



Houédassi Kounagbodé

Houédassi Kounagbodé, Tétédé Ogoutolé and Jeanne Houeto are women peasant farmers from the Ahouanzanhouê Djromahouton Association in the village of Ouanho, Benin.

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Rights for us is linked to our need to protect our way of life. If we are to preserve our biodiversity and our traditional knowledge, we must go on preserving our seeds. There are all sorts of ways of preserving seeds – in bottles, in nurseries, on the roofs of houses or above kitchen fires.

We follow very strict rules with respect to produce stored from the harvest. For example, we must not pass the light of a lantern above maize and beans. If we don't respect this rule, we will have weevil infestations. Products made from processing crops are also subject to certain rules. Palm oil from the fruit of the palm tree [*Elaeis guineensis*] will go rancid if a person who has not washed after attending a funeral comes near.

We have other customary practices and community rules that contribute to the preservation of the genetic diversity of foods. These include:

- **Offering the new yam to the Vodoun fetishes.** The first member of a family to see a new yam in the market must buy it to offer to all the family's Vodoun fetishes. Even those who have converted to Catholicism and no longer worship the Vodoun contribute in this way and buy yam tubers. This traditional practice must be followed before eating yams from the new crop. Failure to observe this ancestral customary practice may cause children to become ill, especially with fever. Sometimes festivities are organised when the offering is made.
- **Annual festivities of the Oro (in Nagot) or Olo (in Torrigbé) fetish.** These take place every year, more or less in the same period – July or August. They always involve the preparation of dishes using beans and yams from the first harvest of the year. Each hamlet provides some tubers and a certain quantity of bean seeds. The festivities include felling trees and playing music in the local style, which may be high-pitched, deep or very deep, and are especially common in south-east Benin.
- **Traditional baptism: Djèdoudou.** This ceremony requires the use of a species of carp (*Melanocarpa*) – known locally as djènoufè – salt, palm oil, maize, beans and yams. Just a taste of salt is placed in the mouth of the mother and the newborn child along with a dry leaf from a ronier palm. This is repeated seven times for a baby girl, nine times for a boy.
- **Birth of twins: Akantountoun.** The birth of twins requires the mother to stop all economic and social activity for three months. Festivities are organised at the end of this period, at which point she will be allowed to resume her activities. This ceremony requires the purchase of mutton and chickens in cages. During the ceremony, the mother of the twins makes an official visit to the market, with special clothes and gourds containing certain foods on her head. The width of the gourd indicates how well she has been looked after by her husband and in-laws.
- **Annual ceremonies: Hounhouè.** These are celebrated by each clan or tribe: for example, the Wètonoun, the Dowènoun, the Houhouènoun, the Azowènoun, and so on. These ceremonies always use beans and yams. Each clan or tribe is autonomous and decides independently on what date to have the Hounhouè festivities. If by chance there is a clash of dates, the clans reach an agreement to change some of them. This organisational precaution allows members of each clan to participate in others' festivities.
- **The Ogou (God of iron) ceremony.** Ogou ceremonies are held if someone is killed in a road accident. In this region, if someone who has died in a road accident is buried without this ceremony taking place, the soul of the dead person does not rest in peace and will disturb the peace of their family. The Ogou festivities require the purchase of a goat, chickens in cages, beans and yams. Yams and beans are the most important foods in all these local ceremonies.




- Theft prevention: To stop our crops being stolen in the fields, Vodoun statues are placed there. Anyone stealing crops in the presence of the Vodoun is cursed and will fall ill, and babies born just after the theft will have birth defects.

The multinationals cannot dispossess us of our traditional seeds and we will always plant our own seeds in accordance with our traditional practices, and no one is able to prevent us from doing that.

Additional contributions

Houédassi Kounagbodé and Tétédé Ogoutolé Adékou: “The world is changing and we no longer live in the world our ancestors knew. Traditional rules are often no longer observed, for different reasons. In past times, nobody bought seeds. We

exchanged them among ourselves. This practice is tending to disappear and we are forced to buy seeds.”

Tétédé Ogoutolé Adékou: “We have to recognise that cultural practices influence how long harvests can be preserved. Where I live, in Ifangni, we do not use fertilisers, and seeds and food staples last longer than here. Peasants, friends and relations still exchange seeds. That is the case where I live. Better still, if you are hungry, where I live, you can go into any field that has ripe crops (maize, yams, manioc and so on) and take what you need to satisfy your hunger. You can sit down on the edge of the field and prepare the food there and then. Nagot society authorises you to do this. Even if the owner finds you in his field, he will say nothing to you. He may even share your meal in a fraternal way.” 

M. Dodou Koudafokè belongs to an association that brings together traditional healers from four villages (Ouanho, Tchakla, Gbakpo and Hèhoun) in the district of Avrankou in south-east Benin.



DODOU KOUDAFOKÈ

We are not directly involved in the discussion on rights. The political authorities in Cotonou work on this but they come with white people to consult us about their work. Intellectuals who understand French are the ones who conduct the theoretical debate on the concept of rights.

As in other parts of the country, the land in our village has been parcelled up into plots, and the risk that some medicinal plants will disappear has led traditional healers to start botanical gardens at village, commune and department levels, with the support of the political authorities. The latter have associated this initiative with local community literacy programmes. As a result of these programmes, there are now traditional healers who read and write Torrigbé or Goungbé [languages spoken in Benin] very well.

Parents pass traditional knowledge on to their children. The holders of traditional knowledge used to keep that knowledge secret and were afraid of passing it on, fearing that it would become public knowledge. That is no longer the case today.

Some healers even give out recipes on the radio. These, however, are often false healers.

One of the endogenous strategies to preserve traditional knowledge about medicinal plants is through Vodoun, the traditional religion of Benin. In the past, some medicinal plants were found only in certain Vodoun temples. That is not very common these days. Such plants can be found in the fields, or in the bush and the remaining forests. Some serious illnesses need treatment associated with Vodoun practices. But it is necessary to disassociate the use of medicinal plants from the practices of Vodoun. If a sick person is a Christian or a Muslim and does not believe in Vodoun, healers may still use these plants.

Each traditional healer has a specific skill. Even though they may be able to cure several illnesses, each has his or her own area of expertise, which is known and recognised by other healers and members of the community. So there are healers for epilepsy, tuberculosis, gynaecological problems, difficult pregnancies, and so on. These skills are also inherited by their children. Through associations of traditional healers and those practising divination,

