

EMBODYING COLONIAL MEMORIES

Spirit Possession, Power, and the
Hauka in West Africa



Paul Stoller

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Paul Stoller

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In Memory of Nicole Echard
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III *Migrating with the Hauka*

<i>Introduction</i>	Thunderous Gods	93
<i>Chapter 7</i>	Colonizing Niger	97
<i>Chapter 8</i>	The Birth of the Hauka Movement	115
<i>Chapter 9</i>	Transgressing to the Gold Coast	125

IV *Transforming State Power: The Hauka Movement in the Postcolony of Niger*

<i>Introduction</i>	Crossing Ceremonial Boundaries	137
<i>Chapter 10</i>	Independence and the Postcolony of Niger	139
<i>Chapter 11</i>	Peasant and Hauka in Niger's Postcolony	149
<i>Chapter 12</i>	The Hauka and the Government of General Seyni Kountche	167
<i>Epilogue</i>	Memory, Power, and Spirit Possession	193
<i>Notes</i>		201
<i>References</i>		215
<i>Index</i>		223

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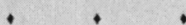
book. His faith in my capacities gave me the confidence to continue on the writer's path. That is why his spirit is ever-present in my prose, no matter the form, no matter the context.

Embodying Colonial Memories is dedicated to the memory of Nicole Echard who died in Paris in June of 1994. Nicole was a scholar who approached the subject of spirit possession with great rigor and profound humanity. Her work on the Hausa *bori* cult is without equal. Nicole was also a dedicated and loyal friend. Although she was ill, she managed to read and comment on portions of *Embodying Colonial Memories*. Nicole had much to tell the field of anthropology about spirit possession and religion. Alas, death is most cruel when it silences a brilliant voice that hasn't yet said all that it wishes to say. My hope is that *Embodying Colonial Memories* will, in a small way, pay homage to the clarity of Nicole's vision, the precision of her voice, and the depth of her character.

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PROLOGUE

Diplomacy On A Dune

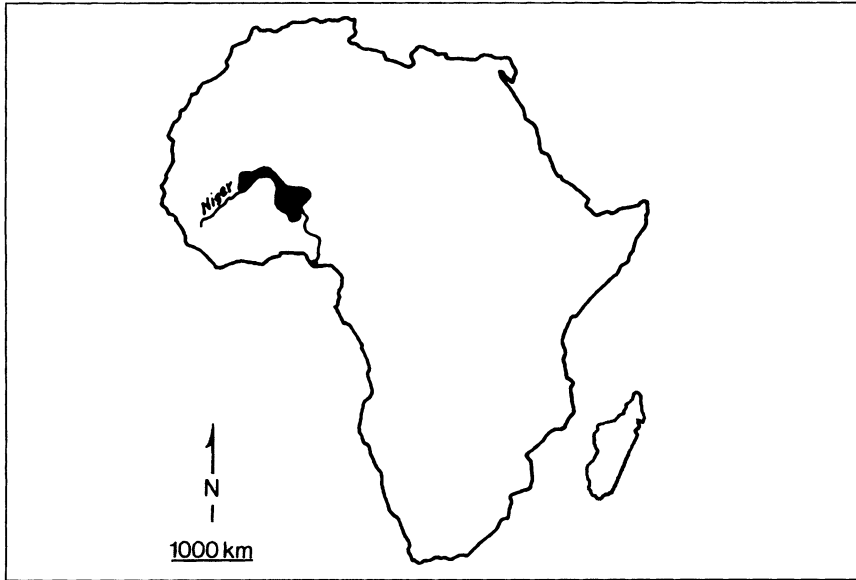


The acrid smell of burning resins infuses Adamu Jenitongo's compound, preparing it for the spirits (*holle* in the Songhay language). It is late afternoon in Tillaberi, a small Songhay town in Republic of Niger, and the sounds of a Songhay spirit possession ceremony crackle through the dusty air: the high pitched "cries" of the monochord violin; the resonant clacks of bamboo drumsticks striking gourd drums; the melodious contours of the praise-singer's "old words;" the patter of dancing feet on dune sand.

It is a white hot day in June of 1987 and the mix of sounds and smells has brought spirits to Adamu Jenitongo's egg-shaped dunetop compound. Four mudbrick houses shimmer in the languorous heat. From under a thatched canopy at the compound entrance, the orchestra continues to play spirit music. Spirits like this place. Drawn by the pungent smells, they visit it day and night. On this day the *Gengi Bi*, or spirits of the earth, have already come to the compound to bless members of the audience, giving them the courage to confront their hunger and sickness. These spirits sing rather than talk, and their melodies have lingered and dissipated into the dusky air.

They are not the only visitors on this day: Clustered in front of the musician's canopy are three *Hauka* spirits—spirits that mimic European

2 Prologue



Songhay Country in West Africa.

figures. They groan, bellow and thump their chests with clenched fists as they stamp across the sand. Saliva bubbles from their mouths. They babble. Their eyes blaze.

Istambula, the leader of the Hauka, is there, as is Zeneral Malia, the General of the Red Sea. These “military” officers are well-served by Bambara-Mossi, a Hauka-conscripted foot soldier who is exceedingly crass. “Hauk’ize,” Istambula shouts. “Hauk’ize of Tillaberi, present yourselves for our Roundtable,” he says in Songhay. Slowly the non-possessed men and women who carry Hauka spirits form a loose circle around the deities. Bambara-Mossi makes sure that the mediums stand at “attention” in the presence of Istambula and Zeneral Malia.

Adamu Jenitongo and the anthropologist are seated under the shade of a tall eucalyptus, whose unquenchable thirst has withered the other trees in the compound. They sit silently on palm-frond mats and swat flies. The Hauka Roundtable is about to convene. Suddenly, Istambula breaks through the circle of mediums and runs stiff-legged in their direction. He leaves his feet like a swan diver and belly flops just in front of Jenitongo and the anthropologist.

“I swear to *Bonji* (God). I swear to Bonji,” he mutters in pidgin French, “that . . . that you go come wit’ us.” Standing in the shadows of the canopy,

the Hauka mediums look toward Jenitongo and the anthropologist. "You must join us," Istambula says, switching to Songhay. "We need your words."

Although Istambula's glowing eyes peer into the anthropologist's, he must be talking about the anthropologist's mentor, Adamu Jenitongo, the wisest and most powerful man in the region.

"We need your words," Istambula repeats in Songhay. "In the name of Bonji."

Adamu Jenitongo says nothing.

Mounkaila, a tall, wiry man, waves to the anthropologist from the canopy. "Hey, *Anasaara* (European) hey," he states in Songhay. "He wants you. Come!"

"Me?" the anthropologist asks.

Mounkaila beckons him to join the circle.

Meanwhile Istambula's inert body, stinking of sweat and dirt, is jolted with what seem to be electroshocks. His face crinkles like burning paper as he pushes himself up on one knee and lifts his right hand toward the anthropologist. "We go jus' now," he says in pidgin. "We need your words," he says in Songhay.

"Why me?" the anthropologist asks in Songhay.

"I European. You European. We European," he says in pidgin. "You hear me?"

Adamu Jenitongo tells the anthropologist to stand up. The anthropologist extends his hand to Istambula, who grabs it and pulls himself up. Braced against the anthropologist's shoulder, Istambula staggers over to the canopy to resume his place at the center of the group. Mounkaila puts his hand on the anthropologist's shoulder.

"Thank you for coming to our discussion. It is only correct that all the Europeans in Tillaberi attend the meeting. That, of course, includes you."

"Thanks," the anthropologist says nervously.

The Zeneral braces himself against one of the non-possessed Hauka mediums. He breathes heavily. His limbs move stiffly, robotically. "We must listen, now. There is talk that one of you must be straightened out. Who is on trial here?"

Mounkaila answers in pidgin. "He no de, Mon Zeneral."

The Zeneral erupts. "Why didn't he come?"

"He is ashamed," answers another of the Hauka mediums.

4 Prologue

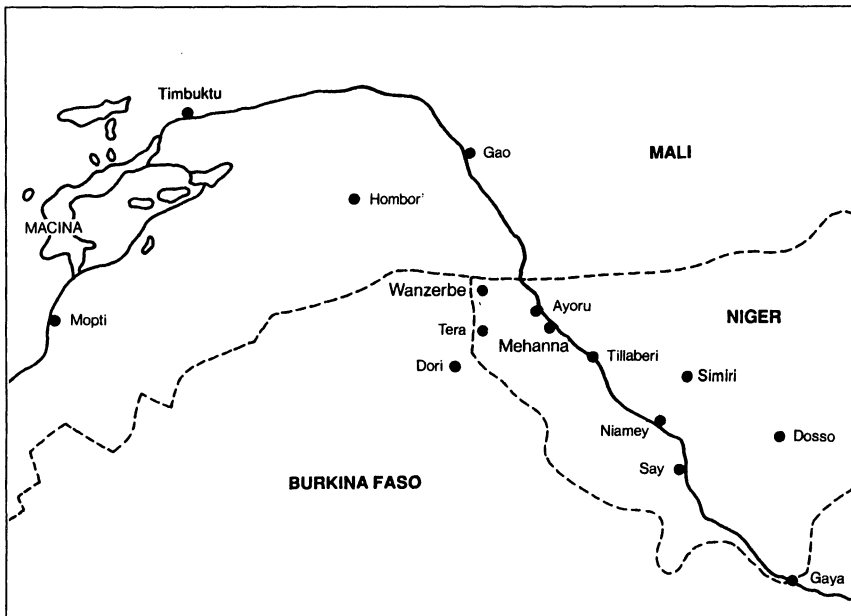
“Anasaara,” the Zeneral says to the anthropologist in Songhay, “what do you think? Should he be here to account for what he has done?”

The anthropologist, of course, doesn’t know the identity of the offender. But, having played this game many times before, he answers. “Of course, he should be here.”

Istambula chimes in. “Hauk’ize. You know that we demand an oath,” he begins in Songhay. “You mus’ waka wit’ Bonji,” he follows in pidgin. “You must obey the rules,” he says switching back to Songhay. “When we choose you, we give you force, and you must not abuse your power.” He pounds his chest. “I Istambula. Istambula, do you hear? You go hear me, Hauk’ize?”

Bracing himself against Mounkaila, Istambula brings his contorted visage a few inches from the anthropologist’s and sprays saliva in his face. “One of the Hauka’ize has had relations with his friend’s wife,” he says in Songhay. “Do you hear, Anasaara? Do you hear?” He swings away from the anthropologist and Mounkaila, twirling in the center of our circle. “Do you hear, Hauk’ize. Relations with his friend’s wife. No discipline. What is to be done with him?”

Bambara-Mossi slaps his massive chest with a hardwood baton. “I go cut



Principal towns in Songhay Country.

off, dangela,” he says in pidgin French. “I go get knife. I go cut ‘im fas’ fas.”

Laughter explodes at the Roundtable. “Non,” says Zeneral Malia in pidgin. “He go tek white chicken an’ kill ‘im fo’ bus.”

Isambula nods. “Hauk’ize,” he shouts. “Hauk’ize. I testify to Bonji and to Dongo, father of us all. The Zeneral has a good idea. You must go to this man’s house and tell him. You must tell him to take a white chicken and go to my altar in the bush.”

Mounkaila, who has become Istambula’s spokesperson, repeats the deity’s words.

“This particular person must go there,” says Istambula, “do you hear me . . . he must go there on Saturday. And all the Hauk’ize must go with him.” Istambula switches into pidgin. “I Istambula. I go bak Malia now. I go bak.”

In response to Istambula’s statements, the musicians increase the tempo. The pulsations ripple like waves through Istambula’s body. He extends his arms and spins around like a top. He grunts and howls. Saliva flows like lava from his mouth. Bambara-Mossi and General Malia join him. The tempo is quite fast; the beat is intense. One by one the Hauka throw their bodies in the air, landing on their backs with thumps. They lay there on the dune like sacks of millet at market—heavy, motionless, and unconscious. Liberated from their Hauka, the mediums cough, slowly sit up and dust themselves off. Attendants bring them water.

The body of an African medium is possessed by a “European” deity who presides over a Roundtable discussion in which the views of Africans and other “Europeans” are expressed in a mixture of pidgin French and Songhay, an African language spoken by three million people in the Republics of Niger and Mali. The Roundtable is a remarkable public forum during which Istambula, the chief of the Hauka (Songhay spirits that burlesque European colonial personages), even invites the participation of the European “occupying” the body of an anthropologist. The problem under discussion—a Hauka medium’s sexual transgression—is debated and resolved. The Hauka, who are curiously horrific, comedic and dignified, have come and gone. By resolving yet another social problem in Tillaberi, they have reinforced their authority. Like the French colonial army of many years past, the Hauka are seen as powerful political beings: they get things done quickly, efficiently. Most Songhay consider efficiency a European trait.



A medium possessed by Istambula.

Most people know the Hauka only through the shocking images of Jean Rouch's monumental film, *Les maitres fous*, in which possessed black men are portrayed as rabid "dogs" who shamelessly chomp on boiled dog meat. I have recently suggested that the images of *Les maitres fous* are the cinematic equivalent of Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, in which images move viewers beyond the anesthetizing influence of language to an uncompromising confrontation with the culturally repressed dimensions of their being.¹ But the existential power of these images doesn't give viewers much ethnographic information about the Hauka.² Viewers learn little about the history or the social context of the Hauka movement. They learn less still about the social power of the Hauka, a power which has grown with time. Jean Rouch has written about the Hauka in his untranslated *Migrations au Ghana*—but only tangentially.³ Historians such as Finn Fugelstad have written essays that describe the early moments of the Hauka movement as

a type of cultural resistance to French colonialism.⁴ My own writing on the Hauka has included discussions of the history and evolution of the Hauka from colonial times to the present, considerations of the political power of the Hauka, particularly following Nigerien independence, and critical assessments of Jean Rouch's films, including, of course, *Les maitres fous*.⁵

The Hauka movement is a particularly compelling example of spirit possession, a subject with an extensive literature in anthropology, sociology, and religious studies. Like much of the scant previous writing on the phenomenon of spirit possession, many of the disquisitions on the Hauka have overlooked a fundamental point: that spirit possession is an embodied phenomenon. There can be little doubt that the body is the locus of possession phenomena. Whether writers call it trance or possession, the same dramatic process presents itself cross-culturally. Musicians, praise-singers, and priests use a variety of expressive media to entice spirits (external forces) to leave non-human realms and enter human bodies. In doing so, the spirit enters social space, transforming mediums both physically and symbolically. Much has been written about the medium's symbolic transformation and the "texts" she expresses.⁶ Much less has been written about the bodily experience of possession.

In this book I argue that embodiment is not primarily textual. The human body is not principally a text; rather, the sentient body is culturally consumed by a world filled with forces, smells, textures, sights, sounds and tastes, all of which trigger social memories.⁷ *Embodying Colonial Memories* will not only consider spirit possession, a typically anthropological subject, but also such subjects as the cultural sentience of the body and the dynamics of colonial and postcolonial movements of resistance and their discourses.

Hauka possessions are simultaneously frightening and funny. Elsewhere I have referred to Hauka spirit possession as "horrific comedy." The horrific/comedic embodiment of the Hauka and its mimetic connection to colonial memories evoke the past, manipulate the present, and provoke the future. Through the power of embodiment, the Hauka stutter-step over the border separating ritual from political practice. In the Republic of Niger, cultural diplomacy on the dune informs diplomacy in the Presidential Palace.

In *Embodying Colonial Memories* I use the compelling example of the Hauka to think about spirit possession as a set of embodied practices with

8 Prologue

serious social, cultural, and political consequences. In this way the study of spirit possession moves from the abstract consideration of how ahistorical, ritual texts constitute a discourse to the concrete analysis of how one set of embodied practices molds historical contexts to constitute power-in-the-world.

The book is organized into a prologue, four parts, and an epilogue. In Part One, "Sensing Spirit Possession," I argue for an embodied approach to the analysis of spirit possession. Chapter One, "Spirit Possession," considers the strengths and weaknesses of past approaches to this enticing phenomenon. In this chapter I suggest that the functionalist, psychoanalytic, and interpretive approaches to spirit possession have usually failed to tease out its embodied, historical and political dimensions. In Chapter Two, "Cultural Memory," I establish a link between spirit possession and cultural memory, which demonstrates how history is embodied in movements, postures, sounds and smells. In "Embodied Memories: Mimesis and Spirit Possession," Chapter Three, I extend Michael Taussig's recent analysis of mimesis and alterity to spirit possession, arguing that it is mimetic embodiment that accounts for the political power of Hauka deities in the Republic of Niger.

Having established the theoretical foundation of the book in Part One, I move on, in Part Two, "Confronting Colonialism in West Africa," to establish the historical and political context from which the Hauka movement emerged. Chapter Four, "From First Contacts to Military Partition," describes how West Africa came under the hegemony of France and Great Britain. In Chapter 5, "Colonizing West Africa," I map the contours of social relations during the colonial epoch in West Africa. Chapter Six, "Embodied Oppositions," tells the story of how West Africans defied colonial regimes through military and cultural resistance movements.

In Part Three, "Migrating with the Hauka," I focus specifically on how the French colonization of Niger resulted in the birth and migration of the Hauka movement. Chapter Seven, "Colonizing Niger," recounts the terror of the early military campaigns of the French and the social upheaval caused by the imposition of taxes and forced-work details. In Chapter Eight, "The Birth of the Hauka Movement," I analyze the emergence and political importance of the Hauka spirits in the 1920s. The political impact of the Hauka was so threatening to the French authorities that many

Hauka mediums were expelled from Niger. In this way, as detailed in Chapter Nine, “Transgressing to the Gold Coast,” the Hauka migrated to what is now Ghana, where in the 1930s the movement flourished in what is now seen as its Golden Age.

Most literature on the Hauka fails to consider the survival of the movement in the postcolonial era. Although the Hauka usually mimic colonial identities, their power and influence grew exponentially following Nigerien independence in 1960. In Part Four, “Transforming State Power: The Hauka Movement in the Postcolony of Niger,” I explore this paradox by probing how the Hauka have affected postcolonial national politics in the Republic of Niger. In Chapter Ten, “Independence and the Postcolony of Niger,” I describe the political evolution of the Government of Niger, focusing explicitly on the socioeconomic impact of government policies on the lives of Songhay peasants. Given this political context, Chapter Eleven, “Peasant and Hauka in Niger’s Postcolony,” looks at local village life to consider how and why a movement that embodies colonial memories has expanded so dramatically during the past thirty years. In Chapter Twelve, “The Hauka and the Government General Seyni Kountche,” my analysis suggests that the embodied aesthetics of Hauka spirit possession shaped state governance during the years of the Kountche regime. It is widely known in Niger that many members of the Supreme Military Council, including President Seyni Kountche himself, were Hauka mediums. I conclude the book with a short epilogue, “Memory, Power and Spirit Possession,” which explores the theoretical importance of the relationship among memory, embodiment, power, and spirit possession.

The clang of cattle bells announces dusk in Tillaberi. The Haukas have come, settled their Roundtable business, and gone. No one leaves Adamu Jenitongo’s compound, however, for one medium, the man who had been possessed by Bambara-Mossi, is thrashing about in the sand. The musicians play Hauka rhythms. A deep groan rolls through the air as yet another Hauka arrives in the social world. He is Chefferi, “the non-believer.”

Chefferi sweeps up from the sand and squats like a wrestler. He tears at his trousers, ripping them off just above the knee. He yanks off his shirt and wraps it around his head like a woman’s head scarf. He pounds his chest, pushes through the circle of onlookers, and struts over to Adamu Jenitongo.

“Albora. Albora.”

“Yes,” says Adamu Jenitongo in response to the respectful term used for wise old men.

“Albora,” he repeats. “You must make *kusu* (magic cake) for the other Anasaara here.”

“That’s fine,” says Adamu Jenitongo.

“Tell your wife to bring me the finest millet seeds. And then bring me the biggest and heaviest mortar and pestle here.”

Adamu Jenitongo asks his senior wife for these things.

Chefferi runs his finger through a small bowl filled with golden millet seeds. “These are good.” He picks up the pestle.

“Not big or heavy enough. Find me a proper pestle.”

A young girl runs to the neighboring compound for a bigger pestle. Holding on to the dish, Chefferi bounds over to the hangar. “Play my music,” he demands.

The musicians play Hauka rhythms. Dressed like a woman, Chefferi, big, thick, and frightening, stands at the center of a large crowd. Night has fallen, and the compound is illumined by the dim glow of kerosene lanterns that hang from the canopy’s rafters. Like a circus performer, Chefferi waves at the crowd. “I, the Hauka non-believer, am going to give *kusu* to this Anasaara.” He points at the anthropologist.

A young woman brings Chefferi two five-foot pestles carved from heavy hardwood. “These are good.” He then lays on his back, and calls for two strong young women—millet pounders. One of the women places the heavy mortar on Chefferi’s bare chest. “Put the millet in the mortar,” he orders, “and pound it until it becomes a fine white flour. The women do as they are instructed and begin to pound. The pestles thump the mortar with great force. The sound of the thumps are in counterpoint to Chefferi’s painful moans. The audience gapes at the wondrous spectacle.

The millet flour is soon as white and smooth as dune sand, and Chefferi triumphantly invites the audience to inspect the contents of the mortar. The young women lift the leaden mortar off his chest, and he leaps to an upright position. Chefferi grabs the anthropologist’s arm roughly. “Anasaara. Anasaara. That,” he says pointing at the millet flour, “is for you.”

“I thank you, Chefferi.”



Recitation of praise-poetry during a Hauka ceremony, Tillaberi, Niger (1981).

“Today, we had a Roundtable on this dune,” Chefferi announces. “We Hauka solved our problems with grace, with dignity. Now I, Chefferi, the non-believer, give you this *kusu*. You are now my brother. May this *kusu* help you to solve your problems with grace and dignity. May it move you forward on your path. May your words be heard by many people. Do not forget the Hauka, Anasaara. Do not forget us!”

The women scoop the flour out of the mortar and put it into a wooden bowl. “Adamu Jenitongo, come here,” Chefferi commands.

Slowly, the old man walks over to Chefferi.

“Albora, tomorrow prepare for this Anasaara, who is now my brother, this *kusu*. Prepare it so he may walk his path with grace and dignity, so that he will never forget us, never lose respect for us.”

“This, I shall do,” says Adamu Jenitongo.

“Good,” says Chefferi. “It is time to return to Malia, to the Red Sea.” The musicians hear this cue and begin to play Hauka music. Chefferi flies through the air and lands on his back.

Lying unconscious on the dune, Chefferi’s being is momentarily lost between the worlds, between the Red Sea and Tillaberi, between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, between his presence and that of his