



RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIALIZATION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH VIDOMEGONAT: ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF A CHANGING BENINESE TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

The vidomegonat, a Beninese customary practice in which a child is entrusted to another family, 'brought up' for socialisation and the transmission of values, is undergoing profound upheavals that are affecting its foundations of solidarity, mutual aid and child protection. This anthropological study shows that the vidomegonat in Benin has been transformed into a system of economic exploitation of children, now known as the 'vidomegon phenomenon', where children in care are often subjected to forced labour, ill-treatment and deprivation of their fundamental rights. It examines the causes of this change, highlighting poverty, urbanisation, the weakening of traditional family structures and changes in social norms, particularly the perception of the child, as the main factors. The study proposes to transform vidomegonat into a positive vector of development by strengthening legislation, supporting vulnerable families and promoting economic alternatives, while using Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to protect children's rights and preserve the positive aspects of this tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

Vidomegonat, also known as Vidomekpa in Fòn, Evilamegbo in Àjà-Mina, and Ọmọ Odo in Yoruba-Nagô, is an ancestral customary practice in Benin consisting of entrusting or placing a child with someone other than his or her biological parents. This practice, deeply rooted in the Àjà-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures, aims to ensure the education, socialization and integration of the child within the community. Vidomegonat is based on philosophical, moral and social values that govern community life and determine behavioral norms and rules of law. This article aims to explore how vidomegonat contributes to the socialization and identity construction of the Beninese child. By examining the different forms of this practice and their implications, we will seek to understand its role in the transmission of cultural and social values, as well as its impact on the personal and community development of children. The practice or custom of vidomegonat, although having deep roots in Beninese culture, is today subject to criticism and controversy, particularly due to the abuses and excesses observed in recent decades. How can this ancestral custom, which aims to guarantee optimal education and socialization for the child, be adapted to

contemporary requirements for the protection of children's rights? What are the mechanisms by which vidomegonat contributes to the identity construction and social integration of the child in a context of modernity and globalization? To answer these questions, we adopted an anthropological approach combining several complementary methods. This approach begins with an in-depth review of the academic literature and existing case studies on vidomegonat, which allows us to establish a solid theoretical basis. Subsequently, we conduct interviews and collect testimonies from the different actors involved: children in care, foster families and biological parents. This approach is complemented by participant observation, involving immersion in the communities practicing vidomegonat to directly observe the rituals and social interactions associated with this practice. We also carry out a comparative analysis by comparing vidomegonat practices with other cultural forms of socialization and child protection in different cultures, in order to better understand their specificities and issues in a broader perspective. This multidimensional approach allows us to understand vidomegonat in all its anthropological complexity, by combining empirical data, direct testimonies and intercultural perspective.

To analyze vidomɛgɔnat, a Beninese sociocultural practice, this research adopts a complex analytical framework that encompasses historical, social, cultural, psychological, and ethical aspects. This theoretical framework is based on three key perspectives: Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1962) theory of social structures, which explores the evolution and integration of vidomɛgɔnat in Beninese society; Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) and Jack Goody's (1983) theory of social reproduction, which examines the educational, social, and economic functions of the practice; and Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1992) critical approach, which addresses contemporary issues related to children's rights. These perspectives offer unique and complementary insights into the various aspects of vidomɛgɔnat, thus allowing for a better understanding of this living tradition and its implications. To provide an in-depth understanding of vidomɛgɔnat as a mechanism of socialization and identity construction, this article is structured in four main sections, the first of which analyzes the historical origins and evolution of this age-old practice in contemporary Beninese society, as well as its operational modalities, detailing the child placement processes, the actors involved, and the underlying reasons. The second section analyzes in depth the socialization and identity construction of the child within the framework of vidomɛgɔnat, deciphering the rituals and symbols associated with this practice, and highlights the essential role of guardians and the community in transmitting cultural values, inculcating social norms, and protecting the vidomɛgɔn, that is, the child "put to be raised," thus revealing the complexity and richness of this traditional system of education and integration.

The third section analyses in depth the multidimensional impacts of vidomɛgɔnat on children and the community, exploring its impact on the personal, social, cognitive and educational development of vidomɛgɔn, while addressing contemporary challenges related to child exploitation and protection, potential psychological, emotional and health sequelae, and drawing on testimonies and case studies to illustrate the complexity and diversity of experiences within this traditional system. The fourth and final section will present the results of the study and the prospects for evolution, critically analyse public policies and civil society interventions concerning vidomɛgɔnat, and propose recommendations and ethical avenues of reflection to reform this practice, in order to effectively protect children's rights while preserving the beneficial aspects of this deeply rooted cultural tradition.

Vidomɛgɔnat: An ancestral tradition of socialization and child protection among the Ajá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô of Benin: Vidomɛgɔnat, an ancestral practice deeply rooted in the Ajá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures of Benin, represents a complex and multidimensional system of socialization and child protection. This centuries-old tradition, with distant origins, is based on deep philosophical and cultural foundations that continue to shape contemporary Beninese society. Through its various forms and manifestations, vidomɛgɔnat fulfills essential functions in the development and social integration of children, while striving to value and respect their rights. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, this practice has been able to adapt and persist, demonstrating its resilience and continued importance in the Beninese social fabric. This article explores the multiple facets of vidomɛgɔnat, from its historical roots to its current role, including its operating mechanisms and its impact on children's identity construction. By examining this tradition from a historical, sociological and anthropological perspective,

we seek to understand how vidomɛgɔnat continues to play a crucial role in the socialization and protection of children, while adapting to the demands of contemporary society. The origins of the practice of vidomɛgɔnat, known as Vidomekpa in Fòn, Evilamegbo or Vilamegbo in Ajá-mina, and Ọmọ Odo in Yoruba-Nagô, date back to time immemorial and are deeply rooted in the Ajá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures of Benin. A historiographical examination of this traditional institution reveals that it embodies the various cultural and social representations of the child within these communities, thus reflecting their specific conceptions of education and socialization, and consequently, their conception of child protection. As shown in our 2014 thesis, these representations are manifested through children's names, proverbs, tales and traditional songs, constituting a rich corpus that illustrates the central place of the child in these societies and the values that guide his education, socialization and protection, based on the ethnophilosophy of the Ajá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô. According to the ethnographic materials known to date and collected by us, vidomɛgɔnat turns out to be a secular practice deeply rooted in Beninese society. This traditional institution occupies a prominent place in the Ajá-fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures, playing a crucial role in child development. The data collected show that vidomɛgɔnat significantly increases the child's capacities for action, development, and integration. This practice aligns remarkably with the guiding principles of the Ajá-fòn and Yoruba-Nagô ethnophilosophy, thus reflecting the deep values of these communities. Our ethnographic observations reveal that vidomɛgɔnat is much more than a simple method of education; it is a complex system of socialization that embodies the cultural and social representations of childhood in these societies. The rituals, songs, proverbs, and tales associated with this practice, which we documented in our previous work in 2014, testify to its cultural richness and its importance in the transmission of traditional knowledge and values. This ethnographic approach allowed us to understand how vidomɛgɔnat has been able to endure through the ages, adapting to societal changes while preserving its fundamental essence in the training of future Beninese generations.

Vidomɛgɔnat, an ancestral practice whose origins date back to the formation of the first human groups in the Ajá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultural areas, was of great use to the Houégbadja dynasty of Abomey (17th-19th century). This traditional institution played a crucial role in the construction and sustainability of the kingdom, being skillfully exploited by the sovereigns to consolidate their power, guarantee social cohesion and ensure the development of the kingdom. At the heart of Beninese social organization, vidomɛgɔnat profoundly shaped the structure of families, communities and clans. Its importance in society was comparable to that of certain European practices of the time, particularly in terms of socialization and training of young people. Indeed, this tradition has proven to be a fundamental pillar of Beninese social and educational structure, with similarities to the apprenticeship and tutoring systems observed in medieval and early modern Europe. A comparison between vidomɛgɔnat and certain European practices reveals notable similarities, such as the sending of young nobles to the court under Louis XIV in France to learn etiquette and the arts of war, or the Spanish infants sent to other European courts to strengthen diplomatic alliances, and the young nobles welcomed by the Habsburg court in Austria for their education. Similarly, the German, Danish, and Dutch courts that sent young princes and nobles

for training aimed at creating links between royal families and ensuring quality education, *vidomɛgɔnat* aimed to socialize young elites, instill in them the values and skills necessary for their future role, and strengthen inter-family and political relations. Exploring the philosophical foundations of *vidomɛgɔnat* reveals a centuries-old tradition deeply rooted in the Àjà-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures of Benin, guided by principles that aim to promote the development of the child and strengthen social cohesion within communities. This practice values the child as a precious being, whose physical, moral, intellectual and social development is at the heart of a holistic philosophy of education. By serving as a vector for the transmission of ancestral values and knowledge, *vidomɛgɔnat* immerses the child in a new environment that allows him or her to internalize community codes and traditions. It also promotes the socialization and integration of the child by making him or her active in daily activities, while offering stable protection to children facing family difficulties. By strengthening social cohesion through mutual aid and solidarity, *vidomɛgɔnat* asserts itself as a pillar of community stability and education, thus preserving the essential principles of the Àjà-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures. The diversity of forms of *vidomɛgɔnat* in Beninese society illustrates its adaptability to varied family needs and contexts. Mainly, this practice is manifested by the placement of the child within the extended family, with a friend or close acquaintance, or with a religious or spiritual leader. Placement within the extended family, often the most common, helps maintain family ties and pass on traditions. When the extended family is not available, the child can be placed with a close acquaintance, offering a flexible solution. Finally, placement with a religious or spiritual leader meets the specific needs of religious or spiritual education. *Vidomɛgɔnat* and European placement practices, although distinct in their cultural contexts and purposes, share common goals of training and strengthening social ties. *Vidomɛgɔnat* is distinguished by its orientation towards family cohesion and cultural transmission, while European practices aimed to prepare young people for leadership roles and consolidate political alliances. This comparison highlights the importance of cultural practices in the formation of young people and the shaping of societies, while highlighting the diversity of approaches according to cultural and historical contexts. Although distinct in their cultural contexts and purposes, *vidomɛgɔnat* and European placement practices share common goals of training, integration and strengthening social ties, thus illustrating the diversity of educational and social approaches throughout history and the world. The comparative analysis of these practices allows for a better understanding of the values, priorities and social structures of the societies that developed them.

Regarding the functions of the *vidomɛgɔnat*, it should be recalled that this institution plays a fundamental and multidimensional role in Beninese society. The *vidomɛgɔnat* first allows the education and socialization of children by transmitting to them the values, norms and traditions of the community, while promoting their social development through diversified interactions. In addition, it ensures the protection and well-being of children by providing a stable environment, particularly when the biological family encounters difficulties. In addition, the *vidomɛgɔnat* strengthens social ties by facilitating solidarity and mutual aid within the community, while sharing the responsibilities related to the education and development of children. Finally, it plays a crucial role in the

preservation of culture by contributing to the transmission of ancestral knowledge and the safeguarding of the traditions of the Àjà-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô communities. Fruit of the ethnophilosophy and history of the Àjà-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô, *vidomɛgɔnat* stands out as a living and adaptive tradition, at the service of the child and society. This ancestral practice, deeply respectful of the rights of the child, ensures a protective and caring framework, even in the event of family difficulties, by offering the child an environment conducive to his personal and social development. Capable of evolving to integrate modern aspects while preserving its fundamental values, *vidomɛgɔnat* demonstrates its resilience and relevance in the current context. It thus stands out as a valuable model for contemporary societies, seeking sustainable solutions for the well-being of children and the strengthening of social cohesion. At the end of this exploration, *vidomɛgɔnat* is revealed as a fundamental pillar of Beninese society, embodying a model of holistic and inclusive education that, while perpetuating traditions, shaping elites and preserving the social and cultural order, remains a living heritage and a precious source of inspiration to be preserved and adapted to contemporary realities. Thus, after establishing the foundations of *vidomɛgɔnat* as an adaptive practice that respects children's rights, it is crucial to explore its specific mechanisms of socialization and identity construction, by analyzing the associated rituals and symbols, their role in the transmission of cultural values and social norms, and the importance of guardians and the community in the education of children in care.

Socialization and Identity Construction: *Vidomɛgɔnat*, a Traditional System at the Service of the Child: The analysis of *vidomɛgɔnat* through the anthropology of childhood socialization sheds light on the complex processes of identity development and cultural adaptation of children, enriching our understanding of holistic educational models and influencing the improvement of global education practices by integrating specific cultural values. *Vidomɛgɔnat*, much more than a simple child placement, is an initiatory journey imbued with rituals and symbols rooted in the àjà-fòn and Yoruba-nagô cultures that play a crucial role in the socialization and identity development of the placed child, thus offering a fascinating analytical ground to explore these deep links. It functions as a complex set of rituals and symbolic practices that facilitate socialization and identity construction. The "raising ceremony", described by Dah Gbegnito and echoing the observations of Boris Cyrulnik's thesis on resilience and rituals from 2013, illustrates the crucial role of rituals in the construction of identity and the child's sense of security. According to him, these codified practices "help in the construction of identity" by allowing the child to "feel secure and familiar with his environment". This statement finds a powerful echo in the words of Dah Gbegnito, who emphasizes that the "raising ceremony" plays a similar role for Fòn children. This ritual, far from being a simple folk tradition, creates a secure and familiar framework for the child in care. Framed by codified symbols and gestures, the child is integrated into his new family and his adopted or surrogate community, thus fostering his sense of belonging and his rooting in Fòn culture. The convergence between Dah Gbegnito's observations and Cyrulnik's theory highlights the universality of the psychological mechanisms underlying rituals. Whether practiced in traditional or modern societies, rituals seem to play an essential role in the development of identity and a child's sense of security.

This complementarity between local tradition and universal theory underlines the importance of taking into account specific cultural practices in the analysis of children's psychological development. Far from being simple superstitions or outdated customs, rituals can be valuable tools for promoting the development and resilience of children, particularly in contexts of change or difficulty. Indeed, the example of the vidomegonat and the "raising" ceremony strikingly illustrates the convergence between Beninese tradition and universal theory on the role of rituals in the construction of children's identity. This convergence highlights the importance of valuing local cultural practices and integrating them into modern approaches to developmental psychology. Furthermore, by participating in community activities such as learning family values, doing domestic or agricultural work, and celebrating local festivals, the foster child (viđómegón) gradually integrates cultural norms and strengthens his or her belonging to the group. Inspired by the work of Lévi-Strauss (1950), Turner (1969) and Bombardier (2001), this system illustrates how rites of passage shape individual identity in constant dialogue with collective identity, transforming the child into a full member of the community or foster family. The vidomegonat embodies the fundamental tension between adaptation and self-affirmation that Dubar identifies in the process of identity formation. On the one hand, the child in care internalizes the expectations and norms of his or her new foster, adoptive, or substitute family (the social "I"), while on the other hand, he or she develops his or her own individuality and capacity for action (the "I"). The vidomegonat, through its rituals and symbols, embodies this dialectic between conformity and singularity, anchoring the child in a collective tradition while supporting his or her personal and social development and preserving his or her essential family ties. The vidomegonat plays an essential role in the transmission of cultural values and norms, thus contributing to the preservation of cultural identity. Children in care (viđómegón) in this system are exposed to a rich variety of ancestral knowledge and traditional practices that shape their understanding of the world. As we showed in our thesis in 2014, "The experience of vidomegonat, by immersing the viđómegón in a distinct symbolic and ritual universe, promotes the construction of a plural identity.

By appropriating the traditions of their new community of belonging, while maintaining a link with their origins, the child weaves a rich and complex identity, nourished by the diversity of their cultural experiences. "By assimilating these elements, they become active vectors of the culture of their community, thus ensuring sustainability and social cohesion. This intergenerational transmission strengthens their sense of belonging and allows each generation to appropriate a living cultural heritage, ensuring that traditions are not lost and that the cultural identity of the community remains strong and resilient. The transformation of values and norms within the vidomegonat takes place through constant dialogue between generations. Tutors, as guardians of traditions, guide children in learning cultural and social codes, while sharing their own worldview. At the same time, children introduce new perspectives and ask questions that can challenge and enrich established norms. This dynamic process fosters continuous reflection and allows the community to adapt to societal developments, while preserving the essence of its traditions. In this way, the vidomegonat becomes a space for cultural exchange and renewal, where tradition and innovation coexist harmoniously, allowing for an evolution that respects the past

while embracing the future. In sum, vidomegonat illustrates how traditional cultural practices, through their rituals and community structures, serve as effective mechanisms for transmitting values, building identity, and strengthening social cohesion. An in-depth analysis of this cultural system, as a holistic education model shaping the personal, social, and identity development of the viđómegón, will allow us to better understand its impacts and optimize its benefits for the well-being of children and the community.

Vidomegonat: cultural anchoring and social springboard for the child and the community: A practice deeply rooted in the Àjá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures, vidomegonat represents much more than a simple system of child placement. It embodies a cultural heritage that plays a crucial role in the identity and social development of children, while strengthening community cohesion. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) pointed out, "Culture is not a set of rules or norms, but a web of meanings in which human beings are caught." This perspective highlights the importance of cultural practices such as vidomegonat in the formation of identity and a sense of belonging. Vidomegonat, as we have seen throughout this study, provides a structured setting where children immerse themselves in the values and traditions of their host community. This immersion not only facilitates the acquisition of practical and social skills, but also the construction of a strong cultural identity. By actively participating in community rituals and activities, children develop a sense of security and familiarity with their environment, which is essential for their personal and social development. In addition, this traditional practice contributes to social cohesion by integrating children into a community support network. Caring relationships with caregivers and community members foster harmonious integration, thereby strengthening social bonds and solidarity within the community. As Mary Douglas (1966) observed, "Rituals are powerful means of structuring experience and strengthening social bonds." Vidomegonat, through its rituals and symbols, perfectly illustrates this dynamic, showing how cultural practices can serve as a springboard for children's social and identity development.

Thus, Vidomegonat represents a model of holistic development that benefits both children and host communities. It demonstrates the importance of cultural practices in identity building and social cohesion, while providing a structured framework for acquiring essential skills for life in society. Vidomegonat, although rooted in specific cultures, offers universal lessons for strengthening social cohesion and community development. Our ethnographic research explores these teachings in depth, drawing on the words and experiences of those who live and practice this tradition. According to Marie Sossou, "By integrating children into foster families within the community, vidomegonat creates new social bonds and strengthens the community fabric, a process that could be compared to the construction of united and resilient societies, as described by the World Bank. "In Beninese society, this integration, according to our ethnographic materials, involves the active participation of various members of the community in the education and development of children, which is consistent with the idea of mobilizing governments, local populations, civil society, the private sector and marginalized populations for social development.

Having said this, it is worth remembering that according to the ethnophilosophy of the Ajá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô peoples, the *vidomègɔnat* system thus generates a support network for children and families, similar to the positive impact of the neighborhood mentioned in research on the effects of the social environment, where communities can help children prepare for school through support networks, accessible services, and positive reinforcement of social behaviors. Furthermore, by allowing children to immerse themselves in the traditions and cultural practices of the community, *vidomègɔnat* contributes to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, which strengthens collective identity and social cohesion. The *vidomègɔnat* experience also helps children develop social and emotional skills, which are essential for long-term social cohesion, thus supporting the idea that social cohesion at the community level positively influences children's cognitive and behavioral attitudes. Finally, by providing development opportunities to children who might otherwise be disadvantaged, *vidomègɔnat* contributes to reducing social inequalities, a key objective of social development according to the World Bank. These dimensions show how *vidomègɔnat*, as a cultural and social practice, can potentially strengthen social cohesion within the communities that practice it, thus fitting into an anthropological perspective of preserving and energizing social and cultural ties (cf. Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner). Although *vidomègɔnat* offers many advantages in terms of socialization, cultural transmission, and benefits for both the child and the community, it also presents challenges that, in the contemporary context marked by constantly changing social and family dynamics, require sustained attention and adaptation of traditional practices to continue to serve the best interests of the children involved. Indeed, it is observed that *vidomègɔnat*, once a symbol of solidarity and child protection, has evolved since the 1980s to give rise to the *viđómegɔn* phenomenon, a pernicious deviation characterized by abuse, economic exploitation, as well as child trafficking and trafficking, thus disrupting the principles of respect and protection of children's rights that were once sanctified by this traditional practice. The first manifestation of the *viđómegɔn* phenomenon, distinct from *vidomègɔnat* which was a system of child placement based on solidarity, is the widespread abuse of children in care. This drift is manifested by physical, psychological and sexual violence, as well as serious neglect, causing devastating impacts on the development and well-being of the children concerned.

According to the field data collected as part of our thesis between 2010 and 2012, the phenomenon manifests itself in various forms of abuse, including physical violence (blows, injuries, corporal punishment), psychological and moral violence (humiliation, threats, rejection), sexual violence (abuse, rape, incest), as well as serious neglect (food deprivation, lack of care, exclusion), leading to harmful consequences on the physical and mental health of the children in care, their development and their social integration. It is crucial to intervene to protect these children and restore their right to a respectful and fulfilling childhood, and consequently, a tradition that once served the development of society. The second manifestation of the *viđómegɔn* phenomenon, a deviation from the traditional system, consists of the economic exploitation of children in care by guardians or parents in financial difficulty. The data collected show that *Viđómegɔn* children are economically exploited through dangerous and unhealthy work (domestic, agricultural, begging, prostitution,

drug trafficking) for long hours and minimal pay. Forced to work in dangerous conditions and deprived of their right to education, many *Viđómegɔn* see their intellectual and professional development seriously compromised today, which marginalizes them and perpetuates cycles of poverty, highlighting the urgent need for intervention to ensure equitable access to education and protect their fundamental rights. The third major manifestation of this drift concerns child trafficking and smuggling. Child trafficking, deeply linked to economic exploitation and uprooting, constitutes a serious violation of human rights that destabilizes the traditional system of *vidomègɔnat*, leading to the internal displacement and illegal immigration of thousands of children, and thus compromising their future. It manifests itself in various forms such as abusive placement through *vidomègɔnat*, forced labor, sexual exploitation, forced begging and organ trafficking. This scourge causes physical and psychological trauma, loss of childhood and deprivation of education, seriously compromising the future of child victims. To fully understand the devastating impact of the *viđómegɔn* phenomenon on children in care (*viđómegɔn*), it is essential to examine poignant case studies and testimonies, which reveal the daily realities of abuse, economic exploitation and trafficking of these children, highlighting the serious violations of their fundamental rights. Some heartbreaking stories of children victims of abuse and exploitation by the heartbreaking stories of children victims of abuse and exploitation by the *viđómegɔn* phenomenon.

The poignant testimonies of Ruth, John, and Wesley, three young victims of the *viđómegɔn* phenomenon in Benin, reveal the horror of abuse, trafficking and exploitation of children in care in today's Beninese society. Ruth, a 10-year-old Gùn girl, endured horrific abuse at the home of two women in Gbɔxikɔn. Placed with Dame Gisèle, she was forced to do household chores and sell ice water and yogurt, suffering beatings, death threats, and even torture for a mere loss of 50 CFA francs. Denied treatment for a severe ulcer, she fled to another home, only to find the same abuse, illustrating the deep physical and psychological scars inflicted on these exploited children, deprived of dignity and basic rights. This story underscores the urgent need for collective action to end these inhumane practices and protect vulnerable children in Benin.

Similarly, the story of 11-year-old John highlights the harsh reality of children who are victims of the *viđómegɔn* phenomenon. Deceived by his guardian's promise of schooling, he is instead exploited in her trade, enduring daily physical abuse, cruel punishment, and severe neglect. Deprived of sleep, food, and care, John lives in inhumane conditions, sleeping in the kitchen and living on scraps. Labeled "*viđómegɔn*" and rejected by his parents, he dreams of escaping at age 15 to learn a trade, a tenuous hope that underscores the need for urgent intervention to protect these exploited children. Wesley, an Aizo boy from the Atlantic, shares a similar story of despair. Placed by his uncle in a foster home in Cotonou, Wesley serves as unpaid labor for his guardian's wife, who sells at the Gbogbanou market. He gets up at dawn to transport goods and endures long days of backbreaking work, without respite or recognition. His daily life is punctuated by insults, humiliations, and beatings. Working more than 12 hours a day, he is deprived of food and affection, treated with dehumanizing cruelty that illustrates the transformation of a traditional practice into a system of

exploitation. These poignant testimonies of Ruth, John, and Wesley reveal the dark reality of the exploitation and abuse of the "vidomègon" in Benin, highlighting the urgent need for intervention to protect these young victims and restore their dignity. Child trafficking victims of the vidomègon phenomenon in Benin: The poignant stories of Jill, Allannah-Erykah and Essie Jill, Allannah-Erykah and Essie, three young girls from Benin, were all victims of child trafficking. Their heartbreaking testimonies tell stories of betrayal, exploitation and violence. Jill, 17, was promised an apprenticeship in sewing in Ivory Coast by her maternal aunt. But instead, she lived through five years of hell, forced into domestic work and street vending, while suffering physical and sexual abuse. Raped, she gave birth to a child who was taken away from her and made sick. Back in Benin, she was taken in by an association. Her story illustrates the serious consequences of child trafficking and the importance of urgent action to protect and rehabilitate victims. Allannah-Erykah, 16, was sent to her aunt in Gabon by her parents, hoping for a better future. But during the journey, she was trafficked, sequestered, starved and raped by the courier. In Libreville, she was exploited, forced into backbreaking labor, and subjected to humiliation and corporal punishment. Traumatized by the deaths of other child traffickers, Allannah-Erykah dreams of returning home. Her testimony highlights the brutality of child trafficking and the urgent need for intervention to protect these young lives. Essie, 16, was trafficked internationally at the age of 9. Promised schooling and a better life by her uncle, she was taken to Gabon where she became a domestic slave. Exploited, raped, and harassed, she was forced into prostitution to survive.

These harrowing accounts, illustrating the cruelty and devastating impact of child trafficking, share alarming commonalities – the abuse of family trust, perilous journeys, multifaceted exploitation, systematic violence, profound trauma, and a yearning to return – that sharply challenge our collective conscience and call for urgent and concerted action to end these atrocities, protect vulnerable children, and ensure that such horrors never happen again. The drift of vidomègonat seriously compromises child protection by violating the fundamental rights of children, as defined by international conventions. Negative manifestations, including economic exploitation, abuse, and trafficking of vidomègon children, create precarious conditions that neglect their education, health, and well-being. These violations of rights compromise their access to a stable and protective family environment, highlighting the need for enhanced cooperation between traditional authorities and state institutions to ensure adequate protection. In light of these observations, it is clear that vidomègonat, once a pillar of Beninese community solidarity, a social springboard for the child and the community, is today at a crossroads, torn between tradition and modernity, collateral victim of the rapid evolution of family and social structures in a country undergoing societal and cultural change. Indeed, the recent evolution of the traditional dynamics of vidomègonat in Beninese society is closely linked to the profound transformations of family structures, themselves influenced by modernity and societal changes. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai pointed out in his 1996 book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, rural-urban and international migration have led to the dispersion of families, making it more difficult to maintain community ties and traditional practices. This observation applies perfectly to the Beninese context, where rural exodus

and urbanization have changed the traditional social fabric. The vidomègonat, once anchored in an extended family and community system, is now facing new challenges. The nuclear family tends to replace the extended family structure, thus reducing the opportunities for traditional child care. In addition, changing social roles, including the emancipation of women and their entry into the labor market, have changed family dynamics and childcare arrangements. These structural changes have led to a significant transformation of the vidomègonat, which is moving away from its original form to the more controversial phenomenon of the vidomègon. This evolution reflects the challenges of structural change in a globalized world, as described by Losch, Freguin-Gresh, and White (2013) in their analysis of rural transformations and development. In some cases, the practice has adapted to urban realities, sometimes taking less traditional forms and closer to a modern childcare system. In other cases, it has unfortunately deviated from its initial objectives, giving rise to situations of exploitation. Thus, the evolution of vidomègonat reflects the tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary Beninese society. Hence the need to rethink traditional practices in light of new social realities, while preserving the values of solidarity and mutual aid that are at the heart of this ancestral custom. In short, vidomègonat remains a valuable practice for the social and identity development of children and for strengthening community cohesion. However, for it to continue to fulfill this role in the contemporary context, adaptations are necessary to address the challenges of abuse, economic exploitation, trafficking and trafficking, not to mention the protection of children's rights, and the evolution of family structures. By integrating these concerns, the vidomègonat institution will continue to be a positive force for the children and communities that practice it, adapting to societal changes while preserving the essence of its traditional values.

Results of the study, prospects for development and recommendations: The results of our study reveal a worrying evolution of the vidomègonat which has transformed from a practice of solidarity into a system of exploitation of children, highlighting the urgency of reforming this institution to protect it from abuses and guarantee the well-being of children. Indeed, vidomègonat, rooted in the traditions of the Àjà-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô of Benin and West Africa, initially designed to entrust a child to another family in a spirit of solidarity and community mutual assistance in order to offer him better opportunities for education, socialization, promotion and protection of children's rights has drifted alarmingly over time into a system of economic exploitation known as the "vidomègon phenomenon", where placed children, called vidomègon, are often exposed to various forms of abuse and deprivation of fundamental rights, thus becoming victims of trafficking and exploitation. The evolution of vidomègonat, from a practice of solidarity to a system of economic exploitation of children, highlights the excesses of a tradition and the need for urgent action to protect the fundamental rights of children. The results of our field surveys essentially show that this practice has experienced a significant drift under the influence of socio-economic factors. Over time, vidomègonat has deviated from its original meaning, moving from the education and well-being of the child to economic exploitation. The "placing" families have begun to perceive children, in general, and the vidomègon, in particular, as free labor, entrusting them with heavy household chores, agricultural work or commercial activities, to the detriment of

their personal development and well-being. Victims of a perverted system, which takes them in a vice of mistreatment, exploitation and trafficking, the *vidómegón*, according to our surveys and analyses, live a nightmarish daily life, punctuated by intolerable suffering. Physical and psychological abuse, deprivation of education and exploitation through work constitute their sad reality, trampling on their dignity and shattering their innocence. Forced to perform exhausting household chores, hard agricultural work or lucrative commercial activities for their "foster family", these children see their health, development and schooling seriously compromised. Deprived of their fundamental right to education, their future is darkened by limited prospects. Victims of a perverted system that has betrayed its original values of solidarity and mutual aid, the *vidómegón* children silently cry for help. Their ordeal challenges the national conscience and demands collective mobilization to break the chains of injustice and guarantee them a dignified future that respects their fundamental rights. The transformation of *vidómegónat*, which we have referred to as the *vidomègon* phenomenon in our previous research, from an ancestral practice of solidarity to the economic exploitation of children is driven by a confluence of socio-economic and cultural factors. Our field surveys revealed that rural poverty, exacerbated by families' difficulties in providing for their children, pushes them to entrust their children to other families in the hope of providing them with a better education and better economic opportunities, hopes often betrayed by the exploitation of children as free labour. Rapid urbanisation and rural exodus have also disintegrated traditional family structures, making migrant children (*vidómegón*) particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon, as urban families, under economic pressure, see them as a source of cheap labour. At the same time, the weakening of traditional family structures, resulting from social change and increasing individualization, has transformed *vidómegónat*, once based on solidarity, into an alternative that is often economically exploited, thus exposing children to abuse and mistreatment. This situation is aggravated by ambivalent social perceptions: some continue to consider *vidómegónat* as a cultural tradition of solidarity, while others, thanks to awareness-raising efforts by NGOs, UNICEF and local authorities, are becoming aware of abuses and violations of children's rights, leading to a gradual questioning of this practice.

The study of *vidómegónat* also reveals a radical transformation or evolution in the social representation of the child in contemporary Beninese society. As our previous work has demonstrated, the child, once considered "the noblest wealth in the world" and "a precious capital," has seen its status change drastically to become a simple commodity and cheap labor. In the past, the child was perceived as an added value, a "real labor force" and "an incomparable societal gain," contributing to the social recognition and political legitimacy of the members of the community. The names given to children, the songs and the proverbs testified to this noble and fundamental vision, which made it possible to strengthen the traditional decision-making and governance bodies of the city. Under the effect of poverty, urbanization and the disintegration of traditional family structures, this valorizing perception of the child has been eroded. Today, in the context of the *vidomègon* phenomenon, the child is increasingly seen as an exploitable economic resource, a means of subsistence for families in difficulty, or a source of low-cost labor for urban households.

This change in the social perception of the child has serious consequences for their well-being and rights, facilitating their economic exploitation, mistreatment, and the violation of their fundamental rights, particularly in education and health. This study reveals how an ancestral cultural practice has been transformed by profound socio-economic changes. The *vidómegónat* appears to reveal the tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary Beninese society. It highlights the challenges of child protection in a context of poverty and transformation of family structures. In light of the results, it is essential to strengthen the legislative framework governing the customary practice of *vidómegónat*, to conduct awareness-raising campaigns among communities on children's rights and the dangers of exploitation, and to set up economic development programs for rural families in order to reduce their vulnerability. The results of the study reveal significant gaps in public policies and civil society interventions aimed at combating child exploitation within the *vidómegónat* system. Although laws exist to theoretically protect children, their implementation is hampered by the socio-cultural complexity of this customary practice, which is deeply rooted in local traditions. Control and sanction mechanisms are often ineffective, providing room for maneuver for the actors involved. In addition, there is a lack of coordination between NGOs and other civil society actors, local authorities and social services, which weakens the impact of isolated interventions and limits their reach.

Current policies favour a repressive approach, focused on criminalising the practice, without addressing root causes such as poverty, social inequalities and the lack of economic alternatives. This approach can strengthen community resistance and hamper the development of sustainable solutions. Furthermore, interventions do not sufficiently take into account the positive dimensions of *vidómegónat*, such as solidarity and mutual aid, which can lead to resistance to change. To overcome these limitations, it is imperative to adopt a nuanced and integrated approach, strengthening legal frameworks while taking into account local realities, improving coordination between actors, addressing the causes and consequences of exploitation, and promoting the positive aspects of *vidómegónat*. This approach must work to restore the social representation of the child in Beninese society by reaffirming its fundamental and precious value, by promoting initiatives celebrating its central role in the community, and by guaranteeing its right to a healthy and fulfilling education and development. This analysis highlights the need for in-depth reflection on public policies and civil society interventions to ensure effective protection of children who are victims of exploitation within the *vidómegónat* system.

To effectively combat the *vidomègon* phenomenon, restore *vidómegónat* and, consequently, the social representation of the child, it is imperative to develop holistic public policies that simultaneously address the root causes of exploitation, by strengthening education, improving rural living conditions and actively involving communities in the design and implementation of culturally appropriate solutions. As we have been emphasizing since this theme became our preferred field of research, "*Vidómegónat*, a complex customary practice deeply rooted in socio-economic and cultural realities, requires a multidimensional reform approach to ensure true effectiveness and sustainability." In this light, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development offers a relevant framework for addressing child

protection and development in the context of vidomègonat, by emphasizing the importance of interactions between the child and the different systems that surround him or her, from the family microsystem to the cultural macrosystem, and by showing that child development is influenced by multiple interdependent factors, which corresponds well to the complexity of vidomègonat. By adopting this ecosystemic approach, vidomègonat, particularly the vidomègon phenomenon, could be profoundly transformed by evolving it towards practices that are more respectful of children's rights. This implies working simultaneously at the level of families, communities, public policies and cultural values. By strengthening the links between these different levels, a more protective environment for children can be created and sustainable change can be fostered. Conclusion This in-depth study on socialization and identity construction through vidomègonat in Benin reveals an ancestral customary practice in Benin with multiple facets, highlighting a complex system of "raising," wrongly called placement or fostering of children, which, by entrusting their education and socialization to people other than their biological parents, acts as a powerful vector of cultural transmission and a protection mechanism, thus shaping the identity construction and social integration of children within the community.

An ancestral practice stemming from the ethnophilosophy of the Àjá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô peoples of Lower and Middle Benin, vidomègonat has historically contributed to the happiness and success of thousands of Beninese children, now established in the administrative, economic, political, cultural and social sectors, making this tradition a powerful vector of integration and social advancement that has allowed many children to flourish in various fields. The study reveals that vidomègonat, an ancestral customary practice deeply rooted in Beninese society that has demonstrated its resilience and adaptability through the ages and crises, has unfortunately mutated in recent decades into an alarming phenomenon of mistreatment, multifaceted exploitation, trafficking and trafficking of children, thus violating their fundamental rights and calling into question its traditional role of protection and socialization, as our field results specify. Faced with the worrying evolution of vidomègonat towards a form of exploitation, it is urgent to adopt a systemic approach. Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979), we propose to act at all levels: individual, family, community and societal. This strategy, by actively involving local stakeholders, would make it possible to transform vidomègonat into a vector of positive development for children, while preserving its fundamental values. "It also seems imperative, in light of our results, to urge public authorities to adopt an innovative approach aimed at reaffirming the fundamental value of the child in Beninese society. This approach must result in the promotion of initiatives celebrating the central role of the child and guaranteeing their right to healthy and fulfilling development.

For vidomègonat to regain its original function as a vector of solidarity and community development, it is crucial to establish a harmonious balance between respect for traditions, protection of children's rights and promotion of human development. This synergy will make it possible to preserve the beneficial aspects of this ancestral practice while adapting it to contemporary child protection requirements.

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