

SYMBOLISM OF JUSTICE IN AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS: THE ELEMENTS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ORISHA SHANGO

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Abstract

During earlier historical periods, when there were high rates of illiteracy, images were intended to educate the population and reinforce political power. Until now, historical legal iconology had mainly studied the symbols and images of European origin, notably Greek, Latin, and Christian. Seeking to contribute to the study of societies on the global periphery, this article aims to analyse symbols of Justice from the perspective of Afro-Brazilian religions. Object of the study in this contribution is the representation of the orisha Shango, according to Yoruba mythology the main entity responsible for the application of justice. The article also analyses the relevant role of religious syncretism in the formation of the modern image of Shango for Afro-Brazilian religions.

Keywords

Shango. Afro-Brazilian Religions. Symbols of Justice. Two-Sided Axe. *Candomblé*. *Umbanda*.

Summary

1. Shango, the man and the orisha. 2. The cult of Shango in Brazil. 3. Shango as a personification of justice. 4. Case study: *The Shango Panel* by Carybé. 5. References.

1. SHANGO, THE MAN AND THE ORISHA

Shango is an orisha who was originally part of the pantheon of deities of the Yoruba religion, arising in the territory of current Nigeria and Benin. Due to the African diaspora, caused by the slave trade, the cult of the orisha Shango moved to South America and the Caribbean, where his cult was influenced by other religions, notably Catholicism.² The main religions worshipping Shango nowadays are Yoruba, Santería,³ Candomblé, and

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² SIMPSON 1962, 1204; see also BARBOSA & BARBOSA 2015.

³ LIMA 1990, 34.

Umbanda. While the first two are mainly practised in Africa and the Caribbean, respectively, the last two are genuine Brazilian.⁴

Lida M. Belt explains that according to Yoruba mythology, the orishas have different origins. Orishas are usually understood as spirits of divine origin or the representation of nature forces. However, in some cases, orishas may root in real historical figures. Shango is one of these orishas whose origin comes from a real person, later being deified.⁵ Although there are some disagreements about the true origin of Shango, historical sources usually indicate him as the founder, a King, or an important leader of the Kingdom of Oyo, one of the main African kingdoms.⁶

As an orisha, the various religions that worship Shango usually consider him to be the most powerful of the orishas, the lord of lightning and thunder. This association seems to have its origin in the fact that Yorubaland (the region where practitioners of the Yoruba religion are concentrated) is very often heavily affected by lightning and thunderstorms.⁷ Shango's leading position in the Yoruba pantheon and his association with lightning and thunder allow people to see similarities between him and other deities from other mythologies, such as Jupiter, Zeus, Odin and Thor.

In addition to supernatural characteristics, the cult of Shango is also associated with human personality traits, among which leadership, equality and justice should be highlighted. It is important to note that historical sources usually indicate that the real historical figure of Shango corresponds to a warlike leader, who was belligerent and violent with his

⁴ PRANDI 1998, 329.

⁵ BELT 1973, 17.

⁶ PRANDI 2001, 244.

⁷ BELT 1973, 19.

enemies, but also concerned with the well-being and the prosperity of his people.⁸

2. THE CULT OF SHANGO IN BRAZIL

Due to the dispersion of Yoruba peoples in different parts of the world, the main characteristics of Shango tend to vary between Africa, the Caribbean territories and Brazil. While in Africa and the Caribbean the orisha Shango is usually worshiped because of his power and strength, in Brazil his image has come to be predominantly associated with the concept of a fair leader.⁹

Reginaldo Prandi says that Shango's association as the personification of Justice stems from an orally transmitted myth that says that during a war against powerful enemies, Shango would have hit his double-sided axe (*ase*) against stones. The impact of the *ase* on the stones would have created tongues of fire that consumed the enemy soldiers who were attacking his troops. Shango would then have directed lightning bolts at the enemy leaders, ending the conflict. The enemy leaders having been killed, Shango allowed the remaining soldiers to continue living.¹⁰

The idea of justice associated with a powerful and respectable monarch seems to be transversal to different cultures. In the case of Judeo-Christian mythology, King Solomon is often the traditional representation of the concept of justice associated with a leadership figure and a fair judge. Although there is no material evidence of a direct syncretism between the two characters, it is possible to trace some links between the figures of Shango and King Solomon, as both were once real living kings, who came

⁸ BASTIDE 1971, 353; see also BASTIDE 1978.

⁹ PRANDI 1998, 340.

¹⁰ PRANDI 2001, 245.

to be worshiped as deities or prophets for their justice and wisdom. Taking into account that Catholicism was fundamental to the way in which the Shango cult ended up developing in Brazil, the association with the figure of King Solomon may have been fundamental to explain why characteristics of a fair and thoughtful monarch have stood out in relation to those of a warrior leader. Nevertheless, the idea that Shango is the orisha of Justice is very old and originated when his cult was still only present in Africa.

Roger Bastide investigated how, in addition to Catholic influence, the social context has been fundamental to determine the way the personalities of the orishas have developed on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The oppressive structure imposed by the slavery regime existent in Brazil may have promoted warrior and vengeful characteristics, while more peaceful personality traits disappeared. In addition, the author also highlighted that some functions that used to be shared between more than one orisha ended up being gradually associated with only one entity. In this case, it happened to put forward their individuality. Bastide's point of view can be exemplified by the case of Ogun. Originally a blacksmith orisha, in Africa his cult is associated with all activities related to iron, notably hunting, agriculture and war. However, during slavery in Brazil, Ogun became the warrior orisha par excellence, who would defend the Africans and their descendants from the subjugation of the white elite. In Brazil, agriculture is no longer a function of Ogun, as it would not make sense for slaves to ask him for blessings for a good harvest on the plantations of their slave masters. Hunting also gradually ceased to be part of Ogun's activities, but in this case Bastide wrote that this occurred as a way of better delimiting the personalities of Ogun and Oshosi, the latter being the main hunting archetype of the Afro-Brazilian pantheon.

Shango, in turn, had his functions preserved in all places where he is worshipped. However, Bastide emphasizes that specific characteristics of the cult of Shango can be identified due to geographical and social particularities. The author explains that Shango's power over lightning and

thunder is stronger in the Caribbean cult, which may happen because of the heavy rains in tropical regions. In the Brazilian case, the moralization of some aspects of the mythology of Shango has been observed, mainly explained by the influence of the Catholic Church.¹¹ The reinforcement of characteristics of justice and leadership, however, is most probably the result of attempts to separate his personality from that of the orisha Ogun, as anger and rage are usually better associated with warriors than with fair leaders.

Also due to the syncretism with Catholicism, in Brazil the image of Shango is usually associated with that of Saint Jerome.¹² Religious leaders of Umbanda and Candomblé explain that this happened because of very visual reasons, the image of Saint Jerome being usually represented on or near rocks, and next to a lion. The lion is a symbol of royalty in Yoruba culture, which refers to the royal origin of Shango, while the rocks are symbols of the orisha, who uses them to punish his enemies.¹³

In addition to the lion, another animal that can be used to represent Shango is the tortoise. Some authors defend that the association of the tortoise with Shango stems from the fact that they both share strength and resistance.¹⁴ Some oral sources, however, affirm that the tortoise also serves as a representation for the ideal of justice being the result of a slow process, capable of allowing all variables to be considered. The tortoise is thus the symbol of a slow, but wise justice process.

Despite the syncretism with Saint Jerome being the most common in Brazil, in some Brazilian regions Shango is also usually associated with Saint Michael the Archangel,¹⁵ Saint Bartholomew¹⁶ and even Saint

¹¹ BASTIDE 1971,353.

¹² VERGER 2012, 320.

¹³ SILVA 2012, 44.

¹⁴ LÉO NETO & ALVES 2010, 572.

¹⁵ BASTIDE 1971, 364.

Barbara. The syncretism with Saint Michael can be explained by the fact that both are represented as warriors. Saint Barbara, on the other hand, may have been chosen because of the fact that she is usually represented holding a sword and wearing red, the colour of the orisha.¹⁷

However, it is important to note that the image of Saint Michael the Archangel is more commonly associated with the orisha Ogun, while Saint Barbara is usually syncretized with the orisha Oya, which makes Shango's association with Saint Jerome predominant in Brazil. Shango's syncretism with Saint Jerome seems to have been the main reason why, in Brazil, the cult of the orisha has emphasized more his characteristics of leadership and temperance. After all, Saint Jerome has no biographical traits that could identify him as powerful and belligerent. However, Shango's association with St. Jerome can be used as an example of the importance that visual and symbolic elements have for Yoruba culture.

3. SHANGO AS A PERSONIFICATION OF JUSTICE

Shango has several symbols that allow his quick identification. His colour is red, and his image is usually represented on top of rocks and stones. One of his main symbols is a side bag, called *laba*. It is divided into four asymmetrical parts that are formed from an intricate embroidery; it has a representation of rays and, according to tradition, its function is to carry the fire stones of Shango.¹⁸

However, the most important symbol of Shango is the *ose*, the two-sided axe.¹⁹ As the main symbol of the orisha of justice, the *ose* ended up being

¹⁶ PRANDI 1998, 339.

¹⁷ LIMA 1990, 35.

¹⁸ BELT 1973, 25.

¹⁹ BELT 1973, 23.

absorbed by Afro-Brazilian culture as the symbol of justice. The explanations are varied, but Umbanda and Candomblé religionists usually explain that the idea of an axe as a symbol of justice derives from the fact that the instrument can be used both to apply penalties as to defend the followers of Shango from their enemies. In other words, because it is a two-sided axe, the *ose* can be used equally against internal and external threats.²⁰

In fact, it is interesting to note that the idea of a double-sided axe as a representation of justice can be associated with the combination of the two main symbols of justice in the Western world: the scales and the sword. The axe, as well as the sword, represent the coercive force of justice. On the other hand, the two sides of the axe and the scales, both serve as a representation of balance and equality.

Having been little influenced by Greco-Latin culture, Yoruba culture does not usually personify its virtues in ideal figures. In fact, the archetypes sought by Afro-American societies are usually directly associated with orishas, who are anthropomorphized entities, with all the excesses and flaws common in human beings. Therefore, unlike in Western culture, African Americans do not tend to identify themselves with idealized figures, such as Lady Justice. The representation of justice for Yoruba culture does not only have symbols, but it also has a name and history, he is called Shango.

Pierre Verger explains that, in Africa, the *ose* is mainly associated with fire, one of the main elements of Shango. Thus, the *ose* represents the symbol of a character who has fire in his head. For this reason, the author explains that Shango initiates must wear a headdress during their trance. The headpiece is called *ajere* and must contain fire. During the ceremony, the initiate must be able to demonstrate that he is not affected by the presence

²⁰ PRANDI & VALLADO 2010, 11.

of flames in his *ajere*.²¹ However, in Brazil the representation of the *ose* is usually associated with another natural element, lightning. Shango legends told in Brazilian territory usually point out that he uses his *ose* to make lightning bolts, which are always directed against his enemies or malicious people.²²

The study of the meaning of the symbols associated with Shango allows a better identification of his characteristics. Whether associated with fire or lightning, African and Brazilian legends always identify the *ose* as the element used in the application of punishments. Thus, the understanding of the identification of Shango as a vigilant orisha stems from the fact that Afro-Brazilian communities strongly associate the concepts of justice and punishment. Shango is the great judge of the Yoruba pantheon, but it is interesting to note that his power and wisdom are rarely associated with merciful or forgiving behaviour. Under Shango's reign, peace and justice are achieved through exemplary punishments against those who attempt to oppose his power.

4. CASE STUDY: *THE SHANGO PANEL* BY CARYBÉ

Hector Julio Páride Bernabó, known by the artist's name Carybé (1911-1997), was born in Argentina but lived and produced most of his work in Salvador, Brazil. One of his main works was the elaboration of twenty-seven wooden panels, each of them representing some of the most important orishas of Candomblé and Umbanda.²³

Despite the very artistic interpretation of the orisha, Shango's pannel can be easily identified by the elements that make up the work. At his feet lies

²¹ VERGER 1997; VERGER 2012, 308.

²² PRANDI & VALLADO 2010, 14.

²³ SILVA 2012, 3; see also COSTA 2019.

the tortoise, symbol of strength and resistance, but also slow and wise justice. The neck of the image carries a necklace, or *fió de contas*, with the colours red and white. *Fios de contas* are a kind of amulet used by the orisha's 'children' as a way to obtain his blessing and protection. The red colour of the *fió de contas* was chosen because it is Shango's symbol colour.



Figure 1: Carybé [Hector Júlio Páride Bernabó], *Shango Pannel*, 1968, wooden panel, Salvador (Bahia), Museu Afro-Brasileiro da UFBA. Source: Collection of the Afro-Brazilian Museum of the Federal University of Bahia.

The *ose*, his two-sided axe, can be seen as a pattern on his clothes, on his right hand, but also, and especially, on top of his head. The representation of the *ose* on top of Shango's head is quite common in African images.²⁴ In addition to giving greater prominence to this, which is the main symbol of the orisha, the representation of the *ose* on Shango's head allows the image to be symmetrical. Symmetry, in Shango's case, can also be seen as a way of also emphasizing his relationship with balanced justice.

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