

Assonhe Degbegnon Barnabe

Ethnic group: Fon (Mahi)

Language (dialect): Fongbe (Mahigbe)

Country: Benin

Recording date: April 29, 2017

Recording location: Savalou; Benin

Total Recording time: 9:45

Technician: Brian Nowak

Group Members:

Assonhe Degbegnon Barnabe – vocals and bell

Track names -- duration

- 1) Gbeme Dji 1 – Bon Bon Ke – 00:43
- 2) Gbeme Dji 2 –Keya Fimi Ke – (What could you do to me?) – 00:34
- 3) Beyeku – 1:02
- 4) Gbewoli 1 – 00:46
- 5) Gbewoli 2 – 00:50
- 6) Gbedi – 1:02
- 7) Gbelosso – 00:53
- 8) Gbe-Winlin – 1:03
- 9) Gbe-Abla (or Bavala) – 00:57
- 10) Gbe-Guda – 00:28
- 11) Gbe-Sa – 00:50
- 12) Gbe-Tumela – 00:37

Group Introduction:

On a steep hill towards the king's palace in Savalou, Benin, eighty-five year old Barnabe sits outside the door to his room, most days in front of a small, wood-plank table. It's common for animist priests and diviners to advertise their homes, usually with long poles with a high hanging piece of cloth or a hand painted sign on wood or metal. The Fa divination table is digitally displayed on a wall only seen when going down the hill. Representing the 256 possible outcomes of the Fa, the ruler perfect painting was relatively expensive.

Now the oldest Fa specialist in town, for decades Barnabe travelled all over Benin as a United Nations Development Fund driver. Sadly, a serious illness forced him to return home after a life of work. After doctors could not heal the illness and basically sent him home to die, he claims to feel fortunate that a traditional medicine from a woman in Southern Benin was the only thing that has kept him alive. He

continues to work as a diviner and healer, pushing through his Fatigue with an easy smile.

Fa spiritual readings, with roots in the IFa readings of the Yoruba tradition, use a binary system to produce a pattern that represents your destiny and answers the question one silently asks before the ritual begins. The binary patterns appear as the priest drops a set of two chains, two sets of four nutshells or medallions separated enough for them to land either up or down. They are swung and allowed to land with two vertical rows in front of the Fa priest.

Incredibly Familiar with the Fa at his elderly age, his divinations are better for locals Familiar with the metaphors as he casually references Fa symbolism. He councils as if those receiving a reading are a character in the parable of their own life. He often recites the full story associated with the pattern one receives after his initial reaction.

The oral tradition is strong in Fa and each of the 256 patterns includes a main parable, proverbs, and a short song. A large ledger book full of handwritten Fa literature served to document the tradition. It now also helps Barnabe to remember all of the details and associated proverbs and advice during readings, and for this recording of Fa song examples.

Recording Context:

Under a long shade hangar with one cement wall and the other side, a complex of planks, braches, trees and other materials forming a shade hangar and sitting area with benches. After recovering from illness he spends most of the day greeting passersby as his concession is located next to the road with a wide, gate-size entrance to his sitting area. Passing through the shade hangar leads to a small passage that winds around and between houses into a matrix of extended Family concessions typical of the older neighborhoods behind the main roads of Savalou.

Recording even these few examples was laborious following a midday trip to the market to buy “ingredients” for an offering to the spirits. We took time to record a few examples from the first column of the Fa matrix. To assure himself that he was prepared, he brought his large ledger book full of the stories, proverbs and songs. For each song he would read the title of the Fa page, locate the songs lyrics towards the bottom, read them, recall the melody by singing to himself, and then start singing. The small bell would often pick up the syncopated beat as the lyrics and melody fit together and the full recall of the song had been established. After sparking his memory he could place down his book and sing from memory. Each song followed this same process.

Notes on Language Use:

The symbolic nature of the Fa's responses demonstrates how the desired means of transmission is through poetic verses in stories with a message in fables, proverbs, and short song lyrics. A combination of the messages and individual events in the stories enlighten the listener. The capacity to understand the message may be guided by the Fa practitioner to help associate references from a story or lyric to real life, although the general message is usually very clear. This matrix-like system requires an almost miraculous coincidence if the moral of a parable forms a message responding to your particular situation or the question you secretly asked the Fa.

The richness of the Fa literature does not only hold the destiny of the clients but also a deep reservoir of socio-cultural, environmental and zoological wisdom from deeply rooted traditions. Part of understanding the message of the Fa relies on the clients knowledge of the animals, agriculture, hunting, herbal medicine, social situations, emotional references, and social traits relating to an associated animal behavior found in the stories. The prevalence of these cultural references proliferates from popular music, in bars, shops, market stalls, homes and the casual conversation and joking that goes on throughout the day as part of everyday life.

The ability to interpret the Fa as an individual then requires a vast knowledge that includes part of childhood development. Adults also deepen their understanding of the symbolism found in the various references found in stories and proverbs. The Fa practitioner can fill in the gaps in a clients understanding of these references and do what is referred to in many West African Languages as "opening" the saying, meaning, explaining an expression, unpacking all of the knowledge and reference condensed into a word or phrase. Therefore the practitioner has two levels of interpretation: the symbolic meaning of the poetic or proverbial messages and the association of the message to the client's personal situation.