
Social Representation of Ndut or Traditional Initiation Among Seereer

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Abstract: This article sheds light on the perception of the seereer universe people through a cultural demonstration which is specific to them: the Ndut. It also tries to reinforce the literary and anthropological knowledge on the Seereer ethnic group in general, the oral literature in particular. It provides an ethnographical documentation on this Seereer ritual practice, starting from the age of circumcision to the stay in the box of man by considering the functioning of the Ndut ceremony and the other essential steps of the training of the circumcised boy in Seereer communities. This study particularly stresses on the social representation of this ritual for Seereer linguistic communities by analyzing the parameters of this rite from various angles: material, relational and emotional. The affective states noticed when the circumcised are on the point to join their traditional shelter (fiif) to the little forest (o njoc) are analyzed in connection with the participants' views about the action. The esthetic dressing of the circumcised delivers an encoded message that requires a strong knowledge of the initiatory language for a right interpretation. The article provides a global analysis of these determining factors in the process of this initiatory traditional rite for the social passage of boys' status to men's one.

Keywords: Ndut, Seereer, Circumcision, Traditional Education, Initiation

1. Introduction

Schooling in the bush [16] remains an interesting and essential practice among Seereer. It is an obligatory stay for boys to become men. This stay of the circumcised boys in the bush is marked by the teaching and learning of virtues and challenges that help them live and integrate well in their community. This cultural practice prepares boys to be responsible, to be wise and conscious wherever they live by assimilating the virtues, taught during the stay in bush. That is to say that cultures are useful for societies: "cultures exist to satisfy the practical, vital needs of existence, to structure a society so as to ensure the perpetuation of the species to transmit a to know hard acquired, the experience of past generations and centuries passed to an inexperienced youth, so as to spare successive generations the dangerous and costly test of learning everything from scratch, by trial and error.» [5]. That is in this logic of transmission of knowledge that the ndut or traditional initiation of young boys in seereer communities is inscribed. Practicing circumcision or circumcising a child is not just a matter of factual; it is a

cultural practice that adds to the obligations of the parent in that circumcision marks the end of a stage of life and the beginning of another life. This initiation participates to the consolidation of the "social peace" [9], and how this peace "is conceptualized" [10]. The circumcised, among the seereer, leaves the sphere of the uninitiated and integrates that of men, that is to say, initiates. As for "the term ndut is polysemic. It can mean the ceremony organized the day of the circumcision of boys. It can also refer to the whole period of training of the circumcised boys, during which they are isolated in the brush." [17]. The ndut in seereer area usually refers to the initiatory education and education of the circumcised, more commonly known as initiation of the circumcised; it may refer to the duration of the circumcised retreat period in the bush as it may also mean the organized ceremony the day of circumcision.

The Ndut event is a traditional rite which is organized and takes place in a very particular ritual and protocol atmosphere that makes it an event of high cultural dimension. The practice of Ndut is deeply rooted in seereer cultural imagery by its symbolism and its specificity from the social point of view. This symbolism and this specificity are

justified by the fact that the Ndut is not an innocuous event from the organizational point of view (cf. [2]). The organization of Ndut requires a lot of financial means. So the Seereer communities prepare well before organizing it. This study focuses on the social representation of Ndut among the Seereer communities. It is particularly interested in the symbolism and the particularity of this social rite. All the parameters taken into account before, while and after the progress of the Ndut, will be listed and analyzed in order to facilitate the understanding of this traditional practice and its social relevant aspects [1].

2. Methodological Approach

Seereer people still engage in ritual practices such as ndut, xoy, and so on. Despite all these temptations for the Seereer conversion to Islam and Christianity, they are clinging to many traditional practices like the Ndut (traditional initiation) that they continue to practice and revitalize. It is in this logic of regeneration and / or confirmation of the values of Seereer that the organization of the Ndut, object of this study is inscribed.

The seereer ndut, by its peculiarity and its complexity, remains a fascinating subject. Many studies have been done on this aspect of seereer culture, nevertheless, the specificity of Ndut, seems to escape researchers who are interested in Seereer society as a whole. Amad Faye focuses on the life of circumcised and the mythical considerations about the god of the seereer ndut called Buure (a mythical character, considered as the god of the ndut members) [7]. Now that the Ndut has been the subject of several works, we are under the impression that today studies must and can be directed towards this cultural practice (Ndut) which remains symbolic and original. The glaring lack of works devoted to this social rite is at the origin of this study.

After a series of investigations concerning the organization, the social representation of Ndut in seereer community, we try to shed light on some symbolic and social facts of which the restricted access is reserved for the village wise men for the preparation of the event and the *njuuli* (the circumcised) in question. This investigation into the arcana of seereer initiates will be accompanied by an operation of decryption of highly ritualized occult facts that mark out the organizational and functional itinerary of the Ndut ceremony. This step will bring out what is most profound and essential in this ceremony: the reinforcement of the social order [8]. Traditional education is a "socio ethnical issue" [11] in many African societies in general [13]. It is real means for social "peace building" [12].

3. The Preparatives of the Ndut Ceremony Among Seereer

The announcement of the Ndut follows a protocol approach guided by the parents and is done by the *xaat* (a young boy, candidate for circumcision [18]) himself. With its

unusual dress, the *xaat* crosses the surrounding villages to inform about the date of his circumcision. This information tour of the Ndut ceremony is done on horseback to inform distant parents, or walk to the neighbors. The *xaat*, well advised and prepared, with regard to socialization (terms of address to use, behavioral attitudes in contact with relatives), talks with close relatives and neighbors to share with them the programming of his circumcision. This work of announcement assigned to the *xaat* who was supposed only to keep and lead the flock, makes him responsible in the sense that it makes him discover a new world and prepares him for his social integration. We seek to integrate him gradually and gently into family life through these visits to the homes of relatives of his extended family. The accomplishment of such a mission reassured the parents of the *xaat* of his courage, and of his determination to undergo the dreaded ordeal: the meeting with the traditional master of ceremony or circumciser and the removal of the foreskin by this one. This step is a great "challenge" [14] for the *xaat*.

4. Ndut and Its Progress

The seereer ndut is a traditional ceremony most often organized by financially well-off families for the circumcision of their sons. Its celebration takes place in total euphoria. Unlike the Ndut itself, the organization of the Ndut was generally solitary depending on the possibilities and availabilities of each family. However, it was only organized during the year of circumcision of the village (o xiid quc), which was always an even year with a spacing of two or four years between the generations. The preparation of this ritual involves the whole family of the circumcision candidates and requires an arsenal of financial means: purchase of bulls and alcoholic beverages, reserve of millet and pocket money to honor the griots, the dancers, and the singers. The whole family expends for a good organization of the ceremony and the reception of the neighbors, neighbors of the surrounding villages. The duration of the Ndut is three days. The Ndut started on Wednesday night and ended on Friday, at night. In the evening of Wednesday begins what is called *aqatax*, that is to say, the slave of *xaat* (o pad no xaat / pad o koor) teaches him how to dance from the night of Thursday until the evening of Friday. The slave holds a band of loincloth (a naf pay) on which the *xaat* holds to imitate or repeat the steps of choreographic dance of his slave. It is the slave who accompanies him to the pen (xulanq) where the circumciser is expecting him. Each *xaat* has a slave. The slave is the first cousin. Léon Crétois underlines that "*a man is a slave to his maternal cross-cousin*". [4] The slave has specific tasks to accomplish. During the preparations, he goes to the home of the *xaat*. Crétois adds: "A few days before the circumcision, the *pad* will be full of attention for his cousin, will build the hut where he will retire after circumcision. It is he who will bring to the circumcised" [4]

The progress of the Ndut is especially marked by the time of the removal of the foreskin of the *xaat* by the *yaamaan* on the evening of Friday and the ritual dance of the *xaat* at home

or at the level of the fetish tree (baobab) which is generally located in the middle of the village. Mystically mined by the father of the circumcised (faap fee juul we / o aa'adax ndut) who has the responsibility to ensure the safety of all within the *laqand*. The *laqand* is located to a baobab tree surrounded to protect it. The coordinator of the Ndut recites incantations or pours gris-gris to make the enclosure a safe space. The father of the circumcised protects the participants by making them all invulnerable against stab wounds, among others. This is the time for the removal of the foreskin, announced to the public by firing and detonations of rifle barrels. The arrival of the new circumcised in the enclosure of the house creates scenes of any kind. This moment of the Ndut is indescribable.

Intense dances are performed, mystical demonstration sessions of people invulnerable against stab wounds (tul we), those with mystical power (yaal a qoox) are illustrated through miraculous gestures and actions, which exceed and frighten the laymen (fuung we). The expression of occult knowledge and mysticism is beautifully illustrated. Some *yaal xoox* do in the unthinkable and unbelievable, either crunching shards of bottles, or drinking bottles of beer and wine without opening them, etc. Adults rival by falls or hysteria (yen yasi), it's a real moment of popular jubilation and expression of strong social cohesion, solidarity and hospitality. All these forms of demonstration are made in order to galvanize the new circumcised and sympathize with him so that he surpasses himself to be insensitive to pain following the removal of his foreskin. To demonstrate all his courage to endure the pain of circumcision, the new circumcised (njuuli), draped in traditional loincloths (pey rabal), wearing amber necklaces (xa peme) slung across the shoulder, offers a touch of moving dance breath the audience and make the emotional people cry in the audience.

Parents and supporters are pursuing him in the compound to honor him with bank notes. This moment of jubilation, exultation, happiness, and total delight begins in the evening and continues until dawn. The cultural dimension of Ndut is strongly expressed at this level. Through the ritual dance, the day before or the day of the Ndut, the *xaat* is already a man in front of the public. Diégane Sarr and Amadou M. Diaw review the importance and purpose of the *xaat* dance in these terms: "*the circumcision candidate was also using the Wong to prove that he had become a man, that he was no longer afraid of anything... he had to show the public that he was now resisting stabbing, that by constantly stabbing oneself.*" [6]

5. The Ndut Device: The Main Actors

5.1. The Candidates for Circumcision

The candidates for circumcision are called *qaat axe* (plural) in seereer language. In the concept of age and generational chronology among seereer, the name *xaat* (singular) refers to the uncircumcised or candidate for circumcision. The term refers to a boy who is preparing for

circumcision, a young boy not yet circumcised but for whom the date of his circumcision is already programmed by the parents. The term *xaat* is generally used from the date of the announcement of the Ndut to the celebration. Young people who are old enough to be circumcised but for whom the date of circumcision is not yet known or at least programmed are called (tunaan ake). The term *dunaan* (singular) refers to a young person who is old enough to be circumcised. Unlike the *dunaan*, the *xaat* is distinguished by an accouterment at once unusual and symbolic of the date of the announcement until the day of his circumcision. The clothing of the *xaat* combines aesthetics and mystical protection. It usually consists of baggy pants (caaya), traditional cotton boubou (ndoki seereer), which guarantees a mystical protection against evil spirits, in addition to traditional white and black loincloths. The white loincloths (pey seereer tan) refer to the purity, as for the black loincloths (pey seereer ßaal), they symbolize the unknown and the mystery of the universe of ndut that the *xaat* is about to integrate. The latter also wears amber necklaces (xa peme) diagonally on the chest; they play an aesthetic function and conjure the bad language and imprecations of the enemy. The *xaat* is handsome by braiding the hair. The braids translate his carelessness and immaturity to the image of the new bride not yet initiated. They also have a function announcing the event. The silver bracelet worn on the wrist reflects the consideration given to the descent and function of each member of the family in the seereer community. Only the paternal aunt has the privilege and honor of putting the bracelet on *xaat*. All these adornments give him a superconstruent physical appearance.

All these adornments give the circumcision candidate not only a beautiful image but also a beautiful way to greet the day of his circumcision with joy and impatience. This way of dressing the *xaat* is a way to reinvigorate him and prepare him to face the *naamaan*, a formidable character. After having toured his village and the surrounding villages to announce the date of his circumcision, the *xaat* must confirm, in the face of the world, his masculinity, in other words, his manhood, his courage, his determination to undergo, hands up, the dreadful ordeal of initiation. To honor himself and his family, the *xaat* must never manifest pain; he must be indifferent to the pain of circumcision. Her resilience and impassivity in the face of pain, as well as the emotion aroused by parents' looks and gestures of encouragement, make of the *xaat* a real hero. The slightest gesture likely to humiliate or tarnish his image in his face to face with the *naamaan* is not tolerated.

5.2. The Traditional Circumciser

In the social hierarchy in seereer communities, the traditional circumciser called *naamaan* occupies a respected position because of the delicacy of his "profession". He has a reputation as a mystical man and a great connoisseur of the occult world. His circumciser profession gives him a place of choice during the Ndut. He is a formidable and unforgiving character. The face-to-face with him remains engraved in the memory of many circumcised (njuuli). The title or function

of *naamaam* came more often to the social category of shoemakers (rafax we) or blacksmiths (faal we). In this connection Léon Crétois specifies that "*the function of circumciser is exercised by a ñeeñoo (a blacksmith or shoemaker)*". [4]

Quuxuc or *naamaam* does not take part in the initiation of the circumcised; he is not part of the *ndut* in terms of initiation or education. During the ritual ceremony of *Ndut*, he attires contrasts with that of the *xaat* who are braided and dressed as women. The ritual dance of the *Ndut* galvanizes them and gives them more courage to face the ordeal of circumcision. The *naamaan* wears a traditional cap woven with a scarlet-colored rônier son (xa piic ndof), covered with a black turban, and he equips himself with a sharp knife called *naamaan*, a mortar (o fa6) covered with white loincloth (pay ndan), a small thin rope (o baak o luur) to attach the foreskin. He places the foreskin of the *xaat* on the back of the mortar, and cuts it off after reciting incantations to alleviate the pain and facilitate the healing of the wound. His wearing expresses virility, and impresses the *xaat* who often try to attack him mystically. To ward off these mystical attacks, both terrifying and dangerous, he wears amulets of all kinds, visible on his body, to protect himself from mystical confrontations with the *xaat* endowed with mystical knowledge. According to oral tradition, an uncircumcised man, once in front of the circumciser, conceals his penis or renders his foreskin invulnerable. Such unprecedented situations make the exercise of the circumciser dangerous. For this reason, only people with mystical knowledge in this area could perform the function of circumciser. The mystical battles which sometimes opposed the circumciser and the circumcised led to scenes kept secret by the initiates.

6. The Last Weaning: The Beginning of a New Life

Weaning is a step that children take naturally. This sudden and unexpected break in the child's diet is a test of life that the child experiences within his family. This diet creates, during the first days, psychic disorders in the child who realizes for the first time, his mother is ruthless and insensitive to this natural need. This deprivation of food is done by the Seereer, following a well-defined ritualized process. In this regard, Odile Reveyrand-Coulon points out that

"the importance of weaning from the mother's breast in black Africa-in Senegal-brutal and brief, is due to two concomitant phenomena. On the one hand because it constitutes the prototypical separation, on the other hand because it triggers a traumatism culturally recovered through a ritual, this type of withdrawal has a psychic simulating function." [3]

The weaning of the seereer child is not only of a biological nature; because it also has a cultural dimension. The child in the seereer communities undergoes two weanings corresponding to two different stages of life. The first is

biological and is from early childhood. It means the suppression of breastfeeding after a year and a half or even two years of normal breastfeeding, this weaning marks the cessation of taking infant milk, it is known to all human societies. The second weaning is traditional and occurs on the day of the circumcision ceremony. From the return home, just after the ordeal of circumcision, the circumcised arrive at the main entrance of the house (a carind) to be permanently weaned. The mothers concerned pass, each one in turn to give the two breasts one after the other beginning with the one on the right, the circumcised sucks both breasts in the presence of all the villagers. Mothers and other women burst into tears; because their children must take leave of their families to be initiated in the small forest (o njoc).

This definitive weaning of the child constitutes a dividing line between childhood and adulthood. It marks the denial of certain fun activities because the child who has become an adult must now put all his actions in the path of the responsible man. His last feeding on the day of circumcision signals a desire for independence, emancipation. This responsibility begins with the day of weaning. After the *ndut* ceremony, the *xaat* that has just been circumcised is now called *o njuuli* (the circumcised boy). The name *xaat* covers a very precise period, from the announcement to the day of *Ndut*. After circumcision, the circumcised boy is called *o njuuli* which would mean circumcised in initiation of *ndut* to the traditional shelter called

7. Behind the Scenes of the Tiif: Shaping a New Identity

The ultimate weaning marks the retirement of the *njuuli* in the bush under the *tiif*. The *tiif* is a form of temporary shelter where lessons moral and educative lessons are given in order to preserve and consolidate the collective life and maintain social cohesion. It teaches circumcised values indispensable to man. The main function of the circumcised retreat is the education and overall education of future men. In this place, we discover real secrets of life, we relax and re-humanize through the occult forces, symbols and rituals punctuated by songs and poems that create a new memory of life in community. According to the *ndut* philosophy, to be a man and to remain so, one must follow a desired course of action and traced by society itself in order to shape one's personality and human dignity. Naturally this re-birth goes through the acquisition of moral values taught during the *ndut* initiation. There are many cardinal values in man, such as health (o wod), security (a yetax), happiness (o daay)... and instrumental values that relate to ways of behaving. These are behaviors to adopt such as will (o ja6), courage (o sad), respect (o yarax), etc. The transmission of these values occurs in various forms found in the oral literature. They are transmitted, either through songs and poems that are a pillar of traditional seereer education, or through tales of vigil and symbols. It is in this register that initiatory education must be placed: the *ndut*.

In the dynamics of shaping a new type of citizen, education blamed the moral faults most feared by the community. Are strongly feared, in the seereer communities, the following moral faults: lie (o maa6), slander (mbokatrand), theft (nguuf), gossip (ñu'), disrespect to the parents (toroxin faap), adultery (saq), rape (yood), among others.

8. The Coming Back of the Njuuli to Village

The date of the return of the circumcised to home is kept secret. Only insider men are informed. Even the circumcised are not informed of their return to the village. This last phase follows a well-defined traditional protocol. On the day the circumcised leave their shelter in the forest to return to village, they are evacuated from the fiif (shelter) early in the morning and taken to the family dump of the house (a siind), where they take the traditional bath that purifies them and protects them against any imprecation. They change clothes and now answer to the name of young man (fes o de6). They go home and re-integrate the community with a new consciousness more adapted to the collective life. On the morning of the day of their arrival at home, the young men (xa pes xa te6) go door to door in front of the village, to greet and be reconciled with the community. These instances of return create a beautiful atmosphere for both young men and parents. The coming back of the circumcised marks the end of their isolation of the village. They are supposed now to become responsible men in the society.

9. Conclusion

Through this study on the seereer traditional initiation (ndut), we noticed that the formative process of the seereer man responds to cultural requirements reinforced by the perception of the universe of seereer people. The Ndut, as a whole, offers the group the opportunity to share in joy and peace. The community recognizes itself and identifies with it through this social communion, because it consolidates cohesion and renews social relations. This ritual practice is a real symbol of unity of the community. Thus, Ndut translates strength and original unity within the family, the village. This social rite makes it possible to appreciate the real value of the seereer culture and tradition, in other words, the unfolding not only in an educational or initiatory logic of the circumcised but also unitary forces of the whole community. It is this unitary and initiatory dynamic that the seereer oral tradition subsumes the framework that shapes the individual and determines his space.

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