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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Anassa TRAORE, Issa DIALLO, Amadou B DIARRA, PERCEPTION DU DON DE SANG CHEZ LES POPULATIONS DE BAMAKO.....	8-23
Abraham GBOGBOU, L'ECRITURE DE L'HYBRIDITE OU LE PLURALISME LINGUISTIQUE DANS <i>LA CARTE D'IDENTITE</i> DE JEAN-MARIE ADIAFFI.....	24-34
NGODI Etanislàs, CRISES DES PARTIS POLITIQUES ET RECOMPOSITIONS DE L'ESPACE POLITIQUE CONGOLAIS.....	35-56
KODJOVI Kangnivi, ADI Tchilabalo, THE POWER OF EXPECTANCY IN EFE PAUL AZINO'S <i>FOR BROKEN MEN WHO CROSS OFTEN</i>	57-70
Fayama Tionyelé, Soulama Kanya, PRATIQUE INITIATIQUE DU "DOGO" EN PAYS GOUIN AU BURKINA FASO : UN FAIT ANTHROPOLOGIQUE EN MUTATION.....	71-85
Adama Samaké THE KURUKAN FUGA CHARTER AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE FORMER MANDINGO SOCIETY: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S CONDITIONS TODAY.....	86-102
Souleymane TUO, SIMULATING REALITY: MASS MEDIA'S CONSTRUCTION OF SIMULACRA IN BEN OKRI'S <i>IN ARCADIA</i> (2002).....	103-120
Zakaria Coulibaly, REALISTIC PRESENTATION OF AFRICAN SOCIETY AND THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY IN <i>THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE BY OLAUDAH EQUIANO</i>	121-133
Mohamed MINKAÏLOU, Ibrahim MAÏGA, THE USE OF BAMANANKAN AMONG MALIAN PUBLIC OFFICE WORKERS, A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE ATTITUDES.....	134-147
Kokou APEGNON, LE "ROYAUME" DE LONFO OU LA GENESE DU POUVOIR POLITIQUE EN PAYS AKEBOU.....	148-161
KOUAKOU Yao Marcel, ASSOUNGA Kouakou Laurent, L'EVICION D'HENRI KONAN BÉDIÉ : REGARD CROISÉ ENTRE LA PRESSE IVOIRIENNE ET ÉTRANGÈRE.....	162-175
DOUKOURE Madja Odile, LITTERATURE COMPAREE ET IMPERIALISME : QUEL RAPPORT ?.....	176-190
Ibrahima FAYE, RESILIENCE ET CONCILIATION DANS LA POESIE DE M'BAÏE DIAKHATE.....	191-204
KOUADIO Adjoua Philomène, L'ETHOS ET LE PATHOS DANS <i>EXPRESSIONS DE COMBAT</i> DE LAZARE KOFFI KOFFI : UNE ARGUMENTATION MILITANTE OU INDEPENDANTISTE.....	205-216
Konin Sévérin, Nougou M'domou Eric, L'IMPERIALISME ARABE ET LA QUESTION IDENTITAIRE BERBERE AU MAGHREB DANS LES SOURCES NARRATIVES ARABO-MUSULMANES (720-745).....	217-230

Belco TOGO, LA PROBLEMATIQUE DE LA LUTTE CONTRE L'ENRICHISSEMENT ILLICITE AU MALI DE 2014 A NOS JOURS : FORCES ET FAIBLESSES.....	231-256
Sory DOUMBIA, REVISITING THE STRUGGLE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS FOR THEIR ECONOMIC FREEDOM AFTER SLAVERY	257-270
Aminata KASSAMBARA, Lèfara SILUE, SYMBOLS AND MEANINGS IN BESSIE HEAD'S <i>WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER</i>	271-284
HIEN Sourbar Justin Wenceslas THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR OILS AND OILSEEDS (IRHO): A MECHANISM FOR THE EXPLOITATION OF OILSEEDS IN UPPER VOLTA	285-301
YA Komenan Raphael, COULIBALY Souleymane, LA MISNUSMA FACE A L'HOSTILITE DES POPULATIONS DE GAO : ENJEUX ET PERSPECTIVES.....	302-316
DIERMA Ousséni, CONTRIBUTION DU PERSONNALISME D'EMMANUEL MOUNIER A L'ESSOR DU CHRISTIANISME EN AFRIQUE A L'ERE DE LA MONDIALISATION	317-329
Ibrahima TRAORE, Youssoufou Omorou MAIGA, Abdramane KONE, CRISE SECURITAIRE ET DEPERDITION SCOLAIRE DES FILLES DANS LE CERCLE D'ANSONGO (MALI).....	330-343
Arnaud Romaric Tenkieu Tenkieu, EL CONCEPTO DE CONJUNCIÓN Y CONJUNCIÓN DE SUBORDINACIÓN ADVERBIAL EN LA GRAMÁTICA ESPAÑOLA DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA FUNCIONALISTA.....	344-353
Issiaka DIARRA, DECOLONIZING THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP BASED ON THE KURUKAN FUGA CHARTER'S ARTICLES	354-366
ISSA COULIBALY, EXPLORING WEATHER IDIOMS IN BAMANANKAN	367-380
El Hadji Ousmane BORE LA PUISSANCE PATERNELLE : LEVIER DE REGULATION SOCIALE ET DU SENTIMENT NATIONAL DANS L'EMPIRE DU MANDEN.....	381-397
Karim KOMA ANALYSE DU TENDANCIEUX DANS LE DISCOURS MEDIATIQUE : CAS SPECIFIQUE DES « TITRE-CHAPEAUX » DES JOURNAUX RADIOPHONIQUES DE - RFI/BBC -(RADIO FRANCE INTERNATIONALE/BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION).....	398-415
Ali TIMBINE, DOGON RITUALS AS A CONGRUOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PREVENTION MECHANISM	416-432



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DOGON RITUALS AS A CONGRUOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PREVENTION MECHANISM

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Résumé

Cet article examine les rituels des Dogons comme un mécanisme de résolution et de prévention des conflits. Les rituels constituent l'épine dorsale de la vie sociale des Dogons. Considéré comme l'un des plus conservateurs, le peuple Dogon célèbre des rituels suivant leur propre calendrier pour maintenir l'équilibre et l'harmonie dans leur monde. Ils pensent que leur vie actuelle est presque toujours liée à celle de leurs ancêtres et que le conflit qui prévaut dans le Mali actuel, en particulier dans le pays Dogon, est dû à la désintégration de l'équilibre entre les deux mondes. Cet article vise donc à analyser l'importance et la pertinence des rituels dogons et leur capacité à apporter la paix et l'harmonie entre les diverses populations maliennes à travers le pays. Le travail a été fait dans le cadre théorique du postcolonialisme. Les résultats de l'étude indiquent que certains rituels Dogon peuvent être utilisés pour prévenir ou résoudre certains conflits ethniques impliquant les Dogon et d'autres communautés. L'étude recommande enfin la vulgarisation des rituels dogons comme un outil de prévention des conflits et de médiation pour rétablir la paix et l'harmonie entre eux et leurs communautés voisines.

Mot clés : cultes, Dogon, rituel, cosmogonie, rites..

Abstract

This paper examines the rituals of the Dogon as a congruous conflict resolution and prevention mechanism. Rituals constitute the backbone of the Dogon social life. Regarded as one of the most conservative, the Dogon people celebrate rituals following to their own calendar to maintain balance and harmony in their world. They think that their actual life is always already associated with that of their ancestors' and the conflict that prevails in current Mali, especially in the Dogon Land, is due to the obliteration of the equilibrium between the two worlds. This paper therefore aims to analyze the importance and relevance of Dogon rituals and their capacity to bring peace and harmony among the diverse Malian populations across the country. The sum total of all this has been done within the theoretical framework of postcolonialism. The results of the study indicate that some Dogon rituals can be used to prevent or solve ethnic conflicts involving Dogon and other communities. The study finally recommends the popularization of Dogon rituals as a conflict prevention and mediation tool to restore peace and harmony between them and their neighboring communities.

Keywords: Cosmogony, Cults, Dogon, Ritual, Rites.

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Introduction

The Dogon Land is a place greatly gifted with a rich cultural, traditional, and historical background, coupled with its strategic location. The Dogon people are one of the many ethnic groups who presently live in the center of Mali, called the Dogon Land. Geographically speaking, the Dogon area is known as the Dogon Land which stretches from Somadougou in Sevaré to Hombori, covering the border areas with Burkina Faso. The region of Bandiagara has been considered as one of the most visited areas since the arrival of the French colonizer. Even though a good deal of research has been done on the Dogon people, little has been handled on their rituals and their importance in ensuring a good social organization, and their salient roles in conflicts prevention and solving. Scholarship on the Dogon has focused more research on cosmogonies than the

rituals which were not considered very important. This is the reason why this study has strived to study the rituals of the Dogon. This would contribute to enrich the very little scientific research available on these rituals.

The objective of the study is to show how the observance of the rituals and their use can enable the Dogon, and Mali in general, to restore communal peace and harmony.

In other words, the interest of the study is to draw attention to some important rituals of the Dogon people which can be used today in the context of insecurity and ethnic conflict in the Mopti region today. Another interest is to show how these rituals are endangered if nothing is done, especially in the case of *Toguna*. We therefore believe that the overall decolonization of Africa can be achieved

only through the African spirituality.

The methodology used in this study is a qualitative one. Structurally, the present study is organized into two main sections: the first section focuses on the Dogon cosmology, their ritual performances and their significance and the second one talks about the *sigi* Dogon ritual as a congruous mechanism of conflict prevention and peace-building.

1. Dogon Cosmology and Ritual Performances

In the Dogon cosmology, several rituals exist but the main ones are the following: *Sigi*, *Ondompiru*, *Ginangolo*, etc.

1.1 . Sigi

The *sigi* ritual for the Dogon is a ritual of the whole Dogon community. It is always organized by the Dogon every sixty years. It has for origin village, Yuga Duguru in the commune of Sangha. To better know

how the *sigi* is celebrated by the Dogon, our informant Dogoly Dolo, one of the ancient initiated of *Sigi* 1967 explains that besides the initiation, the Dogon celebrate the *sigi* to get from their *God Ama* good health, rain, the fertility of the earth and the fecundity of women. But to practice the *Sigi*, it is necessary to renew the link that exists between the Dogon villages in particular and humanity as a whole. It is also for the Dogon to have the same status which continues with the new leaders. That means that it is the transmission of values from generation to generation because, through the *Sigi*, the Dogon renew the social hierarchy by reinforcing the links and cohesion between villages. The foregoing implies that during the year of *Sigi*, the Dogon must reinforce the pardon and solidarity among villages because it is a special moment for elders to teach young generations

about solidarity, humanity, love, cohesion, etc.

The *Sigi* for the Dogon is a famous ritual that is always connected to the Sirius astronomy. In their cosmogony, the world is born from the Sirius. The *sigi* is considered as the oldest ritual of the Dogon. In the Dogon calendar, that *sigi* ritual always starts in Yougo Duguru, a neighboring village situated in the North of Sangha, in the region of Bandiagara. What we mean is that according to the tradition, the *Sigi* first starts in Yougo Duguru because it was where some young people of Arou's community were believed to have committed a crime by killing their grandfather. That is the reason why the *Sigi* is also called by the elders, the ceremony of forgiveness between the two generations: the younger to the elders.

For the Dogon, the *Sigi* is a celebration that can enable to restore social

hierarchies and communal harmony. It means that during this ritual, they reinforce the forgiveness and the solidarity in the whole Dogon country because it is an opportunity for elders to transmit traditional values to the younger generation. It is a peacemaking moment between the living and the dead. It is also a ritual that reinforces the link between generations: the younger and the elders' ones. According to the Dogon, it is a crime for any *Sigi* organizing villages the wearing of the masks during the ritual and the following year. They affirm that what is allowed for the dancers is the only uniforms. At this time, if a person passes away, that person will be buried without any ritual dance.

For the *Sigi* preparation, all the organizing villages have to prepare that ritual five years in advance by collecting enough, money,

food, etc. The final decision of maintaining the *Sigi* depends on a good yearly harvest. Moreover, the next *Sigi* will be always decided at the end of the ritual. Some informants say that the chiefs of the different villages collect much food and money one year before the ritual. For the great mask sacrifice, elder people bring many things: the grain of *sesame* because its oil helps some initiations, the millet for traditional beer and then the buying of a dog. There are some other animals' sacrifices. The Dogon rituals are transmitted from father to son because it is a patriarchal institution and only the initiated can take part in the performances. However, women are allowed to be at the place of sacrifice. To prepare the *Sigi*, the elders choose

three men in each concerned village. That selection is always done among the *Inne piru*¹ (the impure men) who are in opposition with the *Inne Omo* (the already initiated of the *Sigi*) who are in charge of the ritual. Sometimes, one can be born being both (*Inne piru* and *Inne Omo*). This can be known through the divination of the fox pale. For instance, if a grandfather who had been an *Inne piru*, that person must be it during his life. He can also transfer his power to his grandson before his death. That is the reason why the impure classes have the same social status as any Dogon with all of their taboos. After have being chosen as *Inne Omo*², the Dogon elders teach the new *Olubaru*³ not only about

¹ Gerard Beaudoin, Les Dogon du Mali, Paris : Edition Armand Colin, 1984.p25.

² *Inne omo* are initiated people in mask awa society.

³ *Olubaru* are initiated in the dogon cosmogony. They can

astronomy knowledge and but much information about the medicinal plants.

For the ritual, the Dogon select many strong men to be *Olubaru*.⁴ These initiators are not compulsory selected among the former initiators of the previous *Sigi*. *Inne piru*⁵ will be the pure men after they have spent four months in the bush. From that, these *men* become officially as the former initiated. In the Dogon cosmogony, once you have been initiated as *Inne puru*, the elders teach in many domains such as in astrology, plants, etc. When a *Sigi* arrives in a village, all men must cut their hair. The only tool on which they sit to drink and eat is called the *Sigi* siege. So, in the cavern of the masks, elders teach them the secret language called *Sigiso* (language of

the masks). At this moment, all masks are made in this occasion by the Dogon depending on the different generations. Men integrate the *awa* society but women are excluded in that society except for the involved *Yasigine* who represents in the dogon cosmogony as the first woman who got the first language of *Nommo* (Daniel Elouard 2016: 03).

Moreover, in the cavern of masks, the whole village bring food. In addition to that, young people have to hunt in order to get much meat for the ritual. But it is prohibited to kill a bird and some other taboo animals. The bird is considered as the one which knew the secret language of *Sigiso*. The time of the initiation takes end in the bush the same day that the *Sigi* had started. According to Jean Rouch's

explain all but they don't tell the story.

⁴ *Olubaru* are the initiated of *Sigi* ritual. During that period all these people will be taught

by elders about much cosmogony's knowledge.

⁵ The *Inne piru* in *sigi-so* language, are some different young selected during the *Sigiceremony*.

research on the previous data⁶ of the *Sigi*, the latter “had been celebrated in 1787 to 1847-1907 and 1967; the next *Sigi* ceremony will be organized in 2027⁷.” In the explanation given by the informants Barou⁸ and Tessougue, *the Sigi* could have concerned all the villages where the magic stick had travelled when the Dogon occupied the area. It is a ritual which is organized from one region to another and from one village to another. According to Dogoly Guindo (March 2021), there are more than

fifty different villages which are in charge of the *Sigi* dancing. After having started first in the three Yuga: Yuga Duguru, Yuga Na, Yuga Piri, the ritual continues in Touyogou, in Koundou, in Ibi, in Neni, in Banani, in downstairs Sanga, in upstairs Sangha, in Irely, in Yayé, in Amani, in Téréli, in Daga, in Nakomo, in Idiéli, in Nomori and its surrounding villages, in Dourou, in Menteli, in Kama, and ends in Songho⁹. Yugo Duguru is the only village where the *sigi* ritual starts and ends. To know much information on

⁶ Gerard, Beaudoin, *op-cit*, p. 64.

⁷Jean Rouch in Daniel Elouard’s article entitled, « Les Dogon, culte des ancêtres et danses des masques », Copyright Clio, 2016.p1.

⁸ This information is given by Barou Kassogue, one of the most knowledgeable experts of the dogon cosmogony. He is now one of the most important members in the Ginna Dogon Association. This association aims at promoting the dogon culture in the world

⁹This is the personal information is given by a dogon authority. He names Barou Kassogue from Wadouba. These data have been collected during our interviewing about the dogon ritual on September 20th. Barou is counted as the most important personality in the «Ginna Dogon Association». This Association aims at valorizing and promoting the dogon culture in the world. The members of this organization are those whose who master their culture

it, Jean Rouch drew the *Sigi* transmission among the

seven years of *Sigi*. (Jean Rouch, CNRS, 1999 :2)

Year	Village organizers	Interpretation
1	YOUGO	The ritual focuses on the issue of death and the Dogon ancestor who transformed himself into a snake. The Dogon in their mythology explain that death does not exist. When they get very old, they become snakes.
2	Tyougou	In Tyougou, the Dogon celebrate for the <i>dama</i> ritual for their ancestor (his starting point of metamorphosing into snake)
3	Bongo	Here, the ritual is the birth. It means the leaving of the ancestor's soul.
4	Amani	In Amani, the ritual of the <i>Sigi</i> is about the procreation, the teaching of speech, the <i>Sigiso</i> and the new death of the snake) according to this <i>Sigi's</i> program.
5	Idyeli	the placenta (another form of the ancestor's birth)
6	Iamey	In the sixth area, the Dogon celebrate the becoming of the new boy of the ancestor
7	Songo	In Songo, one of the Dogon village organizers, the <i>sigi</i> focuses on circumcision. At this level, the ancestor becomes a young boy to be circumcised.

When the *Sigi* comes in a village, all dancer men must wear their uniform clothes. They dance beside the two great masks¹⁰ symbolizing the

ancestors. So, the Dogon make one great mask only the year of the *Sigi*, just to facilitate them to count the different celebrated *Sigi*. That is the reason why

¹⁰ Www. YouTube// Bakariba Diabate //the history of Dogon.

Griaule counted the number of great masks that were made by the Dogon in the Iby cavern which represent exactly the different ceremonies organized by the Dogon. For the Dogon, the idea of the Sirius is always connected to the *Sigi*. The Dogon tell that through this SiriusB, they started to count as did their ancestors in the pharaonic time. It is the notion of the authentic calendar which is anterior to what was imposed by Gregoire VIII in 1582¹¹. In 1977 Robert Temple wrote a *Sirius Mystery* (1998: 6) where he explains that the Dogon people knew about the star Sirius, because according to Temple, the Dogon ancestors had been in contact with some extraterrestrial visitors who came from the same Sirius. He also adds that the intelligent beings originated from the planet around the Sirius came down on the earth by bringing their culture to the Dogon. Then, the Dogon tell that during the *Sigi*, they observe the leaving of this Sirius B that they call in their language

*poli tolo*¹² in Yougo Duguru where the *Sigi* first starts. In this year, the wise Dogon interpret many things through the leaving of the Sirius with the sun.

As a criticism, many white researchers affirmed that the Dogon couldn't see that Sirius B in a region where there is no telescope and no mathematics application. We realize that the fact of doubting in African civilization can be considered as one of the western forces in domination over all colonized countries. They qualified them as barbarians who always are living in the ancient ways. For that Griaule wrote to clearly demonstrate the Dogon knowledge on astronomy in his book *Dieu d'eau*. We underline that Griaule couldn't tell this knowledge in his book simply because of the historical context of research in 1931 because these people knew about the existence of the Sirius before modern science. The aim of his trip of Djibouti to Dakar was to

¹¹ This information has taken note during my conversation with an African spirituality's writer Daouda TEKETE from Mali.

¹² Poli tolo is in dogon language the grain of fonio which is called the Sirius B in the

study some mysterious African ethnic groups such as the Dogon, Bambara, Wolof, etc. That is why many other western researchers first came in the Dogon land precisely in Sangha in 1921 where they got some of their knowledge through the conversation with a wise *Ogotembeli*. After many years spent, many Europeans confirmed the Dogon knowledge in the Sirius B and its existence. In 1994, two French astronomers Jean-Louis Duvent¹³ and Daniel Benest at the astronomy laboratory of Nice researched about the rotation's movement of the second Sirius, the Sirius B which is invisible to the naked eye. After the answers of some researchers, modern science confirmed that the Dogon knowledge of astronomy is a real subject. The Dogon called the Sirius B (*Pon tolo*) meaning the star of the Sirius *fonio*. *Pon tolo* is the Sirius that the Dogon have discovered since hundreds of years before modern science. By proving this knowledge, a French astronomer Jean Rouch declares: "We have now the proof that

these isolated peoples in this region of Africa, the Dogon astronomers have already erected a real astronomic observatory."

In 1998, Germaine Deiterlen went to Sangha region where there is a specific rock of Sirius observatory. This rock is outside the village called by the initiated the arch of *Ama* where Jean Rouch observed with his telescope. As result, these researchers got exactly what was told by the Dogon many years before concerning the Sirius A (*Sigi tolo*), the Sirius B (*Pon tolo*), the Sirius C (*Emmè Ya tolo*). So, this cosmic knowledge of the Dogon pushed Theophile Obenga, the Congolese scholar to talk about the similarities that he demonstrated between the Dogon astronomy sciences and the modern science of today. For that, many modern scientists believe in the Dogon knowledge of astronomy. We can affirm that that the Dogon observe the leaving of the Sirius with the sun in the year of *Sigi* on the mountain of Yuga Duguru.

¹³ Jean Rouch, « La fête du Sigi chez les Dogons », 1999 ,p.4.

The word Yuga Duguru means to situate the time. After a deeply analysis, we think that the Sirius and other stars were observed by the ancient

Egyptians under the higher pyramids. In regard to the foregoing, many scholars have declared that the Dogon people originated from Ancient Egypt.



Source: The image of the Sirius (Kanambaye, Drissa, 2018)

As for the Dogon, they believe that the origin of human beings comes from the Sirius B (the *polo tolo*), the neighboring star of the sun. A few years later, many astronomers confirm that the revolution of the *Polo tolo* (Sirius) is in 50 years as researched by Jean Rouch in 2014. That is the reason why Cheikh Anta Diop in his book *Civilisation ou Barbarie* pens: “Africans have always been the first astronomers in the world and their civilization is considered as one of the oldest of the world.” (1981:5)

Clarke in 1844. They calculated that the revolution around the Sirius is around 50 years. Far before Jean Rouch’s research on the Dogon astronomy, Robert Temple published a book in which he gave much clearly information on the Dogon Sirius as follows:

A lucky person can see the two Sigi and the extraordinary person sees the three sigi: the first is when the body is on the body of his mother, the second is when he is in the mature age and the third is when he becomes very old. (Rouch, 1969, p1).

The subject of the Sirius was firstly researched by Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel and Alvan

The above excerpt reveals how modern science has confirmed the Dogon

knowledge on the Sirius. For instance, Bonet has also affirmed that the Dogon astronomy knowledge originated from Ancient Egypt where astronomy was practiced thousand years before the Dogon. This was a congruous way for him to confirm the knowledge that the Dogon people have in astronomy. As a matter of fact, the Dogon people of Mali still conserve this knowledge despite modernity.

1.2 Ondompiru: *Ondompiru* is a yearly ritual which is known today by the majority of the Dogon. It is as an annual ritual which takes origin in the village of Ondom. The main objective of the ritual is to get good crops in the rainy season.

1.3 Ginangolo: The *Ginangolo* is a ritual month in which the Dogon pay a great homage to their dead. It is also known a new year ritual of the Dogon.

2. The Dogon Rituals as a Mechanism of Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building

2.1 Significance and Function of Rituals

Rituals are considered as indispensable practices in many African societies in general and the Dogon in particular. they are important and explain everything in the life of the Dogon. Today, the Dogon ,through the different celebrated rituals, created their own calendar of the twelve months. Rituals are important because through the rites and the rituals, the Dogon always think a hope. For instance, in the beginning of a rainy season, the Dogon celebrate many rituals for the good crops, for heath, for happiness for the whole village. Another importance is that rituals represent the complementarity between men and women in the Dogon society. For instance, the *toguna* being the men site in the Dogon land whereas the *Punogudo* is considered as the refuge of women. The two sites are considered as the main identity elements of a Dogon village. Why have the Dogon built these sites in a village? To answer this question, Hama from Ondom says:

“Rituals are indispensable things in the dogon life. Because, since the foundation of any dogon village, the ancients first interest to build these two most important sites which are the toguna and the Punogudo¹⁴. Why these two sites are important? When a dogon tribe displaced one area to another, in their destination, they build a toguna so that to put all the men’s materials before having a village. This place is a pure site in the dogon conception. Whereas, as far as this womanhood site, the dogon build it by thinking also to the women because when displacing, pregnant women must be stayed there during their menstrual cycle. In their mind, when they mix to the men during their period, they will spoil all protected power¹⁵ not only for his husband but also for the ginna (the large family).”

Rituals play many functions in the life of the Dogon. Among them, one can cite: the funeral rituals, rainy season rituals, mask rituals, the peacemaking rituals of *toguu*, of *Sigi*, of

Ginangolo, of *Age*, etc. why do the Dogon celebrate the funeral ritual? In the Dogon thoughts, the death is the first departure to another world. To rest in peace the soul, the Dogon celebrate rituals so that to get the ancestral world. As far as the rainy season rituals are concerned, the Dogon celebrate them so that to get hope in harvest. Moreover, masks play a great role in the Dogon society. They are two roles played by the masks. First, they protect the whole village against many things. Second, masks are the main elements in the Dogon funeral ritual in some villages. *Toguu* ritual, much known among the Dogon of the plateau (Ondom) is a ritual aims at knowing the member of lineage. *Ginangolo* is a new year ritual of the Dogon which aims at praying *Ama* in many domains. And, *Age* is a ritual of the ancestors.

¹⁴ *Punogudo* is a veritable Dogon female’s home. It is a home visited by women nmenstruation.

¹⁵ It is personal information about the two most famous Dogon sites.

2.2 Dogon Rituals as an efficient Mechanism for Conflict prevention and Peace Building

To ensure peace building, the Dogon have always been a people who have used this philosophy as many people in Africa. The Dogon made their society by establishing the laws and the norms of ancestors. According to the Dogon, rituals are to maintain and promote the peace between the Dogon and their neighboring communities. To exemplify this, one can take the case of *toguna*. Under this site, the wise men generally discuss about the common issues. The *Toguna* is considered as the school university where any conflict or any misunderstanding is discussed to avoid social conflicts or tensions between husbands and wives, etc. Under the *toguna*, everybody is considered equal. It means that rich or poor, you are all treated in the same manner following the laws of the land regardless of ethnicity. Here, the wise Dogon

judge everybody based on what each one did as actions.

Furthermore, in many of their rituals, the Dogon always practice the *Sigi* ritual so that to ensure the peacebuilding between the Dogon themselves and the Dogon with other neighboring communities. That is why we may utter that the *Sigi*'s main objective is to ensure peace between human beings.

In many rituals like *Antogo*¹⁶, the Dogon neighboring communities are always invited to participate. The peace building between the Dogon and other communities like Fulani, Bambara are also represented by a few masks in *Awa*¹⁷ society. The chief of masks, Sekou Dolo explains that there are two main masks which represent the Fulani people in the *awa*¹⁸ society. Their representation in that society confirms that the Dogon rituals and rites are meant to assure social cohesion and the living together in the Dogon land. The masks

¹⁶ *Antogo* is a collective yearly fishing ritual that is always celebrated in Bamba, in the department of Koro.

¹⁷ *Awa* means in sigiso masks.

¹⁸ *Awa* means in a secret language the mask.

epitoare: *fulo Yana* mask (mask Fulani girl), and mask *naa* (cow mask). The Dogon being farmers are the one who need the cow milk from the *Fulani*¹⁹ when they eat the crushed millet and *To*. This implies complementarity and indicates that if the Dogon rituals are popularized as they used to be many of the conflicts that have shaken the Dogon Land could have been avoided. We therefore advocate for the institutionalization of the practices of the aforementioned Dogon rituals as a congruous mechanism for preventing and solving existing conflicts in the Dogon Land and in Mali in general.

Conclusion

The Dogon are respected people who live in the West African present Mali. They are respected because of their knowledge in stars and planets before modern science. So, they Dogon can observe the Sirius during their rites and rituals as embedded in their endogenous calendar. By talking about the

rites and rituals, these people do not pretend to have received any influence coming from the outside world but everything that they have is the fruit of their civilization. They are pleased to live their culture, to respect their ancestors, to adore their gods and goddess, etc. The only thing that the Dogon can sacrifice to protect their culture is their lives. In sum, the rites and rituals in the Dogon life are always rated as bearers of hope, peace, cohesion and prosperity. In their mind, it is one of the best ways not only to thank *Ama* but also to ensure all their needs by praising their ancestors for the help of the supreme God *Ama*.

¹⁹ Fulani is a term used for the Fulani community.

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