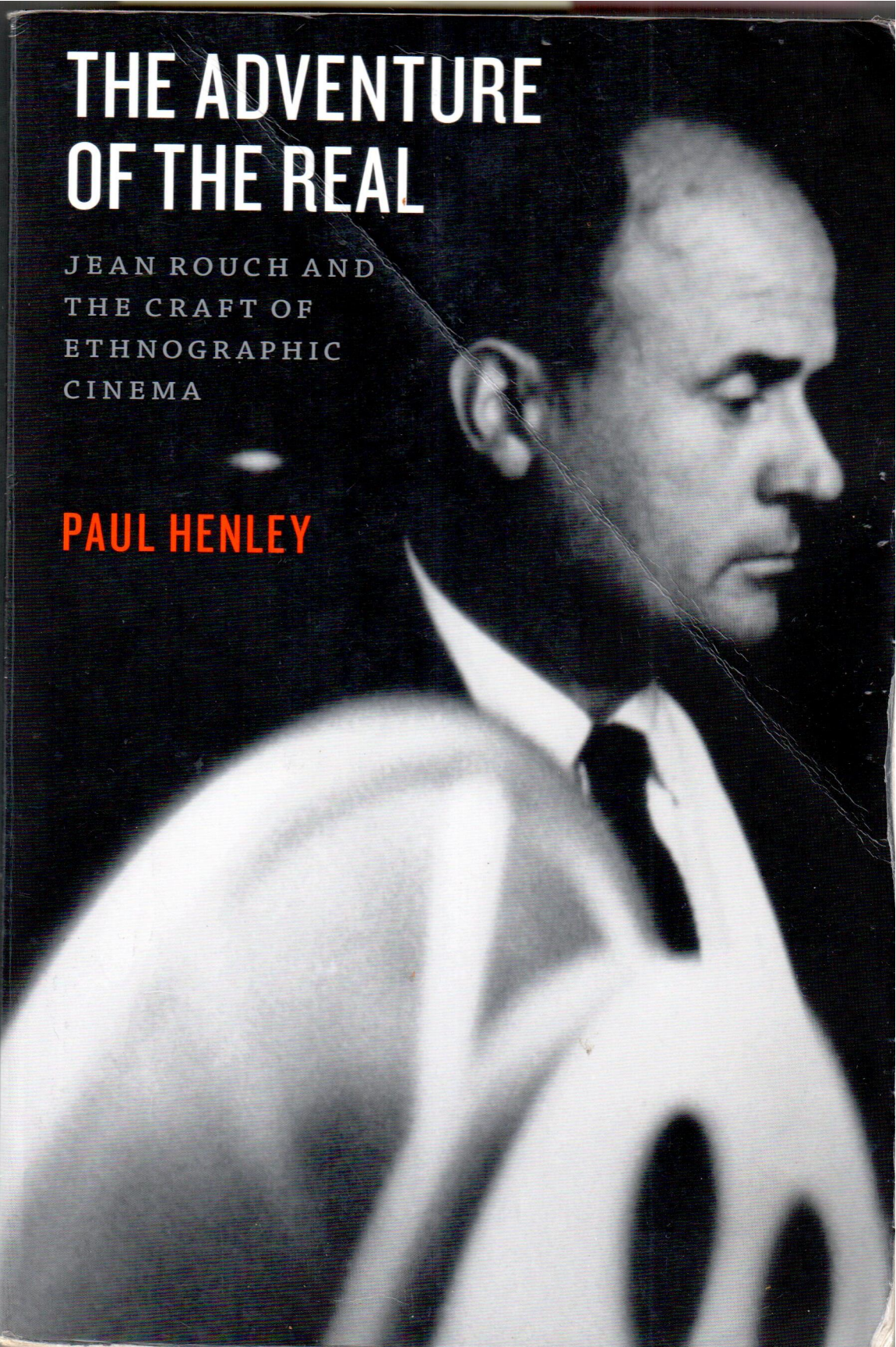


THE ADVENTURE OF THE REAL

JEAN ROUCH AND
THE CRAFT OF
ETHNOGRAPHIC
CINEMA

PAUL HENLEY



risk one runs in improvising films in this way.²⁵ Perhaps, given the prejudices of the time, it would have been just too explosive to have added a racial component to the tragic love triangle, or perhaps it was indeed simply that he found himself lumbered with rushes that did not really hang together and had to make the best of it. But whatever the case, he clearly did not want to leave the film on this pessimistic note, so in the final scene, there is a reconciliation between the two groups as they meet at the airport to see off Nadine, who has decided to return to France. Then, in an epilogue, the film shows a number of the protagonists, including the “drowned” Alain, happily walking down a street in Paris, and one is reminded that the film was but a fiction. Even so, Rouch suggests, it was a fiction that has had effects in the real world in the sense that it has helped all the participants to overcome their racial prejudices.²⁶

La Pyramide humaine confirmed Rouch's developing status as a major figure of French cinema. In 1965, four years after its release, when thirty-one leading critics were asked by *Cahiers du Cinéma* to name the best ten French films since the end of the Second World War, seven of them included *La Pyramide humaine* in their lists while three more included *Moi, un Noir*. Jean-Luc Godard was a particular admirer, rating *La Pyramide humaine* second only to the Max Ophüls film, *Le Plaisir*, as the greatest French film of this period.²⁷ From an ethnographic point of view, *La Pyramide humaine* is perhaps the least interesting of the films that Rouch made during the period of his migration research since we discover very little about the broader social, political, or cultural contexts in which race relations are played out. But in terms of the development of Rouch's praxis, this film is of crucial importance since it prefigures a number of elements that would be central to his work in the future. As we shall see in chapters 8 and 9, the psychodrama methodology and the associated play between the fiction and reality, the incorporation into the film itself of both the initial setting up and the viewing of rushes by the protagonists, and even several of the leading characters of *La Pyramide humaine*, would all reappear, under various different guises, in the films that Rouch would make in the next phase of his career. But this phase would only begin after Jean Rouch had undertaken his own migration, back to Paris, just as the French colonial empire in West Africa was coming to an end.

7: Images of Power

In Jean Rouch's immense body of work, there are a number of films that stand out particularly, but even among these, *Les Maîtres fous* is one of the most salient. Mostly filmed over the course of a single day—Sunday, August 15, 1954—this was the film that first clearly established Rouch's international renown. He shot the film with his trusty spring-wound Bell & Howell Filmo 70 purchased at the Paris Flea Market, while the sound was recorded asynchronously by his longtime Nigerien associates, Damouré Zika and Lam Ibrahim Dia on a “portable” tape recorder weighing in excess of thirty kilograms. It was edited by Suzanne Baron, a rising star of the cutting room who had already worked with Jacques Tati on *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* (1951) and who would later become Louis Malle's editor of choice.

Les Maîtres fous concerns the *hauka* spirit possession cult in and around Accra, capital of what is now the independent state of Ghana but was then still the British colony of the Gold Coast. The mediums were mostly young Songhay men who had migrated from the middle reaches of the Niger River, some 650 miles to the north in the French colony of Niger (and now an independent republic of the same name). Referred to as “Zabrama” in the film, they represented merely the most recent wave of a pattern of seasonal migration from the drought-afflicted southern margin of the Sahelian Desert to the economically dynamic cities on the coastal plains of West Africa that had been going on since at least the middle of the nineteenth century.

This chapter represents a modified version of an essay that was awarded the 2004 Curl Essay Prize of the Royal Anthropological Institute and that later appeared in a somewhat abbreviated form under the title “Spirit Possession, Power and the Absent Presence of Islam: Re-viewing *Les Maîtres fous*” in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Henley 2006a). It is republished here in this form with the kind permission of Blackwell Publishing Ltd. but the original can be accessed via <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/loi/JRAI>.



FIGURE 7.1. Globalization *avant la lettre*. Top, the Little Sisters of Christ proclaim their faith in the streets of Accra. Bottom, West Indian calypso plays day and night in bars with names such as "Weekend in California" and "Weekend in Havana."

Although *Les Maîtres fous* is a relatively brief film, with a running time of less than thirty minutes, it has been the subject of innumerable commentaries. Marc Piault echoes a commonly held view when he observes that *Les Maîtres fous* is a "truly foundational film, without doubt one of the cult films of both cinema and anthropology."¹ In terms of general film craft, it marked an important new phase in Rouch's development as a filmmaker, going beyond the simpler narratives of his earlier films. Whereas most ethnographic films of the day aimed to capture the last expressions of traditional rural cultural traditions under the threat of disappearance, *Les Maîtres fous* celebrates what Rouch refers to in the opening commentary as "the great adventure of African cities" and unashamedly describes a world already affected by cultural and economic globalization long before this term had entered common currency (see fig. 7.1).

But what really accounts for the interest that this film has attracted over the years is its controversial subject matter. Some fifty years after it was made, the argument about the precise meaning of the ritual event

at the heart of the film continues unabated. Indeed, the film is so well known that it is barely necessary to summarize its content, though I shall do so briefly:

Following a preliminary sequence showing the highly varied range of casual laboring jobs performed by Songhay-Zerma migrants in Accra, the film follows a group of them as they travel by rural taxi to the small town of Nsawam, about twenty-five miles north of Accra and then to the smallholding of one Mountyeba, a cacao farmer from Niger and priest of the *houka* cult. Here, after a new member has been initiated and other more established members have offered small animal sacrifices in recompense for certain moral infringements, the *houka* spirits are summoned and the mediums go into trance. While in this state, they assume a series of identities associated with the colonial world, mostly political or military: Governor, General, Major, Corporal of the Guard, and so on, putting on pith helmets and red sashes, blowing a whistle and parading up and down with wooden models of guns. Not all these identities are high-ranking or military: one medium becomes Train Driver while another becomes Truck Driver. Nor are they all male: one man adopts the identity of Doctor's Wife while the only female medium adopts the identity of a certain Madame Salma, the wife of an early twentieth-century French colonial official. In these various forms, the mediums dance about, foam at the mouth, and run flaming straw torches over their torsos (fig. 7.2). At the culminating moment, they sacrifice a dog and throw themselves forward with an animalistic frenzy to drink its blood. They then put it on to boil and plunge their hands into the pot to extract pieces of meat, seemingly impervious to the pain. But next day, the film shows that they have all returned to normal life as smiling workers in the city.

The now-orthodox interpretation of this spirit possession ceremony and one that is almost universal in the English-language literature, is that it represents a carnivalesque parody of colonial authority figures and as such constitutes a form of counter-hegemonic cultural resistance to European colonialism. In this chapter, I shall be arguing that while such an interpretation is immediately attractive, and obviously congenial to postcolonial sensitivities, it is misplaced, involving a confusion of ends and means, and consequently obscuring what the ritual activity represented in *Les Maîtres fous* is really about.

The Genesis of a Counter-hegemonic Text

The first public screening of the *Les Maîtres fous*, when it was still in the form of a work print, took place sometime in early 1955, in the cinema



FIGURE 7.2. Mediums possessed by *hauka*. Top, Lieutenant Malia, "from the Red Sea" enters a trance. Below, by passing a flaming torch over his body, Corporal of the Guard proves that he is no longer an ordinary human being, but a *hauka*.

of the Musée de l'Homme, before an audience mostly composed of anthropologists and African intellectuals. It was a complete disaster. Most of those present condemned the film for encouraging racist prejudices, and urged Rouch to destroy it. The critics included even Rouch's mentor Marcel Griaule, though Rouch would later claim that it was the mimicking of the colonial authorities that most worried him. Only the Belgian anthropologist and filmmaker Luc de Heusch spoke up for the film, declaring that it was bound to become a classic of ethnographic cinema and on no account should it be destroyed.²

Defying the criticisms Rouch completed the film and put it into circulation. In Paris, it continued to cause offence: a commonly told story concerns the late Senegalese director Blaise Senghor who reported that when he emerged from a public screening in Paris, he sensed that other members of the audience were looking at him and thinking, "Here's another one who is going to eat a dog!"³ Back on the Gold Coast, it was banned on the grounds not only that it showed cruelty to animals but also disrespect to the governor, the Queen's representative, and hence to the Queen herself. Many other audiences, both then and now, have

found the images disturbing: Paul Stoller reports that every time that he shows the film to his students, one of them invariably vomits.⁴

But although the film still has its critics, de Heusch's prophecy has come to pass and *Les Maîtres fous* is indeed now regarded as a classic of ethnographic film, with an impact extending far beyond the realm of academic anthropology. Not only did it begin to garner various international film prizes, but also, shortly after it was released, it inspired Jean Genet in the writing of his play *Les Nègres*, in which oppressed Blacks don masks and mimic their White masters. A few years later, Peter Brook screened it to his actors when rehearsing his famous 1964 production of *Marat/Sade* in order to demonstrate to them the effect of overwhelming madness on the human body. Nor was it only in the former colonial metropoli that the film came to be acclaimed. For, according to Rouch himself, those same African colleagues who had once denounced the film as racist later came to appreciate it as the best available filmic depiction of colonialism from below. As such, he claimed, it has come to be considered an anticolonial film that is routinely screened for educational purposes in the independent Republic of Niger.⁵

Over the years, Rouch seems to have worked hard to secure this rehabilitation. Although he may have defied his friends and colleagues at the Musée in releasing the film, he would surely have been deeply troubled by their reaction. That any film of his should encourage racist attitudes toward the African subjects would have conflicted profoundly with his most fundamental principles. In order to disarm these criticisms while not compromising on the documentation of the cult, he appears to have adopted the strategy of suggesting that if there was anything shocking or ugly in the film, this should not be attributed to the African subjects but rather to the colonial society in which they lived.

A number of editorial devices deployed within the film itself encourage this interpretation. First of all, there is the main title, which plays on a series of linguistic ambiguities. For, in French, the word *maître* means both "master" as in "master and servant" and the "master" of a cult, that is, an accomplished spirit medium. The identity of the *maîtres* alluded to in the title of the film is thus ambiguous: it could refer to either the colonial masters or the mediums, or indeed to both. The adjective *fou*, meanwhile, means "mad," which on one level is an ethnographic allusion to the fact that *hauka*, the most common local term for the cult, has precisely this connotation. But on another level, it suggests that it is the political masters, the colonial authority figures represented by the mediums in trance, who are the truly insane ones.⁶

Another such device is the lengthy series of intertitles at the beginning of the film. These warn the spectators of the "violence and cruelty"

they are about to see, but assure them that the objectives of the film are merely sociological, aiming to provide an uncompromised view of one of the “new religions” developed by young African migrants as a reaction to their “bruising” encounter with “the mechanical civilization” of the cities. The spectators are also assured that there is nothing subversive about the cult since the film was made at the request of the cult’s priests, and it is open to all those “who really wish to play the game.” If this “game” seems rather unpleasant, the spectators are reminded that it is “nothing other than the reflection of our civilization” as seen by “certain Africans.”

This reference to a “game” seems to have had the unfortunate effect of suggesting to some commentators that the *hauka* cult is merely a ludic performance of some kind. In fact, this reference is an allusion to the Songhay’s own term for spirit-possession rituals, *holey hori*, which can be translated, very literally, as “game of the spirits.” But what this refers to is not so much the ludic quality of these rituals but rather their theatricality: Marc Piault has suggested that there is an analogy here with the way in which, in the Christian tradition, one can refer to Passion “plays.” As in the case of the latter, the theatricality of these events does not mean that their purposes cannot be both entirely authentic and deeply serious.⁷

The presentation of the *hauka* cult as a reaction to the oppressive nature of “mechanical civilization” is taken up again in the commentary of the film. Over the opening sequence showing the migrants at work at their many different jobs around Accra, the commentary deploys the cacophony of urban living as a metaphor for all the stresses and strains of city life, concluding with the suggestion—running over a dramatic nighttime shot of a medium frothing at the mouth—that the migrants “from silent savannas” are “forced” to turn to the cult as refuge from all this “noise.” Rouch returns to these themes in the concluding passage of commentary at the end of the film. Here, over a series of shots of smiling laborers who only yesterday had been gorging themselves on dog meat, he comments:

When looking at these happy faces . . . one really wonders whether these men of Africa have found a panacea against mental disorders. One wonders whether they have found a way to absorb our inimical society.

Here too then, he is suggesting that if there is anything distressing about the behavior represented in the film, this should be understood as merely the Africans’ response to the madness of “inimical” European colonial society (fig. 7.3).⁸

It is significant that these various editorial devices deflecting a



FIGURE 7.3. Possession as a form of defense. *Top*, the adepts take refuge from the noise of the city by calling on the “new gods.” According to Muller (1971: 1472), the frothing at the mouth is the product of a systematically developed technique involving “special tongue movements.” *Bottom*, next day, the adepts return to their everyday menial jobs. “When looking at these happy faces . . . one wonders whether they have found a way to absorb our inimical society.”

possibly negative reaction—the titles, the commentary—are normally added toward the end of the postproduction of a film. Given that it was only a work print with an improvised commentary that was screened at the disastrous première in the Musée, it is tempting to speculate that these editorial devices in the definitive version of *Les Maîtres fous* were added subsequently, as a direct response to the harsh criticisms that the film had attracted at that first screening. But whatever the exact chronology of their addition to the film, the general line of the interpretation that they promote is the same as the one that Rouch encouraged in his many external commentaries on the film in later years.

Moreover, as time went on, these commentaries became progressively more radical. Rather than present the cult as simply a response to the various personal problems that rural migrants encountered on moving to the city, as is implied in the internal commentary of the film itself, Rouch later came to see it as a form of “group therapy” developed as “a reaction against the colonial power of the British and French authorities.”⁹ By 1977, he was distancing himself from the implication in his concluding comment that the cult could be interpreted as a means of psycholog-

ical accommodation to colonial society, preferring instead to call it “implicitly revolutionary.” However, in the same interview, he acknowledges that the *hauka* mediums “insist” that they were not engaged in mockery nor motivated by any notion of revenge, adding that he considers this to be true, “at least on the conscious level.”¹⁰ Yet by 1990, we find him describing the *hauka* performances as “unmercifully mimicking” colonial military displays.¹¹

In the hands of some secondary commentators, this interpretative tendency has been taken one step further. Although Rouch’s more mature understanding of the *hauka* cult may have been to see it as a reaction against colonial power rather than just against “mechanical civilization” in some more general sense, he still continued to think of it as being essentially therapeutic. In the writings of others, however, this has subtly metamorphosed into an interpretation in which the cult is presented as primarily a form of parodic resistance to the cultural hegemony of European colonialism while the therapeutic element is downplayed in importance or ignored completely.

In reassessing this film, I shall begin by identifying the grounds for doubt about the conventional view of the *hauka* ceremony in *Les Maîtres fous* as a counter-hegemonic performance that arise simply from viewing the film itself. I will then develop an alternative interpretation on the basis of an examination of the ethnographic literature on possession cults among the Songhay and a number of other peoples of West and North Africa. In doing so, I shall be relying heavily on the work of an ethnographic author of unrivalled authority on the subject of Songhay possession. This author is none other than Jean Rouch himself. In effect then, I shall be using the work of Rouch the Author to finesse and expand the reading of the *hauka* cult offered by Rouch the Filmmaker.

Some Loose Threads

My own doubts about the interpretation of the *hauka* cult as a counter-hegemonic parody of European political power were first aroused by a number of details in the film itself. There is, first of all, the extended sequence in the compound before the principal ceremony begins. After a new member has been initiated, a number of more established members make confessions to Mountyeba the priest. One confesses that he has had sexual intercourse with his friend’s girlfriend and consequently has been impotent for two months while a second, clearly in a state of psychological turmoil, declares that he is unclean. A third then questions the very existence of the *hauka* spirits. The priest imposes various fines, involving the sacrifice of a ram and a number of chickens, and their blood



FIGURE 7.4. Public confessions. Top, “I never wash, I am unclean.” Bottom, Mountyeba the *zima* priest imposes an animal sacrifice as a punishment.

is then spattered over the makeshift concrete altar and the painted termite mound that serves as the “palace” of the *hauka* spirit Governor (fig. 7.4). Right at the end of the film, we discover that the impotent man, who had been possessed during the ritual by the spirit known as Wicked Major Mugu, has been cured of his impotence and that his current girlfriend is “very happy” as a result. We do not learn what effect the event has had for the other “penitents,” but this one case shows that there is something else going on here that has nothing directly to do with politically motivated parody.

Another reason for doubt, at least about the *sufficiency* of the interpretation of the event as a parody of European political power, lies in the particular identities of the *hauka* spirits. For not all of the mediums assume identities that would necessarily have been associated with politically powerful Europeans. Not only are some of the characters African, such as the more lowly soldiers and, it transpires, Madame Salma,¹² but in among all the political and military figures, there are also the civilian figures of the Truck Driver and the Train Driver who would probably also have been African, at least in the British colonies.¹³ It is true that all these

characters would have been implicated in some way in the culture of the Europeans' "mechanical civilization," but are we to assume that on these grounds, they are also being parodied in a counter-hegemonic manner? This seems rather unlikely for a variety of reasons, not least because, as we discover in the latter part of the film, a number of the mediums in everyday life are themselves low-ranking soldiers, truck drivers, and the like. So if these characters were being parodied, the mediums would, in effect, have been parodying themselves.

But perhaps the most intriguing loose end concerns the fact that a number of the most senior military figures, in addition to their military rank, are given the name "Malia." This, Rouch explains, means that they are "from the Red Sea." But why would these *hauka* spirits be identified with that thin sliver of water, lying over 2,500 miles away as the crow flies, which separates the Horn of Africa from Saudi Arabia? The mediums would surely have known about London and Paris, so if the *hauka* are parodic embodiments of colonial political authorities, why did the mediums not conceive of them as coming from these imperial capitals?

These are not the only details that provoke questions. One that has generated more comment than perhaps any other single moment of this film occurs about halfway through the principal ceremony, when a number of the mediums approach a small wooden statue of the *hauka* Governor that stands to one side of the compound where they have been dancing. The statue is bespectacled and mustachioed, a sword lies across its shoulder, and the model of a small horse stands at its foot, along with a scattering of small bottles (fig. 7.5). One of the mediums then cracks an egg over the head of statue. At this point in the commentary, Rouch asks, "Why an egg?" immediately answering, "To imitate the plume worn by British governors on their helmet." There is then a cut to a series of shots from above of the present British governor arriving at a military parade, wearing a plumed helmet of ostrich feathers (fig. 7.6). This in turn is followed by a couple of general views of the event, with Rouch commenting:

Amid the crowd there are *hauka* dancers looking for their model. And if the order is different here from there, the protocol remains the same.

At this point, the film cuts back to the *hauka* Governor consulting in Grand Guignol manner with his "general staff" as they prepare to inspect his "palace," that is, the painted termite mound.

This cutaway to the colonial governor's parade lasts less than a minute and stands out in sharp contrast to the editorial aesthetic of the rest of this part of the film. Indeed, cutaways to a different time and place for the specific purpose of commenting on an adjacent shot are highly un-

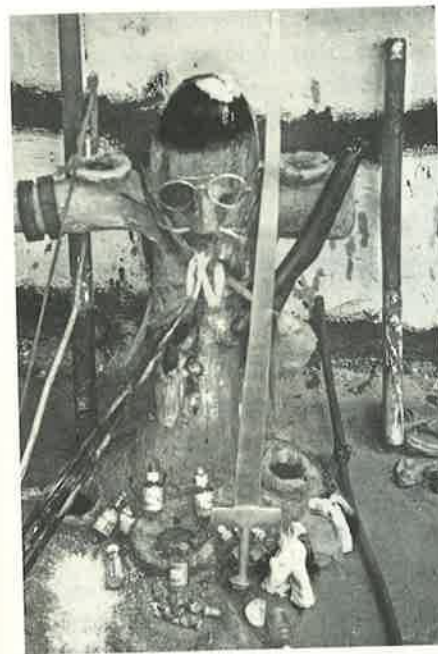


FIGURE 7.5. Top, the statue of the *hauka* Governor, with model horse and perfume bottles at the base; bottom, the *hauka* Governor embodied in a human medium, with his attendants, one of whom, though male, is wearing a flowery woman's dress. © Fondation Jean Rouch.





FIGURE 7.6. Why an egg?
Top, an adept cracks an egg
on head of the statue; bot-
tom, wearing his plumed hel-
met, the British governor, Sir
Charles Arden-Clarke, arrives
at the Trooping of the Colour.

usual in Rouch's documentary work taken as whole.¹⁴ Commentators on the film have debated what kind of cut this is, with some arguing that it is an example of Vertovian montage while others have claimed that it must surely be Eisensteinian. Yet whatever kind of cut it may be, it has been widely interpreted, by critics from all points across the political spectrum, as evidence that the *hauka* performance represents a parodic subversion of imperial power.¹⁵

But this interpretation relies on the assumption that in cracking the egg over the statue, the *hauka* mediums sought to debase the colonial governor symbolically in some way. Yet there is nothing in the film itself that indicates that this is the case. Rouch himself merely comments that the broken egg was considered by the mediums to be imitative of the governor's plumes. Neither this comment, nor his subsequent suggestion over the shot of the crowd at the parade that the *hauka* dancers were there looking for their model, nor even his final observation that protocol was the same in both places, necessarily entails that the *hauka* were intending to parody the colonial governor.

Here it would clearly be a great advantage to have the *hauka* medi-

ums' own explanations as to their intentions. But in their absence, careful attention to the filmic text suggests that the cracking of an egg over the statue, far from being symbolically debasing, was intended to have positive connotations. For, earlier in the film, we see Mountyeba the priest carefully breaking eggs over the *hauka* Governor's termite mound "palace." Rouch does not explain the motivation for this either, but it comes at the end of a sequence in which the priest is shown sprinkling gin around the compound, including on the "palace," to purify the space in preparation for the ritual. This suggests that the breaking of eggs on the "palace" and later on the Governor's statue would have had some similarly beneficial symbolic purpose.

A somewhat different question is posed by the sacrificial dog. "Why a dog?" asks Rouch rhetorically when the unfortunate animal is first brought into the compound. The answer is intriguing:

Because it is a strict taboo and if they eat a dog, the *hauka* will show that they are stronger than the other men, whether Black or White.

So if the rite is supposed to be a challenge, Rouch seems to be suggesting, it is a challenge directed not only at Europeans but at other Africans as well. Moreover, the Africans are mentioned first, suggesting that they are in fact the primary audience for this demonstration of power (fig. 7.7). But which class or group of Africans could this be?

While it is possible that all these apparently dissonant details could be reconciled with a coherent interpretation of the cult as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance to colonial power, they suggest that there is more going on here than any straightforward explanation in terms of anticolonial politics can account for. As such, they invite one to look beyond the film to any literature that might throw further light on the matter.

The *Hauka* in Songhay History

But as soon as one turns to the literature, the parody-of-colonial-power interpretation begins to look increasingly unsafe. To begin with, it is difficult to reconcile this interpretation with the fact that the *hauka* cult long outlived both the French and British colonial presence in West Africa. Although Nigerien migrants were expelled from Ghana some ten years after the coming of independence in 1957, Paul Stoller reports that in the 1980s the *hauka* cult was still flourishing back in Niger, which itself had become independent in 1960. Here the cult has drawn followers from all strata of Nigerien society, including even the military dictator General Seyni Kountché who ruled the country from 1974 to 1987. Stoller himself witnessed a ritual in which an agronomist who had studied at "several



FIGURE 7.7. Why a dog?
Top, at a "round table conference," the Wicked Major and the Governor debate whether the dog should be eaten raw or cooked; bottom, with no sign of fear, adepts plunge their hands into the boiling pot of dog meat, another sign that they have become *hauka*.

European and American universities" consulted some *hauka* mediums in order to find out why his career had not prospered.¹⁶

As a one-time leading proponent of the *hauka*-as-colonial-parody thesis, Stoller seeks to explain the postindependence survival of the cult on the grounds that although the old imperial colonies may have disappeared, Europeans continue to have a powerful presence, even if they now act as technicians, development consultants, and university lecturers.¹⁷ But while this may well be true, it is still difficult to understand why a parody of European power, be it in the form of some long-gone imperial governor, or even in the form of a modern-day European paramedic, could be considered by an elite, university-educated Nigerien to provide a possible solution to his career problems.

The postcolonial *hauka* cults in Niger have also been studied by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, who, in sharp contrast to Stoller, firmly rejects the interpretation of the cults as a form of anticolonial counter-hegemonic resistance. He reports that in the course of conducting "hundreds" of interviews on the *hauka* with Songhay-Zerma informants, not once was

such a political interpretation suggested to him, not even by those who were most critical in other regards of the colonial regime. While Olivier de Sardan acknowledges that the *hauka* spirit world is peopled to some extent by colonial figures, he points out that the notion that there is an intentional critique implicit in the enactment of these identities runs directly counter to the local understanding that it is the spirit that chooses the medium rather than vice-versa. Thus the idea that somebody would purposefully adopt a particular identity in the interests of political satire simply would not make sense in indigenous terms. Instead, Olivier de Sardan argues that the *hauka* cult should not be interpreted as a political phenomenon at all, but rather as a religious phenomenon. In proposing this argument, he claims to be returning to the point of view of the first anthropologist to study the *hauka* cult in any depth, namely, Jean Rouch himself.¹⁸

The credibility of the *hauka*-as-political-parody interpretation begins to unravel still further when one looks at the comparative literature. This literature shows that cults involving possession by spirits identified with Europeans are found throughout West and North Africa and even in East and Southern Africa. One of the most widespread is the *zar* cult, which has been the subject of ethnographic descriptions in both rural and urban contexts in North Africa. But although the *zar* cult typically involves possession by spirits identified with Europeans, this is not exclusively the case. Writing of the *zar* cult in the Sudan, Ioan Lewis reports that spirits associated with eminent colonial figures such as General Gordon and Lord Cromer play a leading role in the cult, but that they cohabit in the *zar* pantheon with a variety of Islamic holy men, as well as with certain modern political figures such as Gamal Abdul Nasser, the former Egyptian president, and even Sheik Yamani, the Saudi Arabian government minister who became internationally famous in the 1970s at the time of the dramatic increase in oil prices.¹⁹

The similarities between the *hauka* cult of West Africa and the *zar* cult practiced in a rural village in northern Sudan as described by Janice Boddy are particularly striking. Boddy's textual description of a *zar* ceremony that took place in this village in July 1976 is highly reminiscent of the ceremony portrayed cinematographically in *Les Maîtres fous* some twenty years earlier. Over the course of three days, the *zar* mediums are possessed by a succession of spirits identified with outsiders. These include spirits modelled on colonial military officers and other Europeans such as the Doctor, the Lawyer and a violent sword-wielding Roman Catholic Priest. As in *Les Maîtres fous*, there are also figures associated with modern transport, including the Aeroplane Captain and the Railway Engineer, who may or may not be modeled on Europeans. But

there are also those who are clearly not modeled on Europeans, including Luliya, the Ethiopian Prostitute; the Azande Cannibal, and the Automobile Gypsy, who is one of a number of spirits identified collectively as Arab Nomads. However, there is also one very noticeable difference with the *hauka* cult as portrayed in *Les Maîtres fous*, namely, that the *zar* mediums in Boddy's account are exclusively female.²⁰

A very significant feature of the *zar* cult and its various analogues is that they are frequently practiced by peoples professing Islam. In the past, the conventional view was that these possession cults represented the residue of local animist religions that had been overlain by Islam as it spread through Africa. However, more recently, Lewis has argued that while these possession cults may indeed have first developed in certain local areas, they have become so completely entwined with Islam that they have been diffused through Africa along Islamic networks.²¹ The pilgrimage trail to Makkah seems to have been particularly important in this regard. According to Boddy, there is evidence that as far back as the early nineteenth century, West African pilgrims on their way to Makkah would meet with Sudanese pilgrims and that they would attend one another's possession ceremonies, resulting in the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. She reports that in the region of northern Sudan where she herself worked, the local *zar* cult has been greatly influenced by the *bori* cult practiced by among the hausaphone peoples of eastern and central Niger.²² These peoples are not only the immediate eastern neighbors of the Songhay-Zerma but they have also had some involvement in the *hauka* cult itself. Indeed, in the view of some specialists, the *hauka* cult is in fact nothing more than a variant of the *bori* cult.²³

This outsiders' historical account of the origins of the *hauka* cult concurs well with the Songhays' own account. The exact details of this account vary somewhat from one source to another, but it is generally agreed that the *hauka* first came into the middle Niger region in the late 1920s when they followed a Hausa man, a veteran of the First World War, as he was returning from a pilgrimage to Makkah. Some versions tie the *hauka* to both strands of Songhay religion simultaneously, suggesting that the most powerful of the indigenous Songhay spirits, namely, Dongo, the Spirit of Thunder, was at one time Yabilan, a Black slave who, having been freed by the Prophet Mohammed, became his first muezzin. While still in Makkah, Dongo is said to have had various adulterous unions with concubine slaves and the children born of these unions later gave birth to the *hauka*, who are therefore Dongo's grandchildren. The slave grandmothers are said to have been white, which would account for the European appearance of some of the *hauka*.²⁴

Whatever the precise details of their genesis, it is generally agreed among adepts of the cult that after lingering in the bush for a while, the *hauka* started possessing people in western Niger, notably in the village of Chikal, close to the town of Filingué and about a hundred miles to the northeast of the capital, Niamey (see map 2, p. 44). Although the *hauka* are said to have announced themselves at their very first appearance as associates of Dongo, they were initially vigorously rejected both by the priests of the more traditional spirit possession cults as well as by devout Muslims. Their appearance particularly troubled the French colonial authorities. Olivier de Sardan cites an official report to the effect that while in a trance, the leading *hauka* medium, a woman by the name of Zibo, "preached insubordination," encouraging people not to pay taxes and to refuse to work in the colonial forced labor gangs.²⁵

On account of what they considered to be the parodying of their military institutions, the local colonial authorities concluded that the cult was potentially subversive. In 1926, the commandant of the local military garrison, one Major Horace Croccichia, attempted to put an end to the cult by locking up Zibo and her followers. But they manage to escape, taking refuge on the Gold Coast. There they continued to practice the cult, even incorporating their oppressor into the *hauka* pantheon as the evil Kommandan or Major Mugu. Also known as Korsasi, on account of Croccichia's Corsican origin, this *hauka* features in *Les Maîtres fous* as the Wicked Major, whose "horse," that is, medium, is the man whose impotence is cured over the course of the ceremony.²⁶

In the view of Nicole Échard, who carried out fieldwork in the region of western Niger where the cult first broke out, albeit many years later, this first appearance of the *hauka* cult was associated with a very real political revolt against the French colonial authorities. However, while acknowledging that Échard has unrivalled authority concerning this first outbreak due to her local fieldwork experience, Olivier de Sardan insists that, even if this was not merely an illusion propagated by the French colonial authorities in their reports, as he suspects, it was the exception that proved the rule since thereafter there is virtually no reference to the cult in Nigerien colonial documents, and certainly not as the vehicle for political resistance.²⁷

Some years later, around 1935, the *hauka* adepts were involved in further trouble in the Gold Coast, though this appears to have been a dispute with the adepts of rival cults rather than with the British colonial authorities as such. Certainly, after briefly banning *hauka* ceremonies on account of the social unrest that it was causing, the British allowed the cult to operate in certain designated places. Over time, the *hauka* came to be progressively accepted by the adepts of other cults and became

integrated into their possession ceremonies, particularly those associated with Dongo. Eventually, they came to be considered his sentinels, providing protection to those whom he possesses and escorting people who wish to have an audience with him into the center of the dancing arena.²⁸

Once the cult moved to the Gold Coast—which Rouch describes as the “Mecca” of the *hauka*—the number of different spirit identities reported in Rouch’s publications becomes much greater, though this proliferation may also be no more than an index of Rouch’s developing knowledge. In his first publication on the *hauka*, dating from 1943, Rouch provides a tentative list of only fifteen names, mostly denoting military ranks, and half of them identified as being from Malia, that is, the Red Sea.²⁹ But this was still the height of the war in Europe and Rouch would have had no access to the British colony. In his book, first published in 1960, after his studies of migration on the Gold Coast, he says that there were more than fifty established *hauka* characters, though he lists only about thirty-five in the book itself. This is clearly considerably more than the very limited selection of twelve *hauka* that actually appear in *Les Maîtres fous*. A comparison of the main *hauka* characters listed in these three sources is given in the table. Later, Rouch revised the *hauka* population upward again, stating in a 1977 interview that were “maybe one hundred” at the peak of the movement.³⁰

From table 1, it is apparent that many of the *hauka* that Rouch mentions in his book are similar to those who appear in the film, that is, high-status political or military characters. They include Askandiya the Judge, Minis de Ger (from the French title, *ministre de guerre*) and even Prazidan di la Republik (from *président de la république*) who first possessed a public works laborer in Niamey in 1948. There is also King Zouri, whose name, Rouch suggests, is derived from “king of the judges,” but as it is rather strange to associate judges with kingship, I suspect that this could be a derivation from “King George” since George VI was on the throne of the United Kingdom at the time. Not long afterward, in the mid- to late 1950s, when many Nigeriens were recruited to fight in the French colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria, and were based at a military transit camp at Fréjus on the Mediterranean coast of France, a new *hauka*, General Marseille, began to possess them.

However, not all these high status *hauka* are identified with Europeans. As in the case of the *zar* cults described above, the pantheon is also peopled by high-status Islamic figures. Thus there is also Dogo Malia, the Very Tall Gentleman from the Red Sea, and Istanbul, the Great Muslim from Istanbul, the greatest *hauka* of them all and considered to be their overall leader. Then there are the more lowly technical

TABLE 1. Hauka Listed in Various Works of Jean Rouch

Hauka in Rouch (1943): 15 spirit identities	Hauka in <i>Les Maîtres fous</i> (1955): 12 spirit identities	Hauka in Rouch (1960a): 50+ spirit identities
Istanboula		Istanbula: chief of all the hauka
		Dogo Malia: a great Muslim
King Zouzi Malia, King Judge/George (?)		King Zuzi
		Prazidan di la Republik: Président de la République
Goumna	Governor	Gomno
		Minis, Minis de ger: Ministre de Guerre
		Askandya: a judge
	Secretary General	Sekter
Zeneder Malia		
Zeneral Malia: General Malia	General	Zeneral Malia, Colonel
Commandant Mougou	Major Mougou: the ‘Wicked’ Major	Kommandan Mugu, Korsasi
Captan Malia	Captain Malia	Capitaine
Lieutenant Malia	Lieutenant Malia	Lieutenant
Lassidan Malia: Adjutant Malia		Adjutant chef, Adjutant
Serzan Malia: Sergeant Malia		Sergent-chef
Capral Gardi: Corporal of the Guard	Corporal of the Guard: General’s adjutant	Kapral Gardi
		Kafrankot: corporal of the coast
		Bambara Mossi: private soldier
	Private Tiemoko: General’s orderly	Tyemoko: child of Kapral Gardi
Doctor Malia	Mme Lokotoro: Doctor’s wife	Lokotoro
	Train Driver	Hanga Beri: “big ears” who drives trains

(continued)

TABLE 1. (continued)

Hauka in Rouch (1943): 15 spirit identities	Hauka in <i>Les Maîtres fous</i> (1955): 12 spirit identities	Hauka in Rouch (1960a): 50+ spirit identities
Maymota Malia: the chauffeur	Truck Driver	Maymota Malia
		Maykuano: mechanic
		Maylanba: surveyor
		Basiru: telephone linesman
		Babule: blacksmith, "spirit" in Hausa
Mayaki		Mayaki: "warrior" in Hausa
		Wasiri: executioner, Kafuyi: marabout killer
		Maykarga: he who spends all day sitting down
Fatimata: wife of Zenender	Madame Salma: colonial wife	Fatimata Malia: wife of Zeneral Malia
		Maryama, Musukura: female spirits
		Ramatala, Andro: child spirits

characters including Maykuano the Mechanic, Maylanba the Surveyor, Babule the Blacksmith, even Basiru the Telephone Linesman. There are also a number of female characters, including Fatimata of the Red Sea and Maryama, whose names presumably derive from those of the wife of the Prophet Mohammed and the mother of Jesus, respectively. There are even at least two children, Ramatala and Andro. Finally, there are some characters that do not quite fit into any social category and seem to exemplify purely transgressive behavior, including Maykarga the One Who Always Remains Seated, Kafuyi the Killer of Marabouts, and Wasiru the Executioner.³¹

Rouch maintains that with the end of the colonial era, the elaboration of *hauka* characters came to an abrupt halt since they were essentially identified with colonial personae. He claims that their place as challenging "newcomers" from the spirit world was taken over by the so-called *sasale*, whose sexually explicit dancing and singing were as shocking to the traditionalists as the *hauka* once had been.³² However, this report of the demise of the *hauka* is somewhat at odds with other sources. As

noted above, Stoller describes the cult in operation in Niger in the 1980s, while Olivier de Sardan reports that in the 1990s new *hauka* characters were still being elaborated, the most recent being "Chinese" characters inspired by the then fashionable kung-fu movies.³³ Certainly, as apparently powerful, exotic, and aggressive characters, these martial arts heroes would conform well with the general pattern of *hauka* spirits.³⁴

Whatever the historical facts on this last issue, it is clear that even in the heyday of colonialism the roster of *hauka* spirits was only to a limited extent made up of European authority figures. In this sense, the selection of *hauka* in *Les Maîtres fous* seems at first sight to be somewhat unrepresentative, since not only are there very few of them, but it includes none of the Islamic figures who were regarded by the Songhay as the most powerful of all *hauka*. But reflecting on the matter more carefully, one realizes that the Islamic figures are present after all, but they have become hybridized in the mediums' performance with the model of distant power provided by more local European authorities. This hybridization is revealed in the recurrent addition "of Malia," meaning "from the Red Sea" to many of the names. For it is, of course, on the shore of the Red Sea that the Muslim holy city of Makkah lies. This then, we can finally conclude, is the ultimate provenance of the *hauka* Governor—certainly not Tunbridge Wells or wherever else the plumed British colonial officer saluting the troops in Accra might have come from!

The *Hauka* in Songhay Religion

The idea that the *hauka* mediums whom one sees in *Les Maîtres fous* dancing wildly, foaming at the mouth and eating dog meat could be Muslims seems rather unlikely, to put it mildly. However, as reported by Rouch the Author, Stoller, and others, although they may not be as thorough in their observance as some of their neighbors, the Songhay have been influenced by Islam for almost a thousand years, at least in the larger settlements.³⁵ But although Allah may stand at the apex of the Songhay empyrean, he is considered an inaccessible entity who communicates with human beings only through secondary divinities. Beneath Allah, there are various classes of supernatural being found in popular versions of Islam, such as angels, djinns, and the demons associated with Satan. There is also a human ancestor cult. The aid of these other supernatural beings may be sought through the making of sacrifices and other propitiatory ritual acts, but it seems to be to the spirits reached through possession ceremonies that the Songhay most frequently turn when they seek solutions to everyday problems. In his book, Rouch claims that while there could sometimes be tensions between the practice of Islam and partici-

pation in possession ceremonies, these two aspects of religious belief were usually reconciled in a highly pragmatic way in day-to-day life.³⁶

As Jean-Claude Muller pointed out in a much-cited review of *Les Maîtres fous*, the work of Rouch the Author demonstrates— somewhat in contradiction to the reference to the emergence of “new religions” by Rouch the Filmmaker—that there is a high degree of continuity between the *hauka* cult and other more traditional Songhay possession cults.³⁷ For a start, *holey*, the term used to refer generically to the spirits invoked in these cults, is the plural form of *holo*, which means “mad” in the Songhay language and refers to the state of a medium in a trance. Thus it is not only the mediums of the *hauka*, but all *holey* mediums who could be legitimately described by the title of *Les Maîtres fous*. But more important, Rouch the Author shows that the *hauka* are but the most recent of some six different *holey* spirit “families” that have emerged at various different points in Songhay history. A particularly striking feature of this pantheon is that like the *hauka*, and indeed like the spirits invoked in the Sudanese *zar* cult described above, most of the other five major *holey* families are also strongly associated with some element of alterity. That is, they are metaphorically associated either with other ethnic groups of the region or with anthropomorphized forces of nature, or with some combination of the two.

In summary, the main characteristics of the five other *holey* families as described by Rouch the author, supplemented here by the accounts from other sources, are as follows:³⁸

- (1) *tôrou*—the most ancient and prestigious family, headed by Dongo, the irascible Spirit of Thunder, who together with his mother, Harakoy Dikko, and his siblings, controls the wind, the rain, and the levels of the Niger River. The various members of Dongo’s sibling group are further associated with particular ethnic Others who over the centuries have had relationships of both hostility and exchange with the Songhay-Zerma, that is, the Fulani, Tuareg, Gourmantché, Hausa, Bella, and Bariba.
- (2) *hargey*—Said to have been born from the union of Harakoy Dikko and a cemetery djinn, they are “cold like corpses” and threaten pregnant women with death in labor. They are identified with Fulani and Bella.
- (3) *gandyi koare*—literally, “white spirits of the bush.” These spiritess are associated with the Tuareg marabouts who arrived in the late sixteenth century from what is now Morocco.
- (4) *gandyi bi*—literally, “black spirits of the bush.” Identified with the original inhabitants of the *gourma*, that is, the right bank of the

middle reaches of the Niger. Considered very primitive, washing themselves with earth and eating excrement. Among contemporary peoples, associated with the Kurumba and Gourmantché, western neighbors of the Songhay.

- (5) *hausa gandyi*—spirits identified with the left bank of the middle Niger, known as the *haoussa*. Associated with all the peoples living there, not just the ethnic group most commonly referred to by this name. Said to drive people insane before drinking their blood. Male spirits may appear dressed as females and vice versa, and both have filthy bodies.

An important point is that each of these *holey* families is believed to specialize in resolving particular problems. Thus the *tôrou*, who control the natural elements, are the ones to consult about bringing an end to drought. This consultation takes the form of a ceremony known as a *yenendi*, meaning literally “to freshen the earth” and the subject of a large number of Rouch’s films.³⁹ On the other hand, the *gandyi bi*, the black spirits associated with the earth, are called upon for problems associated with agricultural matters. These are the spirits invoked in the celebrated short film *Les Tambours d’avant: Touru et Bitti* (1971) in which a village community seeks a remedy to the plague of locusts eating its crops.⁴⁰ However, in all cases, the consultations take much the same form, namely, the priests of the cult ask the spirits embodied in the mediums what course of action they would recommend for resolving a given problem. The remedies that the spirits propose often involve making some sort of animal sacrifice to themselves.

The Songhay refer to spirit mediums as *bari*, literally “horses,” because they are said to be “mounted” by the spirits, and I suspect that this is why there is a small model of a horse at the foot of the *hauka* Governor’s statue in *Les Maîtres fous*.⁴¹ In order to become possessed, it is usually necessary to dance. The general order of dancing is the same for all *holey* cults and begins with the *windi*, a circular counterclockwise dance, led by a priest. This is the dance we see at the beginning of the ceremony in *Les Maîtres fous*. Then comes the *fimbi*, when the dancers begin to shiver all over, starting from the left foot. In *Les Maîtres fous*, we see the Corporal go through this process. Finally comes the *gani*, the full and most animated stage of the dance, when all the mediums are fully possessed.

Not only does each family of *holey* spirits have distinctive powers, but they are also said to have distinctive manners of dress, speech, bodily movement and gesticulation, and even a distinctive smell. In certain of Rouch’s films, one sees mediums drinking from bottles of perfume, which may explain the small bottles at the foot of the Governor’s statue

in *Les Maîtres fous* (see fig. 7.5 above). All *holey* spirits are attracted by the plaintive sound of the *godye*, the one-stringed violin, but each spirit is deemed to favor a distinctive melody. In addition, certain spirits are thought to be attracted by particular sorts of percussive instrument. Although we hear the *godye* in *Les Maîtres fous* well enough, we see the musician only fleetingly, which is perhaps one of the most significant omissions of the film from a purely ethnographic point of view.⁴²

When the priests sense the arrival of a particular spirit, the musicians play his or her melody only. Dancing becomes a convulsion rather than a dance. Suddenly there will be a paroxysm and the dancer will roll on the ground shouting: this is the moment when the spirit takes up residence inside the dancer. The dancer's behavior will then conform to the conventional behavioral attributes of the spirit in question. In a traditional *holey* ceremony, if it is Dongo, the Spirit of Thunder, who has arrived, the medium will look up into the sky and groan; if it is his brother Kyirey, the Spirit of Lightning and supposedly one-eyed, the dancer will close one eye.⁴³ In just the same way, each of the characters in *Les Maîtres fous* is identifiable by certain conventional behaviors or forms of dress: thus Captain Malia walks about with the distinctive marching gait of the British Army, Train Driver plies his way back and forth between the Governor's termite mound "palace" and the cement altar, the Corporal of the Guard carries a wooden gun, the Doctor wears a white coat, and so on.

This description of the broader practice of possession among the Songhay, even though only summary, is hopefully sufficient to confirm Muller's general argument that the *hauka* cult is only "new" in a relative sense. As a category of *holey*, the *hauka* are not that remarkable. All the *holey* spirits are "mad": the *hauka* may be particularly violent and aggressive, but none of the traditional *holey* spirits is exactly genial or beneficent. Indeed, the most aggressive and violent *holey* of all is Dongo himself, since he is both mean with the provision of rain and merciless in his killing of humans with bolts of lightning delivered by his sibling Kiriey. *Hauka* dances may look particularly "savage" and bizarre, particularly to European eyes, but they are different in degree rather than in kind from other *holey* possession dances, as shown in Rouch's many films on these more traditional forms.

It is true that there are two characteristics of the *hauka* that initially appear to mark it out as different from other *holey* cults, but on further reflection, even these are not so significant as they might appear at first sight. The first is the fact that in the *hauka* cult, the "horses" are usually men, whereas in traditional *holey* cults, they are often women. But this, Rouch explains, is because the great majority of those who migrated to coastal regions where the *hauka* cult reached its greatest development

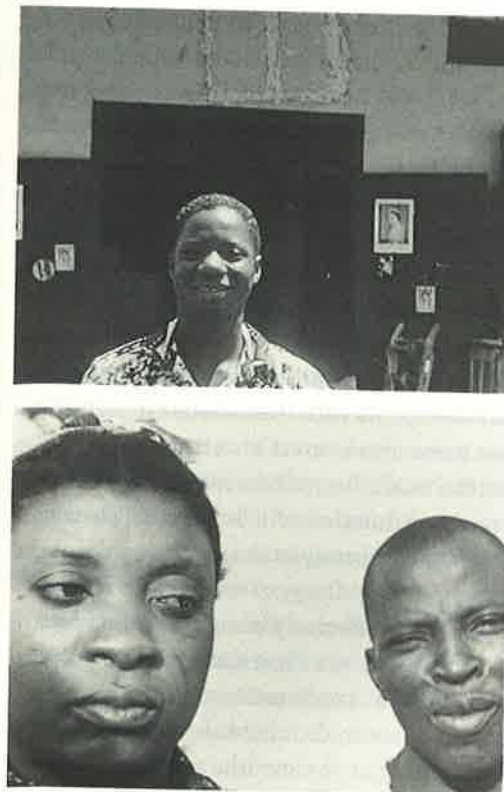


FIGURE 7.8. The day after. Top, in everyday life, Madame Lokotoro, the Doctor's Wife, works for an Asian shopkeeper. Images on the storefront attest to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II the previous year. Bottom, the Wicked Major has been cured of his impotence and his girlfriend is said to be "very happy."

were men. When *hauka* spirits appear in rural areas, their "horses" are just as likely to be women. Even among migrant communities, women could become mediums, as represented in *Les Maîtres fous* by the "Queen" of the Accra prostitutes who is possessed by Madame Salma.

Interestingly, as in the case of the *zar* cults described by Boddy, there is no necessary correspondence between the gender of the medium and the gender of the possessing spirit and it is quite possible for women to be "horses" for male spirits. The reverse is also true, as in the case of the Doctor's Wife *hauka* in *Les Maîtres fous* who is embodied by a male medium, though Rouch describes him as a "rather effeminate boy who uses a lot of hair Vaseline," which I suspect may be 1950s code for "homosexual" (fig. 7.8). There is also at least one other male medium dressed in a very flowery woman's dress in *Les Maîtres fous*, though the identity of neither the possessing spirit nor the "horse" is commented upon by Rouch (see fig. 7.5, above).

The other characteristic of the *hauka* that seems, at first sight, to distinguish this spirit "family" from others in the Songhay pantheon is the association with a particular form of technology, namely, the appara-

tuses of "mechanical civilization" as exemplified by Truck Driver and Train Driver in *Les Maîtres fous* and by the longer list of technicians provided by Rouch the Author in his book. But I would suggest the control of these technological powers by the *hauka* is directly analogous to the control of natural powers by the more traditional *holey* families, most notably by the *tôrou*, who are deemed to control not just thunder, lightning, and rain, but also the powerful seasonal winds, the Harmattan and the Mousson, and the levels of the Niger River. Thus even this attribute can be considered as a variation on a theme, rather than an absolute difference.

But the element of continuity that is surely the most significant of all is the association of traditional *holey* spirits with the various ethnic Others with whom the Songhay have come into contact at certain moments in their history. In this context, the association of the *hauka* with colonial Europeans merely represents a continuation of a long-established pattern. Moreover, there is also a clear continuity in the association of these others with transgressive behavior. Only the *genji koare*, the white spirits associated with Islam, appear to be relatively benign. Other *holey* are variously said to be cold as corpses, to eat excrement, to wash themselves with dirt, to drink blood, or to be transvestites. Indeed compared to the conventional attributes of some traditional *holey*, the *hauka* predilection for dog meat, their foaming at the mouth, and their disposition to burn themselves with flaming torches could almost be considered rather tame! Certainly these attributes are well within the parameters of transgressive behavior conventionally associated with spirits in traditional Songhay religion.

The *Hauka* and the Construction of Otherness

The many continuities between the *hauka* cult and the more traditional *holey* cults suggest that if one were to offer an interpretation of the former, it should be consistent with any interpretation that one might offer for the latter. However, to suggest that parody is the motivation for all forms of *holey* possession is singularly unconvincing. It is true that there is a certain burlesque theatricality about the ceremony in *Les Maîtres fous* that a nonspecialist spectator might reasonably conclude constitutes some sort of oblique satire of colonial pretensions. But that even this degree of secondary parody is involved is firmly rejected by Olivier de Sardan. While recognizing that theatricality is common to all *holey* ceremonies, he argues that the suggestion that the mediums are intentionally parodying the colonial figures on which the *hauka* are modelled is as absurd as the suggestion that the mediums who perform Dongo as

an irascible tyrant in a rain-making *yenendi* are seeking to parody the forces of nature.⁴⁴

In helping us to understand the *holey* phenomenon more generally, Olivier de Sardan makes a telling point when he observes that the behavior typically associated with the spirits of traditional *holey* families is considerably at variance with the empirical reality of the customary behavior of the "real" ethnic Others on whom they are supposedly modeled.⁴⁵ It does indeed seem very unlikely that the Songhay-Zerma would believe, for example, that the "real" Hausa, with whom they are in regular contact and to whom they are culturally closely related, are customarily blood-drinking transvestites in the way that the *hausa gandyi* are supposed to be. Rather it would seem that this conception of the *hausa gandyi* represents an elaboration of some ideal-typical notion of alterity that bears, at most, only a partial and hyperbolic relationship to the Songhay's actual day-to-day empirical knowledge of the Hausa. Moreover, this conception of the *hausa gandyi*, in common with the conception of many of the other *holey* spirit families, is something of a composite since it refers not only to the Hausa themselves but also to all the other groups living on the *haoussa*, that is, the left bank of the Niger.

I would suggest then that a similar process of hybridic conceptual elaboration has taken place in relation to Songhay ideas about the *hauka*. In this view, the local colonial Europeans with their obvious political power and equally obvious technological power, hybridized in a composite fashion with imaginary Islamic elites originating from Makkah, offer a variety of models of what powerful other-worldly beings might be like and how they might behave. The *hauka* performances based on these models are thus not intended to be a literal representation of the "real" Europeans. To borrow Claude Lévi-Strauss's celebrated phrase with regard to Australian totems and stand it on its head, these powerful Europeans are "good to think with," not about the nature of human beings but about the nature of spirit beings. The European colonial world evoked in this modeling of the *hauka* spirit world may appear absurd, authoritarian, and violently aggressive. However, to suggest that the projection of this negative image of the colonial world is the *purpose* of the modeling is to confuse the means with the end, since the beings whom the dancers are seeking to embody are not human Others, but spirit Others.

However, as Stoller very properly insists, what is involved here is much more than a purely intellectual appropriation of the attributes of alterity. Drawing on Michael Taussig's ideas about mimesis, Stoller argues—to my mind very convincingly—that in embodying the highly conventionalized behaviors associated with the spirits in their dancing, the mediums in a *hauka* ceremony are seeking, through a process of mimetic ap-

appropriation, to gain control of the powers associated with those spirits. Their success in doing so, as the Songhay themselves see it, is demonstrated by the fact that once they are possessed by *hauka*, the mediums are capable of running flaming torches over their bodies and plunging their hands into a boiling pot of dog stew. This is a sign that they have become powerful spirit beings, not just in mind or soul, but also in body.⁴⁶

But it is important not to conflate mimesis and parody in this specific context. Although mimesis may often be associated with parody and satire, it can also arise as a result of exaggerated respect: for, as the popular saying has it, imitation can be the sincerest form of flattery. I would not go so far as to suggest that the *hauka* mediums sought to flatter the colonial masters with their performances, but, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, they themselves were at pains to make clear to Rouch that they certainly did not intend to mock them.⁴⁷

Reinterpreting *Les Maîtres fous*

But if the purpose of the *hauka* cult is not parodic, how then is it to be explained? A comprehensive answer to this question would be best left to West Africanist specialists rather than attempted by an out-of-area interloper such as myself. However, I shall conclude this chapter by suggesting some lines of further enquiry.

If we consider the *hauka* cult as but the most recent of the *holey* possession cults, its purpose seems almost too obvious. For, as we saw above, the most salient characteristic of these cults, as with similar cults all over North Africa and beyond, is that they involve consultation with the spirit powers embodied in the possessed dancers in order to diagnose the causes of a range of everyday, temporal problems and then to propose a remedy for them, usually involving some form of animal sacrifice. Even Stoller, for all his advocacy of the interpretation of the *hauka* as a form of counter-hegemonic colonial discourse in his early work, has latterly emphasized this more instrumental aspect of the cult, and he has written very eloquently about this.⁴⁸ It is clear though that not all *hauka* possession rituals have an immediate instrumental purpose: some seem to be enacted merely to maintain the relationship with the spirits.⁴⁹ Nor are all *hauka* possession ceremonies concerned with serious matters. Rouch reports that some *hauka* events are little more than a form of entertainment, considered by the participants to be somewhat superior to going to the cinema.⁵⁰

But if the purpose of maintaining a relationship with the *hauka* is to seek their aid in resolving the problems of everyday life, what kind of problems can they solve? To answer this question, we should begin by re-

calling that each *holey* family of spirits is considered to have a distinctive problem-solving capability. If the *hauka* have a specialization, it would appear to be in matters relating to witchcraft. Both Rouch and Stoller report that the *hauka* are thought to be particularly valuable in the detection of witches, while Olivier de Sardan explains that although Islam recognizes the existence of witchcraft, it has no way of combating its effects. As witchcraft is perceived to be particularly widespread among the Songhay-Zerma, the marabouts will reluctantly admit that the *hauka*, of whom they generally disapprove, do have a value as witch hunters.⁵¹ While this may be a primary specialization, the *hauka* are also deemed to have other skills too. Rouch reports, for example, that they also have a reputation for giving good advice on how to avoid military service!⁵²

However, at first sight, there appears to be no reference whatsoever to the *hauka* witchcraft specialization in *Les Maîtres fous*. Nor does there appear to be any process of consultation with the *hauka* spirits, about witchcraft or any other matter, let alone any sacrificial offering to them. It could be that Rouch simply failed to shoot this aspect of the ceremony or, alternatively, that the ceremony shown in *Les Maîtres fous* has no particular instrumental purpose and should be construed simply as a performance aimed merely at maintaining relationships with the *hauka*. Some support for this latter interpretation can be found in the fact the ceremony in *Les Maîtres fous* is specifically identified as a special annual celebration rather than a humdrum consultation about everyday problems. We might speculate that the latter would have been dealt with during the weekly Sunday meetings back in the salt market in Accra, to which Rouch alludes right at the beginning of the film.

However, on closer consideration, it is evident that there is a process of consultation in the film and one in which there might be some allusion to witchcraft. But this takes the form not of a consultation with the spirits themselves, but rather of the extended consultation between a number of "penitents" and Mountyeba, the *zima* priest, that occurs immediately before the main possession event. Among the problems brought to Mountyeba, there is the case involving sexual impotence, a condition that is certainly sometimes thought to be caused by witchcraft in an African context.⁵³

What is intriguing about this consultation is that although the *hauka* have not yet been formally called by the musicians, the way that Rouch paraphrases the penitents' speech suggests that they are not addressing Mountyeba but rather the *hauka* themselves—for example, they ask the *hauka* to strike them dead if they should transgress again. Moreover, the sacrifice of animals that Mountyeba asks for is something that the *hauka* would typically have required as a condition for their help in the allevia-

tion of a problem. Since the *hauka* have not yet arrived, Mountyebe appears then to be acting in some sense as their representative. Some possible evidence for this is to be found in the very next scene, in which we see him pouring purificatory libations of gin and cracking eggs around the compound. For if one listens carefully, he appears to be chanting in the glossolalic combination of French and Songhay that is the distinctive language of the *hauka*.

This brings us back to the significance of the eggs. I proposed early on in this chapter that the filmic text itself suggests, contrary to the interpretations of many commentators, that the cracking of an egg on the statue of the Governor may have had positive connotations. Support for this idea can be found in Marc Piault's report that for many Sahelian groups, including the Songhay-Zerma, the egg is strongly associated with fertility and, as such, is considered a high-status gift that is offered only to the most prestigious visitors.⁵⁴ We might conclude then that the smashing of an egg on the statue, whatever the imitative rationale suggested by Rouch himself with respect to the ostrich plumes on the helmet of the colonial governor, might also be interpreted as an offering made upon the arrival of a high-status visitor, namely, the *hauka* spirit Governor.

Nor is this the only possible association of the *hauka* with fertility. Adeline Masquelier reports that among the hausaphone Mawri of Niger, whose *bori* possession cult, as we have seen, bears many similarities to the *hauka* cult and may even be the origin of it, the termite mound with its multitudinous inhabitants is regarded as a powerful symbol of fertility.⁵⁵ Would this then explain why the *hauka* Governor's "palace" in *Les Maîtres fous* should consist of a termite mound? Although the *hauka* may embody the power of "mechanical civilization," these associations suggest that they may have been considered to have some influence on natural reproductive power as well. Certainly this would make sense of the fact that as a result of his participation in the ceremony, the "penitent" who was possessed by the Wicked Major Mugu was cured of his impotence.

Finally, there is the enigma of the dog that is butchered and eaten in such a "savage" manner. In the film itself, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, Rouch explains that in eating a dog, which is highly taboo, the *hauka* aimed to show that they are stronger than other men, "whether Black or White." In an interview many years later, he added that the *hauka* ate dog "because the British would not eat dogs, just as before they had eaten wild pig, which Muslims refuse to eat."⁵⁶ Now if the *hauka* performance were conceived merely as some sort of counter-

hegemonic performance, then this interpretation would perhaps suffice. But as a corollary of the various arguments that I have offered above, I would suggest that there is probably considerably more to the killing and eating of the dog in *Les Maîtres fous* than the defiance of European culinary habits.

Here I would return to the point that I made at some length concerning the many continuities between the *hauka* cult and other *holey* spirit possession cults. The first question one might ask then is whether the dog represents a sacrificial offering of the kind that is often made to the spirits during the possession ceremonies associated with other *holey* families, usually in the hope of the concession of some eventual favor, such as the release of the rains, or the withdrawal of a horde of locusts. Admittedly, Rouch makes no suggestion in the film that the dog is considered a sacrificial offering and we certainly do not see any sequence of the priests bargaining with the spirits in which it is suggested that some such sacrifice should be made. But given the presence of animal sacrifice in other *holey* possession ceremonies, one still cannot help wondering whether the slaughter of the dog may not have had some sacrificial rationale of this kind.

But even if the slaughter of the dog had no such instrumental sacrificial purpose and was merely some form of symbolic gesture, I would argue that given the continuities between the *hauka* and other *holey* cults, one should still seek to interpret its significance in terms that one could equally apply to these other cults. That is, rather than interpret the killing and grotesque consumption of the dog as a gesture of defiance aimed at an entirely absent European audience, it would be more appropriate to see it as an aspect of a more general attempt, aimed at the immediately present audience of Africans, to give a material form to otherworldly spirit beings who, by very definition, will behave in abnormal, transgressive ways. On these grounds, I suggest that instead of seeking to explain the *hauka* taste for dog meat as some sort of reaction *against* the perceived attributes of Europeans, it would be more consistent to interpret it as a hyperbolic augmentation of the attributes that the Songhay conventionally associate with Europeans in just the same way that the supposed predilection of the *hausa gandyi* for drinking blood and cross-dressing represents a hyperbolic augmentation of certain behaviors that are conventionally associated with the Hausa, or the tendency of the *gandyi bi* to wash themselves with earth and eat excrement represents a hyperbolic augmentation of certain behaviors conventionally associated with the Kurumba and Gourmantché. In all these cases, the intention is not to parody or belittle the ethnic Other but rather to draw on

attributes associated with them and with the addition of certain transgressive behaviors, to build up a model of how a nonhuman spirit is likely to manifest itself when it takes a human form.

In this context, it is very pertinent that the Songhay-Zerma believe that the peoples who live to the south of them, in the region through which they pass when migrating to the Gold Coast, practice what they consider to be the despicable habit of eating dog.⁵⁷ I propose that it is this attribute of alterity that the mediums have used to elaborate their ideas about the preferred diet of the *houka* spirits, mixing this together with the other attributes modeled on European and Islamic authority figures to produce a typically hybrid and composite conception of this particular class of *holey* spirit. By gorging themselves on dog meat, the Songhay mediums are showing themselves to have become completely Other, that is, to have become nonhuman spirit beings who can behave in outrageously transgressive ways and who can burn and scald themselves apparently without pain. While these spirit beings may partake of the names of both European and Islamic authority figures as well as some of their physical attributes, and while they may follow the dietary habits of the barbarous peoples living to the south, they are also more exotic than any of these Others, and by their transgressive behavior show themselves to be more powerful than any of these Others, be they Black or White. In exceeding all these models in combination, they have become something more powerful than any of them—they have become *houka*.

The *Houka* Cult as a Form of Political Expression

If this analysis is correct, then we may conclude that to interpret the *houka* ritual portrayed in *Les Maîtres fous* merely as some parodic counter-hegemonic theatrical burlesque is to fundamentally misunderstand its purposes and motivations. However, this is not to say that the *houka* phenomenon cannot be interpreted, at the same time, as the expression of a particular political interest. Rouch once recounted how he saw a hundred or so possessed *houka* mediums parading loudly through Kumasi, though, to his regret, he was not able to film this event because it was at night.⁵⁸ This suggests that whatever the instrumental religious purposes of the *houka* cult, it also acted in the context of the colonial city as a vehicle for the expression of the cultural identity and solidarity of the migrants. Far from acting as a refuge from the cacophony of the multiethnic "Babylon" of the city, as Rouch suggests in opening sequence of *Les Maîtres fous*, the *houka* cult seems to have been an energetic assertion of a particular identity that competed for the allegiance, or at least the attention, of the proletariat of colonial Accra, along with

all the other groups shown in the opening sequences of the film, such as the Little Sisters of Christ proclaiming their faith, Hausa prostitutes demanding higher wages, the various brass bands, and Yoruba playing their talking drums.

This perspective on the cult opens up the possibility of recuperating something of the *houka*-as-counter-hegemonic-performance thesis. For what the *houka* performance appears to represent is a collective assertion of the migrants' desire, through mimetic bodily appropriation, to control the forces that govern their lives as represented in the possession ceremonies by the political and military figures, and the skilled controllers of modern technology, such as truck drivers and telephone engineers. Even in this regard, one can trace a continuity with more traditional *holey* cults. For just as in the traditional *yenendi* rain-making ceremonies in rural areas, Songhay mediums literally embody Dongo, the Spirit of Thunder, and other forces of nature, so that the priests can parley with them and try to make a deal, offering sacrificial animals and moral behavior in exchange for rain, so in *Les Maîtres fous*, we see a similar bargaining process underway, with the urban migrants offering to the *houka* spirits, through the intermediary offices of Mountyeba, sacrificial animals and moral behavior in exchange for the spirits' help in overcoming problems of sexual impotence and psychological derangement.

Far from being an intentional parody of power, then, the *houka* performance thus represents an aspiration on the part of men and women whose marginal circumstances make them supremely vulnerable to the vagaries of political power to gain control of that power, albeit indirectly, through religious means. In this sense, one might agree with Rouch that the *houka* cult was indeed "implicitly revolutionary," though the harsh truth is—as Karl Marx famously remarked—that in extrapolating political power to the supernatural world, the cult probably made explicit revolution *less* rather than more likely.

"Thick Inscription" and the Place of Film in Anthropology

In juxtaposing the work of Rouch the Author and other text makers with the work of Rouch the Filmmaker in this analysis of *Les Maîtres fous*, it has certainly not been my intention to demonstrate the superiority of the former over the latter. On the contrary, it was precisely the richness of the ethnographic account in the film that stimulated this recourse to the texts in the first place. My hope is that this reinterpretation can now feed back into subsequent viewings of the film, thereby enriching the understandings that it can deliver and sending later viewers back to the texts with further ideas to pursue. What I am certainly not proposing is

that if the film could somehow be made again that Rouch ought to burden it with all the ethnographic detail laid out in this chapter. By smothering it with information, this would destroy the film's capacity to communicate, even after fifty years, a vicarious but powerful experience of the ceremonial event at its heart.

It is undoubtedly the case that the dramatic nature of the subject matter is one of the main reasons why *Les Maîtres fous* continues to engage audiences so many years after it was made. But it is important to recognize that this engagement is also achieved by the sheer film craft of Rouch and his editor Suzanne Baron. Such engagement would not have been achieved if the film had been merely an unshaped ethnographic document, simply laying out visual "data" for some indeterminate analytical purpose. This molding of rushes into a filmic narrative involves, in effect, a form of rhetoric aimed at convincing the audience of a particular interpretation of the events happening within the film. But the nature of the medium of film is such that this meaning can never be definitive nor remain uncontested for long. For film has an attribute that one might describe, with apologies to Clifford Geertz, as "thick inscription," that is, the potential to record the world in a degree of complexity that can easily escape the control of the explanatory devices of the filmmaker, restricted, as these inevitably are, by the limitations of the ideologies and understandings of the time at which the film was made. A good ethnographic film, then, is one that through its analysis encourages engagement and provokes reflection but that, at the same time, through its richness of detail permits the establishment of connections of which possibly even the filmmaker him- or herself may not have been aware. As I have sought to show in this chapter, *Les Maîtres fous* is surely a magnificent example of such a film.

PART II

BETWEEN PARIS AND THE LAND OF NOWHERE

copies were ordered from Senegal, where the film had not been censored, the full version was shown on the Ivory Coast also (Rouch 1999).

7. The name "goumbé" derives from the name of a particular kind of drum that is played at the events organized by such associations.

8. Delahaye (1961), 7; Rouch (1999). See also Rouch (1958) for a transcript of this improvisational commentary by Oumarou.

9. Godard (1959), 22.

10. For further discussion of their collaboration, see chapter 13, pp. 282–283.

11. Godard (1959), 22.

12. Fulchignoni (1981), 18, also (2003), 166.

13. The term "psychodrama" was the name given to an approach to psychotherapy first developed by the North American psychiatrist of Austrian extraction, Jacob Levy Moreno, in the 1930s. This approach was subsequently adopted for purely theatrical purposes without any necessary associated therapeutic objectives. According to one authority, "Important in Moreno's theories were the concepts of role taking, spontaneity, creativity, tele (empathy), and catharsis. In the process of acting out conflicts and problems in interpersonal relations, the actors gained insight and were helped by the group process to remedy problem behavior patterns and improve coping skills" (Ozarin 2003). Although intended as an account of a psychotherapeutic process, this description parallels very closely Rouch's conception of the dramaturgical processes taking place in the making of *La Pyramide humaine*. See also Sjöberg (2008a), particularly pp. 166–172, for a more detailed comparison of Moreno and Rouch's ideas about psychodrama.

14. Fulchignoni (1981), 18, and (2003), 166.

15. Rouch (1960), 17; Hennebelle (1982b), 168.

16. Ten Brink (2007b), 138.

17. Ten Brink (2007b), 135.

18. Rouch (1999); ten Brink (2007b), 137.

19. Rouch (1960), 20; ten Brink (2007b), 136.

20. This cult featured in a number of Rouch's subsequent films, notably *Monsieur Albert prophète* (1963).

21. Ten Brink (2007b), 137.

22. In his memoir, Rouch admits that the reading of this poem by one of his Surrealist poet-heroes was his idea. The film also features a poem by Baudelaire and two by Rimbaud. These too were suggested by Rouch though he takes pleasure in the fact that after the filming, some of the students developed their own interest in poetry (Rouch 1960, 23).

23. Jones (2005).

24. Rouch (1960), 24–25.

25. Rouch (1960), 26.

26. Though perhaps the transformation in attitudes was not as great as Rouch imagined or hoped for. Alain later joined the Foreign Legion and went to fight against the independence movement in Algeria, where he was killed (Rouch 1999).

27. Anon. (1965b).

Chapter Seven

1. Piault (1997), 12.

2. Luc de Heusch, personal communication, October 2004. See also Rouch (1991); Stoller (1994), 84–85; Colley (1992), 48–49; Marshall and Adams (2003), 192. Rouch's com-

ment on Griaule's reaction seems to have been a canard symptomatic of the ambiguous relationship that he had with his mentor. Marc Piault (pers. comm., 2004) suggests that Griaule was **probably shocked, not** because of the way the film represented colonial authorities **but because it undermined** his long-term attempt to demonstrate that African culture is as aesthetically and intellectually refined as European culture. See chapter 15, pp. 314–317, for a more extended discussion of Rouch's "joking relationship" with Griaule.

3. Stoller (1992), 151.

4. Stoller (1992), 158.

5. Stoller (1992), 159; Fulchignoni (1981), 16, and (2003), 163.

6. Marshall and Adams (2003), 189. Although Rouch worked mostly with the Songhay-Zerma, *hauka* (variants: *haouka*, *hawka*) is actually a Hausa word meaning "madness." This is similar to the meaning of the Zerma term for the spirits of the cult, *zondom*. They are also referred to as *babule* in Hausa, meaning "spirits of fire," presumably a reference to the mediums' practice of scorching themselves with flaming torches (Olivier de Sardan 1993, 171n; Rouch 1989, 81; 1997b, 35).

7. Sardan (1993), 209n; Marc Piault, personal communication, 2004.

8. In the original French version of the commentary, which is generally slightly more detailed than the English version, the last sentence referring to absorption of "our inimical society" is absent. As the English version was recorded some time later, one can only surmise that by then Rouch had become even more aware of the need to defend the film against accusations of racism.

9. Rouch (1995b), 222. This reproduces an article first published in 1988.

10. See Georgakas et al. (2003), 216–218. This reports an interview actually conducted in 1977.

11. See Rouch (1997d), 208 which reproduces an article originally published in 1990.

12. Rouch reports that the "real" Madame Salma, wife of an early twentieth-century French colonial official, was African (see Marshall and Adams 2003, 190).

13. Marc Piault reports (pers. comm., 2004) that in the French colonies, not only truck and train drivers, but also corporals could well have been Europeans, but that this is less likely to have been the case in the British colonies.

14. There are a number of editorial devices in *Les Maîtres fous* that are unusual in Rouch's work and it is therefore tempting to attribute these to the influence of the editor, Suzanne Baron. This is a matter that I shall explore at greater length in chapter 14, pp. 297–298.

15. See Stoller (1992), 152; Russell (1999), 224, 344n; also Taussig (1993), 242. It was this particular shot that appears to have prevented Rouch from getting cinema distribution in the UK. Following a screening of the film at the British Film Institute, the chairman of the Board of Film Censors told Rouch that although he had liked the film personally, there was no way he could approve its general release. When Rouch asked why not, he replied, "You just try cracking an egg on the head of the Queen of England and see what happens to you!" (Devanne 1998).

16. Stoller (1995), 132, 198–199. By accident, some years before Kountché took power, Rouch filmed Kountché's wife taking part in a spirit possession ceremony close to her home in Niamey, the Nigerien capital, on the occasion of a ceremony dedicating a shrine to Dongo that she herself had sponsored (see C. Piault 1996, 149; also 2007, 44).

17. Stoller (1992), 156.

18. Olivier de Sardan (1993) *passim*.