



THE SOCIETY OF THE MASK: THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF WORSHIP OF THE ZANGBETOS IN WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In West Africa, more specifically in Togo, Benin and Senegal, an ancestral cult is practiced whose venerated entity is called Zangbeto, a term meaning guardians of the night. They act as if they were unofficial police authorities, guarding the streets, taking care of the protection of the place and the people. Zangbetos are represented by figures wrapped in structures made of straw, wood and other materials. During ceremonies, these entities display themselves by dancing and/or spinning in the center of ritual spaces. They are always surrounded by tourists, community residents and practicing witch doctors of the voodoo religion. However, according to local Yoruba legend there are no humans under the costume, only spirits of the night. There is no evidence that the manifestation of spirits through so-called Zangbeto is a fraud, or just built and maintained to keep distant enemies and other unwanted. In fact, the Zangbetos are able to inflame the fear in ethnic groups not practicing this sophisticated modality of Vodun. The aim of this manuscript is to discuss the social role of Zangbetos and sorcerers, as well as the symbolic efficacy of these powers in the West African region, notably Togo, Benin and Senegal. It is a work of bibliographical and documentary analysis. The field of discourse includes the classical ethnographies on the theme of religion, theoretical contributions from sociology, anthropology, history and psychoanalysis. The manuscript reveals that a detailed study of the theme of the Zangbetos in Africa and of the politico-social performance of so-called sorcerers is necessary. We do not know whether supernatural entities actually exist and manifest in those spaces, or it is a staging, whose secrets of their techniques are stored at all costs. However, it is undeniable that they have social, political and cultural relevance in the social structures in which they operate.

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INTRODUCTION

In West Africa there is one of the most enigmatic egunguns cults in the world, the Cult of the Zangbetos, the protective spirits. They are considered the traditional voodoo guardians of the night in the Yoruba religion of Benin and Togo which are also known as the *Nightwatchmen*.

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The ceremony in which the entities supposedly manifest themselves is appreciated by an audience that divides their attention between the beauty of the spectacle, cultural richness, peculiar performance of the protagonists of the event "the Zangbetos", representation of the auxiliaries and sorcerers responsible for the preparation and incorporation of the entities inside the structure of straw, wood and similar materials. Information on the cult of Zangbetos can be observed in several videos posted on the internet, such as YouTube sites. Queries can be made by simply entering keywords such as High Magic in Africa, Cult of the Zangbetos, Cult of the

egunguns, among others. According to the statements of those responsible and leaders of the show, the structures are not animated by any human being, but the spirits occupy the hollow interior of the ceremonial vestments to participate in the festivities together with the locals. In fact, this is the great attraction of the event. Tourists mostly pay attention to the movements of the Zangbetos, trying to catch a slip in the acting that can reveal the suspected staging. There is no evidence of human presence within the Zangbetos, which leaves room for the second hypothesis: protective spirits do indeed manifest themselves through ritual dress (DUKOR, 2014). The great strength of the Zangbetos as protective entities, since they are not humans, is that they are beings possessing knowledge and powers beyond earthly comprehension - which serves to frighten and ward off the malicious. In this way, one of the most relevant functions of the practice of cult the egunguns in Togo, Benin and Senegal is to invoke such beings to give protection to their community. In places historically marked by tribal wars and disputes, the protective and supernatural figure of the Zangbeto is an excellent device to discourage consolidated and eventual enemies. However, in addition to the apparent utilitarianism of the cult of entities, there is also the approach of voodoo devotees to the spiritual life, who seek contact with the "sacred" through the relationship established with the Zangbetos. The cult of the Zangbetos involves many secrets, which are kept by sorcerer and beginners. The techniques of construction of the costumes in their various compositions, the rituals necessary to conjure the spirits as well as the correct way to proceed with them is never revealed. This fact makes these sorcerers prominent in local societies, since those who know how to conjure entities are part of local political power.

The sorcerer and his magic: revisiting Lévi-Strauss

Sorcerers in the indigenous societies in which they acted and / or lived were always respected and / or feared because of the belief of the people who believed that they had powers, or the fear that this power would turn against the individuals of the tribe (DOUGLAS, 1970). In this sense, according to Lévi-Strauss (1989: 194), magic has only social efficacy if it "implies in the belief of magic [...] the belief of the sorcerer in the efficacy of his techniques" and in "Confidence and the demands of collective opinion which form at every instant a kind of field within which the relations between the sorcerer and the spellbound person are defined and situated." Considering the cult of the Zangbetos, the three components mentioned by Lévi-Strauss are present and are essential in the social organization of the societies of Benin, Togo and Senegal. Thus, it is in this context that the social-political role of the sorcerer stands out. The sorcerer is the one who holds the secrets to cast the protective spirits, is an agent of interconnection between the living and the dead in the plane of the living, maintains the peace or balance of forces between good and evil in the symbolic and concrete arena of spaces of social conflict. From the opponents' perspective, the belief in the existence and performance of the Zangbetos occurs in the field of uncertainty, that is, not being able to prove that everything is a well-directed scenario, there remains the fear and the consequent distance from the limits of the enemy territory. Thus the performance of the Zangbetos and the secrets that circulate around their supernatural figure are the source of the sorcerers' power. The egunguncult, also known as babaegun, is highly magical and secret, so the Olojés (individuals who have the power to manipulate egungun's

energy) are respected in their communities and even outside it. Although the performance itself is somewhat theatrical, it must be said that there is a connection between theatrical performance and ritual, since both use performatized images to be cognitively intelligible (TURNER, 1987). However, according to Schechner (1985), every theatrical manifestation is composed of performance, however, not every performance is theatrical manifestation. Thus, the interpretation of the presentations of the BabaEgun passes through the logic of ritualistic performance, but is not reduced to mere theatrical staging, given the implicit and explicit magical-religious component (actual or imagined) in the execution of the rituals. In this context, It is performing and theatrical because it has its own space for execution, basic structure of gestures and actions, articulation between stages, fixed determination of performance of the characters, and has continuous representation aiming at a certain group of observers (GOFFMAN, 2007).

With regard to the dynamics of performative episodes, there is a state of things intrinsically associated with liminality and its potentialities. In this sense, liminality has the capacity to subvert the apparent natural order of a given society and to erect forms of representations of reality. In this way, it is an instrument capable of conferring to the performances and rites meanings intelligible and decodable to the members of that society. This is because performance and ritual suspend even temporarily, the daily life, the uniformity of existence in what it has less original (TURNER, 1987). Rites awaken paradoxes and dissensions in the social role in which they express themselves and possess the revolutionary content associated with their dynamics, the latter accentuated by the incoherence and contentious character of the common interpretations of the reality prevailing in a given social structure. However, the paradox is revealed in its performance, in the fact that the existence and representation of rites contribute to the maintenance of sociocultural aspects that form the society. Rites serve as reinforcing and guiding elements of socially accepted conduct and behavior (TURNER, 1987). The apparently harmful character of the rite is expressed in its insubordination to the rules and norms preached to the natives. This subversion to instituted precepts marked by dissolution is the source of an unregulated creative force, not apprehensible in its totality and therefore potentially transformative.

In the text *The Sorcerer and his Magic*, Lévi-Strauss explains - starting from the analysis of ethnographies - what for him are the psycho-physiological constituents inherent and inseparable in the dynamics of the production of what he called symbolic efficacy. This efficacy exists only because it is shared by the social group to which the phenomenon in particular acts, be it expressed through healing, evil spell or even the presence of supernatural entities animating inanimate artificial bodies. Thus, in the case of the Zangbetos - and the fear they arouse in the conscience of the enemies -, the source of the effectiveness rests in the possibility of the entity to arrange to him the death by spell or by spell. According to Lévi-Strauss (1989: 193):

An individual, conscious of being subjected to evil, is intimately persuaded by the solemn traditions of his group, of which he is condemned; relatives and friends share this certainty. Since then the community has shrinks: it moves away from the accursed, it is not only as it were, not only dead but a source of danger for its group. [...] the bewitched yields to the combined action of intense terror it experiences, of the

sudden total withdrawal of multiple reference systems provided by the coexistence of the group. [...] Physical integrity does not resist the dissolution of social personality.

Encouraged by the spirit of disbelief that led Quesalid to try to unmask the sorcerers; many people have tried to prove the scam behind the Zangbetos phenomenon. However, all have failed, despite the use of available technology (sophisticated cameras), it has not been possible to distinguish a human being within the Zangbeto. Knowing this suspicion, the alojés challenge the spectators by dismounting the structure of the Zangbeto in front of all, placing it upside down, on the side, they do everything so that the audience can see or think that it sees the interior of the empty costumes. Several photos were taken, videos produced from all possible angles of curious with powerful cameras, but no complete evidence of fraud was detected. The trick, if this is the case, is extremely sophisticated and almost impossible to verify. In this way, we consider that despite the agile movements of the entities within the enormous and heavy structures, or even of the turns and jumps apparently not reproducible for a human being, it is possible the existence of a corporal technique to direct the spectacle, due to the secret that surrounds the material construction of the ceremonial costumes of the Zangbetos and the very performance of the spirit auxiliaries when it is theoretically incorporated. The social role of sorcerers, the alojés, is of paramount importance in the social structure of societies in Togo, Benin and Senegal, because of their practical and symbolic function. This practice, with the aim of ensuring the safety of the communities, keeps alive the cult of the Zangbetos, whose fear that awakens keeps unwanted people at a distance. Symbolic because it maintains through the cult of entities people in contact with the supernatural and sacred universe.

The body as the first instrument: body techniques and culture

The called body technique is nothing more than our use of the body to achieve a predefined goal such as swimming, running, walking, eating, and so on. When we use the body as an instrument effectively, we can make it respond positively to our most basic needs, making it a tool of our own. Body techniques are characterized by tradition and effectiveness. Traditional because it is based on culturally pre-established models within the social organization of a group of individuals. It is effective because its purposes are achieved (MAUSS, 1974). The way we were taught to sleep, drink, eat, walk, smile, is a bodily movement culturally learned through technical education. From an early age, children are indoctrinated by the culture in which they are inserted such as sitting, chewing and behaving properly. It is common to hear a mother say to her son, "Boy, have manners! Do not chew with your mouth open "; or a father warning his son "Man does not cross his legs like that!". These are some examples of how body techniques are objectified and internalized via culture by social subjects. The body is the first instrument that man manipulates from birth, it is his connection par excellence with the external world (MAUSS, 1974). The techniques of the body are not purely products of culture, but also of biology, it is a biopsychological phenomenon. Mauss (1974), when perceiving the physiological and socioanthropological character of the body, already manifested its concern with the detailed analysis of the interrelationships between Biology and culture, since it recognized that certain corporal techniques

exerted strong influences in the structure of the biological phenomena. With regard to the meanings that cultural practices can assume in a given society, their meaning is naturally given and accepted according to the sociocultural logic inscribed in the place where they were elaborated; however, can transform to meet a new context in which it is inserted. In this sense, the possible interpretations and symbolism present in body techniques may vary according to the education, the experiences lived by the members of the group, or according to the dynamic process initiated by cultural exchanges. Thus, a social practice socially accepted in a certain place may not be accepted in others one (MAUSS, 1974). All understanding of body techniques comes from the fact that the body is influenced by three external forces, the social, the physiological, and the psychological. There is no way of trying to understand the dynamics of bodily practices in a precise way, or at least with a lower probability of errors, taking into account only one perspective, which would imply conceptual reductionism.

In Mauss's (1974) text on the possibilities of using the body, body techniques may serve to reflect on the Zangbetos and their possible strategies of convincing the public as to the magical content. Such secrets involved may conceal sophisticated techniques of mastery of the body, such as the secrets related to the Zangbeto cult in West Africa. According to RODRIGUES, (1979) it is the society that models and / or manufactures a human body in its own way, obviously taking into account the biological limits present in the constitution of human bodies. Lévi-Strauss, when analyzing the text of Marcel Mauss (1950), reveals the pragmatism of Mauss's brilliant study of body techniques whose resonance was felt in later anthropological production. For Levi-Strauss, Mauss has shown that the human spirit animating man has always made the body the result of his techniques and representations. Nowadays, we can easily verify the assertion of Mauss (1974) and Rodrigues (1979) regarding the subject, by simply accessing the internet through YouTube or TV channels. In these spaces, we can observe experiments performed with monks in which they are exposed to very low temperatures that would kill a human being in a few hours, but that does not affect them because they can control their bodies, reducing or increasing their metabolism through meditation Body techniques that go beyond Western understanding of the limits of the physical body, but which exist and are known by some social groups.

The experience of the monks as an object was as follows: the monks were dressed in light clothing and placed in a refrigerated room at a temperature of 4.5 ° C, and were asked to enter into a state of deep meditation. Afterwards, towels moistened with cold water were placed on the shoulders of the monks. Under these conditions, a person who did not receive training would begin to tremble and would succumb to low temperature due to hypothermia. However, the monks, besides keeping warm, dried the towels with the temperature of their bodies. The dry towels were replaced by wet towels throughout the experience, each monk dried three towels in the course of a few hours (Science & Health, 2002). Therefore, the Zangbetos' performance can be understood as a form of corporal practice in which the techniques taught and learned by the initiates can provide a physical performance beyond the understanding one has of the possibilities of the use of the body. Or they are parts of manifestations of psychic energies whose development and control would also be parts of a

socially learned technique (Schilder, 1999). Thus, the priests keep the secrets of these techniques, since they guarantee them prestige and a prominent place in the social structure of West Africa. Another component that enriches the spectacle of the Zangbetos is the materialization of objects. Such objects arise after the *Nightwatchmen* stops moving. With the aid of the auxiliaries the Zangbeto is dismantled in front of several people, or placed upside down, and from it emanate the objects supposedly materialized by the entities.

Final Considerations

In spite of the arguments presented here concerning the manifestation of the Zangbetos in the sense of the possibility of a cultural staging, the possibility of their veracity, that is to say, the existence of such entities and their presence in the cults intended for them, is not ruled out. We explore briefly in this manuscript the possibility that the performance of the Zangbetos comes from sophisticated body techniques and / or tricks in which the use of technical knowledge of magic and Illusionism is present. For those who are unaware of how all ritual procedures are performed, everything is apparently supernatural. However, for people who know the secrets, as Quesalid discovered them, everything is just the exercise of the technique, which must be kept secret, since this secret depend on the sorcerers to preserve their prestige and the possible advantages that they may have as a result his. We believe that it is not impossible to perform the performance of the Zangbetos when incorporated by human beings, although they seem to be implausible from the point of view of corporal limitations. But as we have seen, there are several cultures that have made the physical body an object of manifestation of forces and abilities never before imagined, yet cultivated and exercised in secret. Techniques can be based on tricks, but they can also be the fruit of long-standing knowledge, reproduced and taught only to specific groups, such as the meditation techniques of Buddhist monks. However, as we have already said, we do not ignore the empirical reality of the manifestations of non-embodied entities in various religious spheres around the world, or even belonging to dimensions not accessed by us, three-dimensional beings. The presence of energies and consciousnesses from unknown plans is increasingly a constant in the reality of scientific practice today, since there is a great amount of studies carried out in spiritist centers, umbanda houses and other places of manifestation of the sacred, and also of the profane. Thus, the more the sciences develop and their mechanisms of assessment and / or verification, we come closer to the possibility of understanding about what man is and what his destiny.

For minds accustomed to Cartesian thought, even to suggest that theoretically the existence of supernatural entities in the 21st century is at least laughable. But far from our uncertainties, and in the face of the dialectical and conceptual complexity of the reality that surrounds us. In fact, as set forth in the English poet's phrase "There are more things in heaven an dearth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Shakespeare, 1998: 32).

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