Making the Invisible Visible. Fetal Ultrasound Images and Oracular Consultations in Southern Benin

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Abstract ENG

Drawing on ethnographic observations and existing literature, this article explores how fetal ultrasound imaging intersects with divinatory practices in Southern Benin. Within religious and oracular contexts, ultrasound images act not only as diagnostic tools but also as mediators between the mother, the fetus, and the spiritual realm. In a setting where individuals may be linked to deities or ancestors, ultrasounds help identify the fetus's protective ancestor even before birth. By situating this practice alongside other birth-related rituals, the article questions whether spiritual recognition of the fetus also implies its social recognition as a human being. Highlighting the entanglement of biomedical technologies with religious and divinatory practices, it offers insights into local conceptions of personhood, birth rituals, existential continuity, and reproductive trajectories in Southern Benin.

Keywords: Ultrasound images, Divination, Fetus, Birth rituals, Southern Benin.

Abstract ITA

Basandosi su osservazioni etnografiche e sulla letteratura esistente, questo articolo esplora l'intersezione tra immagini ecografiche fetali e pratiche divinatorie nel Sud del Benin. Quando inserite nei contesti religiosi e oracolari, le ecografie, infatti, non fungono solo da strumenti diagnostici, ma diventano mediatrici tra la madre, il feto e il mondo spirituale. In un contesto in cui gli individui possono essere legati a divinità o antenati, le ecografie contribuiscono a identificare l'antenato protettore del feto già prima della nascita. Collocando questa pratica accanto ad altri rituali legati alla nascita, l'articolo si interroga sul fatto che il riconoscimento spirituale del feto implichi anche il suo riconoscimento sociale come essere umano. Mettendo in luce l'intreccio tra tecnologie biomediche e pratiche religiose e divinatorie, questo articolo offre spunti sulle concezioni locali della persona,

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i rituali di nascita, la continuità esistenziale e le traiettorie riproduttive nel Sud del Benin.

Parole chiave: Ecografie, Divinazione, Feti, Rituali di nascita, Sud del Benin.

Introduction

This article investigates the interplay between ultrasound imaging and divinatory practices in southern Benin. First, I examine the role of oracular consultations in shaping reproductive trajectories, showing how they provide explanations that extend beyond biomedical paradigms to interpret pregnancy outcomes and infertility. I then explore how ultrasound images have become embedded within these practices, altering the conduct of divination and producing new effects at the intersection of two distinct modes of future prediction. Finally, I discuss how the possibility of visualizing the fetus during oracular consultations has enabled the early recognition of protective ancestors reincarnated within it, even before birth. In a social context where newborns are not considered fully human until specific naming and birth rituals are performed – and where historical accounts document practices of infanticide – what consequences arise when ultrasound technology facilitates the identification of embodied spirits during pregnancy? What are the implications of integrating the fetus into the family's existential continuity, linking it to ancestors and lineage, before it even enters the world? Can this spiritual recognition of the fetus be understood as comparable to the forms of fetal recognition central to anti-abortion discourses?

To address these questions, I draw on anthropological literature on personhood in diverse contexts, combined with an analysis of the social recognition of newborns in southern Benin, to provide an overview of the ceremonial practices that transform a newborn into a human being well after birth.

The data presented in this article combine historical and anthropological literature with ethnographic materials collected during several periods of fieldwork conducted in Southern Benin between 2019 and 2025[1]. Over these years, my research has focused on the social and cultural meanings attributed to reproduction. I first examined the interplay between biomedical practices and ceremonial forms of care, and later undertook a critical analy-

1 Fieldwork was initially conducted as part of my Master's research at the University of Milano-Bicocca and later during my PhD at the University of Roma Tre.

sis of international sexual and reproductive health projects. This has allowed me to investigate childbirth, contraception, abortion, local gender models related to motherhood and reproduction, and family rituals surrounding birth, as well as their connections to spiritual dimensions and existential continuity.

Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Porto-Novo, the administrative capital of Benin. Most of the women I worked with came from lower- to middle-class backgrounds, while I also interviewed doctors, midwives, and intellectuals living in both urban and peri-urban areas of the city. I have conducted research in maternity clinics, both public and private hospitals, and within reproductive health projects[2]. Given the centrality of spiritual and ritual dimensions of birth in this context, my ethnographic inquiry also extended to Christian churches, mosques, the houses and temples of *vodun*[3] priests, diviners, and traditional healers consulted by my interlocutors. A central component of my research consisted of accompanying women as they navigated their reproductive trajectories and assembled their multiple therapeutic itineraries.

The Role of Oracular Consultations in Pregnancy Forecasting

Bernard Maupoil (1943), in his renowned work *La geomancie à l'ancienne côte des esclaves*, writes: "the *Fa* oracle[4] is consulted whenever one feels overwhelmed by the unknown[5]" (1943, p. 220). It is therefore unsurprising that the oracle is widely used before, during, and after pregnancy. Le Hérissé notes: "The *Fa* oracle is consulted during pregnancy to indicate the precautions to be taken for a successful outcome" (1911, p. 230). Similarly, Maupoil (1943, p. 228) observes that during pregnancy, a consultation called *adogò-Fa* – literally "*Fa* of the entrails" – is performed. The oracle predicts birth conditions and their impact on the family, and prescribes precautions, taboos, dietary rules, behaviors, and rituals to follow.

Fieldwork data confirm the centrality of the *Fa* oracle in shaping reproductive trajectories. Women I interviewed often attributed infertility, new-

2 In particular, with the *Association Béninoise pour la Promotion de la Famille* (ABPF), which is part of the global network of the *International Planned Parenthood Federation* (IPPF).

3 *Vodun* is recognized in Benin as an official religion and is widely practiced in Southern Benin, particularly through family cults. The term *vodun* carries multiple meanings, referring to the religion itself, its adherents and priests, deities, their material supports, ancestors, or natural elements.

4 *Fa* (or *Ifa* in the Yoruba language) is an oracle of Yoruba origin, probably introduced to the territory of present-day Southern Benin in the early 18th century. Despite being the object of religious devotion, *Fa* is not considered a *vodun* deity, but rather a mediator between humans and the deities, living and ancestor, visible and invisible.

5 All the translations from French or from Italian are by the author.

born deaths, or childbirth complications to vengeful deities, angry ancestors, or sorcery, causes that could only be identified and addressed through the oracle. Although the role of *bokono* (or *babalawo* in Yoruba) – the priest authorized to perform *Fa* divination – is predominantly male[6], women frequently consult the oracle. They may do so independently, accompanied by their husbands or other relatives, and sometimes even in secrecy from their families.

The first time I attended a *Fa* divination session was in 2019, at the home of Silvane[7], a *bokono* who lived in the eastern part of the city and managed a small temple in a strip of marshland just behind his family compound, at the edge of the lagoon. That day, a young couple had come from Nigeria specifically to consult the oracle. The man explained to the priest that, after two years of marriage, they had not been able to conceive a child. Highly skilled in geomancy and the consultation of the *Fa* oracle, Silvane manipulated the *opèlè* – the divinatory chaplet – casting it onto the ground and carefully observing how its components fell and the configurations they formed[8]. He repeated the procedure several times, systematically recording the results on paper before interpreting and communicating the oracle's response. According to the divination, the couple's fertility problems stemmed from their failure to observe certain taboos prescribed by their protective deities, particularly during their recent years in Nigeria. To "unblock" the situation, they were instructed to perform a ritual involving animal sacrifices in honor of one of the deities residing in Silvane's temple. Only then, the oracle suggested, could they hope to become parents. Although the rituals were numerous, the oracle's guidance appeared to give the couple renewed hope. In the words of another woman with a similar story:

> Even if medicine labels you as infertile and tells you that nothing can be done, perhaps with the help of the oracle and the deities, you can still have children. Maybe the problem is not physical […] medicine and spirituality treat two different things (Georgette, 12 February 2022).

This statement reflects an implicit critique of the biomedical system, which often overlooks the social, political (Lock, Scheper-Hughes 1987), and, I would add, spiritual dimensions of the body. Experiences like this one helped me grasp the centrality of spiritual and ritual dimensions in local understandings of fertility and reproduction, a theme that consistently emerged throughout my fieldwork.

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6 For a more detailed analysis of gender dynamics and women's participation in the role of *bokono* or *babalawo*, see Abimbola (2016), Ogunnaike (2018), and Oyěwùmí (2016).

7 All names used in this article are pseudonyms, employed to ensure the privacy and anonymity of my interlocutors.

8 For an in-depth description of the procedures of *Fa* consultation and the interpretation of its signs, see Maupoil (1943, pp. 220-270).

Oracular Consultation and Ultrasound Images

Women's recourse to oracular consultations in their reproductive trajectories underscores the importance of multiple, equally essential factors. In fact, these women also attended regular obstetric checkups, and the biomedical and spiritual dimensions were seen as interconnected, not opposed, but part of a reciprocal interaction[9]. This interaction occurs not only at the conceptual level but also in practical, tangible ways. A clear example is the use of ultrasound scans. Far from being confined to a diagnostic tool for doctors or midwives, fetal ultrasound images have, over time, transcended the hospital setting, and their potential has been rapidly embraced by *bokono* during *Fa* oracle consultations. Many of the *bokono* I interviewed emphasized the great importance they attributed to ultrasounds. Moreover, they claimed to be able to interpret elements within the images that "doctors could not understand". For example, Nunkpo, a *bokono* from Porto-Novo, told me:

> There are many ways in which modern medicine is useful and provides solutions. For example, I can't perform ultrasounds, which I find very useful […] In fact, I always ask the women who come to me if they've already visited a gynecologist and had an ultrasound. If they have, I ask them to bring it to me, because I might be able to see things that doctors can't […] (Nunkpo, 23 October 2019).

A further example comes from Pelagie, a woman I first met in 2019 in the waiting room of a private maternity clinic, where she was seeking specialized consultations regarding her supposed infertility. Pelagie had experienced a miscarriage a few years earlier, and had been unable to conceive since. One day, she told me she wanted to visit a *bokono* to explore whether spiritual factors, beyond the medical, might explain her difficulties, and I asked if I could accompany her. She brought both a recent ultrasound and an older one taken at the hospital after the miscarriage. During the consultation, the *bokono* revealed something that neither the doctors nor Pelagie had noticed on the ultrasound: the pregnancy she had lost had been a twin pregnancy. Pointing to a mark on the ultrasound located just beside the fetus, the *bokono* explained that it represented the spirit of a second twin and stressed the need to perform rituals for the deity of the twins to ensure future fertility[10].

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9 On the syncretism between biomedical and religious/spiritual practices in the treatment of infertility and reproductive trajectories, see the contributions by Arielle Ekang Mvé (on Gabon) and Marie Brochard (on Senegal), both published in Bonnet and Duchesne (2016).

10 In Benin, twins are venerated as a *vodun* deity due to their exceptional nature, considered "doubly possessors of life, for they are neither one nor two" (Gilli 1982, p. 110). The bond between twins is sacred, and if one dies, the family creates an effigy of the lost twin,

In this reading, what doctors see as insignificant marks become, for the *bokono*, visual traces of spiritual realities. This example illustrates how spiritual and biomedical practitioners employ different interpretive codes to read the same ultrasound: while medicine attends to physical anatomy, oracular practice interprets the image as a medium through which spiritual truths are revealed, shaping both understanding and reproductive action.

The incorporation of biomedical tools, such as ultrasound, into ritual contexts like divination should not come as a surprise. As highlighted by a significant study conducted in Uganda (Whyte S.R., Whyte M., Kyaddondo 2018), both divination and biomedical testing are essential methods of acquiring knowledge in many African societies. While divination is an ancient way of addressing uncertainty, biomedical testing is a more standardized and modern practice. Despite their differences, both share similar processes of discovery, involving negotiation and the integration of knowledge into practical decision-making. In each case, specialized tools are used to uncover hidden knowledge, with specialists – whether diviners or healthcare practitioners – interpreting these tools to reveal either spiritual truths or medical conditions (*Ibid*. pp. 97-98). Furthermore, ultrasound images have a unique characteristic compared to other biomedical tests. While all diagnostic tools uncover what is hidden, ultrasounds stand out for their ability to literally transform the invisible into the visible, providing tangible printed images of what would otherwise remain unseen.

From the Womb to the Fetus, from the Fetus to the *Jotò*

Many studies have highlighted the role of ultrasounds in revealing something that is not yet present, but can already be seen. Lisa Mitchell fittingly refers to ultrasounds as the "first picture of the baby" (Mitchell 2001). Ultrasound imaging, far from being a supposedly neutral window into the woman's womb, is, in fact, a form of photography of the fetus. It offers detailed insights into the fetus's anatomy, growth, and development, and can even reveal patterns of activity, rest, and other physiological characteristics (Graham 1983).

Since the 1980s, several scholars have argued that reproductive technologies, including prenatal diagnosis, fetal heart monitors, and ultrasounds, have contributed to a "fetocentric view" (Arney 1982, Oakley 1986), treating the fetus as a distinct patient with rights separate from those of the pregnant woman. Ultrasound, in particular, enabled physicians to bypass the mother as the primary informant about fetal health, reinforcing the fetus

to prevent it from drawing the surviving twin – or, as in Pelagie's case, future siblings – into the spirit world.

as the main patient (Mitchell 2001, p. 19). Before the advent of ultrasound technology, obstetrical consultations focused primarily on the woman – her body, her health – while the advent of ultrasound images shifted the focus from the womb to the fetus itself.

A similar shift appears to have taken place in the oracular consultations conducted by the *bokono*. During interviews, many of them emphasized the importance of visualizing the fetus. They explained that, through the ultrasound image, they could easily discern aspects of the child's character and temperament, identify which ancestor it resembled, and determine if protective deities were involved, necessitating particular rituals.

The most interesting aspect to highlight is that, within the divinatory context, this biomedical tool has been entirely redefined. While in the biomedical gaze, ultrasound makes the fetus – an otherwise invisible entity – visible, within the "sacred gaze" (Morgan 2005) of the *bokono*, the same image unveils additional invisible elements, such as deities and ancestors. Thus, the ultrasound image becomes not only the "baby's first photograph" (Mitchell 2001) but also a "sacred photograph" (Freedberg 1989).

David Freedberg (1989) explores the power of images, particularly sacred ones, arguing that they are not merely representations but entities that "are, do, and act" on those who see or touch them, "evoking moods and motivations in ways comparable to spiritual beings themselves" (Fabietti 2014, p. 190).

During oracular consultations for pregnant women, I often witnessed the *bokono* pointing to specific spots on ultrasound images and asking the oracle to identify which ancestor was represented there, thereby determining the fetus's *jotò*, or spiritual protector.

The *jotò* ("father of birth") may be an ancestor, a *vodun* deity, or both, and differs from the *mejitò* ("the one who brings the person into the world"), a term that refers to biological parents (Akindélé, Aguessy 1953, p. 97, Herskovits 1938, p. 268, Maupoil 1943, pp. 382-386, Saulnier 1976, p. 24). Identifying the *jotò* is vital, as it establishes a set of obligations and restrictions whose observance ensures protection by the associated ancestor or *vodun* deity (Kossou 1983, p. 286) and integrates the individual into the family's existential continuity, linking them to both ancestors and family deities[11].

Classical literature suggests that the *jotò* is usually identified either three months after birth (Herskovits 1938, p. 268, Maupoil 1943, pp. 382-386) or immediately afterward, since it can influence the child's name (Saulnier 1976, p. 24). However, during my fieldwork, I observed cases in which

11 This identification is also a necessary step before determining the *Fa* sign linked to both the *jotò* and the individual, the *agbasà-Fa*. Without this sign, it is impossible to consult the oracle on someone's behalf. For this reason, the *agbasà* consultation is considered the first true oracle consultation of a person's life (Maupoil 1943, p. 229).

the *jotò* was identified before birth, thanks to the combined use of oracular consultations and ultrasound images. In such cases, the *bokono* interpreted specific marks or "shadows" on the scan, and ritual recognition could occur as early as the seventh month of pregnancy, sometimes even sooner.

One illustrative case is that of Monique, a woman I met at a maternity center during her prenatal checkups. Over time, I began accompanying her not only to her medical appointments but also to the oracular consultations she held with a *bokono*, her husband's uncle. One day, during her sixth month of pregnancy, Monique had an ultrasound and was especially delighted by the clarity of the image, later explaining the reason for her excitement that same afternoon when she invited me to her husband's family compound to attend a consultation.

Inside the *bokono*'s room, the ultrasound image was placed carefully on the ground. The *bokono* began casting the *opèlè* while pointing to different spots on the scan, asking the oracle who was represented in those shapes and shadows. Through the simultaneous reading of the ultrasound and the oracle, he identified the fetus's *jotò* as the paternal great-grandfather and revealed a spiritual connection with the deity Dan[12], of whom the ancestor had been a priest. Preparations began immediately for ceremonies and sacrificial rituals dedicated to Dan, and the *bokono* prescribed specific obligations Monique was to follow both during pregnancy and after birth.

By viewing the ultrasound image through the "sacred gaze", the oracle could immediately and confidently identify the *jotò*. It made no difference that the fetus had not yet been born; the spirit of the *jotò* was clearly visible and imprinted on the image, offering tangible and undeniable proof of its presence.

An Early Recognition of the Fetus as a Human?

So, what happens if the *jotò* is identified before the fetus is even born? Does this imply that the fetus is already recognized as a person?

Rosalind Petchesky (1987) was the first to introduce the concept of "fetal fetishism", describing it as the attribution of inherent "life" to the fetus while obscuring its dependence on the woman's body. Building on this analysis, Janelle Taylor in *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram* (2008) argues that ultrasound technology was quickly embraced by anti-abortion movements. Under the banner of being "pro-life," these groups use ultrasound images in propaganda campaigns, portraying fetuses as small children who think, speak, and express a will to live from the womb. The goal is to construct the

12 Dan, which means "rainbow snake" in Fon, is a *vodun* deity venerated along the coastal region of Benin, locally associated with wealth, fertility, and aquatic domains.

fetus as an autonomous life, even in the earliest stages of gestation, and to foster emotional attachment through fetal imagery in order to discourage abortion.

In Benin, voluntary termination of pregnancy within the first twelve weeks was legalized by a 2021 law[13]. Despite this legal change, it would be wrong to deny that a widespread anti-abortion sentiment persists in popular consciousness. Many of my interlocutors, including *vodun* priests, described abortion as morally equivalent to taking a life. This raises questions about the origins of anti-abortion beliefs: do they stem primarily from colonial policies and Catholic evangelization[14], or do they also draw on local conceptions of personhood within the *vodun* belief system?

In this context, discussing Petchensky's concept of "fetal fetishism" seems particularly fitting. Given that *vodun* has often – albeit incorrectly – been associated with "fetishism" [15] and that objects and spirits are considered to hold power, the parallel with the vital power attributed to fetuses by anti-abortion movements appears almost inevitable. Moreover, the analysis could be expanded by asking whether the use of ultrasound in oracular consultations, along with the recognition of the *jotò* during pregnancy, might have played a role in reinforcing anti-abortion beliefs.

However, the recognition of the fetus's *jotò* should not be confused with the recognition of the child as a "social individual" or a "human being". In southern Benin, a newborn attains social recognition only after undergoing a series of prescribed rituals, most notably the *videtòn* ceremony, or "outing of the baby," which takes place a few days after birth (nine for boys and seven for girls). This ceremony marks the child's formal introduction into the family and the conferral of a name (Akindélé, Aguessy 1953, p. 97, Saulnier 1976, p. 24).

During my fieldwork, I attended numerous *videtòn* ceremonies. These rituals were performed not only by families practicing the *vodun* religion but also by Christian and Muslim households, albeit with certain adapta-

13 *Loi n. 2021-12 du 20 Decembre 2021*, available at: https://sante.gouv.bj (Last accessed: February 2025).

14 As I discuss in my PhD theses (see Vergottini 2024), a genealogical perspective is necessary to understand how the "moral economies of maternity" (Hugon 2020) shaped local reproductive policies and discourses. From the 1920s, French colonial concerns over underpopulation in West Africa led to pronatalist policies, including restrictions on contraception and abortion (laws of 1920 and 1923). Dahomean midwives trained in colonial schools were expected not only to assist with childbirth but also to educate women in hygiene and maternal norms, embodying strongly Catholic values (Barthélémy 2009) and acting as what Anne Hugon calls "missionaries of modernity" (Hugon 2020).

15 For a critical analysis of the use of the term "fetish" to refer to *vodun*, see Brivio (2012), pp. 46-49.

tions, being conducted by a catechist or an imam, for instance[16]. Despite variations in practice, the *videtòn* remains distinct from other rites, such as baptism, retaining its original purpose: socially recognizing the newborn as a person. A key moment of the ritual is the symbolic offering of food into two holes in the ground – later filled in – representing victory over death[17] (Saulnier 1976, p. 24). Only after this ritual is completed, the children are fully considered to have entered the world of the living (Erny 2006, p.127).

Until the *videtòn* ceremony, the newborn remains unnamed. Even in the contemporary context, when births occur in hospitals and a certificate must be issued[18], parents typically keep the child's name secret, and no one calls the newborn by name before the ritual. During fieldwork, I frequently attended births in hospitals. On several occasions, when I asked about the name, women simply answered: "baby". Others confided that they had chosen a name but believed speaking it aloud could bring misfortune or even cause the baby to die. In all cases, it was considered improper for a newborn to "possess" a name before it was ritually conferred.

The *videtòn* ceremony does not merely mark a chronological passage from pregnancy to infancy; it constitutes, above all, a moment of social birth. As several scholars have observed, in many cultural contexts, the status of "being born" is not automatically granted by biological delivery but is instead mediated by ritual recognition.

Anthropological studies conducted in different parts of the world have explored the ambiguous status of newborns, highlighting the fluid and unstable nature of prenatal life and early childhood (Mattalucci 2022). Across a wide range of settings, newborns often occupy a marginal position within the network of relationships that define social life (Conklin, Morgan 1996, Erny 2006). They are frequently regarded as unripe, unformed, and ungendered beings, and therefore not yet fully human (Bloch 1993, Carsten 1995). In some contexts, they are even perceived as spirits, angelic beings, or temporary extensions of their mothers (Cecil 1996, Scheper-Hughes 1992). As Boltanski (2004) emphasizes, recognition is central to personhood: through social interaction and language, a being acquires a distinct identity, a name, and a place in society. Without such recognition, the fetus does not become a socially acknowledged individual.

16 The *vidèton* ceremony is traditionally conducted by the *Taynon*, literally "mother of the aunts," an elderly woman from the patrilineal lineage who is also responsible for ceremonies honoring the ancestors.

17 See Sambiéni (2016) for an anthropological analysis of maternal and infant mortality in Benin.

18 Under national law, the birth certificate officially records the child's name and date of birth (Code des personnes et de la famille, Chapter 3, "Acte de Naissance" June 7, 2002).

Hughette, one of my interlocutors, explained the meaning of the *videtòn* ceremony with remarkable clarity during an interview I recorded in my field diary:

> Until that day, the baby isn't really born yet. The soul is already there, the spirit is already there… but we don't know if it will live. It's like when the fetus is still inside the womb…it's there, but it can be called back to the other world at any moment… but it wouldn't be a death, because it hasn't been born yet. It's like a deity, a spirit, a soul, but it's not flesh […] Only after the ceremony we consider the baby truly born. That's when it becomes one of us (Hughette, 27 April 2023).

Through Hughette's words, the *videtòn* emerges as a liminal threshold: it transforms a spirit – still "callable" to the other world – into a fully recognized social person. As mentioned earlier, the *jotò* is believed to shape the soul and destiny of the unborn, while the mother, as *mejitò*, brings the person into the world and physically "fabricates" the body[19]. In light of these aspects, we can distinguish between two different types of recognition: one is the acknowledgment of the invisible entity, the spirit; while the other is the social recognition of individuals as human beings, physically fabricated and socially acknowledged.

Another example that helps illuminate this concept is the historically documented treatment of children born with physical deformities, known in southern Benin as *toxosù*. In the Fon-French dictionary by Segurola and Rassinoux (2000), *toxosù* refers both to certain aquatic spirits and to children with deformities, believed to be spirits who had abandoned the transcendent world. Such children were often taken to a river and drowned to facilitate their return to the afterlife (Segurola, Rassinoux 2000, p. 488). As Akindélé and Aguessy note, these children were considered "not properly fabricated in the flesh", still part of the spiritual realm and often revered as deities[20], and it was believed that practices such as abandonment in water or drowning would facilitate their return to the transcendent world (Akindélé, Aguessy 1953, p. 99).

Carolyn Fishel Sargent, in her ethnography *Maternity, Medicine, and Power: Reproductive Decisions in Urban Benin*, documents cases of infanticide involving so-called "witch babies", children born with physical deformities, in northern Benin during the late 1980s (Sargent 1989, p. 43). Importantly,

19 Similarly, Danielle Jonckers (2010), in her study on childhood in Mali, argues that parents shape a person only materially – through blood, water, flesh, and bones – while supra-human forces provide spiritual existence. Nadia Lovell (2002) in southern Togo, offers a similar analysis, noting that women are seen as containers of fetal spirits and the physical creators of their bodies through menstrual blood.

20 For a deeper exploration of the deities associated with *toxosù*, see Brivio (2023), pp. 106-110.

she notes that home births were often preferred because hospitals prohibited such actions, and that the proportion of "witch babies" killed was already declining due to the increasing medicalization of childbirth (*Ibid*.)

Comparing Sargent's findings with contemporary accounts from my fieldwork, it is evident that these practices are now widely regarded as "belonging to the past". All my interlocutors judged them negatively, reflecting a broader shift in moral and social frameworks, including both attitudes toward disability and conception of the beginning of life.

Scholars such as Petchesky (1987), Duden (1994), Georges (1997), Mitchell (2001), and Taylor (2008) have demonstrated how ultrasound and related technologies can facilitate a deeper emotional and human connection with fetuses. Although these works do not address the Beninese context directly, they help illuminate how similar dynamics may contribute locally to a reconfiguration of personhood, the perception of disability, and the strengthening of anti-abortion sentiments. Furthermore, the spread of Catholicism and Pentecostal churches in this region may also have contributed to a shift in the perception of fetuses and newborns. Noret (2010), who has conducted ethnographic research on death and funeral rites in southern Benin, highlights how the loss of a child during or immediately after birth is a source of immense sorrow for some people. However, according to some of my informants, newborns who die before the *videtòn* ceremony do not receive any funeral rites. This is because, as mentioned earlier, they are not yet socially recognized as human beings. They are considered spirits, and their death is regarded as a return to the transcendent world.

Therefore, returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph – whether the recognition of the *jotò* before birth implies recognition of the fetus as a human being – we can conclude that, while the fetus may be acknowledged spiritually, it does not attain full human recognition until after birth and the corresponding birth rituals.

Conclusion

If *Fa* serves as a mediator between humans and deities, ultrasound images play a similar role. They act as intermediaries between the mother and the fetus, establishing a visual connection, unveiling vital information about the future, and providing valuable behavioral guidelines designed to help the mother successfully carry the pregnancy to term. Moreover, through the "sacred gaze" of the *bokono*, ultrasound images can reveal the ancestor reincarnated in the fetus or the *vodun* to which it belongs.

In southern Benin, ultrasounds have acquired a new interpretive role. They no longer function solely to visualize the fetus, but can also reveal other invisible entities. Moreover, ultrasound use has influenced divinatory

practices, introducing new ways to consult the oracle and eliciting its responses. This also provides a lens for reflecting on the ongoing dynamics of evolution, transformation, and incorporation of external elements within both divinatory practices and religious rituals in this region of Africa.

A second key aspect is the recognition of the fetus's spirit and its integration into family cosmologies even before birth. This spiritual recognition, however, differs from the fetus's social recognition of a human being emphasized in anti-abortion campaigns. As we have seen, in southern Benin, it is crucial to distinguish between acknowledging the spirit and recognizing the individual as a human person. The fetus's spirit is acknowledged and its vital breath recognized, yet it remains unembodied—not yet "fabricated" through blood and flesh, not born, and not socially named. Nevertheless, it is already situated within the lines of existential continuity: prayers can be offered for it, just as they are for ancestors, deities, and other invisible forces. Ultrasound technology has, in effect, rendered visible what was previously invisible.

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