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Cultural resistance and the *Hauka* movement in Niger

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Few things can be more memorable than those occasions when everyday routines are shattered abruptly by shocking experiences. One of my most shattering experiences occurred in 1969 in the Republic of Niger. I had been teaching English in the secondary school of Tera, a town of 1000 in the heart of Songhay country. For three months my routine at the school was to teach from early morning to noon and then go to the dusty bar in town to drink beer with my French colleagues. The same routine was repeated at the end of the working day. We came to spend a great deal of time at Chez Jacob, the establishment of a Yoruba trader, one of the few non-European beer drinkers in town. The beer was usually lukewarm due to the temperamental flame of Jacob's kerosene refrigerator. But neither the temperature of the beer nor the stark décor, a hard bench against a mudbrick wall, kept us from maintaining our European rituals in a strange and distant land. What we did not know about Chez Jacob was that it bordered upon the compound of a *zima*, a ritual priest of the local possession cult. One afternoon, however, we discovered, to our dismay, the violent nature of the *Hauka*, one of several 'families' of spirits in the pantheon of the Songhay people of the western regions of the Republic of Niger.¹

In the late afternoon some three months after we had begun to frequent Chez Jacob a crowd began to form. One musician played a one-string violin and two others were beating on overturned calabashes with bamboo drumsticks. Having never witnessed such a dance we left the hot stuffiness of the bar and joined the crowd. Suddenly, a young man, who had been standing only a few paces from me, vomited up a black liquid. I thought he was about to die. Like the other members of the audience, I gave this man room to maneuver. He threw himself to the ground, threw sand all over his body, and then put large amounts of sand into his open mouth. Sand in mouth, he stood erect and peered at people in the audience. Seeing me, he spit sand in my direction. Seeing the Songhay members of the audience, he jerked his body toward them and attempted to strike them, but attendants of the local cult restrained him before he had the chance to strike anyone. He turned around and I saw him clearly for the first time. His eyes were bulging and a blood vessel in his forehead was throbbing. He groaned like a beast and saliva was frothing from his mouth. He began to come at me and I retreated quickly to Chez Jacob, shaken. 'Is the man crazy?' I asked someone in my inchoate Songhay. 'Oh no,' responded another member of the audience. 'He is

not a man; he is one of the *Hauka*. You must go up and greet him. He will not harm you.'

At first I refused the man's invitation, but he insisted. And so I approached this terrifying *Hauka* who thrust his open hand toward mine. 'How are you?' he asked in Pidgin French. 'Fine,' I answered, still afraid. 'Your mother has no tits.' This provoked great laughter. 'Yes she does,' I protested. 'Your father has no balls.' This provoked even more laughter from the audience which was being entertained at my expense. The man who had accompanied me suggested that I say goodbye to the *Hauka*, and so I did, having had my first exposure to horrific comedy.

Six years later I returned to the Republic of Niger to conduct anthropological research. During that year of field study I learned that *Hauka* in the Hausa language meant 'craziness,' which was not terribly surprising. I also learned that the *Hauka* were supposed to be funny as well as horrifying. Based upon my previous experience, this revelation was also not surprising, for while the *Hauka* were undoubtedly a terrifying sight, they were also aping the ways of the European. Dressed in their pith helmets and carrying their swagger sticks, I often observed the *Hauka* take the roles of European army generals who speak to their troops in pidgin French or pidgin English. This mockery, in my experience, has precipitated fright in impressionable children and has provoked laughter among seasoned adults.

In this paper I consider the *Hauka* movement of Songhay possession dance as a dramatic form in which the deities practice horrific comedy. This comedy, I suggest, provides a symbolic means by which the Songhay anchor themselves culturally in a world which the way of the European is rapidly changing. By aping the European they have resisted culturally the way of the European and have expressed metaphorically their preference for the traditions of their ancestors. In so doing the Songhay have used symbolism to protect their cultural identity from the ever expanding encroachments of European civilization (see Ranger 1975; Mitchell 1956).

Comedy and cultural resistance

Roger Bastide (1978: 156) defined cultural resistance as 'an endeavour not to let the vital values inherited from ... ancestors perish, but to reestablish them through symbolic or military means.' There is a vast literature on the rebellion of enslaved populations in the new and old worlds. But when military aspects of cultural resistance fail, as they did in short order when the Songhay confronted the colonial armies of France around the turn of the century, people must resort to symbolic means to protect the vital links to their ancestors, the essence of cultural identity.

Since the times of Aristophanes, writers have used paradoxical comedy to express their sociocultural protests. Aristophanes himself poked fun at Athenian society, 'criticizing the weaknesses of her citizens and praising the simple manly existence of another age' (Perry 1968: 6). In royal France 'a long succession of farces copied matter from political and social circles so strikingly that at length

Henry IV had to restrict subjects to private life' (Miles 1971: 5). The French farce gradually developed into 'avant-garde' theatre around the turn of the century and the 'theatre of the absurd' in more recent times. As Wellwarth (1971: x) suggests, the disparate plays of the avant-garde and the theatre of the absurd are remarkably similar in that they share a common theme, social protest, as well as the common technique of paradox. Powerless, the creators of the theatre of the absurd

can no longer scream because they can no longer hope. They can no longer speak directly to their hearers because they can no longer believe that they are heard. They can only express themselves indirectly in sardonic paradoxes.

(1971: x)

But the comedy of paradox has served perhaps a more significant purpose for those powerless peoples whose cultural identities have been threatened by contact with powerful Others. For groups such as the Songhay of the Republic of Niger the comedy of paradox as it is expressed in the *Hauka* movement 'has helped them to overcome the strange and the terrifying' (Courtney 1974: 121). In so doing the comedy of paradox can reaffirm a people's link to their ancestors and allows them to create new cultural forms which stretch with the expansion of their experience. 'If a cultural institution is laughed at, its meaning cannot be taken at face value. Laughter must be regarded as a denial of cultural automation and the affirmation of a complex human freedom to follow, change or create culture' (Codere 1956: 349-350). The comedy of paradox is therefore a major tool which can be used by people to resist culturally the influence of powerful foreigners.

Colonization and Songhay society

The coming of the French to Songhay country in 1898 marked a significant turning point in Songhay experience. Before the colonial era, the traditions of the Songhay had never been threatened significantly by military or cultural invasion. During the incessant wars of the 19th century, for example, the victors would take their slave-prisoners or their tribute and return to their own lands. The combatants in these precolonial wars were unconcerned about such European notions as cultural evolution. With the onset of French colonialism, however, the Songhay confronted the way of the European, a path of progress culminating in 'civilization.' To rescue the African from his uncivilized ways, the French introduced a colonial policy of 'cultural renaissance.' The colonial policymakers designed this policy to train a small educated elite and to instil in the masses a deep shame of their ancient ways. 'Cultural renaissance' succeeded in radically transforming the social and political foundations of the precolonial social order. Out of this decay, however, there emerged a revolutionary cultural phenomenon, the *Hauka*, a new 'family' of Songhay spirits. Through their outrageous mockery of such colonial identities as *King Zuzi* (the colonial chief justice) and *Gomno Malia* (the governor of the Red Sea), the *Hauka* burlesqued

the European and his ways. Because of their bold contempt of French culture, the *Hauka* became popular in colonial Niger. In the ruins of the old order, the *Hauka* symbolically resisted the cultural invasion of the French and protected the last vestige of Songhay cultural identity – their links to their ancestors. In what follows I describe the essentials of the colonial policies which devastated the precolonial Songhay social order.

French colonial policy and the chiefs

Before the coming of the French, the chiefs of the Songhay principalities held full authority over their polities. They were military leaders and could declare war against their neighbors. They could form alliances with other Songhay states or with other ethnic groups. They were judges in both civil and criminal disputes and under the right circumstances they could impose the death penalty. They also preserved the right to collect taxes from their subjects.

But the chief was more than a major political operator and more than a great warrior; he was responsible for the fate of his people. Indeed, as Olivier de Sardin (1983) has written of the Songhay: 'The chieftaincy can be considered first as a symbolic institution the roots of which can be traced back to magic and divination.' Military success and prosperity, it was believed, depended upon the chief's links to his ancestors which were maintained through ritual sacrifice.

Through their colonial policy the French usurped the power and authority of chiefs. Chiefs were stripped of their military independence and retained only judicial authority over minor civil disputes. The French also took from the chiefs those military and symbolic aspects of the chieftaincy which gave the polity a political foundation and a cultural identity. And to add insult to injury, the French made the chiefs agents of taxation whose special charge was to recruit their own people for forced labour. 'These functions were largely responsible for the changeover of the position of chief from the symbol of the collective unity of his people to the most hated member of that community' (Crowder 1968: 187).

French colonial policy and slavery

Slavery was the principal pillar of the foundation of most precolonial societies in the Western Soudan.² The importance of slavery for the precolonial Songhay principalities was paramount (Olivier de Sardin 1969, 1975, 1976, 1983). One of the major reasons for the incessant warfare in the 19th century in Songhay country was to procure more slaves. By consequence, all of the Songhay slaves theoretically could trace their descent patrilineally to a prisoner of a precolonial war. A Songhay noble could sell his prisoner-slave, *benya* (*benyey*, pl.), but once the *benya* had produced offspring, the offspring (*horso*) became farmers who tilled the soil for noble patrons, or skilled specialists (weavers, bards, blacksmiths, musicians, and healers) who became the clients of noble patrons.

In 1901 the governor-general of French West Africa, William Ponty, abolished slavery in the French Soudan. This edict, however, did not bring about the

immediate disappearance of slavery. In many regions of Songhay country, for example, the ties between nobles and their former slaves remained important, for slavery was an institution deeply embedded in the social structure of pre-colonial Songhay society. The social importance of slavery was sharply reduced, however, because colonialism brought with it new economic opportunities, especially for men who had once been 'captifs'. With the official abolition of slavery, many former slaves were freed to travel and seek their fortunes in distant markets. In fact the departure of slaves from the lands of their former masters was much greater than the French had anticipated. By 1908 French colonial officials estimated that some 200,000 slaves in the Western Soudan had left their patrons. In 1911 Governor-General Ponty suggested that 500,000 slaves had liberated themselves. And in a report circulated in 1912 French colonial officials estimated that one of every three slaves in the Western Soudan had fled from his master (Roberts and Klein 1980: 393). The end of slavery brought about the beginning of significant labour migrations from the steppes of the Soudan to the forests of the Guinea Coast. Many Songhay slaves travelled to Ghana to seek their fortunes. When they returned as men of worldly experience, they significantly transformed the social category of slave.

As Crowder (1968: 184) writes, 'Once a domestic slave decided to quit the family that owned him traditionally, the master could not reclaim him.' And thus the dynamic interdependence between master and slave, of which Hegel wrote, was forever undermined. As the Songhay slaves liberated themselves by choosing to travel to Ghana, the foundation of the Songhay master-noble identity was compromised. While the nobles and slaves continued their routine as though nothing had changed (and to this day, this pattern continues) the most important foundation of the precolonial stratified society had disappeared. In the wake of its disappearance a new social structure began to emerge.

French colonial policy and education

While the French were undermining the old social order of precolonial Soudanic societies through their policies on slavery and their official relationship with chiefs, they sought to expose some of their new subjects to a European universe of meaning. The French policymakers wanted to use education to create new Frenchmen out of colonial populations. The education policy sought to give instruction to the masses and to educate a small African elite to help in the governance of the new colonies.

French colonial policy on education was ironically called 'cultural renaissance'. As Governor-General Jules Brevie stated:

However pressing may be the need for economic change and development of natural resources, our mission in Africa is to bring about a cultural renaissance, a piece of creative work in human material, an association of the two races which can be brought about only by a free and wholehearted acceptance of the African by the French.

(Mumford and Orde-Brown 1935: 96)

Brevie's rhetoric masked the ultimate policy goal: to destroy the cultural foundations of African society.

In Songhay country there was large-scale indirect resistance to French education. Education among the Songhay as well as many other Islamized peoples in French West Africa was not an isolated phenomenon. Centuries before the coming of the French soldiers, Koranic schools flourished in Songhay country. Detailed non-formal education was also given by fathers to their sons and mothers to their daughters. Given the previous educational experience of the Songhay, why would they resist French education? One major reason is that the Songhay believe that the ways of the foreigner, especially if the foreigner is Christian and White, can pollute the mind. A child who goes off to school, learns French, and studies about European society can never again be a pure Songhay, for the child's mind will have been forever altered. The French, hoping to create an elite with traditional claims of leadership, established schools for the sons of chiefs. The Songhay saw no boon to elite leadership in these schools, and instead sent to be enrolled children of slave origin. An overwhelming percentage of the population of students in French schools in Songhay country were of non-noble origin (Seybou Harouna, personal communication).

French education, together with the policies on slavery and chiefs, created a climate of irrevocable change. The chiefs, once the powerful symbols of their ancestors, became hated tax collectors. The slaves, once the bulwark of the precolonial social order, became free people and they travelled to the edges of their worlds in search of adventure and money. When they returned they were free men of wide experience who transcended the narrow definition of their precolonial social positions. There also emerged a new educated elite, many of whom were of slave origin, which began to play an increasingly important role in the colonial administration on the local level and an increasingly significant role in the local-level politics which was to lead to independence.

Colonialism brought on radical and unsystematic change to the Africans living under French rule. In the decay of the old order, there arose not only the beginnings of a new order, but also a deep despair. In Songhay country and elsewhere in French West Africa, people

had their old life broken by the shock of European contact; the old order of tribal society, with its cohesion based on unquestioned rule of custom, has been forced into the background; and the native, deracialized by the shattering of everything which has previously guided him, drifts disillusioned and despairing now knowing no hope, and now with the insane joy of the iconoclast aiding the outside forces in rending his life from top to bottom.... The future is not clear because the native, here a French citizen and there a mere 'subject' does not know where he can fit in. Seeing neither a place for himself nor hope for his children, he drifts in reckless despair or gives way to carefree insouciance.

(Roberts 1963: 312-313)

While the remark which I quote above is overstated and paternalistic, it does touch on the well-known fact that when peoples are faced with rapid social

change, when they are uprooted from the comforts of centuries-old traditions, they tend toward despair (Kiev 1972). But what the author fails to realize is that people possess a great stock of cultural resources which they can manipulate to cushion blows to their social and cultural vitality. In what follows, I shall describe how the Songhay resisted culturally the ravages of French colonial rule.

Genesis of the *Hauka* movement

The Songhay possession dance (*holey hori*) has been a continually evolving aesthetic form. From its humble beginnings at the dawn of Songhay civilization it grew in importance and complexity to become, along with Islam, a major religious force of the precolonial social order. Possession dances have been always staged in the same manner. The *zima* or priest of the possession cult organizes the dance which features the music of the monochord violin (*godji*) and the calabash drum (*gasi*). When the music of these instruments is combined with the sound of the sacred verse of spirit praise-poetry and the movement of dancer-adepts, the spirits are lured from their domain in the heavens and take the bodies of their mediums on earth. When the spirits arrive in the social world, members of the cult give them food and drink and dress them in their respective costumes. Attendants also give them objects which are associated with their respective roles in the spirit world.

At the onset of French colonial rule, the possession cult of the Songhay, which did not yet include the *Hauka*, was a well-organized social institution consisting of an elaborate cult-on-earth and a pantheon of five spirit 'families' which mythically reflected the socio-cultural experience of the Songhay. Possession dance, in large measure, had been the sociocultural institution which, through the expression of its complex of symbolic forms, had maintained links between the Songhay and their ancestors.

The onset of colonial rule, as we have seen, devastated the economic and social bases of most of the societies of the French Soudan. Songhay was no exception. The first inclination of the Songhay was to militarily resist the armies of the French. There was a revolt against the French in 1905-06 (Kanya-Forstner 1969). This resistance, however, soon proved to be ineffective. While there was scattered military resistance in Songhay country, most of the Songhay reconciled themselves to French military superiority. By 1922 the French had firm control over Songhay country.

As the French began to consolidate their power in Niger, the *Hauka* movement emerged. During the course of a dance of young adults in 1925, the first *Hauka* took a medium. As Jean Rouch's informant, *El Hadj* Mohammadou of Filingue said:

It all began during a dance of girls and boys. During the dance, a Soudye woman, Zibo, who was married to a Timbuktu *sherif*, began to be possessed by a spirit. They asked her who it was. It said: 'I am *Gomno Malia*' (Governor of the Red Sea). The people said that they did not know this spirit. Then others came and took the bodies of some of the young boys. They too spoke

their names, and the people did not know them. The spirits said: 'We are the *Hauka*, the guests of *Dongo*.' This occurred at Chikal, very close to Filingue. A few days later, all the boys and girls of Filingue had been possessed by the *Hauka*.

(Rouch 1960: 73)³

Appalled at this strange turn of events in the ritual life of his town, the chief of Filingue, who had enjoyed the support of the French administration, sent word to Niamey, the capital of the Niger territory, that the woman Zibo had ruined his community with her crazy *Hauka*. The commandant of Niamey, a Major Croccichia, received the message and gave the order that all these *Hauka* should be arrested and brought to Niamey. The Filingue chief presented the 60 participants to the French officials who brought them to Niamey. They were immediately put into prison and kept there for three days. When Croccichia allowed them to leave prison, the young people began to dance until the *Hauka* came into their bodies. Zibo's body, as in other episodes, began to shake from the presence of *Gomno Malia*. Upon learning this, the commandant of Niamey ordered his soldiers to bring Zibo to his headquarters. He slapped her and said: 'Where are the *Hauka*?' He continued to slap Zibo until she said that there was no such thing as the *Hauka*. Then the other *Hauka* were brought to Croccichia and he and his soldiers began to slap them until they, too, admitted that there were no *Hauka*. Finally, the commandant sent them back to Filingue. But Zibo and her cohorts found no peace; they were expelled from Filingue. When they travelled to other villages, they established new *Hauka* cults. In this way the *Hauka* movement began to spread.

The development of the *Hauka* movement

The *Hauka* movement spread rapidly. By February 1927 the French administration noted that there were *Hauka* adepts in all the villages of the Filingue district. Indeed, the colonial administration considered the *Hauka* movement to be hostile to the local *chefs de canton*. The *Hauka* themselves were considered rivals 'of the established order, represented by the chieftaincy, the backbone of the administrative system created by the French' (Fugelstad 1975: 204).

The old chief of Filingue, Gado Namalaya, died in March of 1927. The French supported the candidature of Chekou Seyni, one of the sons of Gado. Chekou, however, had less than the unanimous support of the population. The *Hauka*, manifesting themselves as a political force, supported another candidate. This action was a bold, if not intolerable affront to French authority.

Because of these accumulating incidents, the *Hauka* movement grew in size and in importance. In uninhabited areas of the bush, the *Hauka* founded their own villages and set up their own society which was overtly anti-French.

The French found in the *Hauka*

a clear opposition to the traditional chieftaincy. They discovered the presence of an open dissidence, a society the members of which openly defied the

social, political and religious order. It is here that we discover the most original aspect of the Hauka movement: their total refusal of the system put into place by the French.

(Fugelstad 1975: 205)

The harsh intervention of Major Croccichia, the French commandant of Niamey, accelerated the diffusion of the *Hauka* movement. The brutality which Major Croccichia ordered against Zibo and her group left such a searing memory that Croccichia was soon deified as a *Hauka* himself, *Korsasi*, the wicked Major and one of the most violent of the *Hauka*.⁴

As time passed by, the *Hauka* family and the mythology which reinforced the place of the *Hauka* in Songhay cosmology took form. In all cases, the deities and identities associated with the *Hauka* aped French colonial society. Continuing to assert that they were from the Red Sea and the guests of *Dongo* in Songhay country, the following characters emerged as the most important of the early *Hauka* deities:

- 1 *Istanbula*, who lives in Istanbul and who is both a pious Moslem and the chief of all the *Hauka*.
- 2 *Gomno*, the colonial governor (of the Red Sea).
- 3 *Zeneral Malia*, the general of the Red Sea.
- 4 *King Zuzi*, the king of judges or the colonial chief justice.
- 5 *Mayaki*, the warrior or great soldier.
- 6 *Korsasi*, the wicked Major who sometimes kills his mediums.
- 7 *Sekter*, the secretary or clerk.
- 8 *Kapral Gardi*, the corporal of the guard who is the assistant *Korsasi* and who knows how to break iron with his hands.
- 9 *Babule*, the blacksmith.
- 10 *Falimata Malia*, the wife of *Zeneral Malia* who had her son *Cemoko* with *Kapral Gardi*.
- 11 *Cemoko*, the young boy who knows how to pull silver out of the ground.

(Rouch 1960: 74-75)

Given the great migrations from Songhay country to the Gold Coast during the colonial period, many of the adepts of these deities travelled far and wide. And as they confronted new experiences, new deities manifested themselves in the bodies of adepts. In the Gold Coast of colonial times, the *Hauka* received two new deities, *Kafrankot*, the corporal of the coast, and *Hanga Beri* (big ears), who runs locomotives. Just as the colonial administration had become more complex, so the family of *Hauka* became populated with new deities which reflected the more complete expansion of colonial authority. These were *Hauka* who represented highly placed civil servants: *Minis de Ger* or minister of war, simple ministers, or *minis*, and *Prazidan di la Republik* for President of the French Republic. The *Hauka* also parodied the French colonial army with deities who were colonels, captains, lieutenants, and sergeants, as well as the foot soldier, *Bambara Mossi* (many of the foot soldiers were either *Bambara* or *Mossi* in ethnic origin). Local administrative

identities were not spared from the theatrics of the *Hauka*. There are *Hauka* lawyers (*Wasiri*) and doctors (*Lokotoro*) who inject people with their syringes. These new *Hauka* came into being in the exact manner as the original group in Filingue in 1925. During the course of a dance, an adept would be taken by a new deity which would not be known to the members of the cult. The cult members would then ask for the name of the deity, and upon learning the name, this new deity would become a member of the *Hauka* family (Rouch 1960: 76-77).⁵

The cultural messages of the Hauka in performance

The *Hauka* movement challenged the supremacy of French colonial rule. As a complex, the bizarre and brazen behavior of the *Hauka* expressed clear and boldly critical statements about the nature of the colonizer and his behavior. The verbal statements were made in a mixture of Pidgin French, Pidgin English, and Songhay. Having *Gomno* or *Korsasi* speak to his audience in Pidgin, which continues to be a stigmatized linguistic form in both Francophone and Anglophone West Africa, constituted a negative message about the colonial authorities. Imagine a French colonial administrator being aped by a possessed Songhay. The medium's body is contorted. His eyes are bulging, and like all *Hauka*, he froths at the mouth. And to add insult to injury, he speaks a mixture of Pidgin French and Songhay. The result of this complex of symbolic messages is a combination of fright, for the *Hauka* is a terrifying sight, and burlesque, for the *Hauka* mocks the identity which he or she represents.

The *Hauka* take the bodies of their mediums at possession dances in Songhay country during which deities representing the other spirit families of the Songhay pantheon may be enticed to journey from the spirit to the social world (see Rouch 1960).⁶ These dances are always staged in the same manner. Essential participants in the dance, as I have mentioned, are the *zima* or the ritual priest who is the impresario of the possession cult, the ritual musicians who play monochord violins (*godji*) or calabash drums (*gasi*), the *sorko*, the praise-singer of spirits whose sacred incantations create a metaphorical bridge between the social and spirit worlds, and the mediums themselves (*hol'isey*), the dancers whose bodies may be 'taken' by their spirit.⁷

The possession dance itself consists of two frames. In the first frame any person can enter the dance area, usually a flat sandy plain within the compound of the ritual priest, which is encircled by an audience. A hangar, under which the musicians produce their sacred music, stands at the edge of the dance grounds. This frame is called *hori* which literally means 'to play' in Songhay. During the *hori* the people at the dance have a good time, competing with one another to see who are the best dancers. The best dancers are rewarded with praise: a member of the audience, inspired by a particular dance sequence, will leap into the dance area and present the dancer with a sum of money. The dancer will then give the money to the musicians who are the keepers of the possession dance kitty. After two hours or more of *hori*, the *zima*, with a flick of his wrist, signals transformation from a social occasion to a serious religious ritual. Now only known mediums, all of whom have undergone an initiation, can enter the dance

area. When the music begins again, the musicians play only those rhythms associated with the spirits they wish to entice to earth. These are sometimes the *Hauka*.

There are only two occasions when the *Hauka* alone are summoned. The first is when many members of a community have been suffering from witchcraft, for the *Hauka* today are, among other things, the principal adversaries of Songhay witches. In these circumstances the *Hauka* take the bodies of mediums and then pick up burning bushes and brandish them over their heads – a sign that the witches of the community should be wary of the presence of the *Hauka*. The second circumstance for an all-*Hauka* possession occurs when a novice who has been possessed initially by a *Hauka* goes through his or her initiation – an initiation similar to those of the other spirit families of the Songhay pantheon. Despite the fact that the *Hauka* constitutes only one of the six spirit families of the Songhay pantheon, it and it alone has deities which burlesque horrifically the identities associated with the colonial epoch of Niger.

To illustrate the combination of horror and humour in *Hauka* possession dances, let me describe two cases from my field notes. The first encounter involved *Lokotoro*, the European doctor, which I recorded in December of 1976 in the Songhay town of Mehanna.

I join the audience in the evening. From a distance I see two possessed adepts carrying burning bushes above their heads. These are *Hauka*. One of the *Hauka* throws down his burning bush and takes a torch which he holds to his bare chest with no effect at all. Someone in the crowd tells me that the two *Hauka* are none other than *Zeneral Malia* and *Lokotoro*, the Doctor. *Lokotoro*, who is wearing a pith helmet, carries a hypodermic syringe. He approaches me and extends his open hand.

- Lokotoro*: Sha vas?
'How is it going?'
Stoller: Ça vas?
'How is it going?'
L: Sha vas?
S: Ça vas?
L: Me ne doctor
'I am called doctor.'
S: Ni doctor?
'You are a doctor?'

Our exchange is interrupted by laughter. The members of the audience in my vicinity find this hilarious because I am mocking *Lokotoro*. The dialogue continues:

- S*: Alahumdu lilaahi. Enchanté.
'Praise be to God. Enchanted (to meet you).'
L: Sha vas?

- S*: Ça vas?
L: To anasara hinka. Tu as connay?
'Okay, (there are) two Europeans (here). Do you know it?'
S: Tu as connay?
'Do you know it?'

This comment brings more laughter. *Lokotoro* is ridiculing the Europeans, and I am mocking him, which is appropriate in this context. We are both being obdurate, playing out the exaggerated roles of two Europeans, which the audience appreciates greatly. A *sorko* breaks into our conversation.

- Sorko*: A ne ni anasara no n'inga manti anasara no.
'He says that he is a European and that you and he make two Europeans.'
S: Wo anasara no? To, enchanté.
'This is a European? Good. Enchanted.'

This, too, provokes laughter. Before me is a black man frothing at the mouth and holding a syringe. He tells me he is a white European. I play along with this ridiculous charade, stating that he is indeed a white European. Then I code-switch into French to signify my recognition of his European status and say that I am enchanted to meet him. We are participating in a veritable theatre of the absurd which precipitates uproarious laughter.

Lokotoro leaves me to examine a small girl who had been ill. The girl's mother explains to *Lokotoro* that she had taken the child to the Islamic healers, to the nurses and to the non-Islamic healers in Mehanna. None of their remedies, however, had cured the girl. *Lokotoro* looks at her, blows on her arm, and injects her with his syringe which contains a milky fluid. *Lokotoro* returns to me.

- S*: Ah *Lokotoro* ka
'Ah, the doctor has returned.'
Sorko: (To *Lokotoro*). Ci wala. Ni ma ci wokom ni ga ba
'Recite then. You must tell (him) what you want.'
L: To l'argen'
'Okay, (I want) money.'
S: L'argen'? To a go ka. Ay ma cece l'argen'. Ay ma no *Lokotoro* se l'argen'. *Lokotoro*, boro hano no.
'Money? It's coming. I need to look for it. I should give money to the doctor. The doctor is a good person.'

I give *Lokotoro* 100 francs. He takes the money and puts it in his pocket.

- L*: Anasara, sha vas?
'European, how is it going?'
S: Ça vas.
'It goes.'
L: Mershi.
'Thank you' (for the contribution).

In this last sequence of interaction, *Lokotoro* addressed me as *anasara*, which signifies that we are no longer in the same social category. 'Anasara, ça vas?' is a linguistic device the Songhay use to distance themselves from the European. We are suddenly in different categories because he had asked me for a contribution. This sudden shift is a comic slap in my face.

And so we have here the terrifying possessed figure of *Lokotoro* burlesquing a European doctor and equating himself with the only white person in the audience. This is a ridiculous situation; it is also a means of defining the Songhay vis-à-vis the European colonizer. The interaction creates and maintains distance between the encroaching European civilization (me, in this instance) and the essentials of Songhay cultural identity.

The second *Hauka* encounter I wish to describe occurred in the town of Tillabéri in June of 1981 during a *yenaandi*, the rain dance during which the Songhay make offerings to the spirits who control the heavens. The Songhay believe that if they make offerings to these spirits, the spirits will bring enough rain during the planting season (June through September). A good rainy season usually insures a good millet harvest in October. The *yenaandi* is primarily a *Tooru* dance, for the *Tooru* is the family of deities which control the winds, the clouds, lightning, and thunder – forces which are associated with rain. When the *Tooru*, the nobles of the Songhay spirit world, come to the social world they travel with an entourage of lesser spirits. When there are visiting *Tooru*, those *Hauka* who personify French soldiers swoop down to earth, take the bodies of their mediums and serve as sentries to the *Tooru*. The following slices of interaction took place when the *Tooru* held court during this rain dance. The *Tooru* were seated on overturned mortars and received the people of Tillabéri. Before approaching the *Tooru* to receive advice, however, the townspeople had to endure the horrific comedy of the *Hauka* whose role it was to bring the people to the masters of the heavens. *Commandant Bashirou* (CB) and *Lieutenant Marseille* (LM) were the two *Hauka* who provided this escort service.

CB: (Goose-steps from centre of dance ground to audience. Stops in front of Young Woman [YW]. Slaps his legs together and salutes YW.) You are a fool, young woman. (Sprays saliva in her face.)

YW: (Recoils)

CB: (Grabs her hand and yanks her away from audience)

YW: (Falls to the ground, and as she is dragged) I don't want to go. I don't want to go.

CB: (Stops. Stands on one foot and looks at the audience). You are all stupid Songhay. How can you resist? (Looks at YW and smiles). Come, you daughter of a donkey (He laughs, audience laughs and he pulls YW to standing position and takes her to the *Tooru*.)

(Minutes Later)

LM: (Starts toward the crowd and stands on one foot gazing at the audience for a few moments. Then he struts toward a Young Man [YM] and salutes him). In the name of the army, in the name of God, in the name of the spirits, in the name of the *Tooru* ...

YM: In the name of idiocy? (General laughter.)

LM: (Extends his hand to YM) You ... you, the one with the limp penis. Come and seek a solution. (More laughter.)

YM: (Pointing at LM and laughing) And you with the empty head?

LM: (Grabs the arm of YM and shoves him toward the *Tooru*.)

From these brief accounts of *Hauka* Songhay interaction we see again the bizarre mixture of fear and comedy. The *Hauka* are incredibly strong. Besides being able to pick up burning bushes with their bare hands and touch themselves with burning torches, I have seen them knock down thick mudbrick walls with their fists. Since the *Hauka* are anything but gentle, when they summon someone to the *Tooru*'s court, members of the audience are quite concerned about bodily injury. These roughhouse tactics, however, are coupled with such ridiculously exaggerated military behaviors as goose-stepping and saluting, during which the *Hauka* holds his hand to his forehead for as much as two minutes as he froths at the mouth and stares at the person he is saluting. And so in imagery alone we have a spirit who demonstrates great strength as he mocks the French military. To lighten the context even more the *Hauka* resort to typical Songhay ritual insults. *Commandant Bashirou* calls the young woman the daughter of a donkey, a Songhay ritual insult which in most contexts precipitates laughter (see Stoller 1977). When *Commandant Bashirou* says 'You are all stupid Songhay', this, too, precipitates laughter. This kind of direct insult is not taken seriously. Real insults in Songhay are usually indirect statements. The direct ritual insult therefore precipitates laughter.

Lieutenant Marseille engages in the same kind of horroric comedy as *Commandant Bashirou*. He approaches a young man and salutes him in an exaggerated form. He mocks the formality of military custom, saying 'In the name of army, etc. ...' The young man, however, is taking none of this and mocks *Lieutenant Marseille*, saying 'In the name of idiocy?' The Songhay immensely enjoy this kind of mutual mockery for it corresponds to the verbal duel, a favourite activity of young Songhay. After this verbal duel, which also precipitates laughter, *Lieutenant Marseille* escorts the young man to the *Tooru*.

The *Hauka* in contemporary times

Scholars of the Songhay have suggested that the *Hauka* movement represented mainly the era of colonialism; it was a reflection of the confrontation of Songhay with colonial society (Rouch 1953, 1960; Gado 1980). After 1960, the year that France granted independence to the Government of Niger, the *Hauka*, according to Rouch (1978), had less of a following than during colonial times. Having lost their colonial *raison d'être*, it has been suggested, the *ximey* accelerated the process through which these outlaw spirits were incorporated into the mythology of the *holey*.

So *Dongo*, the god of thunder is now considered their [the *Hauka*] father. And the story is that *Bilali*, another aspect of *Dongo*, when he was in Mecca had a

lot of sons who came to Africa. They say that *Bilali* actually sang *Hauka* songs and did *Hauka* rituals when he was in Mecca. The *Hauka* were the *enfants terribles* of *Bilali*, but now they are with us, and we are all together in the same family. And even today in the very remote village the *Hauka* still play an important role.

(Rouch 1978: 1009)

The expressive role of the Hauka

With Nigerien independence and their putative acceptance into the Songhay spirit cult, one might think that the expressive symbolism of a *Hauka* frothing at the mouth has been relegated to the background of social perception. But when the *Hauka* takes the body of his medium, there continues to be ribald comedy and terrifying drama: a manifestation, perhaps, of ongoing contact with the European 'force'.

There is no longer a separate *Hauka* movement as there was in 1927, a movement directed against the rule of the European. After all, opposition to European rule ceased to be a viable role for the *Hauka* when France granted independence to the Republic of Niger. But just as the conceptual residue of being a slave remains today among the former slave populations of the Songhay (see Olivier de Sardin 1969, 1976, 1983), so the psychological yoke of colonialism has remained with many of the peoples of the Republic of Niger (see Memmi 1962). While Europeans are no longer the political administrators of districts in the Republic of Niger, they still hold many important positions both in the capital city of Niamey and in the more rural regions of Songhay country. Europeans are the technical advisors to various Nigerien ministries. Europeans comprise a large part of the staffs of the national and regional hospitals in the Republic of Niger. Europeans are the technicians responsible for the progress of a wide variety of development projects. And Europeans have been teachers in Niger's secondary schools and in Niger's university.

The European population of Niamey is large and visible. Most Europeans live in one section of Niamey, the Plateau. Niamey has French shops, grocery stores, bakeries and butchers. Europeans, often living on generous 'hardship pay' allowances, lead elegant lives compared to those of Nigerien civil servants and peasants. And so the continued popularity of the *Hauka* is a kind of cultural resistance to the ongoing European presence. Much to the delight of audiences, the *Hauka*, despite the absence of a colonial government, continue to ridicule the European with their pretentious and outrageous mockery. The 'force' of the European continues to be strong in all the regions of the Republic of Niger. And the need of the Songhay to make sense of this 'force' remains equally strong.

Joking, cultural resistance, and the *Hauka*

Radcliffe-Brown (1940) and Evans-Pritchard (1949) have characterized the outrageousness and pretentiousness of joking as 'privileged license' and 'permitted

disrespect'. The mediums of the *Hauka* take the exaggerated roles of Europeans only in the frame of possession dance activities. During possession, they make hilarious statements which form the foundation of a comedic role. Why the persistence of this comedy, especially at the expense of the European?

A partial answer to the question lies in considering the parallels between the *Hauka* movement and the way American Indians joke about the White man. In both cases, the White man, someone who held a vastly different world view, came in contact with peoples whom he subjugated. In the American and the West African cases, moreover, the White man created a 'colonial situation' (Wallerstein 1961) which overturned the worlds of the colonized peoples. In both cases, the colonized peoples reacted to the cataclysmic change by telling jokes about the White man. In the case of the Songhay, there came into being a 'family' of spirits which mocked the colonizer. In both cases it is the powerless who have ridiculed the powerful. As one Canadian Indian put it:

The biggest of all Indian problems is the whiteman. Who can understand the whiteman? What makes him tick? How does he think and why does he think the way he does? Why does he talk so much? Why does he say one thing and do the opposite? Most important of all, how do you deal with him? Obviously, he is here to stay. Sometimes it seems like a hopeless task.

(H. Cardinal quoted in Basso 1979: 3)

The greatest problem for the Songhay is no longer the European; it is rather the European's way. The European no longer rules in Songhay country, but the ideas of the European, his language, his system of education, and many of his values have influenced the lifeways of young Songhay. And when this happens Songhay elders consider these young people no longer to be Songhay, but Frenchmen with black skin. And so the *Hauka* continues to ape the European, continues to mutilate the French language, and attempts through burlesque to make sense of a rapidly changing world in which the European continues to play a major role. The European will remain in the Republic of Niger, and so will the *Hauka*, forever resisting through mockery the influences of foreigners and forever protecting those values which are central to the cultural identity of the Songhay.

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Notes

- 1 There are some three million Songhay speakers in the Republics of Mali, Niger, and Benin. The Songhay continue to be primarily millet farmers in most regions and both millet farmers and rice cultivators in riverine areas. The society is divided into three general groups of unequal status: the nobles, who trace their descent patrilineally to Askia Mohammed Toure, King of the Songhay from 1493 to 1528; former slaves, who trace their descent patrilineally to prisoners of precolonial wars; and foreigners, peoples who have migrated into Songhay country in the distant or recent past. (For more detailed information on Songhay society see Rouch 1953, 1960; Gado 1980; Olivier de Sardin 1969, 1976, 1983; Stoller 1980, 1981).
- 2 The 'Western Soudan' refers to the French colonial territory of West Africa. The colonial Soudan was composed of Senegal, Mali, Niger, and Upper Volta.
- 3 *Soudye* refers to an ethnic group which today lives in the area of Filingue, some 180 km to the northeast of Niamey, the capital of the Republic of Niger. The *Soudye* live on the border of the Hausaphone (Songhay) Zermaphone speech areas. Songhay and Zerma are dialects of the Songhay language.
- 4 There are numerous versions of the incident involving Major Crocchia. The version cited here presents a reasonably accurate view of the birth of *Korsasi*, the wicked Major.
- 5 From the beginning of the *Hauka* movement, the mediums have been of both sexes. But as the movement grew in size and importance the number of male initiates began to out-number that of the females. The mediums of the *Hauka* have come from a variety of ethnic groups and represent the broad swath of Nigerien social experience. *Hauka* mediums are Songhay, Zerma, Peul, Bella, Hausa, and Kanuri in ethnic origin and may be poor peasant farmers living in isolated rural areas or wealthy merchants living in the crowded cities of independent Niger. As was the case in the first *Hauka* initiation in 1925, the new initiates have almost always been adolescents and young adults.
Despite the fact that the *Hauka* deities reject the way of the European, some of the mediums have worked diligently to become French-speaking nurses, soldiers, administrators, and scholars in independent Niger. Once wedded to their spirits, these educated mediums know that they will harbor them for the rest of their lives. These educated mediums keep their distance from the music and sacred words of possession dance festivities because they fear that the intoxicating sounds of possession dance could bring on their *Hauka* and compromise their social positions. Unlike their fellow initiates in the countryside, the educated mediums walk a narrow tightrope between the private world of their deep-seated beliefs and the public world of their social roles in a developing society. The impact of colonialism notwithstanding, the traditions of the ancestors are still close to the hearts of even highly educated Nigeriens.
- 6 The other spirit 'families' of the Songhay pantheon are: the *Tboru*, the deities of the sky and the water; the *Genji Kwearey*, the 'white spirits' who are the Islamic clerics of the spirit world and who advise human beings about social problems; the *Genji Bi*, or 'Black spirits,' who represent the original Voltaic speaking peoples who first mastered the forces of the land; the *Hausa genji*, or spirits of the east who precipitate illness,

especially paralysis; the *Hargay*, or spirits of the cold who are associated with death; and, of course, the *Hauka* themselves. There are roughly 150 spirits in the Songhay pantheon.

- 7 Each medium must be initiated. The spirit first identifies its medium through the manifestation of illness. The proposed medium becomes ill and the afflicted person responds neither to traditional nor western medical therapies. Members of the family of the afflicted person consult a *rima*, a ritual priest, for his or her opinion. If the *zima* senses that the spirit possessing the afflicted person is a member of the Songhay pantheon, he proposes to stage an initiation festival (*horendi*). The initiation festival spans seven days, during which the novice gradually becomes acquainted with his or her spirit (see Stoller n.d.). On the seventh day, the spirit takes full control of the novice's body and reveals its identity to the community. Thereafter the novice will be known as that spirit's horse. Once the ceremonies are over the spirit leaves the body of the novice and the novice regains his or her health. And if the initiation festival has been flawlessly staged, the spirit will return to the body of its medium only when it has been beckoned by the music, dance, and word of a possession dance.

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Part IV

Spectators, space and time in performance

The Performance Arts in Africa

A reader

Edited by
Frances Harding



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For Connie, Christina and our families

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