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## Speaking, Remaining Silent, Transmitting: An Ethnography of Micro-Narratives and Moral Socialization in Vodun Fon

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### Abstract

In the Vodun convents of central Benin, stories circulate through countless “little narratives”—anecdotes, confidences, rebukes, laughter, fragments of experiences. These minor narratives, told in a joking or secretive tone, form the core of an implicit moral and educational pedagogy. Based on observations and interviews conducted in six communes of the Zou region, this article demonstrates that the anecdotes circulating in Vodun Fon convents constitute a discreet yet essential form of transmitting community values, regulating behavior, and facilitating ritual socialization. Through storytelling, initiates learn to speak truthfully, to situate themselves within the symbolic order, and to engage with spiritual power within a living collective memory.

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### Introduction

In the Vodun convents of central Benin, the word circulates like a wave; it is not always given in the majestic form of myth, but often through small stories, such as anecdotes told in a low voice, confidences between novices or stories of sin and redemption, which compose a space of memory and shared knowledge, both sacred and profane. It is in these “little stories”—such as songs, proverbs, anecdotes, dance gestures, ritual objects, and codified silences—that the moral depth of Vodun Fon is inscribed. Here, through insinuation and ritual immersion, the values of respect, hierarchy, cunning, and silence are taught, but also solidarity, a sense of effort, community responsibility, respect for elders, and shared memory. This implicit pedagogy is conveyed by the voices of the convent mothers, priestesses, and novices,

where laughter, shame, and repetition become tools for social regulation and learning to live together.

The minor narratives of Vodun—words, songs, and dances—constitute a true social pedagogy, where the spoken word does not impose itself in the solemnity of myth, but rather weaves its way through the gestures and voices of everyday life. Anecdotes, proverbs, songs and danced gestures form a dense narrative fabric, transmitted by the priestesses and priests, the novices and the mothers of the convent, where the rules of living together are learned through imitation, memory, laughter and shame, in an education without constraint. This study is based on an ethnographic survey conducted between February 2023 and April 2024 in six communes of the Zou department - Abomey (Ahouaga, Azali, Lègo, Djègbé), Bohicon (Houndanou, Agbadjagon, Adajouisso

- Sramè, Siliho), Djidja (Mougnon-Atchago, Zadakon, Mougnonxó), Zagnanado (Zonmon, Doga-Aga), Covè (Touégon, Houéko) and Agbangnizoun (Gboli, Tanvè) - at the heart of the fon convents where the major deities (Sakpata, Dan, Hêvioso, Tohossou) and family or royal cults coexist. The aim is not to describe Vodun as a closed system, particularly in its philosophical, anthropological, economic, and political foundations, as we explored in our previous work (2020, 2023), but rather to understand how these ordinary narrative forms— anecdotes, songs, and dances— contribute to moral and community socialization, and more specifically, to the socialization of the individual.

While Vodun Fon is often studied through its major symbolic systems, including a pantheon, myths, rituals, and priestly hierarchies, it remains to be understood how minor narrative forms, the “little stories” of everyday life, act as vectors of moral transmission, socialization, education, and community cohesion. In these spaces of informal dialogue, often relegated to the margins of scholarly analysis, a subtle and deeply rooted ethic of living together unfolds, where memory, authority, and popular creativity intertwine to shape the foundations of a shared social life. The Vodun convent, far from being a mere place of ritual, functions as a veritable laboratory for moral and civic education, where the implicit pedagogy of fragmented narratives, codified gestures, and eloquent silences initiates individuals into a grammar of collective responsibility. This educational process, unformalized yet powerfully structuring, transmits the norms of hierarchical respect, the codes of community conduct, and the markers of identity that allow each person to situate themselves within a universe of meaning that is both spiritual and social. Through every day “little stories,” ritual anecdotes, performed proverbs, and symbolic stagings, vodún fòn operates a subtle socialization, where learning comes through the incorporation of values, the observation of models, and the activation of collective memory.

From a comparative perspective, the mechanisms of socialization and implicit education observed in the Vodun Fon convent present striking similarities with other traditional learning systems in West Africa, such as informal Koranic schools, Mandinka initiation circles, and Fulani rites of passage. All are based on non-formal pedagogy, grounded in orality, performativity, and the embodied nature of knowledge, where learning is inseparable from community experience and intergenerational transmission. These educational systems, although often marginalized in public policy,

constitute matrices of ethical, civic, and identity formation, capable of producing forms of citizenship rooted in local realities. Within the context of Vodun Fon, this silent pedagogy, structured around minor narratives, ritual gestures, and codified silences, shapes a collective moral consciousness, an internalization of hierarchies, and a sensitivity to the symbolic order of the world. It contributes to the construction of a social subject capable of navigating between the demands of the sacred and the imperatives of living together.

In this dynamic, we can hypothesize that the minor narrative forms and implicit pedagogical practices of Vodun Fon constitute a mechanism for socialization and moral education which, by articulating ritual memory, symbolic authority, and popular creativity, forms a social subject capable of assuming collective responsibility, integrating traditional hierarchies, and fully participating in a spiritual and civic community. To develop this reflection, the study was organized around three complementary axes, allowing for an understanding of the complexity of the educational and moral dynamics at work in a Vodun convent in the Beninese context. The first concerns the frameworks and mechanisms of discourse, through the description of ritual spaces, figures of authority, and the modalities of discourse circulation, between initiatory secrecy and communal sharing. The second focuses on minor narrative forms considered as tools of moral socialization, analyzing stories, songs, dances, and ritual objects in their implicit pedagogical function. The third examines the transition from narrative to ethics, exploring the values, emotions, and social regulations that these narrative practices produce, between cultural continuity and adaptation to contemporary realities.

### **The frameworks and mechanisms of speech in the vodun convent**

In the Vodun Fon convent in Benin, speech is central to minor narratives as a vehicle for community socialization, revealing an implicit grammar where each voice, whether hieratic, didactic, or ordinary, participates in the transmission of norms, the regulation of behaviour, and the integration of individuals into ritual life. In an institutionalized and ritualized manner, speech circulates according to both cultural and social rules that organize relations of authority, order hierarchies of knowledge, and regulate the modes of transmission. The Vodun convent functions as a stratified space of speech, where one does not speak at any time, nor in front of just anyone. Each spoken word is inscribed within a symbolic

economy where the word acts, transforms, connects, or excludes. In the convents of central Benin, this speech is ritualized and subject to a strict gradation. The novice first learns silence: listening, observing, repeating before being able to improvise. A mother from the Lègo convent aptly summarized this pedagogy of restraint: "Here, words are not given, they are earned. Before speaking, you must first know how to listen to the gods, your vodounon, and your fellow initiates." This relationship to language shapes an inner discipline, an ethic of speech where every expression carries weight. To speak is to bless or curse, to reveal or to keep silent, to instruct or to confuse.

The initiatory secret, far from being mere concealment, becomes a lesson in prudence, self-control, and discernment. It teaches one to weigh words, to understand silences, to recognize the moments when speech must yield to listening.

The spaces, courtyards, and sanctuaries of the convent themselves shape the flow of speech, inscribing each utterance within a symbolic geography where ritual architecture, the arrangement of altars, and the segmentation of living areas structure relationships of authority, orient hierarchies of knowledge, and configure the modes of transmission, thus revealing how the material and spatial framework participates, from an anthropological perspective, in community socialization and the reproduction of collective norms. The courtyards, vestibules, seclusion rooms, and altars are not merely physical spaces, but veritable sites of enunciation where specific rules, legitimate voices, and particular tones are articulated, inscribing speech within a symbolic geography that shapes authority, transmission, and community socialization. The hieratic discourse belongs to the priests and priestesses in office, the didactic discourse to the nuns of the convent, and the everyday discourse to the novices and servants. Each register of speech within the Vodun convent is inscribed within a social and ritual logic where the distribution of voices reflects hierarchies, implicit codes, and precise functions that structure the community. In this vein, ritual speech is recognized as an effective act conveying norms and regulations, as [Severi and Bonhomme \(2009\)](#) demonstrate by emphasizing that ritual utterance transcends linguistic content to engage in pragmatic efficacy embedded in power relations and recognition. [Hanks \(2009\)](#) reminds us that ritual interaction constitutes a "primordial site" of sociality where speaker and addressee are bound by codified expectations and mutual obligations.

Thus, the hieratic speech of priests and priestesses embodies symbolic authority, the didactic speech of the nuns implicitly transmits values through narratives and gestures, and the ordinary speech of novices and servants fosters collective learning and cohesion. From a semiological perspective, [Binet \(1998\)](#) reminds us that ritual functions as a "socio-symbolic code" where each register contributes to the construction of meaning and social order. In short, these hieratic, didactic, or ordinary voices form a veritable grammar of ritual communication, mechanisms of socialization and regulation that ensure the reproduction and adaptation of collective norms.

To extend this analysis and better understand how this grammar is embodied in daily practices, we collected voices gathered within the convents themselves, in accordance with the anthropological approach. In the courtyard of a family convent in Abomey, a priestess confided poetically: "Before the Vodun, we speak with the mouth of silence. But among ourselves, we speak with the mouth of laughter." "In Mougnonxó, in a convent in Djidja-centre, a ninsuwé follower confided with restraint: "Here, we first learn to listen to the silences of Vodún before daring to speak," a word marked by sobriety which reflects the pedagogy of listening and the slow conquest of the right to speak specific to female initiation in the convents of Zou, where silence becomes preparation for the right word and listening, a test of spiritual maturity. Further down, in Mougnon-Atchago, in a Sakpatasi convent, an officiant murmured during a night ritual: "The word of the Sakpata does not shout, it gently scratches the memory of those who know how to listen," a formula both enigmatic and evocative which reveals the muted power of the word in the cults of the earth and of healing, where the word does not impose itself by brilliance but acts by inner resonance, like a vibration that awakens buried knowledge and the memories of the body.

These words, collected in distinct initiatory contexts, confirm that in Vodun, speech is always situated, codified, and performative. It is never reduced to a simple verbal exchange, but is inscribed within a dramaturgy of the sacred, where each spoken word engages the body, history, and the community. It is worth noting that, within this economy of the word, where sacred silence and social discourse intertwine in a choreography of speaking and remaining silent, an ethics of language, a pedagogy of discernment, and a poetics of transmission are forged, through which consciences are educated, values are transmitted, and a sense of

belonging that is both spiritual and communal is constructed.

### **Minor Narrative Forms as Tools for Socialization and Moral Education**

Minor narratives appear as essential mediators of community socialization, as they reflect how ritual speech unfolds in everyday and accessible forms, while simultaneously carrying a normative and educational charge. These minor narrative forms—whether anecdotes, proverbs, songs, or dance gestures—constitute the living fabric of initiatory pedagogy within the Vodun convent, articulating the transmission of values, moral learning, and the gradual integration of individuals into the ritual universe. Their function transcends mere entertainment or ritual ornamentation, for they teach through insinuation, emotion, and repetition. Originating from everyday events, be it a ritual blunder, a transgression, or a tension between novices, they are reinterpreted and transmitted as life lessons.

In Djidja, a Vodun priest recounted: “One day, a novice wanted to see what he shouldn’t see. He blew out the lamp, thinking he was deceiving the gods. The next day, he was blinded with shame. Since then, it has been said here: whoever extinguishes the convent lamp extinguishes its light as well.” This story, both humorous and profound, shows how religious knowledge is transmitted through lived experience and shared memory. In Covè, a priestess had her novices repeat a song addressed to Hèviosso: “He who forgets the thunder forgets the measure of his word.”

In Bohicon, in the Siliho district, where a huntò from the Hounyoton lineage of Mougnon-Kossou affirmed that “The drum does not repeat mistakes, it corrects them rhythmically,” and a priestess reminded them that “Singing is not for embellishing the rite, it is for awakening memory,” initiatory education is embodied in the arts of the body and sound—rhythm, gesture, voice—which train novices in self-control, listening to the group, and ritual intelligence, in a pedagogy where aesthetics merge with ethics and art. And in Zagnanado, another woman added: “Thunder only speaks once. If you didn’t hear it, it’s because you talk too much.” Singing here is about learning to listen, to respect the rhythm of the sacred, to understand the limits of one’s own speech. The ritual objects themselves become narrative tools: the broom, the calabash, the drum, the bell—each carries a memory. In Bohicon, a mother from the convent

explained that “the broom isn’t just for cleaning; it reminds us that everything hidden eventually gets swept away,” while in Agbangnizoun, an initiated servant confided that “when the calabash sounds hollow, it means we’ve forgotten to treat it with respect.”

These seemingly simple words connect action to narrative, the everyday to the sacred, the individual to the community, and demonstrate that these minor narratives act as powerful vehicles for moral socialization by establishing collective reference points, weaving coherence between word, deed, and belief, and regulating convent life without ever resorting to coercion. It is through these narratives that educational sociocultural values and norms are transmitted, deviations are corrected, and a shared ethic, discreet yet firmly rooted, is built

### **From narrative to ethics: learning to live together**

In contemporary Benin, within Fon and related communities, Vodun practitioners or initiates experience how minor narratives, when internalized, are transformed into genuine ethical principles and modes of social regulation, where laughter, shame, and rumor operate as powerful pedagogical tools, capable of transmitting norms, strengthening cohesion, and guiding collective behavior. It is important to note that, from an anthropological perspective, collective emotions such as laughter, shame, and rumor are not simply spontaneous reactions but social and symbolic mechanisms that frame ritual speech, guide behavior, and contribute to the moral regulation of the community.

In Zagnanado, a priest humorously remarked, “Here, when people laugh at you, it means the gods have already forgiven you.” But if everyone remains silent, it means the offense is serious.” Laughter, by exposing without excluding, allows transgression to be defused and transformed into a learning opportunity, while shame acts as a moral mirror, reminding us of boundaries without condemning us. Stories of transgressions circulate for a long time within the convents, becoming oral archives of community morality and contributing to the weaving of a collective memory where myth and anecdote intertwine. Everyday stories reactivate archetypal figures—Dan’s jealousy, Hèviosso’s anger, Sakpata’s patience—giving them contemporary faces, as illustrated by this saying from a priestess of Abomey: “When one sister in the convent tried to speak against another, Dan coiled himself around her words. Since then, we say: don’t let your snake sleep in your mouth.”

This formula, repeated in various circumstances, brings the mythological dimension of Vodun into the present by linking it to the life of the group, giving rise to an ethic of lived narrative, where each anecdote becomes a dramatization of what ought to be. Furthermore, these narrative practices open a space for female voices, often marginalized in discourses of authority; through humor, metaphors, and rumor, the mothers of the convent and the priestesses produce a silent critique of power, readjusting hierarchies without direct confrontation, as one mother from Tanvè summarizes: “We don’t speak loudly. But when a story comes out of our mouths, the whole convent falls silent.” These words bear witness to a social intelligence specific to minor narratives, founded on an ethic of connection, memory, and controlled speech, which maintains order while allowing for the possibility of change.

In conclusion, this study clearly demonstrates that minor narrative forms—whether anecdotes, songs, proverbs, dance gestures, or ritual silences—constitute one of the deepest mechanisms of the implicit pedagogy of Vodun Fon. Far from being marginal, they form the framework of a continuous, discreet yet decisive socialization process, where individuals learn to situate themselves within the symbolic and communal order not through formal instruction but through immersion, imitation, and the internalization of values. The fieldwork in Abomey, Bohicon, Djidja, Covè, Zagnanado, and Agbangnizoun shows that the Vodun convent functions as a veritable matrix of moral formation, where humor, shame, silence, memory, and bodily performance become vectors of learning and social regulation.

These findings align with Certeau’s analyses, for whom the practices of everyday storytelling constitute a strategic site for the production of meaning, as well as with Bourdieu’s, who sees the social use of language as a space for the formation of habitus.

In Fon convents, female voices—the convent mothers, priestesses, and initiated servants—play a central role in the transmission of this moral grammar. They are the ones who adjust hierarchies, correct behaviours, interpret myth, and regulate tensions through metaphorical, subtle, and often performative language, demonstrating that authority in these spaces is not only vertical and priestly but also diffuse, collective, and pragmatic. This silent pedagogy, based on listening, observation, and repetition, constructs a social subject rooted in shared memory, endowed with a keen sense of responsibility, hierarchical respect, and community cohesion.

The analysis, however, opens several avenues for reflection and research by inviting a more systematic comparative exploration of the implicit pedagogies within endogenous educational systems in West Africa in order to better understand their logic, convergences, and specificities; by suggesting the need to examine the contemporary dynamics of transformation of these minor narratives to understand how they evolve in the face of modernity, digital media, religious recompositions, and social mobility; and finally, by encouraging reflection on the possible place of these traditional pedagogies in national educational policies, not to institutionalize them, but to recognize the value of their principles of socialization, community ethics, and the embodiment of knowledge.

Thus, the analysis of this study highlights that the words spoken in the convent are not merely ritualistic practices but constitute genuine mechanisms of socialization, revealing the capacity of Vodun Fon to produce, beyond the sacred, an ethic of living together that remains a heuristic resource for understanding contemporary forms of solidarity, transmission, and citizenship in Benin.

This study can be condensed into a synthetic formulation that expresses its anthropological and epistemological scope, emphasizing the structuring function of minor narratives in community socialization and the formation of habitus: “To tell stories is to socialize; to listen and educate is to learn to exist together.”

### **Compliance with ethical standards**

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All the authors acknowledge that there is no conflict of interest. They all agree with what is written in this article.

In accordance with the requirements of transparency and scientific integrity, we, the authors of this study, declare that we have no conflict of interest, whether financial, commercial or otherwise, that could influence the results or interpretations of our research on initiation rites in Benin, thus guaranteeing the independence and objectivity of our work and ensuring the credibility of our conclusions

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