Chapter 6

The idol and oracle of Benle and Togma, and the nature of this superstition

Benle and Togma are the forms of idolatry practised by all the heathen in this Province. Benle is the more exclusive society. Togma is wider, and is subordinate to Benle, and both have as their minister Grand Benle, or Canglo, this being the name of the chief priest. The idol or oracle of these cursed societies is a sheaf of palm twigs, sprinkled with the blood of a puppy or the blood of hens or cocks. When the blood of animals or birds is poured over a bundle of sticks, it has the capacity to invoke Togma. If any member of these societies falls sick, they hurry to this church of theirs, whose only priests are Canglos or Benles of either sex. Women who are priests of Benle are called Bale. These officers of the society kill puppies over the idol, and sprinkle it with flour. Then they go into the forest to eat the same foods, which they take with much wine. In this way, the cramensal and sick-offering are completed. The Togmas and Benles proceed in almost the same way in their sacrifices and other rites. But they proceed in a totally different way when it comes to deaths and burials. The Togmas die in the villages and are buried there: they build houses over the grave, and the members take with them all the precious things they have treasured. Often they have kept them for their burial-day, since they believe that the other life will be just like this one. But the Benles follow a different procedure, as we will show later.

(a) The Togmas take special names when they make their profession and accept the rules of this accursed society, and if they are called by their former names they feel themselves dishonoured.

Translator's note:

In the translation, the word 'congregação' is translated as 'society', etc. This reflects the translator's attempt to accurately convey the meaning of the original text while maintaining the context of the chapter on African socio-religious cults.
In order to become a member of this false society and to be called a Togma, circumcision is necessary, for all members, women as well as men. In order to join the brotherhood, they bring puppies or hens. The Benle takes infant boys in his arms and makes a sacrifice. Normally he spills the blood of the sacrifice as he holds the child, sometimes he does this before he holds it. Once this has been done, the child has gained admittance. Females gain admittance in the same way, after which they servants of the Benles. But this (ceremony) is not strictly necessary, /f.67v/, since they can become Togmas without it. These societies have no officer deputed to admit to the society new recruits and novices, since any Benle can do this. He may undertake the task of admitting newcomers to this form of superstition, provided he first has permission from the chief priest, who is called Benle Bana, that is, Grand Benle, the Superior of both societies. Those who follow the rule of this society must not eat hens unless they have been cooked by a member. Once when one of these false monks entered my house, I offered him some chicken, but he absolutely refused to accept it. However, if we offer them any other sort of meat, or any other kind of food, they do not refuse it. They refuse chicken because it is a special rule of their superstitious code. Yet if one kills a hen and gives part of it to the Togma to cook, they will not in this case refuse it. On the other hand, if they have not cooked the fowl themselves, they will not even eat rice or anything else which has touched the broth from the fowl, so punctilious are they in the observance of their rule.

Now let us discuss the Benles in more detail. All the members of that family are circumcised. More worthy of note is what happens when they are ill. A Benle may fall ill, just like a devotee of any other religion. When this happens they carry him off into the forest, and the priests immediately consult the devil about their brother, wholly by way of divination which, as already stated, is commonly done in cases of illness. If they believe that he is being eaten up by witches, they discover by divination the person responsible, and they leave no stone of his house standing. If the accursed consultation with the devil indicates that the illness is mortal, they call together the brothers or any other relatives of the sick person who are members of the same society, or if these are lacking, other (unrelated) members; and they kill the sick person with blows, the members driving sharp pieces of iron into the head of the victim. They do this whether the sick person is a man or a woman. When this does not kill the victim, they redouble the blows. They consider it improper to nurse him or help him with restorative medicines or remedies. In fact, the reins of life of the poor man can only be slackened or tightened by the Lord who gave him life; but this they do not care to believe,
deceived as they are by the devil. The same thing happens to the female Benles: the sisters of the society kill them. First they let the relatives know that they are going to kill them, by using a procedure /f.68/ that we also use in our countries, that is, summoning witnesses to the drawing up of a will. After the member is dead, they attend to his funeral and burial.

Now let us discuss, first the burial of the archbishop and Superior General, and this will in turn inform us about the burial of the ordinary members, since this is carried out in almost the same way. Speaking of the archbishop, it must be explained that when any Benle dies, whoever he is, the archbishop if present in the village immediately goes to him; and if the archbishop is living elsewhere and can reach the place overland, he comes there. But the rules and statutes forbid him to come by water and in a boat, since they do not permit him to travel that way with his magic potions. When this leading member of the society, its archbishop, himself dies, the other members seat him, naked, on a wooden chair of native design. To this he is securely fastened by means of straps and bands tied round the chair, these being covered with intertwining greenery from a tree called nangua; but his face is left visible. The bands are of nachul, and they circle the spot where these grasses are intertwined. The dead man remains in this position for five days, and during this time a Benle dances around with an Aran, which is a ferocious mask, made of wood and painted in various colours, as I have stated elsewhere. He is dressed in a costume of nachul, shaped like a skirt, which stops above the knee and is finely woven in many colours. He has a sword in his hand, with which he makes different thrusts and movements, with great abandon. He does this whenever he has permission from his Aran, the mask which covers his face, and which has four eyes, two in front and two behind. The Benle who is in charge of the ceremony, with his face coated in rice-flour, approaches the dead man as he sits there, and strikes him three times, running his sword through his body. Then they set to work to bury him in the forest, where this is always done, not in the village.

Only male Benles can attend the rites: this burial is a special occasion, and female Benles cannot attend. The dead man is buried in a grave dug to the depth of about two feet. It is only burials of this society which take place without lamentations. And they ( ? the dead) take nothing with them. The whole occasion turns into a feast, with eating of puppies, goats, hens, etc. The burial is accompanied by all kinds of shrieks and screams, by feasting and dancing, by music and drumming. All that is lacking is tears. When it is over, they all leave the village (sic), their bodies covered with flour. The Little Aran leads them, wearing his
mask. He gets this name from the mask, because a mask of this kind is called aran. But this one has only two eyes. Behind him comes the Great Aran, marching with great pomp /f.68v/ and ceremony and holding in each hand a drawn sword, with which he makes a thousand thrusts and wild movements. When the procession has left the forest and reached the village, various wild dances and movements are made in the arrival, that is, in the central open place, and music and mock fights are performed. All of the Benles may see these happenings. (But) they attack those who are not Benles, and chase them back to their homes. When these buffoons go about naked, as they are in the habit of doing in the secret places of the forest, anyone who comes across them and falls into their hands is in trouble. For they consider it an abomination to be seen with nothing on, and they go about wearing only the same straw decorations they wear when they bury their Great Aran or Superior General. Men as well as women, they cover their faces with dust or flour-paste, and all of them carry in their hands at this time brooms made of palm canes, which they employ in making their gestures. Once the feast in the village is ended, they return to the forest where they lay down their feasting ornaments. If anyone of them, moved by natural affection, wishes to lament for a dead Benle, in the way customary with the Togusas, he can seek permission from the Superior, who will give him permission if he pays for it.

Benles do not make use of (the ceremony of carrying) biers round the villages in order to discover who has 'eaten' a dead man, and hustling the bier wherever they fancy. Some of their archbishops, that is Great Arans, are important enough to be responsible for whole groups or kingdoms. The form used for the burial of these most important people is the same as that for the burial of all other members of the society. They take with them only objects woven from nachul straw. When a Great Aran dies, he is succeeded by the eldest of his brothers. If there is no one of his own family to succeed, one of the other members of the society takes his place.

The terms Benle and Cangulo are titles and imply rank, like our term 'Archbishop'. These people have no fixed feast days. According to the number of deaths they have in a year, whether more or less, they have that number of feasts. If a Benle dies in the village they burn the village to purge this great sin, since they consider that an inhabited place in which one of them dies becomes and remains polluted, as it were. To avoid this, they carry members into the forest when they are ill. There is no other reason for this belief than that the devil so instructed the founders and inventors of this diabolical society. /f.69/.