

**TANGAZA COLLEGE**

**THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

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*of ~~prophets~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~past~~*  
**DEATH AMONG THE NAWDEBA, WITH SPECIAL  
FOCUS ON SANGBAN SUMGA ~~of the past~~**

*You have left this out  
in your cover page!*

Supervisor

**Prof. Mary N. Getui**

**A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Theology**

**NAIROBI 2009**

*Reader A.C. Ngore  
S.M.M.*

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this Long Essay to my late parents and brother: Dadjomgou M'guea Benjamin, Batta'a Yawa and Dadjomgou Gotara John as a sign of the loving memory I have of them. I further dedicate this work to my immediate family members: Dadjomgou Koussanta Edmond, Dadjomgou Bagombayéna Gwladys, Dadjomgou Baloyéma Marie Laure, and Dadjomgou Talaka Arsène and to my niece Dadjomgou Nadège.



## EPIGRAPH

**L**isten more often to things rather than beings.  
The dead are not gone forever.  
They are in the paling shadows  
And in the darkening shadows.  
The dead are not beneath the ground,  
They are in the rustling tree,  
In the murmuring wood,  
In the still water,  
In the flowing water,  
In the lonely place, in the crowd;  
The dead are not dead.

*Birago Diop*



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## STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this Long Essay is the product of my original work achieved through personal readings, research, observation and reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Theology. It has never been submitted to any institution of higher study for academic credit: college or university. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed:.....




Name of Student: DADJOMGOU BAKOMA DAMIEN, SVD.

Date:.....

03 | 12 | 08

This Long Essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

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Date:.....

3-12-08

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### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Death is the center of many traditions and organizations, and is a feature of every culture around the world. Much of this revolves around the care of the dead, the disposal of body on the onset of death as well as the perceptions on the afterlife. The disposal of human corpses does, in general, take place before significant time has passed, and ritualistic ceremonies often occur at that precise moment. This is not a unified practice, however, as in Nawdebaland most of the rituals and ceremonies do take place after the interment. One of these ceremonies that characterize the Nawdeba traditional practices is the <sup>meaning?</sup> *Sumga*. Death among the Nawdeba is believed to have deep roots in the 'world of the unknown', consequently, not all are given the <sup>Word?</sup> (faculty) to determine the real causes and the many implications following the death of a person.

The traditional *Sumga* was the ritual par excellence that established the state of the soul of a departed and the same ritual prescribed the befitting and required sacrifices for ransoming a 'lost or discarded soul'. Sangban Sumga as a Christian expression of the traditional *Sumga* aims at reversing the 'dangerous' effects (e.g. the banishment of a presumed culpable, the stigma that follows after the supposed guilty is discovered and all the social divisions) <sup>in itales - not English!</sup> that ensue the former and try to bring Christians to an appreciation of the church's way of celebrating. The launching of the rite of Sangban *Sumga* among the Nawdeba unveiled a chain of hostility

Word?

hey  
what  
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the  
capla  
was  
are  
the  
reider

between the Christians and their brethren adherents of the indigenous beliefs. The name *Sumga* came to be known as *Sangban Sumga*.<sup>1</sup> As a Nawda<sup>2</sup>, I have long observed and experienced the Christian attempt of inculturating the traditional Sumga. I have appreciated the initiative. I have lived together with many people from my village, the struggles that arose due to the introduction of the 'new rite'. I still remember the threats from the elders of the village against the church leaders. It is still fresh in my mind the divisions that occurred in many families and the curses from the *tadeba*.<sup>3</sup> This situation threw many Christians into confusion and left them with no other option than to take the risk with the 'new rite' because they were threatened with death by the *tadeba*. I would like therefore to explore the rite of Sangban Sumga, to give it a backing by providing a better understanding of the Nawdeba cultural and religious situation.

For this reason I have entitled this Long essay: *Death Among the Nawdeba with Special Focus on Sangban Sumga*. This work is divided into four chapters.

In the first Chapter which is an overview, I have presented mainly the genesis of the Nawdeba community and their geographical location; this has paved the way to the second Chapter. Here I am concerned with the main causes of death and the traditional rituals thereafter in the Nawdeba community before coming to the core of the work in the Third Chapter. At this juncture, I have reviewed the origin, the history and practice of Sangban Sumga and its relevance for the Nawdeba.

I have introduced the last chapter with a brief overview of the Traditional Sumga; its positive effects and its limitations before giving a suggestion in the line of further reflection on how to bring the Nawdeba to an objective understanding and

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<sup>1</sup>To the name 'Sumga' was added 'Sangban' which is an adjective derived from 'Sangband' which means God. Therefore, Sangban Sumga is differentiated from the traditional Sumga even at the level of the appellation.

<sup>2</sup> Nawda is the singular form of Nawdeba.

<sup>3</sup> The *Tadeba* are the traditional priests (fetish priests) who are in charge of protecting the nawdeba cultural heritage and carrying on sacrifices.

appreciation of the ritual. It is my hope that this work will be translated into French in order to be useful to the people of my village. In the same way I wish this work to be culturally realistic for we know that "for a long time, Christianity, in Africa was spoon-fed to the local people (...) who did not understand the faith of the missionaries. They did not know how to express themselves in the church, but today they have to appreciate themselves and the African milieu so that they can understand well the Christian faith and live it as Africans."<sup>4</sup>

Have a section on the  
Clarification or Definition of  
Terms!

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<sup>4</sup> J. MUGAMBI, *The Biblical Basis for Evangelization*, 23.

## Chapter One

### Geographical Location and Genesis of the Nawdeba

#### Introduction

The life of every community is shaped by facts as well as myths. It is commonly believed that each and every ethnic group, every group of people along the years elaborate data and elements that characterize it. In this process, various aspects of the community are taken into consideration in order to give ~~a somewhat~~ <sup>some</sup> exhaustive definition and characterization of the particular society. Elements such as origin, beliefs, traditions, are brought to perspective and molded into a particular culture. The latter defines and determines the identity and uniqueness of the group. The Nawdeba<sup>5</sup> are no exception. In fact, history militated in their favor in the attempt to establish themselves as a sovereign and autonomous people with their specific culture and traditions. That is to say that the settlement of the Nawdeba did not encounter any resistance from the neighboring ethnic groups as it is usually the case.

#### 1.1 Geographical Location and Mode of Subsistence of the Nawdeba

The Nawdeba are located in the northern part of Togo. They occupy a fairly vast plateau on the borders of the high mountains of Kara to the south and the chains of Défalé in the North. The Nawdeba, according to the subdivisions in Togo, form a district that comprises five principal sub-districts. The sub-district of Niamtougou represents at the same time the district capital and the biggest town of ~~all~~ <sup>one</sup> the five. The other sub-districts are Baga, Koka, Siou and Ténéga.

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<sup>5</sup> The Nawdeba are an ethnic and linguistic group in the Northern part of Togo, a West African country.

The geographical location of the Nawdeba community plays a determinant role on their mode of subsistence. The population mostly relies on unproductive lands for subsistence farming. Maize, millet, groundnut, soya beans and cassava are the common crops. Many Nawdeba possess vast lands thus they require considerable labor force; this explains the high rate of child birth in the milieu. There is suspicion that "cultivation needed much time to evolve the crops, the competence and the customs to support an effective agricultural system"<sup>6</sup>. But to this date, the farming system still utilizes rudimentary tools such as hoes, cutlasses, shovels and sticks. In the late 1980s, early explorers such as the ethnographer Leo Frobenius<sup>7</sup> baptized the Nawdeba the "palm tree people"<sup>8</sup> because of the concentration of palm oil trees in their home area.

## 1.2 Facts about the Nawdeba in the Socio-Cultural Context of the Populations of Togo

*the contract* ~~Though~~ the Nawdeba have integrated to their culture many alien elements *but* from other ethnic groups, their authenticity is still far from being annihilated. *but* *fact* *by* *l* Probably the most serious threat to the unity of the traditional Nawdeba customs and beliefs is Christianity. Nevertheless, the Nawdeba remain deeply and firmly rooted in the ancestral beliefs manifested through the many sacrifices they offer. Although many Nawdeba are attracted to Christianity, about 75%, the socio-cultural life of the community remains traditional.

In fact the family type, the lineage, the initiations facilitate the grouping in clans. Basically the Nawdeba are very superstitious and believe in the apodictic laws of obedience to the traditional religion. It is strongly believed that any failure in

<sup>6</sup> R. W. JULY, *A History of the African People*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> German Ethnographer and explorer, protagonist of the theory of 'cultural diffusions'

<sup>8</sup> R. CONNEVIN, *Histoire du Togo*, 185.

fulfilling this religious duty affects negatively the economic, the social and existential prosperity.

The Nawdeba as the other populations of Togo (Ewe, Kabyè, Guins, Moba and Lamba) believe in the existence of evil forces and their influence on humans in their day to day life. Natural elements like trees, springs, forests, stones, are divinized in order to seek protection from them

## **2. Origin of the Nawdeba and their Immediate Vicinity**

### **2.1 Mythical Origin and Historical Origin of the Nawdeba**

Like most of Togo's ethnic groups, the Nawdeba indicate that they are the original inhabitants of their region. Many are the traditions that advocate that the various communities of the Nawdeba did not settle in the region at the same time. Thus variations are clearly visible when it comes to the antiquity of the settlements. Today in Nawdebaland we encounter diverse opinions with respect to their origin. Some views can simply be classified in the realm of myths while some are more scholarly and research based.

#### **2.1.1 Mythical Origin of the Nawdeba**

The formal tradition of the Nawdeba states that the first Nawdeba descended from the sky directly into two forests; one in Koka and the other in Siou.<sup>9</sup> These were men replete with bows and arrows, hoes and other tools. This tradition places the forests in a high order in the life experience of the Nawdeba and to this day there is reverence to sacred forests due to their historical value and importance. Nevertheless, in our day, some think that this myth derives from the misinterpretation of the frequent affirmation of the Nawdeba << Te redan faagan >> by the first explorers (mostly Europeans). In fact this expression is an ambiguous one; it literally means: 'we are from above'. In reality, the word <<faagan>> means

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<sup>9</sup> J.-C. FROELICH- A. PIERRE- R. CONNEVIN, *les Populations du Nord Togo*, 69.

'above'. The Nawdeba refer to the "North" (cardinal point) as << ton faagan>>; therefore, it is not a clear cut idea to think that the Nawdeba claim to have descended from the sky. Probably the first historians in their attempt to reconstruct the history of the origins of the Nawdeba might have misinterpreted the expressions due to linguistic limitations.

### 2.1.2 Historical Origin of the Nawdeba

*Late may also mean recent*  
*Late* and more recent scholarship has increased knowledge about the origins of the Nawdeba. Researchers have indeed come to agreement that the Nawdeba migrated to their present location probably around the 15<sup>th</sup> century and one wave came from the North while the other came from the East.<sup>10</sup> Today, even old Nawdeba recognize Djougou (in Benin) as their provenance. This belief is supported by investigators who found sufficient and convincing similarities between the *Nawdem*<sup>11</sup> and the Yom language of the region of Djougou. Also it has been proven that there are about 35% lexical resemblances between the Nawdem and the 'More' and the 'Mossi'.<sup>12</sup> In definitive, the founders of Niamtougou have been identified as a man named Kégidimbada and his wife Iya.

The Nawdeba come therefore from two big migratory waves. Their migration continues even until now; that is precisely why it is not difficult to meet them in many towns of the country and in the neighboring countries like Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin and Burkina Faso as well. In various towns where they have settled they have managed to live as organized groups carrying with them their own traditions and beliefs such as the *Kamou*, the *Djandjaagou* and the *Daragre*. These are some of the celebrations to signify the unity, and to demonstrate the strength of

<sup>10</sup> Cf. N.L. GAYIBOR, ed., *Histoire des Togolais*. 1,135.

<sup>11</sup> The Nawdem is the Language spoken by all the Nawdeba.

<sup>12</sup> The Mossi is a much spoken language in West Africa. It has similarities with many other languages in the region. It is spoken in Togo, Benin and Burkina Faso.

the community. Still all the Nawdeba no matter where they find themselves point to Niamtougou as their home and long to be there sooner or later.

## 2.2 Immediate Vicinity of the Nawdeba

The Nawdeba are entrenched between the Lamba and the Kabyè<sup>13</sup>; their district is bordered by that of Kozah to the south, Binah to the east, Bassar to the west Kéran to the North and the international border with Bénin to the north east. Their immediate and closest districts of Kozah and Kéran have over the years influenced and shaped their political, social and cultural world. The Nawdeba have indeed inherited a lot from the Kabyè (from Kozah). The naming tradition, traditional dances and many other key cultural and religious practices are said to have initially been taken from the adjoining villages and gradually modified.

Though there has been considerable mutual influence between the Nawdeba and their neighbor, the Lambas and the Kabyè, their languages do not resemble each other and are not mutually understandable. In fact each district is marked by its own totem, beliefs, social and political organization. It is the interest and the survival of the community that has primacy in the day to day operations of the Nawdeba. Therefore, “all should strive towards the building of one and solid community”.<sup>14</sup>

In general, the Nawdeba constitute a peaceful population and keep a brotherly relationship with their neighboring towns. There is no record of any major or historical strife between the Nawdeba and their bordering groups. This situation probably is the leaven stirring the blossoming commercial and cultural exchanges.

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<sup>13</sup> Ethnic and linguistic group of people living in the neighboring district of Kozah.

<sup>14</sup> D.G. MAILLU, *African Indigenous Political Ideology*, 59.

### 3. The Three Dimensions of Existence According to the Nawdeba

It is assumed in almost all the cultures that the rhythm of existence is: to be born, to live and to die. The focus on birth, life and death is therefore of prime importance to African thinking.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, for the Nawdeba there is another dimension basic to understanding the whole reality of human existence; that is the tale of life after death. We shall come to this topic later in our work.

#### 3.1 Life on Earth

It is worthwhile focusing on the reality of life as perceived by the Nawdeba since it is a recurrent concern in their daily living. "Néérem ba dahat"; this short adage might be the most suitable expression that translates the reverence accorded to life. It simply means, 'life is dear'. This saying calls consequently to respect, protection and veneration of the human life. It might be right to say as well that the Nawdeba community is a pro-life one. In truth, abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment are foreign to the traditional Nawdeba community. The Nawdeba believe for example that to attempt abortion is to assault life at its beginning and euthanasia is an assault on life at its eve. These two crimes would definitely attract misfortune and curse upon the offender, his or her family and on the whole village as well. Life is a supreme good from God, given through the ancestors. By and large, the belief in the reincarnation of the ancestors among the Nawdeba governs and dictates the concept of total respect for life.

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<sup>15</sup> D.G. MAILLU, *African Indigenous Political Ideology*, 59.

### 3.2 Death as a Transitional Reality

"What is it like to die? That is a question which humanity has been asking  
 itself ever since there have been humans."<sup>16</sup> <sup>ever</sup> ACROSS time, this question has been  
<sup>Wrongly</sup> <sup>Wb-101</sup> fumbling many generations as many attempts were and are still going on; some in  
 order to grasp this reality and others in order to avert the phenomenon. Death has  
 been defined in various ways and every single definition carries the tag of the  
 definer. Biologists say that death is the termination of the biological functions that  
 define living organisms.<sup>17</sup> Many religions believe that death is the liberation of the  
 soul from mortal bodies and the entrance into a new and high form of life. In these  
 attempts, the Nawdeba think that death is a transitional 'event' it is an 'occurrence'  
 that terminates and inaugurates.

If in his *Apology*, Plato seems to present death as a desirable reality, for the  
 Nawdeba, death is before all else, a dramatic and dreadful event. It needs to be  
 fought and banished from among the population.

This is done by means of two main rituals: the 'Habre' (prodigious dance) and the  
 sacred hunting. Still the Nawdeba have the assurance that death has not got the last  
 word. As a transitional event, death is as a key to various doors; the door of life and  
 that of death. We shall come back on these two truths afterward. Nevertheless, the  
 general belief in the Nawdeba community is that human beings are of double nature;  
 they are bodily (natural) and spiritual (supernatural) beings. From thence come the  
 belief in the reincarnation and especially the belief in the survival of the soul.

<sup>16</sup> R. A. MOODY JR., *Life After Life*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> C. P. ARIES, *The Hour of our Death*, 15.

### 3.3 The Period after Death: the Survival of the Soul

It is important <sup>out from the</sup> at the beginning, to be clear about the use and meaning of the key concepts that will run through this section of our presentation. In most of African traditional beliefs, the concept 'soul' refers to the vital entity that is embodied in the flesh. Shall we therefore say that the Greek dualism of a mortal body and an immortal soul is shared by the African mind at large and by the Nawdeba community? In fact the latter believe that life here on earth, though it is worth protecting, defending and loving, is a mere foreshadowing of a life that takes place after we leave this planet. This belief is evidently a consequence of the cosmology of the Nawdeba. They believe that there are three instances of existence; the world of the living humans, the underworld reserved for the spirits (souls) of the dead and the realm of the divinities. Therefore, after the physical death, the soul continues its journey and joins a particular group of souls according to its merits based on its earthly life.

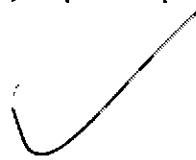
The soul of an upright person is received in the company of the good ancestors while that of a wicked person is sent to perpetual punishment. It is therefore clear that all souls (of evil and good persons) survive after physical death. They live in a spiritual state (world) which Moody JR. describes as less limited, where perception, thought and memory are perfect and where time and space no longer pose the obstacles they do in physical life.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> R.A. MOODY JR., *Life after Life*, 118.

## Conclusion

The seemingly insignificant population of the Nawdeba represents a rich cultural deposit in Togo. Some of these cultural values are “transmitted and embodied in symbolic meanings, which communicate and even perpetuate certain social behavior towards life as a whole”. For the Nawdeba, the quest for the meaning of life and death has always been the central point of all the cultural actions, rituals and sacrifices. Indeed, as a people who strongly believe in life in the hereafter, the Nawdeba have over the years elaborated systematic and rigorous rituals that govern the customary rites especially the ones related to death. Findings have demonstrated that these rites vary accordingly and obey mostly the causes of death. The rituals are therefore requested according to the findings of the diviners who are believed to have the authority to provide people with spiritual guidance.



## Chapter Two

### Causes of Death and the Rituals Thereafter

#### Introduction

“There is no medicine for death.”<sup>19</sup> This saying translates fully the dreadful experience of death among the Sukuma and other African communities at large. There are many myths and stories about the origin of death in more or less every ethnic group or clan in Africa. The multiplicity of views is also noticeable when it comes to the causes of death; this evidently determines and establishes the subsequent rituals. Among the Nawdeba, there are basically three sources of death namely death as a call from God, induced death and death from the witches. In addition, the Nawdeba have the conviction that can be divided into two main scenarios: the bad death << *ku be'em* >> and the ordinary death << *ku hóm* >>. All the same, there is a sentiment of resentment vis-à-vis death in the Nawdeba community.

#### 1. The Nawdeba Myth on the Origin of Death

Before going into the various causes of death, it is worthwhile to narrate the Nawdeba myth on the origin of death. The myth tells of the river Tano<sup>20</sup> fighting with death.

Long ago there was a hunter in the forest who for long time failed to catch anything. After many days he saw and hit an antelope, but it bounded away and a long chase followed. The man went after it but it went into a cave. The creature suddenly turned into the god Tano. The man was terrified but Tano told him not to fear, for he would protect him on the future. The two set off for the man's home and

<sup>19</sup> This is a saying found among the Sukuma of Tanzania

<sup>20</sup> River Tano is one of the biggest rivers of Togo; to the present day sacrifices are offered at its bank probably to implore its protection from illness, evil spirit and eventually from death.

on their way they met death. Death challenged them, and Tano replied that he was going to live with man. Death said he would not allow this, and sang a chant of defiance at Tano. Tano replied defying death, and for a whole month the two great beings sang against each other. Death could not force Tano back along his path, but neither could Tano compel death to let him continue on the road to the man's home. Finally they agreed on a compromise. When a man fell ill, whichever of the two spirits reached him first would have power over him. If Tano arrived first the man would get better, but if Death got to his bed first the man would die. So Tano did get to man's abode, but Death came too.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Death as a Recall from the Creator

As we said in the previous chapter, the Nawdeba believe that life is a supreme good or a gift from a transcendent God-creator (*Re'eta*) through the ancestors. This and many other beliefs are common in various African settings; consequently, in the case of a good death, the Nawdeba believe that it is the Creator who has called one back. In this line Joseph Healey ascertains:

"Realism, necessity, a sense of inevitability and even fatalism are seen in many African proverbs and sayings as they do about so many events; many Africans attribute death to God the highest cause saying for example: 'it is by God's action that he or she died.' The very common Arabic (north Africa) saying is 'if God wills he or she will go'"<sup>22</sup>

Many Africans believe that God calls everyone back to Him at his or her indicated time. The Sukuma saying: "God is now hollowing out the canoe"<sup>23</sup> referring to death is an obvious witness to the belief that God can be the author of death. It must be underlined that these words are uttered in cases of what is referred to as 'ordinary death' that is a painless and non violent one.

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<sup>21</sup> G. PARRINDER, *African Mythology*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> J. HEALEY, MM - D. SYBERTZ, MM; *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 207.

<sup>23</sup> J. HEALEY, MM - D. SYBERTZ MM; *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 208.

It is believed among the Nawdeba that when one dies peacefully and gracefully without any illness or suffering, that death marks the end of the mission for which the person was sent to earth. "In some parts of Africa, it is often heard following the death of a person especially of a young person, 'this death does not come from God' if the individual dies before old age, that person is said to have been bewitched but if the person dies 'ripe' it is said he or she has not been bewitched."<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the Nawdeba find it very hard to accept easily that there is such a thing as 'natural death' thus many indulge in a cause-finding race when death strikes.

### 3. Induced Death

Each year there are rituals performed in order to hunt death in the Nawdeba community; therefore when death still occurs, it is evident that there is someone who has deliberately caused it. Somebody is to be blamed for the tragedy.

#### 3.1 Death as a Corollary of Rebuttal or Omission to Perform Rituals

Evidences show that death can strike at its own will but it can also occur when one of the clan members has provoked it either directly or indirectly. Death in that case snatches a particular individual or a number of people from a family. In various cultures, cases of series of deaths might be a result of the expression of anger by the gods. In most cases it is because the gods were not appeased or were not pleased with the dead person. As Julia Ching expresses it, "the rituals were aimed at pleasing the spirits."<sup>25</sup> While the spirits (gods) await sacrificial items for feasting and thus shower blessings and fortune on the living, they can also curse, strike and eliminate once a person fails to honor them with ritual sacrifices. In fact

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<sup>24</sup> J. HEALEY, MM - D. SYBERTZ MM; *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 209.

<sup>25</sup> J. CHING, *Chinese Religion*, 37.

the gods consider sacrifices their right and consequently the living have the obligation to observe and fulfill this duty. It is not rare to hear the Nawdeba say: “*ha yandaba hera w'm kee werga*” meaning “the ancestors are angry with him or her”.

Sometimes one cannot tell whether the sacrifice is offered solely to the ancestors or to the gods but the Nawdeba minds recall that the ancestors are the protectors of the household but the gods of the family have the ultimate power. Therefore the ancestors who are in communion with the gods have to be taken care of if one wishes to benefit from the protection of the gods. In many cases, the offender is ignorant of the causes of the misfortunes befalling him or her, but “there are people who have the power to ‘sniff out’ hidden sources of disorder. They can advise on procedures to correct the situation.”<sup>26</sup> In this particular case, the reprobate is willing to avert the situation by observing and performing the required sacrifice thus reducing the gravity and the number of deaths in the household.

With the influx of modernity and the Christian thinking, it is common to see people refusing altogether to perform sacrifices. They even go as far as to defy the request made by the elders of the village mostly asking to honor the ancestors; any eventual death is directly attributed to this behavior. In any case, death continues its way. The number of non believers in the power of ritual sacrifices in averting or preventing death is ever increasing. The current socio cultural situation of the Nawdeba is being seriously challenged by the advent of numerous missionary denominations who openly confront most of the beliefs.

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<sup>26</sup> L. MAGESA, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 212.

### 3.2 Death Inflicted by an Enemy

Death can be inflicted by an enemy or at least that is what the Nawdeba believe. More often than not, the first reaction of the Nawda before death changes from surprise into accusation.

The Nawdeba always express a sense of disbelief when somebody is said to have died. In most cases, their first reaction is to do a 'mental survey' and establish whether the dead person had some known enemy, whether he or she had quarreled with someone in the recent past and whether he or she owes anybody. Death is never a 'normal thing' in the first place. It is important to clarify that the term enemy here refers to various kinds of enmity. There are people who are enemies to the others because of reasons such as familial rivalry over ownership of land, cattle, or other properties. Some are enemies just because of jealousy or envy and these types of people are the commonest among the Nawdeba. One can deliberately choose to be an enemy to the other because of his or her wealth, intellectual ability, his or her social position or fame. In all, many deaths have been believed to be the result of the victim's enemies who resort to ways and obscure means to attack, destroy and finally kill. That is the reason why the Nawdeba always seek protection either through charms or amulets. Since one never knows with certainty who is his or her enemy, it is always advisable to protect oneself both against the living and the dead.

The Karimojong also believe that the dead have the power to inflict sickness, misfortune and death; that is why "when somebody is afflicted by sickness or any other kind of trial otherwise inexplicable, they will be asked by the 'emuron' to make reparation to the dead just in case he might have offended some of them, even without knowing it."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> B. NOVELLI, *Karimojong Traditional Religion*. 25.

#### 4. Death from the Witches

“Virtually, every unusual event or tragic experience can be explained by witchcraft.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, in the Nawdebaland, anything from a poor harvest, sickness, death, road accident or headache to a quarreling relationship or unusual phenomena find their explanation in witchcraft.<sup>29</sup> Richard Gehman’s conception of a witch might give us a somewhat generally acceptable view of what a witch is believed to be among the Nawdeba. But before highlighting this attempting definition it is sound to clarify that we shall be using the term witch for both a man and a woman practicing witchcraft. Now who is a witch and what does he or she do?

“A witch does his or her work in secret; usually active at night. He or she walks at night usually very fast, animals may accompany. The witch moves bodily and not merely in his or her spirit. This evil person is anti-social and secretive; unwilling to divulge his or her knowledge or activities. With evil intentions he or she seeks to injure both his or her enemies and prosperous friends. It is an evil person driven by an inner urge to harm and kill. For this purpose, the witch uses all manner of items which had association with the person who is to be bewitched.”<sup>30</sup>

It is common to hear among the Nawdeba that death primarily comes from evil doers (witches). They go to the extent of suggesting names of potential or possible people responsible for the misfortune or death of a person.

These speculations give an enormous weight to the spreading of the belief in witchcraft among the Nawdeba.

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<sup>28</sup> R. GEHMAN, *African Traditional Religion*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> We are aware of the terminological problems. But luckily the Nawdeba have managed to overcome these problems by distinguishing adequately each and every manifestation of witchcraft with appropriate names: *hant'm*, *Nagmte*, *Kunidba*. Nevertheless, we shall use the English generic term 'witchcraft' to drive our point since it will be impossible to find other terms.

<sup>30</sup>R. GEHMAN, *African Traditional Religion*, 80-81.

That may be why Adegbola concluded: "magic, witchcraft and sorcery play a prominent role in 'Africans life'. They are saturated with beliefs, fears and superstitions connected with these practices."<sup>31</sup>

### 5. What Causes the Death of an 'Upright Person'?

The death of an 'upright person' by and large raises a great deal of questions among the Nawdeba and mostly appears more mysterious. It strengthens the already raw accusative behavior of the 'witch finders' and weakens the by now frail position of the few hesitant believers. The ethical appreciation of every individual reposes on the notions of good (*homgu*) and bad (*bægu*). But the understanding of these two terms is quite different from the modern and religious norms.

For the Nawdeba, the moral life can only be determined by the diviner (*taada*). In fact the speculations of the living are of no worth; the diviner is the ultimate source of information. An 'upright person' therefore is a person who while on earth was neither a witch nor was an associate of the community of the diabolic spirits nor possessed the boar (*jib*)<sup>32</sup>. The declaration or the justification given by the diviner is of prime importance for it gives the assurance about the actual state of the soul of the deceased. An 'upright person' is always believed to have been accepted and welcomed into the community of the '*yandaba*'<sup>33</sup>, a community of happiness where all honest and 'pious' clan's men and women are called by the ancestors to be recompensed. It is a kind of paradise in Christian terms.

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<sup>31</sup> E. ADEGBOLA, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, 67.

<sup>32</sup> These are the three criterions for the *taada* (diviner) to declare a person upright. The boar is believed to be owned by some particular people who use them to harm others, to make fortune in a crooked way or even to kill. One gets the boar by signing a contract with the evil spirits (*kunidba*) in the forests and mostly the cost of the boar is either to offer a victim (human) or to offer one's own life after a span of years.

<sup>33</sup> It is the community of the ancestors who lived a worthy and blameless life on earth.

## 6. What Causes the Death of a 'Wicked Person'?

There is no mystery surrounding the death of an obviously wicked or evil person among the Nawdeba. This death is always considered a logical consequence of one's own evil deeds and people usually murmur: "*ha gba'am*" meaning that the person asked for it. Such 'wicked people' are believed to go to either of the following two places: <<*kpam kunidba man*>> (in the fields among the demons) and <<*kpam loṅun*>> (far away in the bush). The former is still a better place to go because the person can still be salvaged through sacrifices offered on his behalf. Mostly those who go there are fairly bad people who neglected ceremonies due to the ancestors, people who signed pacts with dubious spirits. These people are tormented for a while. Does this sound like the purgatory for the Christians? The latter, <<*kpam loṅun*>> (far away in the bush) is the worst place where one can find himself or herself. The people in there are lost forever and are sent for eternal damnation <<*kugnon bermgun*>>. These are people who were 'hardcore criminals' on earth. They become demons (*kunidba*) and haunt the living.<sup>34</sup>

## 7. Rituals Performed After Death

Death, says Buti, "interrupts the ordinary flow of human existence and imposes a condition of rituals."<sup>35</sup> For the Nawdeba as in many of the African societies, every event has deep and generally hidden causes.

Rituals make it possible to determine and access the ~~grass~~ roots of the incidents in general and of death in a particular way. We will be mainly focusing in this section on the rituals that are observed after the death of a person in the Nawdeba customary setup.

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<sup>34</sup> P. WASUNGU, *Organisation Sociale et politique des Nawdeba*, 288-290.

<sup>35</sup> T. BUTI, *Death, African Funeral Rites and the Gospel*, 10.

## 7.1 The Carrying of the Corpse (To'odm)

This ritual of 'carrying' is not uniquely peculiar to the Nawdeba; I understand that some cultural areas of the Eastern Africa practice it. In Kenya for example among the *Luhya* and the *Kalenjin* there is something similar.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, we are convinced that there are some variations that emerge in the way the rite is conducted. The aim of this rite is to establish the culpable of the death of a person. Here I would like to narrate briefly a typical scenario of the To'odm: Two women carry the corpse (formally wrapped in a cloth); and questions are asked to the dead who is to answer them through movements. Generally, great a crowd gathers to witness the event. The questions are formulated in such a way that they can only be answered either by 'yes' or 'no'. A 'yes' answer is indicated by a forward movement of the corpse while a 'no' is characterized by a static position. It goes like this:

The house head (old man) asks: do you know something about your death?

The corpse: (may say) yes or no

The house head: so your death is from someone else?

The corpse: (Generally says) yes

The old man: is your death from below or from above?<sup>37</sup>

(To such a question the corpse cannot answer; so the question is reformulated)

The old man: (reformulates) is your death from below?

The corpse: No

The old man: (confirms) so it is from above.

The corpse: yes

<sup>36</sup> This information was obtained through interview of some Christians from Soweto Parish, Nairobi.

<sup>37</sup> 'Above' means 'among the living on earth' and 'below' means 'the land of the ancestors'

The questioning continues until the corpse is asked to indicate the one accountable for his or her death. The corpse therefore leads the crowd to the house, stands in front of the door or even literally knocks the particular person. Then the body is carried away for burial and the presumed culpable of the death is dealt with accordingly as the elders of the community decide. This happens after the burial is completed.

### 7.2 The Confirmation of the Guilt by a Higher Instance:

'Lugbire gbuute' --- *Waning?*

After the above rite is carried out, there is a similar one that follows and this time it is a diviner who confirms or refutes the allegations of the corpse. Note that these rites are ~~the~~ public ones; *While* these are going on, some members of the bereaved family can choose to go privately and secretly to other villages in order to seek the causes of the death from other diviners. In the course of the '*lugbire gbuute*', the diviner determines with the help of his helpers <kunidfogba> literally 'witch wives' the causes and the origin of the death. It is actually difficult to establish the veracity of the revelations of the diviners. Still it is a common practice among the Nawdeba who generally believe whatever comes from the mouth of diviners. In any case, if the household or the bereaved family is not completely satisfied or pleased with the findings, they can still appeal to a last and highest stage: the '*Sumga gbuute*', the 'beating of the plate'.

### 7.3 The Ritual of the 'Beating of the Plate': (*Sumga gbuute*)

*Sumga gbuute* literally 'the beating of the plate' is the highest form of enquiry for the Nawdeba. It is carried out only when death strikes; it not only gives the causes and the origin of the death of a particular person but it indicates altogether the sources of all the previous misfortunes, sickness and prior deaths in the family.

It also gives alternatives to avert many afflictions and possible deaths in the future. The Nawdeba believe it is the most reliable and objective way.<sup>38</sup> We shall deal with it more comprehensibly in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

The reality of death among the Nawdeba can be evaluated to a certain measure by having a critical look upon their death related rituals and sacrifices. Death is still a mysterious truth with an unknown origin though various myths try to elucidate it. In contrast, life is believed to proceed from a Creator through the ancestors. The many conceptions and beliefs in the various causes of deaths, as seen above, trigger the numerous queries by means of the many rituals and sacrifices that follow after death. However, to this day, the *Sumga gbuute* which is believed to be the most efficient, objective and highest form of investigation has not been able to satisfy the Nawdeba as to bringing them to terms with the reality of death. In this regard it is probably fit to ask oneself whether the Christian version of the Sumga (Sangban Sumga) will do better as to providing satisfaction to the spiritual and religious needs of the Nawdeba.

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<sup>38</sup> B. ALANO, *Le Christ et la Médiation Ancestrale dans la Conception Religieuse des Nawdeba. Approche Christologique*, 10.

## Chapter Three

### Sangban Sumga and the Nawdeba

#### Introduction

Sangban Sumga is the highest form of divination for the Nawdeba. It is held in very high esteem probably due to its psychological, social and religious effects. It is however important to note that Sangban Sumga is a success in the attempt of inculturating the Nawdeba cultural and traditional religious practices. Its target is mainly the converts to Christianity who are in ~~dying~~ need for substitutes to the customs and traditions that they are ~~to~~ set aside in order to be 'true followers' of the 'new religion'. It was believed by some Christians that "The old beliefs are an outgrowth of unbridled silliness, (...) pure foolishness".<sup>39</sup> Any practice that apparently contradicts the teaching of the new faith is an evidence of turning back on the basic notion of good sense and the first principle of reason. It is in this context of what Eboussi Boulaga calls "language of refutation"<sup>40</sup> that the Sangban Sumga sprang in order to salvage the Nawdeba from what is referred to as pagan or idolatrous practices.

#### I. Brief History of Sangban Sumga

Sangban Sumga can rightly be considered a very recent religious practice; as a matter of fact it did not exist until 1988. It was proposed by some Christians who wanted to set things clear when it comes to rituals, especially death related ones.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> E. BOULAGA, *Christianity without fetishes, An African Critique and recapture of Christianity*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> E. BOULAGA, *Christianity Without Fetishes, An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> Among some of the initiators of the rite of Sangban Sumga are people like Seda Bawiena and Noel Batassan.

Surprisingly, the rite of Sangban Sumga started with the death of a non-Christian. M. Badjabela, a traditional chief was the first person to go through this rite. His son who did not want to see his dead father go through the many demands of the traditional ceremonies, sacrifices and rituals, requested the church to which he belonged to consider a simple and meaningful way of burying Christians. That was the kick off of the rite of Sangban Sumga. The church started with a very simple rite which was elaborated and was refined as time went by.

This new rite drew two different reactions; a delightful one from the Christians and a manifest expression of hatred, disappointment and eventually rejection from the non-Christians. Nevertheless, nowadays, it is worthy to observe and appreciate the spirit of mutual tolerance that reigns between the two factions. Also the non-Christians have allowed and recognized the validity of the Sangban Sumga at least for the benefit of those who believe it and practice it.

## **2. Practice of Sangban Sumga and its Significance for the Nawdeba**

The socio-cultural environment of the Nawdeba is at all times marked by the fear of the unknown; they always seem to manifest great fear of a probable misfortune due to a certain neglect of some sacrifices or rituals. The Sangban Sumga carries a significant weight in that it has the power to bring about stillness and needed peace in families as well as in the mind of individuals. More so, this ritual is believed to have somewhat metaphysical functions that bring cohesion and integration to the clan.

## 2.1 Intercessory Character of Sangban Sumga

The primary aim of the ritual of Sangban Sumga is to intercede for the deceased. This function runs through all the other intentions for which the ritual is performed. It is obvious that nobody knows for sure the eschatological state of his or her soul. The Nawdeba share the view that some people, (and these are the majority), will have to go through a kind of purification before being united to the 'holy' ancestors. This we referred to on page 15 as those who go to <kpam kunidba man> (in the fields among demons); these people will go through a temporarily torment and need the suffrages (sacrifices) of the living. In this regard, the more complete the sacrifices are the better because "by means of these intercessions they are set free for a new life, united in a new fellowship".<sup>42</sup> The sacrifices are not directed to the 'demons' but to the ancestors who rejected and ejected the deceased from their company. When the offerings and sacrifices are performed reluctantly or un-satisfyingly, the dead will remain longer in that undesirable state. Sangban Sumga is in fact a process of negotiation and as such it needs to be performed with 'clean heart'. It is good to clarify that Sangban Sumga is not the sacrifice that appeases the ancestors but it helps in determining whether there is need for sacrifices or not.

## 2.2 Integration into Communion of the Ancestors

"Not everyone can become a living dead and pass on to become an ancestor. Before the dead could formally be recognized as (...) an ancestor, someone has to establish it;"<sup>43</sup> that is the competent authority (the clan elders) must have ascertained that the person is worthy to be considered as such. Here comes the rite of integration of the dead into the communion of the ancestors. After the rite of Sangban Sumga is

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<sup>42</sup> L. VISCHER, *Intercession*, 5.

<sup>43</sup> E. A. ADEGBOLA, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, 129.

performed, the family members are assured that their beloved is enjoying not only the communion of the ancestors but also the company of all the other 'dead' members of the family. We know that "what occupy the mind of many Africans in the realm of religion are their ancestors."<sup>44</sup> A Nawda will never be at peace once he or she is not assured of the fate of a departed member of the family. One more feature of the necessity of the Sangban Sumga is that it collaborates into the warm welcoming of the 'dead' by the ancestors; this is secured by the litany of the Saints and of the ancestors<sup>45</sup> which is a very essential component of the rite.

### 2.3 Psycho-healing of the Bereaved Family

Three main factors play a major role in the process of healing of the bereaved family. Sangban Sumga provides these key elements that run through the rite in order to bring the sorrowful family to terms with the reality.

The first element is the social element of the rite. As we said on page 5, a huge crowd gathers to witness the rite. This very fact makes the family feel supported, sustained and strengthened. Émilien Lamirande says: "hell is being (...) alone"<sup>46</sup> and he recognizes that "where there is no charity, there is no union"<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, being united and sharing with the bereaved family demonstrates love, affection and most of all the Christian charity.

The second element in this healing process is evident from the structure and the words uttered by the conductor of the rite. In fact, the various elements of the rite: the readings, the questions, answers and the brief homilies convey a therapeutic feeling.

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<sup>44</sup> E. A. ADEGBOLA, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, 129.

<sup>45</sup> We shall elaborate on the litany of the Saints and of the ancestors eventually.

<sup>46</sup> E. LAMIRANDE, O.M.I, *The Communion of Saints*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> E. LAMIRANDE, O.M.I, *The Communion of Saints*, 12.

The last helpful aspect of Sangban Sumga is the 'agape', the communal meal that is offered by the bereaved family at the end of the ritual to all those who took part in the celebration. All these collaborate in restoring a certain measure of peace of mind and tranquility in the household. But the highest gain from this ritual is that it allows the family to carry on with life as usual.

### **3. Structure of Sangban Sumga**

The structure of Sangban Sumga is not very different from that of the traditional Sumga. In reality, if one should deduct the Christian elements from the rite, the remainder will undoubtedly be the borrowed features from the traditional Sumga. Again, the steps followed in Sangban Sumga are radically similar to those of the traditional Sumga.

#### **3.1 The Holy Eucharist**

The first element that opens the rite of Sangban Sumga is the Celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In the morning of the appointed day for Sangban Sumga, the faithful are invited to join the bereaved family in committing the 'soul' of the departed to the mercy of God. The celebration is held either in the church or in the house of the deceased. The Eucharist is an important component of the rite for it seals the rite with a clear Christian and catholic print. In this, the faithful are invited to profess the one faith in which the deceased shared and indeed will be happy once more to share with them on that august day.

#### **3.2 What is Needed for the Rite to Take Place?**

The day of Sangban Sumga is never seen as an ordinary one. There are various extraordinary elements that need to be displayed in the house in order to give a solemn tone to the environment. Most of these elements will be used in the

course of the rite. In the first place is the placing of a calabash full of local beer at the entrance of the house; a bell is needed to mark the steps in the rite; a large table is prepared as an altar where the rite actually takes place; seats are also arranged in a particular way (the elders of the family first, the other members of the nuclear family of the dead person, the members of the larger family and the lastly the crowd). Other items that are needed are: the Bible, hymnals and musical instruments.

The choir is also required as well as the catechist and the church committee in charge of the Sangban Sumga. Usually the priest (Catholic) has no part in this.

### **3.2.1 Who can Participate in the Sangban Sumga?**

Generally no one is excluded or prevented from participating in Sangban Sumga. Nevertheless, the non Christians feel themselves out of place if they should be present at the ritual. Therefore, they prefer coming at the end of the actual rite at least to partake in the fraternal meal that is offered. Even so, the family members whether Christian or not are 'obliged' to be present from the beginning of the rite till the end. They have no excuse whatsoever. Children are not barred but they are not allowed to be too close to the site where the rite is going on.

### **3.2.2 The Gathering**

Early in the morning, at about 3 am, preparations are to begin. Already, preliminary preparations have taken place the previous day. Now it is the time to have the necessary items for the ritual set and some few hours later, people will start streaming in. In reality people do arrive early so that they might have close by and comfortable seats.

An hour before the rite begins; the whole compound is <sup>usually!</sup> as full as sand at the ~~seashore~~; movements become very difficult even impossible. Nevertheless, the seats of the main 'actors' remain vacant since they are the last to come in.

**3.2.3 The Atmosphere in the House.**

During the ritual of Sangban Sumga, an ambiance of sacred and religious silence prevails in the whole house and its surroundings. There should not be any useless or unnecessary talk. Since it is a Christian rite, it is also a time for people to compose themselves and to raise personal prayers towards God in favor of the dead so that "the communion begun on earth does not break when death takes one of us."<sup>48</sup> It is the time for people to express their unique relationship with the dead. It is really a very solemn feeling that one gets in the house at that precise moment. It is very important to mention that the required silence is an extension of the respect due to the ancestors who on this special day have been invited and summoned by the house leader.

**3.3 The Actual Sumga**

Sangban Sumga which is a version of the traditional ritual of Sumga usually takes place forty days after the interment of the body. Family members of the deceased jointly with the parish agree on the day and the time of the ritual.

The ritual begins once the <sup>who are these?</sup> protagonists arrive, enter and take their seats. These are: the catechist, two lectors and a few people who might assist during the rite. These people form a committee dedicated to the rite of Sangban Sumga in the parish. They are supposed to be people imbued with a particular knowledge of the Nawdeba traditions and culture as well as to have been instructed in the Christian doctrines.

↳ you call the protagonist  
↳ who are these?  
↳ the  
↳ the

<sup>48</sup> E. LAMIRANDE , O.M.I, *The Communion of Saints*, 13.

### 3.3.1 Opening Prayer

As people are gathered, the choir introduces the rite with a song, it must be a song that conveys a message of hope in the life to come; mention has to be made of the deceased, his name and his Christian commitment. Therefore, a song is always composed for this purpose. After this section, the catechist is welcome by the house leader or the eldest son of the house. After the welcoming, the catechist proceeds with a short prayer in which he implores God, the Saints and the ancestors to come and witness the day. Also, protection is begged of the ancestors against any person having an evil intention among the crowd (especially the non-Christians were believed to come with the intention of causing chaos during the rite). They were believed to cast an 'evil eye'<sup>49</sup> in order to counteract the success of the rite.

### 3.3.2 The Word of God

The Word of God constitutes a vital part in the rite of Sangban Sumga because through it "God speaks to his people."<sup>50</sup> For this reason there are three readings plus the Gospel that are read during the rite as we shall see in the outline of the rite in the following section of our work. After each reading, the catechist gives a short exhortation.

### 3.3.3 The Hymns

Hymns are adequately prepared for the purpose. Mainly they are chants that have been arranged in such a way that they interpret the texts read previously and give courage, hope and consolation to the family as well. The hymns are not to be too long or provocative as in some of the rite in the Nawdebaland.

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<sup>49</sup> L. MAGESA, *African Religion*, 162.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no.33

For example in the songs announcing the death of a person, the songs are so offensive and directed towards a virtual culpable. In the case of the Sangban Sumga, the hymns “venerate the memory”<sup>51</sup> of the deceased.

### 3.3.4 Litany of the Saints and of the Ancestors

The singing of the litany is another marking moment during Sangban Sumga; it is a very nostalgic instant. The originality here is that apart from the invocation of the Saints (of the church) there is a solemn invocation of all the ancestors of the bereaved family and of the clan. The purpose of the litany of the Saints is to intercede for the departed while the rationale behind the invocation of the ancestors is of double stand. First the ancestors are to accept the dead person and second the entire bereaved family is entrusted to their care. There are some important and key elements of the rite that will be mentioned under the topic on the outline of the rite.

### 3.3.5 Concluding Words

This part of the ritual that we can rightly call the concluding rite is capitally made of speeches from some elders of the clan. These are expected to give to the youth, wise advice, to draw the attention of the assembly on the brevity of our sojourn here on earth and the need to avoid evil and unbecoming behavior. The elders are also encouraged to give hope and consolation to the family.

These words spoken by the elders are to be taken seriously because there is still the belief that when an elder speaks, he draws his wisdom not only from his personal experiences but he partakes and shares in the wisdom given or transmitted to him in a mysterious way by the forefathers of the clan.

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. *Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 56.

### 3.4 After Sangban Sumga

With the above mentioned interventions, the rite is ended in one way or the other but the assembly remains seated for the complementary parts of it. From this moment onwards the atmosphere in the house changes. One can realize that a lot of movements are going on; preparations are being made for the next stage.

Meaning  
of No  
Sumga  
of cup  
to

#### 3.4.1 Words of the House Leader

It is custom that after the advice of the elders the catechist calls on the house leader or the eldest son of the house to come forward and give his opinion about the rite. He is to express on behalf of the entire house his satisfaction or discontent about the ritual, thus the way it was carried out. Generally he acknowledges that the right things were done and that they are all satisfied. Consequently he and the whole family are assured that the deceased is resting in peace henceforth. As an expression of gratitude, he invites the congregation to partake in a banquet thereafter.

#### 3.4.2 The Communal Meal

Among the many things that express the sense of belonging and communion in Nawdebaland such as dances, ceremonies, rituals and hunting; shared meals have a significant role. "The food-religion connection goes back a very long time in human history. Food has been intertwined with religion and spirituality down through the centuries and is closely related to the deepest religious values."<sup>52</sup>

The meal is not offered because those present are hungry people but after Sangban Sumga, anyone who accepts the food and drink offered by the bereaved family proves his or her innocence. The person also confirms that he or she wishes the family well and shares in the pain.

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<sup>52</sup> J. HEALEY, MM -D. SYBERTZ, MM, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 256.

Therefore it is the duty of the house leader to ensure that there is enough food and drink. The meal is also accompanied with traditional dances. In all, this communal meal helps the clan also to foster the bond of unity and to show “solidarity in face of death; it is an acceptance that life must go on notwithstanding the death experience.”<sup>53</sup>

### **3.5 Outline of the Rite of Sangban Sumga**

In the previous section of our work, we tried to clarify some key moments and occurrences of the rite at study. We judge it opportune to give an exhaustive outline of how the whole rite is carried out.

#### **■Sangban Sumga**

##### **Opening Rite**

###### **-First Step**

- Opening song
- Welcoming address by the catechist
- First Reading (on Creation and origin of sin in the world) e.g.: Genesis 2:5-24
- Brief comment on the text by the catechist
- A song in response to the text
- Litany of the saints and of the ancestors of the family

###### **- Second step**

- Recitation of the Our Father, a decade of the Rosary, Glory be to the Father, Loving Jesus
- A song to the Blessed Virgin Mary
- Sacred silence
- A bell is rang (to break the silence and introduce another step)

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<sup>53</sup> T. BUTI, *Death, African Funeral Rites and the Gospel*, 7.

### - Third step

- Second reading (about the Resurrection): e.g: 1Corinthiens 15:20-25
- Brief comment by the catechist
- Song of praise
- Another decade of the Rosary
- A typical prayer called 'bolba en senb'<sup>54</sup>
- Sacred silence
- A bell is rang

### - Fourth step

- Gospel reading (on the last judgment) e.g.: Matthew 25: 31-46
- Brief comment
- Intercessions for the dead, the family and friends
- Prayer to Mary of Perpetual Help
- Prayer to patron saints and guardian Angels
- Concluding prayer

### Concluding rite

- Words from the elders
- Intervention of the house leader
- Invitation for the fraternal meal

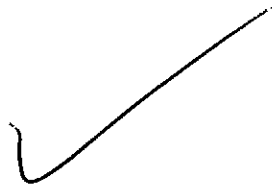
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<sup>54</sup> It is a prayer of intercession composed by the committee in charge of Sangban Sumga and it is peculiar to the church in Nawdebaland.

## Conclusion

The funeral rite of Sangban Sumga which is very essential for the Nawdeba has managed to penetrate and has tremendous impact on their religious mind. As a principle, the Nawdeba are very resistant when it comes to obliterating elements of their religious beliefs. Today, the question is being raised as to the strength of Sangban Sumga by the same population. This is due to the comparison that is being made between the traditional and the Christian rite of the Sumga. Some Christians are tempted to consider the Sangban Sumga an extra for which they have opted for;<sup>55</sup> nevertheless, it is very obvious to appreciate the values brought by the Christian rite of the Sumga. Some of these would be: solidarity, sense of belonging, communion and mutual responsibility.

In this sense we would agree with the Daagaba<sup>56</sup> who say that “no human being is an island, we need the help and collaboration of one another to do things in an objective way.”



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<sup>55</sup> Cf. L. MAGESSA, *African Religion*, 7

<sup>56</sup> The Daagaba are people from the Northern Ghana.

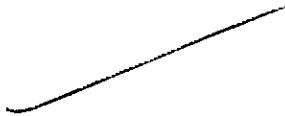
## Chapter Four

### Significant Shift from the Traditional Sumga and Proposed Insights

#### Introduction

“Religion is a fundamental mode of cultural behavior and religious beliefs and practices themselves form a ‘cultural system.’”<sup>57</sup> The arrival of Christianity among the Nawdeba was already an alarm to the population to open their gates to a process of “acculturation”. We know too well that in almost all the African countries, the encounter of Christianity with the Traditional Religion was far from being an unruffled one. In the same way, the introduction of the rite of Sangban Sumga among the Nawdeba generated a chain of hostility between the Christians and heir brethren adherents of the indigenous beliefs. Families were divided; suspicion and bad feelings against Christians were at the order of the day. Yet as time went by, a serene co-existence was able to be re-established.

However, the question that is fumbling the mind of more than one is whether the “new Rite” is able to provide for the inner desires, the spiritual and ‘ pious expectations’ as the traditional one. Other than that, it is urgent to scrutinize and offer to Sangban Sumga a more Christian and Catholic foundation (biblical) so as to be able to convince the faithful who always live at the verge of syncretism.



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<sup>57</sup> A. SHORTER -al., *Towards African Christian Maturity*, 18.

## 1. The Origin and Practice of the Ancestral Sumga: (Haga Sumga)

The ancestral Sumga is known as 'Haga Sumga' meaning, the ritual of the house. It is true that the Haga Sumga whose origin is lost today has always been in the center of the Nawdeba religious practices. It constantly gave them a sure and real satisfaction and was consequently practiced by non-Christians as well as Christians. It is not exaggerated to say that the Nawdeba might have never thought that some of their brothers and sisters will some day reject the practice of the Sangban Sumga. However, the bitter pill is that some did. In order to be more in accordance with the 'new religion', some had with deep sorrow and nostalgia to abandon the practice of this rite.

### 1.2.1 The Haga Sumga an Imported Ritual?

Our findings about the source of the Haga Sumga suggest that the Nawdeba have been practicing this ritual since they came together as an ethnic group. Therefore, there is a supposition that they might have imported it from the Mossi<sup>58</sup> where they migrated from around XVI century. This opinion is ascertained by some writings about the socio-religious life of the Mossi.<sup>59</sup> Another hypothesis is that the Nawdeba copied this practice from their neighboring villages chiefly the Lamba and the Kabyè. Still others believe that it is a practice coming from the magical practices that prevailed in the surroundings.<sup>60</sup> In conclusion, the real origin of the practice remains unknown, but the fact is that it gained deep ground among the Nawdeba.

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<sup>58</sup> The Mossi are an ethnic group residing mainly in Burkina Faso and partly in the northern Togo.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. ALBERT SURGY, *La Divination par les huit Cordelettes chez les Moba Gourma (Nord Togo)*.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. DOMINIQUE GUIGBILE, *Vie, Mort et Ancestralité chez les Moba du Nord Togo*, 144 -149.

About Magic Cf. Art. (Magie) in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Vol. 10, 295-300.

### 1.3 The Compelling Superstitious Nature of the Haga Sumga

The ancestral Sumga or Haga Sumga allows no doubt whatsoever about its verdict. The results of the ritual are to be taken wholesale as released by the diviner (who is the conductor of the ritual). The prescriptions of the latter (sacrifices to offer, atonement, condemnations, banishment) are to be observed for fear of attracting the anger of the ancestors. The Haga Sumga more often than not has someone to blame for the death that occurred. The characters of the rite are believed to enter into a 'second state' in which they are able to communicate with the spirits and the ancestors. Diviners are the mediums used in this respect. Generally this practice brings divisions and conflicts between families and clans.

### 1.4 Sangban Sumga an Inculturation of the Haga Sumga

Sangban Sumga in my view is a telling example of the effort of inculturation taken up by the local church in Nawdebaland and in the African continent on a larger scale. The concept inculturation, ambiguous though it is, is the best terminology for now that expresses what Sangban Sumga aims at. Indeed, it is a ritual aspiring to 'incarnating' the Gospel values into a particular traditional ritual by name 'Haga Sumga' (the Sumga of the house). The hope of this process is that the incarnation of the Christian life and of the Christian message in the traditional Sumga will become a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation.<sup>61</sup> We are not talking about the first insertion of the Christian message into a non-Christian culture in general but into a particular ritual that constitutes the backbone of the Nawdeba day to day life experience.

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<sup>61</sup> A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 11.

In fact, as it has been observed in this work, the importance of the Sangban Sumga cannot be downplayed. Consequently, a serious initiative of inculturation must involve “continuous dialogue between faith and culture”<sup>62</sup>. This attitude might constitute a bridge and avoid unnecessary frictions.

## 2. Biblical Approach to Sangban Sumga

It is obvious that one cannot find the exact ritual of the Sangban Sumga in the Bible. Nevertheless, this ritual is replete with many Christian dimensions thus biblical events and deeds. In this respect, we want to give a biblical foundation to some of the aspects of the Sangban Sumga.

In the first place, the whole ritual of Sangban Sumga can rightly be considered as an expiatory sacrifice offered in favor of the dead. This practice is indeed recommended in the second book of the Maccabees: (2Ma 12:45). This ritual (as a prayer) is offered because of the hope of the resurrection (2Ma 12:44); this hope is signified in the ritual by the belief in the reunification of the dead with the ancestors. I think there is no need to emphasize the necessity of prayer especially the intercessory prayer as it runs through the whole Scripture: (Lk 5:16; Mt 6:9; Jn 17:9 etc). Some principal elements of the ritual are also Scripture based: the hymns are songs that praise God (1Pet 2:9) give him thanks (Eph 5:19) and also express joy (Zech 2: 14). The Our Father which is recited during the ritual is in obedience to the Lord’s command (Mt 6:9); we are assured also of the prayers of the saints (in Rev 5:8) and the angels’ protection (Mt 4:6). The meal at the end of the celebration has equally many biblical support and it expresses human fraternity and hospitality (Gen 19:3; 1Sa 20:28; Lk 14:1).

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<sup>62</sup> A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 11.

It is fitting to say that many of the elements of the rite such as the readings, the commentaries and the hymns come from the popular Nawdeba devotional life and the catholic Traditions.

### 3. Vital Suggestions and Personal Concerns

The traditional Sumga is an expression of the Nawdeba beliefs in the immortality of the 'soul' as Daniel Foucher underlines it: the quest for the meaning of death, irresistibly natural, teaches us that we have a part of ourselves in the other world.<sup>63</sup> It is this belief that urges the Nawdeba to search the causes of death and of any related difficulties.

I believe that any inculturation endeavor should take seriously into account the necessity of contextualization if this process is to be an "attempt to communicate the Gospel message effectively to another context"<sup>64</sup> I am saying this because should somebody (foreign to the Nawdeba Culture) participate in the ritual of Sangban Sumga, it will be difficult even impossible for that person to say that it is a celebration of a traditional inculturated ritual. Rather, the person will think it is one of the many Christian celebrations or rituals.

#### 3.1 Lack of Proper Synchronization

Inculturation is not only the "transfer of faith from one culture to another"<sup>65</sup>; it is not the replacement of traditional hymns, songs, vestments, geographical sites, symbols and signs by Christian equivalents or vice versa. When the process is not well thought and deeply reflected upon, the danger is to pay attention only to the

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<sup>63</sup> D. FOUCHER, *Après la Mort y a-t-il une autre vie?*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> C. CHINKAMBAKO A. M., *Integrated Approach to African Christian Theology of Inculturation*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 13.

external not the real meaning of the ritual. In this case we would only assist at an “adaptation of ritual”<sup>66</sup> rather than an inculturation or contextualization of the rite.

The end result is that the faithful are not fully convinced; they are prone to heavy doubt and to hidden syncretism. In my opinion, Sangban Sumga ought to be a ‘synchronized’ ritual where the traditional Sumga is “enlivened by the Gospel from within a stage which presupposes a measure of reformation and reinterpretation.”<sup>67</sup> This should be a gradual and steady study, research and investigation leading to a satisfactory end.

### 3.2 Overloading the Sangban Sumga with ‘Extras’

The traditional Sumga is simple in its formulation and structure. Few elements and stages are observed and are deepened, thus everything sinks up to the sub-conscience of the participants. In the contrary, the Sangban Sumga is loaded with four long stages; it is full of various elements which without previous adequate explanation (as it is always the case) do not make any sense to the Nawdeba. The procedure is long and the whole celebration becomes simply ‘ritualistic’. I am tempted to believe (from experience) that the crowds that gather and persevere until the end do so because of the closeness with the departed, with the family or because of the exigencies of community life rather than gathering to pray.

### 3.3 Pastoral Suggestions and Enticement

Vatican II Council has expressed openness to the riches of the people and their cultures.<sup>68</sup> Therefore it is imperative to explore and ‘exploit’ these riches for the benefit of the ‘souls’. The Nawdeba community has already embraced the concern

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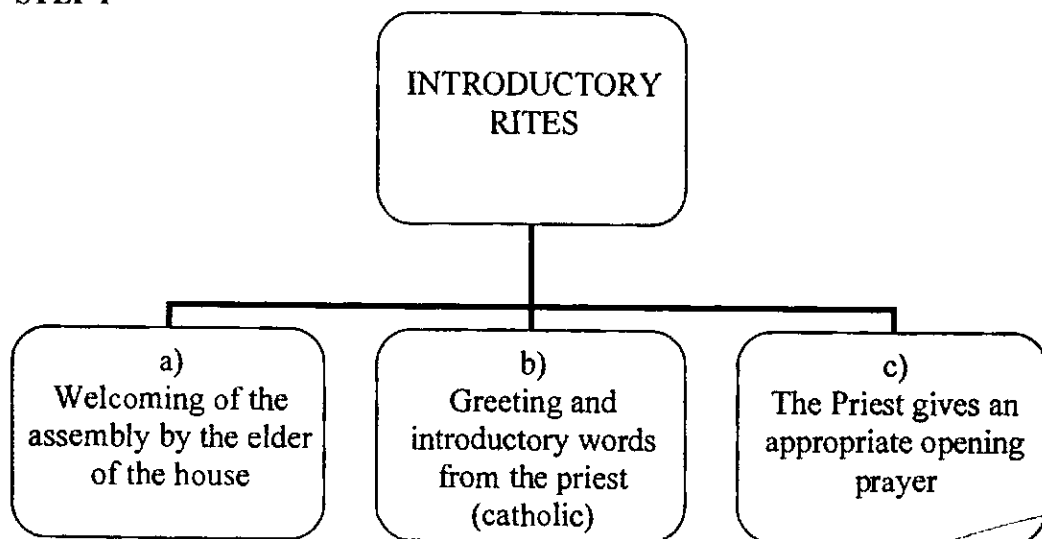
<sup>66</sup> C. CHINKAMBAKO A. M., *Integrated Approach to African Christian Theology of Inculturation*, 189.

<sup>67</sup> A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 12.

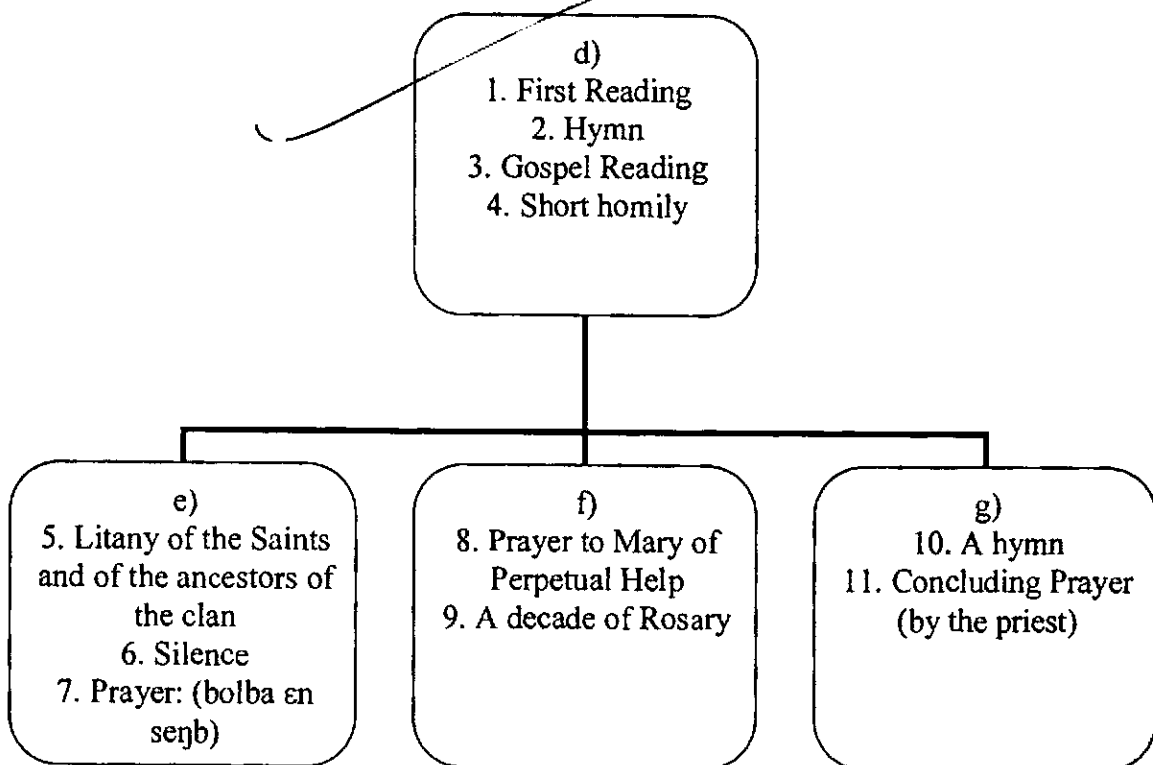
<sup>68</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* 80, 59; *Ad Gentes* 11.

of the church for their 'spiritual well being'; in exchange they expect respect and understanding. The ritual of Sangban Sumga has to be rethought critically in order to be able to spell out clearly helpful features. In this respect my contribution to this noble task stands graphically as follows:

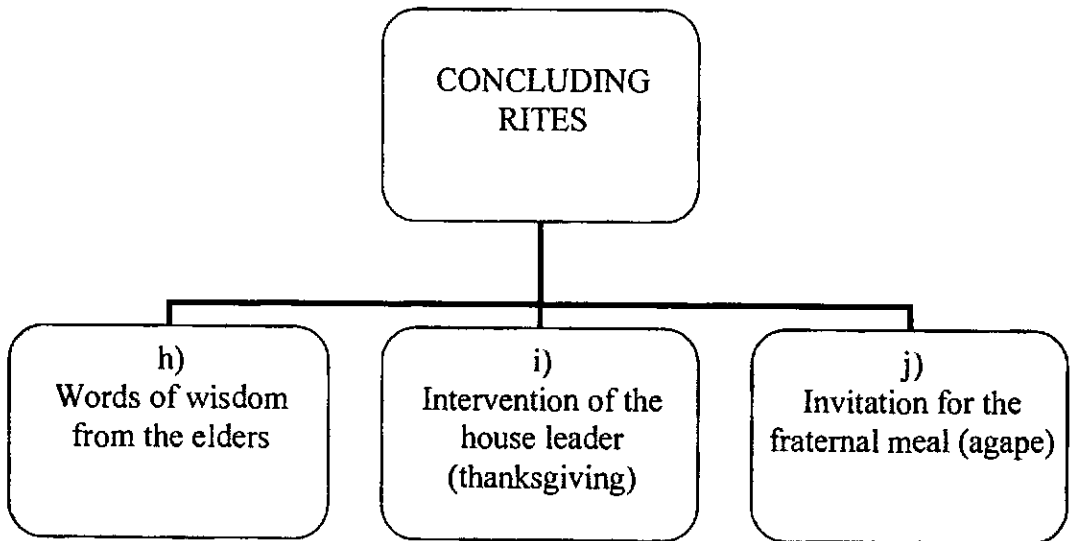
### STEP I



### STEP II: MAIN PART



### STEP III



#### 3.4 Interpretation of the Graph

In this proposal, relevant traditional elements are present and the structure of the ritual is Christian based. We have three steps which are a symbolic representation of the Triune God. The role of the elders (very important for the Nawdeba) is clearly visible at the beginning and at the end of the ritual. The hymns which are proposed are 'homemade' these are local traditional religious hymns that are free from apostasy and that make sense to the Nawdeba. Other elements we incorporated are drawn from popular piety in Nawdebaland or from the Christian devotional life.

On this note I would encourage the Nawdeba, especially the Christians, not to see in Sangban Sumga a foreign ritual but to appreciate and promote it. For this to be effective, the church has to involve itself every time there is Sangban Sumga. It should do so not only through the presence of the catechist but also of the priest who has a ministerial priesthood. Also, the people involved in leading the ritual need to

be well trained<sup>69</sup>. This training must be both cultural as well as Christian formation. There is also a need to encourage communal contributions in cash or in nature (practice that is observed during the traditional Sumga). People should be able to give material support to the bereaved family not only to come eat, drink, dance and go away.

## Conclusion

“At Baptism, the African Christian repudiates remarkably little of his former non-Christian outlook. He may be obliged to turn back upon certain traditional practices which, rightly or wrongly, have been condemned by the church. But he/she is not asked to recant a religious philosophy. Consequently he returns to the forbidden practices on occasion with remarkable ease. Conversion to Christianity is for him a sheer gain, an ‘extra’ for which he opted.”<sup>70</sup> The Traditional Sumga is being abandoned by many Christians on account of what the church has called antichristian practices, especially those mentioned on page 39. Now the challenge is heavy; how to bring the believers to ‘mono-worship’ and save them from the rampant syncretism. The church in Nawdebaland needs to go to the roots and strive to see the kind of spirituality one can deduce from the Nawdeba traditional culture and make it its point of departure.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Vatican II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 55.

<sup>70</sup> A. SHORTER, *Dialogue with African Traditional Religion*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. J. Mbiti –al.. *Paths of African Theology*, 43.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

“Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness, if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.”<sup>72</sup> This statement is very relevant and very important to the church if it wants to succeed in its mission especially in this third millennium. We are well aware of the position of the Second Vatican Council on Inculturation as the opening sentences of *Lumen Gentium* 9 and 13 prove this conclusively: “ At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been accepted to him.”<sup>73</sup> I therefore believe that the traditional Sumga has really been a fertile ground for the expression of Christianity in the domain of post death rituals. Today it is imperative for the Sangban Sumga to fuel its elements in order to entice the Christians.

The fact remains that if Sangban Sumga does not respond effectively to the deeper needs of the Nawdeba, they will not hesitate to go back to their well cherished traditional Sumga to the great disappointment of the Church. That is why we have tried in this work to highlight some of the aspects that might be helpful in elaborating the new version of the Sumga. I am of the view that if the church succeeds in convincing the population with the practice of Sangban Sumga, not only the traditional Sumga will disappear but also this will open avenues for the continuation of the process of inculturation in other areas.

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<sup>72</sup> PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 63.

<sup>73</sup> Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 9; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5.

For example the ritual of widowhood, the Habre<sup>74</sup> and many more rituals needs the attention of the church. The Nawdeba in actual fact still live in a highly superstitious world of their own. They exaggeratedly believe in the powers of the supernatural world which have control on almost all the areas and aspects of their life. This attitude has over the years influenced negatively on their social integration and economic development. The church has started to raise its voice in favor of a more positive religious attitude but at times it also goes to the extreme in her injunctions. It turns to ridicule and condemns pitilessly the customs and some practices of the people. This has led to strong resistance of many of the Nawdeba who see in the Church a tyrant and a rival to the local and traditional religious practices.

A continuous dialogue between the church and the Nawdeba culture needs to be observed and for this purpose, the church really needs qualified people; we can hold in high esteem the advice that “if we want to make a specific contribution to the *intellectus* of the Word of God, it is incumbent to be rooted in the life of the peoples and to plumb the depths of the Gospel and nourish it by the life and questions of these people.”<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, works such as this long essay and others that have been already done can be of great help in this process. Consequently I think the pastoral agents will do well in being open to the various suggestions that come their way. This will lead to a real intermarriage of faith and culture which are in reality two sides of the same coin.

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<sup>74</sup> Habre is a traditional dance which aims at bringing all the Nawdeba from the Diaspora together. It is held every five years. Only natives are allowed to participate in the dance during which many ‘abnormal’ things happen such as cutting oneself, eating crude meat that are not normally ate by the Nawdeba, dancing in fire. It is a time that those who claim to have witchcraft are allowed to challenge one another. Many times it leads to deaths.

<sup>75</sup> J. Mbiti -al., *Paths of African Theology*, 24.

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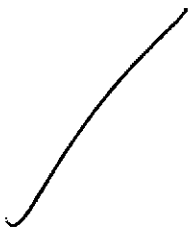
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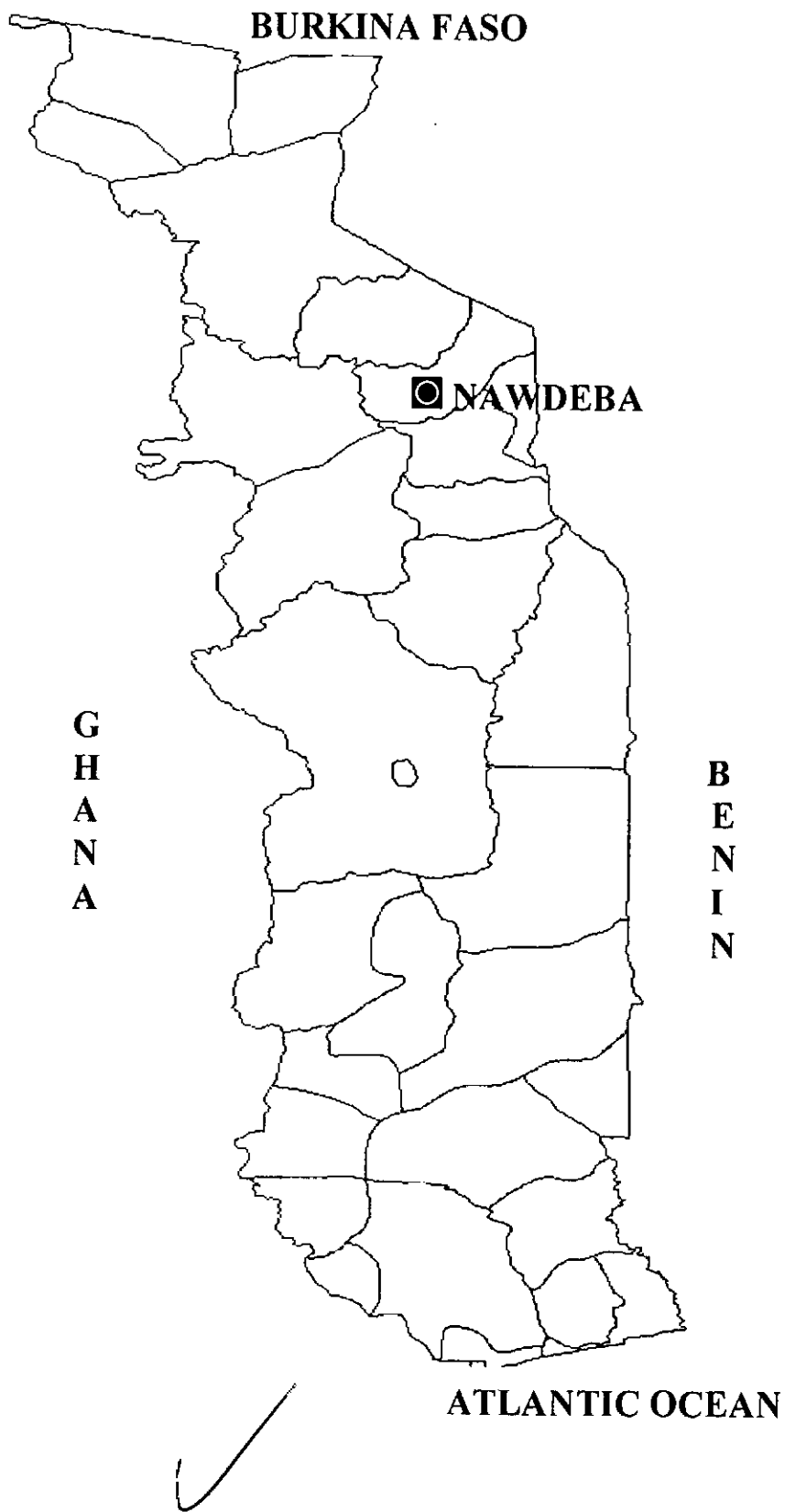
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**APPENDIX I: MAP OF THE REPUBLIC OF TOGO**



**APPENDIX II: PICTURES**

**ATTITUDES BEFORE A DEAD PERSON**



**PREPARATION FOR BURIAL**



## BURIAL IN A COMMON GRAVE



**These are some of the pictures depicting scenes that generally characterize the period of death in Nawdebaland.**

