

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Representational system and excessive alcohol consumption by seniors Agni-Sanwi (Ivory Coast)**

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**This study highlights the impact of alcohol on the health of the elderly in Agni-Sanwi society in Côte d'Ivoire. In relation to their representations of Gin and Rum, the elderly consume them excessively during various cultural practices. The study therefore aims to understand the social representations of these strong liqueurs in that society. In a qualitative approach, interviews and group discussions were conducted from January 17 to February 28 2019, with 28 people within the age range of 60 and above, who make up the chieftom and Elders of this social environment. The thematic analysis of the content of the speeches given by them reveals that Gin symbolizes the vertical relationship with the ancestors and Rum symbolizes joy and restores the horizontal relationship between the brothers of the community. These two liqueurs are therefore positively represented there. However, their excessive consumption by the elderly induces various diseases which, in a context of therapeutic trial and error, condition them to pathological aging.**

**Key words:** Representational system, alcohol, elderly people, pathological aging, Côte d'ivoire.

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to international projections, the African continent will register a high rate of elderly people by 2050 (Leridon, 2015, (United Nations Population Fund) UNFPA, 2016). In Côte d'Ivoire, the number of people within the age range of 60 and above was 913,668 for a general population of 22,671,331 ((National Statistics Institute) INS, 2014). According to previous INS projections for 2018, this same number should reach 1,167,611 out of a total population of 25,195,540 inhabitants. Examining this demographic weight, the aging of the Ivorian population can be observed. Aging is "often described as an inevitable process linked to the

'universal' demographic transition that all societies around the world experience." (Blöss and Blöss-Widmer 2019). Human aging is a complex physiological phenomenon that varies from one individual to another, taking into account several genetic, environmental and behavioral factors. That is why Caradec (2015) is interested in aging from an individual perspective, adopting a microsociological perspective. For him, aging can then be approached as a non-linear process, "engagements and disengagements combinations", but also as an experience (Caradec, 2015). For World Health Organization (WHO) (2016), "Biologically, aging is

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associated with the accumulation of a wide variety of molecular and cellular damage. Over time, these lesions lead to a gradual reduction in physiological resources, an increased risk of various diseases and general decrease in the abilities of the individual. This process ultimately leads to death". This phenomenon affects all societies. Indeed, the quest for longevity and its challenges appear everywhere as a major challenge to be taken up at the macro-social, meso-social and micro-social level as well. Longevity rhymes with "aging well" or successful aging which is a positive perception of aging. From this angle, the actions to be taken must converge towards this type of aging by preventing various alterations. Aquino et al. (2016) distinguish three modes of aging: usual aging, successful aging and pathological aging. Pathological aging is a condition in which a person's physical and mental faculties are no longer optimal. In this type of situation, one or more pathologies are found, with physical and / or psychological impairment (Morée, 2018). In Côte d'Ivoire, certain cultural practices often expose individuals to pathological aging. That is the case with certain cultural ceremonies among the Agni-Sanwi such as the Yam Festival, King or Chief enthronement and Wedding Ceremonies, Funerals, Idol Worship, *Komian Dances*<sup>1</sup> and more. On these occasions, according to empirical findings, strong liqueurs are consumed excessively by some villagers. In these specific contexts, the elderly, guarantors of habits and customs, essential components of the traditional chiefdom and the class of elders, regularly and excessively consume strong liqueurs. However, since 1978, alcoholism has been recognized as a disease by the World Health Organization (ICD-10<sup>2</sup>, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) (2018), classifies alcoholism into two types: the acute form or acute alcoholism (occasional consumption, more or less intense) and chronic alcoholism (regular excessive consumption, beyond toxicity<sup>3</sup> thresholds, which induces dependence). The WHO (2018) determines the state of dependence when "certain symptoms of the disorder have persisted for at least a month or have occurred repeatedly over an extended period; at least three of the events are present at the same time in the course of the past year. ". These two types of consumption are found among the Agni-Sanwi of Côte d'Ivoire. In such a context, how can seniors experience healthy aging or successful aging or even "aging well" as perceived by Aquino et al. (2016) as an absence of pathology and disability?

In this respect, some studies related to alcohol consumption by the elderly have been carried out essentially under several approaches: Some have

focused on the relationship between the use of alcohol and dementia among the elderly (Léger et al., 2015; Chaudet et al., 2016).

Indeed, these studies have proved that moderate alcohol consumption has a protective effect against the onset of Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. However, heavy drinking increases the risk of getting vascular dementia and alcohol related dementia but not the risk of catching Alzheimer's disease. In short, we retain here that the question of whether alcohol is beneficial or harmful depends on the quantity consumed. Moreover, these same studies have established a relationship between the variables age, sex and tolerance to alcohol. They have revealed that older people have lower tolerance than younger people. The decrease in metabolism and blood flow, reduction of thin body mass and decrease of water in the body among the elderly are the explanatory factors. As for women, they have a lower tolerance than men due to significant slowing down of the metabolism. The other studies refer to the consequences related to alcohol misuse among the elderly.

The most frequent complications induced by excessive alcohol consumption are falls and associated traumatic complications, confusional states and behavioral disorders (Paillé, 2014). These authors also mention that in the population as a whole, alcohol is the leading cause of death and the second leading avoidable cause of preventable premature death after tobacco. WHO (2018) concur in the same vein by mentioning that alcohol consumption is the third risk factor for the onset of diseases in the world. For Paillé (2014), among the elderly who consume alcohol excessively, in about two-thirds of cases, the misuse is old and has continued; in one-third of cases, the misuse started late, after 60 years of age.

Still other studies report recommendations for safer alcohol consumption, as adapted to the elderly in the United States. Indeed, after 65 years, it is recommended not to exceed one drink per day, seven per week and three drinks on a single occasion (Paillé, 2014). These recommendations seem not to be of concern among the target population of this study, within which we encounter acute and chronic alcoholism. We are then entitled to ask, what representations do these social actors have of strong liquors in this social space? The present study finds its theoretical anchoring in the theory representation as "a system of values, notions and practices relating to objects, aspects or dimensions of the social environment, which not only allows the stabilization of the living environment of individuals and groups, but which also constitutes an orientation instrument of situations perception and responses elaboration"(Moscovici cited by Kalampalikis, 2019). This study is structured around the hypothesis according to which the social representations that the elderly have about strong liqueurs determine their consumption. The study aims to catch the social representations elders have of strong liqueurs in the Agni-Sanwi social environment.

<sup>1</sup> Dance of the fetishists during which the genies are invoked.

<sup>3</sup>The international classification of diseases or ICD is a codified medical classification classifying diseases and a very wide variety of signs, symptoms, traumatic injuries, poisonings, social circumstances and external causes of injury or disease.

<sup>4</sup>Two to three standard drinks per day.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research has the Sud-Comoé Region as its geographical framework, a locality in the south-east of Cote d'Ivoire. It relates empirically to a village of Maféré which is located at 25 km from Aboisso, a town 116 km from Abidjan. The locality of Maféré is a chief town<sup>4</sup> and its population is estimated at 34,760 inhabitants (INS, 2014). The dominant people and customary landowners are the Agni-Sanwi ethnic group belonging to the Akan group from present-day Ghana (INS, 2014). According to the same sources, Maféré and its villages are part of the Kingdom of Sanwi. The Agni-Sanwi chieftain system is monarchical like the Akan: the choice stems from a hereditary mechanism of succession which limits the exercise of power to members of one and the same family. This took place in accordance with the general rule of reigning tribe inheritance which played a historic role from neighboring Ghana towards the end of the 17th century (Coulibaly, 2015). Before the French colonization, the Akan had developed a kingdom with a political structure made up of the Sovereign assisted by his council. The rest of the society was made up of three main castes: nobles, freemen and slaves (Coulibaly, 2015). Among the Agni, the witch doctor is the Komian. In the Akan societies of Ghana and Ivory Coast, the Komians are all the people who hold occult knowledge. They can teach kings their knowledge or give predictions about the future. Their magico-religious trances allow them to understand things incomprehensible to ordinary people (Ainyakou and Mandyan, 2017). The Kômians are grouped into secret societies (Ainyakou and Mandyan, 2017). This geographical space is characterized by various cultural practices such as the invocation of the spirits and ancestors. There are approximately 126 people aged 60 or older in the study village. These represent 6% of the total estimated population of 2100 (INS, 2014) (Figure 1).

The present study was carried out with 28 actors aged 60 or over, who constituted the target population. They are either members of the chieftain or Elders. They were listed at the funeral of one of their own, under one of the tarps assigned to them for the occasion. Gathered there for customary civilities before the burial of the deceased relative, the impressive number of bottles of strong liqueur from the traditional "*N'ziè*"<sup>5</sup> was seen and the fines imposed by the chieftain to certain citizens of the village deemed recalcitrant. After sharing our empirical findings namely, the excessive consumption of strong liquor by the elders and our intention to research this social reality with the chieftain spokesperson, he gave us the list of these elders. The latter, 28 of them, make up the chieftain and the body of Elders of the village. That list was established on the basis of the following inclusive criteria: age (60 or over), ethnicity (be Agni-Sanwi ethnic group), origin (be a native of the village), social status (be a member of the chieftain or elder), the type of alcohol consumption (chronic or daily, repeated and excessive consumption beyond the toxicity thresholds (two to three standard drinks per day). To be part of this study, the members of the target group should obey these inclusive criteria. By the reasoned choice technique (Dépelteau, 2020) and with regard to the inclusive criteria, the 28 elderly males were chosen and retained as the target population of the study. These people were identified and contacted individually for the interview at their homes, using the snowball technique. This study is qualitative in nature. In a discontinuous manner in a permanent "back and forth" between the field and the editorial office, the data collections were done from January 17 to February 28, 2019. The calendar constraints related to the teaching duties of the spokesperson of the chieftain essentially explain this discontinuity. The village

chieftain headquarters served as the setting for the group interviews. The semi-structured interviews took place at the respondents' homes. The spokesperson for the chieftain served as an interpreter for the elders, who do not at all speak French correctly, during the collection of qualitative data. He also served as a guide during the visits to the courtyards. The objectives of the study were explained and verbal consent for the interview and recording was obtained well in advance of the fieldwork phase. The interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. The interviews were structured around the following themes:

- (i) The different liqueurs consumed regularly during ceremonies and outside ceremonies;
- (ii) The representations that the elders have of the different liqueurs consumed;
- (iii) The cultural and social practices associated with the representations of strong liqueurs;
- (iv) Diseases linked to the consumption of strong liqueurs among the elderly.

An "ICD-PX333 Digital Voice Recorder" device was used to make recordings. Manual counting was adopted as a method for the thematic analysis of the interview guides. The data recorded by input from Microsoft Office Word 2007 software were transcribed. The interviews were grouped by topic and were the subject of a thematic content analysis. Cards with codes that can identify the interview transcripts have been developed. Categories of analysis and units of significance were constructed. These made it possible to highlight the strong liqueurs consumed by the elders in relation to the representations they make of them.

### Difficulties and solutions

Many difficulties were encountered during the data collection. One of these was the unavailability of the spokesperson for the chieftain, due to his teaching duties. As a mathematics teacher in a private school in Aboisso, he was often unavailable to accompany the research program. In addition, on many occasions, the busy schedule of the chieftain, which is very often occupied with various socio-cultural activities, has necessitated the postponement of meetings and the renewal of appointments. This justified the extension of the survey over a discontinuous period of 42 days. Indeed, the meetings organized for the interview should take into account the availability of the respondents. As a solution to these difficulties, the objectives of the study were explained to the respondents. They were reassured of the confidentiality measures taken to respect the anonymity of their village. Gradually, the interviews were conducted with the twenty-eight (28) elders.

## RESULTS

The results of this reflection are structured as follows:

- (i) Strong liquors consumed regularly and the representations linked to these liquors among the Agni-Sanwi;
- (ii) The cultural and social practices associated with the representations of strong liquors among the Agni-Sanwi;
- (iii) The influence of alcohol on the health of Agni-Sanwi seniors.

### Strong liqueurs regularly consumed by the Agni-Sanwi

From the various recorded speeches, Gin and Rum are

<sup>4</sup> (fr) Decree n° 2005-314 of 6 October 2005 creating five hundred and twenty (520) communes.

<sup>5</sup> "*N'ziè*": A form of pooling material and financial resources to support the grieving family among Akan people.



**Figure 1.** Map: Location of Maféré in the municipality of Aboisso.  
Source: RGPH 2014\_ Directory of localities: SUD-COMOÉ region.

the strong liqueurs used in all the cultural practices of the Agni-Sanwi society. Gin is a distilled and flavoured alcoholic drink essential in all the Agni-Sanwi society ceremonies. Rum is the second distilled alcoholic drink required for the same reason as Gin in that society. Those two alcoholic drinks required in all the cultural ceremonies are consumed chronically by the elders who make up the chiefdom and elders body of that society.

The following speeches shed more light on the issue:

*"It is the Gin and Rum that we consume the most in the Sanwi kingdom, especially at the level of the chiefdom and the Elders of our villages. We consume them almost every day at each ceremony and ceremonies are very numerous in Agni-Sanwi country. And then in our land, there are a lot of little little kings in the region, all commanded by the king of Sanwi who is in Krinjabo. As a member of the chiefdom, at each of our meetings, whether in the village, whether with our canton kings or in Krinjabo in the great royalty, it is these two liqueurs that we consume the most. And it's not just any Gin, but it's the Gin with images of silver coins on the bottle that we accept during ceremonies. There are counterfeits, but we*

*know the true and the fake. As for "koutoukou"<sup>6</sup>, it is consumed much more by women and young people because it is cheaper» (M.D., 63 years old, spokesperson for the village chiefdom).*

*"Ah! In any case, we are drinking. It's even stuck on us. They say that "Agni people are drunkard"! The very young people take it to sing. I can drink three to four glasses, often more a day, because there are a lot of ceremonies. But, you don't drink all at once. We drink a little bit because there are often two, three funerals at a time. So we drink and then we don't pay attention. There are also other drinks like koutoukou, beer and wine that we share with friends often " (E.A., 70 years old, Village elder).*

According to these elders, alcohol consumption goes hand in hand with cultural ceremonies. Each cultural practice is associated with the consumption of alcohol. However, several ceremonies can be overlap at the same

<sup>6</sup> Koutoukou is an artisanal brandy consumed in Ivory Coast and west Africa. It is obtained through the distillation of buds of palm leaves such as oil palm, raffia or ronier.

time in this social space. Thus, the ceremonies of king and chief enthronement, idols worship, the feast of yams, dances of "Komian" or invocation of genies, ceremonies of invocation of ancestors and of marriage, funerals, and many more constitute privileged occasions when the social elders consume alcoholic liqueurs in excess, particularly gin and rum.

### **Representations related to liqueurs among the Agni-Sanwi**

#### ***Gin symbolizes the vertical relationship with the ancestors***

The Agni-Sanwi social and cultural space is daily characterized by the execution of sacrifices, the invocation of geniuses and ancestral spirits, the worship of fetishes carried out on altars built in various places. On these occasions, the spirits and ancestors are invoked and revered. Presided over by the king or the village chief, purification rites, animal sacrifices (including poultry) intended for the deities and libations are made to the spirits of the manes. And in these solemn circumstances, it is the gin that is used in the sense that it symbolizes this vertical relationship with the ancestors. The speech of nanan<sup>7</sup> E.J., 80, the oldest chiefdom, enlightens us:

*"We begin every ceremony with the invocation of the spirits and our ancestors whom we invite to take control of all things. Without it, nothing can succeed. They are no longer physically with us, but their spirit is still there with us. Being on the other side, they are in a better position to look after us and to help us succeed in whatever we do. And it's the poured Gin that allows us to knock on their door and get in touch with them."*

Thus, any ritual in this society such as the worship of fetishes (rivers, trees, forests, pebbles, etc.) which embody the spirits and divinities and any ceremony of enthronement of king and chief, are preceded by the invocation of ancestors. It is the Gin that symbolizes this vertical relationship with the ancestors.

#### ***Rum symbolizes joy and restores the horizontal relationship between the brothers of the community***

Once the vertical relationship is established with the spirits and ancestors, the brothers of the village community can rejoice among themselves. And, it is Rum that symbolizes joy and restores that horizontal relationship between the brothers of the said community. This account places us more on the question:

*"Things are done in stages. Once the elders have finished their part, they have poured the gin to call the spirits and the ancestors, then the Rum follows to tell us that permission is given for the next step, and that the people can have a blast. Then everyone is happy. We can do "atouh"<sup>8</sup>! And it's good to wave atouh to your brother or sister who did not see you a long time ago and came for the ceremony. The brothers and sisters who did not speak to each other before because there was a palaver, this is the opportunity to settle all this, to drop everything because it is time for joy."* (A.B., 68 years old).

From these speeches follow the idea of reconciliation and relation restoration between social actors of the same community. From what preceded we notice that Gin and Rum benefit a positive representation from the Agni-Sanwi society.

### **The cultural and social practices associated with the representations of strong liquors among the Agni-Sanwi**

The Agni-Sanwi social space is essentially characterized by cultural and social practices of all kinds. These great rituals similar to festivities mobilize people from surrounding villages and even distant regions. Four of them were selected for this study. These are the enthronement ceremonies, the yam festival, the worship of fetishes and the Komian dance.

#### ***Enthronement ceremonies***

These are the enthronement ceremonies of the king or village chief. Before the ceremony, the future king is "prepared" in the greatest secrecy for mystical powers and good governance practices. On the day set to formalize the enthronement, many ceremonies are performed to confer certain powers on the king or chief. The king, by virtue of his status as supreme head of the kingdom, is a very important personality in the very hierarchical Agni-Sanwi society. The king also embodies his people and as such, he plays the role of intermediary between the living and the supernatural powers. As supreme authority, the king is inhabited by a force and a power which gives him powers that are both beneficial and dangerous. The king is the guarantor of the general prosperity of the kingdom. As such and with regard to his status and role, during the yam festival celebration for example, the king dressed in his ceremonial clothes is carried in triumph and brought back to the village by the Komians, after a purification bath in backwater. It is only after this bath that everyone, at their own level, can make offerings (sheep, beef, chicken ...) to their fetishes and

<sup>7</sup> Respectful way of calling the elderly in Akan society from Cote d'Ivoire.

<sup>8</sup> Embrace.

consume the yam. And this whole process takes place under the blessing of the spirits and the ancestors. A.K. notable (77 years old) says this:

*"The invocation of our spirits and ancestors is part of our tradition. We don't do anything without their consent, without their blessings. Before and during the king's enthronement, throughout his reign and even when he "goes to bed" (dies), we do everything with them. And it is the Gin and the Rum that we use for all these ceremonies."*

It is perceptible that during all these ceremonies and during all the reign of the king, the Gin and the Rum are used, sometimes to invoke the spirits and the ancestors, sometimes to restore the relations between the village social actors.

### **The yam festival**

The Yam Festival is one of the ceremonies that unites the sons and daughters of the Sanwi around their king or chief who presides over it. This feast marks the start of the New Year among the Agni-Sanwi. It is first celebrated in Krindjabo, the capital of the kingdom of Sanwi, before being celebrated in other localities of the kingdom. It is done early in the morning and begins with the worship of the Royal Chair, symbol of the sovereignty of the Sanwi people. Then comes the worship of the Seven Chairs belonging to the seven great families that make up each Agni-Sanwi village. It is therefore an opportunity for the living to invoke and venerate the royal ancestors and the spirits, to thank them solemnly for their assistance and protection. It is a time of intense communion with the spirits of the ancestors who watch over the kingdom. It takes place once a year, on Good Friday, after a "holy week. It is an agrarian feast, a feast of first fruits during which all the agricultural tools (machete, hoe, pickaxe ...) which were used for the seed and harvest are revived through purification rites. On this occasion of great rituals and worship of fetishes, many poultry consecrated to deities are sacrificed on altars and in courtyards to ward off bad spells and 'implore the blessing for the new year. It is also the opportunity to fulfill the promises made to the spirits who have been invoked in different circumstances. During the unfolding of that feast dedicated mainly to spirits and ancestors, the Gin, symbol of the vertical relationship with the ancestors, is widely used and consumed by the elders who are the customary authorities and the guarantors of the tradition. According to SA (70 years):

*"The Yam Festival is one of the biggest festivals in our kingdom. During that feast, we make offerings to our spirits and to our ancestors. It also allows the sons and daughters of the village to exchange gifts. It is the feast of*

*reconciliation and brotherhood and no worthy child of the kingdom should be absent for their own benefit. Because, it is also during this feast that we ask for protection and blessing from the spirits and ancestors, when we pour the Gin. We call our ancestors by their names and by the order in which they reigned. We also pour Rum to consolidate the links between us brothers of the community."*

From the speech of that elder the usefulness of Gin and Rum becomes apparent during that cultural practice which is the yam festival. Those two strong liqueurs function is to restore vertical and horizontal relations, restore joy.

### **Fetishes worship**

During fetishes worship, you cannot get away from spirits and ancestors invocation. It can occur before, during or after the scheduled ceremony. Fetishes worship and veneration are rituals that can also be scheduled and take place annually. Those fetishes can be a river, a stone, a tree, a forest, etc. During adoration, poultry, eggs, sheeps even oxen sometimes are offered to fetishes for it is in fact a matter of spirits and divinities incarnation. Therefore, it is what everyone owns as most expensive that he offers. The value of the offering depends on the offense or problem to solve. Those rituals mostly restricting, have several totems or interdicts. It can be a matter of food not to eat, a word or action to control as a mark of respect of the requirements of the adored deity. In case of transgression, the offenders are passive of severe punishments inflicted by the spirits. By way of illustration, after a libation of Gin, the seats of ancestors can be impregnated with the blood of animals which have been sacrificed to them. This is what 81-year-old nanan A.G. translates into these words:

*"These stools you see here are not simple. In the old days it was human blood that was sacrificed on these stools. But today, as times have changed, it is the blood of sacrificed animals that is poured on these stools ... "*

Indeed, with the human eyes, these consecrated seats also called seats of inheritance are blackened with the dried blood of the sacrifices. According to the discourse of the elders, these stools are objects of power, and among them, the first place therefore goes to "black seats". These seats, although kept far from the king, found and legitimized his power. And during these sacrifices which always begin with the invocation of spirits and ancestors, Gin always intervenes.

### **Komian dances**

In Agni-Sanwi society, the Komians are generally

priestesses who hold occult knowledge which they can instill in kings. During their dances, they commonly go into a trance and in this daze they can give predictions about the future. Through their magical-religious trance powers, the Komians are able to understand things that are beyond the knowledge and understanding of the uninitiated. They also have the power of preventing misfortune and sometimes, of healing. Through divination, the Komians can indicate appropriate healing in case of illness, appropriate sacrifices or rituals to the prevailing situation to regain lost harmony. Success in marriage, academic achievement, prosperity in commerce, business, and work, protection from enemies, the quest for healing, and many more are the reasons for which Komians are regularly consulted. These priestesses are responsible for ensuring the metaphysical security of kings and the entire community. During the yam festival, after the libations in the royal court, the Agni-Sanwi dressed in their finest clothes, in bazine or white percale, accompany their king to the backwater for a purification bath ritual. The Komian (priestesses, exorcists of evil), all dressed in white and whitewashed with kaolin, make libations and purify the village.

During the magico-religious and mystical interventions of the Komians, Gin and Rum intervene to re-establish broken vertical and horizontal relationships, often implicated in the occurrence of situations considered abnormal. Like 75-year-old E.B. says:

*"Nothing happens in our country without the invocation of spirits and ancestors by the Komians. They are the ones who tell us what to do before any problem. And this is where Gin comes into the activities of the Komians. Now, if the Komians tell us that there is such a problem due to such and such person, then we pour the Rum to solve all these problems between people. "*

Agni-Sanwi society lives at the rhythm of spirits and ancestors. Any decision and action to be taken are conditioned by the verdict of these invisible actors. As it can be seen, in that cultural practice of the Komian dance, Gin and Rum are essential like in the previous cases.

### **The influence of alcohol on the health of agni-sanwi seniors**

As Gin and Rum are ingrained in the cultural practices of the Agni-Sanwi, the risk of alcohol addiction among seniors may go unnoticed in that society. This reality seems not to be of major concern to anyone, while the consequences of excessive alcohol consumption on the health of individuals and especially of seniors are numerous and dramatic. This is reflected in the following speeches:

*"In our land, people don't live long oh! The old people*

*you see there are all sick." Some people spend all their time coughing. Others have swollen feet. There is even one who died just three months ago from liver cancer. The village chief also had two strokes. So he's in his room and he can't go out. But the problem is, old people refuse to go to the hospital when the disease starts. They prefer to go to the Komian for consultation and treatment. And it's when everything is bad and the Komians can't do anything anymore that the parents rush them to the hospital. Even being in the hospital, when their condition worsens, the parents will "steal" them and bring them back to the Komians again" (M.D., 63 years old, spokesperson for the village chieftom).*

*"For the past few months, I have been sick. I just cough, especially at night I can't sleep. When I went to consult the Komians, they told me that it was because I offended the spirits and the ancestors by repudiating my first wife that I was sick. Later on, when my son takes me to the hospital, the doctor X-rayed me and told me that I have sores all over my lungs and therefore should stop drinking. I do not know what to do? Of these two there, who tell the very truth. Me, I suffer a lot (M.K., 69 years old).*

From these speeches, it emerges that health state of the elderly is seriously affected by alcohol, in that social space. However, apparently, seniors cannot relate alcohol to the symptoms and illnesses (cough, swollen feet, cancer of the liver, CVA<sup>9</sup>, sores on the lungs, etc.) they suffer from. Likewise, the latter prefer to refer to the Komians than seeking modern or Western medicine when an illness occurs. As a result, their health gradually deteriorates until death occurs. Also, despite the onset of the first symptoms, seniors persist in consuming alcohol, both within the chieftom, during the various ceremonies and festivals and in their various homes.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the speeches of the Agni-Sanwi elders regarding their representations of gin and rum and the excessive consumption of these liqueurs yielded the above results. What sociological significance can we give to these results obtained?

- (i) The representational paradox of Gin and Rum by the Agni-Sanwi and by modern medicine
- (ii) The inevitable pathological aging linked to beliefs and therapeutic trial and error

### **The representational paradox of gin and rum by the agni-sanwi and by modern medicine**

In Agni-Sanwi society, Gin and Rum are positively

<sup>9</sup> Cerebral Vascular Accident

represented. Indeed, the gin symbolizes the vertical relationship with the ancestors. Therefore, this liqueur becomes essential in the functioning of the said society, especially since nothing is decided, nor undertaken without the agreement of spirits and ancestors. However, it is Gin that allows us to come into contact with them. Upstream of all ceremonies and cultural practices that involve sacrifices of poultry and other animals, is the invocation of spirits and ancestors. And it is Gin that is used as a point of contact with spirits and ancestors. Gin is a symbol of affiliation and belonging to ancestors and attests that they are still alive in an invisible world and that at any time, their descendants can "knock at their doors" for any situation they are facing. Therefore, although they are no longer of this world, the ancestors continue to watch over their descendants, bless them and solve any problems these ones are facing. Once they are ready or have given their consent, then the real fun can begin. Like Gin, Rum also plays an important role in this society in that it symbolizes joy and restores the horizontal relationship between the brothers in the community. Indeed, ceremonies and festivals such as the enthronement of the king or the chief, the feast of yams and many others mobilize a large crowd that comes from all parts.

These are occasions for great reunion for members of the community and allied villages. And these are the ultimate occasions for restoring broken fraternal relationships, for reconciliation between brothers and sisters of the same community. In such a setting, it is Rum that is used extensively for this cause. Thus, Rum is as present as Gin in all meetings. Seen from this angle, Gin and Rum are convened as symbols of renewal, restoration, strengthening and restructuring of social relations between social actors and invisible actors on the one hand and between the social actors themselves on the other side. In short, Gin and Rum are symbols which are positively represented in Agni-Sanwi society with regard to the ideological productions of the actors (beliefs, values, standards, practices and discourse). This is what Moscovici and Kalamalikis (2019) express through representation theory. In fact, in Agni-Sanwi society, a system of values, notions and practices relating to objects such as Gin and Rum, aspects or dimensions of this social environment, allows the stabilization of the living environment of individuals and groups. This system is also a guiding instrument for the perception of situations and for responses developing. As symbolic objects capable of restructuring vertical relationships between social actors, their ancestors, spirits, and horizontal between social actors themselves, Gin and Rum cannot represent dangers to their users.

Consequently, the elderly can use it and, in particular, consume it at will, especially since they come from a society where the consumption of alcohol is particularly valued and anchored in daily life. The positive representations that the actors have of these two liqueurs

determine their regular consumption, excessive consumption and the state of dependence resulting from it. In that context, seniors dependent on these liqueurs are unable to establish a link between this excessive consumption and their health state, which is deteriorating considerably.

However, the health state of the elderly directly influences their tolerance to alcohol: the effects of alcohol are added to a balance that has become precarious and a mobility that is reduced, sensitivity to the effects of alcohol increases with advanced age (Gibour, 2020). With an alcohol rate limit in the blood reached very quickly, the elderly face an increased risk of not only having traffic accidents but also domestic accidents. The older the age, the more these changes are marked. Thus risks are more important with an octogenarian than with a newly retired person (Charlebois, 2018).

On top of this is there are certain organs like kidney or liver functioning changes. The more older you get, the more you are exposed to health problems, even with a low alcohol consumption (Charlebois, 2018). That is the case with the Agni-Sanwi respondents during that study, in view of the significant deterioration of their health state. Those people live in a society where alcohol integrates social and cultural practices. Actually for a consumption of lower risk and with an adult of average age, WHO (2018) advise to not go beyond 3 normal drinks a day for a man, 2 normal drinks a day for a woman, 4 normal drinks a day occasionally and a day without alcohol to be careful about. However, with the advance in age and especially health problems, taking medication or an alteration in functional status, many addictologists and geriatricians advise lowering these consumption thresholds, namely: no more than 1 to 2 drinks / day and never more than 3 drinks per occasion.

These thresholds should be reduced in the event of taking medication, the onset of an illness, driving a car, or in performing tasks requiring good psychomotor control (Menecier et al., 2016). Seniors, the target group of this study, do not integrate the above standards into their lifestyle. Rather, they seem to evolve under the domination of their culture with its invisible actors to be consulted at any time through strong liquors such as Gin and Rum which they consume excessively. And, when illnesses caused by alcohol do arise, elders perceive them as stem from the wrath of spirits and ancestors. Such a perception of these diseases determines the therapeutic route which, in the long run, conditions them to pathological aging.

### **The inevitable pathological aging linked to beliefs and therapeutic trial and error**

Therapeutic trial and error is inherent in cultural beliefs and practices. Rooted in their culture and tradition, the Agni-Sanwi elders, the subjects of this study, generally



establish a link between the diseases from which they suffer and the anger of the spirits and their ancestors. Thus, their first instinct upon the onset of the disease is to consult them through the mediation of the Komians in order to re-establish the broken vertical relationship. At the end of this invocation of the manes, poultry or other animals are sacrificed on altars in order to right the wrong done. It is then that care is given to the patient to help him regain his health. Thus, priority is given to medicine from the African tradition than to Western or modern medicine. It is to the Komians and their therapeutic indications that the elders refer rather than to the doctors. In other words, at first resort, requests for care are preferentially made to the Komians who act as intermediaries between the invisible actors and the sick. And this in relation to the perception that seniors have of their disease, its cause, their cultural beliefs and health structures. However, when complications arise even with the treatment prescribed by the spirits and ancestors through the mediation of the Komian, the affected are transported to local hospitals until their medical evacuation in the teaching hospitals of Abidjan. Even being in these health structures, if the parents notice the deterioration of the state of health of theirs, they forcibly bring them back to the same Komians. These comings and goings of the Komian health facilities and the latter in the Komian indicate therapeutic trial and error among the elderly suffering from various illnesses linked to excessive alcohol consumption. Thus, self-medication is presented as the very first course of action in the event of illness, followed by biomedicine. However, the latter is the first reflex when the level of perception of the disease is considered serious (Nkoma, 2015). Despite the political will in terms of health, the therapeutic route of patients is dominated by the use of African medicine (Adjjet et al., 2016). In this trial and error, modern or traditional self-medication is also sometimes imposed as a therapeutic remedy. The lower cost and accessibility of drugs in small quantities or per unit in the private market explains this therapeutic choice. In short, patients generally opt for care outside health structures built for the care of the sick. This study has a specificity in that its target population is elderly people who suffer from various diseases related to excessive alcohol consumption. Being already vulnerable by senescence, excessive alcohol consumption worsens their health state, which is considered precarious. Also, to deal with geriatric illnesses and the health consequences of alcohol, elders legitimize the authority and power of spirits and ancestors. In the absence of appropriate care inherent in the diseases from which they suffer, their health state deteriorates over time until death follows. In such a society ruled by spirits and ancestors, a society in intense communion with the dead, the elderly Agni-Sanwi respondents are conditioned to pathological aging Aquino et al. (2016). This type of aging emerges precisely with different pathologies which accumulate over time and that

will lead to dependence.

## Conclusion

In Agni-Sanwi society characterized primarily by the worship of spirits and ancestors and various worship practices, strong liqueurs are commonly used. It is in this context that the elder members of the chiefdom and notability, guarantors of the tradition, take advantage of the use of these liqueurs to consume them excessively. They thus expose themselves to pathological aging as a result of diseases associated with alcohol consumption. It is to understand the social representations that seniors have of these strong liquors in that social space that this study was conducted. To achieve this initial objective, individual and group interviews were carried out with these 28 elders who make up the chiefdom and the council of elders. The content analysis of the speeches produced by the actors made it possible to identify Gin and Rum as strong liqueurs commonly used in this society and regularly consumed by seniors. These liqueurs benefit also from positive representations in that social environment. While Gin symbolizes the vertical relationship with the ancestors, Rum symbolizes joy and restores the horizontal relationship between the brothers of the community. Likewise, four cultural and social practices associated with the representations of these strong liqueurs among the Agni-Sanwi have been identified: these are ceremonies of enthronement of the king or chief, the feast of yams, the worship of fetishes, and the Komian dance. These different cultural practices are real occasions for the invocation of the spirits, ancestors and excessive alcohol consumption by the elders. As a consequence, almost all of the latter suffer from various pathologies which thus ruin their longevity capital. The therapeutic trial and error that results when these diseases occur in association with other geriatric diseases thus forces them into pathological aging. Paradoxically perceived as highly alcoholic liqueurs to be avoided among the elderly in order to promote healthy aging or successful aging, Gin and Rum are positively and qualitatively represented among the Agni-Sanwi respondents. It is in this that this study makes a discovery of scientific and social significance. As such, it is intended to be a modest contribution in the fight against alcoholism among the elderly in Côte d'Ivoire. In fact, interactions with seniors were real opportunities to sensitize seniors about the harmful effects of alcohol on their health. This awareness-raising, which was carried out in strict compliance with the standards and values established in that society, must be continued and extended to the other villages of the Sanwi kingdom. Indeed, according to the chiefdom, the entire kingdom of Sanwi is ruled by the king of Krinjabo. The petty kings and chiefdoms of the different villages are just a decentralization of the central royal power based in Krinjabo. Thus, the same cultural

practices are found everywhere in Sanwi. In this sense then, these results obtained from a single village can be extrapolated to the other villages of that kingdom. However, an extension of the study to other Agni kingdoms or even to all Akan of Ivory Coast could be considered. This is the perspective of the study that emerges from this analysis. Thus, the fact that the study took place in one village is its limitations. The goal is to better understand this social phenomenon of alcoholism among the elderly, which is on the rise in Côte d'Ivoire.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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