


- 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,



we participate in meetings with colleagues from other villages at departmental and national levels. But we have to recognise that modern times and the introduction of French schools into our country have changed these social values.

Misappropriation of plants

We have no power to deal with the activities of multinationals in our region. Only intellectuals can defend us, because we are powerless in the face of these people. Sometimes the whites come to search for our medicinal plants, which they take away, and then come back with pills made from the plants, which they sell to us for a lot of money in the chemist. We are often asked through our traditional healers' associations to grow specific plants for export. Some traditional healers are quick to accept in order to feed themselves, but others systematically refuse to do so in order to not divulge and sell off cheaply our ancestral knowledge. These different responses often cause open conflict within associations or between associations, with bitter quarrels and even death threats.

Whatever happens, traditional knowledge will not disappear. We are the guarantors and guardians of the knowledge we inherited from our parents. We are in the process of passing it on to our children, even those who go to schools run by whites. I hope such knowledge is always present in our societies. I also teach the children strict respect for the truth. You need to have the humility to say what you can heal and what you cannot.

If children listen to their parents and act accordingly, we will overcome the multinationals, first at the national level, then at the local level. The multinationals always use Benin citizens to make contact with healers and to search for medicinal plants

In order to maintain traditional knowledge effectively, we need to hold meetings in each village and district to decide what attitude to take. Unfortunately, the lure of easy money means that the position taken in one district may differ from that in another, and this makes it difficult to reach a decision at the departmental or national level.



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HONGUÈ KOUDAFOKÈ

If rights are not properly defined, humanity will be committing a crime without knowing it. We must not allow rights to be subordinated to property, because this would mean a return to the way white colonialists used to exploit us. Defining rights in the way outside powers wish is a way of keeping Africa underdeveloped, and their definitions do not accord with reality or with the wishes of the people. It is only legislators, serving their own interests, who want rights defined this way. Multinational companies get access to our country's resources through their influence over our authorities. We must be united and press for our countries to be independent financially from the colonists, because only then might we be able to achieve something.

We can protect our resources in our own way. We can plant the seeds of useful plants, and look after plants that are in danger of disappearing. We have

forestry workers protecting natural resources and preserving our sacred and traditional forests. We must record our knowledge in our notebooks and pass it on to young people. We must take care of our relationship with young people because these days many no longer like to listen to older people, and they are unaware of the value of knowledge.

So what is the way forward? We need to raise people's awareness and encourage them to revolt against outside domination. It is not easy because there is no shortage of traitors among our number. Each family and each community must continue with their own practices. We must combat ignorance and continue with our ceremonies that celebrate haricot beans and yams. We must monitor our traditional practices, because some young people use Vodoun to do harm. We must make sure that traditional healing continues to be a profitable business, just as it was in the past. We must be self-sufficient and take care of our resources.

