

Auto-Da-Fé: A ceremony more than just words

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The modern era Iberian societies were deeply marked by the daily presence of the Inquisition.

In Portugal, Spain and all over the Iberian domain, society was encouraged to cooperate with the inquisitors and expose the «herectic».

People should completely trust the action of the Inquisition Tribunal and keep a distance from what went on inside it, where, away from everybody, defendants underwent long imprisonment, torture and physical and spiritual degradation.

That procedure in no way resembled what is today considered a penal system. Trials were based on constraint, privation of freedom, veiled accusation and unnotified charges.

Secrecy and confidentiality, the Tribunal's dogmas, were solely used against the defendants. Both society and prisoners' families would never come to know what went on inside the prisons.

The long-lasting secret proceedings culminated in the so called auto-da-fé. During these occasions society was invited to share with the Holy Office the diffusion of the sentences of the inquisitorial cases among the public. A scenery was set up to show the defendants. The crowd that gathered the ceremony became thus an essential component of it. This way, defendants egressing from prison reappeared before the watchful eyes of their family, relatives and friends. Such re-encounters with society took the shape of great pomp and circumstance.

The auto-da-fé procession was preceded by representatives of the Holy Office. They marched around the defendants, the so-called heretics of the Catholic faith, the ones who did not follow the desired habits of the Catholic kingdom. These wore special clothes —the «sambenitos»— clothes which at the same time identified and condemned them. These clothes bore printed signs, thus conveying to society the Inquisition Tribunal's verdict on their «crimes». Since the auto-da-fé basically suggested an exorcism of «evil», the crowd that followed the Holy Office representatives may have sought to benefit from such «purification»¹.

¹ Cf. Nazário, Luiz, Autos-de-Fé como Espetáculos de Massa. Dissertação de Mestrado apresentada a F.F.L.C.H. da Universidade de São Paulo, 1989. See him also of the same author " "O julgamento das chamas: autos-de-fé como espetáculo de massa", in Novinsky, Anita e Carneiro, Maria Luiza Tucci (org.), Inquisição: ensaios sobre mentalidade, heresias e arte. Rio de Janeiro, Expressão e Cultura - Edusp (São Paulo), 1992, pp. 525 a 528.

The truth of the Holy Office was to be revealed through words and images. Everything was carefully elaborated in order to obtain the social approval to their secret trial. For this sake, and in order to convey their message, clear codes were set up. Besides the sentences' words, the auto-da-fé also made use of a more subtle communication by means of image.

THE AUTO-DA-FÉ-IMAGES

Consisting of a mobile stage, the auto-da-fé, thus mobile and pilgrim, was formed by a group which turned out to be the scene in which the inquisitorial message was to be communicated.

The auto-da-fé ceremony —the Inquisition defendant— was the scenery where the Church's degree of condemnation was revealed. Framing the condemnation was the square, the city and the crowd. The condemnation took the shape of a micro-cosmos, under the testimony of the cathedral. When the «heretic» defendants were to be burned at the stake, the ceremony took place beyond the city walls, thus emphasizing the power of the Holy Office.

A show inside the show - typically baroque in feature can be found in all this representation: a scene inside the scene thus forming a game of double illusion. Moments before the execution, the defendant condemned to stake was exhorted into repentance. Denying it, he would be taken away by an executor and tied up to the pillory. Negation maintained, the defendant was then told that his soul would be delivered to the devil, who was already at the individual's side, eager to receive his soul and take it to the flames of hell.

A heretic's conversion, already attempted by a Holy Office clergyman the night before, did not, however, have the power to save the convict's life. Its sole effect was that of «mercifully» relieving him from the garrotte before his body was then thrown to the flames.

The manipulated crowd followed the events and, as they commonly did, exhorted the torturer to carry out the execution. The torturers, on their turn, fulfilled the wishes of the crowd and hit the victims' faces with lit embers. The stake was eventually lit up and the heretic burned².

The scenes were very dramatic and their impact was contributed by the presence of the crowd, whose role was both that of an actress and of spectator. Many of the attendants chose to take a rather active part in it, holding sticks on fire as well as dry plants, while others stood by the road sides in order to shout and register their condemnation as the procession passed by.

² It confronts with the description presented by Saraiva, Antonio José, *Inquisição e Cristãos-Novos*. Lisboa, Editorial Estampa, 1985. p. 108.

THE AUTO-DA-FÉ SPACE ISOTOPIES

The stage on which the auto-da-fé was performed can be interpreted based upon a few significant elements - so-called isotopies³ —which are related to the XVII and XVIII centuries' Iberian culture. The illustration «Auto-da-fé stage outline » can help one to visualize such features. As the procession to introduce the defendants was over, the Inquisitors entered the stage by the altar's side where sat the Inquisition Holy Office emblem— a «green cross» (see 10 in the key).

Since the defendants had already been previously sentenced, the Inquisitors presence on stage, where they sat on the top tier (see 1 in the key) had the sole purpose of presiding over the public trial. Their sitting on the superior tier meant both to assert their «vertical» social position as well as to convey their «positive» (of superior value, powerful) status. Such power was not fictitious, for during the auto-da-fé ceremony the General Inquisitor was the most prominent person in town⁴, the king himself, who comfortably watched the proceedings from a window facing the square, being a mere spectator. All civil authorities —at the Holy Office's orders, as it were— took special seats beside the Tribunal's top-rank officials (see 2 in the key).

The whole group thus conveyed a visual idea of a joint power, of an alliance between the public authorities and the Inquisitors⁵, who laid at the hands of the city's highest authority a list of their irrevocable sentences.

The presence of the defendants used to be involved by negative isotopies. The entrance was made by the opposite side to that one used by the inquisitors (number 5 in the key). The stage in which the «sambenitados» used to take a seat faced the one occupied by the inquisitors, the Crown representatives and the Tribunal's top-rank officials (see 8 in the key). In thesis, they would be judged by both the supreme powers: the religious and the political.

The defendants' bleachers was to be situated in an inferior plan to the judges'. Right above their heads a cross, an open code, which conveyed wide meanings in Catholicism, was in such case all but reaffirming the Church power through the Inquisition.

At a certain moment, the defendants should leave their seats in order to hear the readings of the sentences. The stage was thus transformed into an arena. The defendants, placed in a lower level, as «inferiors», defeated, potentially speaking deserved death and the deeps. Their space then passed by an act of narrowness. Confined, the defendants were under the wary look of an alcaide (see 4 in the key). He was not though placing himself at the same plan of the«sambenitado»,

³ For the semiologic analysis it is confronted with. Blikstein, Izidoro, Kaspar Hauser ou *A Fabricação da Realidade*. São Paulo, Cultrix, 1985. Still., Schaff, Adam, *Language et Connaissance*. Paris, Anthropos, 1974, and Hall, E., *The Silent Language*. New York, Anchor Books, 1973.

⁴ Azevedo, Joao Lúcio D', *História dos Cristãos-Novos Portugueses*. Lisboa, Clássica Editora, 1922, p. 283.

⁵ Regarding this, see the article by Anita Novinsky, "A inquisição no Brasil", *Problemas Brasileiros*, 289, janeiro-fevereiro de 1992.

but in a tier, once more asserting his «vertical» social position. Equally, at this same position, a Tribunal member proceeded to the public reading of the defendant's sentence.

After the readings, the defendants who were condemned to stake used to leave the place. Those who had received the terrible fate, the so-called «released to the secular arm», were at that step taken away from the great scenario. The execution of the «released heretics» could not take place at the auto-da-fé site, at the faith location, under the «pious» eyes of God's representatives. All the others characters of auto-da-fé used to remain on their positions. It then continued to take place, arriving to a closure just by means of a very solemn procession involving the return of the Inquisitors and Tribunal members to the Inquisition headquarters.

THE IMAGE OF «SAMBENITOS»

In the process of social reinsertion, the Inquisition defendants should be introduced carrying signs or marks, i.e., settled signs. Image would *tell* beforehand the condition of each one according to the Church's postulates.

The «sambenitos», dresses used by the defendants during the ceremony, were employed by the Iberian Peninsula Inquisition from the very beginning of its history. They represented signs which the Inquisition made use of to communicate its *repertoire* to society. Several Councils of the Catholic Church tried to standardize the use of those dresses. According to the Council of Tarragona, the «sambenito» should be adorned by two crosses in contrasting colours. One should be on the right side of the chest and the other on the left side. In case of the defendant becoming, in the auto-da-fé, «reconciled» (penitent) with the Church, his sentence should outcome above the crosses. It was then decided, according to the Council of Béziers, dated 1233, that a third cross on the dress should be present, laid over the adornment, the cowl or the veil, which the defendant used to wear on his head. That same Council established in a definite way both the colour and the position of the crosses.

The chosen colour was yellow and should be laid on the low-quality wool tissue. Other signs should be on the red colour. The crosses ought to be placed at the front and behind the «sambenito». The penitent's condition could then become visible in his front or in his back. Béziers also set the rules for the precise circumstances each «sambenito» should be worn. E.g., when the penitents should wear the cowl or the veil (women), the number of crosses there should be on the dress, its exact measures and the casual additions the dress should take.⁶

In the world of Iberian culture, certain particularities took place, even though, as a rule, the condemned should be the one that had practiced «crimes» against

⁶ Atienza, Juan G., *Guía de la Inquisición en España*. Barcelona, 1988, p. 64-65.

faith or usages. The Portuguese and the Spanish Inquisitions were deeply related to the so-called Jewish issue⁷. Being so the case, the remarkable user fit for the «sambenito» was the «new-Christian», that means, the one whose origins were Jewish but converted into Catholicism, although being suspected to secretly keep his faith to the mosaic religion. They had to bear the «heresy» crime.

The red-coloured images over yellow on the «sambenitos» were due to mainly mark on the «heretics». The use of these colours, along with other pejorative connoting signs, became widespread peculiarly during the Western history, maybe partially as a fruit of how the ceremony of auto-da-fé was made a commonplace.

The illustration «The basic types of 'sambenitos'» helps us understanding the main codes found in the garments. The three first types of «sambenitos» (from left to right) show the image on how the defendants became penitents, right after «abjuration» of «mistakes», i.e., repentance towards the Catholic baptism. We can observe in the last three garments the signs which indicated the defendant had not previously repented and therefore was condemned to death at stake. All of them worn «crowns», featuring their mind *commitment*. Prior repentance before the reading of the sentence, as shown in dress 4, did not save the individual from death and from compelling presence at the auto-da-fé. There he would give his «contribution» to the ceremony: the garrotte before the bonfire. In case of late repentance, after hearing his sentence (dress 5), the image imprinted on the «sambenito» was that one of flames upside down («rebellious fire»). He was then taken to stake but during the inquisitional speech, flames would only burn *his body and not his soul*, due to his repentance.

The defendant who was not repentant used to wear the garment represented by number 6. The presence of upright flames was the icon image. It was rather reinforced by the images of dragons which would take the body and the soul of the «relapsed one» to the deeps, where he would be burnt forever and ever. The dragon stuck on the cowl referred to how the «heretic's» mind was corrupted by evil and thus fate was being fulfilled. The set —«sambenito» plus cowl— represented a semantic alley, from top to bottom. The present axis disphoric: evil, mistake, hell, devil. In opposition to heresy, orthodoxy would represent a positive axis (a better one): good, righteousness, God. Quotation marks were also present in the garments. They would mean a cut with normality. They were placed over the chest, reinforcing the vision of that time the soul would be sheltered in the heart.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

The reflections about the usage of visual communication the Iberian Inquisition performed permits to better understand the relation between practices, ideology, stereotypes, sign, and symbol systems and the way they were used at that

⁷ Novinsky, Anita, *Cristãos-Novos na Bahia: a inquisição no Brasil*. São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1992, p. XXI (prefácio).

time. The action of the Holy Office aimed at conditioning the individual's perception and cognition, reaffirming a rigid frame of values. Great part of the Iberian society was involved by the inquisitional message because its members realized a total and articulate reality built up by those coordinates. There was a sort of logic to make the power system a commonplace⁸.

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Auto-da-fé contributed for the formation of a mythicizing behaviour related to words and images transmitted by the Inquisition. The macro-system, the Holy Office of the Inquisition, approached a micro-system of signs, auto-da-fé. The ceremony was controlled by semantic alleys of superiority and of vertical authority. The verticality, expressed by the position occupied by the inquisitors, was a manipulative index reflecting the «superiority», the «majesty». The verticality constituted a positive semantic alley, acting as conditioner and exalter. Frontage and rectitude lined up with verticality. In opposition, the horizontality alleys existed, represented by the «heretic» and, more specifically, by the «Unfaithful Chris-

⁸ Symptomatically, yellow was also the colour that nazism found appropriate to identify the Jewish prisoners in the concentration camp of Dachau. The theme was developed by professor Izidoro Blikstein, of the Universidade de Sao Paulo.

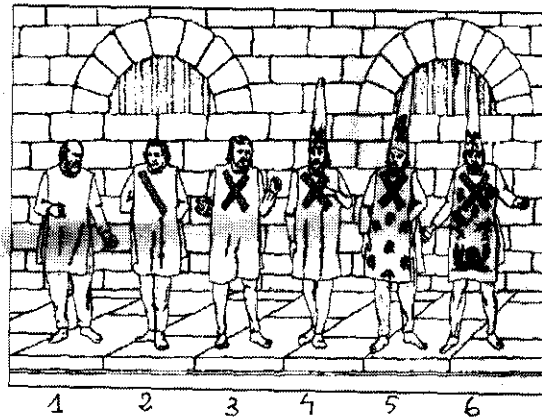
⁹ Atienza, Juan G., op. cit., p. 66.

tian» or, ultimately, by the Jew. They were associated to the lines of pejorative values of tortuosity.

The «sambenitos» were also assigned to image effects. The codes were represented by colours and illustrations. The yellow, the red, the forms (dragoon, flames, quotation marks) constituted stereotypes as a result of the Catholicism semantic alley, combined with those of «rectitude» and verticality.

The Inquisition used images that were not a simple ornamental effect, for they inserted in the concern of communicating a certain frame of values which made the institution and its normative power alive. Thus, they were present in autos-da-fé in all its formal elements, be it the architectural, the ornamental, the festual or in the individual's mobility inside of that produced space.

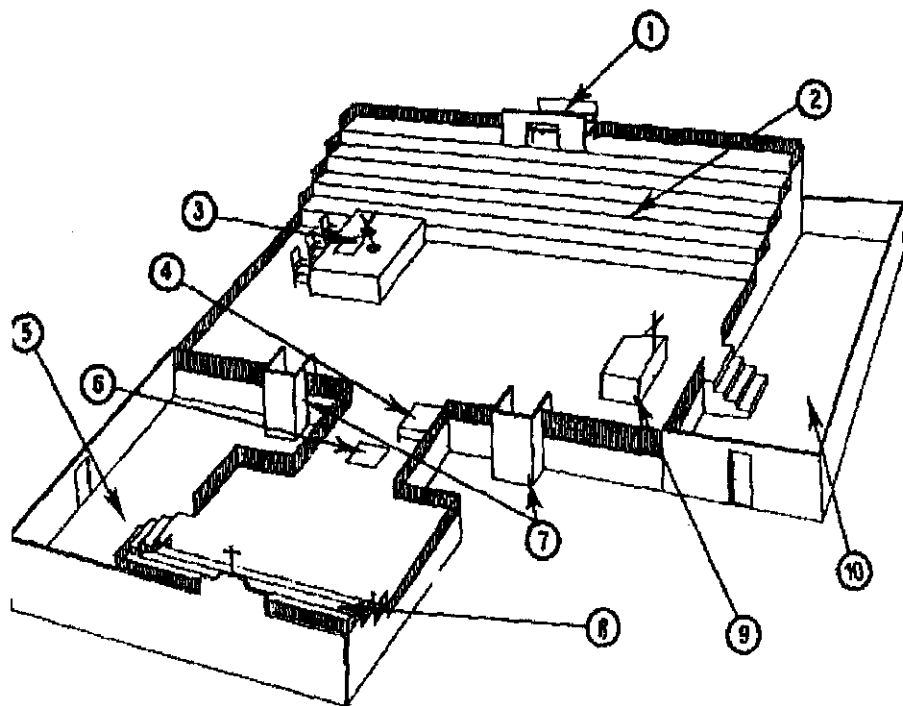
Basic types of Sambenitos



Source of reference of the illustration: Juan G. Atienza, *Guía de la Inquisición en España*. Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1988, p.67.

Key: from the left to the right: 1. reconciled «of levi»; 2. reconciled «of vehementi» (not declared formal heretic); 3. reconcil of vehementi» (declared formal heretic); 4. not previously repented; 5. Late repented after the sentence; 6. released impeniter.

Schematic plan of a stage for auto-da-fé



Source: Juan G. Atienza, *Guía de la Inquisición en España*. Barcelona: Ariel, 1988, p. 63.

Legend: 1. the inquisitor's place; 2. bleachers for the Tribunal's members, ecclesiastical and civil authorities; 3. the secret table; 4. the alcaide tier; 5. atrium of entrance for penitents; 6. place where penitents received the reading of the sentence pulpits for the sermons; 8. bleachers for penitents; 9. altar with the Holy Occupation green cross; 10. Atrium of the inquisi entrance.