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16 RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AMONGST THE WÊ PEOPLE OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE: THE EXAMPLE OF THE GLAÈ MASK, HOLDER OF RELIGIOUS POWER

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INTRODUCTION

Concerns about environmental protection have been on the agenda of international organisations for several years. Apart from the interest of states and secular international organisations in environmental issues, religions have also included ecological issues in their educational programmes for the people and their faithful. This is the case with the Catholic Church, through communications of the magisterium and encyclicals, the most recent of which is that of Pope Francis on human ecology.² But even before Pope Francis deemed the “ecological crisis” to be a “moral problem”, Pope John Paul II decided to dedicate the whole of his message for the World Peace Day of 1990 to ecological issues.³

The Catholic Church is not only religious group to take environmental concerns to heart in its mass communications. Other religions or beliefs also value environmental issues and try to preserve the environment through the process of protecting or sacralising waters and forests through symbolic means of communication to facilitate harmony between nature and human populations. This is the case of certain traditional African beliefs and spirituality, such as those of the Wê people of Côte d'Ivoire.

It is clear that actions taken within local African communities to preserve and protect the environment are often either misunderstood or perceived as having to do with purposes other than those really related to the protection of the environment, thus putting into doubt ecological awareness of these peoples. This issue raises a number of questions to which this chapter attempts answers: How are environmental protection concerns taken into account at the level of African societies such as the Wê of Côte d'Ivoire in their local living environments? What role do spiritual beliefs play through the figure of the *Glaè* mask? And forms of communication are used to protect and preserve the environment amongst the Wê people? The objective of the present research is to determine, first, the theological foundations of beliefs about the *Glaè* mask amongst the Wê people and their preservation of the environment and, second, the symbolic visual means of communication used to achieve it. This chapter is structured in three parts, namely, (1) the definition of concepts and the

1 Félix Houphouët-Boigny University, UFR, Information, Communication and Arts.

2 Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato si'* [On Care for Our Common Home], 24 May.

3 Pope John Paul II. 1990. “Message for the Celebration of World Peace Day”, 1 January.

presentation of context, theoretical and methodological framework; (2) examination of the beliefs, spirituality and environment in Wê society; and (3) symbolic and spiritual communication for the protection of the environment in Wê society.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical framework

The present study is based on a theoretical approach to environmental theology, particularly through the foundational work of Pope John Paul II and the Ivorian theologian Issiaka Coulibaly, both of whom start from the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. Pope John Paul II,⁴ recalled the beauty of creation in his message for the celebration of World Peace Day on 1 January 1990, which he devoted to environmental concerns, observing:

In the pages of Genesis, where the first revelation that God makes of himself to humanity (Genesis 1-3) is reported, the words “And God saw that it was good” return as a refrain. But when God, after creating heaven and sea, the earth and all that it contains, creates man and woman, the expression changes markedly: “God saw everything he had done: it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God entrusted to man and woman all the rest of creation and it was then, as the text says, that he was able to rest “from all the work he had done” (Genesis 2:3).

These observations emphasise the mandate entrusted to man and woman for the preservation of the environment. It is this idea of mandate that is taken up and deepened by theologian Issiaka Coulibaly, working from the same book of Genesis in the first chapter (Genesis 1:1), “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth” and other biblical references (Psalms 23 and Romans 8:20-21).⁵ Coulibaly develops four ideas and facts from the Genesis verse:

- a) First, there is the idea that the whole creation belongs to God. He is the exclusive owner and she is entirely his property. This applies to the land as well as to the sea, to the heavens as well as to the depths of the land and sea (cf. Psalms 95:5).
- b) Then there is the fact that as a good owner, God takes care of his creation (cf. Ps 23) and safeguards it. He also works for his redemption (cf. Romans 8:20-21).
- c) Then comes the idea that God delegates the management of creation to man (male and female) as steward (cf. Genesis 2:15). The mandate thus entrusted to man revolves around two families of actions represented by the two verbs “cultivate” and “keep”.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, “Message for the celebration of the World Peace Day”.

⁵ Coulibaly I. 2017. “Foreword”, in Coulibaly I and Pohor R (eds). 2017. *Dieu, la terre, la guerre* [God, land, and war]: *actes du colloque international conjoint 19 au 21 mai 2016 à Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire*. Abidjan: FATEAC Press, 11.

- d) Finally, there is what the very ideas of “delegation” and “mandate” require: men will be held accountable for the management they have done for the good entrusted to them.⁶

One can take from the above analysis that all creation is a property of God. He cares, and he takes care of his creation. He delegates this creation to humans to cultivate it in order to feed themselves, to preserve and take care of it and to bequeath it to future generations. Humanity will be called to account for the management of the creation entrusted. With regard to the environment, the Creator has planned everything since the beginning of time. Humanity has a mission to manage and preserve that creation. It is this mission of preserving nature, especially the waters and forests, that is done in Wê society through the *Glaè*, a being that has come out of nature and serves as a mediator and intermediary between God and men.

Methodological framework

Qualitative ethnomethodological approach was the favoured method for the collection of data for this study. This is based on the “knowledge of the actors” because they are full of multiple aspects to take into account as advocated by Harold Garfinkel and the field of ethnomethodology. According to Garfinkel, it is necessary to start from the knowledge of the layman, because social actors are not “cultural idiots” who must be approached with condescending airs and preconceived ideas.⁷ He argues that social actors are people whose actions are manifest in routine, “self-evident” dimensions, or “ethnomethods”. To learn about these “ethnomethods” in terms of knowledge of the *Glaè* in connection with symbolic communication for environmental protection, we used interviews from targeted focus group. These interviews were organised with custodians of the knowledge and history of the *Glaè* mask in the Wê community. Indeed, in Wê society, the story of the *Glaè* is not told by the incumbents or those who embody the spirit, but by other persons entitled to do so who are named the *GlaeaZo* or *Zo* (the human advisors of the *Glaè*) in the Wê tradition. These *GlaeaZo* are the intermediaries between the *Glaè* and the people. The *Glaè* live in the bush, it is the intermediaries who represent them in daily life in the village. Not everyone can be *GlaeaZo*. They are chosen by the *Glaè* on the basis of their devotion, their love and their affection for the *Glaè*’s cause.

Our focus group focused on the history and religiosity of the *Glaè* mask. The interview data was accompanied by images of the symbolic communication for the protection of the environment in Wê country. These images were taken in villages in the Wê region of Bangolo. This study particularly used documentary sources of the Wê oral tradition through the anthropological work of Angèle Gnonsoa and of Alfred Schwartz.⁸ The work of these researchers has been revisited on the basis of

6 Coulibaly, “Foreword”, *Dieu, la terre, la guerre*, 11-12.

7 Garfinkel H. 1967. “What is ethnomethodology?”, *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

8 On the subject of the *Glaè* in Wê country, the work of the anthropologist Angèle Gnonsoa, herself Wê, is authoritative. She has devoted almost her entire career as a researcher, to

the observation of the society and the role that the *Glaè* plays in it that forms the basis of the present study. This included participant observation of the Wê in the cultural activities in Wê country, such as those of the follow-up committee of the Council of Traditional Wê Chiefs and Communities.

SPIRITUALITY AND ENVIRONMENT IN WÊ SOCIETY

Who are the Wê?

The Wê are an Ivorian people living in the mountainous west of the country. Linguistically, there are dialectal differentiations between the South Wê and the Northern Wê. But these different dialects do not significantly influence the inter-communication within Wê country. From the point of view of political organisation, the Wê society is not governed by a central power of the monarchical type, as in the case of some peoples in Côte d'Ivoire, such as the Akan. But Gnonsoa makes some important notes about the level of the social organisation of the Wê.⁹ These include family lineages as small political units that reach outward through federations and the federations through the clans, including both the autonomy of the village cell and the connection of lineage members to sacred institutions (*kwi*, *dji*, *Glaè*, according to clans). Amongst these sacred institutions present in Wê country, we are interested in those whom the non-Wê administration call "masks", but which the Wê themselves call *Glaè*. But what is the *Glaè*, and what is its religious role? This question leads us to examine spirituality and religiosity in Wê society: the place of the *Glaè*.

The place of the Glaè

The term "mask" is commonly used to refer to an object of any form which is used to hide the face. It is in this context that this term is used in the term "masked ball". But amongst the Wê people, the mask does not refer to this. Here it is not a vulgar object, whose sole function is to conceal something, the human face. The mask in Wê society and civilisation represents a "living reality", an institution of the order of the sacred that embodies religious and political powers.

The *Glaè* is a spirit that has come from the universe. Before our parents communicated with spirits through the bush.

The *Glaè* comes from God. And he incarnates himself as man who possesses and speaks a specifically different language from the language of the

understanding society from the point of the political and religious views and the role of the *Glaè*.

- 9 Gnonsoa A. 2007. *Le masque au cœur de la société wê* [The mask at the heart of Wê society]. Abidjan: FratMat Editions, 33. See also Schwartz A. 1971. *Tradition et changements dans la société Guéré* [Tradition and change in Guéré society]. Paris: ORSTOM, 52, and Schwartz A. 1975. *La vie quotidienne dans un village Guéré* [Daily life in a Guéré village]. Abidjan: INADES.

16. *Religion, spirituality and environmental protection amongst the Wê people*

ordinary man in the village. He's adored by the Wê. Hence the term for the *Glaè* in the Wê language "gninhindê" the one we worship, adore and owe respect to.¹⁰

Historian Christophe Wondji,¹¹ explains the reality of the institution of the mask better when he writes:

The world of Wê masks, [is] a mysterious world with appearances and stage manifestations often confusing to the laymen: mysteries of shapes and colours, mysteries of songs and words, mysteries of gestures and acrobatics whose decryption we introduced to one of the most symbolic civilisations of Black Africa. Indeed, this approach to Wê masks and their role in society aims, in a way, to highlight the structures and functioning of a traditional civilisation marked by the constant search for harmony between man and divinity, between nature and culture, between society and the cosmos. It is not a question of opposing man to nature and divinity, but of harmonizing his relations with entities, in order to integrate him into the system of the world. For if Greek Prometheus took fire from the gods to ensure the mastery of men on earth, the Wê ancestors used masks to establish the rule of the gods over men.¹²

To speak of a Wê mask or *Glaè*, is to touch upon a first-rate institution for this people, because "ubiquitous in the life of the Wê and the masks performed various functions. They had the upper hand over religion, politics, economics, knowledge and art".¹³ But from the point of view that the power of the *Glaè* is based on the fact that it serves as an intermediary between God and men.

The religious power of the Glaè

The Wê believe in the existence of a single God who creates heaven, earth and all living beings, visible and invisible. For them, this God is the beginning of all things, because it is the oldest being and pre-eminent above all. The word for "God" used in the Wê language shows it easily. Indeed, amongst the different dialects, God is referred to as *gnonsoa*, that is, "old", amongst the northern Wê, or *guela*, that is, "old", amongst the southern Wê.

But as Gnonsoa observes, "the Wê invoke God only in the last instance, when all remedies have been exhausted. This is why they only come into contact with God through intermediaries",¹⁴ such as the *Glaè*, to whom a collective and popular cult

10 Interview with a *GlaèZo*, the intermediary between humans and the *Glaè*, by C Gnonzion, Côte d'Ivoire, exact place and date not given. The remarks from two separate *GlaèZo* interviewees.

11 Christophe Wondji is a historian, former director of African history projects at UNESCO and former director of the Department of History at the National University of Côte d'Ivoire.

12 Gnonsoa, *Le masque au cœur de la société wê*, 73.

13 Gnonsoa, *Le masque au cœur de la société wê*, 73.

14 Gnonsoa, *Le masque au cœur de la société wê*, 77.

is dedicated. “The Wê addresses the supernatural powers to ask them to ensure the maintenance of cosmic and social balance. Worship serves to make these powers favourable. The Wê want to get from God, through his mediators, which can make his life enjoyable and as long as possible.”¹⁵

The *Glaè* are these mediators between God and men. In the Wê society, the *Glaè* have a religious, administrative, political, economic and judicial role. They embody law, power and strength. They impose their authority on society. They even oversee the forced work for the construction of infrastructure, such as bridges and public works. Before the arrival of the colonial settlers, there was no force of order and security, it was the *Glaè* who assumed the safety of the population. In case of disturbances or calamities of nature and epidemics, it is the *Glaès* who invoke the spirits.

Figure 16.1: A Wê *Glaè* mask in a ceremonial outfit, including the face, a skirt made of palm fronds and a white tunic that covers the neck and part of the skirt.

(Photo: Célestin Gnonzion)

GLAÈS FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT: SYMBOLIC AND SPIRITUAL COMMUNICATION

As described above, the *Glaès* embody the spiritual and sacred institutions in Wê society. The spirituality of the *Glaè* was described as eternal. As one of our informants described it:

The institution of the *Glaè* has survived over the centuries from the ancestors to the present day. The *Glaè* have been able to resist all times because they are eternal. They existed in the time of the ancestors, in the

15 Gnonsoa, *Le masque au cœur de la société wê*, 77.

16. *Religion, spirituality and environmental protection amongst the Wê people*

time of our parents, in our time and they will exist after us. The *Zozêhi*,¹⁶ who are human beings who are incarnated in the spirit of the *Glaè*, succeed each other but the *Glaè* remains eternal. The *Glaè* never dies, even if the *Zozêhi* do.

The *Glaè* are sacred and spiritual beings who live outside the village. Much of their forms of interaction with humans are done through communication with linguistic codes, sign language and symbols. The language has an airtight code that not everyone can decode. This is why the *Glaè* always uses an intermediary to communicate with humans, an accompanist or interpreter whose role is to help decode the language of the mask. *Glaès* can also communicate through symbolic images that represent them and make people then think of them in the collective imagination.

As far as the protection of the environment is concerned, with the Wê, it is the *Glaès*, who are the guarantors, because they themselves come from the bush and are thus able to protect the waters and forests. According to one of our informants, "The *Glaès* are the guardians of nature and they look after its preservation. Because they are more in harmony with nature than humans, they themselves come from the bush and they live in the bush so in nature."¹⁷ To preserve this harmony with nature, visible symbols of the masks are used to materialise the prohibitions on touching, exploiting and penetrating sacred or protected sites.

Sacralisation and protection of nature through the Glaè

The preservation of the environment amongst the Wê is done by protection or by sacralisation. In terms of environmental protection, it is the people themselves who ask for the *Glaè* to help protect a space, such as a watercourse or a forest. For example, according to our informants, "When people want to preserve fish from a stream, they use *Glaè* to ban this stream from human activity. And the *Glaè* materialises this by placing at the entrance of the stream a few pairs of palm fronds from his skirt."¹⁸ The pair of palm fronds is the communication symbol that allows the population to be able to identify the site thus protected as indicated in Figure 16.2. Informants told us, "The ban on human activities on the watercourse can last a year or more. And it is only the *Glaè* who can lift the ban to allow collective fishing."¹⁹

16 The Wê word, *Zozêhi*, refers to the human being in whom the spirit of the *Glaè* is embodied and who wears the *Glaè* mask.

17 Interview with a *GlaèZo*, the intermediary between humans and the *Glaè*, by C Gnonzion, Côte d'Ivoire, exact place and date not given.

18 Interview with a *GlaèZo*, the intermediary between humans and the *Glaè*, by C Gnonzion, Côte d'Ivoire, exact place and date not given.

19 Interview with a *GlaèZo*, the intermediary between humans and the *Glaè*, by C Gnonzion, Côte d'Ivoire, exact place and date not given.

Figure 16.2: Put at the entrance of a stream, the palm fronds symbolise in the collective imagination of the Wê the prohibition of exploitation of the water, which becomes from this moment a property of the *Glaè*.

(Photo: Célestin Gnonzion)

This kind of symbolic communication that manifests itself through an aspect or attribute of the *Glaè*, represents in the collective imagination of the Wê that this space is forbidden to human activity and that it is preserved because it now belongs to the domain of the *Glaè*. The ban is always materialised by a visible and distinctive sign of the *Glaè*. Apart from the pairs of palm fronds, a piece of white tunic used in the appearance clothing of the *Glaè* can serve as a symbol as shown in Figure 16.3.

Furthermore, apart from the protection of water and forests, there is also in the We, a form of environmental preservation through the process of sacralisation. It is the same method of symbolic communication used to demonstrate the prohibition of exploitation or penetration of the targeted sites. But the difference between protected and sacred spaces lies in the duration of the ban. If the protected areas (forests and streams) are for a period determined by the *Glaè*, which can at any time lift the ban on the sacred spaces for a definite or indefinite period. According to our informants, sacred spaces (waters or forests) are places on which or in which protecting spirits and geniuses live. These are forests or waters in which one does not enter without authorisation and certain incantations made by the initiates or the *Glaè*,²⁰ because one can get lost, lose one's life or expose oneself to great misfortune.

²⁰ The penetration on these areas may be for sacrificial and ritual reasons. It is not about the exploitation of these sacred spaces.

16. Religion, spirituality and environmental protection amongst the Wê people

Figure 16.3: A *Glaè* tunic affixed to the entrance of the forest reminds of the importance of *Glaè* in the Wê society. At the same time, this image represents the message in the collective imagination of the Wê of the prohibition or sacralisation of this space. (Photo: Célestin Gnonzion)

The Wê have well-marked terms for areas preserved according to whether they are simply protected or actually sacred. A protected forest is referred to as *ya kwlae*. And if it is sacred, it is referred to as *bôhò klwae* or *gninhin kwlae*. As for bodies of water, there are protected waters named *Wê ya-no*, and sacred waters that are also adored are called *gninhin ni* or *bôhò ni*. Violations of protected or sacred areas may be subject to a series of forms of repression prior to the person's re-establishment or reintegration into the normal social fabric. According to Alfred Schwartz,²¹ "Once the guilt of the accused is established, repressive intervention depends on the seriousness of the fault. The penalties are threefold: fine, corporal punishment, banishment."²² But according to our informants, corporal punishment and banishment are rare. According to them, "When desecration of a protected or sacred site is observed, the intermediaries between the *Glaè* and the men called *GlaeZo* trigger the repair process. The members of the offender's family are arrested in order to pay the amount necessary to make amends and repair the fault committed."²³

21 Schwartz, *La vie quotidienne dans un village Guéré*.

22 Schwartz, *La vie quotidienne dans un village Guéré*.

23 Interview with a *GlaèZo*, the intermediary between humans and the *Glaè*, by C Gnonzion, Côte d'Ivoire, exact place and date not given.

THE ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS OF THE WÊ PEOPLE

One question that deserves an answer is whether all practices of the sacralisation of nature in Wê country through symbols of visual communication are a sign of an ecological awareness of this people. This question appears to be relevant insofar as researchers Azowa Gilles Kragbe Kragbe²⁴ and Martine Tahoux Touao²⁵ maintain, “The ecological motivations that drive local communities in the sacralisation of nature are primarily related to their subsistence needs. Their first objective here is to ensure the sustainability of the natural resources on which the survival of the social group depends; it is a goal that is not ecological.”²⁶ Kragbe and Tahoux Touao explicitly report the positions of two other researchers to this effect. These include anthropologist Stephan Dugast,²⁷ who believes that “it is the search for abundance that would explain such resource management”, and environmental geographer Jean Boutrais,²⁸ for whom “sacralisation is not fundamentally aimed at managing nature, because what local communities manage is exclusively social relations and not biodiversity”.²⁹

But as far as the Wê people are concerned, we believe that there is an ecological awareness through the institution of the *Glaè*, insofar as the *Glaè* itself is an integral part of nature. Born and living in nature, he is best placed to know all the mysteries and to protect it in the eyes of men. It is itself an emanation of nature in the village. This is what constitutes its mystery: a being from the bush who lives amongst humans.

The *Glaè* is a spirit that has come from the universe. Before our parents communicated with spirits through the bush.

The *Glaè* comes from God. And he is incarnated as a man whom he possesses and who speaks a specifically different language from the language of the ordinary man in the village. He is adored by the Wê, hence the term for designating the *Glaè* in the Wê language is “gninhindê” in the Wê language, the one we worship, adore and owe respect to.³⁰

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26 Kragbe AG and Tahoux Touao M. 2010. “La sacralisation de la nature dans la gestion de l’environnement: Le cas des Dida de Côte d’Ivoire” [The sacralisation of nature in environmental management: The case of the Dida of Côte d’Ivoire], *Revue des Sciences Sociales*, 2010, no 43, “Humour et dérision” [Journal of Social Sciences], 43:134. Online at: <https://bit.ly/35oPmu6>

27 Anthropologist at the Research Institute for Development (IRD-France), Joint Research Unit (UMR), Local heritage, environment and globalisation.

28 Geographer, Research Director Emeritus at IRD.

29 Kragbe and Tahoux Touao, “La sacralisation de la nature dans la gestion de l’environnement”, 134.

30 Interview with a *GlaèZo*, the intermediary between humans and the *Glaè*, by C Gnonzion, Côte d’Ivoire, exact place and date not given.

CONCLUSION

In the Wê society, the preservation of the environment takes place through the processes of protection and sacralisation. These processes are carried out through the spirituality of the *Glaè* and the people's belief in it. As the custodian of religious power in the traditional Wê belief and religion, the *Glaè* helps preserve the environment, streams and forests through symbolic communication. It is a question of affixing objects that represent and recall attributes of the *Glaè* to the entrance of the spaces. These are symbols of his ceremonial clothes such as a pair of palm fronds or a white tunic. These *Glaè* attributes posted at the entrance to the sites to be preserved have a double meaning. They symbolise, first of all, the *Glaè* as a messenger and at the same time recall in the collective imagination the message of prohibition, protection or sacralisation of environmental sites.

The *Glaè* is therefore an important figure for the preservation of the environment, which constitutes a necessity of survival and harmonious coexistence with nature amongst the Wê, a forest people. This spiritual being occupies a central place in religiosity amongst the Wê, because it is an intermediary between the Gods, called *Gnonsoa* or *Guela*, and the human beings of Wê country in a way that is concomitant with legal and political power and predominant and exclusive in religious power. But today, with the existence of modern administration, the *Glaè* holds only spiritual and religious power amongst the Wê. And it continues to influence the preservation of protected and sacred areas: water and forests.