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## BAKAMA DO TCHIZO: REPRESENTATION OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE

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**Abstract:** This article is the product of the doctoral thesis on “Forms of representation of the traditional culture of Cabinda: Educational processes of the Bakama”. In this context, the main objective of the article is to approach the main forms of representation of the culture of Cabinda through the Bakama of Tchizo. Within this context, (1) to know the main rituals that involve the identity of the Bakama of Tchizo from a cultural point of view, (2) to understand how the subjects of the community become Bakama. Based on the objectives of this research, the following research question was asked: How is the cultural representation of the Bakama of Tchizo manifested? The problem raised allowed us to define the following questions: (1) How does an individual in the community become Bakama? (2) What kind of rituals identify the Bakama’s social functionality? (3) What is the origin of the Bakama? From a methodological point of view, in order to obtain data, interviews were carried out with leaders of the five Bakama groups. Observations of dance and the funeral ritual related to the Bakama of Tchizo were also carried out, using filming to facilitate observation and subsequent analysis. From a theoretical point of view, concepts about culture and civilization and traditional African culture were worked on. The results obtained allow us to affirm that: the Bakama are a secret society and their secrecy comes from the enigmatic cosmology of their masks; they have mythological origins through the mermaid Lusunzi and, although the date of their origin is not known for sure, this study estimates that their origin dates from approximately 1491; they have group initiation rituals, laws and norms that regulate both group members and society; of the five groups identified as being Bakama initially, three identify themselves as being Bakama, and two identify themselves as being Zindunga.

**Keywords:** Culture and civilization, African tradition, group rituals, Bakama, Cabinda-Tchizo.

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to approach the main forms of representation of culture in the region of Cabinda, belonging to the Republic of Angola, through the Bakama do Tchizo, a village located on the outskirts of the city of Cabinda. In this sense, it is intended, in the foreground, to address the main rituals that involve the identity of the Bakama from a cultural point of view and, in the background, to understand how the subjects of the community become Bakama.

From a cultural point of view, “Bakama” is a term defined by most scholars as being a traditional organization related to supernatural beliefs that exist in the Cabinda region. This organization belonging to the Bawoio ethnic group. The group obeys internal rules of coexistence that are exclusive. For external agents, its origin is almost unknown. The records that are still available on its origin, meaning and symbolic power are the result of oral history, which included reports from members of the Bakama and even so, following the internal precepts of interdiction, as it is a group whose secret rituals only the initiated can participate, which is to say that much of their tradition still remains invisible and, perhaps, imperceptible to those outside the group.

This condition of being strangers and subjects, almost imperceptible, of the Bakama tradition raised us to know and explain the meaning of Bakama. What is the etymological meaning of Bakama? Bakama is the plural of Nkama, a word of Bantu origin from the traditional and national language Fiote dos Cabindas belonging specifically to the Woio ethnicity and the ancient kingdom of Ngoio (a sub-kingdom that had its origin in the

ancient kingdom of Congo). The word is used to designate women in the plural (Bakama), which has the singular (Nkama) which means woman. This way, Bakama is the group of women that we will henceforth call “the Bakama”, with the feminine article in the plural.

Therefore, the “Bakama” are an organization that includes a secret society, since during their manifestations they dress up in masks covered with dried banana leaves and carry a broom made from the leaf part of the palm in their hand, becoming even impossible to identify, in the sense of recognizing the true cultural actors. No one has ever been able to identify the Bakama members, to the point where secrecy is extreme among the group’s members.

This is how, among mysteries, involving the tradition of the Cabindas and in particular that of the Bakama, many questions are asked about the richness of this tradition. However, the new generations and even some older ones know little or almost nothing about the essence of this organization. Hence the need to study and better understand the cultural wealth that surrounds the secret society of the Bakama, also added, as we have already mentioned, to the fact that it will contribute to the preservation of this secular cultural knowledge that identifies the Woio<sup>1</sup> from Cabinda.

Therefore, the importance of carrying out the present study was related to the manifestation of traditional values, anchored in the existence of the danger of the gradual weakening of part of the values of groups that make up the Bakama organizations.

In this sense, from the recommended objectives, we define the following research questions: (1) What is the origin of the

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1. Woio, which is written in the plural as the Bawoio. It was a kingdom constituted in the south of Cabinda, involving today the confluence of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Located in the Atlantic, coast of Central Africa, north of the Congo River, it was founded by the Bantu, around the 15th century. It was known as a stage of civilization that marks the Iron Age in that region.

Bakama? (2) How does an individual in the community become a Bakama? (3) What kind of rituals identify the Bakama’s social functionality?

To obtain data, interviews were carried out with leaders of the five Bakama groups; in addition to the Bakama from Tchizo, Bakama leaders from the villages of Susso, Tchinzazi, Povo Grande and Ngoio were interviewed. Observations of dance and the funeral ritual related to the Bakama of Tchizo were also carried out, using filming to facilitate observation and subsequent analysis.

### **THE ANGOLANS OF CABINDA IN THEIR BELIEFS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF MILANDO AND MARTIN**

An approach that invites us to reflect on the traditional historical relationship of the social coexistence of Cabinda people with the sphere of religious spirituality, in which two realities are observed in evidence, is carried out by Milando (2013), when considering that, on the one hand, the existence of the benefit unsatisfactory social religiosity of the faithful, and on the other hand, the social recurrence to the prevailing traditional religiosity methods, as an alternative arising from the need to satisfy needs in the material, spiritual or psychological domain.

In the Cabindese tradition, according to Milando (2013), God does not seem to exist in most people’s daily ideological manifestations. These deal with spiritual entities in the immediate environment and only then is God evoked. Thus, these populations essentially act under a kind of spiritocentric rationality, and less theocentric (MILADO, 2013).

Following Milando’s (2013) approach

perspective, Martins (1972) in his work “Cabinda - História, Belief, uses and customs”, addressed the Laws, uses and customs that Cabinda society followed at the time, arising from an Nkisi named by Lusunzi; these laws governed all acts of the moral and social life of the peoples of Ngoio<sup>2</sup>.

According to the author, Lusunzi for the Cabindas is the greatest of all the Bakisi-Basi, the protective spirit of the land. Its laws not only regulated society, but also its existence, the behavior and dynamics of the Bakama or Zindunga, in this context.

## **CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF THE BAKAMA OF TCHIZO**

### **ORIGIN AND MEANING: BAKAMA OR ZINDUNGA?**

The term Bakama from a cultural ethnolinguistic point of view has a symbology that portrays respect, gender, group and secrecy in the specific tradition of the Woio of Cabinda.

In this sense, in order to understand the traditional symbolic value of the term Bakama, it was necessary to resort to an interview with the leader of the organization of the Bakama do Tchizo, who made the following statement:

Bakama means term spoken with respect, because even the couple, the woman can say my husband, but you man has to call in Ibinda “nkamami”, so it is transmitted by the respect of such a group of Bakama, as the name of the Bakama. Because to give respect like Lusunzi, it was a female mermaid, according to the information I received, who was the owner of such a Bakama. When she disappeared from people’s eyes, then she appeared in dreams to the old men of that time to always give the name of each mask Nkama, Nkama, they are all Bakama, to respect, minu ivami Nkama, so bantu bami ibica...bau Bakama (for example, I’m also

Nkama, so it’s my people I left...they are Bakama) (MANGEBELE, leader of Tchizo’s Bakama, 2014).

However, from the Leader’s speech, meanings are attributed to the term Bakama, as we mentioned initially, based on ethnolinguistic symbology, where respect represents the charisma and socio-cultural importance attributed to the Bakama; gender represents the relationship established with the female figure of the Bakama, therefore, in this context traditionally represented and manifested by men; the group represents the set of symbolic elements that culturally constitute the Bakama tradition; and the secrecy that represents the mystique of the unknown about the Bakama, which involves the masks oriented towards the sense of the unknowable of those who humanly attribute life to the masks and who is behind them. In this sense, for each one of these masks, it represents a woman (nkama), whose set was called Bakama (women).

The origin of the Bakama is directly related to the existence of mythological figures. They are supernatural beings from the aquatic environment, rivers and lakes, which appeared either physically or in dreams to the traditional chiefs of the time in order to help them maintain order and tranquility in the territories under their jurisdiction. These mythological figures came to be represented by masks that they guided so that they were sculpted, not in the logic of westernized knowledge, but in the logic of knowledge acquired by tradition and in the mythological perspective of the mermaid Lusunzi, and who came to be considered as the military. of the king or chief; that is, the masks are soldiers that the mermaid endowed with supernatural powers to guard the king or chief, and to regulate the behavior of its population through a law or regulation given

2. One of the three kingdoms that made up the Cabinda region. The three kingdoms were: the Ngoio, the Cacongo and the Loango.

by the same mermaid, called Lusunzi, as we will see later.

The defendants' reports were not sufficient to accurately determine when the activity of this organization began. Data obtained show that although the exact period of its origin is not known, the defendants' response showed that this organization had already held its demonstrations for at least two hundred and fifty years, although it was not at the same time for all organizations of the existing bakama. This statement can be justified through the speech of the Leaders interviewed in the villages of Tchizo, Povo Grande and Susso. Returning to Martins (1972), the legend of Lusunzi said that she had two faces in the same head. A face was white skin, and white was the part of the body that was on the same side as the white face. Another face was black skinned, and black was also the part of the body that was next to the black face. The two faces are explained for the following reason: To make everyone understand that "Nandi kaizila muna nza buingi sukula mambu mivala ke bafiote i ke mindele", that is, "She came into the world to expose the doctrine of value and benefit to blacks" and for whites". These are evidences that lead us to infer that the Bakama organization may have emerged in a period when the inhabitants of Cabinda were already living with the white man in their territory, which began approximately in 1491.<sup>3</sup>

From this perspective, the 69-year-old leader of the Bakama do Tchizo was unable to inform since when the Bakama appeared and started the activities, stating that:

I don't know [...] that part I don't know; since that time... that man was Chimpanzo Chimuámina is the one who moved the first masks, but I don't know which month, date, year, which century, I don't know either; this

part too, if he knew, he could tell me, it seems he didn't know either [...] (MANGUEBELE, leader of the Bakama of Tchizo, 2014).

The Leader of the Bakama do Povo Grande, 78 years old, recognizes the transmission of traditional skills, leadership of the Bakama from the hereditary point of view, the knowledge and leadership received from his father's family, having told us the following:

I got it from my father's family. My father left it and he also received it from his father; I have no idea of temporality but I know that my grandfather, my father's father already found it (CHICO, leader of the Bakama of Povo Grande, 2014).

The Leader of the Bakama of Susso stated that:

Since childhood, we have seen the elders. Many of them died and left to our elders. But if they had left written books we might know; we only know because the elders taught us, transmitting this knowledge. But our great-grandparents have already found it too (SÁBALA, leader of the Bakama de Susso, 2014).

In the same vein, according to the cultural historian who collaborates with the Provincial Department of Culture of Cabinda, he considered that "the origin of the Bakama comes from a mythological figure called Lusunzi". As his speech converged with that of the Tchizo Leader, he referred to the figure of Chimpanzo Chimuámina as the Shitoma shi si (Chief of the land) who had received guidance from the mermaid Lusunzi to sculpt the masks.

In the first instance, the writings of Martins (1972) considered all organizations to be Zindunga, and identified them in the number of four: the Zindunga of Tchizo, Chinzazi, Ngoio and Susso. While currently information obtained from the Secretary of

3. The writings of history tell us, through Pinto (2006), that Rui de Sousa, a Portuguese navigator who followed Diogo Cão, landed in "Baia da Almadias" in 1491, and would have conferred with a Manfuka whose given name was Binda, the term Cabinda being the result of the agglutination of the two words.

Culture indicates that all organizations of this nature are Bakama and that there are five in number: the Bakama of Tchizo, Chinzazi, Ngoio, Susso, and the addition that is not seen in the written by Martins (1972), who is the Bakama of the Big People.

However, one particular element needs to be clarified in the understanding of Bakama and Zindunga. All are considered to be Bakama, and for some consider the Bakama to be both Bakama and Zindunga. When the research started, the information obtained gave us to understand that all organizations were considered to be Bakama, in the amount of five existing in the territory of the Woio of Cabinda. This data was obtained through a document from the Cabinda Provincial Secretary of Culture. The present research found that of the five organizations of the Bakama, in fact there are only three: Tchizo's (oldest), Povo Grande and Susso. These are the only Bakama existing in the territory of the Woio of Cabinda. The other two organizations are called Zindunga, they are: the Zindunga of Chinzazi and the Zindunga of Ngoio. According to the defendants, this difference is due to the fact that the Bakama are women and the Zindunga are men, also highlighted by the way of sculpting and adorning that is attributed to their masks, as can be seen, they are of different shape. as we present:

We can see that the mask of the Bakama organization expresses femininity in its structure: painting, texture, adornments with the presence of a scarf on the head; while the masks of the Zindunga organization express masculinity in structure and shape, and their paintings and texture also accompany masculine expression.

## **THE BAKAMA BEING: INTEGRATION INTO THE GROUP**

A social group, according to Bottomore

(1996), can be defined as an aggregate of human beings in which there are specific relationships between the individuals who comprise it and each individual is aware of the group itself and its symbols; it has at least a rudimentary structure and organization, including rules and rituals, and a psychological basis in the consciousness of its members (BOTTOMORE, 1996). In this context Bakama is a group that, due to its tradition, has a ritual of integration of its members and taking possession of its Leaders.

It is understood that to be a member of the group, it is necessary to be a native and genuine member of the Tchizo community. It is not enough to have descendants from the same community, but to be able to live and interpret the laws of the group and identify as a faithful member of the group. The family education process is fundamentally exercised by the mother, as we will see when we talk about educational processes. It is an extreme care with the preservation of the values of the tradition left by the ancestors "ancestors", also said in the native language "bakulus", in the sense that one can only enter the sanctuary and have access to the secret of the masks and be masked, who is genuine from the community and has internalized the rules, norms and values or better said, who really has a sense of belonging to the community.

Elements from other communities may also belong to the group, who live in the territory of Tchizo and live together continuously with the former members of the community. These cannot have the right of access to sanctuaries, much less to masks, because the law does not allow it and that is how their ancestors left. They can only participate in support related to dance and other activities of the organization.



Figure 1 – Mask: Bakama (Tchizo).

Photo source: Field research, 2014. Credits by Alberto Mavinga.



Figure 2 Mask: Zndunga (Chinzazi).

Photo source: Field research, 2014. Credits to Alberto Mavinga.

## HOW AN INDIVIDUAL IN THE COMMUNITY BECOMES A BAKAMA

In order to elect the new member, a whole persuasive apparatus is created to involve the candidate to the organization in the knowledge of the group's norms, making him aware of his responsibility to become, to be, to know how to do and to assume attitudes that guarantee the preservation of the group. in the face of values considered sacred.

For the candidate to become a member of the organization there is, necessarily, some initiation ritual to be fulfilled. In the reality of Tchizo's Bakama organization, the rite of passage that makes the individual a member of the group must obey rules and steps to be followed. First, being Nkama is not for those who want it, but for those who really deserve it. This merit is not something evaluated by the candidate himself, but by a jury committee that, in a previous meeting, analyzes the qualities of whoever they want to become a new member of the organization; secondly, the candidate is surprised in his house one night, without other people noticing it, and is obliged to take the elements mentioned by the leader to the Bakama shrine, and is severely beaten with brooms made of palm leaves, until the leader to order that it arrives; third, while lying on the floor after the beating, the leader announces to the group and candidate about the existence of a new member based on the ritual being performed, and gives the new member advice on the rules and norms that, henceforth, he must obey, and the violation of them will imply the sanction of death, for allegedly having violated the sacred and; fourth, everyone drinks the drink that the new member had to offer, as an integral part of the ritual.

In the event of the death of a member of the organization, who can replace a Bakama after his death, according to this Leader,

is one of the children, nephew or direct grandson. Power in the Bakama is hereditary; it is not by suffrage nor is it influenced by the community, much less the interference of the public power.

## BAKAMA PARTICIPATION RITUALS

Regarding the Bakama rituals, we find the festive or commemorative dance, Mbese (rite of blessing the land), the ritual called Sanguila Ngó (funeral ritual), Nkungi Samba (Ritual of mourning), and the Mpuela (ritual of the rain).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the epistemological sense of the results obtained, the Bakama are a secret society that have mythological origins through the mermaid Lusunzi, who is represented by a set of eleven female masks called Bakama, they are considered soldiers and guardians of the mermaid Lusunzi law. They are characterized by the hierarchical secrecy of their masks, which symbolizes the mystique of the unknowable of the Bakama.

The results and data obtained from the notes by Martins (1972) and Pinto (2006), allow us to estimate that its origin exists in a period approximately since 1491, when it is estimated that the first whites arrived in Cabinda; evidenced also to the fact that the laws of the mermaid Lusunzi came to regulate the social behavior of blacks as well as whites.

The process of admitting new members is carried out through a ritual of careful selection and initiation into the group. Only those who are from Tchizo and whose parents were also born in Tchizo can be submitted to the Bakama admission process. The Bakama resist a centuries-old period of history, cultural and religious traditions. This led to these forms of existence and cultural manifestation remaining the



forms of representation and identity left by the ancestors through rituals that are still practiced today, namely: the festive or commemorative dance, Mbese (ritual of the blessing of the land), the ritual called Sanguila Ngó (funeral ritual), Nkungi Samba (mourning ritual), and the Mpuela (rain ritual).

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