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Carducci, Federico

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Dreams, Memory, and Bureaucracy: Prophetic Temporalities and Conversion Narratives within the Tokoist Church in Contemporary Angola

The Tokoist Church¹ was established in 1949 by prophet Simão Toko and has since gained an important place in Angola both in the public sphere and in the relationship with the Angolan State. A visit to the Golf 2 district of the capital, Luanda, will reveal the immense temple of the Church (Figure 1), currently the largest religious structure in the country. Alternatively, one may take public transport and encounter Tokoists dressed in white and wearing the Church's pin, a visible sign of their membership of this community. The emergence of this church can be traced back to a context of religious fervor during colonial times, particularly in the cross-border region between Angola, a former Portuguese colony, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, a former Belgian colony. This context was characterized by a conflictual relationship with the Christian missions and colonial authorities.

However, the current visibility of the Tokoist Church is largely linked to its new leader, Afonso Nunes, who, in 2001, emerged as the 'spiritual personification' of the founding prophet Simão Toko, who passed away in 1984. Nunes's public emergence responded to a threefold mission, which Simão Toko is said to have entrusted to him during his personification operation. The first of these was to reunite the Tokoist Church, which had been fragmented into several currents and directions following the prophet's death². The second was to build a temple and make the Church a universal project. The third was to put an end to the long civil war that had ravaged the country since independence (1975), reconcile the "Angolan family" and restore relations with the State, after several years of tension³.

¹ The full official name in Portuguese is: *Igreja de Nosso Senhor Jesus Cristo no mundo "os Tokoistas", lembrada em 25 de Julho de 1949 por Sua Santidade Profeta Simão Gonçalves Tôco* (Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the World "the Tokoists", remembered on July 25, 1949, by His Holiness Prophet Simão Gonçalves Tôco).

² In 1992, after a period of official atheism, the state officially recognized the Church in a tripartite form, comprising three distinct wings: the *Anciãos Conselheiros da Direção Central* (The Old Counselors of Central Direction), the *Doze Mais Velhos* (The Twelve Elders), and the *18 Classes e 16 Tribos* (The 18 Classes and 16 tribes). See Blanes and Paxe (2008); Schubert (2000).

³ Angola gained independence from Portugal in 1975, following a lengthy period of armed conflict (1961-1975) between three nationalist movements (MPLA, *Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola*; UNITA, *National Union for the Total Independence of Angola*; FNLA, *National Front for the Liberation of Angola*) and the colonial authorities. Nevertheless, the advent of independence precipitated a civil war between MPLA, the ruling party since then, and UNITA. This conflict concluded in 2002 with the defeat of UNITA's leader, Jonas Savimbi, and MPLA's military victory. For further insight into the civil war and its conclusion, see Messiant (2008) and Péclard (2008).



Temple of the Tokoist Church (credit to the author)

Over the last two decades, a significant portion of the goals set by this figure has been successfully achieved. In addition to the construction of the temple in 2012, the Church has largely reunified. However, minor factions remain, the most notable being the Twelve Elders (*os 12 Mais Velhos*), whose relationships with Afonso Nunes have become increasingly polarized. Moreover, Afonso Nunes has clearly reestablished relations with the Angolan state, elevating his status as a key figure in the national political and religious landscape, and positioning himself as a close friend of and advisor to former President José Eduardo dos Santos (1979-2017). Finally, one of Afonso Nunes's most significant achievements is his ability to attract a substantial following. Today the Church is the second largest religious institution in Angola, with an estimated 2 to 3 million adherents⁴, second only to the Catholic Church.

This growth is perceived, both by members of the Church and external observers, as a discontinuity with the past, when the Church primarily consisted of Bakongo believers, reflecting its local and historical roots in the predominantly Bakongo northern regions. However, within Angola, this growth is often interpreted in utilitarian terms. Such interpretations suggest that the Church's growth stems from its close ties with the state and its strategic efforts to maintain dominance in an increasingly diverse and competitive religious field. During my fieldwork in Luanda, which I conducted as part of a study examining the relationship between the Tokoist Church and the State in the post-war period, I tried to uncover the reasons individuals chose to join this church. My objective was to move beyond the

⁴ Over a national population of about 40 million people.

utilitarian perspective and to critically assess the official narrative of exponential growth⁵. As a result, I conducted interviews with individuals who had converted to the church, gathering a series of ‘conversion narratives’ in line with the classic approach of sociologists of religion.

The focus on conversion is particularly innovative as it is embedded with a broader narrative, shaped by the Afonso Nunes’s movement. This narrative posits that the influx of new members is both the result of Nunes’s transformation of the Church into a social project and a testament to the fulfilment of Simão Toko’s prophecies and the authenticity of the personification operation—a distinctive self-referential approach⁶. However, through interviews and participant observations with members of the Church, I came to understand that the insights we gain are less about the reasons for conversion and more how my interlocutors reappropriate similar narratives as part of their ‘biographical re-invention’.

Indeed, Loïc Le Pape emphasizes that in Christianity, storytelling is an obligatory reconstruction, as it is an integral part of the conversion process itself⁷. This makes it a crucial stage, requiring a reflexive examination of both the context of its production and its performativity. As Géraldine Mossière observes, “the act of conversion entails a performative dimension, evidenced by the retelling of the events that led to the adoption of the new religion. In this sense, the conversion narrative constitutes a central act of faith, constructed through a selective recounting of intense events, experienced and interpreted through the lens of the new religious doxa”⁸. Analyzing conversion narratives, therefore, requires an exploration of the power dynamics and imaginaries that prevail within the Church.

This study places significant emphasis on conversion narratives, their performance contexts, and the repertoires they activate, while situating them within the Church’s historical trajectory. This focus is particularly compelling given the Church’s claim to a unique theological identity

⁵ In terms of statistical analysis, it is challenging to collect representative data regarding the demographic composition of religious institutions, especially as the most recent official census in Angola was conducted in 2014, which did not distinguish between different types of churches (beyond broad distinction between Catholics and Protestants), and churches themselves lack official data on their members.

⁶ I have been told that hundreds of individuals attending Sunday services at the temple for the first time decide to convert. Indeed, specific ecclesiastical figures, namely those responsible for administering the sacraments, await individuals who have experienced a spiritual event during the service in a specific area of the church. Subsequently, these figures request that the individuals provide their contact information, after which they are converted to the Church. This dynamic is analogous to what Yannick Fer observed in the Assemblies of God in French Polynesia. See Fer (2022), p. 75.

⁷ Le Pape (2009), p. 214.

⁸ Mossière (2012), p. 6.

as an ‘African spiritual Church’ centered on prophetic leadership⁹. In this case, such leadership manifests in two distinct forms: first, through the figure of the ‘founding prophet’ (Simão Toko), and second, through the ‘personification’ of the prophet in Afonso Nunes. This leadership is further defined by a process of hierarchization and institutionalization, ultimately culminating in Afonso Nunes’s appointment as the Church’s bishop (*Bispo*)¹⁰.

Numerous theoretical analyses have explored the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity, particularly in the context of Pentecostalism, emphasizing the dynamic of rupture associated with conversion. This rupture typically involves both a “break with the past”¹¹, frequently characterized by a rejection of tradition, and a “biographical rupture”, facilitated by the development of a ‘personal relationship with God’ centered on direct experiences of the Holy Spirit—a hallmark of Pentecostalism¹². In contrast, far fewer studies have focused on ‘prophetic churches’¹³ which are distinguished by their specific spiritual and institutional frameworks.

This study has two main objectives. First, it examines how the forms of socialization and authority fostered during the conversion process reshape the interplay between the individual, the community, and the institution. This dynamic reinforces the discourse of biographical transformation, evident not only in conversion narratives but also in biographical trajectories and the influence of social capital. Second, the study demonstrates how conversion narratives draw upon a historically constructed narrative paradigm in which temporalities and memories are framed through a prophetic trajectory. This paradigm operates on three distinct levels: the event, the process, and the performative.

⁹ The term “spiritual church” is an emic expression frequently evoked by Tokoists as a marker of distinction from other churches, which would prioritize material concerns over spirituality. The implicit reference is, I think, to numerous charismatic churches practicing the “Prosperity Gospel”, an interesting example of which is the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), which has a significant presence in Angola and whose social practices have been the subject of numerous criticisms. See Sampaio (2020).

¹⁰ In the wake of Afonso Nunes’s public appearance, the Church has undergone a profound process of bureaucratization and hierarchization. This has resulted in the establishment of a hierarchical apparatus bearing striking similarities to that of the Catholic Church. In addition to the traditional role of the bishop, which is absent in most independent African Churches, other institutional roles have emerged, including that of “Auxiliary Bishop”, “Reverend-Pastor” and so forth. It is worth pointing out that these numerous hierarchical categories are absent from the original Tokoism and the Twelve Elders, who claim fidelity to the original doctrine of Tokoism, accuse Afonso Nunes of having set up this hierarchical structure to compensate for his lack of spiritual legitimacy and acquire only a ‘charism of function’.

¹¹ Meyer (1998).

¹² Fer (2022).

¹³ It is complex to categorize churches using different denominations due to the heterogeneity of their references. The distinctive feature of so-called ‘prophetic’ churches is that they claim to have been founded by a prophet or messiah, and that they have institutionalized themselves by creating specific ecclesiastical roles or ministries. In the English-language literature, the term ‘African Independent Churches’ (AIC) is also used to refer to these independent churches. See Meyer (2008) and Mary (2009), p. 57.

To address these objectives, the article is organized into four sections. The first section provides a brief historical contextualization of the Tokoist Church within Angola's religious and social landscape, tracing its development from the colonial era. This overview highlights the Church's detachment from the missionary field and its unique relationships with political actors. Simão Toko's biography is particularly significant, as it intertwines spiritual trajectories, political positions, and processes of institutionalization. This contextualization helps identify the historical milestones shaping the conversion paradigm.

The subsequent three sections focus on the temporal dimensions embedded within this paradigm of conversion, as reflected in the narratives. Drawing on the Augustinian tradition of conversion narratives—which typically begin with a crisis, proceed through experiences of divine intervention, and culminate in the discovery of the true path¹⁴—the conversion process is shown to encompass two interrelated aspects: the spiritual and bureaucratic dimensions, and the routinization of conversion within daily life. A third temporality, highlighted through ethnographic analysis, is the performative narrative. In interactions with the researcher, converts actively integrate the ethnographic moment into their narratives, thereby reaffirming and reifying their conversion experiences.

Methodological Notes on Fieldwork Access, Interview Settings, and Conversion Narratives

This study is based on interviews with converts and ethnographic observations conducted in various contexts. The process of establishing contact with converts was long and intricate, given the challenges of researching the social and political role of the Tokoist Church within its highly hierarchical structure. Indeed, my initial access to the field in 2019 was facilitated by a parallel process of establishing indirect contacts with select members of the Twelve Elders group, through intermediaries who were other researchers with prior experience working on the Church. This group has historically been more open to engaging with researchers, partly due to its critical stance toward the institutional ties between Afonso Nunes and the MPLA government.

As for Afonso Nunes's group, my entry into the field was facilitated 'from above', through institutional contacts established by third parties. While this approach granted me access to the Church's main hierarchical figures and provided a degree of legitimacy within the Church, it

¹⁴ Décobert (2001).

also restricted my ability to engage informally with ordinary members, including converts. Any such interactions required prior approval from Bishop Afonso Nunes.

Furthermore, while official Church accounts claim that hundreds of individuals convert weekly, the lack of a formally organized group of converts made it difficult to identify suitable interlocutors for this study. This necessitated the use of indirect contacts to access this audience. Between 2021 and 2022, I was able to meet a few converts and document their conversion stories. However, the centrality of conversion dynamics to my study was constrained by the limited number of interviews—just twelve in total—which reduces the representativeness of the sample. This limitation highlights the methodological challenges in studying such a subject within the Church.

Moreover, the difficulty of gaining autonomy in coordinating interactions with followers and the interest that my research generated among my interlocutors further shaped the interview settings and the profiles of converts I encountered. Notably, during all my interviews with converts, I was regularly accompanied by some Tokoist friends, who assisted in identifying convert profiles and, in effect, participated in the interview process. Although I obtained consent to use my interlocutors' real names, I prefer to refer to them by pseudonyms.

I. Between Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Spiritual Liberation: The Emergence of a Historical Paradigm of Conversion

Angola experienced early Christianization during the colonial era, with significant missionary efforts by both Catholic and Protestant groups spanning the extensive colonial territory. These missionaries often found themselves navigating a complex relationship with Portuguese authorities, characterized by a dynamic of both competition and cooperation¹⁵. Among the three primary missions—the Methodist mission, based in Luanda and its surrounding areas; the Congregationalist mission, active in the central highlands; and the Baptist mission, located in northern Angola¹⁶—the Baptist mission operated in the border zone between Angola and the former Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). This area was predominantly inhabited by Kongo ethnic groups and their numerous subgroups.

¹⁵ Péclard (2015).

¹⁶ This was an English and North American mission, whose official name was the *British Missionary Society*.

Simão Toko, originally from Maquela do Zombo in Uíge Province (northern Angola), was trained by the Baptist mission¹⁷ and actively participated in its evangelization activities. He served as a schoolteacher and as the director of the Kibokolo choir, composed of Bazombo, a subgroup of the Bakongo people native to Uíge Province. However, Toko's relationship with the missionary authorities became increasingly fraught, particularly following significant spiritual events in his life.

In 1935, Toko reportedly experienced his first spiritual encounter with a figure identifying himself as God, who declared that he would “work in him”, as documented by Ruy Blanes using archival sources¹⁸. A second pivotal moment occurred during the Central and West African Conference held in July 1946 in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), organized by North American Missions and attended by members of African spiritual churches. During the conference, Toko, selected as the African representative of the Baptist mission, delivered a prayer invoking the Holy Spirit to empower Africa and facilitate the spread of God's Word¹⁹.

The defining moment in Toko's spiritual journey—and the founding event of the Church—occurred on July 25, 1949. During a gathering of Toko and his disciples to seek confirmation of their prayers, the Holy Spirit descended upon them in what is regarded as a Pentecostal event. This spiritual experience conveyed a dual message: the missionary Church was not the ‘true Church’, and the African Church needed to return to its biblical origins²⁰. This event marked the birth of the Church of Jesus Christ, officially remembered on July 25, 1949²¹.

Toko's spiritual investiture led to the adoption of explicit proselytizing strategies by the first generation of his followers, who sought to convert others to what they perceived as the mission of the ‘Angolan prophet’. However, this increasingly strained relations between Toko and the missionary authorities²². While his followers recognized him as a prophet, the missionary

¹⁷ For more points on Simão Toko's biographical trajectory during his time at the mission, see Grenfell (1998) and Blanes (2014). Another interesting fact is that Toko also spent part of his adolescence with a Methodist family in Luanda, where he studied at the Lycée Salvador Correia. Curiously, the family where he stayed was that of Pastor Agostinho Neto, father of António Agostinho Neto, first President of the Republic of Angola (1975-1979), with whom Simão Toko shared a room and whose personal relations deteriorated at the time of the independence.

¹⁸ Blanes (2009), p. 167.

¹⁹ Grenfell (1998), p. 213.

²⁰ Blanes (2009), pp.167-169. This reference is a recurring one in what are commonly referred to as ‘prophetic’ churches and in those born of the revival movement (Aladura movement) in Nigeria in the 1920s. All advocate a return to what they perceive as ‘primitive’ Christianity, reflected not only in the emphasis placed on the Old Testament of the Bible, but also in the presence of hybrid liturgical elements, combining Catholic and Protestant traditions. See Mary (2009), pp. 66-67.

²¹ For an analysis of the concept of ‘remembering’ (*relembança*) in the Tokoist spiritual and institutional trajectory, see Ruy Blanes (2009, 2014).

²² Grenfell (1998), p. 215.

authorities rejected his claims, ultimately expelling Toko and his disciples from the mission and denouncing them to the Belgian colonial authorities. Following their expulsion, the Tokoists were deported to Angola, where they faced repression under the Portuguese colonial regime.

Between Holy Spirit, socialization, and pacifism: evangelization through repression

The period of repression played a crucial role in legitimizing both the prophet and the Church within the Angolan socio-religious landscape. The colonial authorities suspected the Tokoists of harboring subversive ambitions and promoting ethno-nationalism, particularly due to their historical connections with the Bakongo regions and their alignment with the Congolese context²³. However, Simão Toko's political stance was distinctive within the historical context of his time. He advocated for spiritual liberation while maintaining a strongly anti-belligerent position—this was at a time when independence movements and anti-colonial revolts were beginning to take shape, eventually leading to Angola's war of independence (1961-1974) and deep divisions among nationalist factions.

Despite his pacifist stance, the Tokoist community was dispersed across the colonial territory in an attempt to weaken its alleged ethnic cohesion and the ties between Simão Toko and his followers²⁴. While this strategy resulted in less visible proselytism, due to the Church's clandestine nature, it paradoxically spread the movement beyond its ethno-regional core, leading to the 'indirect conversion' of many individuals²⁵.

Several elements in this historical narrative reflect a broader paradigm of conversion, whose key components are frequently reproduced in contemporary conversion narratives. First, there is a notable overlap between the institutional dimension of the Church and the spiritual dimension associated with the charisma of Simão Toko and the Holy Spirit. This is evidenced by the fact that many individuals who came into contact with Toko experienced possession by

²³ In addition to Tokoism, other prophetic religious movements emerged in the Kongo region and were suppressed by the Belgian colonial authorities. The most prominent of these is Kimbanguism, which has a significant presence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. Its founding prophet, Simon Kimbangu, was sentenced to life imprisonment, while his followers were also harshly repressed.

²⁴ Tokoism had strong links with the Kongo ethno-political space (both in northern Angola and in colonial Congo), and Tokoists had contributed to the creation of a mutual association of Zombo nationals (ASSOMIZO), from which the nationalist movements linked to this ethnic space (PDA, UPA and FNLA) would emerge a few years later. Historically, therefore, there was some suspicion that Tokoists might have joined the ranks of the FNLA, although one of the main precepts introduced by Simão Toko was the prohibition of any party affiliation, in the name of this pacifism. Interestingly, at the last Church congress, Afonso Nunes abolished this precept, allowing his followers to join any political party. See Grenfell (1998), p. 220.

²⁵ This dynamic is not only recounted in several testimonies collected in Angola, which link the national character of the Church to this ability to attract people from other regions, but also in the sources collected by Grenfell (1998) and Blanes (2014).

the Holy Spirit, which was often an essential step in recognizing and accepting their conversion. According to some sources, the experience of the Holy Spirit was an indispensable part of the conversion process for the first followers²⁶. In contrast, in other cases, conversion occurred as a result of evangelical efforts led by Church members, during which individuals engaged in prayers directed toward Simão Toko, who was viewed as a figure within the Holy Trinity.

Second, the Tokoists' strong work ethic and their ability to contribute to the development of the areas where they were relocated²⁷ exemplify their impact. This is notably illustrated by their work at Val de Loge, a labor camp (*colonato*) in Uíge where they had been confined by the colonial authorities to perform forced agricultural labor. The Tokoists transformed this camp into a large coffee farm²⁸ and this transformation is associated with the Tokoist work ethic, which not only earned the respect of the colonial authorities but also played a key role in the conversion of many individuals.

Finally, the socio-political stance taken by the Church and Simão Toko during the colonial period involved a rejection of partisan and militant ideologies, advocating instead for spiritual liberation—a liberation believed to result from a profound individual transformation. This transformation was to be achieved through respect for all forms of authority, including colonial authorities. This stance is viewed as a pivotal element in the conversion process, as it enabled many followers to see the Portuguese colonists not as enemies, thus rejecting the identity and military logics embraced by the nationalist movements during the civil war. This shift in perspective aligned with the spiritual dispositions necessary for peace to become an integral part of daily life, a perspective that contemporary Tokoists continue to promote.

Prophetic Temporalities and Contexts of Plausibility

The conversion paradigm is rooted in the intersection of the spiritual event—particularly the encounter with Simão Toko and the experience of the Holy Spirit—and the historical and socio-political context that made this event plausible. This context includes the politicization of the religious field and the Tokoist Church's positioning in favor of a new vision for society and its relationship with authority. The two temporalities of this paradigm are deeply intertwined. The

²⁶ Ferreira (2012), p. 60.

²⁷ According to several accounts, Tokoists were employed in a variety of tasks. In particular, they made up a significant proportion of the workers who built the railways between Benguela and Huambo, which also enabled Tokoism to spread in this central and eastern territory, historically far from the religious dynamics observed in the north (interview with a Tokoist member of the 'Eastern Tribe', conducted in Luanda, January 2, 2023).

²⁸ Blanes (2014), p. 67.

Church's political positioning forms part of a broader trajectory of prophetic legitimization initiated by Simão Toko, who advocated for an agreement among the various nationalist movements during the war of independence to prevent a more brutal conflict later on²⁹. This prophetic vision was subsequently embraced by Afonso Nunes in the early 2000s, whose rise to prominence is viewed as the fulfillment of Simão Toko's prophecies, particularly the prediction of his return to end a war that had already been foreseen³⁰.

The process of the 'return of the prophet'³¹ encompasses both spiritual and institutional dimensions, manifesting in the renewal of relations with the government and the establishment of a partnership. However, it is precisely this dual dimension—and the temporality it represents—that has led to tensions between Afonso Nunes's faction and the Twelve Elders. The Twelve Elders not only reject the spiritual concept of personification but also challenge the political nature of the operation, viewing it as an act of political engineering backed by the government. In their view, this betrays the prophet's historically neutral stance during the colonial period.

At the same time, Afonso Nunes introduced significant theological and doctrinal shifts that are crucial to the conversion trajectories of many followers. Since his public confirmation, he has consistently emphasized the Church's commitment to addressing societal issues, including the 'urgency' of peace, social and moral reconciliation, and the need for the Church's doctrine and rules to adapt to contemporary societal needs³². This commitment entails the regular review and discussion of the principal obligations imposed on members, particularly the youth.

²⁹ This refers to the civil war that broke out just after independence (1975-2002) due to the differences (historical, sociological) between MPLA and UNITA. It is noteworthy that Simão Toko, following a lengthy period of exile, was instrumental in fostering a constructive dialogue between the three principal nationalist leaders and facilitating a peaceful postcolonial transition. The failure of his initiative, which the majority of Tokoists attribute to Agostinho Neto's rejection, despite his close relationship with Simão Toko, marked the beginning of a period of repression led by the Marxist-Leninist independent regime under MPLA's leadership.

³⁰ According to the narrative brought by Afonso Nunes and shared by Tokoists, the end of the war and the access to peace have been the result of the return of the prophet and his historical commitment to peace and against any divisions. See Carducci and Péclard (2021).

³¹ Carducci (2022).

³² For instance, at the last Church Congress held in 2023, the main hierarchy discussed the role of women within the Church and introduced many doctrinal changes, which involve, among other things, a relaxation of certain dress and behavioral codes that the faithful must strictly observe. The Church Congress has therefore decided to allow women to go to the hairdresser to have their hair done, whereas this was previously forbidden.

II. From Dream to Registration Form: The Conversion Event and Its Unfolding

The emphasis on conversion as a primarily spiritual event is also evident in the accounts shared by my interlocutors. This event often takes the form of a dream³³, through which individuals make contact with the Holy Spirit or the spirit of Simão Toko, sometimes mediated by another prophet or an angel³⁴. In many cases, Afonso Nunes is said to appear in the dreams, and his figure merges with that of Simão Toko, thus reinforcing the ambiguity surrounding Afonso Nunes's dual role as both the Church's spiritual and institutional authority. Three examples illustrate this ambiguity.

The first is the conversion of Fernando, a young man from *Ilha de Luanda* (Cape Island), who had been visually impaired since birth. Fernando was a member of the Catholic Church and had attended several Pentecostal churches before joining the Tokoist Church. He recounts having a dream in which he prayed to God for a solution to his blindness and saw a man, surrounded by angels, pass by without stopping. After sharing his dream with his Tokoist brother-in-law, the latter encouraged him to attend a Sunday service at the Tokoist Church. There, Fernando claims to have seen Afonso Nunes for the first time and immediately recognized the figure from his dream. The service that day focused on the topic of “physical and spiritual blindness” (*a cegueira carnal e espiritual*) and during the homily, Afonso Nunes is said to have remarked, “I’m talking to a blind man who is among us today”, which Fernando interpreted as a direct reference to himself and his dream³⁵. This spiritual experience sparked a sentiment in Fernando that he had never felt before, convincing him to follow Afonso Nunes and ultimately convert to the Church.

The second example is that of Miguel Santos, a 45-year-old former pastor of the Methodist Church. He shared with me that over a period of several years, he had three separate dreams in which he saw an angel delivering messages to him. In these dreams, the angel presented cryptic visions, including the possibility of accessing the “New Jerusalem” through careful study of the book of Revelation, and the bizarre notion of receiving a new car as a gift but being unable to

³³ I use the term ‘dream’ to translate the Portuguese emic term “*sonho*”, which has often been used interchangeably with the term “vision” (*visão*). Indeed, while the dream is an indispensable element of the conversion narrative, it has often been evoked in other circumstances by followers who are not converts, notably as a specific feature of the individual relationship that develops between them and the prophet Simão Toko. In one interview, for example, a young Tokoist explained to me that he had been able to pass his university exams thanks to a personal spiritual communication with prophet Simão Toko, who enabled him to give the right answers.

³⁴ The prophets mentioned in the stories are often Simon Kimbangu, founding prophet of the Kimbanguist Church, Habakkuk and Ezekiel, two prophets mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible.

³⁵ Interview conducted in Luanda, August 6, 2021.

drive it due to the presence of “Catholic saints”. These visions, both detailed and vague, left the pastor with a sense of uncertainty, prompting him to speak to a Tokoist uncle. He then decided to participate in a Church excursion to northern Angola. It was during this trip that Miguel Santos reports having visions of Simão Toko and the Holy Spirit, as well as meeting Afonso Nunes for the first time.

The third testimony comes from Alvaro, a former member of Angola’s Rastafari community. His encounter with the Tokoist Church did not directly involve a dream, but rather an event that marked a turning point in both his sociability and spirituality. Alvaro’s introduction to the Church was somewhat accidental: while working with the president of the Luanda Basketball Federation, who was a Tokoist, Alvaro inquired about a pin the president wore on his jacket. The president explained that the pin symbolized Simão Toko’s return, embodied by Afonso Nunes. Skeptical but curious, Alvaro visited the Tokoist temple, where he met Afonso Nunes, who, as Alvaro claims, “was waiting for [him]”. During their interaction, Alvaro says he saw both Haile Selassie and Simão Toko in Afonso Nunes. This experience led him to immediately convert, leaving behind his Rastafarian beliefs: “I immediately got rid of Rastafarianism, I cut my hair, and nobody could believe it. I was a leader of the Rasta community, we were part of the first movement, we founded the Association of the Rastafarian Order in Angola”³⁶.

The accounts mentioned illustrate how the spiritual event, which appears to be both a necessary and sudden step for the conversion process to be deemed authentic, only acquires its transformative significance through a network of socialization that supports it. For Fernando and Miguel Santos, this support came from Tokoist family members, while for Alvaro, it was a Tokoist colleague who played a crucial role. Moreover, institutional moments—such as the Sunday service, the Church-organized trip, and the meeting with Afonso Nunes—are essential for validating the dream and ultimately leading to a definitive act of conversion.

Towards a System of Bureaucratic Validation

The conversion event is not merely a matter of contact with the prophet through a network of socialization; it also requires official recognition through a system of bureaucratic validation. Unlike Pentecostal churches, where spiritual experiences such as speaking in tongues, witnessing, and spiritual gifts serve as necessary signs of conversion, in the Tokoist Church, the conversion process is paradoxically entirely bureaucratic. This reflects the bureaucratization

³⁶ Interview conducted in Viana (Luanda), September 27, 2022.

that occurred within the Church under Afonso Nunes's leadership, although there are no liturgical or ritual spaces where conversions can be shared or narrated.

The first step in this process is baptism by immersion, which is universally recognized as a sign of Christianity³⁷. The transition from the spiritual to the bureaucratic dimension is often described in conversion narratives as an indispensable condition for the authenticity of the spiritual experience—referred to as the only “*true conversion*” (Alvaro)³⁸. In this context, “giving one's own name” becomes a powerful symbolic act of self-transformation:

“I've been to many churches, but I'd never given my name” (Fernando).

Paula, a 26-year-old orphan from the Futungo neighborhood, recalls, among several spiritual encounters, the exact moment when she decided to “complete her conversion form”:

“On that day, I visited the place where individuals convert, completed my form, and was the last to do so. I told myself, ‘I'm not leaving here without becoming a Tokoist’. I underwent the conversion process, and when I left the Church, I was experiencing a profound sense of personal transformation”³⁹.

Beyond Historical Skepticism: Towards ‘Conversion to History’

Conversion to Tokoism, experienced as a significant transformation, often leads to conflicts for converts, particularly in terms of their socialization spaces, including their relationships with family members. The experiences shared by converts reveal that they typically come from families who belong to the same church, a situation that fosters spiritual uncertainty, itinerancy, and sometimes a skeptical view of Simão Toko and Afonso Nunes⁴⁰. This dynamic is rooted in

³⁷ As the Church recognizes the baptism administered by any Christian Church, the Church to which the convert belongs is an essential element in defining his or her path of insertion into the Tokoist Church. Furthermore, the acceptance of baptism as a sign of the Church's Christianity, which is generally rejected by Pentecostal Churches, is an important element in the Angolan religious panorama, insofar as several prophetic churches very active in northern Angola and particularly attached to the experience of different prophets (Mpadism, Bundu dia Kongo, Associação Confessional Kintuadi etc.) categorically refuse baptism and any other association with Christianity, and they claim to be anti-Christian and authentically African. See Sarró (2018).

³⁸ In the Church's official regulations, among the sacraments provided, there is a difference between dedication (*dedicação*), namely the act by which a family announces the birth of a child and their wish for it to become part of the Church, and signaling (*assinalação*), which corresponds rather to conversion, in the sense of a voluntary signaling of a person (over 12 years of age) wishing to join the ecclesial community.

³⁹ Interview conducted in Luanda, October 20, 2022.

⁴⁰ All the conversion stories begin by explaining the different experiences of religious socialization and their links with the family's religious affiliation, and they end by reminding that the families of the converts are now themselves part of the Church. Moreover, in many cases, skepticism about Afonso Nunes reflects a widely held view in Angola that this religious leader is a ‘puppet’ (*bajulador*) in the service of the government.

the historical connection between the Tokoist Church and the Bakongo socio-religious space, which means that many adherents are Bakongo, born into Tokoist families, who have joined the Church through familial socialization networks.

However, this historical association with the Bakongo also involves the mobilization of stereotypical and sometimes negative views of them among non-Tokoists, particularly in Luanda, as highlighted by several scholars⁴¹. These perceptions often stem from the Bakongo's association with tradition, and their values and practices are frequently seen as incompatible with the modernization project championed by the MPLA elites— a view that persists to this day.

A second factor contributing to skepticism is the religious field in Angola, historically dominated by the Catholic Church and Protestant mission churches⁴², where prophets are often seen as lacking religious or Christian legitimacy. This is particularly true in northern Angola, where several individuals claiming to be prophets have founded churches, many of which are not officially recognized by the state⁴³. These historical factors, in my view, create a dual sense of conflict—both internal and familial—that can only be resolved through the process of conversion. Indeed, many conversion narratives reflect this paradigm of historical skepticism. For example, Fernando admitted that, before his conversion, he considered the Tokoists (including his brother-in-law) to be “lost” because of their belief in the figure of a prophet, which he found unacceptable from his former Pentecostal perspective. Conversion, therefore, seemed impossible to accept due to these historically ingrained prejudices:

“I had no intention of converting to Tokoism, far from me!” (Fernando)

Miguel Santos, the former pastor of the Methodist Church, initially regarded Tokoists as fanatics, illustrating the historically negative perception of the prophet Simão Toko:

It is notable that all the converts with whom I have been able to engage in discourse have undergone religious socialization and have had multiple experiences in Christian churches. This is a relatively common profile in Angola, given the significance of Christianity in individual trajectories. This suggests that the emphasis placed on individual and self-transformation, as well as the internalization of moral elements associated with conversion, aligns with a classical approach that originated with Saint Augustine and his conversion.

⁴¹ Sarró, Blanes, Viegas and Deslaurier (2008).

⁴² Messiant (1998b).

⁴³ Sarró (2018). These churches also reproduce memory struggles linked to the complex and conflicting relationships between the Catholic Church, Protestant Christian missions and prophetic movements born in colonial times. For this reason, Ramon Sarró and Marina Temudo, after conducting long fieldwork in Mbanza Kongo, the ‘religious capital’ of prophetism in Kongo area, referred to this city as a ‘prophetic enclave’. See Sarró and Temudo (2019).

“I’d always thought they were fanatics; I’d never thought I could be with them [...] Those who were with me in the Methodist Church followed us, whole families of 20 to 30 people. Many people in Angola have a negative perception of Tokoism because of church rivalries and the colonial burden, the reputation of a terrorist church, and of having a false prophet. It’s not easy to accept that Toko was a prophet, but when the Holy Spirit touches you, you have no choice but to accept it”⁴⁴ (Miguel Santos).

Paula, meanwhile, shared how her decision to officially convert to Tokoism led to a family crisis:

“I went home after my conversion, and it was not until a month later that my sister noticed I was not going to her church anymore, and she asked me, ‘Have you really become a Tokoist?’ The war started... she said a lot of bad things to me and even abandoned me at home, took her three children with her and left me for many weeks without food or water” (Paula).

Nevertheless, overcoming this crisis aligns with the historical paradigm of the overlap between spirit and institution: the spiritual fulfillment that the Church offers, along with the socialization dynamics it fosters, serve as catalysts for the conversion of family members and a process of resocialization in the converts’ lives. All the converts mentioned that, after their initial difficulties of being accepted by their families, their families eventually also converted to the Church:

“A few months later, my sister, who used to make such a fuss, also converted” (*Ibid.*).

José’s case is another example of this pattern of crisis and its resolution, affecting both the individual and the family context. His conversion to the Church, which occurred through a sudden and intense encounter with the Holy Spirit, initially created tensions within his Evangelical family, where Tokoism was viewed negatively. However, his perseverance, along with the ongoing influence of the Holy Spirit, eventually had a transformative effect within his family, which now serves as a testament to his spiritual journey:

“When the Holy Spirit called me, my family was in doubt, I was a very sinful person, I used to have many girlfriends. My parents did not like it, I was the only one in the family who had

⁴⁴ Interview conducted in Luanda, August 10, 2021.

become a Tokoist. But in the end, it was a blessing, everyone followed me in the Church and now I'm highly respected in my family, and the Holy Spirit performs many miracles there"⁴⁵.

These elements seem to suggest a 'conversion to history', as defined by Ruth Marshall, drawing on John Peel's work. This concept encompasses "a powerful sense of individual spirituality, inextricably linked to new notions of personal and collective progress, and to the relationship to be established with the past"⁴⁶. In this context, the conversion to history can be understood as the reproduction of a narrative paradigm imbued with historicity. This includes the historical skepticism surrounding Simão Toko, as well as the recognition of the Church's uniqueness following unprecedented spiritual episodes. Furthermore, conversion to history involves an individual's engagement with a largely unknown history—both Christian and Angolan—which blends proven historical facts with a theological perspective that can only be fully understood through spiritual experience.

In other words, conversion signifies the reappropriation of a memorial regime, one that is inherently contentious and, in doing so, reinforces the memory conflicts that have historically shaped Angolan society since its independence. Christine Messiant⁴⁷ highlighted the extent to which these conflicts can be traced back to the struggle for independence and the divisions among various political factions. Meanwhile, Jon Schubert⁴⁸ examines the emergence of a new "master narrative" centered on a mainstream, depoliticized vision of the end of the war and the beginning of peace. Conversion, therefore, functions as an event in the Foucauldian sense, not merely as a decision or a victory, but as a "relation of forces" in which symbolic struggles and temporal imaginations are articulated, and social positions are redefined within this context⁴⁹.

Furthermore, it encompasses the two distinct etymological and philosophical meanings that are central to this concept within its Christian semantics. On one hand, conversion represents a "return to the origin, to an ideal and perfect state" (*epistrophe*). On the other hand, it signifies "an uprooting from a state of sin and a total upheaval of being in faith in the word of God" (*metanoia*)⁵⁰. The key element that emerges is the role of prophecy, which serves as a nexus between these two dimensions of conversion and acts as a catalyst for its realization.

⁴⁵ Interview conducted in Camama (Luanda), November 4, 2022.

⁴⁶ Marshall (2009), p. 60.

⁴⁷ Messiant (1998a).

⁴⁸ Schubert (2015).

⁴⁹ Bayart (2005).

⁵⁰ Heurtin and Michel (2021), p. 14.

III. From Event to Duration: How to Sustain Conversion

Beyond the spiritual and bureaucratic events that occur through conversion, access to the Church involves not only adherence to a memorial and symbolic regime but also a process of resocialization within the community of the faithful. As Darmon notes, “it is not the mystical crisis itself that produces the convert, but rather the inclusion in a social structure that confirms day after day the products of resocialization and enables the convert to remain converted”⁵¹. This inclusion in a long-term social structure also entails two main dynamics identified through the converts’ narratives.

The first dynamic is a reconfiguration of the converts’ relationship with their family. This involves not only an unprecedented ability to act as an example and convert all family members, but also a kind of social backlash within the family space. However, two points need to be clarified: firstly, the ability to convert family members is part of the ‘mission of evangelization’ that converts undertake, which also creates a form of social and institutional pressure that they indirectly experience. Secondly, the reconfiguration of the convert’s position within the family socialization space appears to be more pronounced among those with lower social capital—specifically, individuals like Fernando, Luis, and Paula, who did not hold a well-defined institutional position (unlike Miguel Santos or Alvaro). These individuals all recount having gained new visibility within their families, and now serve as spiritual examples.

The second dynamic involves a reconfiguration of the professional socialization spaces of these converts, following a logic of reproducing the ‘crisis paradigm’ and its subsequent overcoming. For instance, Paula shares how her conversion led to her being fired from her job at a laundry, as her employer did not accept her decision to become a Tokoist. This event initially triggered a period of significant personal crisis: “a period I do not want to remember, all the people I used to hang with”. However, the experience of conversion and her subsequent involvement in the Church—where she now serves as a choir director and oversees the cleaning of temple—helped redefine this crisis and facilitated the emergence of a new sense subjectivity. She reflects:

“This experience has transformed me, I’m no longer the same person. God has chosen me.
I’m not ashamed. I finally feel very well”.

⁵¹ Darmon, cited by Fer (2022), p. 73.

In this way, Paula's narrative exemplifies the profound changes that conversion brings not only in personal identity but also in professional life, as the spiritual transformation enables converts to overcome crises and create new subjectivities in both their personal and professional spheres.

“Our Behavior is the Best Gospel”: Witness and Evangelism, between Individual and Institutional Mission

Once the conversion process is complete, new converts are enrolled in a formation program (*discipulado*), where they are taught the doctrinal foundations and moral codes of the Tokoist Church. This stage ensures that converts not only understand the theological aspects of their new faith but also adopt the practices and values necessary for full integration into the community. Following this, they are typically assigned to different parishes (*paróquias*), and often assume positions of responsibility within the Church's institutional structure shortly after their conversion⁵². Conversion to Tokoism also brings a significant transformation in daily life. The Church's doctrine requires converts to follow a strict disciplinary regime, including five daily prayers, weekly attendance at the Tabernacle (on Wednesday evenings), regular evangelistic activities, and participation in the Church's administrative functions. These practices are central to maintaining one's spiritual and institutional status within the Church.

Moreover, Tokoism imposes stringent moral codes that regulate behavior and personal conduct. Among these are prohibitions against consuming alcohol and pork, engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage, and wearing red or black clothing, which are considered spiritually improper. Additionally, converts are required to dress in white, with women specifically instructed to wear a veil and skirt.

These moral and behavioral codes also reshape converts' roles within broader society. Tokoists are expected to respect government authority, rejecting protests or any form of resistance to the established order. The Church advocates for peace in daily life, urging its followers to avoid conflict and to transcend the traditional friend-enemy dichotomy. This stance reflects the teachings of both Simão Toko and Afonso Nunes, who emphasized spiritual liberation over militant or revolutionary actions, positioning their followers as non-confrontational and oriented toward peaceful coexistence.

⁵² Parishes are the most decentralized hierarchical structure of the Tokoist Church, present in Luanda's various districts. This category of ecclesiastical administration is absent from the original Tokoism, whose original structure is rather organized into tribes (*tribos*), which are linked to the geographical origins of the various faithful coming to Luanda.

If this transformation is seen by the convert as essential for spiritually aligning with the Church, conversion may nonetheless result in the reproduction of social distinctions, disguised as a ‘spiritual discernment’ of everyone’s gifts⁵³. Indeed, the accounts suggest that conversion often reinforces and reproduces the social capital of converts. The case of Miguel Santos, the former Methodist pastor, is particularly illustrative: just two years after his conversion, he holds a hierarchical position of reverend-pastor, similar to his previous role within the Methodist Church. However, he attributes his advancement within the Church to the spiritual work he has been able to carry out. Similarly, Nuno’s conversion to Tokoism strengthened his social capital. Originally from the eastern province of Lunda-Sul —a predominantly Chokwe ethnic area— this former Catholic seminary student and schoolteacher became the first in his family to convert to Tokoism, a decision influenced by the intervention of a churchwoman who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, told his mother that he needed to convert in order to regain his lost spiritual peace. Nuno then experienced a period of spiritual crisis while studying for the Catholic priesthood. After converting to Tokoism, he was appointed as pastor, responsible for rites and sacraments. He claims to be the first Tokoist from his province to hold such a position in the Church, attributing this to the extraordinary nature of his conversion:

“There are a lot of people who know each other and come from the same region, whereas when someone unknown arrives it’s different, I’m not a friend of Bishop Afonso Nunes or anyone in the Church, I do not have any family in the Church. When I heard my name to be part of the Church’s pastoral care, in October 2019, I looked for the recording to listen to it again because I could not believe it”⁵⁴.

Conversion also inaugurates a new mission: that of evangelization, which plays a crucial role in articulating the relationship between the individual, the community, and the institution. On the one hand, every member of the Church is responsible for converting others through prayer and behavior. This is exemplified by the saying, “*O melhor evangelho é o nosso comportamento*” (our behavior is the best Gospel), which Tokoists often repeat. On the other hand, evangelization is also a bureaucratized institutional process, managed by specific

⁵³ Fer (2022).

⁵⁴ Interview conducted in Luanda, October 31, 2022. In this respect, I would like to mention an anecdotal element during the interview with Nuno: when he told me that he considers himself privileged to be the only one from his province to hold such a position, I asked whether there would be a major presence of members from north Angola (Bakongo) in the hierarchical structure of the Church. In his reply, he made it clear that he was referring less to any institutional privileges that people from the north might have than to networks of sociability and acquaintances that make it easier to enter the Church.

ecclesial figures, namely pastors and evangelists, who organize ‘evangelization missions’⁵⁵. The goal of these official visits to the Church’s ecclesiastical provinces (*Províncias Eclesiásticas*)⁵⁶ is to meet with the local faithful and visit local Church structures in the presence of Afonso Nunes—much like an official institutional visit by a government representative. These official visits are seen as a significant factor in converting the faithful, as they allow the Church to demonstrate its institutional and social work (in terms of partnerships, commitment to society, and peace), as well as to showcase Afonso Nunes’s charisma.

In terms of the Church’s historical trajectory, this dynamic inaugurates a new paradigm in its relationship with the public. This shift is part of the renewal project for Tokoism led by Afonso Nunes, which is rooted in significant bureaucratization⁵⁷. It also involves an expansion project throughout Angolan territory, notably through the construction of temples and other social institutions, such as universities, a radio station, and a hospital⁵⁸—Afonso Nunes’s movement is now one of the few churches present in all 18 Angolan provinces, whereas, for example, the Twelve Elders movement is present in only 8 provinces.

This expansion represents the realization of Simão Toko’s vision and mission to universalize the Church. It is now present in several countries across Africa and beyond, including Portugal, Japan, Brazil, Jamaica, and others. Additionally, the Church’s relationship with the Angolan

⁵⁵ Among the many functions introduced by the Church in its process of bureaucratization, the pastor is responsible for ensuring followers’ good conduct and Christian education, while the evangelist deals with the admission of new Christians and is appointed directly by the spiritual leader. Concerning the hierarchical system introduced by Afonso Nunes during a Congress in 2010, this has as its highest authority Bishop Afonso Nunes, which is considered as a spiritual category rather than an institutional one (he is referred to with many names by Tokoist, such as “Spiritual Leader”, “Leader”, “Bishop”, “Mayamona”). Just under the Bishop are the Auxiliary Bishops (chosen by the bishop) and then come other ministries including priesthood, pastors, pastors-reverends, youth ministry, child ministry, women ministry. See Estatutos e Regulamento Geral da Igreja [Church statutes and general regulations] (2016), pp. 55-65.

⁵⁶ The establishment of ecclesiastical provinces is also the result of the bureaucratization process, based on a better structuring of the Church at different territorial levels, following the example of the territorial organization of the State. To date (without considering the change in the number of provinces introduced by the government in 2024, which includes two new provinces), the Tokoist Church has 19 ecclesiastical provinces.

⁵⁷ In the theological and sociological literature produced by the various currents of the Church, there is a tendency to identify a real break with Simão Toko’s Tokoism, hence the definition of a “Neo-Tokoism”.

⁵⁸ During my fieldwork in 2022, I was invited to participate in an official Church visit to the province of Moxico (east), with the objective of inaugurating the construction of a large temple. Additionally, the *Instituto superior politécnico tocoísta* (ISPT) has become a prominent university in Luanda, attracting numerous students due to its affordable tuition fees. Regarding the Tokoist Radio (*Rádio Tocoísta*), it is one of the few religious radio stations licensed in Angola (alongside *Radio Ecclesia* and *Radio Kairos*), and broadcasts in all the principal national languages, reflecting the Church’s objective present itself as a very Angolan Church.

government is a crucial element. According to some sources, the Church enjoys a close alliance with the government, which suggests substantial financial backing⁵⁹.

Concurrently, this phenomenon reflects a paradigm shift in both individual and institutional missions that every Tokoist must undertake. This mission now combines a spiritual and theological project embodied in the process of the ‘return of the prophet’ with a civic and institutional project for the moral regeneration of Angolan society, a project that several Angolan churches have been engaged in for many years⁶⁰.

The *corpo vate* or everyday charisma

While, on the one hand, conversion can enable some individuals, supported by their social capital, to acquire an institutional role in the mission of evangelization, on the other hand, the act of being put in direct communication with the Holy Spirit confers on others the role of *corpo vate* (or *vaticinadora* if the individual is a woman), meaning a messenger who is supposed to remain in constant contact with the Holy Spirit and act as a spiritual intermediary between it and the Church. This is a defining characteristic of the Church, as the descent of the Holy Spirit in 1949 granted those who frequented the “Tabernacle” the ability to “vaticinate”, i.e., to anticipate the future—a gift that can only be acquired through prayer and song⁶¹. This function

⁵⁹ The minority currents within Tokoism are not opposed to the Church’s internationalization project *per se*, but rather to the political backing it presupposes, as well as to Afonso Nunes’s illegitimacy as personification of Simão Toko. Over the past 30 years, these divisions between the different currents have been the subject of numerous legal disputes over the official status of the Church.

⁶⁰ Most Angolan churches are engaged in what they define as a struggle to redeem the civic and moral values of Angolan society (*resgate dos valores morais*), following a slogan frequently used by President João Lourenço since his election in 2017 (Operação Resgate lançada em Angola, *RFI português*, 30 October 2018, accessed 7 September 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/pt/angola/20181030-operacao-resgate-lancada-em-angola>).

The rhetoric of combating immoral behavior and vandalism resulted in the enactment of a controversial legislation that penalizes any act of vandalism, with an implicit association with social protests that the government has historically linked to vandalism (Proposta de Lei dos Crimes de Vandalismo de Bens e Serviços Públicos passa a votação final global, mas com a abstenção da UNITA, *Novo Jornal*, 18 July 2024, accessed 29 November 2024, <https://novojournal.co.ao/politica/interior/proposta-de-lei-dos-crimes-de-vandalismo-de-bens-e-servicos-publicos-passa-na-votacao-final-global-mas-com-a-abstencao-da-unita-120316.html>). For a comparative perspective of different Christian churches and their politico-social posture, see Blanes and Zawiejska (2020).

⁶¹ As Ruy Blanes explains, the Tabernacle (*Tabernáculo*) is conceived in Tokoist doctrine, taking up the functionality mentioned in the Book of Exodus, as a sacred place where God Himself, through prayer, and to which only spiritually empowered people can gain access. This space exists in both the central cathedral and all Tokoist parishes, accessible only to the followers — I have never been permitted access as an outsider to the Church. The distinctive feature of this location is that all the followers may enter it for prayer and spiritual connection (in their daily lives, Wednesday is dedicated to prayer in the Tabernacle). At the same time, it is a regulated space where the Holy Spirit, or even the spirit of prophet Simão Toko, communicates messages and prophecies to the community, through *vates*, in their role of spiritual intermediation and intercession.

The centrality of the Tabernacle in the spiritual structure of the Tokoist Church is such that several functions are performed there. In particular, it is in the Tabernacle that every *vate* is supposed to transmit the message he has received, through visions or communications with prophets or angels, insofar as those in charge of the Tabernacle have the mission of verifying the source of the message and validating it. At the same time, the Tabernacle is also

corresponds, to some extent, to what André Mary refers to, in relation to the Celestial Church of Christ in Gabon, as a ‘visionary charisma’⁶², meaning the ability of certain followers to have visions or fall into spiritual trances during worship or other circumstances. These individuals can then discern the type of spiritual force seeking to manifest itself, particularly through experiences like speaking in tongues (*falar em línguas estranhas*) or, in some cases, transmitting messages to the entire community (*profetizar*).

The Tokoist Church, similar to other African Independent Churches, assigns a specific institutional role to those with the gift of vision, which is regarded as a “category of virtue”. This term refers to spiritual and individual predispositions that grant access to the Tabernacle and the practice of spiritual healing. The experience of the Holy Spirit serves as a means for the converts to confirm, day by day, their conversion, especially as it is understood as a latent predisposition that can only be revealed through conversion and the acceptance of one’s role within the Church:

“I was already a vate before I became a Tokoist, but I didn’t know it, I discovered it on the day of my baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended on me. It didn’t have that impact before, but it was already in me” (Paula).

Furthermore, although being a *vate* implies a solid and constant relationship with the Holy Spirit, this quality must be continually nurtured by the individual, particularly through prayer and other pious practices. The *vate* must ‘merit’ their privileged role in relation to the community. As Mário, a young *vate*, once told me, “A vate is like a mirror; if his body misbehaves or deviates, he loses the virtue of the Holy Spirit”⁶³. In other words, *vates* not only have an intermediary and intercessory role within the ecclesial community, but they also establish a privileged personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, which brings both freedom and responsibility for the individual. Two testimonies from converts who discovered they possessed this gift are particularly illustrative of this point: Helga recounted how the Holy Spirit protected her in several situations, including one night when she was walking alone and confronted by a *bandido* (a thief) who threatened to rape her, but she was shielded by the action of the Holy Spirit⁶⁴.

the main venue for spiritual healing (*cura espiritual*), which takes place according to a well-defined procedure and in the presence of authorized participants. See Blanes (2009), pp. 118-121.

⁶² Mary (2009).

⁶³ Interview conducted in Luanda, October 20, 2022.

⁶⁴ Interview conducted in Luanda, September 1st, 2021.

The second testimony comes from José, whose experience with the Holy Spirit introduces another central element: the question of healing, as the Holy Spirit can physically heal (*curar*) the *corpo vate* and other followers⁶⁵. The personal relationship established with the Holy Spirit carries a responsibility not only towards the ecclesial community—through messaging, intercession, or spiritual healing—but also towards oneself, which often makes it challenging to manage this gift. José explained how, in the Tokoist Church, no action can be taken without first consulting the Holy Spirit, and how he receives almost daily guidance from it, which enables him to succeed in various aspects of his daily life.

The experience of the Holy Spirit, provided through conversion, allows followers who ‘discover’ that they have this ‘predisposition’—namely, the gift of *vaticination*—to redefine their role within the Church’s spiritual framework. As mediators and even healers, they acquire new functions that also reconfigure their subjectivities and social relations. It is significant that this gift is most often associated with converts (José, Fernando, Paula, Helga) who do not hold other institutional roles based on the reproduction of social capital within the Church’s bureaucratic apparatus, similar to the family resocialization process. In this way, this gift nourishes the biographical illusion of conversion, fostering the emergence of new subjectivities and forms of socialization.

IV. The Narrative as a Performative Space for Conversion

In this final section, I propose to reflect on the context in which these conversion narratives have been produced, and how my presence as investigator contributed to their production. These elements are revealing of the ambiguities surrounding the role of conversion in the ‘narrative device’ of the Tokoist Church, but also of the dynamics of biographical reinvention, nourished by the performative act of narrative. Indeed, although there are community insertion groups for new converts, their rather closed, bureaucratic character prevented me from gaining rapid access to them. This led to a certain difficulty in identifying converts, which I tried to circumvent by mobilizing a network of personal acquaintances within the Church, both friends and institutional leaders, who enabled me to identify profiles suited to my objective. Not only did this dynamic inevitably create expectations among the people identified, aware of the interest their story could arouse in me, but it also indirectly conferred on my acquaintances a position of intermediation. This, in turn, influenced both the selection of converts and the

⁶⁵ In his narrative, José told me how the Holy Spirit healed his leg, fractured after a serious accident, a healing that not even doctors would have been able to explain.

performance of the storytelling. In other words, the challenges inherent in engaging with such an audience led me to rely on the standard cases of conversion that my intermediaries deemed potentially relevant for my research. The following anecdotes illustrate how the ethnographer's presence was reappropriated by converts in their narratives, underscoring the significance of the socialization context in the dynamics of conversion.

A first example of this reappropriation shows that the exchange can take the form of a narrative performance, wherein the conditions of the storytelling are determined by my interlocutors. This was the case with Miguel Santos, whose narrative was a monologue lasted nearly two hours and encompassed the entire conversion process, from dreaming to institutional change⁶⁶. In addition, the 'stage' for the performance was also prepared, with approximately ten individuals present and all listening attentively to the story, which took place in a room in the Church's central temple, thanks to the contact of the Church's Youth Ministry (*Pastoral Juvenil*). This dynamic was reproduced in a comparable manner during the interview with Alvaro, whose conversion story took the form of an interview (with cameras and streamed on Facebook). In this way, he was able to illustrate his extraordinary experience, addressing not only myself but also the live audience, who provided commentary as the narrative unfolded. The social status of both my interviewee and my intermediaries also played an important role here: Alvaro is a well-known theatre actor in Luanda, and my friends, who were instrumental in staging the narrative, are video technicians and are involved in the dissemination of information pertaining to the Church.

A second type of examples demonstrates that my presence can, conversely, be incorporated in the conversion story, as a means of legitimizing the transformation occurring in the convert's biography. The interview conducted with Fernando is illustrative of this. He asserted that the opportunity to interact with a researcher is a key indicator of the authenticity of the conversion process, and that he feels comfortable speaking with me as a result:

“Before, I wouldn't have been able to talk to you like we're doing now, Tokoism is a school, it has transformed me, changed me, I feel like I have a master's degree or a doctorate”

(Fernando).

⁶⁶ During the two-hour interview, a few people entered the room and unwittingly interrupted the flow of the story. This was perceived negatively by my interviewee, who openly indicated that he no longer wished to be interrupted.

The context in which the exchange took place was found to exert an influence. Given my interlocutor's difficulty in navigating the city due to his visually impaired condition, we selected a location proximate to his residence, namely a park situated on the island (*ilha*) of Luanda. This proved to be a rather unconventional venue for this type of activity. This was incorporated into the legitimating narrative, namely the fact of being able to converse with a researcher, who, moreover, came from Europe, in such an informal context, which once again demonstrated the profound impact that conversion opened up in Fernando's life. Paula's case is also interesting: after illustrating her conversion trajectory, she expressed her desire for me to convert to the Church, explaining at the same time that henceforth she would only consider marrying a Tokoist man and that conversion would have significantly altered her mode of interaction⁶⁷.

I therefore consider the narrative as a moment of performativity, following Judith Butler's approach, which "proposes to combine the notions of body, language and norms into a concept that would make it possible to account for rituals capable of shaping the subject. Thus, performativity refers to exercises in the reiteration of norms carried out through simultaneous training of the body, emotions and reason, like so many sites of discipline where religious virtues acquire the status of habitus"⁶⁸. In other words, the narrative constitutes a ritualized practice through which the Christian faith is performed⁶⁹, leading at the same time to a new subjectivity, in the dialogical and diachronic relationship with the collective and individual past as well as the former self, to the point of including, in a rhetorical approach, the ethnographer in a situation of interaction. However, in contrast to the conversion experiences within Pentecostalism, which place significant emphasis on witness, prayer, and healing as essential steps—being Pentecostal is, from a theological and an experiential point of view, a very conversion⁷⁰—in the Tokoist Church, the bureaucratized dimension of conversion, coupled with the convergence of diverse forms of charismatic and institutional authority, constrains this performativity to sporadic instances. This is evidenced by my observations of interactions with converts. At the same time, these narratives are performative insofar as they are part of this

⁶⁷ The interview took place in the presence of a friend, but throughout, my interlocutor did not really realize my role as a researcher interested in the Church (since my friend had introduced me to her) and she thought my interest stemmed solely from my intention to convert. Interestingly, a few months after our interview, I met Paula again at church and she asked me if I had finally decided to convert.

⁶⁸ Butler quoted by Mossière (2012), p. 10.

⁶⁹ Taylor (2019).

⁷⁰ Marshall (2010).

prophetic perspective of reality, thus strengthening and reproducing the ‘power of prophecy’ as embodied by Afonso Nunes⁷¹.

Conclusion

This paper presents a case-study of conversion narratives and trajectories within the Angolan Tokoist Church, a prophetic and highly institutionalized Church, whose visibility and influence within Angola’s sociopolitical context have grown over the last twenty years, after the end of the civil war and the ‘return of the prophet’. Two main conclusions can be drawn from the presented material.

Firstly, these narratives, collected through interviews and ethnographic experiences in Luanda, illustrate how a historically constructed paradigm, one where spiritual encounters (either with the Holy Spirit or with the Prophet’s Spirit) intersect with an institutional and sociopolitical dimension, is reproduced in contemporary conversion experiences. This paradigm serves as a catalyst for a biographic illusion, where contact with the Spirit is regarded as the primary factor for one’s transformation, yet it remains closely tied to one’s social capital. It can thus be said that “conversion is not simply a scene where the social fades away in favor of an identity freely shaped by religious conviction, but rather a relational process, involving the individual as much as communities and institutions”⁷². The relational dimension is also evident in the interview setting, where the researcher’s presence is reappropriated by the narrative to testify to individual change. This illustrates how interest in conversion, as a predefined experiential and discursive category, can reify it, simultaneously reinforcing both the conviction of an unprecedented change in the convert’s life and the heuristic significance of the ethnographer’s research mission.

Secondly, conversion narratives and their historical paradigm reproduce three distinct temporalities, which reflect those implicitly embodied by the figure of the prophet: the event, associated with a spiritual dimension (i.e. the descent of the Holy Spirit) and the bureaucratic act of conversion. The first temporality takes into account events in the context of the prophet’s emergence, his spiritual investiture, the creation of a Church, and his return to society through the process of personification. The second temporality concerns process and duration, involving

⁷¹ My presence as a researcher on Tokoism has often been interpreted through a prophetic lens, as the prophet Simão Toko is said to have predicted that European researchers would one day come to study Tokoism. In this sense, my research on this church and my interest in conversion contribute to reproduce a prophetic perspective on reality, reinforcing both the legitimacy of Afonso Nunes and the biographical illusion of converts.

⁷² Angey, Fer and Vildard (2021), p. 3.

access to institutional positions and daily charisma. This is visible in contemporary conversion trajectories, as well as in the historical formation of a group of followers who have experienced access to the Holy Spirit and have entered the Tabernacle. In terms of the temporality of process within the figure of the prophet, the institutionalization of Afonso Nunes as bishop, the ecclesiastical head of the Church, is a sign of this dynamic. Finally, the third temporality is performativity, evident in the conversion narratives, where the presence of the researcher and its insertion into the narrative process reifies the conversion. This performativity is also present in the prophetic trajectory as a whole, where prophecy, as a retrospective reading⁷³ of Angolan history, exists only through the performative act of the word.

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⁷³ Dozon (1995).

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