

THE BLACK SERPENT

WHO OPENED THE EYES OF MAN¹

“Few African Gods have attracted the attention of travellers as has *Dangbé*, the Good Serpent,” writes Pierre Verger in the introduction to the chapter he devotes to the Dahoman Python.² At the end of the 17th century Guillaume Bosman attributed to the Serpent the rank of “divinity.” He describes the “House of the Serpent” (the Temple of the Serpents which still exists in

Translated by Nelda Cantarella and Alessandro Ferace.

¹ This article summarizes the essential parts of a work, to be published soon under the title of *Dangbé, du Python sacré dahoméen au mythe universel du Serpent*. In order to return to the sources of a tradition picked up in Ouidah, the authors, Merlo and Vidaud, were led to examine the mythic analogies of the Python, first in Black Africa, then in the whole African continent and finally everywhere in the world where the Serpent basically resembles the initial exemplar. Since such a subject is too wide to be exhausted in a review, this article represents only the sapiential aspect of the problem.

² Pierre Verger, “Note sur le culte des Orisa et Vodun à Bahia la Baie de tous les Saints, au Brésil et à l’ancienne Côte des Esclaves” (*Mémoires de l’Institut français d’Afrique noire*, No. 51, IFAN, Dakar, 1957), pp. 511-522.

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Ouidah); the offerings that are brought to him; the pilgrimages that the Kings of Fida (Ouidah) made there every year and the punishments meted out to Europeans or Africans who failed to pay him due respect.³ In the preface to his *Voyage du Chevalier des Marchais* the Reverend Father Labat relates how this “great Serpent” came out of the ranks of the army of Ardres (Allada, south of Abomey) to enter those of the army of Juda (Houéda, from which Ouidah). He describes the Serpent as being one and a half arms in length, or seven and a half feet long, with a very beautiful skin “marked by wavy stripes in which yellow, blue and brown combine in a most agreeable way.” The animal, quite innocuous as are all pythons is “extremely patient and never attacks people.” He concludes: “The Serpent is in Ouidah a superior and excellent Divinity. He looks after and into everything, everybody appeals to him for advice, for rain, for good weather or in case of sickness or war, for trade, for harvest, for weddings.”⁴ It is possible to perceive already in this confusion of heteroclitic attributes the divinity that in our time has come to symbolize, and is said to procure fertility, fecundity, good health, wealth, peace, wisdom and happiness.

Snelgrave,⁵ corroborated by Norris,⁶ relates that in 1727, at the time of the siege of Savi, the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Houéda, by the warriors of the bordering Kingdom of Abomey, the worshippers of Dangbé laid the sacred pythons on the banks of the stream that constituted a rampart, believing that the Dahomans would never venture to pass over their bodies. But the Serpents of peace were slaughtered and Savi taken and destroyed, together with the Temple of the Serpents (February 7, 1727).

President de Brosse creates for Dangbé the word “fetichism.” He writes: “The story of the Fetichism, prevalent in Ouidah, a small Kingdom on the Guinea coast, will serve as an example for all such activities in the rest of Africa, especially as concerns the

³ Guillaume Bosman, *Voyage en Guinée* (Utrecht, 1705), p. 394.

⁴ Rev. Fr. Labat, *Voyage du Chevalier des Marchais en Guinée, isles voisines et à Cayenne* (Paris, 1730), 2nd vol., pp. 165-178.

⁵ Guillaume Snelgrave, *Nouvelles relations de quelques endroits de Guinée et du commerce des esclaves qu'on y fait* (Amsterdam, 1734), pp. 12-15.

⁶ Robert Norris, *Mémoires du Règne de Bossa-Ahadée, Roi de Dahomey* (Paris, 1790), p. 81.

description of the striped Serpent, one of the most famous of Black Divinities.”⁷

Pruneau de Pommegorge is the first to transcribe the name of the python-god—“Daboué.”⁸ Nowadays we hear: *Dagbé*, *Dagoué* and especially *Dangbé*, a dialectal form of Fon, imposed by Dahoman conquerors after the collapse of the Kingdom of Houéda in 1741. Lacépède in the very important chapter devoted to the python-god, writes his name Daboie,⁹ which at that time was pronounced *Daboué*. Gourg has this to say about the most respected divinity: “In Juda, it is the serpent *Daboe*, ancient divinity of the Juda people” (inhabitants of Ouidah).¹⁰ Labarthe calls it *Daboue*,¹¹ Skertchely, *Dah-gbwe*.¹²

If the descriptions of the animal and of his public worship, of the men and women who made up its clergy, of its novices and their ascetic exercises assume the value of valid ethnographic documents because of their precision, the information about the attributes of the god are too often rare and sketchy. John Duncan,¹³ F.E. Forbes,¹⁴ Dr. Répin,¹⁵ the Reverend Father Borghero,¹⁶ Richard F. Burton,¹⁷ the Abbé Laffitte¹⁸ accumulate different facts and

⁷ Charles de Brosses, *Du culte des Dieux fétiches* (Paris, 1760), p. 25.

⁸ Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Amsterdam, 1789), p. 195.

⁹ Lacépède, *Histoire naturelle, comprenant les cétacés, les quadrupèdes ovipares, les serpents, les poissons, nouvelle édition précédée de l'éloge de Lacépède par Cuvier, avec les notes et la nouvelle classification de M.A.G. Desmarests* (Paris, 1775), pp. 385 and seq; le Daboie.

¹⁰ Gourg, *Mémoire pour servir d'instruction au directeur qui me succédera au Fort de Juda, 1791* (Paris, 1892).

¹¹ P. Labarthe, *Voyage à la Côte de Guinée* (Paris, 1803), p. 130.

¹² J. A. Skertchely, *Dahomey as it is, being a Narrative of Eight Months' Residence in that Country* (London, Chapman and Hall, 1875), p. 54.

¹³ John Duncan, *Travels in West Africa* (London, 1847, 2 vols.), t. I, pp. 124 and 195.

¹⁴ Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (London, 1851), t. I, p. 108.

¹⁵ Dr. Répin, *Voyage au Dahomey, Tour du monde* (Paris, 1863), p. 71.

¹⁶ Rev. Fr. Borghero, *Quatre années au Dahomey (1860-1864)*, 1881.

¹⁷ Richard F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahomey* (London, 1893, 2 vols.), t. I, p. 29.

¹⁸ Abbé J. Laffitte, *Le Dahomé, souvenirs de voyage et de mission* (Tours, 1872), p. 123.

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details; but it is not until the Abbé Pierre Bouche comes along that the enigma of Dangbé is properly evoked.

“The worship of serpents,” he says, “is peculiar to the ancient Kingdom of Juda (Houéda). What is reported about the origins of this religious cult is most certainly a remembrance of antique traditions. It is interesting to find again in our time, on the Western coast of Africa, the doctrines and practices of a sect which, according to some authors, antedates Christianity and originated in Egypt. I refer to the Ophites, ancient worshipers of the serpent.”

“Here is the history of the serpent, as we heard it in Wydah (Ouidah): *Dan* or *Dangbé* (the Sacred Serpent) is a great fetich, something like wisdom incarnate. Since God had made the first man and the first woman blind, *Dan* opened their eyes and they were able to see good and evil. That is why *Dan* is the greatest benefactor of mankind and deserves our most respectful homage.”¹⁹

This text, in spite of the doubts caused by its a-priorisms, nonetheless has the great merit of facing the problem squarely. Ellis, who sees in *Danh-gbi* the serpent (*dan*) who bestows life (*gbé* and not *gbi*), is wrong in his etymology, but he is right as regards one of the god's attributes.²⁰ Monsignor Steinmetz says that *Dangbé* “symbolizes gentleness and wisdom” but that he also brings “life, health and well-being” into the huts he visits.²¹ Already the two opposing poles of the research become apparent. By opening men's eyes Dangbé confers upon them “wisdom” (of good and evil, according to Bouche), or else “life, health and well-being” (biological existence, physiological equilibrium between the individual and the species)? This is precisely the question that we would like to answer in this article.

Contemporary ethnography will be of great help by providing us with the indispensable data on the subject.

In his studies of the Dahoman clans, Herskovits writes about the Akilivi Sodonou clan:

¹⁹ Abbé Pierre Bouche, *La Côte des Esclaves et le Dahomey* (Paris, 1885), p. 385.

²⁰ A. B. Ellis, *The Ewe speaking Peoples* (London, 1890), p. 54.

²¹ Paul Hazoumé, *Dahomey, 50 ans d'apostolat, souvenirs de Mgr. Steinmetz* (1942), p. 41.

“At the time of its origin, the members of this clan were blind, and the Cat, who at that period could speak like a man, brought them to the Serpent who opened their eyes. Moreover, they do not eat a wild plant called *gblwô*, described as resembling the pepper-plant. In very early times they are nothing but that plant, but when they began to worship the Serpent *Dangbé*, they started getting sick and dying off. This went on until they were forbidden to eat *gblwô*, which, it was then discovered, had caused those deaths.”²²

This report does not specify whether the Serpent who opened the ancestors' eyes was *Dangbé*, nor does it say who forbade them to eat the noxious plant. However there is mention of the opening of the eyes and of the knowledge of the fact that *gblwô* was harmful. Moreover in the chaos, one finds a tree which causes death and a Serpent who opens men's eyes, in short, a background and characters which recall those of the Genesis (III, 4-5, 7). It is important to make note of it.

In his work on *Religion in Western Africa*, Geoffrey Parrinder remarks:

“The Fon associate the python with the first man and the first woman. Because their eyes were sealed, it was he who opened them (Cf. the Genesis). The Ashanti tradition has it that the python taught the first couple the secrets of procreation.”²³

These data, together with many others on the religion of the Fon, were given to the author by an informant of Ouidah.

During the course of his scientific expeditions in Dahomey, A. Villiers visited the Temple of the Serpents in Ouidah and reports the same tradition about *Dangbé*:

“The python is considered as embodying a superhuman being: he is the Spirit of Waters, the God of War, the Goddess of Fertility, the God of Culture, the God of Wisdom and of Terrestrial Happiness. It is he who opened the eyes of the first man and the first woman.”²⁴

²² Malville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey an Ancient West African Kingdom* (New York, 1938, 2 vols.), t. I, p. 179.

²³ Geoffrey Parrinder, *La religion en Afrique occidentale* (Paris, Payot, 1950), p. 206.

²⁴ A. Villiers, *Les serpents de l'Ouest africain, Initiations africaines* (Dakar, IFAN, 1950), p. 34.

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In *Serpent Worship in Africa*, a work which has become a classic, Wilfrid D. Hambly confirms the same tradition: "The first man and the first woman were blind but he (the python) opened their eyes."²⁵

The Dangbé tradition of the "unsealing of the eyes"²⁶ having thus been corroborated, we were eager to hear it ourselves during an eight-month stay in Ouidah in 1937. Since we were familiar with the Temple of the Serpents and with the *Dangbénon* (Master of Dangbé), and we knew enough *Fongbé* to be able to check on the interpreter, we learned from Mègbo, in charge of the cult, that a hymn in ancient Houéda, which we were later able to transcribe, recalls the glories and the downfall of the divine Python:

It was Dangbé who opened the eyes of men
So that they might see the universe and enter it.
Dangbé has become a derisory plaything for mankind.
It is Dangbé of the Houédas who opened their eyes.

From the explanations that followed, it became clear that the Dangbénon knew full well that "the Christians had something to do with the Serpent." He had heard the story (the Cathedral of Ouidah is within sight of the Temple of the Serpents), but he added that his own tradition was very old, that it had existed before the arrival of missionaries and that the Houéda had been entrusted since time immemorial with the esoteric secret of a Python who opened men's eyes. Houéda Ancestors, of both sexes had been born with closed eyelids and Dangbé had opened them; he had to pry open the eyelids in order to allow the original couple to see, and by the same token to know all things and in particular how to procreate. This same doctrine was to be taken up in the numerous other temples dedicated to Dangbé.

During the course of a conference to which we invited, in December 1937, all the "chief fetichers" and all the Ouidah notables, all participants acknowledged the existence and the tra-

²⁵ Wilfrid Hambly, "Serpent Worship in Africa, Field Museum of Natural History," *Anthropological Series*, vol. XXI, No. 1 (Chicago, 1931), p. 71.

²⁶ "Dessiller: découdre les paupières d'un faucon. Séparer les paupières qui étaient jointes (on écrit aussi déciller)." (Larousse) We used the last spelling to translate: to separate the eyelids which were closed.

dition of the unsealing of man's eyes by Dangbé. One of them sang a hymn whose words we were able to note phonetically:²⁷

Dagbe Wō hū nukū na mi (na e)
Nu alagbe tete mō ya (mō ji)
Odagbe (Dāgbe) wa ni alele hu
N'alagbe keto gbeto e mi.

The audience translated it:

It was Dangbé who opened our eyes (or showed us the path)
To give us birth;
Dangbé has become a crawling nothing
For all the human beings that we are.

This initiative was emulated, and some days later we received from Jean Adjovi, Chief of the Adjovi clan, the following text which we reproduce without making any changes:

Chant of Dagbe

Fetich-Serpent Ouédah-Dahomey

Air: chant *Adoun Adjovi hein nou*

Jean Adjovi family

Dagbe opened eyes men and women to know each other and make children in this world

*Dagbé wé houn koun na hé, na alagbé, Tété mon gna (or ji)
Abôtin wa gni alélé houn nou kêtô gbeto emi.*

December 21, 1937

Adounhan of Dangbé
signed Jean Adjovi

In the margin there is written: "bis and several couplets."

This text, except for a few variants, is written like the preceding one in ancient Houéda. The *adounhan* is a sacred chant (*han*) accompanied by the percussion of both hands against the thorax and by a dance (*adoun*). Jean Adjovi claimed this *adounhan* to be one special to his family clan (*hein nou*), which contributed many

²⁷ We usually employ the alphabet of the International Association of Phonetics, which will be simplified here because it requires a particular typography. The *tilde* which indicates the nasalization of the vowel is sometimes replaced by the circumflex accent, but this creates ambiguities for open vowels (ê, ô). Sometimes dots are placed under some letters to mark either the opening of the vowel, or peculiarity of the consonant. Learned Dahomans know these different signs and they sometimes use them together with French phonetics, as the reader will see in the various transcriptions they provided. In order to simplify, we suppressed the variotonic accents since they are not needed here.

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priests to the cult of Dangbé. Noteworthy is the use in the same text of the names *Dagbé* and *Dangbé* (Odagbé, in the first text). *Ahòtin* is one of the “sacred names” of Dangbé; it means: A being (*tin*) of royal nature (*ahô*). Jean Adjovi, commenting while translating the Houéda hymn, emphasizes the sense of genesis. As for the marginal notation, we have never heard other couplets and we therefore believe that the informant meant that the couplet was repeated. Repetition, very frequent in African-negro music, is a rhythmic and pedagogic medium which serves to impress the words of the chant in memory.

On December 23, 1937, Casimir Agbo called Alidji, “monographer” of Ouidah and our learned informant, brought to our knowledge a “chant of complaint” which has been transcribed and translated by him and which we reproduce textually:

Dagbé wè houn noukoun na mi; na gbèto alagbé
It was Dagbé who opened eyes for us for mankind

bè do mon nou
who in this way was able to see

Dagbé wa zoun alélé houn do kêt-to
Dagbé has become derisory fetich for the inhabitants of the universe
gbèto les-si
mankind in regard to

Houèda Dagbe wa zoun alélé houn d'alagbé-gbèto les-si
Houèda Dagbe has become vile fetich mankind in regard to

Dagbé wa zoun alélé houn do kêt-to
Dagbé has become a nothing fetich for the inhabitants of the universe

Gbèto les-si
the people their hands.

To this text was added an “interpretation of the chant as it concerns the fetich Dangbé.”

It was Dangbé who opened men’s eyes (or who taught them), allowing them to see and to know.

Alas! in the hands of mankind, Dagbé ended by becoming a derisory fetich!

Dagbé of Houéda has become a vile fetich for mankind;

Dagbé has become a fetich without value in the eyes of the people of the whole world.

In 1946, Casimir Agbo published the same vernacular text with comments and the following translation:

Dahoman fetichist chant

There exists in Ouidah a eulogy of the Serpent sung by Houédah fetichists during the ceremonies in honor of the fetich Dangbé or in honor of Houédah ancestors.

It is a very old chant, anterior maybe to the arrival of Europeans, or contemporaneous of the first Christian sermons, to which it quite possibly makes allusion.

1. It was Dagbé (a Python that is the object of a popular cult among Houédah tribes) who opened men's eyes, allowing them to see.
2. But for the people, Dagbé has become a derisory fetich.
3. The Houedah Dagbé has become a derisory fetich for the people.
4. Dagbé has become a derisory fetich in the eyes of the people.²⁸

Finally in his *History of Ouidah*, Casimir Agbo reproduces his vernacular text, but with the rythm of the adounhan, so that the alliterations are stressed:

*Dagbé wè houn noukoun na mi
Na gbèttob-alagbé dô mon nou
Dagbé wa zoun alélé houn
Do kèttob-gbettob lès-si
Houéda-Dagbé wa zoun alélé houn
D'alagbé gbèttob lès-si
Dagbé wa zoun alélé houn
Do kèttob-gbèttob lès-si.*

We have nothing to add to the text of the Ouidah historian, except the fact that it seems to us more Fon than Houéda. This could be an indication of the cultural preponderance achieved by the conqueror. The "correct interpretation of the chant" as given by Agbo, has no more than a few variants in regard to his preceding translations:

It was Dagbé who opened the eyes of man
allowing him to see.
Alas! before the world
Dagbé ended by passing as a derisory fetich.
Ignored, the Houéda Dagbé has become

²⁸ Casimir Agbo, in *Notes Africaines* (Dakar, IFAN, July 1946), No. 31, p. 24.

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a vile fetich for ungrateful mankind.
Alas! Dagbé has become a fetich without value
in the eyes of the people of the universe.

A note at the end of the page states: "This chant coming from the night of times, seems to designate the Serpent mentioned in the Garden of Eden of the Ancient Testament."²⁹

Paul Hazoumé, whose historical and ethnologic work rests on Dahoman traditional chants, having been informed of our research chanted for us the old hymn in ancient Houéda as he heard it from Mama Dangbénon (daughter of Dangbénon and wife of Deka, priest of Dangbé) who, when Dangbénon was away, performed the rites in the Temple of the Serpents of Ouidah.

Dagbé ni hú kú na e
Dagbé opened eyes for me
Na do kpô ké mô na
and I could see the Universe and enter it
Ogonu wa zu alélé hu
the Glorious Being has become derisory, plaything divinity
Na ke to gbe to emi
for the Universe people you
Hueda Dagbe ni hú kú na ye
Houéda Dagbé opened eyes for you
Na ye do kpô ké mô na
and you could see the Universe and enter it
(*kpô ké mô na*—and we saw the Universe in the distance) etc.

Our learned informant reminded us that *adounhan* is the name given to any dance dedicated to divinities. It consists in singing sacred chants while beating the thorax with the hands as a human tom-tom. We saw it and heard it very often in the Adja-éhoué country where it is called "akpè."

After a field trip to Dahomey Paul Hazoumé brought us another version he picked up at Ouidah. It is in the Fon tongue. We pass on verbatim the phonetic transcription and the literal and literary translations which he gave us:

²⁹ Casimir Agbo, *Histoire de Ouidah du XVI^e au XX^e siècle* (Avignon, Les Presses universelles, 1959), p. 16.

Dagbé we hú nukú na gbe
Python who opened eyes for people

Bo gbeto le do wa gbe
and men the came to world

Dagbé wazú alélé nu
Python has become plaything thing

Nu keto gbeto le
for fathers of the universe of the world the.
(which is to say: mankind)

Literary translation.

It was the Python who opened the eyes of mankind
And allowed mankind to come into this world
But the Python has become a plaything
For the Universe (all mankind).

At about the same period, Paul Hazoumé in his study *The Soul of the Animist Dahoman as Revealed by His Religion*, gives of the hymn a slightly different transcription and version, with interesting comments:

“It was Dagbé, says an old Houéda chant, who opened the eyes of the Universe” (i.e.: who lighted the Universe):

Dagbe wâ hú nukú na gbê
It was Dagbé who opened the eyes of the Universe
(who made the light)

Bo gbêto lé dowa gbê
And allowed mankind to come into this world

Dagbe wa zú alele nu
But Dagbé has become a plaything

Nu kêtô beto o lé
For all mankind.³⁰

Before examining the preceding variants we must mention the version picked up in Abomey-Calavi by Guy Merlo, who translated and transcribed it according to his interpreter's indications:

³⁰ Paul Hazoumé, “L'âme du Dahoméen animiste révélée par sa religion,” in *Présence Africaine* (1957), No. special.

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Dagbé webun noukon ma (read: *na yé*)
Serpent who opens eyes for them
Ye ou gbeto le do mon nu yoyo
for men to begin seeing something strange
Dagbé wa zun nu . . . vleko
Dagbé has become the object (something) of mockery
Yé Ogounou le do mon onu yoyo
We the Gounou have taken something new.
(which is to say: Dagbé has brought civilization).³¹

A comparison of all these oral documents, for the sole purpose of elucidating the tradition of the Serpent who unsealed eyes, allows to arrive at not negligible conclusions.

Dagbé is the authentic form of the name of the principal divinity of the Houéda. All variants are dialectal. *Dangbé* is either the nasal pronunciation of Fon, or a word invented by the Fon people, because of its similarity with the word *dan* which means “serpent.” In Ouidah and Porto-Novo, the initiates call *Dangbé Dan*, an esoteric name meaning “the” Serpent. Paul Hazoumé translates *Dagbé* for Europeans with “python”, but there can be no doubt about it: *Dagbé* or *Dangbé* is the Houéda’s python-god.

The form *we*, which has been translated: “it is he..... who” is frequently used in Houéda and Fon. As in French, it denotes a definite designation. It is possible to say: *Dagbé houn noukoun* *Dagbé* opened the eyes. The meaning of the *adoun* is therefore: “It is really *Dagbé* who.....,” he himself, and no one else.

The expression *houn noukoun* (*houn’koun*), contracted form of ancient Houéda, means literally: to open the eyes. *Houn*, to open, is used in such expressions as: to open a door, to open the mouth, etc. Segurola in his French-Fon dictionary, under the entry for the word *hú* lists the expression: “*hú nukú*: to have open eyes,

³¹ According to this version the beneficiaries of the unsealing of eyes are the Gounou (Ogoun, Ogounou, Goun or Gounou are the inhabitants of the region of Porto-Novo). The hymn of Mama Dangbénon in ancient Houéda says, *Ogonou*, Being of Flower, Being of Praise, which is one of the “sacred names” of *Dangbé*. The variant *Ogonou* is explained either by faulty hearing—the old hymn would no longer be understood, sign of the decline of the cult of *Dangbé*—or by political and religious reaction—since Houéda immigrants had brought *Dangbé* to the Gounou, their princes disdained this recently imported cult, while the priests and the initiates were the beneficiaries of the “civilization” revealed by the Python-god, as the text seems to imply.

to be enlightened, to have a good deal of knowledge, to be educated, to be civilized." Paul Hazoumé and a Dahoman professor whom we questioned about the meaning of *bû nukû*, told us that the expression means literally: "to open the eyes," "to open the eyelids," and figuratively, "to enlighten," "to reveal," "to initiate." Therefore there is a rigorous similarity between the French and the Dahoman, as there is between the French and the Hebrew of the Book of Genesis. Corroborating proof is provided by the Bible, where the expression *bû nukû* is used to translate: "their eyes were opened." We can therefore say beyond any doubt that the expression *bû nukû* is literal and figurative. The myths and rites of Dangbé will teach us what meanings are to be attributed to this expression.

Whose eyes did Dangbé open? The answer is given in the first verses: ours, those of men and women, mankind's, men's, mine, the world's, the universe's, theirs. The context of the following verses confirms and enlarges the concept: those of the inhabitants of the universe, people's, mankind's, the world's, humanity's, those of the people of the universe, of the men of the universe, yours, the world's, men's, those of the inhabitants of the world, of all mankind, theirs, men's, ours. Such universalism is common in texts for initiation rites. It is cosmogonic while remaining originally Houéda.

What was the consequence or the end-purpose of the opening of the eyes operated by Dangbé? As a simple result of the opening of the eyes, "mankind could see," "and I could see the universe and enter it," "and the men were born into this world." It seems however that Dangbé, "having allowed mankind to be born into this world," intended "to allow men to see, to know." A very precise purpose is indicated however in certain versions: "to give us birth," "so that men might begin to see something new," "to know each other and make children in this world." We must point out that in Dahoman two propositions connected by a coordinating conjunction suffice to express a causal subordination; the preposition "for" is not necessary. We can say therefore that in the various versions we have quoted, Dangbé opened eyes for a purpose and this purpose is expressed in the next line.

This purpose differs according to the texts; in some it seems to be the gift of sight, Dangbé having created light and lighted the

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universe (Hazoumé); in other texts, sight is knowledge; but most of the versions attribute to sight a genesitic meaning. The sacred character of this chant and its role in initiation rites must be emphasized; it is part of the Dahoman mentality to hide an esoteric truth under a trite formula; the layman will be satisfied with the literal meaning, while the initiate will use it as a “pass-word” (Pierre Verger) to have access to inner secrets.

Since, according to Paul Hazoumé, Dangbé created light and lighted the universe, he could be the hero of a solar myth. At the very beginning, according to certain traditions (Houédacomé, Porto-Novo), the whole world was plunged in darkness and it was Dangbé who gave it the light. According to another tradition (Ouidah), human beings were neither men nor women. But the forefathers of the Akilivi Sodonou are called “blind,” and certain traditions registered in Agatogbo, Cana, and Godomey claim that God created men “blind.” A tradition of the ancient Lemon family of Ouidah, recalls that the eyes of woman alone were opened, or at least that her eyes were opened first. Other accounts say that animals were also created blind. However all these blind people had eyes and were not afflicted by congenital blindness. “God created man and woman but their eyes could not see.” Father Kitti writes that “previously men’s eyes were completely closed.”³²

We are here at the origins, in chaos. The history of religions recognizes this state of chaos in which light and darkness, male and female had not yet been “separated.” The point is to find mention in the same text of light and darkness, man and woman. Therefore it is not necessary to invoke a recollection of the Word-Light, personified by the Serpent among the Gnostics. Light can be the symbol of knowledge, as is the case with the “brilliance” in other myths, say, among the Bantus and the Australians.

If Dangbé can open the eyes of men he can close them as well. Whoever—including the King of the Houéda and excepting only the Dangbénon—sees the “archetype” of Dangbé, whose mystic brilliance is comparable to that of the sun, lightning and fire, immediately loses his sight. He who happened on Dangbé Ahouanba

³² Anonymous articles, but in reality written by the Rev. Father Kitti, published with the title: “Le culte du Serpent-fétiche au Dahomey et à Ouidah en particulier” in *La Reconnaissance africaine* (Cotonou et Lomé, July 1, 1927), No. 40, pp. 3-5.

in his solemn, annual, nocturnal procession incurred various punishments, among them blindness. The Dangbénon frequently became blind. A popular saying was: "The Dangbénon who sees his god, loses his sight."

This without any analogy with the spitting serpent, a rather common species in Dahomey. Father Kitti reports that the Dangbénon dropped "poison" in their eyes (juice or sap of certain plants) which makes them blind.³³ According to others (Rev. Fr. Huchet), this blindness could be criminally provoked by the highest dignitaries.³⁴

Kitti claims that the Dangbénon who became almost blind with advanced age, deliberately deprived themselves of sight to maintain their faith in the blinding Serpent, according to the above-mentioned popular saying. Is it true or not that some Egyptian Coptic monks blinded themselves the better to attain ultimate mystic "knowledge"? The incestuous Oedipus blinded himself not to "see" any more, claiming that it was Apollo who had blinded him and that Creon wanted to hide him out of respect for the Sun.

Father Bertho found out on the outer wall of a small temple between Abomey and Bohicon a bas-relief representing a solar disk spiraled like a coiled serpent.³⁵

The Rainbow Aidohouèdo has Dangbé, the Python for its emissary or "récadeire." The same is true in the Yorouba country, where Ochoumaré, the meteor, has as its envoy a large python called Eré; in the Ewé country, the "boa constrictor" *Wo* is the Serpent of the Rainbow *Anyéwo*.

Dangbé the small python (*pytho regius*) is no more than the earthly image of what we call the archetypal Dangbé, the brilliant Ouranian divinity. The excrements of the Rainbow which are none other than those of the python, are believed to have magic properties. "At night the excrement of the Python lights the room as brightly as does the sun during the day." (P. Coquard de Mesques).³⁶

³³ *Ibid.*, No. 38, May 1, 1927, pp. 2-3.

³⁴ Rev. Fr. Joseph Huchet, "Le Serpent-fétiche," in *Tams-tams* (Lyon, Missions africaines, 1960), pp. 56-57.

³⁵ Information graciously provided by the Reverend Father Jacques Bertho, specialist of the Houéda.

³⁶ Rev. Fr. Coquard de Mesques, Handwritten annotation of this member of the

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“Oodio,” “Ohouého,” the Brilliant One, the White One, He of the Whiteness, are the most frequently-invoked sacred names of Dangbé. He is acclaimed with the words: *Zongbo odio!* (Brilliant Source). White is his liturgical color. The Dangbénon, when Dangbé’s festivals are approaching, daub his temple and sanctuary with kaolin. The Dangbénon wears white loin-cloths. A small python is called *Dangbé houé-houé*, white Dangbé or *Dangbé Lissa* (Dagbé Sun). Lissa is the Sun-God and in the Yoruba country among the *Oricha foun-foun* is one of the “white divinities,” or Solar divinities, since white signifies grandeur and purity.

Maupoil remarks that the Rainbow Serpent is believed to “make the sun run on its course.” In Ochoumaré there is the root Etchou-Otchou, the Sun.³⁷

A *mlan-mlan* (sacred litany) of Dangbé contains the aphorism: “The sun rises, death flees.” We can therefore regard as established the symbolism of “night-sun” which is also interpreted in the sense of blindness-sight, ignorance-knowledge as well as death-life.

It must be remembered that in the Houéda pantheon, Dangbé is the eldest son of the 41 (sacred number) children born of the primordial couple: the Sun (Lissa) and the Moon (Mahou).

Among its other magic properties, the dung of Dangbé Aidohouédo (Rainbow) turns every metal into gold. Gold is the sun (*houé*, which we find again in Aidohouédo). In Ghana, among the Akan, gold is sacred, being the symbol of the soul of Nyamé (God), the eternal spirit of the Sun: he “gives life.” (E. Meyerowitz).³⁸

Near Dahomey, there was in the Yoruba country a clan of the Sun which became a clan of the Earth. The importance of the Sun kept diminishing, while that of the Moon (Mahou) became primordial, to such a point that the word *Mahou* serves to translate God in the vernacular versions of the Bible.

African Missions of Lyon, on the margin of a copy of the work of the Rev. Father Baudin, *Fétichisme et féticheurs* (Lyon, 1884).

³⁷ Bernard Maupoil, *La géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves* (Paris, Institut d'ethnologie, 1943), p. 75.

³⁸ Eva Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan* (London, 1949), p. 197.

This very ancient and widespread mystique of the Sun is also found in the Bantu civilization. According to Storms, the name of God, Nyambi (Nzambi and other variants) has as its root the verb "to shine," since brilliance connotes mystery. A prayer says: "Lord, bring brightness to our eyes." (i.e. "Give us wisdom"), which recalls Dangbé-Wisdom (Monsignor Steinmetz) and Wisdom (incarnate) of Abbé Pierre Bouche. Tempels explains that the obscurity of eyes is wrath, human passions; light therefore is reason, objectivity, intellectual and moral uprightness. In other prayers there is an invocation to God: "Sun, who cannot be looked upon in the face (whoever looks at him is burnt by his rays)." It is said that "the son of God is not visible; if you see him tears will spurt from your eyes."³⁹ The Bounyoro of Uganda claim that it was not possible to look upon the face of their ancestors: their eyes were so bright that looking into them dazzled the beholder; "it was like looking into the sun." Whoever looked upon the archetypal Dangbé, immediately lost his eyesight. This is another resemblance with the Bantus for whom kaolin represents the beauty of Nzambi, and is a symbol of beauty, purity, happiness, prosperity, goodness and truth. It is reserved for the worship of God; serves as a shield against misfortune; it is related to the sun, the harvest and the food.⁴⁰ It therefore seems that if Dangbé brought light into the world, he did not do so only to allow men to see or to walk.

We thus come to the myth of Knowledge evoked by the *adoun*. Casimir Agbo, in "interpreting" this chant, says that the Python who opened the eyes of men, "taught" them, so that they might see and "know." Gavoy calls Dangbé "Science" and quotes the adage: "It was he who taught the Blacks everything."⁴¹ It is quite likely that the Houéda attributed Knowledge to Dangbé before the introduction of the cult of Fa in Lower-Dahomey. Nowadays, the Dahomans praise Fa by saying: "You gave knowledge to Gou (another divinity), you gave us knowledge and education."

³⁹ Rev. Fr. D. Storms, "La notion de Dieu chez les Baluba du Kasai," in *Bulletin des Missions*, Abbaye de Saint-André-lès-Bruges, t. XXVI, Nos. 1 and 2, 1st and 2nd trim. (1952), p. 96.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.

⁴¹ A. Gavoy, "Note historique sur Ouidah (1913)," in *Études dahoméennes* XIII (1955), p. 71.

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(Maupoil)⁴² A good number of syncretisms link the attributes of Dangbé and those of Fa. Like Dangbé, Fa (Odou-Gbaadou) “expresses the highest degree of knowledge that man... has achieved by himself.” Whoever sees Gbaadou without having been prepared to it becomes blind. (Maupoil)⁴³

In the 18th century, travellers who describe the cult of the Great Serpent praise his wisdom and science and describe how people turn to him for counsel and help in case of “need.” Modern authors recognize the sapiential character of the African Serpent. Hambly remarks that the concepts of the Serpent correspond to the notions of fertility, reincarnation, power and wisdom.⁴⁴ Parrinder notes that in West Africa the python is admired for its elegance and wisdom.⁴⁵ Théodore Monod writes: “The serpent has always held a place of honor ... rich of fearsome or beneficent secrets. His wisdom is proverbial.”⁴⁶ Dennet, quoted by Hambly points out that Ndoma, the Serpent of the Bavili “makes man reason and think.”⁴⁷ In a story that the Abbé Bouche heard in Ouidah, Dangbé “wisdom incarnate,” opened the eyes of the first man and the first woman and they saw good and evil. There is no doubt that the Abbé extrapolates,⁴⁸ but it is quite true that Dangbé knows everything. Gavoy reports on a belief according to which the Python, penetrating silently into huts and seeing everything that goes on in them reports to Mahou.⁴⁹ Some *mlan-mlan* about Dangbé give it this symbolic expression:

Master of the pent-roof, he sees who is about to enter into the house...
Hidden under the pent-roof, he is not seen by the master of the hut.

⁴² Maupoil, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Hambly, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Parrinder, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴⁶ Théodore Monod, *L'hippopotame et le philosophe* (Paris, 1943), p. 340.

⁴⁷ Hambly, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴⁸ It is true that in the third book of Genesis 4, 5 and 7 the opening of the eyes is the consequence of chewing the vegetable, while Dangbé himself unseals the eyes with a vegetable medicine. Approximations like these favour syncretisms. However it is possible that Africans imagined and staged the episode in their own way. In any case, we never heard any mention of good and evil, as related by the Abbé Bouche.

⁴⁹ Gavoy, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

Two myths explain how and why Dangbé, eldest son of Mahou, and the confidant of his secrets opened the eyes of men, either without his permission or during his absence. At the beginning, according to the legend picked up by Father Kitti, men's eyes were completely closed. Dangbé opened them without the permission of Mahou, creator of *vodoun* (gods), men and the universe; men were then able to see the *vodoun* under their monstrous forms: one had an enormous head, another had only one arm and one leg, a third had no nose. Men mocked them or were afraid of them. Irritated and humiliated the *vodoun* complained to Mahou who removed them from the sight of profane eyes, by making them invisible, except for Dangbé whom he heaped with reproaches and cursed. "You shall forever crawl on your belly and you will be trodden underfoot, exposed to the eyes of man and thus dishonored among the other *vodoun*." Nevertheless Mahou took this peaceable and benevolent *vodoun* under his protection, punishing severely whoever dared to abuse him.⁵⁰ It should be noted that although men misused their knowledge it was not taken from them nor were they punished. It is also clear that Dangbé was chastised less for having opened the eyes of men without the permission of Mahou — who recognizes his peaceable and benevolent character and protects him — than for having been the indirect cause of disorder among the *vodoun*. Dangbé is not the perverse Tempter, and his punishment has been the result of the abuse of knowledge perpetrated by men.

According to another tradition which has prevailed at Houédacomé, a section of Porto-Novo, God had told Dangbé that if men ate a certain fruit, they would acquire sight. Then God went away, and since he did not return, Dangbé revealed the secret to man. Thus it was that man and woman saw. In this case, the Serpent seems to have acted during the absence of God, without permission, of course, but almost as a delegate.

The Knowledge of Dangbé is also understood through his oracles. The Abbé Bouche describes the oracle scene that he witnessed in the Temple of the Serpents in Ouidah on November 21, 1864. A merchant had come to consult Dangbé about the success of a trip he was about to undertake. An old priestess took a small

⁵⁰ Kitti, *art. cit.*, No. 40, July 1, 1927, pp. 3-5.

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python, put it on a native stool and started to interrogate it, while young priestesses played their tom-toms and the Dangbénon performed a slow stately dance. The serpent, coiled in spirals, then stood upright on its tail or twined itself around the priestess's arms. "He is too young," she said, "and his science is not great. He can not answer my questions and advises us to have recourse to the wisdom of the Serpent that has come from Ardres (Ardra)." She let him slide among the rafters of the hut and soon after the Abbé heard a groaning and in the midst of a strange and confused noise, the following words pronounced in the Djidje (Dahoman) language: "Go! I will be with you and your trade will prosper."⁵¹

In Badagry (Nigeria), the great black python *Idagbé*, who as his name indicates is only a variety of *Dagbé*, reveals the future, according to Talbot, through his priestesses in a state of trance.⁵²

However, since many *vodoun* deliver oracles, the science or wisdom of Dangbé — we noted the simultaneous use of both terms in the preceding report — cannot be attributed to his divinatory role alone.⁵³ There is, actually, in Negro-African culture a mystique of the eyes, which derives from the fact that sight is the symbol and sign of knowledge.

We have pointed out how clearly the Baluba express the "blindness" of wrath.

Danquah quotes the Akan saying: "When God created the world, Evil was already born, but his eyes were not yet open." Danquah explains: nobody had any use for him.⁵⁴

Herskovitz tells the story of a man who wanted to carry away a "stone of Thunder." He had to give it up because it became too heavy and "he could not see any more." When he returned the stone where it belonged "his eyes became clear again" and he was able to go back home.⁵⁵

There are many clan-stories about ancestors who had lost their way to the village and were led back to the right road by cat-

⁵¹ Abbé Pierre Bouche, in *Contemporain* (December 1874) quoted by Verschueren, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁵² Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (London, 1926), vol. II, p. 92.

⁵³ Bernard Maupoil, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁵⁴ J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God. A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London, 1944), p. 85.

⁵⁵ Herskovits, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 160.

eyes or panther-eyes. In Togoland the divinity Nana Bouroukou places a magic mixture on the eyes of hunters who have gone astray, so that they can find the right road. We have already mentioned the tradition of the Akilivi Sodonou, whose blind forefathers were led by the Cat to the Serpent who unsealed their eyes.

In South Nigeria, the deceased is sometimes buried with cats or cat's eyes, no doubt to guide him in the other world.

Nowadays in the same region, knowledge is imparted either for one special purpose or in toto after a long period of initiation.

Talbot writes of the Ibibio of the Lower-Niger: "In many secret societies initiation rites are supposed to procure the power of clairvoyance. In the great Idiong society of the Ibibio, the candidate at a certain moment is 'killed,' whereupon he is supposed to travel to the City of Death in order to learn the future. The final ceremony consists in opening the neophyte's eyes on which the blood of a cock has been smeared in order to make it more credible; from that very moment he is believed to have achieved the gift of second-sight."⁵⁶

In Haiti, the "reception" or "getting of eyes" marks the supreme degree of Voodoo initiation. According to Verschueren, Haitian mystagogy is marked by four degrees: 1) the "head washing," 2) "promotion to the function of aide-papaloi," 3) the "receiving of the *asson* or rattle" and 4) the "receiving of eyes" which adds to the art of prophecy the knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs.⁵⁷

Katherine Dunham, who was initiated, confirms all this. She specifies that the "receiving of eyes" requires a full three months of isolation and heavy expenses.⁵⁸ If one bears in mind that Dangbé is at the base of Haitian Voodooism such an analogy is self-explanatory.

The *adoun* of Abomey-Calavi (Dahomey) has it that Dangbé opened men's eyes to allow them to see something new, that is to say — according to the interpreter's comments — to see the civilization that Dangbé brought: work, construction, techniques.

⁵⁶ Talbot, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 192.

⁵⁷ J. Verschueren, *La République d'Haïti*, t. III, *Le culte vaudou en Haïti* (Paris, 1948), p. 63.

⁵⁸ Katherine Dunham, *Les danses d'Haïti* (Paris, 1954), pp. 64-65.

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We seem therefore to remain in the field of knowledge but the Dangbénon adds the following point to the enumeration: "and the way to have children," as if genesis were also a technique implying secrecy and apprenticeship.

Many versions of the quoted chant attribute the following meaning to the opening of eyes: "so that mankind might come into the world," "to allow us to be born," "to know each other and bring children into the world." To "see something new" can also mean in the language of initiation rites, "to see the other sex," or the union of the sexes, and "to know" in the biblical sense.

The manner of unsealing eyes may shed light on the enigma.

The Dangbénon of the Temple of Aimlonfidé (Dahomey) narrates that God, before leaving, had told Dangbé that men would acquire eyesight by making use of a vegetable poultice whose composition he revealed to him. Since God did not return, the Python mixed the poultice and applied it himself to the eyes of the first couple.

In most traditions — if we except this poultice — it is the juice or sap of a vegetable leaf, branch or fruit which was sucked in and then spit out by Dangbé into the eyes of men, that enabled them to see. In Agatogbo it is the juice of the *tchékoun* leaf, which grows on the tree in which Dangbé happened to be coiled. In Godomey (Dahomey), the Python cut the branch of a tree, chewed it, removed the spittle-moistened substance from his mouth and placed it on the eyes of human beings. A tradition of Ouidah relates that "Eve" held a fruit in her hands while "Adam" held the Serpent who chewed the fruit and spat out the juice in their eyes. At that moment man and woman were able to see.

These variants are valuable because like those of the *adoun* they furnish us with additional enlightening explanations. Dangbé functions like a "medicine man;" he prepares the collyrium or poultice and places it on the eyes of the patients. However, the medicine is impregnated with his spittle, and ethnologists know that spittle is the essential element of the Word. The animist priest chews Kola nuts or any other liturgic substance and spits it out while blowing on the object or the person about to be consecrated or blessed.

Among the Akan of Ghana, the Python, learning that the two primordial couples knew neither desire, conception nor birth

ordered them to stand face to face. He plunged into the river, then emerging therefrom, sprayed some of his water on their bellies while uttering mysterious words. He advised them to go to their huts and to sleep together. The women conceived and gave birth to the first children.⁵⁹

The tradition of Ouidah, with Eve holding a fruit in her hands and Adam a serpent in his must not be allowed to mislead us: the Dahomans, evangelized since the 17th century, quite readily use the names of Adam and Eve to designate the primordial couple of their own legends. The fruit in Eve's hands may be the result of a syncretism, but the sexualism of the Houéda story and above all the phallicism of the serpent are clearly part of the African-Negro tradition. If there is a reminiscence of the Bible, the myth is nevertheless autochthonous and the characters have been garbed in the mental fashions of the country.

One of the sacred names of Dangbé that recurs frequently in many *mlan-mlan* (sacred litanies) is *Okpli vodoun*, divinity (*vodoun*) of union (*okpli*). One *mlan-mlan* says:

The *Vodoun* of union (*Okpli vodoun*) makes the thing assemble.⁶⁰

Is this the "new thing" mentioned in the *adoun* of Abomey-Calavi?

The first meaning of union (*okpli*) could be sexual union. Coitus for the python is lengthy and peculiar to it since the animal has two hemi-penises, each one forked and with spines which by hooking into the body of the female, fix her firmly to the body of the male.

There exists, in certain initiation schools a general rite called *xan-kplikpli*, "union of the mat." It is a simulated sexual union between a boy and a girl or a woman at the initiation stage. This rite permits them to bypass the sexual interdiction which is compulsory during this stage. The female novice can marry before the end of the stage.⁶¹

J. Rouméguère-Eberhardt describes a similar rite among the Venda of Northern Transvaal during the *Domba*, a stage of initia-

⁵⁹ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford, 1923), p. 48.

⁶⁰ Pierre Verger, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

⁶¹ Rev. Fr. Jacques Bertho, Unedited typewritten note, kindly provided by the author.

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tion “within the belly of the Python.” The union, real or simulated, takes place under a skin or a blanket. It is part of the sexual and civic initiation.⁶²

But *Okpli vodoun* may also be an esoteric evocation of the “marriage of the Serpent.” Considered as a private prerogative of Dangbé’s priests and as an example of dissolute mores by the travellers of the 17th and 18th centuries, the ceremony took place at the Temple of the Serpent, once the initiation stage was over. Father Labat writes:

When girls reach the age of marriage, which is usually around 14 or 15, there takes place the ceremony of their marriage with the Serpent. Parents consider the alliance a great honor and buy for their daughters the most beautiful loin-cloths. Then they lead them in great pomp to the House of the Great Serpent. When night falls, two or three girls are taken down at a time into a deep elongated pit with vaults opening to the right and to the left, where they are supposedly awaited by two or three serpents acting on behalf of the Great Serpent. While the girls are in the pit, old fetichist women and young women who are about to be married sing and dance to the sound of musical instruments around the edge but far enough away to hear or see nothing of what is going on below. After one hour the girls emerge from the pit and thereafter are considered to be wedded to the Great Serpent. It is common belief that besides serpents there are other animals far more fit for marriage than reptiles, and in fact many of these girls come out of the pit far less virginal than they were before descending into it; and at the end of the term fixed by nature they give birth to anything but serpents.⁶³

The science of religions gives the true meaning of this rite which has been almost abolished today in Dahomey: the initiation into the mystery of procreation and hierogamy, conformity to cosmobiological rhythm (fertility-fecundity). Since the rite repeats the myth to make it actual and eternal, we may say that “the marriage of the Serpent” renews the primordial act of Dangbé who opened the eyes of men “to allow them to be born, to know each other and make children in this world.”

We can interpret still another belief in an analogous sense of

⁶² Jacqueline Rouméguière-Eberhardt, “Sociologie de la connaissance et connaissance mythique chez les Bantu,” in *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. XXXV, 10th year, July-December 1963, p. 120.

⁶³ Labat, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

death-resurrection conceived in cyclical terms: in Pobé (Dahomey) the male Python "kills" his wife after copulation, then spits into her eyes the juice of a plant he has previously chewed and she revives. The informant adds that if man could discover this plant he could resurrect the dead.

Belonging to the cosmobiological rite is the festival that takes place in the Yoruba country when the yam is ripe. A small python known as "the farm serpent," symbol of *Oricha Oko*, God of Fecundity, is also called "He who is erected," in reference to his phallic attributes.⁶⁴ During the festival, the priestesses give themselves to the priests indiscriminately; elsewhere adolescent boys may copulate with old women. Usually these people are very upright, but they are convinced that unless they accomplish these rites the harvest will be bad.⁶⁵ *Oricha Oko* is the Yoruba form of Dangbé Gbedji of the Houéda.

We must also mention the role that the *Vodoun of the union* has played in the formation of the religious and political unity of the Houéda. Since it forged, on one hand, the "bond" (which is one of its "sacred names") among the clans in order to build the tribe and the Houéda Kingdom, and on the other, unified family and public cults absorbing them all in its own religion.

We conclude by stating that there is no reason to pit the opening of the eyes as the symbol of knowledge, against the opening of the eyes as the symbol of sexual union and genesis. The two notions are complementary. We can go so far as to say that the expression "to open the eyes," far from being ambiguous, conveys in full this dual meaning: to know and to procreate, since procreation is only one chapter of knowledge. "To see," in the Negro-African semantics as in many others has in fact both a conceptual or cognitive and a genesitic sense. Since menstrual blood makes women unfit for every sacerdotal, conjugal and culinary function, her periods are indicated by figurative expressions. Many are like ours; Africans say: "to see the moon," or simply "to see."

During their stage of initiation, novices are made to "see" "the thing of the beginning": the creation of the gods, that of their forefathers-gods and later the revelation made by the latter to the

⁶⁴ Pierre Verger, *op. cit.*, p. 562.

⁶⁵ Parrinder, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

chiefs of future clans on the uses of stone, the fusing of metals, procreation etc. There is not, nor could there be at this level, the essential distinction between knowledge and genesis which exists by tradition in Western philosophy.

If the myth of Dangbé, or of the Serpent who opens the eyes of men has points in common with those of other Negro-African mythic Serpents, it nonetheless has distinct characteristics of its very own.

Like its congeners, Dangbé belongs to the same category of pythons: reptiles which do have neither poison glands nor injector-fangs and which are innocuous when of small dimensions like him (*pytho regius*). Of gentle and peaceful nature it lives up to the most commonly accepted etymology of its name: "the Serpent (*Dan*) good (*gbé*).” It thus stands in direct contrast to "evil" venomous serpents and constrictors. It underscores a distinction which the history of religions has not sufficiently stressed, between "good Serpents"—spirits of fertility, fecundity, health, wealth, peace and happiness—and the "evil Serpents" that embody vindictive ghosts or telemechanical agents of wizards, spirits envious of men that rob them of knowledge and immortality and are contemptuous of the Divinity, etc.

It is logical that the "good Serpent," eldest son and emissary of the Creator, considered as the benevolent father of all men, procured for them the benefits of knowledge and genesis. Human ingratitude so deplored in the *adoun*, may be observed at the earthly level in the massacre of pythons perpetrated by the Dahomans during the siege of Savi, and in the fact that the Yoruba still eat them. At the spiritual level it is evident in their destruction carried out by missionaries without any distinction for the various species, and in the repugnance displayed by Christians for the "Serpent worshiped by Negroes." In point of fact, the cult of Dangbé has declined steadily since the second half of the 19th century.

Between Dangbé and the other serpents of the same species there is not much difference as regards wisdom, science, the gift of knowledge and of human fecundity. The mystique of sight and the technique used for the opening of eyes are part and parcel of African-Negro cultural sources.

On the other hand, the unique character of the Houéda mythic

serpent lies in the fact that he is the only Black Serpent known today as having opened the eyes of the first men, thus conferring upon them knowledge and genesis.

Is this an irreplaceable link in the chain of African-Negro traditions? According to some scholars, the convergence of the African characteristics we have noted should suffice to make of Dangbé an autochthonous Serpent, especially since prehistorians consider Africa the cradle of "hominization." In Bechuanaland the rock engravings of giant Serpents are perhaps contemporaneous with the human fossils of the Olduvai Valley, and the important cults of the Python *Sélouanga* on the shores of Lake Victoria, or of the Python of the *Domba* among the Venda of Northern Transvaal might be the still living vestiges of a prehistoric religion in which the Serpent played a vital role. Other scholars in an effort to supply the missing link, ascribe it to a continental or extra-continental acculturation. As a matter of fact, the Black-African Serpent has many traits in common with the Egyptian, Gnostic, Mediterranean, Semitic (and Biblical), Dravidian Serpent. These resemblances may be explained by the contacts—however sporadic—between Black-Africa and the outer world. But the osmosis may be reciprocal, and this would explain the "totemic" role of Serpents in Egyptian clans and, among the Gnostics, the role of the reptile incarnating the Word.

The study of the mythic Python in countries which are farther removed from Africa — China, Japan, New Guinea, Australia and pre-Colombian America — discloses precise analogies with the Black Python. Such analogies can be explained only by a sort of pre- or proto-historic diaspora spreading a supposed religion of the Serpent, or by a constant of the human spirit wherever it takes as the object of its metaphysical and religious meditation this ancient and mysterious animal.

But be that as it may, all these factors may have played a role. Today it would seem that the solution of these perhaps insoluble problems is perhaps less important than the study of all these complex data with a view of derivating from them a useful human lesson.

In fact, the debate on the Serpent who unsealed the eyes of men is not gratuitous as it may seem to certain people whose eyes are not sufficiently open to the world of ideas.

Among the Houéda, Dangbé, as we have said, the *vodoun* of union and bond, wrought a tribe out of the initial clans, and from the tribe the Houéda Kingdom. After the conquest of the latter by the Abomey Kingdom, the victor “bought” (symbolically) the cult of Dangbé and introduced it into his own pantheon, thus establishing a mystic bond between the vanquished Serpent and the triumphant Panther (Abomey).

Among the Fang of Gabon and the Cameroun, the Serpent presides over the “schools of knowledge,” as well as the schools of political power. In East Africa, the “Empire of the Serpents” extends over four million initiates. Among the Venda of Transvaal, the Python embodies at one and the same time the divinity, the Kingdom and the school of initiation; he creates the bond between the clans. Everywhere the Serpent is the sign and the symbol of union, solidarity and brotherhood. To an Africa tragically in search of cohesion as it develops a growing awareness and consciousness of self, the mystic Python, far better known, could help “to make the thing assemble.” Philosophical and religious ideologies would have nothing to fear from such an enterprise. Ecumenism recognizes the spiritual values of non-Christian religions and the Moslem Africans respect the animal who was one of the most venerated “totems” of their forefathers. The Black Python who opened the eyes of men might still be able to endow them with wisdom.

If, as countless clues suggest and many authors acknowledge, there is no specific difference between religions based on the mysteries of Antiquity and those studied *in situ* by contemporary ethnology, we may see in Dangbé, as through the glass case of a laboratory, the actual living exemplar of what must have been the Serpent of the Cananans, the Python of Eleusis and the Serpents of Bona Dea, mother-country of fertility-fecundity rites. Dangbé would be none other than the African version of the mythic Serpent, teaching men at the origin of time as he still does in the secrecy of initiations.

He could teach those who may still be unaware of it that Africa has in this symbol a sign of its recognition of spiritual matters, a master-word of introduction to universal cultures, a reason to take its full and rightful place at the round table of great civilizations.