

On the path of inter-religious dialogue ***Meeting the Mandjak people of Guinea-Bissau***

Michel GERLIER

Father Michel Gerlier, a Spiritan, exercised his ministry mostly in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau.

A few years after Guinea-Bissau gained Independence (1973), Bishop Settimio Ferrazzetta, the first bishop, called the Spiritans to proclaim the Gospel in the heart of the *Mandjak* country. The missionaries in Dakar immediately responded to his appeal. However, they were unsure how to approach this people of immigrants jostling at the doors of the Church. In fact, the Mandjak population, who were part of the former Province of Portuguese Guinea remained, and still remain to this day, strongly attached to their traditions. The migratory phenomenon, which has accelerated since the 1950s, has not affected this fidelity.

First contact with the *Mandjak* world

In Pikine, the great suburb of Dakar where I spent my first nine years of priestly ministry, 80% of our parishioners were Mandjak, but we spoke French and sometimes *Wolof*. Only one confrère in the whole of Senegal spoke their language: Fr. Gustave Bienvenu, who, as early as 1970, had had the good idea to found a Mandjak Community in Dakar, gathering couples, young students, artisans, and even an elderly grand-mother. He lived there among them with a missionary Sister and a trainee seminarian. In Pikine, we often called upon him for the adult catechumenate. He helped us to unravel complicated cases of polygamy and some compromising contracts linked to their traditional religion. We trusted him entirely, but nevertheless had some misgivings because we could not speak the vernacular ourselves and could not verify the justice of his position, which at the time (1975) seemed rather daring. It must be said that the Theology of Inculturation was then only in its infancy, with the publication of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

It was by working with Father Bienvenu in training Mandjak catechists that my taste for inter-religious dialogue began to awaken. Until then, it was above all the link between the proclamation of the Gospel and development that interested me, as well as the missionary dimension of personal and community life. Father Bienvenu had set up, in a corner of his chapel, a small traditional altar on which he poured libations, before or after Mass, in his capacity as *nauyäk kato* (head of the family) in charge of maintaining the link with the Ancestors. I no longer know which entity the stake stuck in the earth represented (a saint or some other deceased ancestor?), but it represented the transposition of a traditional cult into the church, the *pëcap des balugum*, a cult I was often invited to attend when I joined the Spiritan Team in Guinea-Bissau at Christmas 1985.

My predecessors had chosen to settle in Bajob, a tiny village lost in the bush, because they had been told that it was particularly representative of the traditional Mandjak universe. Some Christians, baptized in Senegal or The Gambia, favoured their establishment; and it was from this base that they quickly spread to the surrounding area with about fifteen villages. When I arrived, six years after the founding, I had the joy of finding Christian communities in embryo more or less everywhere, with recognizable signs: chapels, schools built of mud bricks, water points, wells, orchards of cashew-trees, grafted mango trees, market gardening, etc. But, in my opinion, the Founders' most important decision had been to adopt Father Bienvenu's missionary vision. They

had taken a year-long course with him to become familiar with the Mandjak culture. The study of their vernacular had been a priority as was participation in all the manifestations of their traditional culture a daily concern; obviously, to the extent that the doors were held open.

How could I have had the slightest reticence in setting my foot in their footsteps to share in a dialogue they had started so well?

Immersion in a people

I stayed for twenty-three years in Bajob; I only said ‘goodbye’ in June 2018. My missionary experience in the “Mandjak country” took place in two stages of the same duration, broken by ten years in Ziguinchor, southern Senegal. Learning the language was obviously the best means of entry. To understand what the other person is saying, one must enroll at his school and use his means of communication. My teachers were the villagers themselves. However, I am also grateful to Pierre Buis, a confrère on the previous team, with whom I shared my first three years, because he obliged me to set the *Wolof* language aside. I had learned it in Dakar and many people in the village understood it because of their seasonal transmigration. I am also grateful to him for having drawn my attention to the limited expression of Portuguese *Crioulo*, a Portuguese patois, which may nevertheless be regarded as the first national language of Guinea-Bissau, but which nonetheless remains a dialect, doubtless useful for trading with other ethnic groups, but unable to convey what a Mandjak really feels in the depths of himself and of expressing his relationship with the invisible world.

I think it took me three years to learn to speak Mandjako pretty well, to master the syntax and increase my vocabulary, so that I could understand what the people were saying and start to express some ideas that made sense to my interlocutors. But it did not take me three years to realize that to communicate with a people from a totally different culture is something quite other than words and phrases formulated according to the rules. One must also be able to penetrate the invisible world through sign language: symbols, rites and myths.

While I was learning the language, it was not too hard to adapt to what sociologists call *acculturation*, in all the areas accessible to a foreigner trying to understand a people’s ways and life. People who welcomed one with open arms: habitat, food, crafts, agricultural work, barter and trade, political organization, etc. The Founders of the mission had preceded me on this path with great assurance. Could I have doubted for a moment the validity of the choice they had made upon their arrival?

The beginning of a dialogue of life

This decisive immersion in the Mandjak culture naturally led me to “dialogue” with Traditional Religion. Indeed, it is difficult to separate inter-religious dialogue from inter-cultural dialogue, at least in the tiny corner of Africa that welcomed me. One can say that the Traditional Religion encompasses, envelops or irrigates every Mandjak activity, their thought and words, from birth to death: their social and political organization, work, arts and crafts, medicine.... This is why it is impossible, in the process of the inculturation of the Gospel message, to separate the traditional values, which would in theory be compatible with our faith, from the rest which appertain to the “animist/pagan” religious sphere, as for example, the role of the innumerable intermediary spirits in Mandjak spirituality.

As soon as I arrived in Bajob, I was confronted with this dilemma: when one suspects that things are ambiguous to say the least and that there is a high risk of regression/back-sliding or even

syncretism, should one desert the other? Or should one dare to meet the other at the risk of compromising oneself in the eyes of some of one's co-religionists?

That year was the 'Year of the Initiation'. The future initiates were to enter the sacred grove around 20 March, and stay there for three months, without ever being able to return to the village. Having learned that 80% of the candidates for initiation were Christian, I sought to enter the wood, with the idea of being able to organize celebrations of the Word of God, and even Mass, at least on Easter Day. The 'old Christians' tried to oppose this project, claiming that a priest had no place in the sacred wood. But their arguments were not convincing. I objected:

- Say instead that this is no place for a White!
- No! This is no place for a priest!
- In this case, it is no place for a Christian either! Because a priest is nothing, if not a Christian ordained to serve his Christian brethren wherever they are! If Christians can enter the wood, the priest must go there too. Otherwise, everyone stays outside!

Thus, just three months after my arrival, I was at the very heart of the problem posed by the evangelization of the Mandjaks: should a Mandjak renounce his customs to become a Christian? Why did the 'old Christians', who are all going there, not want to meet me there? What, in the sacred wood, was contrary to faith in the Risen Christ? What type of spirit presides over all this?

No! I was not going to wait until the next *Initiation* (twenty-two years!) to understand.... I entered the wood, the very first week, helped by some young Christians who were already initiated and with the complicity of old "pagans".... What happened next? Having promised on my honour never to reveal what I saw and heard in the sacred wood, I will not now reveal any secrets. But I do not think I betray my word by saying what I felt in my mind and missionary heart when the "old" requested me to pray for the initiates in a sanctuary that had nothing to do with the village chapel. After a brief moment of vertigo, the word of Jesus, telling the disciples not to worry about what they would say when in an embarrassing situation, struck me like a flash. And I spoke words that I have never regretted because I was certain that the Holy Spirit was with me and that *Dabomanin*, the spirit of the wood, was neither an adversary nor a competitor of Christ the Saviour. One could advance in dialogue without complexes. The door was open on the side of the Traditional Religion, it only depended on me to advance on the path of encounter.

Having definitively rejected the temptation to proselytize, dismissed an after-thought to make converts in the strict sense of change of religion, I gained mutual trust, it seemed to me that all the conditions were fulfilled for lucid and serene dialogue. That *Nasienbatsi*, the one God, Creator of heaven and earth, whose name is daily on everyone's lips, is not honoured or worshiped in the way that a Christian, a Jew or a Muslim thinks that he should be does not mean that the Mandjak people worship false gods. And I do not see why the sacrifice of animals, big or small, offered every day in the sacred wood or on the domestic altars to intermediate spirits, would offend the Christ whom they do not know or know so little. Even if I know that Christ shed his blood, once and for all, for the salvation of all mankind. The First Letter to the Corinthians has often enlightened me in my day-to-day relationship with the believers of the Traditional Religion: apart from the danger of scandalizing the weak, one can peacefully take this path, as St. Paul himself did. I shall give some examples.

Ancestor worship

I shall begin with the simplest example, the one that usually poses the least difficulty, even to the most scrupulous of missionaries: ancestor worship. Father Bienvenu had already opened the

road in his community in Dakar-Médina. The Founders of the mission in Bajob had followed suit without hesitation by taking part in the traditional libations whenever they had the opportunity. In the Mandjak culture, it is by means of planting sacred stakes (*icap*) in the ground a few meters from the family home, that one can maintain communion with those who have joined the world of the ancestors (*balugum*). At each event, happy or unhappy, the head of the family (*nauyäk kato*) consults, by means of these perceptible *pëcap*, those who have become invisible, accompanying his prayers with libations, offerings or sacrifices, according to a well-established ritual. These family ceremonies take place throughout the year, according to need. But at the approach of the rainy season, an occasion called *kakao* brings the members of each family together, at the same time, around their respective ancestors, to implore their intercession in favour of those “who still support the weight of the day”. To ask them for health, food, drink, clothing, work, rain, money, schooling for the children, education of the new generations, agreement between the members of the family....

The Cult of the Ancestors is not about to disappear in the Mandjak world. On the contrary, it is what, to a large extent, maintains the cohesion and harmonious development of each family, despite the well-known mobility of this people. The missionaries in Bajob did not hesitate to transpose these rites into the basic communities, planting the *icap* of their patron saints at the entrance to the chapels and honouring them, on the patronal feast days, with original liturgies that integrate the Feast of the Patron Saint and the ancient Rogation Rite in a symbolic language immediately perceptible to Mandjak Christians.

Who, in reality, are the intermediary spirits?

It is much less simple for many Christians, priests and lay people, to enter dialogue with the Traditional Religion when it comes to participating in the traditional cults addressed to other invisible beings, such as the animist bodies called *gëkai* in the Mandjako dialect. The missionaries to South America, during the time of the Spanish and Portuguese *Patronates*/Protectorates, as well as those to Africa in the nineteenth century, indiscriminately relegated these intermediary spirits to the category of devils.

In Guinea-Bissau, the foreign missionaries who only use the *Crioulo* idiom to proclaim the Gospel have only one word to indicate all the spiritual entities distinct from the Ancestors, the word *iran*, which always conveys a pejorative sense. An *iran* is an intrinsically evil spirit; one must renounce it. When I was in Dakar, at every adult Baptism, I heard this refrain taken up by the neophytes in chorus: “*Mam baaja, uno batismu-inji, ma wëtan gëcai ...*” (“I swear, on the day of my Baptism, to give up the *gëcai*”). Thus, it was clear that the *gëcai* were all compared to what are called devils or demons in the Christian religion. One was not far from the *tabula rasa* of the missionaries to America in the sixteenth century, at the antipodes of the opening Matteo Ricci and his companions inaugurated in the Far East at the same period!

The problem is that, once one has left the Mandjak country, most of the baptized in Dakar return

quickly, and without qualms, to the traditional cult celebrated on the altars of the *gëcai* in the family domain, the sacred wood or any other place reserved for these rites. The name of God is always pronounced, but the sacrifices themselves are all offered to the *gëcai*, constantly implored to solve personal or communal problems concerning the living and the dead. To ignore this cult, snubbing it, while continuing to proclaim the Gospel, is, in my opinion, condemning oneself to marginalize the Christians or, what is no better, to create people perpetually torn between the demands of the Traditional Religion, inseparable from their culture of origin, and those of the Christian religion into which they have entered through Baptism. Indeed, to fight this cult on the pretext that it is evil, not

to say diabolical, is to decide that no dialogue is possible because the encounter begins and continues to be marked by this tenacious prejudice: the *gëcai* are demons!

Judge the tree by its fruit (Mt 7:15 ff., 6:43)

Luckily, there is a third way: that of the Gospel of Jesus telling us that a tree is recognizable by its fruit. The path I chose to take on my arrival in Mandjak territory was to discern the spirits case by case. Never to generalize, but to live each meeting as it developed. On this path, I believe I met true devils whom I expelled, as one ought, with the power of the Spirit of Jesus (Mk 16:17). But, more often than not, I only met real-life imps with whom I tried to dialogue in order to understand the reason for their deviant or malicious behaviour.

As for going to the sacred places of the Mandjak, all inhabited by the *gëcai*, I may say that I simply followed my instinct: I never tried to force a door that was closed, but neither did I refuse to go where I was allowed.... Once in, I strove to discern the spirits in the light of the Holy Spirit and with the help of some Mandjak Christians who were constantly involved in this inter-religious dialogue. For example, if one needs to pour three liters of palm wine and slaughter a tiny chicken on the altar of the traditional witchdoctor so that his *ucay* may allow him to treat a patient with a snake bite, or suffering from some other disease, thanks to the herbs of which he has the secret, by what right can one dismiss as “devilish” such a benevolent spirit? Health and peace are eloquent signs that enable one to discern what type of spirit one is dealing with.

On this journey of encounter with the Traditional Religion, I had the good fortune to benefit from the valuable help of two exceptional experts, a biblical scholar and an anthropologist. The first was none other than my colleague Pierre Buis of whom I spoke earlier. As an expert in the Old Testament, he really enlightened me on the place of angels and demons in the Bible, reminding me that they had only entered it rather late, during the Babylonian Exile; and that even in Holy Scripture it is often difficult to recognize whether one is dealing with benevolent or evil spirits. As for the anthropologist, Maria Teixeira, she stressed the same ambiguity in the world of the *gëcai*, by drawing an almost exhaustive picture of the “main actors of the invisible”. She wrote:

“God sent powers to the earth, the *ngëcay*. Some of them are good and work together for good, while others are bad, most of whose actions are oriented to evil.

“*A priori*, it is impossible to distinguish a good *ucay* from a bad one: ‘In order to know, one must approach him to know him better. It is the same as for men’, say the officiants.

“The beneficial or malevolent orientation of an *ucay* partly depends on the person addressing it. Powers and humans are closely linked in action. Almost all domestic powers are neutral, ambivalent, and able to perform good and evil at the same time. Men are like the powers who serve them, with ambivalent attitudes”.¹

If this is so, one can see how inter-religious dialogue can take place from day to day. Once the practices directly related to the evil spirits have been set aside or eliminated, an immense field of investigation opens up before whoever really wants to dialogue with the believers of the Traditional Religion, as well as with the numerous Mandjak Christians who belong to both trends. For the latter one could even say, that the dialogue which takes place within their person is a kind of “intra-religious dialogue”, to use a particularly felicitous expression used by Paul Coulon. He wrote: “Today the real dialogue in Christian communities is basically an *intra-religious dialogue*: every African Christian has to confront within, his/her Christian faith and traditional heritage — as does every community within itself”.²

Speaking of faith in another language

To return to my own experience, I should like to add that, if immersion in the traditional Mandjak world, without *a priori*, enabled me to understand this people's relationship with God and with all visible and invisible beings better, if empathy prevented me from "demonizing" all that seemed mysterious or frightening to a visitor with limited time, the dialogue of life, day by day, also taught me to express my faith in a language that was a little more comprehensible to this people. I worked through catechesis and the liturgy, playing my part in the patient work of inculturating the Gospel. But I am well aware that despite speaking the other's language correctly, the encounter with God, the All Other, will always remain a deep mystery for each one of us. In the end, only the Holy Spirit, who precedes and accompanies us in every dialogue, can render the dialogue fruitful. It is he who will guide us, the disciples of Christ and the followers of the Traditional Religion, "into the whole truth" (Jn 16:13).

FOOTNOTES:

1. Maria Teixeira, *cf. Rituels divinatoires et thérapeutiques chez les Manjack de Guinée-Bissau et du Sénégal*. L'Harmattan, 2001, p. 33.
2. Paul Coulon, *cf. "De Africa nunquam satis. On ne se lasse jamais de l'Afrique"*, *Mémoire Spiritaine*, n. 21 (1^{er} semestre 2005), p. 169.
[Gëcai/jinn/genii]?

Reprinted by courtesy of *Spiritus, Revue d'expériences et de recherches missionnaires*, n. 234, March 2019, pp.7-16.