

Review

The Zàngbeto: The Other Community Security Actor Facing Modernity in Porto Novo

¹Donatien SOKOU and ²Dodji AMOUZOUVI

¹Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Centre Universitaire d'Adjarra (University of Abomey Calavi), Tel: (00229) 97347500. Corresponding author's E-mail: sokoupremier@yahoo.fr

²Professeur Titulaire/CAMES, Université d'Abomey-Calavi, FASHS/Département de Sociologie-Anthropologie, Tel: +229 66 67 48 60; Email: dodji1975@yahoo.fr

Accepted 5 June 2024

The *Zàngbétó* acts as a secret police force in Beninese society. It controls the night and plays an important role in managing community insecurity problems. In this context of modernisation of the city of Porto-Novo, this research aims to analyse the contributory role of cultural entities in optimising the challenges of the security of goods and people in Porto Novo. The methodological approach adopted is based on a literature review of the situation of the *Zàngbétó* heritage and contextual observations. In addition, interviews were conducted with thirty-one (31) stakeholders selected from the five (05) districts of the city of Porto-Novo. At the end of the data analysis, it emerged that the galloping urbanisation of the city of Porto-Novo has had a direct impact on traditional, cultural, and worship practices in the city, in this case, the *Zàngbétó* cult, and its various functions, which are experiencing a regression. The multifunctional spaces for *Zàngbétó* worship, locally known as *Zanhonto*, which constitute sacred sites, are restricted or others are disappearing as a result of modernisation.

Keywords: *Zàngbétó*; community security players; hardship; modernity; Porto Novo.

Cite This Article As: SOKOU, D., AMOUZOUVI, D. (2024). The *Zàngbeto*: The Other Community Security Actor Facing Modernity in Porto Novo". *Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult.* 12(2): 65-71

INTRODUCTION

In Benin's vodoun tradition, the *Zàngbétó* cult has its origins in the town of Porto Novo. Commonly known as the "guardians of the night", the *Zàngbétó* community is a secret brotherhood responsible for the safety of the inhabitants at sunset. Usually established in every neighbourhood, these convents are losing their foothold more and more in the new nomenclature of cities as they urbanise and modernise. And one wonders whether the loss of the territorial anchoring of the convents of *Zàngbétó* could not justify their loss of social and security anchoring. What's more, public policies are increasingly distancing themselves from the traditional, community-based security institutions that the *Zàngbétó* constituted, *relegating* them to secondary status. According to the work of L. Hounkarin, the *Zàngbétó*;

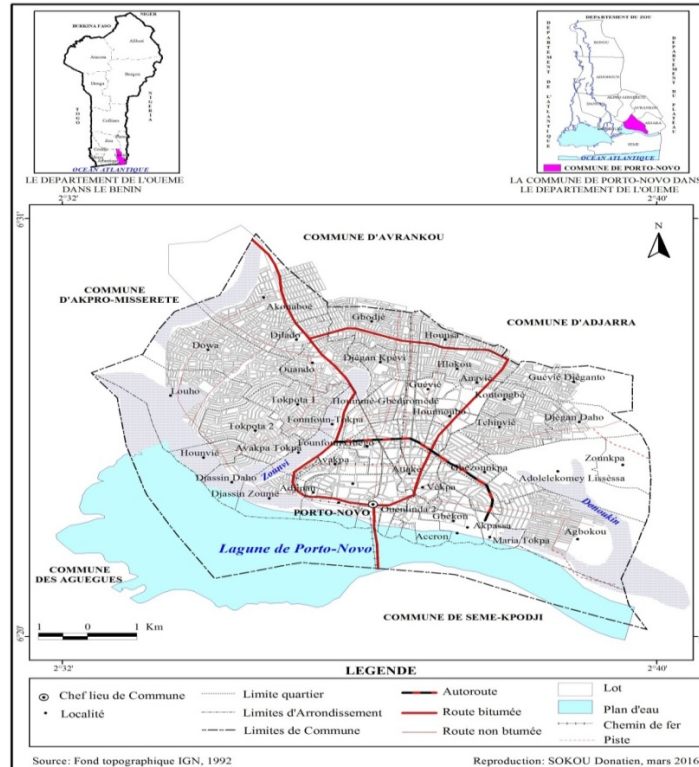
"They are not an association of people who want to have fun together at night and annoy the world. It is a pious, charitable institution (...) which is likely to render eminent services, appreciable to the Administration if it is well organised and purged of certain barbaric customs, contrary to the principles of French civilisation". (P. Hounkarin, 1937, p. 13).

The *Zàngbétó* has always been important in the communities of southern Benin. However, the development of towns and their modernisation marked by the erection of buildings and the electrification of rural localities has caused these community institutions to be hijacked or to lose their significance. As H. Blumer (1962, p.2), meanings are not given automatically or once and for all. Their use requires a process of interpretation on the part of the person acting each time. Unfortunately, in today's society, meanings obliterate the process of interpretation. Increasingly, these mechanisms are losing their meaning as traditional protective mechanisms. According to E. Fouomene's definition (2013, p.43), *"Traditional protection can be defined as all the mutual aid mechanisms put in place and perfected over time within social groups, to enable their members not only to better provide for their daily needs but also to mitigate the various hazards of life and better plan for the future. Increasingly, these community security institutions are losing their social roots and becoming confused with the emergence of self-defense groups, which are generally perceived as spontaneous institutions with no legal basis"* (I.A. Moumouni, 2017, p.91). Such an assimilation confuses the real meaning and significance of these institutions of solidarity and protection. There arises a blurring of the security paradigms proposed by the institution of *Zàngbétó* in the face of the major transitions facing cities. Thus, the following question emerges: how is the function devolved to the *Zàngbétó* in the city of Porto-Novo constructed in the face of the contradictory strategies of institutional actors? To answer this question, the research postulates that the city's new urbanisation challenges justify the security function of the *Zàngbétó*. This starting theoretical position is broken down into three (03) hypotheses, namely: i) the organisation of security by the *Zàngbétó*, contradicts the principles of freedom of movement for citizens in Porto-Novo; ii) the new heritage issues of the City of Porto-Novo justify the affluence of the *Zàngbétó*; iii) the urbanisation of the City of Porto-Novo justifies the place given to the *Zàngbétó*.

Methods, Materials, and Analysis Model

Research Area

This study was carried out in the city of Porto-Novo which is considered the core area of the *Zàngbétó* cult. The following illustrates the geographical location of the city on a map.



Map 1: City of Porto Novo.

With a population of 264,320, the municipality of Xògbónú (Porto Novo) is the cradle of the *Zàngbétó* cult, an actor in community security par excellence. Since the advent of decentralisation, when the city became a city with special status,

the urbanisation rate has risen to 100%. As a result, the town is increasingly faced with problems such as protecting its heritage, following the example of Zàngbétó, which, in addition to its cultural importance, plays an important role in making the town safer.

Nature and Targets of the Research

This research is qualitative in nature. The research took place in the five (05) arrondissements of the city of Porto Novo. Fixed observation units were selected: the gathering places of the Zàngbétó society. The purposive sampling technique made it possible to reach six (06) informants at the level of political-administrative authorities, ten (10) at the level of Zàngbétó cult leaders and fifteen (15) at the level of community actors, bringing the research sample to thirty-one (31) interlocutors.

Methods and Techniques

Data were collected through participant observation and individual semi-directive interviews, with the documentary review playing a crucial role. Participant observation enabled us to get a real feel for the different attitudes and postures adopted by the people we spoke to concerning Zàngbétó. But it was also, and above all, to observe the changes brought about by urbanisation in Zàngbétó-related practices. The individual interviews targeted institutional authorities, Zàngbétó cult leaders, and local community actors. The documentary review enabled us to identify writings that reconstruct the evolution in the practice of Zàngbétó and the difficulties it faces on a daily basis. All these tools made it possible to gather the different conceptions at the level of social strata in the five districts. These include Tokpota, Davié, Agbokou, Gbodjè, Déguèkomè and Foun-foun Kpota. The choice of these localities for this study was motivated by the need to assess the relationship between Zàngbétó and the transformations taking place in these localities. In the present research, once the data have been collected, they are analysed using interview guides and observation grids. This analysis is both manual and computerised. Content analysis was used to understand the rationale and strategies put in place by the various stakeholders. This analysis took into account all the stakeholders' perceptions and social representations of the issue. The data were triangulated with existing literature.

Analysis Model

The theoretical model used to analyse the data from this research is based on the theories of structuro-functionalism by T. Parsons and social disorganisation by R. Park et al.

On the one hand, Talcott Parsons defends a 'systemic' and 'functionalist' vision of society. For a stable society to exist, it must fulfil several functions: adapting to the environment, pursuing objectives, integrating and maintaining patterns. Through structuro-functionalism, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) sees society as a structuro-functional system, meaning that society is simply a set of interrelated structures and functions. She gives equal importance to the concept of structure and function, placing particular emphasis on the relationship between institutions and the social structures in which they are embedded. Starting from the idea that the security system in the community of Porto Novo forms a structured and integrated whole, whose constituent elements perform functions that are necessary to the survival of society and the maintenance of social order, we must try to understand how these constituent elements (institutional and non-institutional actors such as the Zàngbétó) perform their functions and how they malfunction.

On the other hand, the theory of social disorganisation, which shows how social changes due to the development of large-scale industry and transformations in forms of social control explain how the development of the city of Porto Novo, with its accompanying urbanisation, can disorganise the entire social organisation centred on interactions between institutional and non-institutional security actions. This new social order has security implications for the municipality.

Research Findings

The Zàngbétó and the principles of freedom of movement for citizens

The development of large cities in Benin is accompanied by a regression in traditional, cultural and cultic practices. It is with this in mind that Zàngbétó practices find themselves obliged to reduce their range of activities. The Zàngbétó, also known as the "night watchman", is a cult whose main task is to ensure the safety of people and property, especially at night. The following photo gives an idea:



Photo 1: Zàngbétó
Source: field data, 2024.

Less and less, communities no longer frequent these spaces because they believe that "*gbè ko houn noukoun*". In other words, the world has moved on and there is no point, for example, in learning vodun Zàngbétó. Such a view, while legitimate, downplays the vital role played by these communities in strengthening local security. However, a damaging question arises namely: Is safety really ensured when a citizen is prevented from using a public thoroughfare?

Indeed, the risk of being arrested by the Zàngbétó in the middle of the night often forces certain individuals, even if they have identity papers and have nothing to reproach themselves for, to avoid going out at night. This is because, according to the principles of Zàngbétó, anyone who has not been initiated should not travel after the masks have come out, or at the very least, should not use the roads occupied by the masks. In fact, according to several of the people we spoke to, the Zàngbétó night-time demonstrations constitute "obstacles to the free movement of citizens". However, for those in the know, the principle behind these checks is: "*to manage to get the ill-intentioned people off the road once night has fallen*".

The interviewees also mentioned the misuse of the Zàngbétó's role. Such is the case with the targeting of individuals against a backdrop of settling scores. One interviewee explained his problems with the Zàngbétó in his locality in the following terms:

They waited for me outside my house, barricading both access roads to my home. Unfortunately, this happened a week after I had unknowingly turned the headlights of my car on them. I have a feeling that this Zàngbétó outing was expressly aimed at me. Another evening, it was on my son, they projected the metal gong. And, that's when I became very bitter with them, to the point of threatening to summon them to the police. Since then, I've had no more problems with them. (Z. F, 52, civil servant)

This experience shows the dualism around the security function of Zàngbétó. This situation may be linked to unfortunate circumstances and misunderstandings. According to several people in charge of convents in Zàngbétó, the police are often asked by residents to get us out of the way so that they can pass through. Finally, other people believe that Zàngbétó is misogynistic because it does not tolerate women. All these situations combined lead us to believe that the Zàngbétó is a problem for the security of individuals. However, when we look into this cult, we realise that it is a practice whose main objective is to ensure people's safety.

Heritages, Issues, and the Standing of the Zàngbétó in Porto-Novo

Zàngbétó is both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. But as most of those we spoke to acknowledged, the tangible heritage aspect takes precedence over the intangible. This is because, since the restitution of Benin's cultural assets, public policy in Benin has focused a great deal of attention on tangible heritage. This, at least, is the apprehension of the people we spoke to, executives from the town of Porto-Novo. For them, it is clear that the tangible heritage function of the Zàngbétó attracts more attention from the city authorities, who value it. Unfortunately, the heritage issues associated with the values defended by the Zàngbétó are not given too much prominence. As the people we spoke to acknowledged: "*the role of night watchman at Zàngbétó is less in the limelight these days*". For some, social transformations are leading to the emergence of new priorities at the community level. Firstly, there is the need to align themselves with the criteria of Western cultural heritage based essentially on monumental architecture. Hence the construction of squares and monuments such as the Musée International du Vodoun (MIV), the renovation of the statue of King Toffa, and the renovation of squares known as *vodoun-honto*.

In the Region of Porto-Novo, the Zàngbétó have several functions: awareness-raising, prohibition or punishment, and information.

For the awareness-raising function, they inform households about the laws and principles of household solid waste management. In Benin, environmental management in general, and household solid waste management in particular, is governed by general principles. However, most households are not familiar with these laws.

On the question relating to knowledge of the laws and principles governing the management of solid household waste, most of the people questioned (75%) admitted that they did not know the laws and principles governing the management of solid household waste, but were grateful for the assistance of the Zàngbétó in using their awareness-raising symbols to decorate waste disposal sites.

To make this more explicit, one informant (head of a DSM pre-collection facility) said:

"The plan is actually to put up posters in the neighbourhoods to make householders aware of the laws and standards for managing household solid waste, but we don't do that. We do it with the help of the Zàngbétó, who use dry banana leaves to surround the depots that serve as waste disposal sites for households. This is done to get them to subscribe to our pre-collection structures" (Mrs M10, aged 60, DE of a MSW pre-collection structure).

The Zàngbétó's function of protecting the environment or imposing sanctions is an ancestral practice that manifests itself in different ways. The most widespread practice is the ban on depositing rubbish in squares and places housing the Zàngbétó. Other practices consist of banning a deviant citizen from living in his usual place after having violated one of the rules of the community tradition, for example seeking another's wife, stealing from one's neighbour, stealing a common good or revealing a secret of the tradition to a layman. All that needs to be done is to place the Zàngbétó symbol at the place of sale or on the hut. As far as the zàngbétó's informative function is concerned, they inform the population of messages from the palace about cultural events, meetings, etc.

Above and beyond this, the Zàngbétó play a vital role in monitoring and securing the territory. The Zàngbétó have a preventive and repressive role. This was highlighted by Sokou:

"They do surveillance, especially at night. This allows them not only to carry out preventive work, through their nightly rounds but also to participate in repression by arresting offenders, especially at night. They make the offenders they apprehend available to their partners, who are the traditional security actors, for the appropriate procedure. They play a vital role in the prevention and even suppression of criminal acts. Their participation in the co-production of community security is well established throughout the south and much of the centre of the country" (2017: 209).

Urbanisation and the Practice of Zàngbétó.

The metamorphosis of the city of Porto-Novo can be explained by its status as the administrative capital of Benin. Many major projects have been undertaken to make the city more attractive. As part of this laudable effort, priority has been given to modern facilities, such as the Vodoun convents. These include the Zàngbétó convents, which were previously just rudimentary spaces used as meeting places for initiates. However, the contrast between these facilities and modern ones means that towns no longer consider these spaces to be essential to the town. As one person in charge of Zàngbétó explained:

Over the last few years, we've had to fight to keep this small space of three (3) metres by five (05) metres. Otherwise, the town authorities have taken away almost all the land we previously occupied. (A. G, aged 44, carpenter, head of Zàngbétó convent)

This reality, described as commonplace, is nevertheless painful for those involved, who express great regret at the attitude of the local authorities in failing to ensure the preservation of all the city's cultural heritage. Similarly, intensification by increasing the extent of urbanised areas is not just a matter for the public authorities, but may also be a private initiative aimed at profiting from speculation. Over the last eight (08) years, the Beninese government, in its vision of modernising the city, has built several major roads. As a result, many infrastructures, such as hotels, administrations, and private companies, have sprung up to take advantage of the attractiveness offered by the road infrastructure.

This change in the environment is accompanied by the installation of public lighting, and better still, the lamps installed on the new roads are solar-powered.

DISCUSSION

Debates on the concept of security raise many concerns, including the disenchantment of communities with the roles of security agents and institutions. But it is above all the socio-historical relationships that communities have forged with these institutions that point to new dynamics of cooperation. Indeed, when the notion of security is raised in Africa, the idea of a legal and formal institution emerges in the minds of most African politicians. This state of affairs is easily explained by the fact that the new African leaders in the post-independence African states, having been influenced by modernity and by the security doctrine of the ex-colons, now give primacy to the need to control territorial space and consolidate the security of their nascent states to the detriment of the security and safety of people, goods, and territories. As a result, the traditional security mechanisms that protected people and heritage are being abandoned, or at least, as A. Adegbinni (2022: 355): The multifunctional worship spaces known locally as *Vodoun-honto* are sacred sites that have been able to survive thanks to the enduring existence of beliefs and practices linked to traditional religion. Nowadays, however, these spaces are undergoing profound changes, ranging from expropriation to the commodification of these spaces for the transactional value they represent with the urbanisation of cities. According to our analysis, this problem can be explained by the loss of influence of the institutions that are supposed to ensure security. The first institution to experience this loss of influence is the police. In this regard, P. Favre (2009:1237) emphasises the following:

"The social sciences are often reluctant to admit that the existence of police forces in the broad sense is a determining factor in the perpetuation of social order, and even more so in its production. Sociologists thus argue that the internalisation of order is now achieved in advanced societies and that the use of force is no longer necessary".

And if we take the communities of the City of Porto-Novo, the existence of traditional mechanisms ensures these different functions in society. This is the case of the *Zàngbétó*¹ in Benin. Unfortunately, these practices seem to be losing their place in communities as cities urbanise.

The place of communities remains decisive in understanding the roles assigned to institutions. The logic of the actors involved only serves to reinforce the convictions that only interests predispose the survival of institutions.

CONCLUSION

It emerges from this research that the notion of security remains a social construct in communities in southern Benin. The *Zàngbétó*, as an institution and a space for protecting citizens, remains a better means of social control. But this important non-institutional community player in the process of co-producing security is finding itself, increasingly limited in its function of securing people and property. Indeed, this player, who contributes to the free movement of people and goods, one of the principles of internal security, is finding its remit reduced as a result of the urbanisation of the city. This also limits the extent to which the city's heritage can be safeguarded. Lastly, modernisation, which aims to develop the city, has practically relegated to the background the *Zàngbétó* cult, whose primary role is not only to ensure security at night but also during the day. In one way or another, this situation is having an impact on safety, since one of the key players, the *Zàngbétó*, is becoming less and less involved, and even the followers of this cult are not without reproach.

REFERENCES

- ABOU MOUMOUNI I. (2017) 'The informal provision of public security in Benin: the instrumentalization of self-defense groups by the State'. 1 (Vol. 41), pp. 91-119. DOI : 10.3917/ds.411.0091. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-deviance-et-societe-2017-1-page-91.htm>
- BUUR L., (2010). Domesticating Sovereigns: The changing nature of Vigilante Groups in South Africa, in KIRSCH G. T., GRÄTZ T., (Eds), *Domesticating vigilantism in Africa*. Woodbridge Suffolk, Rochester N.Y, James Currey, 26-50.
- FAVRE Pierre. (2009). QUAND LA POLICE FABRIQUE L'ORDRE SOCIAL Un en deçà des politiques publiques de la police? *Revue française de science politique* Presses Sciences po, 2009/6 (Vol. 59), pages 1231 to 1248
- FOUOMENE, E. (2013). Traditional protections and the development of the social security system in Cameroon. 2013. doi: 10.13097/archive-ouverte/unige:28342

¹ This is a secret folklore society that is widespread in the West African region. They are the guardians of the night in Benin, and more specifically in Porto-Novo.

- GRÄTZ, T. (2010). *Devi & his Men. The Rise & Fall of a Vigilante Mouvement in Benin*, in KIRSCH T. G., GRÄTZ T., (eds.), *Domesticating vigilantism in Africa*, Woodbridge Suffolk, Rochester N.Y, James Currey, 79-97.
- HOUNKANRIN, L. (1937). *Les Zangbetos de Porto-Novo* (Document en fascicule) CBRST (Centre Béninois de Recherches Scientifiques et Techniques), IRAD, 1962, p. 13.
- KIRSCH, T.G., GRÄTZ, T.,(2010). *Domesticating vigilantism in Africa*, Woodbridge Suffolk, Rochester N.Y, James Currey.
- PARK E. R., BURGESS, W.E., MACKENZIE, R. (1925). *The City*, University of Chicago Press, 28p.
- PARSONS, T. (1951). *Toward a general theory of action*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 128p
- PREGNON, C.N. (2016). Current challenges to security governance in Africa. *Revue Ivoirienne de Gouvernance et d'Etudes Strategiques (RIGES)*, *Gouvernance et Developpement Humain*, 2 (1), pp.17-54. hal-01602121
- SOKOU, D. (2017). *La gendarmerie nationale face à la recrudescence de l'insécurité au Bénin : matériaux pour une sociologie des institutions policières*, doctoral dissertation in development sociology at the University of Abomey-Calavi, 403p.