

School for International Training

Study Abroad- Ghana

Arts and Culture

Spring 2002

A War of Words:

Halo Songs of Abuse Among the Anlo Ewe

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Acknowledgments

This paper came about through the co-operation, support and inspiration of so many people. Thank you to my Project Advisors, Professors Kofi Anyidoho and Mawuli Adjei for your patient guidance, Dale Massiasta, his family and the staff of the Blakhud Research Center for all their help and hospitality, to the students and staff of SIT for their support and for keeping me sane. To the Academic Directors- Yemi for his advice and Gavin for his unwavering confidence and enthusiasm, and my friends and family who helped me find the courage that got me across the Atlantic, I am hugely grateful.

I would also like to express my unending gratitude to my informants. Your trust in me is the most valued compliment, the biggest gift I could have received in Ghana.

Thank you, medase, and akpe.

Abstract

"Sticks and stones will break my bones but words can never hurt me."

Nearly every American child is taught this phrase. The Anlo Ewe of Ghana, however, have more reverence for the damaging potential of language. Their songs of abuse, or halo, are at once an artistic medium, a social control, a source of humor and entertainment. At the same time they are a form of verbal warfare, with victims and casualties the same as in any other type of war. This mode of communication is at times beautiful and profound, yet because of the damage it can cause it is no longer practiced. In the Southern Volta region where it originated, there is still a wealth of information about halo, but due to the restrictions against its use and its volatility, knowledge about the practice is not openly shared.

The following paper will examine these songs' function, composition and performance. I will attempt to address how this tradition ended, how these songs are now perceived and how the mode of insult is woven into the fabric of the Anlo Ewe community.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	
Abstract	i
Introduction	1
Methodology	4
Body:	
Description of Halo	8
Features of Anlo Ewe Society that Prevent its Continuation	20
Positive and Negative Aspects	26
Halo and Insult in Modern Anlo Ewe Society	31
Conclusion	33
Definitions	35
Halo Texts	36
Endnotes	39
Informants	42
References	44

Introduction

As a foreigner visiting a country for the first time, committing the occasional social taboo or unwittingly causing insult is virtually unavoidable. While these instances are often unfortunate and embarrassing, they can also be some of the quickest, most effective teachers of culture. The following paper is born out of this assertion. Through discovering what is considered offensive to a group of people, social, historical, religious and cultural information about that group becomes accessible.

Ghanaians tend to take insults very seriously. Peter Sarpong observes, "If there is anything the Ghanaian cannot stand, especially in public, it is insulting him. I need only mention that abusiveness in public is one of the legitimate causes for destooling a chief and the reader will realize the serious import of the point I am trying to make. ⁱ" A cultural misunderstanding may be excusable, but to intentionally berate a person is not tolerated.

However, within the country there are a handful of cultures who allow for offensive remarks to be openly expressed in a controlled environment through song. The Takyiman people, for instance, allow songs of insult during the Apoo festival as a sort of purging of resentment and ill will. These songs are sometimes presented as 'praise songs' when addressed to a chief, and are used to make him aware if he has made a decision or taken action that has caused the public's disapproval. ⁱⁱ

Nzema women provide another example. They unite in song to air opinions and complaints on social issues specific to women. These songs are often full of ridicule that

they would not otherwise be free to express.ⁱⁱⁱ Elsewhere in Ghana, similar groups are beginning to appear, including the Avorto-Klikor Women's Group in the southern part of the Volta Region.

The Southern Volta has also produced the tradition of halo, or songs of abuse, which is the focus of this paper. In this practice, two opposing groups take turns directly and publicly confronting each other through songs laden with insults and verbal abuse. As Alan P. Merriam notes in his book, *The Anthropology of Music*, ". . . it does seem probable that obscene songs are sung among almost all peoples,"^{iv} yet halo is distinctive due to its competitive, confrontational nature and gratuitous use of overkill. Halo was officially abolished in 1960 due to the rifts that it caused between rivaling villages and groups within villages.^v

Research on this music is incredibly sparse. Most all those I have found who have done extensive study on the topic are Anlo Ewes themselves, belonging to the culture that inhabits the southern Volta Region. Few people from outside the culture know that halo existed. Indeed, after its proscription people became reluctant even to speak of it. As a result, knowledge of halo even among the younger generations in the villages where it was once practiced is becoming a rarity.

This paper aims to describe the practice and nature of halo, demonstrate how halo in its indigenous setting is not a sustainable tradition, and to examine ways in which verbal abuse is still present in Anlo Ewe society.

In a culture where knowledge of and connection to the past is so important, halo is a cultural phenomenon in danger of being forgotten. Those who took part in it are among the very old and are becoming increasingly few. Before long, to do research as I have done will be no longer possible. It is therefore my sincerest hope that the following study may in some small way be used to preserve some of the texts and details of halo performance and serve to explain this part of Anlo Ewe heritage to future generations.

Methodology

My research took place mainly in the Klikor Traditional District and surrounding towns. Data was collected primarily through independent research and both formal and informal interview.

Halo is a very delicate topic. Many Ewes view it as a dangerous and hurtful episode in their history. The texts are emotionally charged even after the practice has been abandoned for several years, and even discussing halo can have serious consequences. I am only able to write about this topic as a result of the incredible amount of trust given to me by my informants. As one professor told me, what I asked of my interviewees is somewhat similar to wandering around the capitol of the United States asking questions about the CIA. For this reason, both techniques in gathering and interpreting information had to be areas of constant attention and concern during my research.

There are many problems that will be confronted by anybody researching halo, but in addition to these there are problems specific to those who come to do research as a foreigner. I came to the Volta Region knowing no more than three words in Ewe. Being Caucasian I had no chance of blending in rural village life. Given only a month to study, there was no opportunity to for people to get used to my presence before I had to start looking after sensitive information.

Also working against my favor are the past experiences the villages I visited have had with foreign researchers. The village of Klikor happens to have a strong religious base in the Afa traditional religion, which has recently come to worldwide attention for a controversial practice called Trokosi. In the past few years, several groups have gone to Klikor looking for information to use against this practice, sometimes undercover.^{vi} In addition, westerners have gone to this area to steal artifacts from their traditional shrines.^{vii} As a result, foreign researchers are regarded by some with suspicion, regardless of the topic of their research.

To combat all that was working against my favor as best I could, I lived in a home with a family. I went to social functions and funerals to let people get used to my presence as much as they could. In an interview setting I tried to ask questions indirectly related to my topic first to try and test how they would react to more direct questions. When I felt a person was beginning to get defensive I tried to shift my focus of inquiry to topics that were more benign. I always tried to leave room for them to ask about myself and my research, and always asked if they had any advice for me. I tried to accept what they had to say gracefully, even if their advice was, "Drop it."

Difficulties do not end after the information is gathered. Among the challenges that remain are those posed by inconsistency of information. When I asked people what criteria could be used to classify a song as halo, I was surprised at the variety of answers I got. One of the biggest discrepancies occurred over whether a song had to mention a

person's name in order to be considered halo. To some of my informants, this is the essential part that separates a satirical song from a halo song. The attacked person has to be directly named. Others argued that in some villages, a song could refer to a person without using his or her name, and if the song's target was obvious through the context of a song, it could also be considered halo. If, for example, it was well known in a town that man was leading a promiscuous lifestyle, his name could be substituted with "He-Goat."^{viii} Those who believe halo requires using the person's actual name would argue that this is an example of *hama* or *lobalo*, not halo.

I was also unable to get a unanimous answer as to whether *hama* and *lobalo* are the same thing. While some people believe the terms to be interchangeable, others argue that *hama* is a song that uses indirect insult, whereas *lobalo* is more of a riddle, usually where a question is posed and requires a response. In other words, *lobalo* is a tool, which involves discussion and consideration instead of a song of insult.^{ix}

In asking about the procedure of halo, I ran against the same issue. It seemed for every answer I got I had another one that in some way contradicted it. The widest variety I got in answers was concerning how halo was judged, whether formally or informally, who judged and whether there was an award for the victorious group. Another aspect that there was much disagreement on was as to how a person acknowledged his or her presence before a song was begun. Some told me that the victim stepped forward to come face to face with the cantor, others indicated that it was only necessary to raise a hand, others stated the subject had to stand on a stool or platform of some kind to raise them above the rest of the audience. While with many of these issues only details differ,

this serves to illustrate that one needs to use great caution in declaring one procedure or criteria for halo as universal throughout the area.

As in the latter example of acknowledging his or her presence at a performance, there may be sufficient consistency to make general statement. In this case, for instance, the opposing party was expected to be present and some kind of acknowledgement was given, yet I found that this is best given as a general characteristic rather than a hard and fast rule. Exceptions can usually be found with only minimal searching. In the above example, when ancestors or the deceased are sung against, it would certainly be shocking if that person revealed their presence to the crowd during a performance.

There are more exceptions in this genre of music than there is time to address them in a semester-long study. Halo has been adapted to different settings and even different mediums, such as poetry or graffiti. One intriguing variation I came across was halo that was used at the workplace, for example fishing songs where one fishing group directly insulted another through song while pulling in the nets.^x

Another issue which must be addressed is that information is much more accessible coming from those who believe halo to be a positive practice. Some of those with the most intimate knowledge of the subject refuse to discuss it due to the damage and the hurt it has caused in their own lives. As a result, the data collected is bound to be somewhat one-sided.

To do this topic justice would involve more interviews than are possible in a one month research project, more background information on the proverbs, history and the religious roots of halo. The following paper is therefore best regarded as an introductory examination from a foreigner's perspective of an incredibly dynamic and complex issue.

Description of Halo

Definition

Halo, or songs of abuse, were found in the southernmost area of the Volta Region, occupied by the Anlo Ewes. The name halo is comprised of two words: ha, which is the ewe word for song, and lo, or proverb.^{xi} It is an exchange of insult through song between two rivaling peoples. Halo is generally characterized by the following traits.

- The opponent must be present
- The song is performed in front of the public
- The opponent must have the opportunity to respond
- There is a rope or other barrier to demarcate the audience from performers

Halo is no longer practiced in its traditional form and setting. It was officially abolished in 1960^{xii}, however in my research I learned of halo practiced as late as 1982.^{xiii} Ethnomusicologist Daniel Avorgbedor quotes the tradition as beginning in 1912^{xiv}, yet some of my informants indicated that it was handed down through several generations as opposed to having a lifespan of less than 50 years. Documents from the colonial government banning the *haloga*, or announcement of a halo performance, indicate that these songs of abuse were firmly in place by 1918. (See following page.)

Circular Notice

567

From
Via Adams of
Hypocrite
10th March 1911

To
10 3/11
all chiefs
of the court

Sir,
Please note that no Drum Club
has any right to beat for - for - for -
any club for your honor
Any Drum Club who contravene
this rule shall be liable to a fine
of £5-0-0 (Five pounds)

By Order
(Sgt) Adams of
The of Hypocrite

Against Whom

Halo reportedly happened most often between neighboring villages, yet it was not limited to this setting. Rivaling people or groups within a village have also been known to use songs of abuse as a means of expressing aggression. Halo can be highly political, using a person's bad character to discredit a political party, or a political party's bad judgment to reflect the bad judgment of an individual.^{xv}

It is important to note that nobody is exempt from ridicule in halo. Ahiakpote, a leading composer and cantor in Apegame, Klikor, even wrote a song about his own wife. In another of his songs he likens himself to a gun who does not consider relations when it aims- he declares himself an instrument for justice.^{xvi} Another composer named Tokpo composed an abusive song against his sister.^{xvii}

A song can also target a person has died or an ancestor. One of my informants sang me a song directed at a British officer who ordered the building of a canal that turned out to be a disaster. Many homes were flooded and people killed as a result, the officer included.^{xviii} This song ridicules the man posthumously. The deceased receive the same merciless treatment as the living. Lies can be concocted against a dead person and presented as fact, as they could when they were alive.

Composers are also obliged to disregard the respect normally given to an elder or chief. While a chief cannot respond personally to a song composed against him, he may commission a group to respond on his behalf.^{xix} As for the elders, Kofi Anyidoho brings to light that with an elder's elevated respect, exemplary behavior is expected. "Indeed, at

his death a stupid and worthless elder is sent to his grave with the warning that he should never reincarnate with such abominable behavior.^{xxv}

Causes

Halo has many different causes. Some of the most common include competition over natural resources, thievery, longstanding rivalries between individuals or groups, homicide through practicing magic, and issues of wife snatching and inter-ward marriage. Livelihood in the southern part of the Volta Region is highly dependant on the land and its natural resources. Disputes over fishing rights or farmland are therefore very serious. Other rivalries could happen between different organizations within a town, for instance political parties or drumming groups.

The Anlo Ewes typically believe that people have the capacity to send their spirit out to harm others. This can lead to unexplained sickness or even death. Therefore, if a person falls seriously ill or dies, that person's known enemies could easily be suspected to have played a part.^{xxi}

Of all the causes for halo, arguments over women are seen as the most common. Both the men and women I've interviewed seem to agree with this assertion. One woman told me of a halo rivalry started by a female goat breaking a neighbor's pots. According to this woman, it is part of the female condition to raise conflict.^{xxii} The most common situation described to me was that of two men courting the same women. The

two opponents would engage in halo to prove their rival's worthlessness, and win the woman's favor as a result. Reportedly, even after a couple had married, it would be quite possible for a woman to leave her husband, using evidence provided through halo as proof of his bad character.^{xxiii}

Types of Insult

Insults used in halo usually address physical appearance, deviant behavior, personal histories, or can otherwise be characterized as obscenities. An unattractive person would often find him or herself insulted in halo "from forehead to toenails."^{xxiv}

Among the songs I have come across, people have been harangued for having a long mouth, big ears, "legs like scissors," "scrotum rotund," a shiny forehead and sagging buttocks. The practice of halo makes frequent use of overkill, making a heavy person a bulldozer or steamroller, big ears becoming the sails of a ship, and a shiny forehead that of a person just struck by lightning. While these insults are humiliating, they are not always seen as "good halo." A person has no control over the face or body he or she was born with. That person's appearance is decided by God, therefore an insult describing his or her physical makeup is actually an insult against God.^{xxv}

Defamation of character is thought to be far worse. These include proclamations that the opponent is dirty, greedy, lazy, a thief, prostitute, drunkard, or glutton. Often, stories will be exaggerated or fabricated altogether to demonstrate a person's bad character.

Embarrassing personal and family histories, particularly involving slavery, are some of the most potent insults. In the judgment of halo these are highly valued because they can demonstrate the thorough examination a group has invested into their victim's past. The category of obscenities is kind of a catch-all. Here, insults are limited by nothing save the composer's imagination.

While there is no topic that is universally tabooed in halo, various communities may have a topic considered highly sensitive and generally avoided. In Amedzikope, one informant told me that the female reproductive organs are not discussed. The reason being that they are the origin of every human being, therefore there is no shame in the subject.^{xxvi} Another informant from the same town, however, sang me a song insulting a man as being "extra black" because after he was conceived, his mother didn't "wash her woman."^{xxvii} We can assume through this example that some flexibility is allowed in such issues.

The traditional district of Klikor is and has been securely rooted in the Afa traditional religion. Some people came to this area to be initiated into the shrine of the Thunder God in search of religious asylum. After their initiation it was considered inappropriate to dig into these people's past lives. Because of this, halo, which is often constructed upon misdeeds in their subjects' pasts, did not occur in Klikor until 1938. Even after 1938, the sensitivity of some of Klikor's residents' personal histories resulted in compositions focusing on other types of insult. Digging into the history of an initiate of the Thunder God was often considered poor taste.^{xxviii}

A disabled person could be insulted mercilessly about his or her handicap. One informant recalled a bow-legged man bursting into tears during a particularly ruthless

song about him. The performing group who chooses such insults must be aware, however, that in so doing, any disabled person in their own group becomes particularly vulnerable.^{xxix}

Methods of Embellishment

A halo song could be enhanced with several visual aids or theatric devices. Before the actual performance commences, a group may hand out flyers boasting of past victories and bragging about its performing abilities^{xxx}. A crude sculpture, or *du f ozi*, could be rendered for display during a song, highlighting a person's unsavory physical features.^{xxxi} If a song tells the story of some misdeed or embarrassing incident, an 'artifact' could be constructed as evidence.

One performance described to me was about a man who was caught sleeping with another man's wife. He was so afraid of the other man's wrath that he fled, farting uncontrollably as he left. For this particular song, the performers procured a piece of cloth and punched holes in it, claiming that this was the cloth he wore and the holes resulted from his violent flatulence.^{xxxii} Another song claimed its subject never went to the bathroom, then produced a cloth to represent her "tarred" undergarments as proof of her filth.^{xxxiii}

Livestock could also be brought into the performing arena as "proof, against a person. For example, if a person stole a fowl, they could bring forth a bird and tell the

audience that this is the animal he stole. If a person is insulted as a "fucker of goats," an impregnated goat could be brought forth as the unfortunate object of that man's transgressions.^{xxxiv}

A group might also choose to act out an event, such as a theft or some instance of extreme cowardice.^{xxxv} As with the actual song texts, these skits would make use of overkill to exact as much laughter from the audience and anger from their target as possible. A song could also incorporate multiple languages. A Hausa man, for instance, may be performed against partly in Hausa. The use of other languages could be a way for a performing group to show off their education and also to mark their subject as an outsider.

Three Social Roles

There are three social roles involved in halo performance: the performers, the song's subjects and the audience. Halo is unique in that all three roles are very clearly defined. In most musical events, the audience is expected to participate in the performance, whether by hand clapping, dancing or wiping sweat from a person's face. In most halo performances there is a rope to divide the performers from the spectators. This is a precaution taken in case a person being insulted could no longer contain his or her anger.

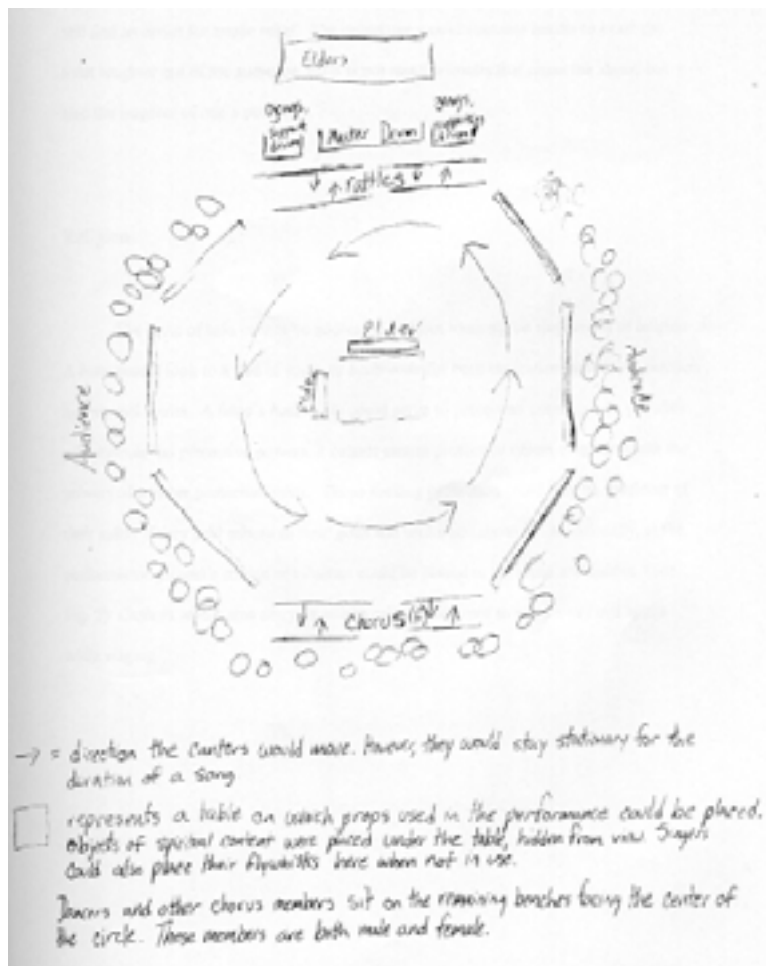
Yet even if this barrier were not present, the performers arrange themselves in such a way that it would be difficult for an aggressor to reach the cantors. The cantors

make an inner circle facing out to the audience, enclosed by a circle of benches in which chorus members, dancers and drummers are sitting. (See Fig. 2)

The closed circle of performers has other function than to act strictly as a barrier. The format is used elsewhere in Ghana in the Ayabomo songs sung by Nzema women for different reasons. In her article on this topic, K. E. Agovi emphasizes how this layout also promotes unity and support among performers. "It sets the women apart, simultaneously heightening their sense of "togetherness" and "separateness."^{xxxvi} This concept serves to further distinguish between spectator and performer.

Those addressed in song find themselves playing a part in the performance as well. Their presence is typically required at their opponent's production. Before a song is begun, the subject of the song must acknowledge his or her presence for the performers and the audience. In some villages this entailed coming forward from the crowd to face the cantors, elsewhere they were to raise themselves onto a platform or chair, and in yet others it would suffice only to raise a hand. In any case, the recipient's reaction to a song would be closely monitored. The abused would try to appear indifferent or even to laugh along with the audience. For an opponent to betray feelings of anger or embarrassment would equate to a victory for the performer. Physical violence in such occasions signified defeat.

Lastly, the audience is of great importance. The *heno* would create halo with both his or her target and the audience in mind. Each insult came equipped with a warning to those following similar lifestyles that they were risking facing similar treatment. These performances were highly competitive, making the audience's approval of great importance.



One quality of Ghanaians is their ability to find the humor in most every situation. This is made apparent, I think, in halo. Amidst anger and a host of other feelings, they still find an outlet for comic relief. The composer would calculate insults to exact the most laughter out of the audience, for it is not just the insults that cause the abuse, but also the laughter of one's peers.

Religion

The topic of halo cannot be addressed without touching on the subject of religion. A *heno* would look to a god of song, or *hadzivocdu* for both inspiration and also protection against evil spirits. A *heno's hadzivodu* could serve to protect an entire group, yet while a *hadzivodu* has protective powers, it cannot ensure protection unless combined with the powers of another protective spirit. Those seeking protection could only be confident of their safety if they paid tribute to their gods and broke no taboos.^{xxxvii} Additionally, at the performance ground a tribute or talisman could be placed in the arena and hidden. (See Fig. 2) Cantors would also carry flywhisks called *hadzilashi* to ward away evil spirits while singing.^{xxxviii}

Editing/Performance Procedure

Halo songs go through a number of revisions and rehearsals before they are performed for the public. The reason for such particular concern with producing a quality work is the element of competition and that a composition will come under the serious scrutiny of one's foes. The process starts when a composer, or *heno* goes into *hangble*, a song meditation. After he or she has produced a satisfactory draft, the *heno* will go to the *hadada* (lit. mother of song), or master songster to fine tune the text and rhythm of the words. This meeting is called the *hagoso*. From here the work is brought to a *havolu*, or meeting of the executive members of the group for further revision and preliminary rehearsal. Throughout these processes, the song is being edited and bits of incriminating information added. The next step is the *hakpa*, or larger group rehearsals. *Hakpas* occur until all the members of the group have mastered the tune and the Lyrics.^{xxxix}

The entire process is done in secret to ensure the opposing side will overhear. The performers must all be trustworthy, otherwise a member could leak information or spy for the opposition. In the event that they do discover what insults have been created against them, a group can make a counterattack, concocting responses to shout during the performance to make the insults and abuses look inconsequential.

The performances themselves vary in length and content. Typically they are a mixture of new material and older songs of particularly high quality.^{xl} The presence of new compositions is essential due to the fact that the entertainment is partly dependant on shock. Generally, the performance begins with *ayo*, or "throat clearing songs," which are

shorter and typically have a thicker texture. These lead into *hatsiatsia* songs, which are longer and tend to be less dense. Another song type used in halo is the *hafloflo*. This is performed by the master cantor, sometimes with a person singing a supporting vocal line.^{xli}

Musical Attributes

In separating halo into two parts, the musical and the textual, an interesting dichotomy emerges. While it is quite difficult to find examples of halo songs, and especially people willing to perform them, the musical styles that were used as the framework for halo still thrive in most Anlo Ewe communities. Halo is a musical classification based entirely on text. Just as there is no set form for songs about love or peace, there also exist no formal criteria for songs of abuse. Preexisting musical styles and rhythms provide the basis for halo. (Diagrams of instruments and basic rhythms commonly used in halo appear on the following pages.) The same terminology used to describe other Anlo Ewe songs applies here as well. However, the *hamudedede*, which is elsewhere a benign explanation of a song's lyrics, takes the form of a verbal attack in songs of abuse.

Rhythms Commonly Used in Halo

Kinka (Rhythmically the same as Goro and Waka)



Handwritten musical notation for Kinka, showing a sequence of notes and rests across three staves. The first staff has a series of eighth notes, the second staff has a series of eighth notes with some beamed together, and the third staff has a series of eighth notes.

	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
X	X	X			X	X		
X		X		X		X		

16 pulses pulses = 3/4

Gatzo (Fast)



Handwritten musical notation for Gatzo, showing a sequence of notes and rests across two staves. The first staff has a series of eighth notes, and the second staff has a series of eighth notes.

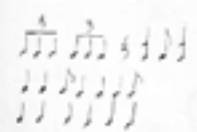
X	X	X	X	X	X	X
X	X	X	X	X	X	X

12 pulses pulses = 3/4

Waka/Tateikago

X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

36 pulses pulses = 3/4

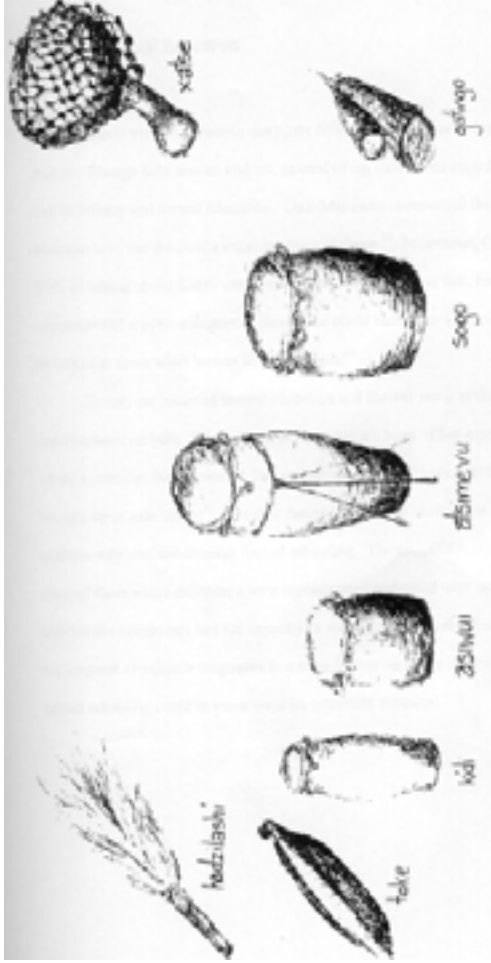


Handwritten musical notation for Waka/Tateikago, showing a sequence of notes and rests across three staves. The first staff has a series of eighth notes with some beamed together, the second staff has a series of eighth notes, and the third staff has a series of eighth notes.

Dancepo/Kimehime



Handwritten musical notation for Dancepo/Kimehime, showing a sequence of notes and rests across two staves. The first staff has a series of eighth notes, and the second staff has a series of eighth notes.



Halo and Formal Education

Halo is viewed as having markedly different literary status depending on who you talk to. Though halo was an oral art, several of my informants regard the topic as being tied to literacy and formal education. Dale Massiasta commented that it is only the well educated who see the innate value in songs of abuse.^{xlii} In contrast, Chief Togbi Addo VIII, in talking about Klikor composer Ahiakpote, expressed that, had he had formal education and a greater degree of literacy he could have risen to great things, yet because he lacked in these areas he was limited to halo.^{xliii}

To me, the issues of formal education and literacy seem as though they have been superimposed on halo. These songs are a verbal art form. They existed in a community where a considerable portion of the population was not literate, so the issue was not brought up in halo songs.^{xliv} It is also dangerous to view intelligence and learning as qualities only attained through formal schooling. The usage of proverbs and imagery in some of these songs indicates a very sophisticated command over language, regardless of whether the composers had the capacity to write them down themselves. The employment of multiple languages in a song further serves to demonstrate that those with limited schooling could in some ways be extremely educated.

* 40 die aghi zoadte tu he
3) do kuis hiazu e, nie z m da i u m

viez jedo. Lariudi ne jadu
ka va va ga na zuo. qana
haziki kya di sodo.
do xsi zu ne qvov de ke ne zen
7. ene kusia xna nava koe.
e. vedo no da. ne be yad i d e x
u u di m i a k p o. da do q lo z e
do k u k u r o v o d u y a d o a n e
w a z e w e s t b i a n u b e y a h o s o
s l e q a n e l e. z i z a q l o s h i z u o.
d i x p e w u x s i d e n e z u u d i d o.
d e r u r u r o k p a s a d o l i e n e k o o o
v o v y i q b a d i x p i x s o d o l o d e m
l o z a n e n i e j e n e k e s e n a d o f i a
n a n i h a z u m i l o v i x u k u r y a
d e d y z z q a q a d y r a l a q b o r a q o
d r a g e v i d i z e d a h u d a d y o h a
d a d l o a. d y o v s e n e q b r a l l u
k i p e q e. m i s r u b i n i a s r a z i z a q l o h.
z u o q s k u x o d o q u i d e l d e h a
q b o i d o n e q b e h a z u a. z u o e. i r e z h

Features of Halo and Anlo Ewe Society that prevent its

Continuation

Had halo not been abolished, there are several features inherent in the songs that still would have prevented them from living on as an oral tradition. Of these, the most significant is the highly individualized, highly personal nature of the music. Halo songs often left in their wake permanent victims. A catchy phrase or particularly potent insult could haunt a person until the end of his or her life. Even today when so many of the direct victims have died, it is still not safe to sing their songs, should a friend or relative overhear.

Furthermore, the natural environment of songs of abuse is conflict. Many of those who still remember the songs are understandably reticent to bring up old rivalries or to unearth offensive or embarrassing phrases from a person's past. Even the slightest provocation could bring to surface a conflict that had been laid to rest.

In many cases, especially if two opposing groups went beyond halo and sought to harm each other either spiritually or physically, the involved chief or chiefs may have called for the existing songs to be "buried," not to be repeated.^{xlv} While halo as a practice was officially abolished in 1960, songs were abolished on an individual basis throughout halo's lifespan as part of the process of conflict resolution.

Additional motivation to refrain from singing halo came from inter-ward marriage. Although in some cases inter-ward marriage was the root of a conflict, in other cases it could serve to resolve a conflict. Once a man and a woman from two disputing sides united and started a family, to sing against the opposing group meant singing against family.^{xlvi} Thus, halo was sometimes stopped in an effort to preserve family unity.

The above attributes of songs of abuse demonstrate some of the obstacles that serve to prevent those who know a song from relaying it to others. In addition, there are also elements at work that hinder others, particularly children, from learning them. It must first be noted that halo songs are typically classified as ayo, or "throat clearing songs," which are short, or hatsiatsia, which are considerably longer. It is common for the latter type to reach over a hundred lines in length.^{xlvii} A hatsiatsia therefore takes considerable dedication and repetition to learn. In learning a song after it had been buried or abolished, the frequent repetition required to commit these songs to memory would be exceedingly hard to come by.

While a person of any age was allowed to witness a halo performance regardless of the songs' crude content, nowadays several of my informants took measures to ensure that no child could overhear the songs. I think the purpose of this was twofold- it was due in part to the vulgarity of the language used and secondly to not trusting children to keep quiet that a halo song was sung. One young man I talked to recalled how his grandmother would sing halo prefaced by a warning to her grandchildren that these songs were very bad and they shouldn't try to learn it.

With the elimination of this tradition being carried forth by old compositions, halo in its intended form could only be maintained through active practice. That is, it relies heavily on the continuous creation and performance of new material. Here as well, halo's continuation has been stifled by outside factors besides its abolishment. Most of these factors are due to changes in the Anlo Ewe social structure over the past century. These factors include the change from colonial rule to Ghana's independence, the nature and the frequency of the use of the court system, time management within the culture, changes in gender balance in the population and in the nature of marriage in Anlo Ewe society.

Ghana gained independence from Britain on March 6, 1957.^{xlvi} In the years to follow, Ghana was urged to unite. This was encouraged politically through the Preventative Detention Act passed in 1958, where to speak against the ruling government could result in a jail sentence of indeterminate length, and later in 1964 when Ghana was declared a one-party state.^{xlix} The abolishment of halo is seen by many as a local response to this national push toward establishing unity.

Starting at roughly the same time, the court system became a much more common medium for settling disputes. In the opinion of Chief Togbi Addo VIII of the Klikor traditional district believes that, while these institutions were in place before this time, the court system became more refined post-independence. Disputes that might have been addressed in halo were brought to a legal arena instead. If a person was publicly insulted, he or she could now bring the case to court citing defamation of character. The aggressor might then be fined or made to provide drinks or an animal for slaughter.¹

In my research I was also told that people no longer had the time for halo. To be sure, between the composition of a song, its rehearsal and performance, halo was a great consumer of time. In addition, it was common for two disputing groups to engage in halo for several years. I am still unclear, however, as to why shortage of time is more of an issue now than it was several decades ago. The inhabitants of Klikor are largely engaged in the same occupations that they were then, namely farming and traditional crafts such as kete cloth weaving.^{li}

It is a commonly held assertion that women are the root of nearly every halo dispute. This can be explained in part if we include women in Anlo Ewe society in the category of natural resources. The furthering of one's lineage is hugely important in this culture, as it is in Ghana as a whole. In Klikor, just before the beginning of World War II, the ration between the male and female population was significantly skewed.^{lii} As Chief Addo VIII explains, the "order of the day" was for a man to marry the daughter of his paternal aunt or maternal uncle. If a man came from a family where neither relation could be provided, procuring a wife could become a serious struggle.^{liii} It was terribly important that a man in this situation had a known and respectable family history, which could serve to explain why halo songs frequently involve insults about ancestors and relatives, for example dishonorable deaths or a history of slavery.

During the slave trade in Ghana, there were both the enslaved and the enslavers among Ghanaians. The Anlo Ewes, probably as a function of their proximity to the coast, are historically classified among the enslavers. Some believe that due to their power position over other areas of the Volta Region, the Anlos felt themselves to be superior.^{liv}

This opinion could further explain their reluctance to look for spouses outside of their own society.

If we consider the polygamous nature of this society, a lesser number of women becomes increasingly problematic. The composer Ahiakpote, for instance, had seven known wives, another one being discovered after his death.^{lv} As the gender ratio became more balanced over time, the competition became less severe and eventually dissipated. Today in the Klikor Traditional District, women make up a sizeable majority. The population is estimated at roughly 52 thousand people, approximately 55% of the population is female, 45% male.^{lvi}

While polygamy is still practiced by the Anlo Ewes, concepts of marriage are changing. Polygamy is increasingly less common. Also, men and women tend to get married later in life. Single men and women are often not considered ready for marriage until they are older.^{lvii} Therefore, the matter of marriage is less urgent. One of my interviewees speculated that the population having a larger percentage of females has caused the women of Klikor to become more aggressive in procuring a husband.^{lviii} Yet, in any society where polygamy is accepted, an overabundance of women is not considered a problem.

For these reasons in combination with halo s official abolishment, songs of insult have not for the most part been passed down as part of the Anlo Ewe oral tradition. Abolishment tended to be encouraged and most rigorously enforced when those in power were the ones being criticized. When a person comes under attack and has the jurisdictional power to put an end to it, the practice is most often ended. This happened in 1954 in Klikor when King Addo VI was abused in halo for laziness.^{lix} The colonial

government in the beginning of the 20th century was often thus employed by halo victims, and local chiefs were likewise pressured to bring performers into a court setting to account for what was said in song.^{lx} (See following pages.)

Positive and Negative Aspects

The Positive

Halo is viewed as a positive function in many aspects. First, it is a form of social control and reform. Members of society known for laziness, drunkenness, promiscuous behavior, poor hygiene, thievery or any other social ill are easy targets for a halo. Insults could be used not only to criticize an individual but also his or her entire family, making an individual's poor behavior a matter of concern for his or her relatives as well. An upcoming performance would cause people to be on their best behavior in order to avoid giving a group grounds for criticism.

Secondly, it was a controlled arena for conflict. Halo did not always avoid violence, yet as Kofi Anyidoho writes, "In the absence of halo, there would have been physical violence."^{lxi} In some cases these songs allowed time for hot tempers to cool and thus physical aggression was avoided. The Anlo Ewe have a saying: "Halo menye dzre o. Ne nosiwo dzi de woa, woha nadzi adee." "Halo is no quarrel. When you are addressed in song, you also reply in song."^{lxii} As this saying implies, the medium of song helps to divorce abuse from physical violence. In halo, to resort to violence is to admit defeat. Violence is seen in this situation as a sign of weakness instead of power.

Another way in which halo can be viewed as a positive social function is that it is a means for addressing issues that are not easily settled in a federal or a tribal court. Daniel Avorgbedor examines several of these in his essay, *Freedom to Sing, License to*

Insult: The Influence of Halo Performance on Social Violence Among the Anlo Ewe. One such case is the practice of "black magic by an imagined or real opponent."^{lxiii} When modes of spiritual aggression are expected reasons for a person's serious illness or death, an aggrieved family will be unlikely to find resolution in a court system, which relies heavily upon concrete physical evidence, such as an autopsy in the case of a death.^{lxiv}

Marriage in the Anlo Ewe community is of a nature that leaves room for legal interpretation. Wife snatching, for instance, cannot be handled easily by authorities due to the acceptability of polygamy and that marriage certification by a civil court is not required.^{lxv} Thus, it is difficult to prove when a man forcibly takes the wife of a man from a different ward.

While interward marriage is not an infraction on any law, it has in the past been the reason for numerous quarrels between wards. Such a union can be seen as an affront to a potential suitor from the woman's ward and therefore be a source of ill will and conflict where a court has no jurisdiction.^{lxvi} Halo has been used in many such cases to address the issue.

In his book, *The Anthropology of Music*, Alan P. Merriam cites researcher Hugh Tracey, who made the following quote regarding topical songs of the Chopi of East Africa:

. . . it performs a highly social and cathartic function in a society which has no daily press, no publications, and no stage other than the village yard in which publicly to express its feelings or voice its protests against the rub of the times.^{lxvii}

Here, Tracey articulates how such songs can be an important emotional outlet in a rural community.

Some also view halo as a form of social security. Composers and performers serve as warriors for the community, fending off any verbal attacks and protecting its residents.

Social function aside, songs of abuse also possess an artistic function. A heno has to be a master of description to provide the likeness of his or her victim and use a considerable amount of imagination to exaggerate or altogether fabricate a personal history. As the word halo implies (ha = song, lo = proverb), a composer is expected to have command over a large catalogue of proverbs, traditional images and stories to help illustrate the song's target. In translating several of his father's halo compositions, Dale Massiasta claimed to have found 34 proverbs in a single song.^{lxviii} Professor Kwakuvi Azasu asserts that halo, due to its complex system of editing, is the most sophisticated of Anlo Ewe poetry.^{lxix}

In addition to the words used in halo, a performance is also evaluated in terms of the cantor's skill, a group's dancing ability and musical prowess. These songs of abuse provided an entertainment venue with comic value even in the midst of an emotionally charged and potentially explosive situation.

Negative Aspects

The negative aspects of halo are equally as abundant as the positive. The family unit in Ewe society, similar to just about any culture in Ghana, is a web of shared responsibilities and accountability. A conflict initially involving one family member will be quick to involve the family at large. Songs of abuse enhance this shared accountability by extending insults to the entire family, including ancestors. This is effective in delocalizing the conflict and spreading it out to the surrounding community. Given the size and extended nature of the Ghanaian family, a dispute between two people can easily grow to involve entire towns. In this way, halo allows conflict to escalate instead of dissipate.^{lxx}

Halo songs are calculated to inspire their rival's anger. While people are encouraged to respond to this anger through the composition and performance of a halo song, this is not always the case. Halo has often led to the practice of black magic and physical violence. Many view halo as a musical device that literally kills people.

Those people used as the subject of halo songs often feel their lives, though not literally destroyed, are scarred permanently by these compositions. Lies about a person are taken as truth, families break up or form permanent rifts with other families and people are forced to leave their homes. It was a shock to me to witness the pain and the anger this issue aroused in some people. People's names have been replaced by derogatory words or phrases and loved ones have been lost. To those affected most acutely by songs of abuse, some of the harm done by these songs is absolutely unforgivable.

A few informants gave me examples of the other day or the other week when they had felt affronted by old halo rivals. These rivalries sometimes extend to children. One informant explained how some people in his village don't like him because of an insult his father composed against them decades ago. He went on to tell how his uncle had married a woman, but her father came to collect her one day because his family had been abused by this man's family.

In another village, I heard tell of two boys who were insulted in a halo song in Primary Class 1, and by Primary Class 3 they had dropped out because of the abuse they received every day from their peers. In this man's opinion, these boys "dropped to the level of the song." "They deteriorated psychologically."^{lxxi}

As can be seen by the above, the abolishment of halo was not caused merely by a few people's low tolerance for insult. One informant told me that halo is a good thing, yet the human race is not good enough for halo.^{lxxii} The amount of maturity and strength it would take for to bring only good is more than can be expected from any community.

Halo and Insult in Modern Anlo Ewe Society

While halo may no longer be actively practiced in the Southern Volta Region, it would be entirely false to conclude from this that insults are absent from the Anlo Ewe music tradition or that it no longer serves as a social control. Halo, defined as direct verbal attack through song, has given way to *lobalo* and *hama* musical traditions, where a person is insulted indirectly. It is a bit confusing when those who believe halo can be indirect as long it is common knowledge who the subject is. I found the easiest way to take this into account was by defining halo as a verbally abusive song where the victim is known and given the opportunity to respond. With *hama* and *lobalo* there is no way for a person to prove he or she was slandered in the composition, and therefore given no way to address the aggressor.

There is some argument over whether these terms are synonymous with one each other or whether they are two entirely different forms of expression. As we have learned, *ha* in Ewe means song. When I asked after the meaning of *ma*, I was told it is most likely referring to covering a person's private parts. This makes the literal translation of *hama* something along the lines of "covered," or "shrouded song," referring most likely to the hidden insults in the text. *Lo*, as mentioned before, means proverb. The closest I was able to get to a literal translation of *lobalo* was "a proverb that is interpreted by another proverb." In conversational Ewe, *lobalo* seems to equate to riddle.^{lxxiii} These names in and of themselves seem to imply some difference in their usage.

Insults continue to be used by the Anlo Ewes as a form of social control, both in and out of song. The Dzifa Habobo Avorto-Klikor Women's Group mentioned

previously sing songs generally insulting men who fail to live up to their expectations. The difference is that these songs are addressed to men in general and not to specific individuals. Outside of song, a person dancing too straight may be told she dances like a cassava stick. A messy eater can be told that his or her face looks like a field laid to waste in the crop rotation. Such insults are still plentiful, used to keep people from deviating from what society deems as acceptable behavior.

The biggest gap left in the absence of halo appears to be the element of competition. Competition in the past has driven people to a level of excellence in their performances and compositions.

Conclusion

I started my research on halo knowing very little about it. I knew that halo were songs of abuse, and I knew that they were abolished. At the end of my research I feel I understand halo and the phenomenon of their performance much better, yet there is still so little I can conclude. It seems to me a performance being pulled in two directions- one being the number of artistic and societal benefits it can bring and the other its potential for tragedy and at the very least humiliation.

The people I interviewed expressed both the opinion that halo would live on, whether through slightly altered forms or as it has in the past and the opinion that halo is gone from the Ewe tradition. I tend to side with the latter viewpoint. As I understand it, halo is more than just a classification of song. Halo is a performance practice dependant on specific social roles being present and a specific nature of the interaction. Songs of insult will live on through other mediums, yet Anlo Ewe society has changed in such a way that a tradition founded on this style of confrontation and social interaction cannot be sustained.

To me, the more pressing issue then becomes, should knowledge of halo be preserved and discussed with the younger generations of Anlo Ewes, or does the damage done in its practice warrant that it be silenced? I have concluded that its preservation is important, if for no other reason because it serves to tell us something of these peoples'

past- the things that could be said to hurt a person worst, the religion that served as halo's base, the strength of character and self-control these people must have possessed in order to stand up to these compositions and not react with despair or let their anger overtake them. Most of all, halo is a lesson to all people about our own susceptibility to the power and the potency of words.

Definitions

Instruments

atimevu/atsimevu- master drum, 4-5 feet tall, played propped sogo- large flat drum. Takes on the master drum's part in its absence kagan- smallest, highest pitched drum asiwui/asivi- supporting drum, lower pitched than the kagan toke- banana-shaped castanet gakogui/gatigo- bell or gong axatse/xatse- gourd rattle

People

heno- composer

zaguno- drummer hadada- (lit. "mother of song") master songster

Performance and Song Vocabulary

hangole- song meditation

hagoso- meeting of the heno and the hadada to edit the song

havolu- secret meeting before a new song is performed in which the song text and the history behind it is explained to executive members of the performing group

hakpa- secret rehearsal meeting of the entire group

haza- dress rehearsal the night before the performance

hamekuku- vocals accompanied by toke and gakogui parts.

ayo/hayo- (lit. "throat clearing songs") short songs used as preludes

hatsiatsialhatiata- (tsia or tia means to pin) longer songs

*ayo and hatsiatsia are subgroups of hamekuku. They are performed by a group and refer to the song's length, not style.

hafloflo- (flo means to climb) solo song, sometimes with a supporting vocalist

hanudede- verbal attack in recitative

wuchocho- dance music. Uses full ensemble

hadzilashi- flywhisk, made of ram's mane, used in song to ward off evil spirits

hadzivodu- god of songs

Halo Texts

Poem 1.

It is in the hands of destiny
our life is in the hands of the Creator.
Songsters, listen.
My Creator sent me this way
he gave me nothing
not even looks.
So the rich ones howl in the lanes -
proclaiming their wealth.
Dunyo says I know not what to do
My Creator gave me songs.
I will not refuse them
My song came from the Creator's house
simmering in my head
Please, I say gently.
whose leg is larger than the hippo.
I will be mute; let someone abuse me
then I will tell it to him.
The whore was forgetful; she walked
like the wandering duck into my song.
She thought it was a matter of opening legs.

She asked Dunyo, what kind of
dirty Lago cloth are you wearing
and I have none to cover my nakedness?
And behold she wore
the same dirty Lagos cloth.
I asked her what cloth is this you wear?
She said I have velvet,
If I rise up I will wear it.
Dunyo answered her,
You are not the Creator
you did not create me.
Come and hear the voice of slander.
You clutch the earth like a leather bag.
On your stem you stand
Like the porcupine in clothes.
You run like the bush rope.
Your back caves in rising like the hillock
Beneath your stomach is the hyaena's ravine.
Your chest is as short as the red monkey
on the corn barn.
Will this too insult the poet? Alas,
My song shall speak the words of songs.

Poem 2.

Hm hm hm. Beware
I will place a load on Kodzo's head
Nugbleza informed me that
It is the women of Tsiamé
Who goaded Kodzo into my song.
Questioners, this become the evil firewood
he'd gathered; his hands decayed
his feet decayed
I am the poet; I am not afraid of you.
Kodzo. winding the air, his anus-agape
his face long and curved
like the lagoon egret's beak
Call him here, I say call him
and let me see his face.
He is the man from whom the wind runs,
the man who eats off the farm
he hasn't planted;
his face bent like the evil hoe
on its handle. Behold, ei ei ei
Kodzo did something. I forgive him
his debt.
I will insult him since he poked
a stick in the flying ant's grove.
Amegavi said he has some wealth
And he took Kodzo's part.
The back of his head tapers off
as if they'd built a fetish hut
on his breathing spot.
His face wags, a fool with a white ass.
The monkey opened his anus
in display to the owner of the farm.
The lion caught a game, alas,
his children took it away from him.
Kodzo's homestead shall fall,
shall surely fall.
Questioners, let evil me die
let death knock down the evil doer.
If I were the fetish in the creator's house
That will be your redemption.
Kodzo, this imbecile, evil animal
who fucks others' wives fatteningly
his buttocks run off, his teeth yellow
his penis has wound a rope around his waist

Listen, listen so that you can hear.

pulling him around and away,
his backside runs into a slope,
his eye twisted like the sun-inspector,
he has many supporters in Tsiamé
his mouth as long as the pig
blowing the twin whistle.
Something indeed has happened

Poem 1 by Dunya, Poem 2 by Ekpe, documented and translated by Kofi Awoonor during his research in Tsiamé in 1974. *Guardians of the Sacred Word* pgs. 56-57.

Poem 3.

I have not offended any god
To be killed by spiritual means
You work! Is that any offensive issue?
To work yourself and eat to satisfaction
That is no matter for quarrel
You yourselves know
That prices of goods have shot up
The worker bill is separate
The Land Poll is in force
The corn pan is the judge
He adjudicates cases in court
The court is on every
Kpoglu market day
When you fail to attend you can't stay at home
You'll only hide outside your home
And hear the children cry
In the distance, saying work work
Acheampong said that you should work
So that life becomes comfortable for you.
Sitting under trees is no longer the order of the day.
You work Kabore says that you farm
So that you eat to satisfaction
Plentiful laziness is no longer acceptable
Siesta is now extinct
Acheampong emphatically said no to it.
One day we were assigned a public work
It was a communal labor
We all flocked on the work
We were working very hard

But my brother worked so weak.
It was as if he were a newly pregnant woman
A lazy man's sweat is never dirty.
My brother sweated but the sweat was crystal clear.
The elongated has topped the elongated
Suddenly the elongatedly he raised his head up
Peeping into the sun and not working down
And using the blunt edge of a cutlass to cut a tree

The above is a song of indirect insult (related to halo, but not a halo song) at a particular lazy man, composed by Ahiakpote and translated by Dale Massiasta.

Poem 4.

Those of you who think halo is dead,
Come and bring your thorn mats.

hails from Wheta.

Her mother is from Atiavito.
X~ thought halo was a big penis
which she could use to fuck,
but halo was too much for her
so she fled to a life of prostitution.

Poem 5.

Who fucked XXX
On a bed?

Criminal XXX

XXX refused to bathe
Dirty skin
Head full of lice,
Pubic hair heavily infested with lice.
Let me make things clear for you.
Criminal XXX (opening refrain)

Poems 4 and 5 are kinka songs from Abor. Translated by Dale Massiasta.

Poem 6. To Stanislaus the Renegade

This is addressed to you, Stanislaus, wherever you are. Listen you punk, the last time we met you were selling faulty guns in Addis I heard you panting afterwards in a Cairo whorehouse Before I knew you split with my spring overcoat a cashmere job I danced for in a bar in Kabul. I heard you were peddling fake jewelry to Pueblo Indians and Washington hippies. The jail you occupied in Poonaville, Tennessee was burnt down after you escaped; they could not eradicate the smell. Verna wrote the other day, you remember Verna, the lean assed girl whose rent money you stole in Detroit, she wrote to say you are still running around in her underpants. What is this I hear about you preparing to settle in the Congo to grow hashish in the valley of Zaire? I will be waiting for you; for every gun you buy I shall command a thousand assegais, for every sword a million Ashanti machetes and Masai spears I am not afraid of you any more. Those days are past when you stole my school fees and my catapult and fled into the cove beyond bird island. I too came of age.

Poem 7. To Felicity, A Girl I met in L.A.

Felicity you are fat,
You are stuffed with hogs and sheep
Who now grunt and bleat in your large bosom,
Rolling hills without entrance or exit.
Felicity, I hear you've hlearnt a new laughter
Since we last met - a shrill low moan
Interlarded with wheezing jerks of fat flowing in valleys
Go to a farm, lose weight, Felicity Fat freezes the seminal fluid of giants
Congeals the heart-warming desire to braves and stalwarts
And hides the entrance to kingdoms of joy.
Besides, Felicity, it is not good for your heart. P.S.:
Have you learnt to wash your girdles?

The above are two poems by Kofi Awoonor that can be considered modern adaptations of halo. Taken from Ride Me Memory, pgs. 20 and 23.

Informants

The following interviews were conducted under the understanding that they would be used strictly for the purpose of research and education. This is a topic that, under different circumstances, would not be openly discussed.

Informants are listed in chronological order.

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- Methodology
- ^{vi} Mawuli Adjei. interview 25 APR 02
- ^{vii} 2 Mawuli Adjei. interview 14 APR 02
- Description of Halo
- ^{viii} Avorgbedor, 85.
- ^{ix} 2 Avorgbedor, 84.
- ^x 3 Togbi Addo VIII, int. 3 MAY 02
- ^{xi} 4 Avorgbedor, 84.
- ^{xii} 5 Massiasta, int. 15 APR 02
- ^{xiii} 6 Massiasta, personal document.
- ^{xiv} 7 Azasu, int. 30 APR 02
- ^{xv} 8 Zingalo, int. 17 APR 02
- ^{xvi} 9 Massiasta, int. 16 APR 02
- ^{xvii} 10 Anyidoho, Kofi Awoonor and the Ewe Tradition of Songs of Abuse. pp. 92.
- ^{xviii} 11 Massiasta int. 16 APR 02
- ^{xix} 12 Doe Ifia Agbowugbe, int. 5 MAY 02
- ^{xx} 13 Ahadzi, int. 20 APR 02
- ^{xxi} 14 Anyidoho, Abuse. pp. 91.

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- xxii 15 Azasu, int. 30 APR 02
- xxiii 16 Ahadzi, int. 20 APR02
- xxiv 17 Dzigba, int. 17 APR 02
- xxv 18 Massiasta, int. 19 APR 02
- xxvi 19 Massiasta, int. 19 APR 02
- xxvii 20 Massiasta, int. 16 APR 02
- xxviii 22 Adjei, int. 14 APR 02
- xxix 23 Akpabla, int 5 MAY 02 34
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- xxxiv 28 Massiasta, int. 16 APR 02
- xxxv 29 Azasu, int. 30 MAY 02
- xxxvi 30 Dekakpui, int. 23 APR 02
- xxxvii 31 Massiasta, int. 16 APR 02
- xxxviii 32 Massiasta, int. 15 APR 02
- xxxix 33 Addo VIII, int 3 MAY 02
- xl 34 Massiasta, int 4 MAY 02
Features of Halo . . .
- xli 1 Anyidoho, int. 4 APR 02
- xlii 2 Makumator, int. 4 MAY 02
- xliii 3 Massiasta, int. 3 MAY 02

xliv 4 SIT Ghana, Arts and Culture Spring 2002 Syllabus, pp. 11.

xliv 5 SIT Syllabus, pp. 11.

xlvi 6 Addo VIII, int. 3 MAY 02

xlvii 7 Massiasta, int. 16 APR 02

xlviii 8 Addo VIII, int. 3 MAY 02

xlix 9 Addo VIII, int. 3 May 02

^l 10 Ofori, int. 26 APR 02

^{li} 11 Massiasta, int. 5 MAY 02

^{lii} 12 Addo VIII, int. 3 MAY 02

^{liii} 13 Addo VIII, int. 3 MAY 02

^{liv} 14 Adede, per. corresp. 23 APR 02

^{lv} 15 Massiasta, int. 17 APR 02

^{lvi} 16 Addo VIII, int. 3 MAY 02

Positive and Negative Aspects

^{lvii} 1 Anyidoho, int. 4 APR 02

^{lviii} 2 Massiasta, int. 30 MAR 02

^{lix} 3 Avorgbedor, pp. 87.

^{lx} 4 Avorgbedor, pp.87.

^{lxi} 5 Avorgbedor, pp. 87.

^{lxii} 6 Avorgbedor, pp- 87

^{lxiii} 7 Merriam, pp- 194

^{lxiv} 8 Massiasta, int. 3 MAY 02

^{lxv} 9 Azasu, int. 30 APR 02

^{lxvi} 10 Avorgbedor, pp. 85.

^{lxvii} 11 Ofori, int. 26 APR 02

^{lxviii} 12 Fiadu, int. 3 MAY 02

^{lxix} Halo and insult in Modern Anlo Ewe Tradition
1 Massiasta, int. 20 APR 02

lxx

lxxi

lxxii

lxxiii