

Halarou Alou

Ethnic group: Hausa (Arewa)

Language (dialect): Hausa (Arewanci)

Country: Niger

Recording date:

Recording location: Gountou Yena neighborhood, Niamey, Niger

Total Recording time: 15:52

Technician: Brian Nowak

Group members:

Halarou Alou – goge and vocals (spike-fiddle)

Anabi Sabi – goge and vocals (spike-fiddle)

Issaka Gongassa – kwarya and vocals (calabash)

Idi Boro – kwarya and vocals (calabash)

Track names -- duration

1) songs 1 – 4:09

2) Halarou Alou interview – 11:43

Group introduction:

The Hausa animist tradition centers around an area known as Arewa surrounding the town of Dogondoutchi in Niger. Halarou's grandmother is the chief of all animists in the region and his playing resounds with a deeply seated dedication to songs for spirits that possess mediums in ceremonies. Songs praise and conjure the spirits with alluring lyrics, and sacred incantations. Music pierces the ceremonial grounds with a physical impact on initiates' bodies. This ensemble is typical to the Hausa arrangement of musicians with two goge players and at least two calabash players.

One of the best goge (monochord spike-fiddle) musicians in the country, Halarou's recording features songs that opened the ceremonial gates to the spirits at the start of a possession ceremony in the capital city of Niamey. Although he now resides in Niamey, he frequents ceremonies throughout Western Hausa country and has lived in Filingué, the epicenter of the Hauka spirit movement.

Recording context:

Priests of the possession ceremonies tend to live on some sort of peripheral space, often the physical placement of their house on the outskirts of a town and most often on the economic periphery too. As many practitioners of animism and spirit worship need to head to the bush to perform sacrifices and rituals also, leaving them on the social

periphery, between invisible and inter-influential social and spirit realms.

So the edge of town, in the poorest of settlements, is the ideal place for a priest, however sometimes pockets of a former periphery exist in between the new plots being carved throughout downtown Niamey. Here in the very center of town, between the large Seyni Kountché Stadium, a bus station, and a filthy running gully of water with unsanitary gardens and darkness at night, is the straw makeshift dwelling of a Hausa Sarkin Bori, or Spirit Priest.

The spirit shade hangar faces a space for dancing on a designated dance-floor with surrounding spectators both sitting on benches and chairs, and standing in any remaining gaps. However the long day of marathon-quality, intense playing starts with an empty space. The first sounds are often a squeal and smack following ritual sacrifice of an animal, or offering an object, like cracking an egg.

The moment that follows, the warming of the possession space, including interlaced formalities and playful greeting for a significant amount of time before a crowd forms and the ceremony begins. Here, the musicians light the arena with the first songs to begin a full day of ceremonial levels of intensity and dedication.

Lyrical and musical deliverance follows the energy that flows throughout the hours of the long day. This recording at the start of the ceremony shows how the musicians are already setting a high standard in the initial morning songs. One of the calabash players commented that they were so serious that they would not even crack a smile on the way to the ceremony. This he stated from the moment he was picked up.

The energy pushes the content with incantations, lyrics, and praising blasting out of the mouths of those perched at the edge of the spirit canopy facing the open space. A short example of mixed linguistic and musical performance fill this excerpt with a high degree of quality elements from ceremonial performance in its best form. This song is a perfect example of pre-crowd, action-packed warming-up of the possession grounds.

Notes on Language Use:

Halarou interlaces incantations and praises into the hours of music performed during a ceremony. The *goge* player decides what songs to play and when so that no ceremony is ever the same.

The decisions about which songs to play is a complicated negotiation between social and spirit worlds and can change in an instant as a medium enters the ceremonial grounds, or to target a particular spirit for possession, or to honor a spirit indirectly by praising a spirit's family members in order to please them into possessing the medium.

The directorial nature of the *goge* player highlights not only the leading role as main designer, but also as one that channels of the socio-spiritual space. The *goge* player constructs a musical and lyrical accompaniment while also interacting with the social scene, and anticipating the progression of possession, with an endless cycle of songs based on spirit families and individual spirits.

Lyrics are believed to physically impact listeners. Shout-outs and praises interject emotional reactions into the unique soundtrack, improvised with linguistic creativity that follows a stream of consciousness, sometimes quite literally, to possess others.

Music here embellishes the lyrics as string and percussion rise to follow heartfelt singing that can only be graduated to a beyond-language musical release, in the form of a fill or solo, depending on the timing in the song.

The rising and falling of language used during possession ceremonies carries the truly artistic expression of applying language as a force driving some gathered in the crowd to spirit possession. The commanding nature of language would be the extreme form of expression used by a leader to invoke possession by a stubborn spirit or a difficult situation. In these cases the musicians' tone could become demanding in asking that certain criteria for a deal or behavior from an individual spirit be met.