

Zakaribaba Sorko speaking to Serci.

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LOOKING FOR SERCI

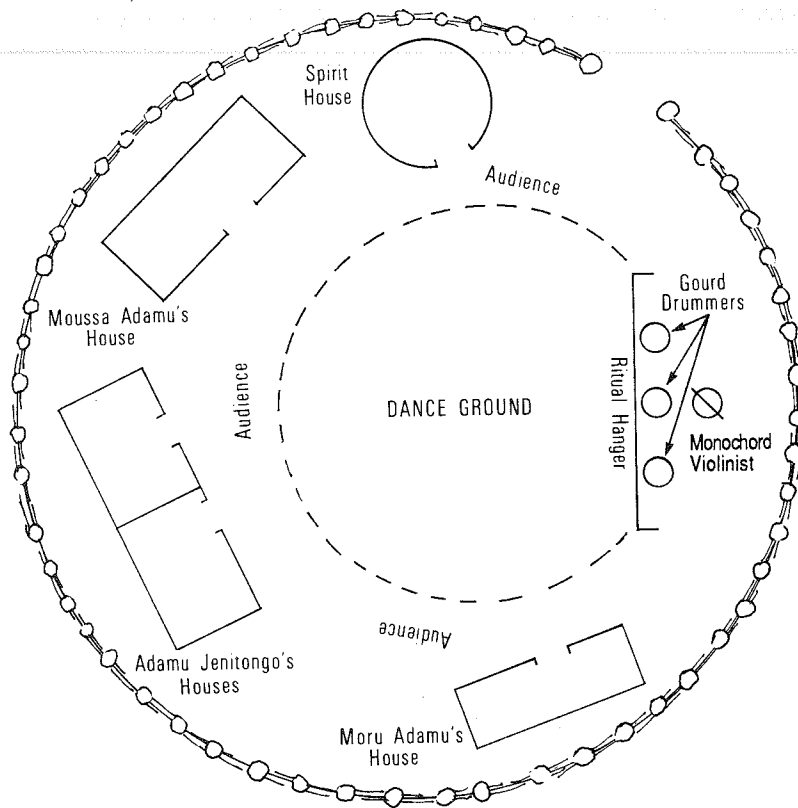
Clack! A sharp sound shattered the hot, dry air above Tillaberi. Another clack, followed by a roll and another clack-roll-clack, pulsed through the stagnant air. The sounds seemed to burst from the dune that overlooked the secondary school of the town of a thousand people, mostly Songhay-speaking, in the Republic of Niger.

The echoing staccato broke the sweaty boredom of a hot afternoon in the hottest town in one of the hottest countries in the world and, like a large hand, guided hearers up the dune to Adamu Jenitongo's compound to witness a possession ceremony.

The compound's three-foot millet stalk fence enclosed Adamu Jenitongo's dwellings: four straw huts that looked like beehives. At the compound's threshold, the high-pitched whine of the monochord violin greeted me. Inside, I saw the three drummers seated under a canopy behind gourd drums. Although the canopy shielded them from the blistering Niger sun, sweat streamed down their faces. Their sleeveless tunics clung to their bodies; patches of salt had dried white on the surface of their black cotton garments. They continued their rolling beat. Seated behind them on a stool was the violinist, dressed in a red shirt that covered his knees. Despite the intensity of the heat and the noise of the crowd, his face remained expressionless as he made his instrument "cry."

A few people milled around the canopy as I entered the compound, but no one began to dance. The clack-roll-clack of the drums ruffled the hot Sahelian air, drawing more people to the compound of Adamu Jenitongo, the zima or possession priest of Tillaberi.

When the sun marked midafternoon and the shadows stretched from the canopy toward Adamu Jenitongo's grass huts at the eastern end of his circular living space, streams of men and women flowed into the compound. Many of the woman wore bright Dutch Wax print outfits—bright red flowers, deep green squares contrasting with beige, brown, and powder-blue backgrounds. Many of the men wore white, blue, and yellow damask boubous—spacious robes covering matching loose shirts and baggy drawstring



Adamu Jenitongo's compound during possession ceremony.

trousers. Vendors with trays of goods balanced on their heads were right behind the spectators. They sold cigarettes, hard candy, and chewing gum to the growing audience.

The music's tempo picked up; the buzz of the audience intensified. A number of young children danced in front of the musicians, but they were unnoticed by the swelling crowd and the possession troupe's major personalities. Adamu Jenitongo, the zima, remained far from the crowd, and the spirit mediums had not yet left the spirit hut—the conical grass dwelling in the easternmost space of the compound.

More people joined the audience. The relentless cries, clacks, and rolls of the music compelled three old women to dance; the

crowd cheered. They sauntered onto the dance ground, grinning at one another. The loose flesh of their furrowed faces flapped as they danced.

Three movements distinguished their dancing. At the outset when the beat was slow, they danced in a circle. Moving counter-clockwise to the slow beat, they kept their arms at their sides. When they stepped forward they pressed their right feet into the sand three times. Eventually, the dancers broke their circle to form a line at the edge of the dance ground in preparation for the second dance movement. The musicians quickened the tempo, and each woman danced forward toward the source of sound—the ritual canopy. They came closer and closer. The tempo raced toward its climax. Just in front of the canopy, the dancers furiously kicked sand. The musicians slowed the tempo, signaling the third dance movement. The dancers remained just in front of the canopy, moving only their heads and arms to the music. They turned their heads to the left while sliding their right hands along their right thighs. Then they slid their left hands along their left thighs, shaking their heads to the right. The musicians played and the dancers shook their heads from left to right, left to right. Beads of glistening sweat sprayed into the air.

One gifted dancer, an older woman with a face puckered by the sun, delighted the crowd with her graceful pirouettes followed by her clumsy bumps and grinds. Her performance so inspired a member of the audience that he broached the dance ground and gave her a five hundred franc note (about \$2). The dancer took the money, held it high above her head, ran over to the canopy, and gave the note to one of the drummers, who put it into a common kitty. Even so early in the afternoon, the excitement of the music had generated a healthy pot.

The music swept the old possession priest onto the dance ground. Prompted by the dancing of his colleagues, Adamu Jenitongo, a slight, short man whose ebony skin stretched across his face like sun-weathered leather, matched the musicians' frenetic pace. He glided toward the canopy, his sharp eyes transfixed on the violinist. Someone gave him a cane. He held it above his head and danced furiously. Concerned that the dancing could strain his old heart, his sister, Kedibo, whisked him from the dance ground. Despite its brevity, the old zima's vigorous performance elicited generous contributions to the kitty.

Soon after Adamu Jenitongo's turn, one of the old women danc-



A woman doing the *gani*.

ers shooed the children from the dance area. Now the dancing was limited to those men and women who were part of the Tilla-beri possession troupe. The musicians played the music of the White Spirits, the deities who resolve social disputes and offer advice to people who are about to change their lives. The leader of the mediums, Gusabu, strolled into the dance area accompanied by two of her "sisters." They circled counterclockwise.

The musicians struck up the theme of one particular White Spirit, Serci, "the chief". A praise-singer chanted:

Dungunda's husband. Garo Garo's husband.
 Zaaje. White salt. Master of evil.
 You have put us
 Within your own covering of clouds.
 Mercy and Grace.
 Only God is greater than he.
 He is in your hands.
 He gave the angels their generosity.
 You are the master of Kangey.
 You brought the birth of language.
 You brought about victory.

The drummers chanted the praise-poem repeatedly as they and the violinist held the audience in thrall with a syncopated profusion of clacks and rolls cut by the wail of the violin. The three mediums approached the musicians. Gusabu, a large woman with a fleshy face and watery eyes, took a further step toward the musicians. She swayed to the sounds in front of her, behind her. The praise-singer burst through the crowd, a torrent of poems pouring from his mouth. As Gusabu swayed, the sorko chanted praise-songs to the White Spirits and the Tooru (spirits controlling the natural forces of the universe—water, clouds, lightning, thunder). He juxtaposed his praise with the insult, "nya ngoko" (fuck your mother). "If the spirit does not respond to praise-poetry," the sorko told me, "it will come to earth to demand retribution for my insults."

The musicians gradually quickened the tempo. Gusabu bobbed more rapidly now and shook her head back and forth, back and forth. Sensing that the spirit Serci was hovering just above the dance ground, the violinist upped the tempo even more. Gusabu twisted her body and pumped her arms; she perspired profusely. The sorko shouted directly into her ear. Serci was close now. Gusabu's forehead furrowed; she squinted. Tears streamed from her

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eyes and thick mucus flowed from her nose. Suddenly, Gusabu was thrown to the ground. She muttered, "Ah di, di, di, di, di, a dah, dah, dah, dah." Groaning, she squatted on the sand, her hands on her massive hips.

Serci had arrived. The drummers welcomed him, chanting, "Kubeyni, Kubeyni. Dungunda Kurnya. Garo Garo Kurnya" (Welcome. Welcome. Dugunda's husband. Garo Garo's husband.).

The two women behind Gusabu guided Serci to the edge of the dance ground and seated the deity on a straw mat. Meanwhile, another woman, whirling in front of the canopy, obliged the musicians to pick up the pace. The sorko shouted into her ear, and she too was taken by Mahamane Surgu (Mahamane the Tuareg), which prompted Serci to leave his attending mediums and join Mahamane in the dance area. They hugged one another in greeting and then pointed at the musicians.

"Play good music," they screamed.

The musicians responded, and the two spirits kicked, stomped, and grunted until the music momentarily died.

One of the attending mediums went to the spirit house to bring out the costumes. For Serci, the medium brought a white turban and white damask boubou, symbols of chiefly authority in Songhay. Mahamane Surgu was costumed in billowing black trousers and a long black boubou, both of which were made from thin Chinese cotton. A black turban was wrapped around Surgu's head—symbols of his Tuareg origin.

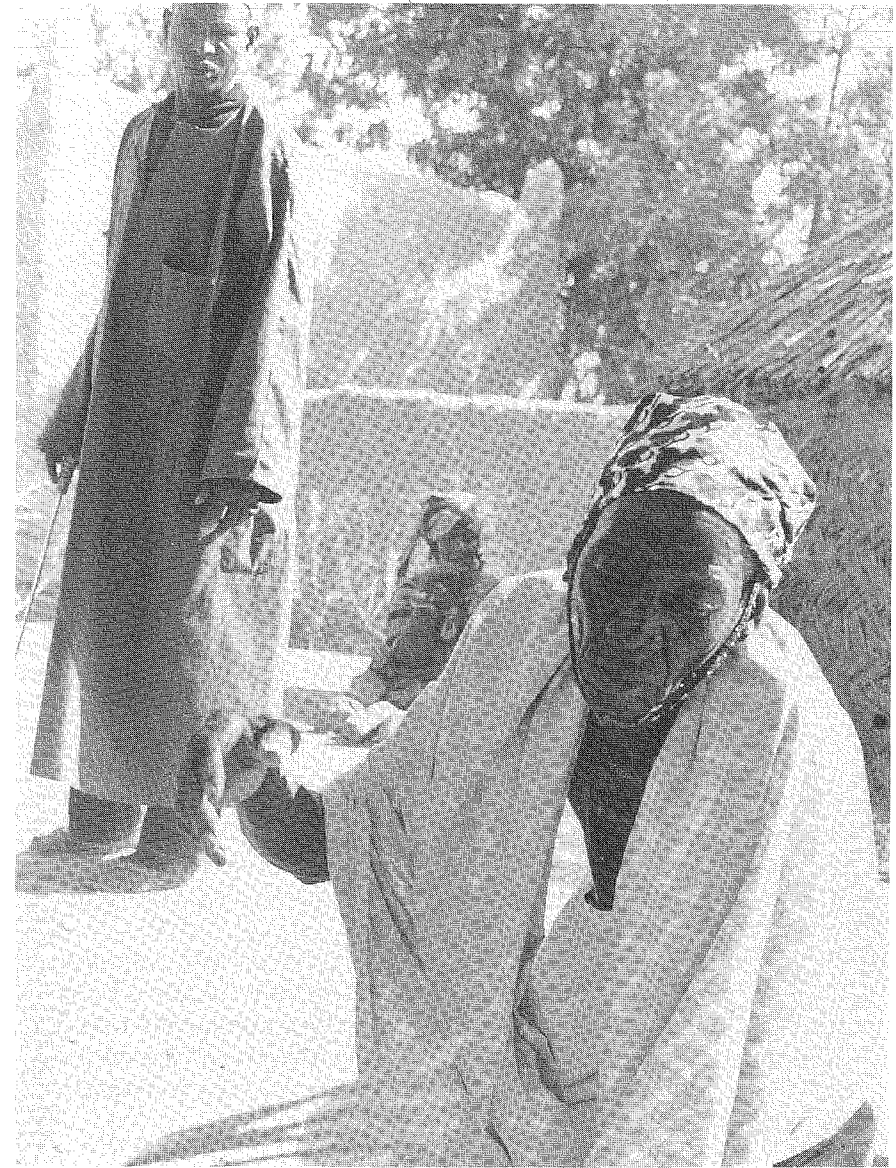
Preparations for this possession ceremony had begun several days before the musicians split the afternoon air in Tillaberi with their sacred sounds. Because Songhay marriages are full of uncertainties and often end in divorce, people contemplating marriage may seek the advice of the spirits. Plans for Serci's possession ceremony originated when the mother of a future groom visited Adamu Jenitongo.

"Zima," she said to Adamu Jenitongo, "I am fearful of my son's marriage. Will my son be happy with his new wife? Will the woman bring me grandchildren?"

"You must protect yourself on the path," the zima told her.

The woman nodded.

"We must stage a one-day White Spirit ceremony. We will look for Serci. Only Serci can answer these questions. Only Serci can tell you and your son how to protect yourselves."



A medium about to be possessed by Serci.

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"Yes, Serci tells only the truth. We should have this ceremony, zima."

"Good," said Adamu Jenitongo. "Tomorrow bring me 2,500 CFA [roughly \$10] and a white, a red, and a speckled chicken. We will hold the ceremony on a Thursday." (Thursday is the sacred day of the spirits, a day they are likely to swoop down from the heavens.)

Now Adamu Jenitongo would once again exercise his authority as the impresario of the Tillaberi possession troupe. He summoned his grandson: "Habi, go to Gusabu's compound [the head of the Tillaberi mediums] and tell her about our news of the Serci ceremony."

Adamu Jenitongo's grandson descended the dune on which his grandfather's compound perched. Marching through the deep sand, he came upon a dry riverbed strewn with the skeletons of cows and donkeys. He crossed the riverbed and climbed yet another dune, beyond which was the center of Tillaberi. As he reached the top of this second dune, he could see the Niger River stretching out before him. He walked toward the river on one of Tillaberi's wide dirt roads. He passed dry goods shops, parked trucks, a pharmacy, and a gas station. He crossed the single paved road of the town to pass the market and bus depot. Finally, as he came to the bank of the Niger, he arrived in Gusabu's neighborhood, Gunda Che.

Gusabu gave the boy water to drink in recognition of his long walk from the zima's compound. Like his colleagues in other villages, Adamu Jenitongo preferred to live close to the bush rather than in the center of town. "Near the bush," Adamu Jenitongo often told me, "one has peace. One is far from the treachery of the town."

Dressed in a black kaftan, Gusabu took another piece of black cloth and wrapped it around her head. Her brown-skinned brow was deeply furrowed and her eyebrows seemed perpetually raised as she assessed the zima's grandson. Fixing her watery eyes on the boy, she asked him questions about the upcoming possession ceremony.

"When is it to be staged?"

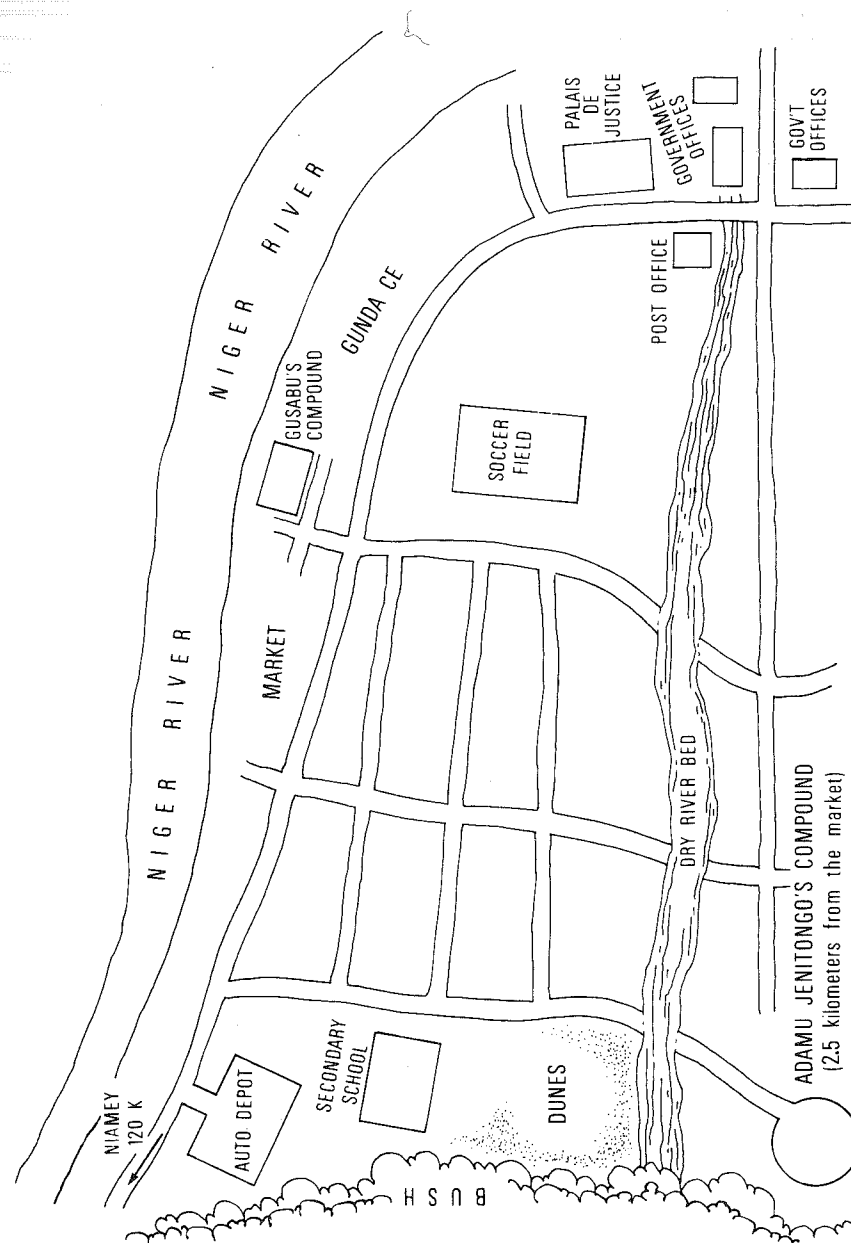
"They say Thursday," the boy answered.

"Will it last more than one day?"

"They say it is a one-afternoon ceremony."

"What is the purpose of the ceremony?"

"To bring Serci to Tillaberi."



Map of Tillaberi.

"How much will the mediums be paid?"

"My mother," the boy protested, "I know nothing of money."

Gusabu was now ready to execute her plan of action. Calling to her own grandson, she asked the boy to go to the compounds of her associates to inform them about the scheduled possession ceremony. She herself would visit those mediums whose bodies alone could attract to earth the spirit Serci.

The next day, a full two days before the beginning of the festivities, a group of mediums trekked to Adamu Jenitongo's compound. Like the zima's grandson's journey the day before, the women's trip was like a march through time. They left their mud-brick compounds, which had neither electricity nor running water, and crossed a paved road. They walked past a secondary school, which, with its rows of one-story cement buildings, looked like a military base, and saw students who were dressed in European clothing. The students spoke French to one another. The women marched up the first of two dunes. Soon the moos of cows being led out to the bush overwhelmed the echoes of the French language. They passed through a cloud of dust raised by the cows and tramped across the dry riverbed. They climbed the second sand dune and caught their first glimpse of the zima's compound shimmering in the morning light. Behind them was the center of Tillaberi; ahead of them was the millet-stalk fence of Adamu Jenitongo's compound, and beyond it was the sun-baked bush dotted with occasional thorn trees. They stopped at the opening of the compound, where Adamu Jenitongo greeted them enthusiastically.

"Hadjo and Jemma," he called to his two wives, "bring out some straw mats for our guests. Put them under the tree."

Gusabu objected, however. "No, no, no. We don't want the mats there. Put them next to the spirit house," she ordered crisply.

Gusabu, Adamu Jenitongo, and the other mediums sat down to talk. Gusabu pointed to the canopy. "Is it ready?"

"Yes," Adamu Jenitongo replied. "I sanctified it yesterday."

"How much money will my mediums be paid?" Gusabu demanded.

In his usual soft voice Adamu Jenitongo explained, as he had a thousand times: "Sister, you know that the share of a medium depends on the size and generosity of the audience. Besides," he said, "you know that the fees of the musicians have been getting dearer."

"I don't care, brother. We want more money."

"May God provide it," Adamu Jenitongo proclaimed.

"Amen," the mediums responded. By now the lesser priests in Tillaberi, having heard the news about the scheduled possession ceremony, came to Adamu Jenitongo's compound to ask when it would begin. Meanwhile, apprentices to the lesser priests picked up debris and smoothed the sandy grounds of the compound with tree branches. The three drummers arrived. With shovels, they dug foot-deep holes just in front of the sacred canopy. They then placed a five-foot stick across each little crater. These provided support for the drums they put over the holes. In this way the drummers created for themselves deep resonating chambers—a key to the quality of the drum's sound. When they played their drums they struck the gourds with the flat of the hand or with bamboo drumsticks that are made like human hands, having a "palm" area (bands of tightly bound cloth) from which five "fingers" are extended.

Later in the afternoon, the violinist, Daouda Godji, strolled into Adamu Jenitongo's compound, carrying a cloth sack that protected his instrument from the elements. Daouda sauntered past the zima and his cronies and entered the spirit hut. Inside, he hung the violin sack on one of the wooden poles that supported the conical structure. Other ritual objects were there: the small leather sandals and clay jugs of the Atakurma (the elves of the bush); Dongo's (deity of thunder) black cap; a mirror embedded in a small hill of sand at the base of the hut's support poles (for the narcissistic Nyalia, a major deity of the Cold Spirits, which bring on sickness in women). Bottles of perfume and large clay jugs stocked with honey hung above the entrance to the hut, offerings for the Hausa Spirits who love the smell of perfume and adore the taste of honey. Wedged between two of the support poles was Dongo's weapon, a hatchet with a bell attached to its wooden head.

Daouda left the hut and rejoined Adamu Jenitongo and his cronies. The presence of the sacred violin, the central instrument in the mythic first possession ceremony, would draw the spirits from the bush to the spirit hut.

The clacks of the drums and the cries of the violin cut through the din of the crowd that surrounded the visiting spirits. Before the spirits were costumed, their heads were covered with white

cloth, the Songhay symbol for nobility. Priests and mediums washed their feet, ankles, hands, and heads as if they were being prepared for Islamic prayer. The mediums then brought out soft leather pillows on which the robed spirits sat. They were now ready for an audience.

The woman who had commissioned the dance approached Serci and Mahamane Surgu with her son, who would soon marry. They sat on the sand at the feet of the spirits, with the sorko who was to serve as the intermediary.

"What must I do to protect the marriage of my son?" the woman asked the sorko.

The sorko posed the same question to Serci:

"Sorko, tell the woman she must acquire one white chicken, one red chicken, and one speckled chicken. These she must kill and then give the cooked meat to the poor." Serci paused a moment. "Do you understand, sorko? Do you understand my message?"

"Yes, yes, my chief. I understand."

Serci continued. "Sorko. This young man must acquire the egg of a white hen. He must dig a hole under the acacia at the crossroads on the Mangeize road—Sorko, do you hear my message?"

"I do, indeed, my chief."

"Sorko," Serci said, "if they follow my words the marriage will have peace and happiness only. Peace and happiness. Sorko, do you follow me?"

"I do, indeed, Serci." The sorko repeated the prescriptions to the mother and son.

Serci grabbed the young man by his head and screamed in each of his ears. Finished with his work, Serci waved away the mother and her son.

"Sorko. Sorko. Tell them they must never stray from the path of the ancestors and their spirits," Serci said.

Serci held his arms in front his body, grabbing his right wrist with his left hand. In this manner he presented his right hand to the mother and son and extended his forefinger in the air—the spirit gesture reminding the audience that there is but one path that connects the Songhay to their ancestors—the path of the spirits.

Meanwhile, the music echoed in the background. Suddenly, the audience scattered from the edge of the dance area, making room for a man whose thrashing covered the crowd with a shower of

sand. Gondi, "the snake," had slid from the heavens into the body of his medium. Gondi slithered on the sand toward his masters, Serci and Mahamane Surgu, all the while darting his head and flicking his tongue. People in the audience tossed coins onto the straw mat where the spirits were seated.

The drums clacked and the violin droned. The deep orange light of the late afternoon seeped into the huts of the compound. But the possession ceremony was not yet finished. Suddenly, Baba Soro, the Fulan herder, took his medium—none other than the ninety-eight-year-old Adamu Jenitongo himself. He stripped off his black robe and rolled his trouser legs to just above the knees. He dashed toward the musicians, screaming:

"I am running. I am running."

He thumped his chest and hit his forehead repeatedly with his open hand. A medium gave him a tunic made of coarse white cotton, which he slipped over his head. Another medium presented him with a wooden staff covered with leather and decorated with scores of cowry shells.

"Play my music," he ordered. "Play my music."

They played and chanted:

Doosa ana Bowsa. Doogu. Pula
Maara mooda. Narra Balukuli.
Gungun Naara [all names of Baba Sora].
If all the spirits died,
You would remain.

The coming of Baba Sora, the harbinger of good will, was a rare event. Excited by this good fortune, people gladly gave Baba Sora money, which he redistributed to children. He took 500 CFA and gave it to the musicians. He ran everywhere; he danced frenetically.

A lesser priest pulled Baba Soro from the dance area and shook him so the indefatigable young spirit would leave Adamu Jenitongo's tired, old body. Other priests did the same to Serci, Mahamane Surgu, and Gondi, "the snake." The sun slid toward the western horizon and, in the absence of possession music, stillness returned to the air above Tillaberi. Smoke from cooking fires rose in dusk clouds above the village. Headed for evening meals in their own homes, the audience poured out of Adamu Jenitongo's compound. The lead drummer gave Adamu Jenitongo all the

money that had been collected. The zima put the money in a leather satchel.

"Today, was a great success," he announced. "Tomorrow, everyone must return, so that we can distribute the money."

The Songhay Universe

The Songhay universe consists of two domains: the social and spirit worlds. Although the spirit world is generally unseen and separate from the social world, its power and influence surface during possession ceremonies. In the ceremony described above, Serci, a spirit, enters and speaks through Gusabu, a spirit medium. This possession episode represents in Songhay the fusion of a spirit and a human being. More generally, possession is the fusion of the unseen and the seen, the supernatural and the natural; it is the fusion of the worlds, during which deities speak to mortals in Songhay communities. This pattern of communication has long enabled people in Songhay to comprehend the mysteries of their universe.

The Songhay people, who are primarily millet farmers in the republics of Benin, Mali, and Niger, trace their origins to the "first people" who were, according to legend, the Atakurma. The Atakurma were either small and thin or short and fat. While the Atakurma disappeared from Songhay more than a thousand years ago for reasons unknown, they remain a significant part of the "living tradition" of Songhay history.¹ Atakurma today are "guardians of the bush" who can inform their human interlocutors of future events. Ritual specialists often make offerings (candy, sesame, honey, and fresh milk) to the Atakurma. On several occasions Adamu Jenitongo and I left sesame and candy offerings at the base of an acacia in the bush. Adamu Jenitongo makes these offerings infrequently these days. Considering the Atakurma's prescience, Adamu Jenitongo says that "an old man does not want to know when he will die."²

Songhay oral history also speaks to the existence of two loosely organized social groups: *laabu koy*, or "masters of the earth" and *Do*, "Masters of water"—the Niger River. The *laabu koy* worshiped the gods of their lands and believed that if they did not stage rituals to the earth spirits, the land would become sterile.³ Until 1953 *laabu koy* rites were staged yearly in Tera, Niger. The officiant, however, was Gurmantche rather than Songhay, and he spoke to the spirits in his own tongue, a Voltaique language unrelated to Songhay. These facts led Jean Rouch to speculate that

the "masters of the earth" were Voltaique-language speakers who are perhaps today the Kurumba people of Burkina Faso.⁴

There are still many *Do*, masters of the water, who live along the Niger River.

The origin of the *Do* can be traced to *N'Debbi*, the messenger of the Songhay magicians. One day he asked a group of fishermen for a volunteer who would lie on his stomach and offer his back as a point of support so that *N'Debbi's* iron dugout could be launched onto the river. The descendants of this volunteer became the *Do*. Due to this act of courage, the *Do* received from *N'Debbi* the power over water and that which it contains, and the mastery of water, under which they can remain for an entire day without surfacing.⁵

While the *Do* have been assimilated into Songhay society and culture, they are still consulted when, for example, a group of fisherman organizes a hippopotamus hunt. Without the *Do's* blessing, the hunter subjects himself to grave danger. In addition, *Do* do not eat the red flesh of the Niger River catfish (*desi*), which is their totem.

The *sorko* were also early inhabitants of Songhay. Mythically, the *sorko* are descendants of Faran Maka Bote, who was the son of Nisile Bote, a fisherman, and Maka, a river genie. Faran was the first possession priest. The *sorko's* historical past, though, is steeped in mystery. Rouch suggested that they migrated to the Niger River from the region of Lake Chad. Following the Benue River, they finally came upon the Niger in present-day Nigeria and migrated northward along the river into present-day Niger.

Songhay history begins with the coming of Aliaman Za, the founder of the first Songhay dynasty. Historians continue to debate Za's place of origin. Although a few historians think Za came from Yemen, the weight of historical evidence suggests that he was a Lempta Berber who migrated to the Niger bend (near Gao, Republic of Mali) from the Gharmantes in southern Libya. Za arrived sometime in the eighth century and found a local population consisting most likely of *Do*, *sorko*, and speakers of Voltaique languages—*gabibi*, or "black skins." Terrorized by a river demon, these peoples asked Za to kill it with his iron spear. In gratitude for Za's success, the local groups declared him king. Za quickly legitimized his newfound authority and established a dynasty situated at Koukya, an island in the Niger south of Gao.⁶

The first fourteen Zas were animists. In the eleventh century,

Za Kosoy converted to Islam.⁷ During the early period, however, Islam remained a religion unknown to most of the Songhay population. Vestiges of the Zas remain in Songhay ritual life today. Among the most important Songhay possession deities is Za Beri, "the great Za," who might be a symbolic manifestation of Ali-aman Za.⁸

During the epoch of the Zas, Songhay kings paid tribute to both Ghana and Mali. In the thirteenth century Ali Kolon, son of Za Yasiboy, fought a series of battles against the king of Mali and, as a result of his victories, gained momentary independence. He assumed the kingship, and his descendants, because of his bravery, considered themselves part of a new dynasty, the Sonnis. Independence was short-lived, however; soon the successors of Sonni (or Si) Kolon found themselves again the vassals to the king of Mali. Not until the ascendancy of Sonni Ali Ber (1464–91) did Songhay vanquish the Mali Empire. Beyond the fact that Sonni Ali Ber was nominally a Muslim, he was reputed to be the most powerful sorcerer in all of West Africa. His mother was of the Faru of what is now Nigeria, a people renowned for their sorcery. During his youth Sonni Ali Ber lived with his mother's people and learned their secrets. From his father, Sonni Seliman-Dam, he learned the regal magic of the Zas and the Sonnis, receiving as an adult the master world of power (*gind'ize gina*). From his mother's milk and his father's blood he inherited special magical powers—the ability to fly great distances and to kill people with incantations. In sum, Sonni Ali Ber became so powerful that he and his armies appeared to be invincible. Returning from a military campaign in 1491, Ali Ber died under mysterious circumstances.⁹

The Songhay Empire reached the height of its power during the reign of Sonni Ali's successor, Mohammed Touré, who, after defeating Ali Ber's son, Si Baru, established the Askia (1493–1591), the third and last dynasty of Songhay. Except during the reign of Askia Daoud (1542–88), the power of Songhay was sapped through internecine rivalries. Sensing a Sudanese prize, Morocco's El Mansur sponsored a series of military expeditions against Songhay. Finally, in 1591, a relatively small Moroccan force defeated the Songhay army. After Gao "broke" in 1591, the nobility escaped to the south. Restraining their ambitions at first, the Songhay princes attempted to maintain the integrity of the empire. Soon, however, princely rivalries caused the empire to balkanize into five chiefdoms: Kokoro, Tera, Dargol, Garuol, and Anzuru. From the outset, the autonomy of these polities was threatened by

ceaseless disputes among the princely family and by the rise of powerful and influential ethnic groups in neighboring regions: the Tuaregs in the north; the Moose in the west; the Fulan to the south in Torodi; and the Zerma and Hausa to the east.¹⁰

The splintering of Songhay and the increasing strength of its neighbors brought on a long period of incessant war, or what the French call *guerre intestin*. Garuol would form an alliance with the Tuareg to fight a war against Dargol, which, in defense of itself, would form an alliance with the Zerma. Tera would ally itself with Dargol to fight Kokoro. Kokoro would ally itself with Garuol to battle the Tuaregs. This pattern of alliance and warfare continued unabated from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century, the onset of French-Songhay contact.¹¹

Throughout the turmoil of *guerre intestin* Songhay remained a stratified patrilineal society in which slavery and preferential patterns of marriage produced a strong sense of social exclusivity. Nobles were the patrilineal descendants of Askia Mohammed Touré. Slaves were the patrilineal descendants of the prisoners of precolonial wars. Social exclusivity was reinforced further by strict codes of behavior. Nobles restrained their emotions and re-distributed their wealth. Slaves acted like children and lived on the noble's dole.¹²

There was little contact between Songhay and Europe until the very end of the nineteenth century, during which the French colonial army conquered what was to become the French Soudan. Colonial policies, discussed at length in chapter 7, quickly undermined the fragile balance of the precolonial social order. The French transformed chiefs into tax collectors and conscripted young men to build roads. They introduced a money economy and educated a colonial elite.¹³

Despite the wholesale changes unleashed by colonialism, the social groups that comprise Songhay in the Republic of Niger still represent significant sociocultural vestiges of the precolonial era. Today, Songhay is comprised of the following groups:

1. Nobles (*maigey*, pl.). Nobles are the patrilineal descendants of Askia Mohammed Touré. They believe that their noble blood carries powers that give them a predisposition for local-level governance.¹⁴

2. Non-noble Songhay. Non-noble Songhay are comprised of Si Hamey, the patrilineal descendants of Sonni Ali Ber; the patrilineal descendants of Faran Maka Bote, who are called sorko; and commoners, who are patrilineal descendants of ancient peoples

long ago assimilated into Songhay (Gow, Do, Kurumba) or of slaves who bought their freedom. A small group of Si Hamey and sorkey (pl.) continue to practice sorcery and praise-singing to the spirits.

3. Former slaves and artisans. In the barter economy of pre-colonial Songhay, former slaves and artisans—the prisoners of precolonial wars—were clients to noble patrons. They are today civil servants, clients to economic patrons, as well as millet and rice farmers.¹⁵

4. Foreigners. Songhay is marked by ethnic diversity. Since precolonial times, Songhay have coexisted with Fulan, Tuareg, Gurmantche, and Moose people as well as the Songhay-speaking Zerma, Wogo, and Kurtey. Hausa-speaking peoples, who migrated to Songhay during the early part of this century, have become a major economic force in the region.

5. Civil servants. These are members of the educated elite who are professors, bureaucrats, and extension agents. Ideally, they place such national priorities as development above narrow ethnic interests.

Possession in Songhay

Songhay cosmology has expanded with historical experience. Prior to the Askia, Songhay developed the central theme of their belief system: Human beings are powerless actors in a universe filled with powerful forces that can at any moment destroy society. Individuals attempted to control the powerful unseen forces through ritual offerings to their lineage altars (*tooru*). The historical patterns suggest, moreover, that prior to the Askia, Songhay religion consisted of a series of localized and private rites during which sacrifices were made to the land, to the mountains, to the sky, and to the Niger River.¹⁶

With the onset of the Askia and the Islamization of Songhay, Songhay ritual practices appear to have become more public: private offerings to the spirits of the *tooru* (altar) of a lineage became public offerings to the Tooru spirits that now spoke to mortals through the bodies of mediums. Like the old altar spirits, the Tooru controlled the most powerful forces of nature: the sky (wind, lightning, clouds, and rain) and the Niger River.¹⁷

What precipitated this transformation? The policies of the Askia promoted Islamization, the dispersion of entire populations, and the dissolution of the lineage as a decision-making body.¹⁸ In this climate of irrevocable change, the possession ceremony (*holle*

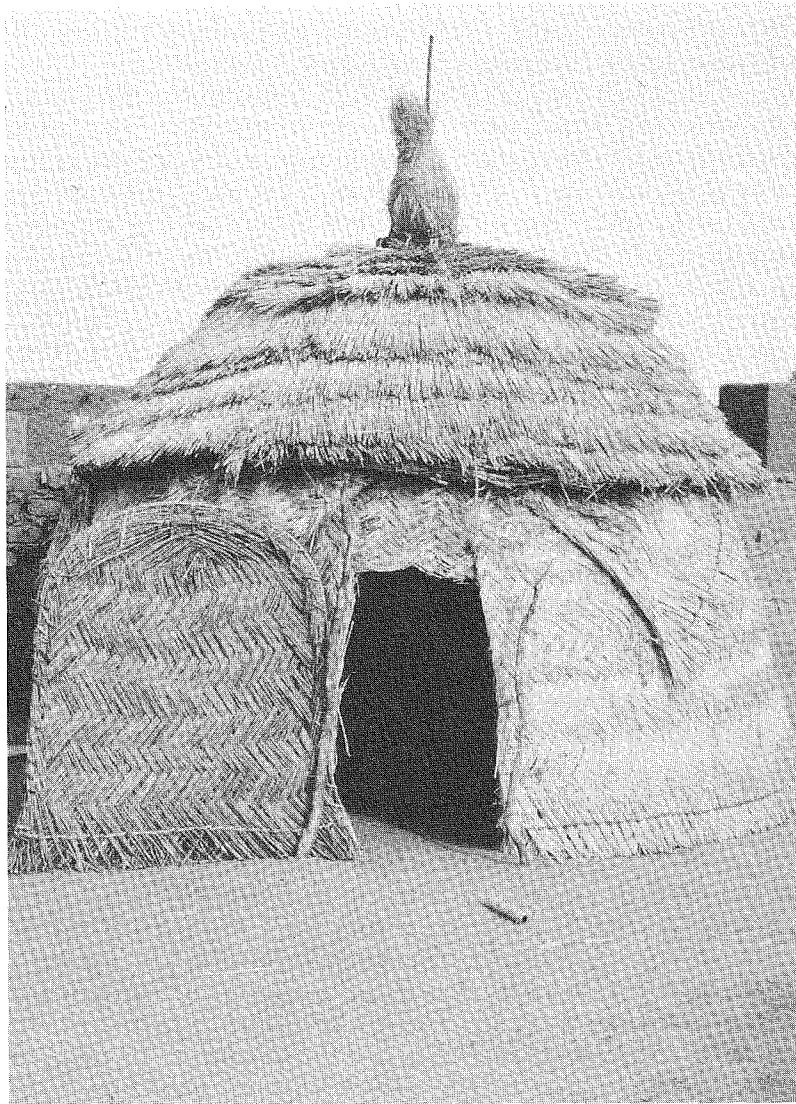
hori) became a stage from which Songhay made sense of the changes confronting them.

The same patterns of incorporation emerged during other periods of Songhay historical contact and crisis. From contact with the non-Negroid Islamized Tuareg came the Genji Kwari or White Spirits, who are *kadi*, Islamic dispute arbitrators. From nineteenth-century contact with Hausa-speaking peoples, the Hausa deities became part of the Songhay pantheon. On the eve of the colonial period, there were five distinct “families” of spirits in Songhay (Tooru, Genji Kwari; Hausa, spirits of sickness and death; Genji Bi, spirits of the land; and Hargay, spirits of the cold, i.e., death and infertility). At the same time there emerged in Songhay villages possession troupes, consisting of priests, mediums, musicians, and praise-singers, which staged rites that created an interpenetration of the social and spirit worlds—the fusion of the worlds.

There are still many possession troupes in Songhay, and the possession ceremonies they stage continue to reflect symbolically themes of Songhay history. The Genji Bi, the spirits of the land, represent the earliest populations of Songhay; the musical instruments used during the ceremonies are mentioned in Songhay myths.

Possession ceremonies are also used by many Songhay to resolve various social problems. In the case of the mother and her son described earlier, the goal of the possession ceremony was to solicit the counsel of Serci, an expert on human affairs. Because of the care Adamu Jenitongo took in staging the rites, Serci did, indeed, swoop down from the heavens to visit Tillaberi and give his advice to mother and son. The mere presence of Serci and Mahamane Surgu, however, does not guarantee the son's successful marriage. If the son has “filth” in his heart, if he “walks two paths with one foot,” to cite the wisdom of a Songhay proverb, the spirits will sabotage his marriage: his wife-to-be will be barren, or she will die in childbirth, or she will bear a dead child. Mother and son know this well. Because of his fear the son will follow Serci's advice. But if he should malign the spirits during the everyday routine of his life, he will pay dearly for it.

“Those who deviate from the path of the ancestors,” Adamu Jenitongo was fond of saying, “suffer through life until they reach their untimely deaths.”



The spirit hut in Adamu Jenitongo's compound.

PART ONE

ORGANIZATION OF THE
POSSESSION TROUPE