

## RELIGION, EPIC, HISTORY

### NOTES ON THE UNDERLYING FUNCTIONS OF CULTS IN BENIN CIVILIZATIONS

The interest now being manifested in the history of African civilizations (an interest which one may be assured in advance can never be satisfied), raises the question whether the function which, in our societies devolves upon the diffusion of history, has not sometimes been fulfilled on the African continent by activities based on specific functions generally considered devoid of historical significance, as, for example, religion.

History is not only a reconstruction of the past carried out according to criteria defined by our methodology, but it remains, for most of the population, a source of reference, a set of models.

Certainly, Africa has its professional historians, sorcerers genealogists, palace officials charged with the duty of keeping a record of traditions. Furthermore, a study of the texts indicates other

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means for preserving the past, revealing the underlying functions of the phenomena under observation. In societies of southern Dahomey whose possession-cults have often been described, the studies which have been published as well as observations that we have been able to make, lead us to examine certain cultural manifestations with a view toward determining whether they do not tend toward the reconstruction of the past. Of course, our intention is not to re-examine here those mythical accounts which certainly incorporate, in their formation and deformation, some fragments of history. The almost stratigraphic analysis of myths is a technique which has already been widely utilized. More precisely, we intend to devote ourselves to an examination of the ritual dramas forming an essential part of religious life in the societies of the Benin coast.

Let us very briefly recall some general characteristics of the life of the people of southern Dahomey, which will permit us to emphasize the persistence of traditional beliefs, before passing on to an analysis of some religious manifestations.

In 1954 the total population of Dahomey was estimated at about one million six hundred thousand inhabitants; the number of Christians at that time was approximately two hundred fifty thousand, Muslims one hundred fifty thousand. The fact that should be stressed is that the number of Animists is perhaps higher in the middle of the twentieth century than it was at the end of the nineteenth century, the effective total of the population appearing to grow more rapidly than that of the Christians and Muslims if one compares these last figures with those established at the beginning of the century. However, one fact compensates for this growth, if it really takes place, re-establishing the equilibrium of social forces—that is, that Animism tends to become the religion of the countryside. Almost all the cities become Christian or Islamic, and the aspiration of the youth play against Animism, since schooling, such as it is, always goes along with the conversion of young people.

An interesting phenomenon which also makes for the revival of traditional beliefs, is the apportionment often set up within families among the different creeds. When, for example, in certain families of southern Dahomey, it is decided that the boys will go to school, in the same family a girl will be reserved for the

*Vodun*, the supernatural beings who compose the Dahomean pantheon. A little further on, we shall see what we mean by "reserved for." If in a family every one is attending school, it will be the lineage branches living in the bush, the "country cousins," who will maintain the traditional cult. The co-existence, in the heart of lineage groups, of heterogeneous and implicitly conflicting situations because of regulations tied up with each group of beliefs and values, makes clear how deeply rooted are traditional modes of conduct.

Animism is practiced by both great ethnic groups, the *Adja*, comprising in particular the *Gun* of Porto-Novo and the *Fon* of Abomey, and the *Yorouba*, here called *Nagots*, who occupy southern Dahomey and are also found in Nigeria and Togoland. The society is made up of large patrilineal groups whose actual numbers may reach several thousand persons, often dispersed, who have managed to maintain their unity; the latter is revealed in the recognition of their internal hierarchy and, on the religious level in ancestral worship and respect for the cult of the *Vodun* and *Orisha*.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental rule of life is, in fact, patrilineage, whose order is sanctioned by religion.

During those centuries preceding European occupation, this part of Africa witnessed the setting up of important kingdoms, among others, those of Abomey, Porto-Novo and Oyo. Society was made up of a hierarchy of kinship groups, royal kinship and the lineage of dignitaries, dividing power among them, which in the case of Abomey, seems to have been largely concentrated in the hands of the sovereign. A court life was developed in the political capitals which formed veritable urban agglomerations; the officials there were numerous either because they were the beneficiaries of hereditary privileges or because they had been rewarded with titles for their services. At the same time there developed an art which enhanced the prestige of those holding power, frequently evoking their great deeds or those of their ancestors.

These details permit us to set Animism in its social context. One finds in the religious pantheon, in the supernatural hierarchy,

<sup>1</sup> *Vodun* and *Orisha*, respectively, designate the gods of the *Adja* and *Yorouba* pantheons.

an order which is not without analogy to that of the society of the living; let us point out, for example, that the king's ancestors are much more important than those of simple subjects. There is, therefore, a projection of the social order into the religious order.

Let us complete this brief sketch by stressing that although ancestor cults—the *Vodun* or *Orisha* by kinship—are the most important, certain divinities have proved themselves to be so powerful and efficacious that even persons not belonging to the lineage in which these gods were originally worshipped, have sought to benefit from their protection. The wars of past centuries, following the movement of prisoners, seemed to have contributed to the spreading of cults. Besides, one can readily observe today the following process: a childless woman will consult a soothsayer who will prescribe that she make obeisance to the cult of such and such a *Vodun* or *Orisha*, following which she will introduce the cult in question into her home.

The *Shango* cult is one of those which, in the course of history, was widely spread all along the coast, following the political-military vicissitudes of that time when, according to the myth, *Shango* was an ancient *Yorouba* king, and thereby his cult originally belonged to a royal *Yorouba* lineage.

Let us now consider some religious manifestations. A witness who is foreign to the country will observe two types of these. As he enters the "compound," a large group of dwellings close to, or surrounded by a wall, he will observe trees and potteries there bearing traces of oil and alimentary débris. These are family altars before which, periodically, members of the kinship group will come to say a prayer and prudently perform some sacrifice. By contrast, the same observer will be struck by the extent of the public ceremonies being performed in the neighborhood of shrines and temples scattered in the towns and countryside, these latter designed to honor the *Vodun* or *Orisha*.

On such occasions, processions will sometimes number hundreds of participants; many orchestras accompanying innumerable dancers and veritable throngs in attendance at the most spectacular moments of the ceremonies, when the gods "descend upon the head" of some of the dancers. In his introduction to the illustrated book dedicated to these cults, P. Verger quite correctly invites us to witness "the African gods returning to earth, dancing

momentarily in the company of mortals.”<sup>2</sup> Besides, this is not only the most spectacular aspect of the cult, it is also the loftiest from a religious point of view, since it deals with a phenomenon, a type of communion, in which the divinity takes possession of a man in a trance.

The term “dance” often seems inadequate to us: not only do the participants dance, but they play and even, to put it more exactly, become the gods who have taken possession of them. In describing Haitian *voodoo*, a debased form of African cultism, A. Métraux insists upon the theatrical aspects of possession, reminding us, at the same time, that “similarities between possession and theatre must not make us forget that in the eyes of the public no one who is possessed is really an actor. He is not playing a role, *he is* that character during the entire trance.”<sup>3</sup> The gravity and solemnity of Dahomean cults are in sharp contrast with Haitian masquerades, and if the *voodoo* practices described by A. Métraux seem to be caricatures, often burlesquing the cults from which they have derived, his description emphasizes the representational element in the original phenomenon. This will be the leading thread of our analysis.

But first, let us glance at the elements constituting the supernatural universe, and then at the relationship which man holds with it.

Authors have always distinguished between the ancestors on one hand, and the *Vodun* and *Orisha* on the other. The latter correspond more closely to the idea usually held of supernatural power, if that is characterized by the immensity of its force and its capacity of intervention in human affairs. However, perhaps this is only a question of difference of degree, for *Vodun* and *Orisha* are, to the best of our knowledge, always distant and far-off ancestors who have been made divine. In all known cases, myth leads to characters far back in history placed at the summit of the supernatural hierarchy because of great deeds which they accomplished during their lives, as evidence of the power with which they were gifted. Around the *Vodun* and *Orisha*, there

<sup>2</sup> P. Verger, *Dieux d'Afrique*, Paris, Hartmann, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> A. Métraux, *Le vaudou haïtien*, Paris, Gallimard, 1958, p. 113.

grows up a mythology evoking that of classical antiquity, as has often been observed. Relationships are established between mythical personages, adventures draw them close or set them in opposition to each other. Powers are granted to them permitting them to dominate natural phenomena. Some are associated with thunder and lightning, as is the case of the *Shango*—of Hêviosso in Dahomey—; others with water; others again with earth. P. Verger analyses very clearly the characteristics of regional pantheons: "Let us recall that cults paying homage to the *Orisha*—*Orisha* is the Yorouba word corresponding exactly to *Vodun* (here we are dealing with the *Orisha* of the *Yorouba* but the text also applies to the *Vodun* of the *Fon* and of the *Gun*), address themselves in the beginning, to the forces of nature. In fact, the definition of an *Orisha* is complex; if he truly represents a force of nature, this is not, however, to be understood as nature in its unleashed and uncontrollable form. He is only part of it: made wise, disciplined, fixed, controllable, forming a link in man's relationship with the unknowable. Another link is constituted by a human being who has been made divine, having previously lived upon the earth, and having known how to establish this liaison with the force of nature, controlling it, taming it, drawing a line of interdependence between it and himself by which he draws upon himself and upon his people the beneficent and protective action of this force and diverts its destructive power upon his enemies. On the other hand, he made offerings to this aspect of Force, which has been fixed and made sedentary, sacrifices necessary for the maintenance of his power, his potential, his sacred force called "*ashê*." The *Orisha* cult sometimes is directed toward those two entwined links, that fixed aspect of the force of nature and an ancestor who had been made divine serving as the intermediary between man and the supernatural. This alliance is represented but not materialized by a witnessing object, the support of the *ashê*; these objects vary according to the *Orisha*. These are meteorites and neolythic axes, called *édunara*, (thunder-axe) for *Shango*, god of thunder; pebbles from the river for *Oshun*, god of water courses by the same name; seven pieces of forged iron for *Ogun*, god of metals and war; a bow and iron-tipped arrow for *Oshosi*, god of the hunt. These symbolic objects are preserved by the descendants of the first *Alaschê*, that is to say, the master

of force, proprietor and guardian of the *ashê*; the latter transmits from generation to generation the secrets which give them power over the *Orisha*, words pronounced at the moment of the setting up of the *Orisha*, elements constituting its mystic support, leaves, earth, sand, animal bones, etc..."<sup>4</sup>

Let us take up two points of this text: firstly, that the cult devoted to the *Orisha* is really, when analysed, a cult rendered to exceptional ancestors; second, that the notion of a sacred force, of *ashê*, would appear essential in order to give the ancestor that power which characterizes him. Belief in the efficacy of a sacred power has often been pointed out. Such, for example, is the *nyama*, the movement of which, according to Griaule, would underlie the interpretation which the Dogons of the Sudan give to the sacrifice. The notion of *tsav*, among the Tiv of Nigeria also seems to us comparable to that of *ashê*. It would certainly be useful to establish similarities and differences that may be found in ideas very widely diffused among various African societies; but, in any case, these terms connote all the ideas of power, force, vitality, ability, which different categories of beings apportion among themselves in varying degrees.

Now, let us look at the rapport between men, on the one hand, and the ancestors, the *Vodun* and *Orisha* on the other.

First of all, let us mention those factors which are common to the various cults, no matter what beings they pay homage to.

In their major lines, the manifestations are similar: in all cases, the believers recite prayers and invocations, proceeding then to gifts of food and palm oil, and to sacrificing chickens, goats, and sometimes even cattle. In all cults, the ancestors and gods "are fed;" all these beings "are hungry" or "are thirsty." Reciprocally, interventions on the part of these gods are expected in favor of childless women, the ill, protection against death, and in general, against all the evils which could menace the existence of the kinship group. The supernatural powers intervene on another level, that of justice. When, for instance, an adultery or theft occurs within a kinship group, the practice is to have re-

<sup>4</sup> P. Verger, *Notes sur le culte des orisha et vodun à Babia, la baie de tous les saints au Brésil, et à l'ancienne côte des esclaves en Afrique*, Dakar, Travaux et Mémoires de l'IFAN No. 51, 1957; pp. 29-30.

course to a trial in order that the ancestors or the *Vodun* of the lineage group might denounce the guilty person. This custom has lasted up to our own days. Such, in brief, is what man and the supernatural beings owe to each other.

Having indicated these common factors, a certain number of differences exist. The ancestors remain very close: they have been dead only a little while. Once the funeral ceremonies have ended, rites mark the establishment of a cult founded upon beliefs pertinent to the characteristics of the person, thus permitting the maintenance of a relationship between the living and the dead. The cults of *Vodun* and *Orisha* rest upon the same bases but the men who have been at the origin of these cults are of another stature than those who have died more recently. We have cited the case of *Shango*, king of *Oyo*. At Porto-Novo, one of the most important sanctuaries of the town is dedicated to *Abolubo*, founder of the royal *Adja* from which emerged those who later established the dynasties of Porto-Novo and Abomey. What separates the ordinary ancestor from the *Vodun* could therefore be considered as the projection, in the religious domain, of that which will be, on the historical level, a "social distance" founded on the prestige of deeds.

The organization of the cult and the carrying out of ceremonies might equally seem to differentiate by nature between the ancestors and the *Vodun*.

Ancestor worship is practiced in each lineage group by the family chiefs or by old women of royal blood, paternal aunts of those holding authority. There are no specialized organizations.

With regard to this, *Vodun* and *Orisha* require a complex hierarchical religious apparatus. We cannot describe this in detail, but only succinctly indicate that at the summit of the organization is found the master of the *Vodun*, the *Voduno*; that he is assisted by various subordinates and a more or less important effective force of women, the wives of the *Vodun* or the *Vodunsi*, sometimes also called "steeds of the gods," who are possessed by the divinity on the occasion of cult-ceremonies.

Despite these differences, and the idea commonly held that it is difficult to reduce the Dahomean supernatural world to unity, an examination of the various descriptions of religious ceremonies leads one to believe that the supernatural world presents a certain



homogeneity, permitting the evocation of the functions about which we have spoken.

For this purpose let us utilize the observations made by M. Herskovits, regarding a ceremony which took place at Abomey in honor of the *Nésouboué*. According to the author, the *Nésouboué* cult takes in all the ancestors of those who serve at the court of the kings of Abomey. The text reads as follows: "During this time—the first and last days alone being excepted—the spirits of the impersonated ancestors were being called one after another to the heads of the young people who, though they represented the most distinguished of the forebears, yet danced for all of them. As the name of each ancestor was called, his deeds recounted and his praises sung, one of the dancers possessed by his spirit, would circle the clearing."<sup>5</sup>

Let us emphasize that we are not dealing here with a ceremony in honor of personages lost in the mists of history, nor with very exceptional beings; on the contrary, the cult is devoted to warriors, dignitaries of the royal court of Abomey, very likely separated by several decades from their present descendants in this place.

Prior to this passage, Professor Herskovits cites some of the figures manifesting themselves: "Thus, at one ancestral rite the most important figure impersonated was a princess; in another it was a chief who had been Prime Minister to one of the early Kings; at another an ancestor who had been appointed head of one of the Dahomean provinces."<sup>6</sup>

The rest of the description permits us to grasp the evocative aspect of the ceremony: "As the days passed, the costumes became more extravagant, the participants were now garbed in sumptuous vestments, velvet and brocade which one would have taken as costumes worn under the monarchy. Several women were dressed in appliqued clothing, similar to those of the palace of king Glélé, representing complicated maltese crosses. Two of them had short curved sabres in their belts. All the women wore chased silver

<sup>5</sup> M. Herskovits, *Dahomey, An Ancient West African Kingdom*, New York, J. J. Augustin, 1938, p. 218.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

bracelets, some encircling up to twenty or thirty centimeters of their forearms, and wore heavy silver armbands on the upper part of their arms; two of them had silver gorgets above their breasts in the form of crescents suspended from their neck by silver chains. Another wore large red and white pearled armbands. Nine women and five men brandished fly chasers like horse manes..." "...the dance was accompanied, as before, by exclamations saluting the exploits of the dead person represented by each dancer..." "...the principle difference with regard to the dances already observed was a group dance in honor of the conquests of the Dahomey kings in which the ancestors had taken part, and in order to recall the great deeds of these ancestors themselves in military campaigns."<sup>7</sup>

Let us recall that for several decades, at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, the kingdom of Abomey situated one hundred kilometers inland, defeated all the little states separating them from the coast, expanded on all of its frontiers, often held its large neighbors of present-day Nigeria in check; each year in the dry season campaigns were launched against its neighbors. The women themselves were organized into regiments. It is, therefore, understandable that in this context military virtue should be most appreciated and success in war should be the major objective of life.

What, therefore, do the Dahomeans accomplish in these possession cults? They offer themselves in spectacle to themselves. What Professor Herskovits describes might be called a *tableau vivant*—a living pageant of history. With this almost similar distinction which A. Métraux has clearly indicated with regard to the Haitian cults: history is not being represented, history is there. The rites seek to create conditions which will permit those who have been the artisans of the past to come forth and manifest themselves.

Let us indicate more specifically what we mean by examining a characteristic trait of cult-organization: the initiation of the *Vodunsi*. These are initiated in those places which the Europeans thought might justly be baptized with the name of "convent". The word *Fon* used to designate this place, *kouhoué*, signifies precisely

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

"house of the dead," an expression much more significant than the other term.

The initiation consists in a sojourn in the "house of the dead." The women who have been selected to become *Vodunsi* are subjected to a rite of symbolic death which in some cases might go so far as to place them in a cataleptic state. During their passage in the *kouhoué*, the women, undergo, on one hand, complex rituals of purification and consecration, and on the other, instruction, in the course of which they learn the salutations, dances and language of their *Vodun*. They are required to express themselves only in this language, and their conduct is regulated by a group of rules which, in certain cases, oblige them to behavior contrary to their habitual ways. After leaving the "house of death," the return to the world of the living takes place in stages, certain ceremonies marking the abandonment of habits acquired in the *kouhoué*. There is a classic schema of the rite of passage.<sup>8</sup>

What we wish to point out is the fact that the women have been prepared to receive the *Vodun* by making them move ritually among the dead, that is to say, in the universe of the *Vodun*, in learning to greet him, to dance his dances, and to place themselves on some sort of equal footing with the one whose mystic brides they are going to become. Do we not have here the re-establishment by means of rites—therefore, by a symbolic process—of a traditional quasi-historic reality (preservation of an archaic tongue, ancient dances) which, by entertaining the ancestors, permits them to return?

M. Herskovits has noted the Dahomean reactions to their ancestors, which constitute a superficial, but none the less real, justification of the ceremonies made in their honor: "...the ancestors are held to love display and ceremonial, and they would resent a role of oblivion in the daily round of life. They would be angered by failure of the members of their sib to consummate the 'customs' which publicly glorify their deeds while on earth, and bring them back to the world of the living for several days of enjoyment among their descendants."

<sup>8</sup> The initiation of the women of the *Orishas* has been described by R. Bastide in *Le Candomblé de Bahia*, Paris, Mouton, 1958.

What seems characteristic to us in this religious proceeding is the importance accorded to the realization of the past. It matters very little whether it be near or far; those almost-recent ancestors are as likely to manifest themselves as the heroes, masters of the elements lost in the depths of time. Position in the genealogy is not a determining factor and the distinction between ancestor and *Vodun* is summary. It would seem to be a relatively homogeneous pantheon and those composing it are differentiated by the character of the deeds which they accomplished and which testify to their power.

There still remains the legitimate question of determining the principles which command these returns. The data at our disposal indicates that the dead who manifest themselves are those whose exploits attest to their power and ability. Insofar as this society, whether it be *Adja* or *Yorouba*, grants privilege to such a notion as *ashê*, seeing in it the explanatory factor of human acts, therefore of history, there is no reason to be surprised that the supernatural universe should send us an epic image of the society, and that religion, by means of the intermediary of the phenomena of trance, should be the occasion for a selective resurrection of the past.

One might remark that this past is fragmentary, naive, eulogistic and without any relationship to the methods of historical analysis. Our aim here was not to determine to what extent ritual dramas might be exploited as historic sources; the rite which is a gestual language should be studied first of all as just that. The hypothesis was not to prove that religion was history, but to investigate whether in these Benin societies, religion did not fulfill one of the functions of history by evoking a past in which there intervened those who, in the eyes of that society, had been its makers. Obviously, in this relationship between the living and the dead, the present and the past, the notion of time is beside the point. Mythical time, or historical time, may be intermingled: it is not a question of placing events in a chronological order, but of obtaining guarantees for the future from those who contributed toward the formation of the society. For such cases, the order in which things took place is secondary.