

Sahizonou Gregoire

Ethnic group: Nago

Language (dialect): Nago (Ouidah)

Country: Benin

Recording date: May 10, 2017

Recording location: Ouidah, Benin

Total Recording time: 13:30

Technician: Brian Nowak

Group Members:

Sahizonou Gregoire – Lead vocals and Agbe-ka (gourd-shaker with bead net)

Ogoulola Rene -- Agbe-ka (gourd-shaker with bead net)

Medegan Arnaud Stanisla – Agogo (iron, half-pipe bell)

Medegan Jean-Bapstiste -- Agogo (iron, half-pipe bell)

Kofi Aine – Akko (chest and thigh slaps)

Track names -- duration

1) Agbo Elegba (Song for Elegba) – 3:55

2) Gbalagbe Majo (Song for the Agbe-ka gourd shaker) – 3:05

3) Ogu Lo Nigbo (Ogu opens the path) – 6:32

Group Introduction:

From the Adjido neighborhood on the Southern edge of town, off the road to the beach, Ouidah is a place with a strong colonial history and cultures that thrive on the vodun, or spirits. The Nago in Ouidah have deeply rooted music and ritual traditions despite the proximity to Cotonou, Benin's largest city and major, coastal port for West Africa. Many ceremonies take place in the concessions of families all over town, and the agbe ka gourd shaker is kept in a shrine dedicated to the sacred instrument.

The gourd with a bead net is not always a sacred instrument. It is a popular instrument in endless styles of music along coastal West African. The sacred agbe ka among the Nago of Ouidah differs physically than the more practical popular kind. A gourd with a particularly bulbous base, with knob-like handle for the stem allows for deep resonant bass thumps. The knob-handle is the main grip although the bass-end also thumps back with a sturdy under-hand hit from the palm. It also has a looser, wider net, and fewer beads or shells than the more common gourd-net shaker. The shape of the agbe ka allows the hands to produce more sounds when directly striking the gourd.

Recording Context:

The agbe ka are dedicated to the Egungun, or the “returned,” spirits of the ancestors. The Egungun are an important group of vodun, especially important at the family-level for the Nago. Shrines for families and even lineages often consist of small, iron, cone-headed stakes of various décor. Sometimes they develop over generational time into elaborate alters. Some of the Egungun’s songs require ritual before playing and the agbe ka require permission and generosity in the form of sacrifice.

For a demonstration of paired instruments with a ????? chest and thigh slapper, only two of the three gourds were assembled with two iron ago?????. The two agbe ka converse clearer in this smaller arrangement. The bells form alternating rhythms, to emphasize and enjoy the underlying pulse in the absence of a straight-forward tempo-keeper. The presence of the third agbe ka appears only through the offering of sodabi and soda to the third, not present, agbe ka in its place during the small ceremony before the recording.

The larger bulbous area of the gourd is a handful so the preferred posture is an open-armed grip, so that one hand holds the bottom of the gourd, while the other hand holds below the knob on the neck of the gourd. Using a back and forth motion the musician can push, pull and slap, to articulate the syncopating rhythms while allowing for various incidental sounds.

Notes on Language Use:

Aside from the physical differences between the more popular gourd-net, musicians perform regular rituals including sacrifice, regular prayer, offerings, and consultation create a multi-faceted role for this instrument in both ceremonial and everyday contexts.

The sacred agbe ka featured here are part of a set of three, housed in a concrete shrine, respectfully attended to as the resting place of a tool used to communicate with the ancestors. Closed-off and enshrined, animal sacrifices made the instruments worthy of sacred and ceremonial treatment, with regular offerings. More often, regular offerings are food and drink, so that musicians and ancestors share meals and drinks together via the agbe ka, as offerings are poured on the ground in front to of the instruments before being consumed. The drinks usually include sodabi, the local, fiery, palm-juice moonshine balanced with a cavity-carving, sweet soda, in this case, electric-bright orange.

Directly reminiscent of sacrifices to personal or family shrines, when a musician makes offerings to the agbe ka, the instrument expands its role to become a spiritual communicator, in addition to carrying the singer's praises to the ancestors. The sacred aspect of the instrument includes non-performance contexts including asking permission before a performance outside the context of a ceremony for foreigners for this recording. There are also regular offerings of thanks and respect for the instruments while seated in their altar. The agbe ka carry messages during inaudible contexts, including divination, as well as through the music created during performance.

The heightened status of these particular instruments, even in the context of an incomplete set of instruments and staged recording, required not only a ceremony with offerings but also permission in the form of divination. Two varieties of Kola nuts, a regional stimulant, are offered, but then broken carefully into four pieces for the common kola nut, and two pieces for the smaller, oval shaped, dark kola. They are thrown to the ground and interpreted with transparency according to the side they landed on, open (inside-up) or closed (outside-up), before distributing to those present for the ceremony. Having transmitting a message from the ancestors, the infused, divinatory kola then blesses the person that chews it.