

THE IMPERIO IN THE AZORES.

THE FIVE SENSES IN RITUALS TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

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The author describes what senses are significant, and how, in the ritual Imperio festival that takes place in the Azores and has been connected with the veneration of the Holy Spirit since the 13th century. This deeply-rooted ritual practice has a special collective value within local communities and is especially cherished by emigrants to the United States and Canada.

Keywords: *Holy Spirit, Imperio, Azores, sense, ritual.*

Avtorica opisuje, kako in kateri čuti so pomembni pri ritualu "Imperio" (vladar) na Azorskih otokih. Obred je povezan s čaščenjem Svetega duha, ki je poznano že od 13. stoletja. Globoko zakoreninjena ritualna praksa je posebna kolektivna vrednota v lokalnih skupnosti, posebej je pomembna priseljencem iz Združenih držav Amerike in Kanade.

Ključne besede: Sveti duh, »Imperio«, Azorski otoki, ritual, čuti.

The Azores archipelago is a part of Portugal located in the North Atlantic, halfway between Europe and North America. It is of volcanic origin, with recent eruptions and constant earthquakes. According to an old legend, it was here that Ulysses landed on his way back home. Some mysterious and rather esoteric legends attempt to explain why the cult of the Holy Spirit has remained active here in such a deep and genuine way.

The veneration of the Holy Spirit dates back to the 13th century in Portugal. It survives in a few places on the mainland, but it is clearly in the Azores that it has retained a very special and strong folk religious tradition.

In the old days, a man was elected "emperor" by the village community to govern in a spiritual rather than political sense for a period of one year. Nowadays the emperor is a boy under eleven that is crowned in great pomp and circumstance during the festivities. Each village has its own coronation day, which means that throughout the Pentecost period a different village elects and crowns its own emperor every Sunday.

These festivities are the object of various sacred and profane rituals involving the sacrifice of an animal, usually a calf or an ox, which is slaughtered to provide meat to be served at the banquet for the entire population. Foreign guests are invited to partake as well.

The methodology of my research on these festivities includes personally recording the events, with special relevance given to the involvement of the five senses in folk ritual. Color, music, sound, taste, smell, and touch are omnipresent.

The cult of the Holy Spirit in spontaneous folk religion is associated with the ancient

conception found in the Old Testament; it is a breath of life that imparts life to all living beings: people, animals, and plants.

The festival of the Holy Spirit, or Pentecost, is traditionally held seven weeks after Easter. The word *Pentecost* is derived from Greek *pentēkonstē* 'fiftieth', which refers to seven weeks or 50 days. It was formerly a rural festival to mark the beginning of the harvest and it was a time to renew promises and contracts like its predecessor *Shavuot*, which was the Judaic feast of the renewal of the old covenant established on Mount Sinai between Yahweh and His people. Throughout the centuries, in Christian tradition Pentecost has also been commemorated either on Ascension Day or on the Sunday after Pentecost. In Portuguese religious tradition, it has been associated with Ascension Day, a very important day of the year when people in rural areas still go to the fields to gather several plants to make up a bundle of greenery that will be exchanged among family members and friends: a sprig of olive, a spike of wheat, a red poppy and daisies or other native wild flowers. This bundle is kept at home to bring good luck for the rest of the year. It is therefore easy to understand the connection established between the beginning of harvest time and this festival – as a symbol of hope, renewal, and fertility.

The cult of the Holy Spirit may have been introduced in Portugal in the 13th century (in 1296, to be precise) by Queen Elizabeth, who was married to King Denis of Portugal. The queen was a princess from Aragon, a kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula, when what is now Spain was made up of several kingdoms. Elizabeth was so affected by the extreme poverty in Portugal that she took the initiative to create the *Misericordias*, a charitable institution that provided shelter and primary healthcare to people in need. The symbol of this institution was the royal crown, to which the dove of the Holy Ghost was added. The first ceremony took place in Alenquer, north of Lisbon, when food was distributed to the poor on Pentecost Sunday.

The underlying tradition of this institution may be a custom dating back to Greek antiquity, with the *bouphonia* aimed at abolishing hunger in certain regions when sacred animals were slaughtered and their meat distributed. The *bouphono*i were the priests that participated in these rituals. This old nomenclature is still used nowadays.

The decision made by Queen Elizabeth (or *Isabel*; her name may come from *Isis-Bel*) and King Denis (from *Dionysus*) could have been inspired by the Franciscan way of thinking, from Joachim of Fiore and the *spirituali*, and certainly as a successor to the same type of charitable institution in France, which was the *Ordre du Saint-Esprit*, founded in 1160. Queen Elizabeth was deeply religious and was later acknowledged as a saint.

Some esoteric currents have established a connection between Queen Elizabeth and the holy dove: a symbol of divine knowledge, the third *logos*, the *sanctum-sanctorum*. It may not be just by chance that Elizabeth, a symbol of Mother Earth, spread the devotion to the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit.

Gradually, several villages and towns in Portugal started the custom of organizing a festival during Pentecost week with the purpose of distributing free meat and bread to the

poor and anybody that might wish to join in. This entailed the crowning of an “emperor” who would be the central character of the whole festival – surrounded by a hierarchy of assistants that organize the event – in close connection with the religious ceremony in church. A community meal lasting the whole day on Pentecost Sunday was the main objective.

This custom has nearly disappeared from mainland Portugal – with some remnants in the Beiras region, in Tomar and Sintra, among other places – although it survives with a very special charisma in the Azores archipelago. Through emigration, the Portuguese diaspora has taken this tradition to remote places in North America, Brazil, Africa, and even Hawaii.

This presentation describes the tradition of the *Imperio* (i.e., ‘emperor’) festival, which has such a lively tradition in the Azores. Although forbidden by the Inquisition, whose power was felt in Portugal until the 18th century, these festivals have survived and are the most important folk religious events in the islands. The Azores archipelago is composed of seven islands, and each island and each village has its own special features related to these festivals.

The *Imperio*, which is dedicated to the Holy Spirit, takes place from Pentecost onwards through May and June, but not on the same day in every village or place. The most important symbols are the crown (because the emperor is crowned) and the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit.¹

THE NOMENCLATURE

The village group organizing and participating in the *Imperio* is composed of the following persons:

The emperor was traditionally drawn by lot among the *mordomos*, or the group of men organizing the festival, although the emperor may also be chosen because he provides a generous grant for the event. He may also be a young boy, usually the son of one of the most important donors. He may offer to be the emperor as a way to fulfill a former promise (ex-voto).

The empress is the emperor’s wife. The emperor is the most important person but has no power of decision because the one that rules the event is the *trinchante* ‘president’; he wears a white or colored scarf and a gown, and he is the one that makes all the decisions,

¹ The *New Testament* passage in the Gospel of St. John describing Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River says that, after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, He came out of the water and John the Baptist saw *the Spirit of God descending upon Him from heaven like a dove* [John 2:32]. The dove was already a symbol at the time of the Phoenicians: in their mythology, the world was created from a cosmogonic egg; when it hatched, the living beings were the sons of Phoenix. The goddess Astarte was represented in the form of a dove and *Shekinah*, which in Genesis incubated the waters before Creation, was also a dove. The dove is also a symbol of Israel *Israel is a silly dove . . . which I (Yahweh) will catch in my net* [Hosea 7:11–12].

sets up the calendar and the timetables, grants permission to the priest in the church for the ceremony to begin, and gives orders to all the other attendants.

The *foliões*, who number three to six, wear silk scarves and headpieces similar to a bishop's tiara.

The *briadores*, three in number, have long staffs and are assistants to the *foliões*.

The *menino da mesa* is a child that may represent the emperor on certain occasions. The *copeiro* is in charge of distributing the wine.

The *cozinheiros* are the cooks that prepare the meal. The *serventes* are assistants to the cooks. The *aguadeiros* are in charge of bringing water as well as firewood for cooking.



Fig. 1: Crown and dove, Ponta Delgada, Azores, 2006 [All photos by the author].



Fig. 2: The *trinchante* governs and the *foliões* lead the event, Ponta Delgada, Azores, 2006.



Fig. 3: The oxen are slaughtered and offered as a holocaust, Ponta Delgada, Azores, 2006.



Fig. 4: Oxen, star, and the Holy Spirit, Ponta Delgada, Azores, 2006.



Fig. 5: Free wine for all, Ponta Delgada, Azores, 2006.

THE SEQUENCE

The custom is for everybody in the village to participate and contribute by making a donation to the *Festas do Espírito Santo* well in advance. During the harvest, women and girls go around with a basket decorated with a white wooden dove, asking for a few handfuls of corn or wheat for the Holy Spirit, and the same occurs during the wine-making season.

The emperor is elected on Trinity Sunday, as mentioned above, and he receives the crown and staff, the symbols of his status, which he takes home until the Sunday after Easter. Two weeks before Pentecost, several village women start baking cakes. In some places the rosary is said in the community throughout the entire week.



Fig. 6: Cakes for the procession, Ponta Delgada, Azores, 2006.

On Pentecost Friday there is a procession through the village with the calves or oxen that will be taken to be slaughtered. They are wreathed with flowers, various decorations, and symbols of the Holy Spirit (see photos). Before being slaughtered, the animals are offered to the Holy Spirit: they are touched with the scepter while facing the imperial crown.

The oxen are important in these festivities² and their meat is to be distributed among the people. The cows that are slaughtered for the Holy Spirit meal are also referred to as

² The use of oxen as an offering goes back to ancient times in several cultures. This is known as the hecatomb or holocaust to Jupiter, or to God (i.e., Yahweh) in the *Old Testament*.

“oxen;” this goes back to an old tradition according to which the male is the one to be offered in the holocaust so that it can transmit its strength and magical power to humans.

In the meantime, the bread that is being baked is displayed at the emperor’s home and blessed by the priest. After the oxen are slaughtered, their meat is also displayed at the emperor’s home and blessed by the priest.

On the Saturday before the festival there is a procession with the food, displayed in beautifully decorated oxcarts (*carros de bois*) and followed by the band and the entire community. It proceeds to the *Imperio* chapel, which is not the village church but a special, tiny chapel strictly used for this occasion.

On the morning of the *Imperio*, soup is freely distributed – this is the called *sopa da manhã*. After this the procession is organized and it proceeds to the village church. The *trinchante*, who gives the orders, grants permission to the priest to start the ceremony. The priest places the crown on the altar, he crowns the emperor, and mass follows. At this moment fireworks burst in the air, and noise and odor blend. After mass, the procession goes from the church to the *teatro*, which is where the community meal takes place.

THE MEAL

The meal is freely available to everybody; even visitors and passersby are invited to participate. The main course is *alcatara*, very tender ox meat, cooked in a special way with bread (*pão levedo*) and *sopas do Espírito Santo* (a special soup made of ox bouillon), with cabbage, bread, and wine.

The people from the village offer a *pão da mesa* as an ex-voto. This is a round loaf of bread decorated with flowers (roses and carnations). Occasionally, one may see a woman going around the churchyard carrying a huge loaf of bread on her head, wrapped up in transparent paper; she is fulfilling a vow before bringing it to the meal. The *Espírito Santo* meal lasts all day long.

In the evening, when all the meat and bread have been eaten and nothing is left on the table, the crown is taken to the emperor’s home or, in some cases, to the home of the next emperor (if he has already been elected for the coming year), where it is displayed for three days. However, this ritual varies from island to island and from village to village. In some places, the leftover bread is auctioned and the money is given to the poor.

CONCLUSION

The *Imperio* festivities to the Holy Spirit are kept alive in the Azores with special charisma. They are so deeply rooted in the collective values of the communities that they survive and are cherished by the population. The role of former emigrants (who have usually gone to

the United States and Canada from the Azores) that return to their native islands is crucial because they bring with them modern values that blend with ancient traditions. They also help to fund the festivities because they are wealthier than the locals.

Nobody can precisely assess the real essence of this cult of the Holy Spirit in strictly religious terms. However, it is certainly an old tradition and a holy occasion for the entire population to join together in worship that is more profane than sacred.

The most important element is the meal served to the entire population and the sacred meaning surrounding it; in worship dedicated not to God the Father, not to God the Son, but to the Holy Spirit, an abstract element connected with the *nađve* and pure soul, as well as the impact of power and wisdom.

"IMPERIO" NA AZORSKIH OTOKIH.

PET ČUTOV V PRAZNOVANJU SVETEGA DUHA

Avtorica opisuje, kako in kateri čuti so pomembni pri binkoštnem ritualu "Imperio" («vladar» na Azorskih otokih. Povezan je s čaščenjem Svetega duha in poznan že od 13. stoletja.

Na Azorskih otokih to praznovanje ohranjajo s posebno pozornostjo. Praznovanje vodi »Vladar«: včasih je bil to starejši moški, ki ga je izvolila lokalna skupnost in je skrbel predvsem za duhovno blaginjo skupnosti, danes pa jih vodi deček, mlajši od 11 let. Eden glavnih dogodkov praznovanja je kronanje vladarja, ki se zgodi z velikim pompom. Vsaka vas ima za kronanje v binkoštnem času določeno svojo nedeljo; tako se kronanje vsako nedeljo dogaja v drugi vasi. Ob praznovanju, ki vključuje svete in profane obrede, zakoljejo žival, navadno tele ali vola, ki je glavna jed na pojedini, pripravljene za domače prebivalstvo in povabljeni udeleženci.

Globoko zakoreninjena ritualna praksa je v lokalnih skupnosti posebna kolektivna vrednota, posebej je pomembna za priseljence iz Združenih držav Amerike in Kanade.

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