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# **Transformations of Traditional Culture: The Role of Rites of Passage among the Avatime People in the Modern Era \***

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**Alina O. Lapushkina**

*International Center of Anthropology; National Research  
University Higher School of Economics; Institute for Afri-  
can Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences; Russian State  
University for the Humanities*

## **ABSTRACT**

*The evolution of social institutions, particularly of rites of passage, is a gradual process in West Africa, drawing on a centuries-long body of tradition, and influenced by various cultural, economic and political factors. Today, gathering piece-by-piece the oral tradition of the history of the rites of passage of a small ethnic group in eastern Ghana, one can find many examples of how these practices are adaptive by their very nature (Baiburin 1993). The structure of the rite has been shaped by various external factors and historical process. The attempt to explain such rites by saying simply that 'the ancestors did it this way' is insufficient. Rather, a regularized socialization practice, in this case rites of passage, shares its functions with a number of other socialization practices, while it continues to evolve.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This article is first to describe the evolution of rites of passage among girls of the traditional Avatime society. It particularly focuses on how the rites have changed since the colonial period. Using this phenomenon as an example, we will examine how the rites of passage and related social attitudes, gender roles, and social relationships in traditional society have changed. We will likewise analyze the relationship between gender in the world of ancestral spirits, and the general position of women in society. The examples of correlations between

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women's societal position and the presence of female spiritual beings in ancestral belief systems are provided in the work of the American scholar Marion Kilson (1976).<sup>1</sup>

The article is based on the analysis of field work conducted in Ghana during expeditions in 2011 and 2013, which became possible thanks to the help of the Vinokurov family of Russian missionaries, and several friends from the Avatime people. In addition to the observations included below, information was primarily gathered through questionnaires and interviews (whether structured, semi-structured, or unstructured). In total, 97 questionnaires were collected, and 43 interviews were granted.

### **THE ROLE OF RITES OF PASSAGE**

Cultural values, traditions and concepts of male and female social roles on the African continent were passed to children, from generation to generation, through socialization and enculturation. In the traditional patriarchal society, the roles of men and women were strictly delineated. Men assumed the duties of breadwinner and responsibility for wider social relationships, while women were occupied with housework and child-rearing.

The mechanisms for transmitting such social models from parent to child were primarily rites of passage, including the watershed moments such as naming, circumcision, and the first hair cutting. During these rites, younger members of the community, male and female, were inducted into adult life and introduced to the opportunities it offered. Their future prospects hinged entirely upon their biological genders. For example, in agricultural societies, boys assisted their fathers in field labor from an early age. Meanwhile, from around the age of six, girls were already responsible for the house's supply of water, whilst also helping their mothers with cooking.

The colonial period precipitated a certain 'shake-up' of traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and social attitudes in African cultures. 'The White Man' brought great political, socio-economic, and religious changes to Africa. The patterns of internal family relationships, most of all the authority of fathers and husbands, began to undergo a process of 'erosion' (Rybalkina 2011: 206). The scale of labor migration also increased, exerting a major influence on family and marital relationships. In the post-colonial period, women themselves became labor migrants. They began to leave their homes not simply as their husbands' spouses (which used to be a norm), but rather with the aim of independent earnings. Such changes affected both parenting models

and family structures, while also reflecting new roles for men and women in society in general (Brydon 1989: 31).

The establishment of schools and churches further reduced the role of traditional mechanisms of child socialization. On the one hand, the education system has assumed some of the functions previously fulfilled by families. Education has also, however, provided the opportunity to break with traditional practices, and to head for the 'bright city lights' instead (*Ibid.*: 45). Departing for the city has rendered educated African women increasingly distant from the ritual life of their native settlements. Religious changes, specifically the spread of Christianity and Islam, also created a number of preconditions for modern Africans' rejection of traditional beliefs and rites, or at least their gradual abandonment.

However, the traditional social attitudes are still preserved and continue to be transferred orally from generation to generation, mainly in village settings. The younger generation, increasingly raised not by parents, but by older relatives, continues to follow such traditions until a certain age. According to African demographers and sociologists, the adolescents become the most malleable part of society increasingly exposed to the influence of mutually opposing tendencies of tradition and modernity; they become involved in their parents' adult life and need to combine that involvement with educational commitments, with the preservation of traditional beliefs and participation in the established religious life of the local church or mosque (Adepoju 1995).

The prevailing variety of trends, social institutions, norms in the context of the culture of one people can be considered as one of the important prerequisites for the evolutionary process. This 'layering' demonstrates a sufficient level of sociocultural diversity, which usually entails a transition to a qualitatively new form (Bondarenko, Grinin, and Korotayev 2002).

#### **rites of passage and their transformation among the Avatime**

The Avatime are a small-scale society, inhabiting eight villages in Eastern Ghana's Volta Region. In total, they number 27,000 people, speaking the Sideme language (otherwise known as Siyase), which is a Niger-Congo language, belonging to the Kwa group.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that in general little information is available about the Avatime. In particular, in the encyclopedia *Nations and Religions of the World*, the Avatime are mentioned only once, in the general listing of 'Vestigial tribes of Togo' (Tishkov 1998), with the Avatime language accordingly categorized as a 'vestigial language'.

In contemporary literature, in order to avoid negative connotations, it is customary to use an alternative name ‘Togo and Ghana Mountain Languages’ or TGM for short (Babaev 2013). Recently, linguists have become interested in the tonal quality of the Avatime language so an increasing amount of research has been conducted (see, *e.g.*, Defina 2009; Adjiei 2007; van Putten 2009, 2014, 2016, *etc.*). The cultural life of the Avatime is described exclusively in the works of the English anthropologist Lynne Brydon (1975, 1979, 1989, 2008, *etc.*). The only surviving written source is the *Chief's secretary book* which contains personal records of the Avatime rulers starting from the nineteenth century and it was kindly provided for our research.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Asante Empire was located to the west of the modern Volta region, with Dahomey to the east. The Volta River provided protection against the Asante invasions, and also provided quick access to the coast (the western edge of the former Slave Coast). The Avatime, whose name is translated as ‘tired of war’, purposefully chose this region in accordance with their sedentary lifestyle: mountainous terrain, rivers and waterfalls all provided a temperate and agreeable environment. These factors did indeed contribute to the Avatime's prosperity but did not deter the neighboring empires. Oral tradition, as well as certain entries in the records of the leader's secretary, testifies to a ‘bloody time’ endured by the Avatime. By the end of the nineteenth century, having united with neighbouring peoples, the Avatime managed to secure their independence from the Asante, though only at a great cost (Brydon 2008). Regarding the founding of the Avatime's last village, Dzokpe, according to the book of the chief's secretary ‘In the old days, Dzokpe was the center of slave trade and many people in [this] town were bought. People from other six towns of the Avatime came together to build this town’ (Chief's Secretary Book XIX). In the Ewe language,<sup>3</sup> the name of this village means ‘reunion [of people]’ (author's comment). Even though a number of years ago the settlement was divided into two separate settlements, New and Old Dzokpe, a monument, dedicated to those sold into slavery, remained in the territory of Old Dzokpe.

At the end of the nineteenth century the Avatime adopted Protestantism and Catholicism. Throughout the twentieth century, new Christian churches continued to be built, and today there are about 57 churches of various denominations in the Avatime region. The multiplicity of Christian practices and Avatime participation in weekly services are integrated into traditional Avatime religious life with visits to traditional places of worship. For instance, the Avatime leader told us about the importance of handing down the chair of omnipotence from

ruler to ruler, while sitting in his living room beneath a large crucifix. Moreover, each village has a temple of its own.

### **THE FRAGMENTS OF ORAL TRADITION: THE ORIGINS OF AVATIME RITES OF PASSAGE**

According to the Avatime's own legends, they originated exclusively as males in Akhanta (in the west of modern Ghana). Ethnogenetic myths tell us that the Avatime took wives from among the Baya, a nation of giants. It is from here that unusual initiation rites entered the Avatime culture. Some elders claim that the Avatime had led a nomadic life before the war with the Asante at the foot of Mount Gemi, and therefore that the rites were adopted from other peoples in the process of partial assimilation. Though today the people of Avatime practice a sedentary lifestyle, they inhabit a territory adjoining to other peoples. So the preservation of traditions, customs and practices is particularly important for the Avatime ethnic identity. The relevant oral tradition varies from elder to elder and from village to village. Unfortunately, there are no sources that could provide information about the origin of the rites of passage. However, from a scholarly viewpoint, the Avatime rite of passage has long been one of the key elements of their ritual culture and plays an important role in socialization of the community's younger generation.

The history of rites of passage performed on both girls and boys is preserved mostly in the Avatime oral tradition. Nevertheless, not limited to it. The book of the Avatime Chief's secretary still keeps some notes about the rites of passage of 1862, for example: 'Every man became a soldier in wartime, so the boys were called "Otu", which means "the next born to go to war"' (Chief's Secretary Book XIX). As part of his initiation ceremony, the boy was usually given a gun and instructed on how to use it. When the boy brought back the first game he successfully shot during hunting, the elders would offer palm wine libations, apply white clay to the boy's shoulders and head, and solemnly ordain him as a member of the tribal group. During this ceremony he would be notified of the rights and obligations of a man to his people. In case of war, a boy, who passed the ceremony, was obliged to take part in it. In peacetime, the boys were trained for combat, practicing with empty rifles. Over time under the influence of the colonial and post-colonial eras, the Avatime almost entirely ceased to perform the male rites of passage. At present, a young man is considered an adult after reaching the age of 18. That is to say that the age of maturity is gradually assuming a biological rather than social existence in the Avatime worldview. Meanwhile, the initiation rite has been transformed into

a small celebration (with a gift given by elders to their young) coinciding with the attainment of the age of legal maturity.

By contrast, women have been traditionally more confined to family life than men; the latter have typically been socialized in society as a whole. Society is transforming faster than the internal relationships within any individual family, and male gender roles changed faster than the female equivalents. Accordingly, the ritual element of family life, in which the gender roles were shaped, has also changed. However, the female initiation remains relevant, despite having undergone several stages of transformation.

### **THE *ABLEBE* FEMALE RITE OF PASSAGE**

Nowadays the *Ablebe* girls' initiation rite is mostly forgotten, as it has been supplanted by the *Kusakokor* ritual, which will be discussed later. *Ablebe* means 'a ripe pineapple' in the Sideme language. According to the respondents, in the past, the Avatime drew an analogy between the ripening of pineapples and the maturation of young girls, 'Like with a pineapple, you notice only when it is ripe, likewise you notice the physiological maturation of a girl when she is ready to become a wife' (Interview with an informant No. 1). As soon as a given girl began menstruating, older women would give her a red cloth, a large number of beads, and lead her to a river in which the girl was required to perform ritual ablutions. The initiation would last for about one month, after which the girl received the status of woman, the right to have children, and the opportunity to be accepted posthumously by her female ancestors. Indeed, they believed that by falling pregnant before the rite, a woman could anger a deity.

Other related peoples of the Kwa language group, including the largest of them, the Asante, also practiced the *Obra-ogoru* rite of passage for girls ('obra' means menstruation) which displayed certain common elements. Perhaps, the Avatime came to adopt the rite due to their close proximity to the Asante, in the Akhanta region, or after having been defeated by them in the war at the foot of Mount Gemi, on the modern Togolese border. However, Vladimir Popov considered *Obra-ogoru* to be a remnant of earlier initiation rites, and did not rule out that age-based systems might have been previously characteristic of these peoples (Popov 1990).

### **THE TRANSITION FROM *ABLEBE* TO *KUSAKOKOR***

With the arrival of missionaries, the *Ablebe* rite in the Avatime society gradually took a slightly different form. The ceremony was not explicitly abolished, but the girls' naked bodies, covered only with beads,

were no longer deemed acceptable. The perceived immorality of such nakedness necessitated a shift towards a more 'clothed' version of the rite, which then developed into the *Kusakokor* ritual, its name is translated as 'bestowed fabric' (Interview with an informant No. 2).

Mothers were required to be especially vigilant as their daughters approached the age at which they moved from the status of girl to that of an adult woman, ready for marriage. And they also were required to assume the bulk of responsibility for the preparation of their daughters' initiation rites. A particularly important part of this preparation was instructing the initiates in the weaving of a special threaded cotton cloth, known to the Avatime as 'liwalo le kusaa', or 'Monday cloth', and the subsequent presentation of a daughter's attempt at producing such cloth. The cloth is so named because the rite of passage would begin on a Monday and then encompass the following week. The finished strips of 'kente' fabric would be stitched together, forming cloths of white, green, and other colors. It was crucial, however, that the fabrics' colors should not coincide with those of the Asante, a people against whom the Avatime waged bloody wars, as has been mentioned above.

The hut in which the ritual took place was located, as a rule, on the outskirts of Avatime villages. For two weeks, girls were trained in personal hygiene, sex education, domestic handicrafts and cotton spinning. The production of cotton yarn was among the women's duties in the Avatime traditional regions as it was subsequently spun into special men's clothing. This outfit was subsequently painted brown and worn by men while farming, hunting and at war. Additionally, a certain amount of the cloth produced, which is usually weaved using traditional weaving apparatuses, was used as towels and sponges. If a given girl was the eldest in the family, then she was required to spend two weeks weaving in the hut. By contrast, younger sisters were required to weave for only one week. The girls were taught how to take care of themselves, and also educated about the menstrual cycle and its implications for fertility. They were taught to use lemon and other similar local, remedial disinfectants; to string beads on a string; to wear those beads; and to wear a piece of red cloth as an analogue of a modern sanitary towel.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this advice, each girl was instructed how to behave properly with her future husband; how to receive guests in the marital home, even if her future family was not wealthy; how to converse and be polite. Young women did not typically assume the responsibility for training the initiates; ordinarily, mature women with broad life experience and successful marriages were chosen for this mission.

During the period of seclusion, the girl's friends were permitted to visit and entertain her by singing and dancing, particularly late in the evening, 'the higher the moon in the sky, the better' (Interview with an informant No. 3). If by that time the girl was already engaged, then her fiancé's relatives were also required to visit her with palm wine, food, and other gifts for the bride-to-be.

After teaching, training, and grand dinners 'in order to present an attractive appearance' (*Ibid.*), a girl would return to her parent's house. Then, the two oldest women from among the girl's relatives tour the community. The women visited each family, offering them palm wine and informing the other women that the girl had been trained and that they could join the celebration. All this would take place two days before Monday. Once her relatives started their tour, the preparation for the celebration would start in the girl's house. Wild rice was planted in large quantities, and during the early hours of Monday morning, the girl's friends helped with the final preparation of the meal.

In order to receive the status of a young woman, a girl needed first to pass across husks of ground rice. Then, a pre-selected aunt from her father's side of the family tied *liwalo le kusaa*, or 'Monday cloth', around the girl's waist. Simultaneously, the girl abandoned her previous outfit, which, by tradition, the aunt picked up and took for herself. Again all this proceeds atop the rice husks. The girl was then wrapped completely in the 'Monday cloth'.

From this day the holiday period would start, during which time the girl was required to keep from all kinds of work, even food preparation. This restriction arises from a local belief that any injuries sustained during the holiday period will never heal. The girls' maternal and paternal uncles were notified of the holiday's commencement early in the morning by receiving a gift of palm wine.

Wednesday preceded the single most anticipated day of the celebration, when the girl announced the end of her unmarried life. If she was engaged, then on Wednesday she would be brought to the groom's house. If her future husband was already ready to marry, then the girl would symbolically sit on a ritual stool, facing in the direction of a new home and new cooking pot. Her groom bore responsibility for the provision of the remaining kitchen utensils: a ladle, spoons, pottery, plates and bowls. On Wednesday evening, the groom's aunt would prepare a bed with a white sheet and place a white handkerchief atop it. The future husband and wife were supposed to spend their first night of married life on this specially prepared bed. If blood stains were found on the linen on the following Thursday morning, this confirmed the girl's virginity and brought honor to her family. The aunt of



the groom would then announce that the bride was 'found at home'. Dressed in clothes bearing traditional symbols, the new wife was presented to the clan elder. From this moment she acquired the right to wear two separate fabrics at once, indicating her newly-acquired womanhood.

The next morning, the whole clan gathered at their elders' home, bringing with them barrels of palm wine. Together, they sprinkled a certain amount of palm wine on the ground, in order to receive ancestral blessings and bring peace upon the meeting.

On Saturday, the now-married girl was escorted by an elder accompanied by drums, singing and dancing. The traditional meal – at this point it was porridge cooked from brown rice, palm nut soup and beans, and smoked red meat – were generously distributed to all those present at the ceremony. Palm wine 'flows without end' (Interview with an informant No. 3). Gifts, predominantly in the form of cowrie, were also presented to the young woman.

After the celebration at home, the newly-married girl joined the procession in the street. During the procession, she was required to hold a chewing stick in her mouth, with the stick being a little taller than the girl herself. This signified that, being married, the girl was now reliant upon her husband. During the day, the girl constantly changed her clothes, allowing her friends to take them for themselves.

The culmination of the celebrations was the participation in Sunday's religious service. After church, dances and drumming were continued until dawn in the house of the newly-wed girl, who was surrounded by friends and relatives. Then, on the first market day after the festivities, the girl was led around the market stalls, announcing her maturity. Thus would end the female rite of passage both into material and ancestral Avatime society.

According to the Franco-Belgian folklorist Arnold Van Gennep, a ritual ceremony formally secures the transition of an individual or a group to a new social category and the acquisition of a new social status. In his book, the stages of the passage of a participant of the rite were described for the first time: the stage of separation (preliminary), intermediate (laminar) stage and inclusion (in a new quality as a participant of the rite) if successful (Van Gennep 2004). All passages had to be accompanied by rituals.

To become a full-fledged member of the community, an individual had to symbolically die for the past earthly life, then enter the mythological sacred space (intermediate according to Van Gennep) and plunge into the timeless world of ancestors. The sacred script of the rite is the spiritual death of the former imperfect being, which the

individual used to be, and his/her new birth in a different capacity, with a new perception of life – already at a deep level (Kulkova 2010).

The boundaries between the above-mentioned stages become more blurred, and sometimes even completely absent, the more we move towards the present.

### **KUSAKOKOR IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Today the majority of cultural traditions have been to some extent curtailed, while others have completely disappeared. However, according to one of the senior teachers of the first school that was opened in the Avatime territory, ‘even today, boys and girls from about 15 to 20 years old must be presented to the elders, otherwise they will not be considered full-pledged members of society’ (Interview with an informant No. 4).

The rite of passage is no longer associated with either social maturity or the onset of menstruation, but rather takes place if and when the parents of the initiate can afford to host the ceremony. The hosting implies a number of expenses: drinks for elders; palm wine for ancestral offerings; and the purchasing of both dress fabric and beads. The financial aspect has also given rise to a new tradition: it has now become easier to time the Kusakokor rite to coincide with the Avatime's single largest festival – the Amu Rice Festival, which is held every year in November. During the festival, the Miss Avatime beauty contest also takes place. Prior to the competition, girls who wish to perform the initiation rite receive the status of adulthood before the representatives of all Avatime villages.

If for some reason the girl is unable to participate in the ceremony during the festival, then she may instead perform it during Christmas or Easter. During these periods most adults temporarily return from earnings elsewhere to their native villages, while schoolchildren are also out of school. However, Easter, the commemoration of Christ's suffering, is often considered an improper time for such ‘fun’. And it is forbidden to hold the ceremony in the same month with a funeral.

If the girl's parents are able to provide finance, then immediately after her first menstruation, or on any other Sunday, the girl goes to church, where her maternal aunt ties *kente* fabrics around her three times after the service. Once the aunt has completed her task, the girl herself ties a knot, symbolizing acceptance of her new status. Then she returns home, where she is draped with numerous beads, and the father's sister puts a bracelet around her left hand (should this be performed by her mother's sister, then the bracelet is placed on the right hand). During the day of festivities, the girl must change her clothes at least

three times. According to the respondents of the survey, in order to perform this rite mothers should buy two yards of *kente* fabric and two more yards of three different types of fabrics for clothes well in advance. The fabrics totally cost more than an average monthly salary of a Ghanaian public school teacher.

By this time, food should already be prepared and served in the community centre, a special place where local folk events are usually held. Here the attendees dance to the sound of drums, sing and help themselves to refreshments. The next day is known as thanksgiving, which is also held in the community centre. Once again, large quantities of food are served. The girl seats on a chair, and her father's sister presents her with a water-filled calabash, grain, grass of 'peace' and coins. The water is a symbol of purity, grain – of rich harvest, the coins – of prosperity, and the grass – of peaceful resolution of conflicts. The calabash, along with its contents, is turned over onto the girl's legs, after which she becomes a full member of the female community.

### **THE RELEVANCE OF THE *KUSAKOKOR* RITE**

There are different opinions about the importance of *Kusakokor* for girls' spiritual life. Older and younger generations have different views on this issue.

If a girl fails to perform the initiation rite during her life, then it will definitely be performed at her funeral in a shortened form. Her clothes will then be laid in a coffin and buried with her. After that, she will undoubtedly spend the afterlife alongside her female ancestors. No one can know whether she will be in heaven or in hell, but the rite will help her to be recognized in the female ancestral community. Otherwise, the woman's spirit will not be able to find her place in the afterlife and instead will disturb the living (Daniel, a senior teacher, and the son of the village leader Gbazheme [Interview with an informant No. 5]).

Young people rarely recall the spiritual aspect of the initiation rite. Only a few representatives of local Anglican churches discussed this aspect, and only in the context that Christian women should not adhere to this tradition associated with belief in ancestral spirits. However, it is widely believed among schoolchildren and elderly people that only after the initiation rite does a woman fully become, in a spiritual sense, an adult female. School-age children are often brought up by their grandmothers, therefore, we can assume that this is most likely a reflection of the beliefs of their elders. In high school, many

such traditional beliefs are questioned, before being either wholeheartedly accepted or discarded.

The representatives of churches of various Christian denominations have different attitudes towards observing of this tradition. Among the various Protestant denominations, most of which have only recently been locally established, the initiation rite for girls is not welcomed, to the point of prohibition. Meanwhile, within the Roman Catholic Church, one of the first Christian denominations established in the Avatime region, the rite is both permitted and carried out completely in accordance with the description given above. Despite the fact that the duration of the initiation ceremony for girls has been shortened and that not every representative of the Avatime considers the rite obligatory, all secondary school students in the village of Vane responded positively to the question, 'Does a girl have to perform Kusakokor?'. Prior to this question, interviewees were asked about the meaning and significance of the rite. The most common answers were: 'Kusakokor is an Avatime puberty rite that transfers a girl from childhood to adulthood', 'Kusakokor is when a girl is given new clothes', and that 'It is a wedding'. In response to the question 'Why should a girl perform the rite?' only once did we receive the answer 'To obtain important knowledge for family life,' which in our opinion indicates the erosion of the educational function of the rite.

Previously, this ritual allowed a girl to receive items necessary for family life as gifts from her wider community. Nowadays the ritual is carried out only if the parents of the girl can afford it or at least make a contribution if several girls simultaneously pass the initiation. Meanwhile, modern Avatime girls, educated and willing to move away in order to study, either abroad or in the capital, are often keen to become financially independent from their parents, find work and save up for a white wedding dress, rather than follow local traditional rituals.

The modern position of young Avatime women is vividly illustrated by an incident that occurred in 2011. The editorial office of Ghana's state newspaper where a young woman, a journalist of Avatime origin, was employed, received a letter. The author of the letter was also a young Avatime woman writing with a request to allow the Avatime women to wear trousers. The young woman worked as a photographer, a new and non-traditional job among the Avatime, and had some difficulties since until recently the Avatime elders did not approve women wearing trousers. However, the subsequent publication of the letter allowed complying with the request. After this incident, the Avatime Queen Mother lost the right to prohibit young women to wear trousers. As stated in an interview with the Queen Mother's granddaughter,

‘A photographer should wear clothes that are comfortable for him or her. If I am a photographer, then I should be able to wear trousers, even if I am a woman’ (Interview with Informant No. 6).

The Avatime female rite of passage has been transformed during two separate epochs – the colonial and post-colonial periods. Today, it continues to evolve under the influence of both external and internal factors, and often existential challenges. From ancient times to this day the meaning of the *Kusakokor* ritual is not only the transfer of practical knowledge but of spiritual knowledge as well. The completion of the ceremony gives a girl a posthumous status within the female ancestral community, and protects her soul from being trapped in-between the living and ancestral worlds. Due to the spiritual component of the rite, it has recently come under the scrutiny of church authorities. At first missionaries prohibited women from participating in the *Ablebe* ritual, so it can be assumed that with coming of Christianity it became necessary to resolve the issue of local women's spiritual and ancestral identities. At present, the churches themselves become some of the most important venues for the ceremony; thus, the Christian denominations active in the Avatime region, primarily Evangelical Presbyterian and Roman Catholic, actually encourage the girls' participation in the rite.

### CONCLUSION

In this article we have observed how the changes in the rites of passage reflect the spread of new socialization practices resulting from cultural transformations in African history during the colonial and post-colonial periods. We have described the evolution of these rites among the Avatime, and demonstrated the basic reasons behind the changes to both the form (ritual), and the content (functional) components of the rite.

In traditional cultures, the gender roles are predetermined. The departure from rigid sex and age stratification is a significant sign that a society has diverged from traditional and archaic norms in this sphere. The boundaries between age and gender categories become blurred while there takes place a desacralization of gender roles and relationships. Gradually, the social role of women also changes. They need no longer confine themselves exclusively to family life, should they feel a desire to do otherwise. The presence and significance of such social institutions as churches and schools contribute to the erosion of the traditional and integrated sense of self, adding new layers of identity. This process increases the role of women at inter-clan and inter-communal levels (in churches young girls participate in rites of pas-

sage irrespective of their clan or tribal affiliations). The system of rites of passage loses its educational and socialization functions and gradually transfers them to alternative, modern social institutions.

Interestingly, among the Avatime, the integration of the traditional initiation ceremony into a relatively modern social institution, the church, occurs despite the presence of a traditional spiritual belief component in the rite of passage. This stands in marked contrast to the conventional assumption that the spread of Christianity would lead to a gradual ejection of such rites from local customs. The survival of the rite is also notable since it is preserved in spite of substantial costs, not least financial ones, attached to its continued practice.

In traditional Avatime culture, the principal incentives for the practice of rites of passage are associated with afterlife. The ancestral world is divided into male and female parts. Should a woman fail to undergo the initiation ceremony, then after her death her spirit will disturb other women, both living and dead. Changing modern African lifestyles often lead to gradual disappearance of rites of passage. However, the introduction of such ceremonies into schools and churches creates prospects for their preservation, albeit with significant changes after the transition of the rite into a new qualitative form.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> URL: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/avn>

<sup>3</sup> Ewe is the most widespread language in Volta region and the third popular language in Ghana.

<sup>4</sup> The widows were also required to wear red cloth not to be impregnated by the spirits of their dead husbands.

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