

Fifth European Conference on African Studies ECAS 2013:

African Dynamics in a Multipolar World. Panel: Body, culture and social tensions

### TO BE BORN AS A SOCIAL BEING.

#### GIVING IDENTITY TO THE NEWBORN BUBI BABY ( EQUATORIAL GUINEA)

“Tuparapará” is the name for the presentation of the newborn baby in the community among bubi etnia. This is an initiation rite to life through which a baby acquires identity and is socially acknowledged as an individual. Because buibi society is made up of human beings and non-human beings, birth is ritualized twice, first to introduce the baby to the ancestors and second, to the rest of the community, thus expressing the continuity between ancestors and descendants, which are both immersed in the same life cycle. This ceremony obviously implies the other way round of the introduction which is to introduce the social environment to the baby, that is to show who is the kin group.

That’s why another of the ritual’s purposes is to endow the baby with knowledge and socialization. This is performed through symbolic instruction. All along the ritual there are projected the expectations that the newborn as a “social being” should fulfill throughout his/her life (the links the person should establish, the roles and the place that he/she should play and occupy in the family and in society as well. All of this is performed through symbolic introduction.

Giving birth implies another transition : to be mother. The ritual also performs this initiation to motherhood, as well as many of ritual practices related to woman's corporeal nature that giving birth involves. In this sense, the symbolic association that appears all along the performance between the matriclan's house and the mother's body is especially interesting to understand the kinship links and relationship among the community.

I will analyze the symbolic content of both the ritual process and the ritual stage on which a multitude of crucial aspects of ubi society are expressed :

For example pointing out how the links are established between the community and the ancestors, that is to say how the family group is replaced. We can also appreciate how reciprocity is expressed, the idea of socialization and how the spirits control their lives.

### **The Ritual**

The day of the celebration all the relatives on the mother's line are gathered together in the matriclan house as well as the relatives on the father's line. All of them bring food and drinks to share with the rest of the group. The eldest woman of the matrilineage, sitting next to the mother and the baby leads the ceremony.

The ceremony starts with a purification of everybody rubbing their hands with some kind of clay. The grandmother addresses the ancestors, who are located in a corner of the house, in gratitude for the arrival of the new born baby. After the grandmother, and the mother with the baby goes to the exterior of the house

stepping on the threshold of the house and then sitting down next to the door. At this moment, the mother is not holding the baby in her arms. The baby is lay down in a kind of recipient on the floor. The the grandmother does her food offer, some kind of vegetables, to the baby and it is the mother that pretends to eat it. Her breast is wash down with salty walter in order to purify the baby's intake of food. When they finish this rite all of them goes inside and at this momento the biological father sits down with the mother and the baby. Meanwhile the granmother offers food and drinks to the ancestors because it is at that moment when the baby is among them and the baby is drawn up to the corner to touch them.

We can say that this is the first recognition of the baby. Finally the imposition of the tradicional name gives the baby a new identity. This is the start of "being someone" andi t is follow with the share-out of food and drinks. The ceremony ends in the inside of the house and all of them takes again a piece of clay rubbing their hands to leave protected. The family group goes out of the house to gather with the rest of the neighborhood and fellows of the village.

Once the baby is outsider the house its relatives welcome it with joy andi t is integrated in the kindgroup through a simbolic instruction of socialization. The adults dramatize the transmision of knowledge that the baby is going to need. They show it several instruments for working and how it has to used them, the gender rolls that will have to play , books that will have to read, etc. If the baby is a girl they will show her pots and pans for cooking and if it is a boy shotguns and traps to caught animals.

The grandmother , the mother and the baby after four days of celebration they return to “Karichobo”’s house in order to tell all the spirits that the ritual ceremony is over. And all the rites of purification, protection , food and drinks offers are repeated again . It is now that the baby can go out and visit the whole village, meeting new people with whom will establish new links .

The baby on this visit will receive basic objects for the daily life such as food , firewood, money, etc. In each of the visits to the village houses the baby goes first over the threshold and then the mother. The ritual finishes with the inclusion of the baby in the community.

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I am going to point out three aspects which show the start of life, identity and sociability of individuals :

1º - The symbolic content related to the body and the ritual stage.

2º - The threshold stages that characterize the woman in labour and birth.

3º The breaking off and ties that the newborn baby experiences to overcome its threshold stage to become a social being. That is consider the first great conflict to undergo.

### **Body metaphor and threshold stages**

The house as a woman’s body metaphor.

The ritual scenery takes place in two confronted spaces : inside-outside. This opposition DENTRO-FUERA symbolize in a clear way the birth of the child.

The “Karichobo” mother home that houses all the family group – ancestors and alive relatives. During the ritual it is represented – the woman’s body who carries the baby and the entrance of the house stage – as sceneries for the important momento of birth.

The metaphor of “Karichobo” House tells us about the ubi believe of the conception of life. First it is negociated with the ancestors and lately it is place in the woman’s womb. The woman carries other connotations as well such as : Continuity, past recolections – she is the place where the ancestors were born and are still alive – the link mother-child and the principle of “ matrilinealidad”.

The several divisions and connections that the baby feels with her mother and father and all the members of the family group are dramatize in relation to spatial orientation of entrance and exits of the family home. In such a way that the transit from one stage to another is connected with the space itself.

This cognitive order of space not only represents the ubi world next to the birth of the child, and its links with the ancestors and alive relatives but also incorporates simbolic associations of ideas in contrast to : movement and autonomy (to go out of the house sugest the start of life ) against stillness (of the non-human being yet) and to remain together (when the baby is inside), the petition of protection in contrast to the adquisition of knowledge (through out a simbolic instruction) as well as time inclusion (the past represented by ancestors and the future represented by the simbolic instruction in order of the development of the baby as a human being).

INSIDE-STILLNESS-MOTHER LIKNS-TOGETHER-PROTECTION-PAST-  
OUTSIDE-MOVEMENT-SOCIAL LINKS-AUTONOMY-KNOWLEDGE-FUTURE

## **Threshold**

The start of a new human being is the best expression for the concept of threshold. The ritual of “tuparapará” and the border limit where it takes place represents the threshold stage that characterize the birth not only for the child but for the mother as well.

The threshold stage is associated with attributes such as : darkness, ambiguity, undefined, human beings classify as not “social beings”, with the defenceless and finally with the non-sexual beings.

The three threshold stage of the “tuparapará” implies all their attributes such as : the baby is not yet a human being, it has no name and it lacks of anything material. That is why he/she leaves home like a human being he/she receives from the community all what he /she needs for making a living. On the one hand the baby is a vulnerable creature that depends on its mother for everything. It belongs to her and both of them are one thing together. On the other hand all critical situation of the threshold stage implies protectionist rites. And that is why petitions of protection to the ancestors with its following tribute are established in the three sequences of the threshold stage : before the first birth in the presence of the spirits, before the second birth in the presence of society and finally before the departure from home.

To sum up the sort four days confinement that mother and child have to remain together between the first and last stage of the ritual reinforces the idea of the threshold stage in a special way for the mother. The prohibition of changing clothes, washing herself, abstain from sexual relations during this period and being feed excessively (because the mother is the food for the child)

gives the idea of the “non-corporeal” condition of the woman in labour. This break off in the daily life and confinement of the woman reaffirms what is called by Turner (1988) a state out of normality.

### **The broken link : The first grate conflict**

Another outstanding question of “tuparapará” is the performance of the first grate conflict that human beings have to face : birth. The out coming of the threshold stage and the transition from “not being” to “being” (for the child) and the “being a woman” to “being a mother” carries in itself a conflict. Birth and woman labour represents a critical moment of separation : becoming apart from the mother’s body and for the mother her child inside.

In the transition to life birth is not the only thing that an individual has to undertake. The child also gets rid of its placenta (afterbirth), umbilical cord and finally its weaning. All this implies what Carry (1989) calls an irreparable loss. Any separation or loss implies uncertainty and fear, which implies a certain contamination in the ritual of impurity elements and that is why the abandonment of one stage to another usually goes all together with protection and purification rites closely linked with the “tuparapará” rite.

That is why a pregnant woman or a woman in labour has been stigmatized with her capacity for contamination and dirt, for example towards food or even to her own maternal nourishment. The mother’s breast is purified before breastfeeding the child. There are other parts of the body related to the woman’s in labour or the upbringing of the children that are tabú. The ritual treatment given to the placenta (afterbirth) and the umbilical cord are based on the belief that can cause harm to the baby. But the umbilical cord is treated in a different

way because it is connected in a sympathetic way to the baby. It is considered an appendix of the baby after its separation.

### **The new links : The second gate conflict**

The threshold stages of birth it is not overcome with the breaking off with the mother. She is essential to start other different links. The second birth to the baby is to be immersed in its own community. That is the second gate conflict to it : to start its interactive social ritual bounds and becoming a “social being”, to get to know its own community and get used to new people. That is to say : the incorporation of someone else in the group with its new condition of human being . And that involves to assume some tasks and to gain some rights in the future.

### **Food and links**

Finally I will like to comment the importance of food in this ritual as a symbolic expression of the different links and during the aggregating process. It is well known how the guest are present in all the occasions where people are gathered together and not only in celebrations. During the “tuparapará” food is present in all of the stages of the ritual and everyone receives food in some way or another. The first symbolic nourishment of the baby is given immediately as soon as it crosses the threshold stage. It is at this moment when the mother pretends to take the “sisa” and her breast is purified. During the symbolic instruction of the baby : the baby-boy is shown an arch and traps in order to find food. The baby-girl is shown some hardware stores to cook food.

Ancestors are as well fed with the offers of the grandmother and lately all the guest takes part in the banquet. We can appreciate in this nutritional rite have

several meanings : as a bond element , as a ritual offer and as simple food in itself for the baby to be feed very important in its first stage of life.

### **Final considerations**

I would like to emphasize a final consideration of what this ritual express. It stands out the importance of the processes of separation and connection for the individual to become a “social being”. It also stresses the condition of sociability from the very beginning of the start of life. The social identity goes beyond the significance act of birth. To performance this the baby is presented as an “alive body” but with its social identity which is gained through different stages : the baby gets to know its relatives extending its social connections to new fellows. To sum up the main idea of the ritual is to answer questions such as “To whom I do belong?” or “Who I am ?”