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Finding Ifa. Sacred places of the god of destiny in Porto-Novo (Benin)

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Spatial conditions as they relate to religious practice is an established topic in Anthropology¹. Can a ritual act be performed anywhere? Can the place of daily life be a place of worship? Under what conditions can a natural space also be a ceremonial place? How does one transform an ordinary place into a place of spiritual relationship? These are the questions asked as early as 1899 by Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert in their *Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice* (1981), further explored by Emile Durkheim in 1912 in the study of elementary forms of religion (1995). The Durkheimian answer is twofold: first, to perform a rite, space must be sacred, or better said *sacralized*, that is, it must be actively separated from profane space; second, this sacralization is equivalent to a *collective symbolization*. A place becomes sacred when it includes a symbol which *represents* the community, but it can be sacred in itself when the place *is* this very symbol (for instance, the place where the founder of the community was born). Using the ethnography of his time, Durkheim interprets in this sense the ceremony of homage to the totem pole representing the witchetty grub among the Arunta of Australia. It consists first of a procession of the clan towards a dozen rocks sunk into the ground, in a cave or a hole, which represent – or rather, *are* – the founding ancestors who became eternal stones. Aborigines take dust from those stones and rub it against their body; in other clans, such as the Hakea Flowers or the Kangaroo, after a similar ceremony, some young people shed their blood on those stones until the latter are completely covered with them (2003: 467-469). The substance of the clan founder is incorporated by the people of the clan by rubbing the dust, and conversely, the human substance (blood) must enter the substance of the mineralized totem. This ritual journey defines a sacred space, i.e. a network of places where the exchange of substances between the living members of the clan and the eternal body of the totem pole is carried out, unifying the community in a symbolic consubstantiality.

¹- This paper is a revised and augmented version of the lecture given during the conference *Sacred groves and secret parks: Orisha landscapes in Brazil and West Africa*, Harvard University, October 3&4, 2019.

It would be naive to mechanically apply this scheme of interpretation out of context, but we can nevertheless look at its degree of validity on African soil by studying the cult of *Ifa* of the Nago (Ifa is known as *Fa* among the Fon and the Gun in southern Benin). In contrast with the Yoruba from Nigeria who also worship Ifa (Olupona 2011 : chap. 6), the reference to the city of Ifê² as the place of origin of *Fa* is rare among the *bokono* (diviners) of Fon and Gun ethnicity. They do not usually refer to Ifê as a sacred city as do Yoruba diviners. Hence, the *Fa* practice is detached from this symbolic reference. So what are Ifa's places of worship? First, since Ifa is the god of destiny, it is at the heart of divinatory practices that take place in a divinatory practice. Secondly, the cult of Ifa has an initiatory extension, outside the consulting room, in a real (or fictional) bush. Finally, there is another place of worship for *Ifa*, the temples of the *Church of Ifa*, founded in 1934 in Lagos, and whose establishment in Porto-Novo is almost contemporary with the foundation in Nigeria. This third place presents an essential difference with the previous ones: no blood sacrifices are made there. We will hence describe and analyze successively the spatial organization of these places of worship in *Ifa*, and try to find what social and symbolic functions they have.

The consulting room

As early as 1943, Bernard Maupoil published a remarkable description of the consulting room of a *bokono*, a place called *Fagbasa* in Fon language of southern Benin. According to Maupoil, every priest of *Fa*, unless he is very poor, has a room reserved for divination and the sacrifice of *Fa* (1988: 167). Today, Porto-Novo, this is still the case, where all *Fa* professional diviner's house has a room dedicated to his practice. It is in this room that divination and most of the sacrifices take place, as well as some ceremonies such as the bath of *Fa*. Goat skulls, which were sacrificed, are frequently preserved and exposed, once cleaned, hanging on the wall, above the door of the *Fagbasa* or stacked (Pictures 1 and 2).



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Fig. 1 - Consultation room, skulls on the left. 2018
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²- Ifê is considered among the Yoruba as the city where the god *Oduduwa*, ancestor of the Yoruba kings, came to Earth. Ifê is also a real city, in South West Nigeria.



Fig. 2 - The *Fagbasa*. 2018
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All *Fagbasa* have a hole, called a *lêdo*, near a wall (and not in the middle of the room, for example). Near the *lêdo* is planted an iron rod with a tray called an *asên* dedicated to the ancient diviners, and at least one *Legba* divinity in a more or less anthropomorphic form (there can be several *asên* in one *Fagbasa*) (Picture 3).



Fig. 3 - Hole of the deceased diviners, 2018.
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According to Maupoil, some *bokono* have a *duwo* (*gbana* in Fon), a container with one hole at the top and one at the bottom, buried about 50 cms in the ground, containing various mineral and vegetable ingredients, and especially some of the powder of the sign that the diviner found during his initiation in the bush (see below). This buried object is used as a substitute to a sacrifice claimed by *Fa* in order to repel an imminent misfortune, by pouring in the *duwo* a little water mixed with

the powder of *Fa* (*iyêrosun / yê*) of this dangerous sign. I have never seen a *duwo* in Porto-Novo, but I do not exclude that they exist elsewhere. The *bokono* I know who find a dangerous sign (*Che Lete* for example, « not to be pronounced ») usually hasten to fulfill the prescriptions, without resorting to a fast expedient like the *duwo* “technique”.

No *Ifa* ceremony can be performed without the homage paid to the divinity *Elegbara / Legba*, and the easiest way for the *bokono* is therefore to have a *Legba* installed in the consulting room³. This “room” *Legba* is called *Legba Agbanukwe*, or *Legba Agbanuko* (the “luggage in front of *Fa*”), or more simply *Fa Legba*. He is the guardian of *Fa* and of the *bokono*, he appears as a statue of clay or cement representing an anthropomorphic head or bust, bearing on the occiput feathers, a needle or a knife, sometimes a small *asên* (Picture 4); this clay head is placed in a cup, on which the *bokono* pours the blood of the animal sacrifice, but also libations of red palm oil, white corn porridge and sweet drinks. This divinity is seldom moved once installed: it remains close to the *Fa* during the consultation to protect it, but also to receive the offerings quickly if necessary.



Fig. 4 - Legba with small *asên* on the head. 2018
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Note that ritual elements can be accumulated in a very restricted space. The multiple *Legba* who belong to the diviner’s family and sometimes *Legba* from clients are sometimes accumulated in the same room, often adjacent to the consultation room. When the diviner needs to make a sacrifice recommended by *Fa* for a client, he just has to give it in the next room. One can also see in these small rooms other *asên* and skulls from older sacrifices (Picture 5).



Fig. 5 - Sacrificial goat skull, several white *Legba*, *asên* in the corner. 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

The *asên acrelele*, also called *asên aligle* (“bell” in Fon) is with *Legba* the most important element for the spatialization of *Ifa* in the consulting room (Picture 6). I would say that *Legba* sacralizes the space of consultation in a horizontal way, because he is a guardian who prevents attacks on the surface of the earth; while the *asên* generates a sacred vertical relationship with the ancestors. It is a straight iron rod planted in the ground, near a cemented hole, about one meter high, always bearing a circular plate supported by four rods, sometimes bells and a kind

³- *Legba* can be installed in another room, what I saw sometimes, or even outside the *Fagbasa*, in the courtyard. It depends on the available space in the consultation room.

of hook are attached to the vertical rod to allow the *bokono* to grasp and carry it. As Maupoil rightly writes, it is “the stick of *Fa*” (1988: 176), which the *bokono* carry when they go out in procession to the sacred woods, or to the place of an important ceremony (for example, the consultation of *Fa* for the king of the city). It is the symbol of the many deceased *bokono*. That is why the *asên* is planted near a hole: the sacrifices and libations made on the metal tray of the *asên* flow along the stem and go into the ground, where all the dead reside. As the deceased *bokono* have been buried into the ground, these offerings are intended for them.

The *Shango/Xevioso* divinity, god of lightning, is also frequently installed in the divinatory cabinet (Picture 7). The reason for this is that many signs call for offerings to be made to *Shango/Xevioso*, especially the combinations of the signs *Loso*, *Aklan* and *Yeku*. Similarly, the divinity *Gu* is often settled near the *Fagbasa* (all the combinations of the sign *Guda* call for a sacrifice to this god), in the form of an accumulation of scrap metal, in the courtyard rather than inside the house. Indeed, *Gu* is a more a “bush deity” than a domestic deity.

In brief, it appears that the spatial inscription of *Fa* is inexorably *mediated* by other entities in the consulting room. It is necessary to install a *Legba* there because it supervises and protects the place of worship, and must receive sacrifices; it is also necessary to dig a hole which will allow the ancient *bokono* to receive their homage, through an *asên* planted in the ground where these spirits reside. Finally, it is useful to be able to give the sacrifices prescribed by *Fa* to divinities installed nearby, like *Shango* or *Gu*. Those elements correspond very well to the three dimensions of the cosmivision of the Yoruba, who are close neighbors of the Gun and the Fon of Benin. Jacob Olupona summarized perfectly that worldview (2011 : 87) : [...] ayé, the central layer of the cosmic sphere, located between heaven (*orun*) and the underworld (*ilẹ*)”. Ancestors dwell in the underworld, *Legba* is the messenger and circulates between earth and the skies, and the *orisha* live in the skies. Nevertheless, *Fa* itself is *materialized* in specific palm nuts (Picture 8), but it is not *implanted* somewhere: its relationship to space is thus associated with other spiritual



Fig. 6 - The *asên acrele*, 2018
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Fig. 7 - Shrine of Shango., 2018 © Erwan Dianteill



Fig. 8 - Sixteen *Fa* nuts, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

entities who connect it to parts of the cosmos. We will now see how *Fa* can be displaced out of the *Fagbasa* under certain initiatory circumstances.

The sacred forest

The initiation of *Fa* consists for a person to receive the major sign of her/his life — or rather to find for themselves their own life sign — in a process led by the *bokono*. The sign received is one of the 256 signs of *Fa*. That sign bears prescriptions and



Fig. 9 - Initiate about to enter the *Fazun*, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

prohibitions that, if followed, will allow the initiated to be happy, prosperous and to live a long life surrounded by many children. This sign manifests itself in a specific place, called *Fazun* in Fon language, *Igbodu* in Yoruba; French-speaking *bokono* all call this ritual space the “sacred forest”. Why go to the forest? Quite simply because *Fa* is born from it. According to believers, it “lives” in the nuts of a certain type of palm tree. It is not made of clay like *Legba* or of iron like *Ogun*, it is the product of the

vegetal world. It is therefore to the source of this life — the trees — that one must return to find their own sign thanks to the palm nuts. An old *bokono* said to Maupoil (1988: 278): “Ifa was created by God at the same time as life”.

This place can be in a real forest — the Nago diviners from Pobe, north of Porto-Novo, whom I most often frequent, always go to the bush for their initiation — but in the city, it is usual to recreate a *Fazun* outside the forest, at home. This artificial *Fazun* is made of large palm branches attached in the shape of a circular enclosure, two or three meters large, without a roof. The novice (Picture 9) goes there with the many offerings he has prepared in a large basket, as well as with the sacrificial animals (usually sixteen hens, one goat is given to *Legba*, the other one to *Fa*). These elements vary according to the *bokono* circles, and the Gun of Porto-Novo tend to simplify the ceremony to give *Fa* at a lower cost in one day (instead of seven). Nevertheless, the essential ritual element is preserved, namely the creation of a sacred space where the sign of *Fa* of the novice can be found.

There are many ritual variations, but this is usually the way it works: once the *bokono* and the novice have entered the enclosure (Pictures 10 and 11), the *bokono* plants its *acrolele asên* in the ground. The link with spiritual ancestors is thus established. The *bokono* and the novice sit face to face, the first on a mat or leaves, the second on the ground. Only insiders, i.e. those who have received their *Fa* under the same conditions, can attend this ceremony, but they remain standing. The novice manipulates the *Fa* nuts he has brought in, in order to find a sign, which he gradually traces on the ground. Once the sign is written, the main assistant named *jogbana* (*oyubona* among the Nago) takes some of the land that will be used to make a *kpoli*,

Fig. 10 - The temporary *Fazun*, 2018 © Erwan DianteillFig. 13 - Initiate with his new *Fa*, 2018 © Erwan DianteillFig. 11 - Initiate entering the *Fazun*, 2018 © Erwan DianteillFig. 14 - Drawing *Fa* signs in front of the iroko tree, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

Fig. 12 - Sacrifice to the evil spirits, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill



Fig. 15 - Sacrifice to the iroko tree, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

that is a rectangular object made of fabric and white earth with the novice's sign. Very often, the sacrifice associated with the sign is accomplished without any delay, in the *Fazun* or just outside, in order to lift bad luck and attract the chance of the sign on the novice's head. For instance, in one initiation I attended, it was necessary to give immediately a chicken to the dangerous female spirits (*Iyami Oshorong*) to protect the life of the *Favi* (Picture 12). The *Favi*'s hair and nails, pieces of his loincloth, the ground on which the additional signs after the main sign were traced and the leaves on which the bokono was sitting, are buried. They represent the impurities of his old life that the novice leaves behind him in the bush. The novice, the *bokono* and his

acolytes then leave the *Fazun* and return to the master initiator's house with his new *Fa* in a calabash (Picture 13), where other rituals will take place.



Fig. 16 - The first *Fa* church temple in Porto Novo, 2018
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Fig. 17 - Sign on the facade of the *Fa* Church, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill



Fig. 18 - A pastor of the Church of *Fa* during the service, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

The important thing here is that the sign of *Fa* has been traced on the ground, but has also been erased. Nothing remains of this punctual location. The *Fazun* is dismantled, the *asên* is removed and taken away, the sacred space returns to profane life; it is the same thing in the bush, where nothing apparently distinguishes the place that was used for the ritual. *Fa* is not permanently placed anywhere, even if it temporarily and indirectly maintains a sacred link with the earth and vegetation, since a large number of sacrifices of the signs of *Fa* are made at the foot of an iroko (Pictures 14 and 15).

The Church of *Fa*

It is impossible to develop here the history and ethnography of this very original Church, since it preserves and reformulates the Yoruba and Gun cosmivision within an ecclesial institutional framework derived from Anglican Protestantism⁴. Instead, we present an analysis of the spatial framework of their ritual.

Founded in 1934 and present very early in Porto-Novo as mentioned above, after a period of latency between the 1940s and 1980s, the Church of *Fa* resumed its activities with the return of democracy in Benin in the mid-1990s. There are five or six temples in the Porto-Novo and Cotonou region, small in size (about 50 followers in each temple), but still active. They look like large rectangular wooden huts, sometimes with light masonry walls, covered with a roof of wood, leaves and branches (Pictures 16 and 17). The congregation sits on rows of benches facing the altar, men and women are separated, just like in a regular protestant temple. The pastors, dressed in white dawns, celebrate the service in front of the public (Picture 18).

⁴- See my forthcoming book: *Hexadécalogue – L'Église de Fa au Bénin et au Nigéria*.

Between the congregation and the pastors who officiate, there are drummers on the men's side, and a female choir on the women's side. The service is composed of prayers addressed to *Olodumare*, the supreme god, and to *Orunmila*, his Holy Prophet (*Woli Mimô* in Yoruba) (Picture 19). No animal sacrifice is ever made in the temple; it is a place of prayers, hymns, sometimes dances, and the pastor also pronounces homilies based on the stories of *Fa*, moralizing them. How is *Fa* made present in this place? Firstly,

by invoking it through prayers and hymns, the spirit is called upon to be present among the faithful, just as in a Christian religious service. Secondly, the signs of *Fa* are inscribed on objects: a sheet covering the altar; the *asên* placed in front of the congregation on the altar; the t-shirts of some of the faithful, but also, in the case of one temple, the sixteen main signs are painted on the walls (Pictures 20, 21 and 22). This certainly does not mean that *Ifa* has a real presence in these signs, not any more than Jesus is present for a Christian in a cross hanging on a wall. They are *symbols*, not divine substance. The representation of the first four signs on the *asên* on the altar and the sixteen fundamental signs on the walls have an educational purpose: it is a means for the faithful to learn the names of the *odu* and their graphic representations.



Fig. 19 - Some brethren of the Church of *Fa* facing the altar, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill



Fig. 20 - Symbols of *Fa* in church, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

The service of the *Church of Fa* is not divinatory in nature — no consultation takes place there — nor is it initiatory — no sign of *Fa* is found for a consultant. It is exclusively a matter of giving the divinity a collective manifestation in a temple. It should be noted that all pastors are also diviners who handle individual cases during the week in their own consulting room. Sunday



Fig. 21 - The altar of *Fa* in the temple, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

service is therefore, in the temple, a means of creating, in a very Durkheimian way, a community of believers who adore signs that they are also bearers of, since the members of the congregation are for the most part initiated, that is, they have received their sign of *Fa*, or they aspire to receive it. The temple is therefore a modern sacred space that works *in addition* to the consulting room and to the sacred forest, without replacing them.

Summing up, the *Fagbasa*, the *Fazun* and the *Fa Church* have three different social and symbolic functions: *consultation*, *initiation* and *congregation*, the latter being a relatively recent innovation, in a context of urban modernity.



Fig. 22/23/24 - Three *Fa* signs on the wall, 2018 © Erwan Dianteill

Conclusion

Some of Bernard Maupoil's informants already told it in the 1930s: "Fa is not a vodun". Indeed, it seems to be a spiritual entity whose relationship to matter and space is different from that of the other deities of the Yoruba and Fon/Gun world. Vodun and Orisha are all "fixed" in objects (big pebbles, wooden objects or metal pieces) and installed in a specific place from which they will rarely leave. It is true that sometimes people leave the deities' conservation room in procession to make a sacrifice in the bush or on the lagoon⁵. But the fact remains that the vodun and *orisha* are generally *resident* entities, i.e. attached to a domestic or external place. Admittedly, *Fa/Ifa* is also fixed in a material object, namely the *Fa* nuts, but these are eminently portable things, since the diviner frequently travels outside his home to do his job. If it is not *Fa/Ifa* that he takes away, it is his *Ifa* chain (Y : *Okpele* / F : *Gumaga*) that replaces it. Note that *Ifa* nuts like that *Ifa* chain are *means* of obtaining divinatory signs; but ultimately, these signs *are Fa/Ifa*. To the question, "Where is *Fa/Ifa*?", we can answer: the spirit is where the nuts consecrated by plants and sacrifices are, supported by the vertical chthonic link with the ancestors, by the *orisha* and vodun who dwell in the skies and by *Legba*'s horizontal vigilance. But there is another possible answer: *Fa/Ifa* being a system of signs, it is not localized at all. From this point of view, *Fa/Ifa* is where it is manifested by tracing one of its many graphic signs, that is, potentially everywhere.

Coming back to Durkheim and Mauss, it appears that the three places of worship that were studied in this paper correspond to a process of integration of the individual in a religious collectivity through symbols. In the *Fazun*, initiation builds a new identity symbolized with a *Fa* sign attributed to the individual. That peculiar sign creates a new individual identity by inserting them in a meaningful natural cosmos, but it also rules the relationship with others, since it encourages or prohibits certain social actions for a particular person. In the case of the *Fa Church*, the temple is the place where a congregation is socially built, that is where a collective identity emerges, beyond individuals: all are members of a religious community, surrounded by collective symbols. Finally, what is the meaning of the consultation in *Fa*? The *Fagbasa* is the consultation room where a *mediation* between the individual and society is built; it leads the social actions of the individual, before and after the initiation. The *Fagbasa* is a place of *orientation* for the individual in society thanks to the consultation of *Fa*.

⁵- Initiated in the cult of *Oya* was walking outside the compound, carrying the *Orisha* on her head, see Dianteill 2016)

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Finding Ifa. Sacred places of the god of destiny in Porto-Novo (Benin)

Abstract

Ifa/Fa is a deity divinity with abstract characteristics since they are a system of signs. Unlike the other orisha and vodun of southern Benin, Ifa/Fa is a portable deity; the diviner can easily move them. Under these conditions, what is the relationship between Ifa and space? Following Durkheim and Mauss, we can ask ourselves about the social and symbolic processes at work in different ritual places. Firstly, Ifa/Fa being the god of destiny, they are at the heart of private divinatory practices that take place in a divinatory cabinet. Secondly, the cult of Ifa/Fa has an initiatory extension, outside the consultation room, in a real (or fictitious) "sacred wood". Finally, there is another place of Ifa/Fa worship, the temples of the Ifa Church, founded in 1934. Those places have three different social and symbolic functions: consultation, initiation and congregation.

Trouver Ifa. Les lieux sacrés du dieu du destin à Porto-Novo (Bénin)

Résumé

Comment le culte d'Ifa/Fa est-il spatialisé au Bénin, sachant que cette divinité a des caractéristiques abstraites puisqu'Ifa/Fa est un système de signes ? Contrairement aux autres orisha et vodun du sud du Bénin, Ifa/Fa est une divinité portable, le devin peut facilement le déplacer. Dans ces conditions, quelle est la relation entre Ifa et espace ? En suivant Durkheim et Mauss, on peut s'interroger sur les processus sociaux et symboliques à l'œuvre dans différents lieux rituels. Premièrement, Ifa/Fa étant le dieu du destin, il est au cœur des pratiques divinatoires qui se déroulent dans un cabinet divinatoire. Ensuite, le culte d'Ifa/Fa a un prolongement initiatique, en dehors du cabinet de consultation, dans un « bois sacré » réel (ou fictif). Enfin, il existe un autre lieu de culte d'Ifa/Fa, les temples de l'Église d'Ifa, fondée en 1934. Ces lieux ont trois fonctions sociales et symboliques différentes : la consultation, l'initiation et la congrégation.