can continue to modify them to adapt. For example, nowadays you can be in a convent and attend school or learn a trade. We can never abandon our tradition because it is our reason for living.” Extract from an individual interview with an initiating priest, approximately 55 years old, in Gando.

Okpenkpen (exchange)

The “Exchange” does not take into account the girl’s adult age before she is sent for marriage. At home, she is exposed to premature sexual intercourse where she can become pregnant. This practice tends to disappear in some areas because the authorities condemn it. On the other hand, there are still pockets of resistance among the Gangam of Gando where the exchange takes place, regardless of the age of the girl. Indeed, she may still be a minor. The husband has the right to take his wife whenever he wants, and can forbid her from continuing her education. One of our interlocutors declared:

“Almost every day at the gendarmerie, there are regular cases of Okpenkpen (Exchange). Especially

Table 2: Some perceptions of the Gando community on certain rites and initiations

Rites and initiations	Perceptions
Sikpeng/Okpenkpen	The community thinks that this rite is a good thing because it gives everyone the chance to conceive and avoids sexual depravity. But it must be completely abandoned because often some girls run away or commit suicide.
Komont/Tkonte	Traditionalists believe that <i>Tkonte</i> can never be abandoned. This initiation is an ancestral heritage that survived over time and has been readapted to modern times.
Ignogues	Participants recommended that awareness should be raised among young people not to practice <i>Ignogues</i> , especially as they are unaware of the consequences. For the community members, <i>ignogues</i> is bad practice.
Teenage pregnancies	For the community, being pregnant in a school environment is not frowned upon. The position of the girl at school is not of much use because the girl according to Gangan tradition is made for the home. Girls in the community experience this ordeal despite the laws protecting young girls through the intervention of various committees and NGOs. Early and forced marriage continues because the previous debt must be paid and above all it is the parent who decides when and to whom their child should be married.

in the case where the girl does not consent, she comes to report. We punish perpetrators severely in order to deter potential perpetrators. These exchanges lead to school dropouts, running away from home, and suicides. During the year 2022 we had a case of a minor student at the top of her class who came to denounce her parents. Extract from a group interview with a Gendarme, aged around 35, in Gando.

Tkonte/Komonte (Convent)

Tkonte expresses the entry into a convent of the young boy or girl. At the convent, young girls receive an education which marks their entry into the adult class. The priestesses talk to these girls about how to take care of a husband and give him the proper respect. Once out, the young girls feel ready to get married. The convent also prepares young girls to accept an imposed marriage. It was noted that the young girl admitted to the convent following refusal to marry ends up accepting the man following spells whatever her age. This exposes her to forced sexual relations with the alleged husband and she may become pregnant. It was revealed that in the convent, there is no provision that protects a girl from premature sexual intercourse. It is in this sense that a member of the multi-sectoral framework, aged approximately 37, in Gando made the following statement:

“...The secret of the convent is reserved for initiates and priestesses. The reality we see is that upon

leaving the convent, the girl ends up agreeing to marry the man she had rejected.”

Ignogues (Gris-gris)

This practice allows the young girl or boy to captivate the opposite sex so that he/she agrees to have sexual relations. It exposes young girls to premature sexual relations and early pregnancy. A midwife who is a member of the multisectoral framework confirmed this fact in these terms:

“A student in the 1st class impregnated three of his fellow students. When the girls came for consultation, I noticed that it was the same sexual partner. I tried to speak with the latter and in response, he said: that he comes from a poor family and no girl would accept him. Following the advice of one of his friends, he put gris-gris into practice. He managed to win over the girls. He further said that if he wanted to have me, a midwife, in his bed, a fraction of a second would be sufficient for him to do so.

*Likewise, there is a woman in this locality who was denounced because she would introduce girls to this practice.”*Comments from a member of the multi-sector manager, aged around 32, in Gando.

Here a reality appears which directly concerns the sexual health of adolescents. The young boy suffers from traditional heaviness and the fear of rejection on the one hand, and on the other hand there are young girls with early pregnancies.

Perceptions of different stakeholders on rites and early pregnancies in the region

In the savannah region, the perception of the actors interviewed on the rites and initiations gives an orientation of the usefulness of the rites and initiations practiced in the locality concerned. The perceptions of the different actors are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

The analysis of the data from this study confirms the existence of initiation rites but above all, the persistence of initiation rites in connection with early pregnancies. This study highlights the socio-cultural factors which perpetuate these practices. The supporters of these rites consider the sexual maturity of the girl on the basis of external signs such as the first menstruation, the growth of the breasts, the appearance of curves in the girl. For the boy, maturity is observed in his ability to respond to field work. To confirm this, a test of lifting an object that weighs 50kg qualifies them as a “real boy”. Apart from the attitudes dictated by the parents, it is necessary to recognize the note the behaviours linked to the adolescents' own attitudes. Having a boyfriend has become the “norm” among young girls who trivialize the sexual act and its consequences. This was revealed by a student who claimed he was from a poor family and that no girl would accept him, but who practiced “*Ignogues*” and consequently impregnated three female students during the same school year. Unfortunately, having a sexual relationship is seen by some girls as a way to access the adult world more quickly. But when a pregnancy occurs, these young girls find themselves in conflict because not being adults, they no longer feel like teenagers in the face of new responsibilities.

The analysis resulting from this study is in agreement with the results of the work of several authors that demonstrate various pathways to early pregnancy by adolescents and the role of rites and initiations in potentiating early pregnancy.

According to Blum *et al.*, teenage pregnancies can be referred to as “ecological” because they take into account the range of multiple factors that come into play in this phenomenon and their combined actions in all their complexity. They highlight three main approaches: socio-cultural, socio-economic and institutional approaches⁵. The

factors act at five interlocking levels ranging from national to individual, including community, school/peer, and family levels.

With respect to the sociocultural approach, morals, norms, values and initiation rites are likely to influence procreative behaviour in society. Its basis relates to the fact that the sexual and procreative perceptions and practices of individuals arise from the sociocultural system in which they are molded. It reflects the fact that sexuality and fertility are not isolable phenomena, but are part of the norms and values regarding sexuality, marriage, family and fertility in communities⁶.

A publication of the World Health Organisation in 2021, identified the risk and protective factors related to adolescent pregnancy in low- and middle-income countries. These, include girls being pressured to marry and have children. The report suggests that early marriage puts girls at increased risk of pregnancy because girls married early are generally likely to have children⁷.

Secondly, in many places girls choose to have a child because their prospects for education and employment are limited. Very often in many of these societies, motherhood within or outside of marriage or a union is valued, and marriage or other forms of union and pregnancy may be the best solution given the few options available. In the same vein, some of our interlocutors emphasized that the cultural norm which requires Gangan women and girls to be obedient exposes them to the risk of early pregnancy and sexual violence. As part of the exchange, the parents consider that the choice of spouse is their responsibility.

Conclusion

The analysis of the perceptions of the population of the Savannah region on the rites and initiations linked to early pregnancies enables us to conclude that the phenomenon exists and that it is not necessarily perceived as a societal evil. In this context of preventing early pregnancies through rites and initiations, some key informants interviewed expressed the wish to see the return of rites which required young people to preserve their virginity. With modernity, and being aware of this reality, informants recommended the importance of awareness raising as a way to remedy the phenomenon of early pregnancies and to help young people benefit from the educational services

provided for them. This study highlights the positive perceptions of traditional rites among clan leaders, religious leaders, and by young people themselves. The need to preserve tradition seems to take precedence over the well-being of young girls and boys. This shows the complexity of the problem and calls for approaches and policy reforms to change these practices that potentiate early pregnancies in the community.

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