

Revisiting Benin Linguistic and Cultural Legacy in the Americas: Living Heritage of a Transatlantic Dialogue

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The heritage issue has attracted increasing interest in recent years. Intangible heritage is defined as that cultural element, in its broadest sense, which refers to both practices and social spheres related to knowledge and practices in time and space. Forms of social consciousness, ideology, philosophy, etc. Indeed, intangible cultural heritage is a category of cultural heritage defined by the “2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” and adopted by UNESCO.

Language is one of the forms of expression of social reality, and can be vehicular or conventual, for religious reasons. It is also the expression of identity par excellence of a human group, a nation or a society.

In the anthropology of religion, more specially of Afro-American (or African American) religions, there are recurrent restless discussions and attempts at theoretical formulations on such a thought-provoking topic. My goal in this article is to showcase the legacy of Dahomean culture in the Americas and the multicultural dialogue between Africa, always considering as a basis the Adja-Fon and Yoruba-Nago knowledge in the present-day Republic of Benin.

What are these themes? In understanding the dialogue, does it mean that it is limited to the commercial and transatlantic slave trade aspect and to the supposed redefinition of identities from the returnees, the former slaves and their descendants that go back to Africa? Which are the basics that allow me to question this kind of dialogue? In the cultural aspect, does it mean that ritual language constitutes a sufficient element to explain this dialogue. Or, are there other elements that reinforce significations to the point of nullifying the first element, or simply make it indispensable? As for anonymous African-American literature, what are the challenges for its conservation and how are social conscience forms expressed in this treasure? What are the mechanisms of continuity in this process of preservation of the legacy?

If research on one of the two sides of the Atlantic has been done, the necessary link between both sides could be a subject of research, but so far, very limited written works exist.

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Otherwise, it is necessary to investigate not only the cultural dialogue between Africa and America, but also the cultural dialogue among American countries as a whole, united and diverse on one side, and the African continent.

In the eighteenth century, commercial relations between the two continents were intense, and they have continued developing in some way up until today. Considering all these aspects means highlighting conjectures that deal with the history of religious systems formation, and on possible origins of ethnic groups; the historical ground of intercultural dialogue between Africa and America; the social, historical and cultural motivations of the dialogue, and situations, occurrences and important and concrete processes of African heritage in the countries on the other side of the Atlantic.

More recently, the relation between art and religion has been discussed, an undoubtedly legitimate concern. This concern will progressively reinforce the importance of religious language in constant transformations, and of African presence and inspiration in the Americas.

Dahomean or Ewé-Fon elements in Arará Santería, Vodun in Haiti, and Mina-Jeje Candomblé in Brazil

The African presence in the New World has been identified throughout the Americas, from Canada to Patagonia. A brief reference to African enslavement between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries shows how transatlantic trade has been the principal cause of the link between the countries or nations involved in the greatest holocaust that humanity has ever suffered. Triangular commerce may be considered as a consequence.

As transatlantic commerce is concerned, the African imported nations were: Congo, Angola, Jeje, Maxi, Yoruba, Nagô, Fanti, Ashanti, Soninké, Pepel, Susu, Balanta, Malinké, Gangá, Peul, Bariba, Ibadan, Bambara, Wolof, Ewé, Mina, Arará, Malagashi, Abakuá, Carabali, Mossi, and others. On the composition of the religious nations, the studies of Fernando Ortiz (1924), Bastide (1967) and Métraux (1963) refer to the presence of Santería in Cuba and Vodun in Haiti. Furthermore, Candomblé, Tambor de Mina, Batuque and so on in Brazil, are regional modalities of African presence cults in different regions of that country, thus part of immaterial patrimony of Brazilian people is religion.

A basic premise of the studies on the dialogue between Africa and the Americas is provided by José Antonio Saco, a Cuban intellectual, when he quotes that we cannot think about the Americas without thinking about Africa, and vice versa. Thus, the study may start from the flux and the reflux, words created at that time by Pierre Verger (1968) to characterize both directions of the cultural heritage between the two continents. It is worth mentioning that religion and language are of importance in these comparisons.

Ethnic groups could be considered countries, until the period before the Berlin Conference in 1885. In the Benin Republic, for instance, Fon, Maxi, Yoruba, Dendi, Bariba, Mina or Gen, and others were countries. The concept of nation was reduced to a stable linguistic and cultural unit, established in a territory. After the Berlin Conference, the signification of the concept has changed, because of the new configuration of the continent by colonizers such as France, Spain, Portugal, England and Germany: the arbitrary division of Africa, which provoked confusion in the relations between nations and ethnic groups.

The situation persists to this day. Some tensions created from that violent destruction of the hegemony of realms and empires originated from the policy of divide to better rule. The process of colonization of the continent was a concrete practice of that policy. Settlement and exploitation colonies have been created. A lot of natural resources have been moved from Africa. Movements against colonization have been organized, and this contributed to the independence of many countries in the twentieth century. Pan-Africanism also helped in these victories. Pan-Africanism is the movement or link that united Africans from the continent and Africans of the diaspora with a common objective: complete liberation of the African continent. Movements of returnees (to the continent) were also organized.

The study of linguistic retentions: Challenges and results

Cuba

Regarding Cuba, some information was obtained from the communities of Jovellanos, Perico and Agramonte. I was able to know the level of comprehension of the contents of ritual songs. The question was to know whether the groups were conscious of what the messages in the lyrics were. I do not want to comment on a series of underlying behaviors related to secrets, because of the diversity of forms of replies from the informants. Some of them are reticent in furnishing the correct information. Some others do not know the real significance of the ritual songs, and argue that the deity is the only one that knows the content of the song, and so on. A fundamental element in the development of the present study has been fieldwork based on the work of informants from Jovellanos (Maximiliano Baró and Miguelina Baró) and from Perico (Emiliano Zulueta).

The samples – more than 180 ritual songs and prayers, 300 words and a highly significant number of proverbs, fables, guiles and refrains – are in Fon, except for cases of lexical loans of other African languages. It is important to draw attention to the fact that chants, prayers and lexicons are used according to their place, meaning that there are songs, prayers and ritual lexicon far from the ritual context as well.

There are some doubts on who was the soloist: if it was the deities, the drum players, or the interpreters of songs embedded in the public in general. The response is different in each context, and it depends on the importance of the secret. It seems that the content or meaning of the song is not the most important. And this is true with Afro-Brazilian adepts of Candomblé as well. What is of interest is the intention and the context in which the songs are performed.

The lexicon has been amplified to some 300 words and expressions of Dahomean origin in Cuba. Also, the universe of the ritual songs has been extended considerably. I studied phrases, refrains and knowledge of Adja-Fon origin, elements that have been registered in the linguistic and cultural treasure of the Ararás in Cuba.

Haiti

Vodun in Haiti is an integration of various nations: Guedé (Gédévi), Aradás, Congo and Zandor. It is worth mentioning the importance of the créole language as an integration language, with a substratum in French and Fon (Sogbossi 1996, 66-69). Example: *Lègba louvri Barryè agooo eee*. We identify words in the Fon language such as *Lègba*, the name of a deity; *ago* 'license, permission'. *Louvri* and *barryè*, are forms of transcription to Créole the French words *ouvrir* 'to open' and *barrière* 'a barrier'. The word *vodun* has been used only to state that religions of African origin are diverse in the Americas.

The basis of the work is a sample of lexicon, knowledge and songs that I selected from various books and reviews. *Le Vodou haïtien* by Alfred Métraux (1963), *Le Royaume d'Ardra e son évangélisation au XVIIIè siècle* by Henri Labouret; Laennec Hurbon's *Dieu dans le vodou haïtien* (1987) and Guérin Montilus' *Dieux en Diaspora: les loa haïtiens et les vaudou du Royaume d'Allada (Bénin)* (1988).

The Fon presence – or another African language – in the Créole must be seen, not only in the words of African languages and in the texture of créole phrases, as quoted by Price-Mars. But also in the pronunciation and intonation of the *lingua franca* of enslaved Africans: the French language. In other words, we must see the presence in terms of influence.

I distinguish three characteristics: stretching or great vowel shift; nasalization or shift from oralization to nasalisation; and *nasalizaçã*o or great nasal vowel shift. In the case of proper nouns such as René, Sénégal and Dahomey, Fon people pronounce them as: Hlenen, Senenga, and Danxomen, respectively. Phonetical aspects and phonological ones: nu; n'l; 'for'. Morphological aspects: three cases of Fon presence: the morpheme of future {n'a}; that of participle {-etè} and those of infinitive {-re} and {-é}. Future: {n'a}. Jacques Roumain (1944) uses expressions such as *n'a rivé...*, *n'a entré...*, *n'a remercié...* All of them translated as 'we will come', 'we will enter', and 'we will acknowledge', respectfully. In Fon the morpheme {n'a} is used for the future. In present-day Benin, among the Fon speakers of the coast, there is a

tendency to use expressions or words from European languages such as French, English, or Portuguese, which demonstrates a similitude of this practice as compared with the Créole spoken in Haiti. This is also applicable to the infinitive.

Far from the compared lexicon of Fon terms in Haitian Vodun from the Dahomean and Haitian contexts, with words such as *govi* 'pitcher,' *zen*, 'pitcher' (also), *hunsi* 'adept of Vodun,' *hunguenikon* (*hunj'nukon*) 'assistant of a priest of Vodun,' *Ezili* (*Azili*) 'the deity of sensuality, a kind of Ochun,' *bokor* (*bokono*) 'ifa priest,' *hunfor* (*hunxo*) 'the Vodun temple,' and so on...; *Lègba* (deity, equivalent to Exu of the Yoruba), *hunguenikon* (variant of *hunjenükön* 'assistant of a religious leader'), *azaka* (deity of Savalu people), *hun* (deity), and *hungan* (Vodun priest). I will only mention three words of Fon origin: *M*: personal pronoun. First singular person; it seems that it originates from *m* or *un*, from the Fon language. In this language it is used as a subject. In complementary form we use *mi*. According to Vaval (1995) *m* is the contraction of *mwen* in Créole and both forms are used without distinction. *Ni*: appears in Brown (1973) and means 'to him, to her,' thus: *M (n) di ni*: 'I tell him.' In Portuguese: 'I tell for him' (literally). To express "for him, for her," we use the form *nu l*, or the agglutinated form *n' ii* or *nwi*. On Martinica Island *nu* is used to refer to the prepositions "to" and "for," as in Fon; in Haiti, *pu* is used. T

The analysis proves the similarity in the sequence of the words in Créole and in Fon, as observed, for example in *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* of Jacques Roumain. According to Guérin Montilus (1988) the Fon influence is very clear in this theology of God that is fundamental for Haitian: God is the protector of the innocents, the orphans, the abandoned, and the chased. In Cuba also, a proverb with the same meaning still exists, with a mixture of Fon and the Spanish spoken by blacks in earlier times. The presence of Fon and its similar forms in Haitian Créole is evident in pronunciation, intonation, and contexture, and its words and expressions.

In the case of Brazilian Portuguese, one of the research (Castro 2001) proves that there is an indisputable presence of the structure and signification of African languages such as Yoruba and Fon.

Brazil

In this country, research in São Luiz do Maranhão revealed a resemblance to the tune and repetition almost faithful of the words. The adopted technique is direct and participant observation; I have been noting some data to more easily describe rituals. The funeral ritual must have importance and is described as taking into account principally two cult-houses: the Axé Opô Afonjá and the Bogum cult-houses. The *Axexê* in the first one has been dedicated to the Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, who died in August 2001. In the second one I participated in the seventh anniversary of the death of the mother-of-saint Evangelista dos Anjos Costa, doné Gamo Lokossi, also known as Nicinha. The zenli ceremonies included some Fon ritual songs.

With the goal of extending the field of comparison and to better understand funerary rituals, I had an opportunity to assist one *Axexê* in the Gantois cult house. It is certainly remarkable that the *jeje-nagô* houses of Bahia have a cultural dialogue; it means that, according to Nina Rodrigues (1977) the two cults coexist so that we can speak more about a *jeje-nagô* mythology than a simple *jeje* or a *nagô* mythology. The cult houses of Roça do Ventura and of Hunkpamè Ayönu Huntölöji, both in Cachoeira, also have a series of rites performed such as the *zandrö*, a kind of night watch, the Azili ritual, and the *tomar grá*, a phase of a devotee initiation. There is also the Boitá ritual, the *itá*, some kinds of procession around sacred trees and to revered deities of the *jeje* pantheon.

Conclusions

Cultural and linguistic retentions in the New World recalls Africa. The corpus of songs, words and expressions of African origin, specifically of Dahomean origin, phonetical, phonological and morphological aspects stand as sufficient evidence of this dialogue. The songs are occasionally translated literally in order to provide a total comprehension of the message from the poem or text. There are partial translations that need, to be more intelligible, an approximation between researcher and informant. The researcher needs to understand some keywords stored in the informant's memory, contextualize them, and then infer a major comprehension, a more complete comprehension. The legacy concerns various aspects such as art, religion, cooking, kinship, and others.

In short, this modest work, which does not assume to exhaust the topic nor to reach results and definitive conclusions, should be seen as a first approximation, and it will serve as an introduction to further research, or simply as an expansion of the studies that work on African retentions in general, and Dahomean in particular, in Latin American cultures.

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