

Son Mageste Missano Dah

Ethnic group: Fon

Language (dialect): Fongbe

Country: Benin

Recording date: April 10, 2016

Recording location: Ouidah, Benin

Total Recording time: 26:15

Technician: Brian Nowak

Group members:

Son Mageste Missano Dah – (gourd shaker)

Track names -- duration

- 1) Missa various songs of worship 1 – 14:26
- 2) Missa various songs of worship 2 – 9:13
- 3) Missa song for possession 1 – 2:36

Group introduction:

One of many major vodun shrines found all over Ouidah and its immediate vicinity, the Missa shrine is more enormous than it seems. One of the only ways to know about the shrine inside is the sign next to the door on the concrete wall that shows in picture form, with red x's: no shoes, no shirts, no hats. The man who is in charge here is called "His Majesty."

Regularly used altars, like thick tree branches, or stones, surround the small porch attached to the small shrine room. His majesty, family, and other devotees of the house sing songs to the spirits at the opening to the shrine room, a private room that houses the mask. The opening to the room is covered by layers of cloth gifted by practitioners, and clay pots, saucers, shells, gourds, calabashes, bottles and a divination tray with trinkets lie scattered along the bottom edge of the cloth in a perfect way.

Recording context:

Two near graduates of an 11-month apprenticeship are a blessed addition to the group. Both are just days from a multi-day ceremony, the first public outing as official mediums of their new spirits. These massive celebrations host guests from all over, including neighboring Togo in this case.

The man playing the loud gong sitting next to His Majesty, and the smaller girl that gets up to dance, are close to finishing a huge life

achievement. Notice how the girl grabs her initiatory, black, hand-spun cotton, loom-woven cloth, to dance.

Also, the girl dancing with the infant facing her on the ground is an incredible moment especially as the baby jiggles to the music. It even makes his majesty laugh a couple of times. Look for when the baby gets scared of the camera getting too close, only to be jolted back into it with some directed gong in the face and a jest from the chest slapper.

These songs include those initiates need to learn for the spirits.

Notes on Language Use:

The initiatory rites for the Fon, and many other groups, include intensive oral literature memorization in the different forms, including songs, incantations, nick-names, descriptive poetry, associative references to a spirit's family members as well as characteristics and likes and dislikes, like a character study

Sometimes, short lyrics are considered distinct songs in the sense of using a phrase or two to capture a particular quality of the spirit or approach to worship, or homage to an ancestor. When explaining these songs' names, a Fon might tell you the actual lyrical phrase as the name of a given song. It is as if the melody of the short lyrical phrases each has their own song quality, in the sense that they set a different mood.

The design of vodun society helps to establish a socio-linguistic network of individuals for a shared encyclopedia of knowledge, including vocabulary, sacred songs, genealogies, and, moral and spiritual advice. Vodunsi, the name for a vodun initiate, is initiated to houses with shrines, where members spend a lot of public, private, and even family-like time with each other.

Vodun Shrine Houses host both private and public ceremonies during which the literature of different spirits and even particular lineages dominate much of the important moments of worship. The importance of ceremonial life to language heritage preservation remains more important than when most of these traditions began, as there are more avenues of communication and more variety of influence on radios, tvs, and cellphones now.