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Title: Verbal art of the Fon (Benin)

Issue Date: 2013-10-16

Part 2: Elements of hwènùxó

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In the second part of this book, I will describe the various elements that enter into the composition of Fongbe verbal art. Chapter 5 brings to life the elements of the **hwènùxó** and the **yèxó**, the dramatic and the comic stories. I will specify the world of the stories and the leading role of the central participant. The chapter also captures the part of the agents who come in pairs. I will give a survey of the impact of the Fon religious devices before embarking on the main topic of the stories of the corpus, which is power and power relations, in chapter 6. In chapter 7, I will discuss the genre of the **hwènùxó**. Chapter 8 finishes part 2 with conclusive remarks.

5. Elements of Fongbe stories

The present chapter describes the elements that characterise the Fongbe **hwènùxó**. I will describe all elements that convey the cultural codes of the Fon society (see p. 33ff.). I will explain the elements that are essential to grasp the meaning, since they convey religious issues that foreigners or uninitiated outsiders easily misunderstand. I will describe the setting and the decor. I will furthermore consider the role of the central participant. Actually, he is the only character that figures in the stories, though he is not a human being. I will also describe the pair of agents and their roles. Agents do not come to life. They do not have a face, they impersonate functions in the Fon society. I will also discuss the crucial role of the traditional religion including the gods, the cult of the ancestors and the religious devices of the **Fa** divination. Finally, I will consider the fundamental principle of duality and the basic topic of the **hwènùxó**.

5.1. The world of the Fongbe stories

The stories of the corpus are all set in the surroundings that are familiar to the performers and the audience. This world consists of a series of dwellings and the market in a nearby village. It consists also of **dǔn**, meaning ‘over there’ or ‘the supernatural world’. Performers also use the expression **to ðe mè** ‘in a certain country’ (AC 5). Performers refer to **dǔn** by mentioning religious devices and by dropping hints about the symbols or appearances of the gods and the ancestors. Gods may stay for some time in the huge iroko tree as in a temporary abode. Therefore, Fon people believe that the iroko tree is a sacred tree that one must not fell. This tree is for example the temporary shelter of the cat’s children in one of the Cat- and-leopard stories (AC 16). The territory between the dwelling and the supernatural world is inimical to human beings. This territory consists of two sites; **zunkan**, ‘the

forest', that is the abode where the thunder god **Xeviosù** and the monster with thirty horns live, and **tò**, 'the lagoon', where **Sakpata**, the god we must not name, and the ancestors reside. Either a crossroads or a three-way fork is the 'point of no return' that separates our world from the supernatural world (AC 18). This is the place where two crocodiles separate us from the ancestors who live in the water (AC 14).

The Fon dwelling is a square compound that is surrounded by a fence of trees or branches and consists of several rectangular huts and a fireplace. Long palm leaves give shelter to a small terrace that is located in front of the entrance to the most important hut. The chief's dwelling has an *apatam*: a spacious round hut without sidewalls, covered with a roof of palm leaves (see 3.1.). A separate hut houses the **aséén**, the cone-shaped iron altars for the ancestors. This dwelling also comes back in the stories. Performers rarely provide us with detailed descriptions of the dwelling. Actually, they use the locations to indicate a change of the point of reference in the story, such as 'in the hut', 'in her room', 'at the market', and so forth. Some stories in the corpus mention the palace, a two-storey house that has a huge porch and a courtyard, for example AC 4. In brief, the setting of the stories is familiar to the audience.

On the other hand, the performers provide us with substantial details about life within the dwelling and give a recognisable and accurate picture of the Fon world. There is a lot of economic activity in and around the village. The inhabitants of the village earn a living with local crafts and trades, for example the blacksmith and the tailor figure in some of the stories. Several stories offer an extensive description of the markets where the saleswomen weekly take their trade, as they do in real life. The stories often mention the diviner and his consults.³⁶ The women at the market sell starchy staples, such as manioc, millet, maize, yam, and groundnuts and various beans. The women also prepare all kinds of fried snacks that they produce from groundnuts or beans that they flavour with some combination of the ubiquitous spices *pili-pili*, ginger and freshly chopped red peppers and its ground seeds (McCann 1988: 130ff.). The men sell livestock and fish. The hunters are familiar with the bush where they hunt for game and small animals like guinea pigs and even snails (AC 1; Mondjannagni 1977: 414).

Stories often mention daily utensils such as earthenware jars and cooking pots. The stories pay attention to childcare: mothers bath their children and dress them in clean shirts (AC 16). The stories provide specifications of the different types of clothing, like the loincloth or the **agbada**, the chief's large shoulder cloth, and the occasions where the various clothes are appropriate to wear. Performers sometimes specify the

³⁶ The Fon people have a week of four days that is copied from the Yoruba week; in the south of Benin the important markets take place at the traditional cycle of four days; (Mondjannagni 1977: 279).

musical instruments or the orchestra that contribute to a special occasion or feast (AC 10). Some stories emphasize the special apparel for an important celebration like the marriage of a king; the king offers his bride packages of wrappers, pearls and beads, powder and perfume (AC 4, A 4).³⁷ Some storytellers even give the names of specific birds and trees.³⁸ Actually, the stories provide us with a scene where men meet on an equal footing with gods, animals and plants. All creators and creatures behave and speak as human beings do. Animals and human beings journey from the village through the forest to the supernatural world to meet with the gods.

Verdier, who collected his corpus in Togo, confirmed my description of the decor of the Fongbe stories. He noted that the society and the social life in the stories resemble life in a rural West African village where the inhabitants keep themselves busy. Verdier observed that his corpus was set in the decor of a 'pays des contes', a country of tales. He called this country of tales a 'trompe l'oeil' landscape in which the forest or the marshlands separated the world from the supernatural world (Verdier 1973, I: 17). Verdier considered that the stories have two paradoxical forms; on the one hand, the story is a theatre where the storyteller performs, on the other hand, the story is a timeless asset of the expression of a culture (Verdier 1973, I: 20).

5.2. The central participant

One of the main features of the Fongbe **hwènùxó** is the occurrence of one single character instead of several protagonists or 'dramatis personae'. This character is the central participant who is the star actor of the story and plays the leading role. He is the driving force whose acts are decisive to solve the incident that haunts the developing story. The central participant uses direct speech in songs (see 11.1. and chapter 15).

The central participant has extraordinary, that is divine and supernatural properties, for he embodies the vital spirit **Sé**, who is a person's guardian spirit. The diviner worships his cult through the divination of **Fa**. The central participant has all kinds of religious devices that are associated with **Fa** and its religious rituals and symbols. **Sé** is the incarnation of the distant **Măwù**, the goddess 'Moon'.

³⁷ The King of **Danxomè** was called 'the king of pearls' since he had the monopoly to wear the pearls made from the excrements of the Snake god **Dan** (Le Hérisse 1911: 23).

³⁸ The Klikpo brothers named specific birds and trees. In Ayou 1 the prickly shrub is mentioned, in Ayou 7 the kapok tree or silk cotton tree (the genus *Ceiba pentandra* in the family *Malvaceae* that also includes the 'baobab' tree (genus *Adansonia*). The brothers also mentioned the African harrier hawk **gangan**.

On the other hand, on top of all this, the central participant has the sensory perception of a human being. He has a feeling for language, he speaks well-formed Fongbe, he has an eye for details, and he has a flair for business. The central participant only speaks when he is alone, or when he assumes that nobody can hear him. He acts like in the Fongbe proverb about the three monkeys: they hear and see anything that happens, but they keep silent. The central participant is the character who sometimes sings a song that gives the moral of the story at the denouement. The song resembles a chant by its rhythmic manner of presenting speech, which verges on recitation. I will describe the three aliases under which the central participant acts; he may impersonate a personal object, a deity or an animal.

The personal object

The central participant is often a personal object. The object may vary from a utensil as a saucepot to a piece of jewellery, for instance a ring. The owner of this object goes through terrible ordeals when it is mistreated. The object embodies the divine guardian spirit who protects his owner and punishes the culprit. In these stories, the objects become sacred objects or ‘fetishes’ that give shelter to a spirit or a god. The story states that either the object has an owner, or it reports the gift of the object by an unknown person. One of the stories mentions for example that, after the orphan saves the unknown man from a bushfire, the man gives a magic ring to the orphan. At the end of the story, the orphan must return the ring but he may keep his newly acquired wealth (AC 6).

Some stories depict the central participant as a number of objects that follow one after another. This happens in an Abomey-Calavi story that offers the following embodiments of the central participant: the first appearance is a lamb, the second presence shows a talisman, and the last materialization is a group of three objects: a rope, a fish basket, and a rod. These three objects together are the central participant who finally punishes the culprits (AC 3; see also 5.5.).

The transformation of a deity

The central participant of a number of stories is a deity who changes into a human being. The corpus has several stories in which a prickly shrub changes into a beautiful girl (Ay 1, AC 10). There is a story about an antelope that changes into a beautiful girl, and there is a story about a blueberry shrub that changes into a girl and a horse (A 2, AC 8). The shrub refers to the earth god **Sakpata** who gives the rain, the gift of fertility as well as the plague of smallpox. Notice that, in general, the Fon people do not mention the names of their gods.³⁹

In the corpus, twins embody gods. This reflects the belief of the Fon people that considers twins as deities who also have a special cult. In two stories from Abomey-Calavi, the central participant is a two-faced deity.⁴⁰ One example of the corpus shows a central participant who takes the better half: the **hǒxò**, ‘twins’ **Zinsù** and **Sagbò** (AC 19).⁴¹ The beginning of the story once mentions the name of one of the twins. This is the name of the reckless **Sagbò**, whose absence nearly costs his twin his life. In this story, these two deities resemble the hermaphrodite twin gods **Sakpata** and **Xevìsù**. The last one is the god Sky, who is jealous of his twin, the god Earth. This story reminds us that gods are like human beings, who, at their turn, resemble animals. De Souza mentioned that animals are considered divine spirits that are incarnated in tangible bodies (De Souza 1975: 19).⁴²

Gods also change into animals. In a story about the gods **sùn** ‘Moon’ and **hwè** ‘Sun’, the god Sun throws his children in the lagoon, and they change into fishes. This story explains the origin of the lunar eclipse (AC 17). Le Hérisse and Maupoil also published this story (Le Hérisse 1911: 257ff., Maupoil 1988: 574ff.). Verdier published a version of this story in the Mina language (Anecho) (Verdier 1973, II: 181).

Gods can also change into two friends. Let us consider the story from Abomey-Calavi about the two **xòntón**, ‘friends’, **Nǔvènumì** and **Nǔvènumiã**, ‘Anything-makes-me-angry’ and ‘Nothing-makes-me-angry’ (AC 5). The names of the friends express their nature. This story is about power and prosperity, and provides us with a fine example of the different roles of the gods and the use of their properties in the stories. The friends have opposite properties that make them friends. This bipolar central participant refers to the ambiguous competence of the god **Lègbà**, the

³⁹ In the stories about the creation of the world, the performers named the name of their gods (Ay 2, AC 17).

⁴⁰ Fon statuettes of gods often show gods that have two heads; gods are able to look behind.

⁴¹ The Fongbe word used to indicate the twin here is the English ‘Guenon monkey’, in French ‘cercopithèque’.

⁴² **Sagbò** already joined the ancestors, for the performer told that he stayed in the forest, which meant that he was dead.

youngest son of the **Mǎwu-Lisà** pantheon, who is the linguist of the gods, as well as the god who protects the markets, but is also a troublemaker. One of the properties of the friendly young man in this story refers to **Lěgbà** as the great communicator, for he never gets angry, and he speaks the language of the birds, and the languages of the **Aja** ‘West’ and the **Ayo** ‘East’. He heals both the king of the West and the king of the East. The first one is the king of **Aja**, who is blind, which is a property of the god **Xevìsù**. His opponent, the king of **Ayo**, has a hunchback, which is a property of the god **Sakpata**. The king of **Aja** rewards **Nǔvènumiǎ**, ‘Nothing makes me angry’, with the rights of the markets of **Aja**, and he becomes the king’s linguist. This function was a much sought-after position in West Africa. Yankah described the prominence of the king’s linguist in his publication about the Akan of Ghana (Yankah 1995: 212). The friendly **Nǔvènumiǎ** triumphs over the angry man **Nǔvènumì** who dies at the end of the story.⁴³

The trickster

The trickster is an extraordinary central participant. He is an exceptional character: he is neither divine nor human, though he succeeds in journeying from the earth to the sky where the ancestors live. The trickster in the corpus often is **Adɔ̀nɔ̀ Yegbó** or **Yɔ̀gbó**. The stories show that the trickster is a living being, for he is said to eat a lot. On the other hand, it is impossible to kill him. He is often sent away, but to no effect, for he will always return to achieve more acts of deceit and deception. The performers give no description of the looks of the trickster. They drop several hints that he is an animal indeed. This reminds us of the Fon habit that one does not openly say a person’s name, but a person’s status, for example ‘the wife of **Kɔ̀jo**’.⁴⁴ The performers hint that the trickster is a spider in three out of six **Yɔ̀gbó**-stories in the corpus. In the first story, the trickster is in the room of **Dada Ségbó**, the Great Spirit who is one of the agents. There, he furtively watches **Dada Ségbó** who hides three objects for a contest to marry off his daughters, and later he lets his stepbrother in on the secret in order to let him win the contest (Ay 2). This indicates that one does not notice **Yɔ̀gbó**, for he is small. The performer calls him **Adɔ̀nɔ̀**, ‘the web’s owner’, which the language consultant used to translate into ‘the glutton’ or ‘the lover of nice food’ (see 14.1.).

In a second story, a boasting **Yɔ̀gbó** wins a contest in the sky by jumping over the rope that separates the sky from the earth. However, this time the elders succeed in

⁴³ The stereotyped pair of the two friends **Nǔvènumì** and **Nǔvènumiǎ** reminds us also of Azuonye’s description of the representation of kings in Igbo tales; they are pictured on the one hand as the legitimate authority and on the other as the abuse of power (Azuonye 1995: 65-82).

⁴⁴ **Kɔ̀jo** is the name of a boy who is born on a Monday.

cheating on him, and so he falls from the sky out of the House of Rain. The fall crashes the trickster, and his web spread all over the bush ‘and his web scattered everywhere on the trees, on all the branches, spread over the whole world’ (Ay 3).

The third story refers to the trickster as the ‘the large fat belly’ (Ay 4). Segurola described the trickster as a mythical, gluttonous and immortal being. He is well-known for his tricks, deception, ingratitude and insatiability (Segurola 1968, II: 620). The dictionary also mentions the synonymy of *yè* for *yègletete*, meaning ‘spider’ (Segurola 1968, II: 615). The surnames also indicate that the Fongbe **Yògbó** is indeed the counterpart of the spider **Yiyi**, the Ewegbe trickster (Konrad 1994).⁴⁵

The corpus presents two comic trickster stories that show that **Yògbó** is not the only Fon trickster. Both stories stage a small animal as central participant. A Fongbe proverb says that a small thing is capable of disturbing many things, meaning that the size of an animal is opposite to the intelligence of its behaviour. A small animal is said to be smart, cunning and secretive, and able to survive a much bigger adversary. Tricksters may be also part of a household, as shows the Youngest Cat (Ay 5) and the Rooster (Ay 6).

It is remarkable that two authors alleged that the Fon people have a trickster-god, which is **Lěgbà**. Herskovits even mentioned that **Lěgbà** is not the only Dahomean trickster, “we also have Yo” (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 101). Pelton called **Lěgbà** the Fongbe counterpart of the well-known spider **Anansé**, who once travelled from Ghana to Surinam to become Anansi (Pelton 1980: 113ff. and 223ff.; Voorhoeve 1979: 7). It is clear that both **Lěgbà** and **Yògbó** have in common that they are capable of travelling between the sky and the earth, and vice-versa. However, there is a salient difference. **Lěgbà** is a god, he is the youngest son of the gods of the **Măwŭ-Lisà** pantheon, and he is the linguist of all the gods as well as the god who protects the Fon markets in front of which his statue with the characteristic erect penis stands (De Souza 1975: 55). The corpus has no allusions to any sexual interest of the trickster **Yògbó**; his interest is in getting food, getting it effortlessly, and getting it in considerable amounts. This calls to mind a spider’s web indeed. The claim of both Herskovits and Pelton, which states that the Fon people have a trickster-god **Lěgbà** is not borne out of my data. On the contrary, one of the stories of the corpus relates how **Yògbó** and his greediness made the elders angry; they expelled him forever from the Land of Sky, the habitat of the ancestors (Ay 3).

⁴⁵ Guédou described him as ‘the shadow’. See 14.1.

5.3. Agents

Let us consider the role of the agents. Performers stage them as roles, not as characters. Agents have no face, no age, no opinions and no emotions. Agents impersonate a function: they do not come to life. They have properties that fit their functions, which stem from the institutions of the Kingdom of **Danxomè**. The agents in the corpus have a few basic features that resemble the stereotyped players in the Italian 16th century's 'commedia dell'arte', and the puppets in a Mr. Punch and Judy show. The actors in the 'commedia dell'arte' wear masks and clothes that make clear who they are supposed to be. The resemblance as well as the difference with the Fon agents is clear.

When we observe the agents and their actions, they merely serve to accomplish contrary actions. All stories cast two agents; agent A represents the good one and agent B represents the bad one. They are like two sides of a coin; they illustrate the topic of the story. The performer exposes each of the agents alternately; the performer does not stage them together until the denouement. An action that involves Agent B can take place at Agent's A's place, while Agent A is absent (see Greimas 1966 (b): 172ff.).

Agents always come in pairs, which reflects the duality that I discussed in the description of the kingdom and the pantheons (see 1.2. and 1.3.). One does the right thing and the other one violates the inhibitions. They disclose behaviour and misbehaviour, and finally they symbolize life and death. They are direct opposites and incompatible. They have one thing in common: they all speak Fongbe. However, they speak reported speech (see p.154).

Humans become animals and vice versa. Animals are also casted as powerful agents, for example, the leopard and the cat are stand-ins for powerful people. The part of the ugly one is for **kpɔ̀**, 'leopard', who is the symbol of the King of **Danxomè**. Her stepsister who has the same father is **awii** 'cat'. She plays the good person in the role of the traditional doctor (Ay 5, AC 16, A 7).

Gods change temporarily to humans or animals to warn against the violation of a taboo. This happens for example in the story about the poor man who only knows how to cut hoes. The god **Dan**, 'Snake', makes the pauper a wealthy man, but he takes back all his possessions from him when the man forgets the obligatory sacrifices (AC 8). Gods may change temporarily into human beings, but human beings cannot change into gods. The agents embody also ancestors to emphasize their support of the living, for example the orphans in the corpus (AC 6, AC 14).

There are three distinct types of agents: the kings, the monsters and the common agents that work in trade and crafts.

Kings and their antagonists

The Great Spirit king

The stories sometimes present the god **Dada Ségbó** as a king. He is the main ancestor, the Great Spirit, who created the universe according to the oldest Fon pantheon. He keeps himself far away from this world. The Fon consider him a wise man that is capable doing justice. He also consults **Fa** (AC 4, A 4), and the trickster cannot deceive him (Ay 2). He is an example to men. He has no enemies. The performers picture him as the antagonist of the powerful worldly king who he never meets in the stories.

The worldly king

Several stories feature a worldly king who is the chief: the **tomèxósu**, ‘ruler of the country’. He is the most distinguished agent who holds a high function that has its original base in history. The **toxósu** is moulded on the former rulers of **Danxomè**. He represented the highest position in the kingdom, and his arrogance and cruelty were greatly feared. The king had a divine status, for he was the only one who decided whether people lived or died. The king never addressed himself to the people; he had a linguist who conveyed the king’s message (see 1.2. and 6.2.).

The king makes his authority visible by sending his messengers on a special assignment: **wenzagun**, the ‘halfheads’, whose right half of their heads was shaved (Argyle 1966: 68). They are in charge to bring presents to the future bride of the king (AC 4), and they are the ones to negotiate the damages for abducting the spouse of the bodiless spirit hunter (AC 10).

The worldly king has to face two distinct agents that may function as his opponents: the hunter or the orphan. The hunter and the orphan never figure in the same story; they apparently exclude each other. The hunter and the orphan are both powerful agents for they are not sedentary, as the king is. Their journeys give them an independent existence. The hunter travels in the forest amongst the gods, and the orphan is a frequent visitor of the ancestors in the lagoon (see chapter 6). The corpus figures them in several stories where they fight for justice and always win. The hunter **Albviđogudo**, ‘Little Finger’, is in touch with the gods. His reward is the shrub that turns into a beautiful girl. When the king kidnaps the girl, Little Finger discloses the secret and the girl becomes a shrub again (Ay 1, A 2).

The other opponent of the king is the orphan. **Nđeyóví Tđeyóví** is the orphan who has neither mother nor father. His self-confidence is extraordinary, and he is capable of journeying on his own. Two kings try to deceive him, but they have to admit defeat (AC 6). The hunter’s conflict is about to go through a lot of trouble to have sex. The orphan’s conflict is about to waste one’s time and effort to get food and to survive.

Monsters

Two of the stories in the corpus stage a visible evil agent, which is the monster **Yehwe Zogbannɔ**. The **Yehwe Zogbannɔ** meaning ‘priest with 30 horns’ is a child-eating monster that lives in the bush. He has one horn on his head at his first appearance in a story. Then, his brother appears with two horns, followed by another brother with three horns, and so on (AC 7). In a different story, the **Yehwe Zogbannɔ** threatens the twin **Zinsu** by popping up and showing off his 30 horns. The twin sees how the monster eats and is frightened, for the monster not only is able to separate his head from his trunk, but he also puts his hands and his legs aside before he feeds his limbs one by one. The twin politely addresses the monster as ‘Sir’ (AC 19). In Fongbe, the monster is called **kanlin**, ‘animal’. There are male and female monsters. One female monster is pregnant and therefore the hunter does not kill her, which means that the monsters will always be amongst us (AC 19). Performers tell these stories in a light-hearted way and especially to children.

The corpus also shows a girl whose hands and feet are chopped off, as the penalty for being the only child of her mother. She is left to her fate at the three-forked road (see p. 72). This girl is a **Dobligodo** girl. She is a monster, for she feeds on stolen raw beans (AC 18). This agent relates to the **Dobligodo** people whom Maupoil mentioned. These monsters were also able to separate their head, arms and legs from their trunk at their pleasure. The men were famous for stealing girls to eat them⁴⁶. Maupoil stated that the **Dobligodo** were a mythical people that originally stemmed from the Yoruba storytelling tradition. Maupoil boldly claimed that these stories traveled to the Nago in the East of Benin, and from there on migrated to Haiti. (Maupoil 1988: 610ff.). In my view, this statement is not substantiated, for there is no base of evidence to support this claim.

⁴⁶ This brings to mind the habits of the **Yehwe Zogbannɔ** (See AC 7 for the ambition of eating girls, and AC 19 for the separation of limbs from the trunk).

The common agents

The common agents in the stories are a mix of tradition and modernity that reflects real life. Common agents are the rural and urban Fon people in the trade and crafts who have to work for a living. On the one hand, the blacksmiths set up shops in the villages. The musicians go from village to town, and viceversa, to any place where their trade is welcome. The stories also report on the town market, where fishmongers and butchers sell their goods and where tailors are sewing shirts. Here, there are many costermongers and street-sellers: women who sell food, spices, herbs and vegetables, as well as fried snacks. Women who play a role inside the house are also staged as common agents. Examples are the co-wives (the first wife and the new wife) or the adulterous wife (AC 2, A 5, AC 4, A 4, A 8).

Common agents beseech the diviner to consult the oracle **Fa**. Deities can change into common agents that have tangible bodies. Several gods in the corpus embody the artisans of real life. The goddess **Mǎwǔ** for example is the divine goldsmith. She is the godmother of the blacksmiths; she is the one who uses gold to forge a child for a childless mother, or a vagina for the boy who wants to be a girl (A 1, AC 4).⁴⁷ The hunter of several stories personifies the iron war deity **Gũ**, who also appears as a blacksmith in one story (Ay 1, AC 10 AC 5). The rainmaker and the fire lighter embody **Sakpata** and **Xeviosù** (AC 6).

5.4. The principle of duality

One of the main features of the culture of the kingdom was the often described principle of duality in religion and the royal administration (Argyle 1966: 76, and chapter 1). I will confine to the issues that are relevant to the stories: the occurrence of complementary opposite pairs and the dualism that goes with these pairs, the frequent enmity between siblings, and the belief in divine and magical power.

The principle of duality is part of the rural Fon society. It is therefore not surprising that the agents in Fongbe stories come mostly in pairs. All agents, whether they are human beings, gods or animals, exhibit the principle of duality in one way or the other. Performers picture animals as a pair, for example in the texts about the cat and her stepsister, the leopard. The two friends, the two co-wives and the twins represent a two-faced person that has one face that is bestowed with virtues, while the second face is pictured as a wicked one. Agent A is the victim, and Agent B is the offender.

This goes also for the hunter ‘Little Finger’ who speaks with animals, and is capable of realizing metamorphoses. Little Finger only seems to be an easy victim of the

⁴⁷ In the corpus **Mǎwǔ** exclusively sculptures golden objects. Several authors mentioned that **Mǎwǔ** uses clay to shape human beings.

king's deceit, but he breaks his promise of keeping the secret by informing his first wife about the identity of the second wife. The first wife sings a song that reveals that the king's new wife is a shrub. Therewith she violates the taboo that one must keep secrets and Little Finger defeats the other agent, the King (Ay 1, AC 11, and A 2).

Let us consider the similar texts of Abomey-Calavi and Abomey about 'The sadist co-wife' that are a typical example of duality (AC 2, A 5). The first wife is jealous of the new wife who cooks delicious spicy sauces. When the new wife goes to the market, the first wife enters the hut of the other woman, eats from her sauce and defecates in it. This behaviour continues for some time, and the new wife becomes desperate, because she has to throw away the filthy sauce, and to cook a new sauce. She complains to her husband who remains indifferent to what is going on. Finally, the new wife decides to put magical glue on the rim of the saucepot. The first wife is caught with the saucepot sticking to her buttocks. She denies her misbehaviour, but the facts prove her wrong.

Eco proposed a structuralist analysis of a story. This kind of analysis provides us with contrastive roles and actions of the two agents, A, the good one, and B, the bad one (Eco 1966: 79). The contrastive pairs of roles and actions that occur in both texts are the following:

Agent A	Agent B
The new wife	The first wife
Goes to the market	Stays at home
Sells	Idle
Cooking	Stealing
Creative	Destructive
Lives	Disappears

The list clearly shows the duality of the pair of agents. The principle of duality was already ingrained in the Kingdom of **Danxomè** and in its religious pantheon. This principle of duality is still present in all Fongbe **hwènùxó**.

5.5. Religious devices

I will describe the symbols that refer to gods and ancestors, before embarking on the role of divination. All stories allude to the gods and their miracles and gifts to humanity. They also refer to religious devices and the important role of divination. The stories reflect the divine devices that are important in the Fon society. The cults emphasize the frequent contact between human beings, the gods and the ancestors. The stories report the exploits of the various gods and their *gris-gris*, and make them look as a part of the actual world.

The stories praise the power of the gods and spirits, without naming them. Instead of naming them, stories only mention the name of the place where a spirit may stay.⁴⁸ Recall that an iroko tree does not impersonate a spirit. A spirit may use the iroko as a shelter from time to time. Therefore, one must protect the iroko trees. It means that the stories have often an underlying meaning that is only understandable if one knows the meaning of the symbols that are used.

On the other hand, in the case of creation or production, performers name the name of gods. The Fon people consider the **vodun** ‘gods’ as spirits that gave many gifts to humanity. One of the stories of the corpus reports the creation of fish. **Hwè**, the god Sun, kills his children by throwing them in the sea. They turn into **hweví**, ‘fishes’, literally meaning ‘children of **Hwè**’. This is how the god Sun gave us food (AC 17). Gods give wealth, but they also may take it back. Therefore, performers emphasize the importance of respecting the annual ceremonies (AC 3). A second story tells the great anger of **Dan**, ‘Snake’, the founder of the kingdom, towards an act of sacrilege such as the neglect of the obligatory sacrifices (AC 8).

Fon religion gives the ancestors or ‘ethnic deities’ also an important role (Mondjannagni 1977: 123). The **tóxwýó**, ‘ancestor **vodun**’, are the ghosts that are celebrated in the ‘ceremony of the ghosts’. This cult has individual **aséén**, ‘portable iron altars’ that serve to venerate them (see chapter 3). The elders had a prominent role in chasing the trickster from the Country of Sky (Ay 3). One story relates to the foundation of the **Adanhunsa** market in Allada by King **Adjahuto**, one of the **hěnnuvodun**, the famous royal ancestor and founder of the kingdom (AC 13). The name of **Adanhunsa** means ‘anger at the foot of the kapok tree’, which calls in mind **Adjahuto**’s reported anger at his arrival in Allada (AC 13; Mondjannagni 1977: 277). The names of the rural markets in Benin often differ from the villages where they are set up to remind us of the past.

Markets are the places to encounter ancestors. This is the case in a trickster story (Ay 4), and in an orphan story (AC 14). The intersection of two roads has an identical function. The orphan decides to make a journey to his deceased mother, for

⁴⁸ Fon people use to refer to a function or a state instead of using names (see p. 76).

he suffers ill treatment by his stepmother, the new wife of his father. He passes three crossroads to join his ancestor. He successively encounters an old woman, two fighting stones, and an old woman with a crocodile. Finally, he encounters a lonely jar with cooked rice. All these items symbolize death, meaning that the orphan has to face death before he may find his mother (AC 14).

In 1976, in spite of the inhibition of religion, the Fon people still consulted the diviner in order to solve a problem (De Souza 1975: 88). The corpus reflects also the tangible role of the oracle **Fa** and the **bokónḽ**, ‘the diviner’ who consults **Fa**.⁴⁹ The world of Fongbe verbal art emphasizes the authority of the **bokónḽ** who is capable of connecting to the supernatural world in order to consult the oracle **Fa**. He consults **Fa** to get to know the help of the **Sé**, ‘the guardian spirit’ of an individual person. Maupoil extensively described the interpretation of **Fa** and its **dù**, ‘signs’ (Maupoil 1988).

The role of the guardian spirit **Sé** is crucial in the stories, for this vital spirit helps to turn around the misfortune of the good agent. The central participant often uses the devices given by **Sé** to accelerate the denouement. The use of devices is twofold: to get support from the gods to solve the problem, and to entail the penalty for the violation of a taboo. The devices **bõ**, ‘gris-gris’ or ‘juju’, vary in appearance. There is **awḽn**, ‘glue’, if the plot of the story so requires (AC 2, A 5). A second example is **Dosu** who is as poor as a leper and successively receives a sheep **gbõ**, a talisman **bõcyó**, and then the trio of the **kàn**, ‘rope’, the **akakó**, ‘fish basket made from the leaves of a coconut tree’, and the **bǎ**, ‘rod’ (AC 3).

Let us consider the role of the guardian spirit in one of the stories from Abomey-Calavi, ‘The day to thresh the millet’ (AC 4). Le Hérisse published a similar story (Le Hérisse 1911: 266ff.). The central participant in this story is the fiancée of **Dada Ségbó**, the ‘Great Spirit’ ancestor who is the oldest god who created the world. There is a problem, for the bride-to-be is a boy. The boy and **Dada Ségbó** consult together the diviner to ask how they must cope with the slanderous talking of the first wife. They also want to know how they must deal with the most important ritual of the year, the threshing of the millet. The bride has to participate in this ritual where everyone is naked. The diviner tells them to offer the following sacrifices to **Sé**: 41 pieces of **wḽ**, ‘red porridge,’ and 41 cuts of white chicken meat.⁵⁰ These sacrifices will enable them to meet with the guardian spirit. **Sé** agrees to change the boy into a girl, and goddess **Mǎwũ** forges a golden vagina. The goddess has a good sense of humour, and comments that she originally intended the boy to be a woman, while he himself preferred to be a man. Obviously due to circumstances, he changed his mind, but this will cost him dearly. The boy becomes a girl indeed, and she

⁴⁹ Fa originally stems from the Yoruba Ifa cult.

⁵⁰ Note that the number 41 indicates **Lisà** the god Sun.

definitely is the girl that she was meant to be (AC 4: 153-159). The story clearly illustrates the necessity to consult the guardian spirit **Sé**, for even **Dada Ségbó**, the Great Spirit ancestor, has to consult the diviner. The story illustrates also the fact that the performers picture a number of deities in the Fon pantheon as hermaphrodites.⁵¹

Fa uses specific numbers as religious symbols that play a crucial role in the stories as well. The numbers from the **Fa** divination indicate a sacrifice or a sacred gesture. The stories often mention the number 16, that is the number of the 16 great signs of **Fa** (Maupoil 1988: 430, 646). This is the number for the sacrifices of calabashes, pigeons, chickens, and balls of porridge, bottles with palm oil, and bottles with alcohol (Maupoil 1988: 615, 651). It is the number of wealth: 16 bags of money (Maupoil 1988: 623). Fate is indicated with the number 256, meaning 16 x 16, meaning all the **Fa** there are, **Fa dù: hùn afɔ̀tɔ̀n nukún ɖokpó**. The number 41, in Fongbe **kandɛ̀ nùkun ɖokpó**, sometimes occurs as **kandɛ̀ nùkun lisà** referring to the god Sun **Lisà**, the male counterpart of the distant goddess Moon **Máwũ** (A 4).⁵²

Maupoil described the sixteen major **Fa**. The **Fa** signs come in pairs, the first one is male and the second one is female, and so on. Maupoil mentioned that the diviners disagree about the sex of the second sign.⁵³ The 240 minor **Fa**, called **Favi**, ‘the children of **Fa**’, complete the list of 256 **Fa**. Some of the signs are so dangerous that the Fon diviners warn against mentioning them: **yíǎ**, ‘call’. This would bring bad luck (Maupoil 1988: 412).

Each **Fa** has a number of maxims or mottos, and a number of stories that go with it. Maupoil calls these stories ‘legends’. Maupoil noted that the number of mottos and stories are countless. Each of the major **Fa** has a taboo or interdiction, and stipulates sacrifices (Maupoil 1988: 419ff.). The list of the appearances of **Fa** in the stories of the corpus is impressive. I will give an overview of the incarnations of **Fa** that is based on the publications by Maupoil and Le Hérisse.

⁵¹ The Calavi version in the corpus is similar to the French version published by Le Hérisse, and entitled ‘Conte grivois’ meaning ‘bawdy tale’ (AC 4; Le Hérisse 1911: 266-270). Paulme analysed Le Hérisse’s translation, and described the central participant as a transvestite boy (Paulme 1976: 70ff.). This analysis is erroneous in my view, for the Fongbe story of the corpus gives a clue neither to a transvestite boy nor to an egotist king who wants to marry a younger person, as Paulme suggested. It is probable that neither Paulme nor Le Hérisse knew that Fon people venerated a number of hermaphrodite deities.

⁵² The principal deities of the Nagogbe (Yoruba) **Kenesi**, the ‘black magic deities’, are also indicated with the number 41 (Maupoil 1988: 20).

⁵³ Maupoil appears to be correct. The descriptions of the sign indicate that the first sign represents the East, that is the goddess **Máwũ**. The second sign represents the god **Lisà** and the West. The Yoruba pantheon and its contrary representation probably caused the confusion of the points of the compass.

The first sign is the sign of life. One of the incarnations of the first sign is **ajinaku**, ‘elephant’. He appears in the story with the bigmouth rooster or the bigmouth bird **titigotin**. The bird makes the gathered crowd believe that he killed the elephant; the meaning is that a small thing may cause a lot of trouble. The colour of this sign is white (see Ay 6 and Maupoil 1988: 437). The elephant is also an incarnation of the eleventh sign, the sign of the Snake god **Dan** (Maupoil 1988: 526).

Ye, ‘divine spirit’, is the incarnation of the second sign and represents the god **Lisà** ‘Sun’ who gave fish to men (AC 17). This is the sign of death. Note that the sculptors of **vodun** statuettes often give their wooden figures two heads. **Ye** is the potential double, the two-headed figure that symbolises death. Gods of this sign are also **Dan** and **Sakpata**. The colour is black (AC 10, AC 17, Maupoil 1988: 444ff.).

The third sign represents the vicious animals such as the lion **kinikini** and the hyena **xlà**. These animals relate to the **aséén**, ‘the altar of the ancestors and the **vodun** of all recipes and medicaments’ (Ay 4, A 6; Maupoil 1988: 453ff., 618ff.; Le Hérisse 1911: 265ff.). The colour is brownish red.

The fourth sign represents the thighs and the genitals of a woman, the impurity of women and childbirth. The colour is black (AC 1, AC 2, A 5, AC 19; Maupoil 1988: 460ff.). One of the incarnations of this sign is the **hǒxò**, ‘twins’, **Zinsu** and **Sagbo**, and the monkeys that the Fon people consider the twins of mankind (AC 19; Maupoil 1988: 435, 462, 493, Le Hérisse 1911: 234).⁵⁴

The fifth sign is a dangerous sign that involves misery, blood and fire. The favourite colour is red. The sign reminds us of the obligation to sacrifice to the gods. Several stories describe fire as a gift of the gods; the performers refer to **myò**, ‘fire’ or ‘ember’, and **nakí**, ‘firewood’, that one encounters in the forest (Ay 4, AC 6, AC 14, AC 19). The gods of this sign are amongst others the fire god **Xeviosù** and the iron god **Gũ** (AC 5, AC 6; Maupoil 1988: 469).

The sixth sign is one of the most dangerous signs of **Fa**. The sign is the second-in-command of the sign of death during the night and represents the first sign of life during the day. The god is **Sakpata** (Maupoil 1988: 473 ff.). This sign concerns the stories about **kpò**, ‘the leopard’ (Ay 5, Ay 7, AC 16, A 7; Maupoil 1988: 477ff.). The interdictions concern amongst others the food of **Sakpata**: **nu mime**, grilled plates (Ay 5, AC 16, A 7).

The seventh sign represents the rope **kan**. The gods of this sign are the Snake god **Dan**, the Sun god **Lisà**, and the twins **hǒxò**. The colour is blue. This sign embodies stories about the Muslims who came to the world to steal from the fields of **Fa**

⁵⁴ Recent research pointed out that Benin has the highest number of twins in the world. There are 28 twins born out of every 1 000 births (Smits and Monden 2011).

(Maupoil 1988: 488). A Muslim restaurant owner figures in one of the stories of the corpus, **manèlènù** meaning ‘man from Mali’, that is ‘Muslim’, or ‘dervish’ (AC 3). It appears to me that the sign refers to the practice of the **vodun** cult, where shaped sculptures represent the gods. These sculptures show limbs that are tied with many ropes to manage evil. In a more worldly meaning, the rope refers to the slaves, **kannumɔ**, ‘captives’. The stealing Muslims are also the Yoruba who within living memory competed with the Fon when it came to loot and sell human beings. One of the stories of the corpus mentions their king, the King of **Ayɔ** (AC 5). Maupoil expressed his doubts about the meaning of this sign (Maupoil 1988: 482).

The eighth sign represents the hunter who is the chief of the twins who themselves are the mystery of life. The taboos concern the eating of monkeys and the tying up of a bundle of firewood (Ay 1, AC 1, AC 11, AC 19, A 8; Maupoil 1988: 492).

The ninth sign is a dangerous sign that represents iron and fire, and the gods **Gũ** and **Xevicsù**. The sign refers to the penis, sperm and erection (AC 9; Maupoil 1988: 499ff.).

The tenth sign represents the black magic and **awii**, the cat. It symbolises the female demons that hide in a calabash that has the form of a crescent moon. This sign rules the two ears, the two sides of the nose, the eyes, the lips, the thighs, the legs and the feet. The main colour is red (Ay 5, AC 16, A 7, AC 5, AC 6, A 3; Maupoil 1988: 508ff.).

The eleventh sign represents the snake, including the venomous **amanyɔnu**. This sign rules the bush and its animals. It is also one of the most dangerous signs, and it is supposed to kill children (A 1, A 3; Maupoil 1988: 524ff.).

The twelfth sign represents pregnancy, abortion, and the god of the twins. Gods are **Sakpata**, **Gũ**, **Xevicsù**, **hõxò** and **kpò**, ‘leopard’. The favourite colour is red (AC 19; Maupoil 1988: 530ff.).

The thirteenth sign represents somebody who talks too much, like **Lěgbà**. Several consultants told Maupoil that the sign symbolised Muslims, as well as the white men and women. The sign is reminiscent of people who wear a skirt and a jacket (Maupoil 1988: 536ff.).

The fourteenth sign represents the sky and the earth, the gods **Lisà** and **Sakpata**. The colours are white, blue and red (Ay 3; Maupoil 1988: 546).

The fifteenth sign is again one of the most dangerous signs of **Fa**. It represents incest and illnesses. The god is **Sakpata**. However, in spite of the bad omens, the sign promises also wealth and a long life (AC 3; Maupoil 1988: 553).

The sixteenth sign is a mysterious and dangerous sign as well. One of the stories in Ayou refers to the sixteenth sign **Fu** (Ay 6). It is the sign of the sorcerers and the

birds who are sorcerers. One of the incarnations is **agbalin**, ‘the antelope that is capable of escaping death’ (Ay 1, AC 10, A 2; Maupoil 1988: 39, 571).

The dangerous signs have a common taboo: **lǒ**, ‘the crocodile’ (AC 14, Maupoil 1988: 41). The Fon people believe that the deceased journey to the ancestors in a carriage that two crocodiles pull (Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain: 2011). The diviner uses **děsunvǐ**, ‘kernels of the fruit of a palm tree’, to consult **Fa** (AC 4, A 4, AC 9; Maupoil 1988: 41). The good and bad omens are called **kpǒli**, ‘the sign of the forest’ or ‘the sign of the soul’, or ‘the sachet’ (AC 14; Maupoil 1988: 319).

The most important ritual of the Fon people is **li so** ‘the threshing of the millet’ (AC 4, A 4; Maupoil 1988: 357). The misery of **Dosu gudunǒ**, ‘the leper Dosu’, is well-known (AC 3; Maupoil 1988: 622). Fon people make fun of **segbǒ**, ‘the billy goat’, that is the sacrificial ram; he has a beard as the Muslims have (AC 3, A 6; Maupoil 1988: 629). Kings do not speak in public, they convey a message like **Dada Ségbó** does by gesturing his **azǒkwε koko**, ‘the earthen pipe’ (AC 3; Maupoil 1988: 641). The bush is dangerous, but it is also sacred: **zunmε**, ‘the sacred forest’ (Ay 1, Ay 8, AC 6, AC 7, AC 10, AC 19, A 2; Maupoil 1988: 623; Le Hérissé 1911: 234). Furthermore there are the countries of the Adja and the Yoruba: **Aja** and **Ayǒ** (AC 5; Maupoil 1988: 625, 632). Finally, yet importantly, there is **Lěgbà**, the linguist of the gods and humankind, as well as the helper of **Fa** and the guardian of markets and trade. His symbol is red clay, and the statue of his erect penis is all over the villages in the south of Benin. The rooster in Ayou 6 in the corpus incarnates him.

The **bǒcyǒ**, ‘statuettes’, that picture the features of the **vodun** gods show many of the symbols of the **Fa** divination. These features are often used in the stories of the corpus, for example **hùnjén**, ‘nails’, in Abomey-Calavi 4, or **kàn**, ‘rope’, that figures in several stories.