



## Bwiti, iboga, trance and healing in Gabon

Pierre Didier Nyongo Ndoua & Kaveh Vaghar

**To cite this article:** Pierre Didier Nyongo Ndoua & Kaveh Vaghar (2018) Bwiti, iboga, trance and healing in Gabon, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 21:8, 755-762, DOI: [10.1080/13674676.2018.1504012](https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2018.1504012)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2018.1504012>



Published online: 16 Apr 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 383



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)



# Bwiti, iboga, trance and healing in Gabon

Pierre Didier Nyongo Ndoua<sup>a,b</sup> and Kaveh Vaghar<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Yaoundé, Yaoundé, Cameroon; <sup>b</sup>Department of Theology, University of Vienna, Catholic Theological Faculty, Vienna, Austria; <sup>c</sup>General Hospital of the City of Vienna - Hospital of the Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

## ABSTRACT

The Bwiti is one out of several religions in Africa and through it, it is believed, that the members can be connected to the world of the ancestors. There is also the ritual of healing in Bwiti. In this ritual, participants are invited to take iboga. They fall into a trance and after this phase, which in principle lasts three days; those who were sick recover the health in many cases. We try to find out in the article, if the change of the state of consciousness like trance can heal. In the end we discover that it is possible. In Bwiti, the change of the paradigm is the most important principle.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 May 2018

Accepted 20 July 2018

## KEYWORDS

Bwiti; religion; trance; consciousness; iboga; culture; health

## Introduction

The question of health in the world has always been a concern for human beings. In every society, there is a well-established body of work in the field of health. The so-called traditional societies may not all have written documents, but they certainly knew knowledge, sometimes millennia, which was transmitted from generation to generation. Nowadays there is still a use of this knowledge. Expressions such as “grand-mother’s medical recipe” translate it well. About Africa, Zartman (2000) writes “Traditional societies in Africa and elsewhere are reputed to hold secrets of peace-making locked in their ways, formed from centuries of custom before the disruption of colonisation” (p. 1).

In Africa, there is a strong culture of traditional medicine that resists modernity. It can be said that in Africa, traditional medicine and modern medicine coexist, sometimes maintaining good neighbourly relations, sometimes conflicting relations.

The WHO (2002) Centre for Health Development defines African traditional medicine as:

The sum total of all knowledge and practices, whether explicable or not, used in diagnosis, prevention and elimination of physical, mental, or societal imbalance, and relying exclusively on practical experience and observation handed down from generation to generation, whether verbally or in writing.

In Gabon, the Bwiti is both a cult and a traditional ritual aimed at healing the sick. Concerning the healing of the sick in the Bwiti, the process takes place in stages. The first step is a phase of purity and confession of one’s faults in a river. Then comes a second step,

during which the patient consumes the broken roots of the iboga. Iboga is a plant from West Africa. Schmelzer (2008) writes:

The active compounds in the root, root bark, stem bark, leaves and seeds of *Tabernaemontana iboga* are indole alkaloids. (...) Ibogaine is the most important alkaloid present in all plant parts except the seeds. (...) The main activities of ibogaine are on the central nervous system and the cardiovascular system. (p. 599)

During this stage, all the participants of the ceremony are also invited to consume these crushed roots, but in small doses, to stay awake. The third step is the most important one. It is the one where the patient falls into a trance. Finally comes the stage of healing. The principle here is no trance, no healing. Trance is a change in the state of consciousness. Cox (1874) speaks of trance in these terms: "Trance is not a sleep, nor is it in any manner allied to sleep. It is entirely a different physiological and psychical condition and has no more resemblance to sleep and dream than insanity has" (p. 234).

Since trance is considered to be the trigger for healing in the Bwiti, the question that concerns us all along this work is: can a change in the state of consciousness of a patient lead to healing? The response to this preoccupation will initially lead us to interest in the Bwiti. Bwiti is not the only traditional religion found in Africa. Muzzanganda Lugira (2009) gives in one book a list of traditional religions that we can find in Africa. For example : Berber, Cushite, Egyptian religion, Aksumite, Dinka, Nuer, Galla, Zulu, Ashanti, Bambara, Fang, Dogon, Xhosa, Fanti, Fon, Bafipa, Yoruba, Edo, Ewe, Igbo religion, so on and so forth. We can also add the famous Vodoun.

Following we will study the rite of healing in Bwiti. Afterwards, we will examine trance and ibogaine. There are indeed several forms of trance. Wier (2009) writes "There are several types of trance which are implied by the model. Each type depends on the location of the trance generating loops and the location of the people's ego awareness" (p. 144). We will determine the type of trance in the Bwiti. Finally, we will bring a response to the concern that constitutes the thread of Ariane's article.

## The Bwiti

LaGamma (2007) presents the Bwiti with these words:

In the rainforest regions of west-central Africa one of the most important of such institutions was Bwiti, a politico-religious organisation dedicated to the veneration of first-comers ancestors or the spirits of the land. The history of this institution is both fascinating and instructive, for it illustrates the manner in which ancient Niger-Congo precepts have been built upon and altered over the centuries, producing a variety of ritual associations. (p. 48)

When we talk about Bwiti, all those who know this traditional religion refer directly to Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Congo. About the word "Bwiti", Ndzigou (2009) writes: "Bwiti is God in His whole duality" (p. 19). The question that needs an answer here is: is Bwiti a religion for the people of these countries? This question poses a problem of the status of Bwiti.

## The status of Bwiti

Is the Bwiti a religion or something else? For a long time, it was called animism in Africa. These activities began to be called religion in Ivory Coast at Bouake during a symposium in

1965 (Tabard, 2008). Shabani Mligo (2013) in a book on African traditional religions thinks that these activities can be considered as true religions:

It is a religion that is mainly based on oral transmission from one generation to another. Its teachings are not written on paper, but in the hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines, and religious functions of people who believe in and practice this. (p. 15)

The Bwiti religion presents itself as a religion of initiation. One becomes a member after an initiation. Ndzigou (2009) writes: “The initiation is composed of four stages: admission, theory, exercises and practice. Moreover Bwiti has three degrees: Bandzi (neophyte), Nima (initiated), Nima Na Kombo (adept)” (p. 19).

The esoteric knowledge acquired by the Bwiti’s members concerns not only the earthly life but also that of the hereafter. For Ndzigou (2009):

Bwiti is the worship connecting man to his origins, his ancestors and perfect knowledge of self and so on; it is the discovery of God and His hidden face. Discovering the secrets and nature’s laws, acquire and master the invisible and visible world phenomenon, knowing the reasons of one’s presence on earth as one’s life mission are the few keys in a million of Bwiti. It is important and paramount to have knowledge, ignorance is the sickness of the world. (p. 17)

The Bwiti is based on a fundamental principle: there is a continuity between life here and that after death. There is a communion between the living and the dead. The dead can be used to understand the real meaning of life and to find solutions to specific problems.

The rites of the Bwiti are not organised once a week unlike the Sunday mass among Catholics or the Friday prayer among Muslims. The Bwiti is organised according to the circumstances of life. There is, for example, a Bwiti for the initiation. Adams (2014) says: “The Bwiti initiation rite follows the traditional process of three stages that characterise most rites of passage – separation, liminality and reintegration” (p. 134). There is also a bwiti on the occasion of the death of an initiate, when someone is sick and needs healing, for the blessing, to offer a sacrifice.

There are two main types of Bwiti ceremonies: a celebrity Bwiti for joy or “disumbamba” events and a celebrity Bwiti for unfortunate events or Bwiti “mvengue”. The structural organisation of these two Bwiti is different. The celebrations usually take place at dusk and end at sunrise. During these times, members pray, dance and sing calling spirits and consuming iboga (Lantet, 2004).

In the following, the most important part of the Bwiti structure which is initiation will be presented.

### ***The Bwiti of initiation***

For Lantet (2004), as a general rule, a Bwiti for initiation, which is the most important, has the following stages:

- To make a meeting with the organiser of the ceremony or nganga. The candidate is presented to the Nganga (diviner and healer) by an intermediary whom himself is already initiated. The nganga consults the invisible to know how to act with the newcomer, but he will also consult his group, and it is only with the general agreement that he will agree to initiate the arrival. If the nganga agreement is obtained, the nganga will then begin his teaching by speaking the secrets of the Bwiti.

- After that follow the preparations for the ceremony by the purchase of the necessary products which will be used. In a river, the candidate confesses his faults, obtain a bath of purification and the at the same time, the geniuses of the forest are invoked by the ngangan.
- When the night falls, the postulant is placed in the consecrated place surrounded by the group that must protect him from the intervention of evil spirits. The group will enliven the evening with songs and music, while the candidate for initiation swallows the sacred wood, equipped with a mirror that he must fix to see, a fly-sweeper to ward off unwelcome spirits and so on.

Then follow the phases of vomiting, possession, visions and predictions. The nganga continues to give iboga until it has reached the threshold of initiation, that is, the moment when the visions are bright enough to allow the initiate to discover his true identity in the world. This stage can last up to three days.

- The last step is the “edika”, the ceremonial exit and the presentation to the group. It includes a process of closing (taking an antidote to iboga), and the blessing of the initiates.

Given this level, it is important to note that after this presentation which was an introduction about Bwiti, we will now be interested in the rite of healing in the Bwiti. We will be particularly interested in the effects of iboga on the human body.

### **The rite of healing in the Bwiti**

It is necessary to emphasise that the Bwiti cannot be considered as a panacea which would cure all diseases. That is obvious if the Bwiti could cure all of them then no patient should exist in the places where this religion is practiced and there shouldn't be any demands for hospitals. The Bwiti is not a panacea but it allows practicants to discover who they are in reality. It may be useful for psychical healing. The focus is on the psychological quest for oneself, the rediscovery of the deep self or the forgotten body, the healing of the collective unconscious.

Alain Wagner (1985) summarises the different stages of the treatment in the following way:

- Consultation by divination
- Confession of faults
- Purification which is done with a bath in a spring with various leaves of medicinal plants
- Initiation and / or sacrifice,
- Finally, the final blessing.

Here, two appreciations can be quickly made.

Firstly, the character of “death and resurrection”, “erasure and resurgence” found in this therapy. The therapy is divided into two parts:

- Confession of faults and purification are like a decent, a death, an effacement of the candidate. The candidate is invited to undress, to empty himself and to get rid of the “old man”.
- The inauguration and the final blessing that represents the rising, the resurrection and the resurgence. The candidate is dressed, to become a “new man”.

Freud and Breuer's (1956) psychoanalytic based treatment is based on the method of free association. It is for the patient to express all thoughts, ideas and images without any discrimination and spontaneously. What we notice here is that, firstly, in both Bwiti and psychoanalysis, a place of choice is given to speech: through confession in the Bwiti and free association in psychoanalysis.

Secondly, what we can see here is a parallelism between Jung's therapy (1984) and Bwiti. The therapy at Jung (1984) obeys at four stages:

- Confidence and confession
- The transfer and its analysis
- Education and self-education
- Metamorphosis

Confidence and confession correspond to Bwiti in the face of mistakes. The transfer and analysis correspond to purification. The education and self-education correspond to initiation and/or sacrifice and finally the metamorphosis corresponds to the final benediction.

## About trance and ibogaine

Trance is a crucial moment in Bwiti therapy. Pratt (2007) writes:

iboga is central and essential to the Bwiti spiritual practice. It is used for initiation to "break open" the heads of initiates allowing communication from their Ancestors and as a visionary sacrament for initiated members. In the initiation ritual, initiates are given one or two massive doses. The intent is to induce physical collapse followed by a deep trance state during which the initiate has a vision of contact with the Ancestors in the spirit world. (p. 219)

Trance is very important because through it the initiate can enter in the spirit world.

According to Wulf (2000), trance is: "a state of profound absorption or lack of mental content during which the individual is experientially cut off from the outside world; it is frequently accompanied by vocal and motor automatisms, lack of responsive awareness, and amnesia" (p. 339). Trance is a change of state of consciousness or a modified state of consciousness. It is a deviation in psychological functioning from specific general standards of consciousness in the waking state.

Wier (2009) distinguishes between several types of trances:

- Meditative trance is "characterised by a generating loop in the cognitive plane with internal stimulation which is perceived from the dissociated plane" (p. 144).
- Hypnotic trance is "characterised by a generating loop in the cognitive plane with an external stimulation which is perceived from the dissociated plane" (p. 148).
- Addictive trance is "characterised by a generating loop in the cognitive plane with an external stimulation which is perceived from the dissociated plane (...). The main difference between a hypnotic trance and an addictive trance is in the location of the trance generating loop" (p. 149).

- Centric trance is “characterised by a generating loop in the cognitive plane with internal stimulation which is perceived from the dissociated plane. Centric trances contain multiple dissociated trance planes in some of which the trance generating loops are found” (p. 152).

The trance in the Bwiti is a hypnotic trance. This trance is induced by several causes which are the external stimulations. That of Bwiti seems to be caused by lack of sleep, fatigue, repetition of traditional music and prolonged consumption of the iboga.

About the iboga, it is a hallucinogen plant. Iboga is a small shrub of the family Apocynaceae that occurs in Africa in the equatorial forest. There are several kinds of iboga. The one used in the Bwiti religion is the “iboga tabernanthe”. The active principle in “iboga tabernanthe” is ibogaine. Iboga help to stop the addiction of drug. Mash (2010) writes:

Addiction is a behavioural pattern of drug abuse characterised by compulsive use, loss of behavioural control, and a high tendency to relapse. An integrated medical, psychosocial, and spiritual treatment is often needed to achieve recovery in addicted patients. Ibogaine is a unique pharmacotherapy for the treatment of substance abuse disorders because it fosters a life change or may work as a transition-based therapy similar to the goals set in the 12-step fellowship programs. While ibogaine's effects on behavior are complex, the beneficial actions of the drug on withdrawal symptoms and cravings are because of an interaction of the active metabolite noribogaine with neurotransmitters in the brain reward and addiction circuit. (...). Iboga stimulates the central nervous system (CNS) when taken in small doses and induces visions in larger doses. (p. 50)

The iboga produces an affirmative action in the resolution of the problems of addiction to the psychotropic.

Schmelzer (2008) also writes that: “Research with animals and anecdotal reports of humans suggest that ibogaine has considerable potential in treating addictions to heroin, cocaine, alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, amphetamine, desoxyephedrine or methadone, or combination of these” (p. 600).

Can trance induce psychological healing? The question can be prolonged by asking whether the change of state of consciousness can induce healing. The answer to this question requires us to be interested in what happens in the body when a person is in a trance.

There is a close connection between body, thought and emotion, as Celestin-Lhopiteau (2015) points out. Hypnosis, meditation, trance can cause changes in cerebral functioning. Celestin-Lhopiteau (2015) presents the discoveries made at this level: the influence of thought on the immune system, the influence of stress on the cardiovascular system, the positive impact of sport in the depression due to the increased serotonin, norepinephrine, and endorphins in the brain.

Celestin-Lhopiteau (2015) recalls that several structures that intervene in attention, emotion and imaging such as the hippocampus, the prefrontal cortex, the amygdala and the hypothalamus have a modified activity during the trance. This allows a relaxed attitude to be observed in trance, with reduced breathing and heartbeat, a reduction in stress related to the production of vasopressin, cortisol, ACTH and CRH. There is also a production of arginine which leads to a decrease in the perception of fatigue and consolidation of new memories and learning. Stimulation of the hypothalamus results in the release of beta-endorphin, which reduces fear and induces a sense of joy.

All this change causes a flight to somewhere else. It is this flight towards the outside world that is the engine of psychic healing. It consists in leaving the world of suffering from finding oneself in a world that is gayer than the imaginary. To leave the world of suffering is to let go, to invest oneself in suffering from investing oneself in something more cheerful.

## Conclusion

It appears at the end of this reflection that any trauma that is not assumed is not exacerbated, but takes refuge in the unconscious. Psychic suffering may also seem to be incapacity of the psychism or perhaps of the will to “change the paradigm”, to let go to invest elsewhere, to abandon a trauma lived to invest oneself in something else more cheerful. The Bwiti religion in general and iboga, in particular, are presented as those forces which allow the unconscious to exacerbate the trauma and the mind to give up, on thinking of something else. Whereas in Freud (1956), transference is the driving force of healing, and in Jung (1984) healing takes place in four stages: confidence and confession, transference and analysis, education and auto-education, the metamorphosis, in the Bwiti, healing seems to be based on a maxim: “We must not stop on its sufferings, but know how to advance despite everything”

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## References

- Adams, P. M. (2014). *The healing field: Energy, consciousness and transformation*. Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press.
- Celestin-Lhopiteau, I. (2015). *Soigner par les pratiques psycho-corporelles: Pour une stratégie intégrative* [To treat by the psycho-corporal practices: For an integrative strategy]. Paris: Dunod.
- Cox, E. W. (1874). *What am I?: A popular introduction to mental philosophy and psychology, band 2*. London: Longman and Co.
- Freud, S., & Breuer, J. (1956). *Studies on the hysteria*. Paris: PUF.
- Jung, C. G. (1984). *Psychological healing*. Paris: Georg.
- LaGamma, A. (2007). *Eternal Ancestors: The art of the Central African reliquary*. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Lantet, M. J. (2004). *Approche thérapeutique de la prise d'iboga dans l'initiation au Bwiti vécue par les occidentaux* [Therapeutic approach of taking Iboga in the initiation to Bwiti experienced by westerners]. Retrieved from <https://www.cairn.info/revue-psychotropes-2004-3-page-51.htm>
- Mash, D. C. (2010). Ibogaine therapy for substance abuse disorders. In D. Brizer, & R. Castaneda (Eds.), *Clinical addiction psychiatry* (pp. 50–60). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Muzzanganda Lugira, A. (2009). *African traditional religion*. New York, NY: Chelsea House.
- Ndzigou, B. P. (2009). *Sacred light of the blacks*. Niangu, China: Fondation A.M.O.U.R/ Niangu Publishing.
- Pratt, C. (2007). *An encyclopedia of Shamanism, band 1*. New York, NY: The Rosen Publishing Group.
- Schmelzer, G. H. (2008). *Medicinal plants, band 1*. The Netherlands: Backhuys Publishers.
- Shabani Mligo, E. (2013). *Elements of African traditional religion*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications.
- Tabard, R. (2008). *Théologie des religions traditionnelles Africaines* [Theology of African traditional religions]. Retrieved from <https://www.cairn.info/revue-recherches-de-science-religieuse.htm>
- Wagner, A. (1985). Médecines traditionnelles [Traditional medicines]. In T. Obenga (Ed.), *Les peuples bantu, migrations, expansion et identité culturelle, sous la direction de Théophile Obenga* [Bantu peoples, migrations, expansion and cultural identity, under the direction of Théophile Obenga] (Vol. 2, pp. 293–297). Libreville, Paris: Cibaba/L'Harmattan.



- Wier, D. R. (2009). *Trance: From magic to technology*. London: Trance Research Foundation.
- Wulf, D. M. (2000). Mystical experience. In E. Cardeña, S. J. Lynn, & S. Krippner (Eds.), *Varieties of anomalous experience: Examining the scientific evidence* (pp. 397–440). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- World Health Organization. (2002). *Traditional medicine strategy 2002–2005*. Geneva: WHO publications.
- Zartman, I. W. (2000). *Traditional cures for modern conflicts: African conflict “medicine”*. London: Lynne Rienner.