

## Sufi Sounds, volume four

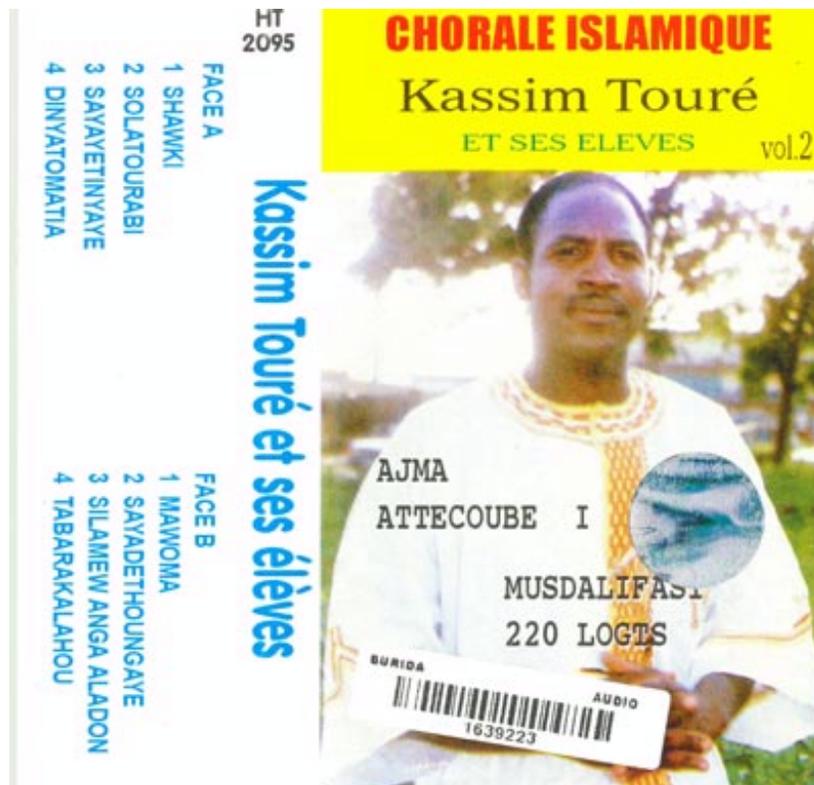
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Related Categories: Cote D'Ivoire

This fourth, and for now, final, installment of African Islamic music features recordings from the Cote D'Ivoire, Benin and Nigeria. (I think I will wait until next year to present the Islamic recordings we have in our collection from Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Niger, Northern Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Egypt. My original plan to highlight selections from all of our recordings by the end of the month of Ramadan was too ambitious!) One of the most enlightening aspects of going through all of the recordings that I've featured over the last month has been realizing the ways in which these different Islamic musics interact with other traditional and modern musical genres, both national and regional. Similar dynamics have shaped the Islamic singing of the Cote D'Ivoire.

The Cote D'Ivoire is perhaps the most ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse country in Francophone West Africa. Drawn by the swath of cocoa plantations that cut across central Cote D'Ivoire (the Cote D'Ivoire is the world's largest producer and exporter of cocoa), large numbers of labor migrants from Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, and Liberia have settled in the country over the last five decades. The port of Abidjan, up until the late 1990s, was one of the busiest in West Africa, and drew laborers and sailors from all along Africa's Western coast. Long the economic center of Francophone Africa, Abidjan was also, before the civil war, home to large Moroccan, Lebanese, and French communities. Throughout the golden years of the Ivoirian economic boom (the 1970s and 1980s) the state of the art recording studios and many nightclubs of Abidjan attracted musicians from Togo, Benin, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Guinea, Cameroon, Gabon and both Congos.

The last five decades have seen a dramatic spread of Islam in the Cote D'Ivoire. Up until Ivoirian independence in 1960, Islam was a minority faith, limited largely to the smaller cities and farming villages of the country's Northern Savanna regions. Today, Islam is the religion of almost forty percent of Ivoirians, with the largest number living in the South, especially in greater Abidjan. Probably because of their longtime minority status, and the country's religious diversity, Ivoirian Muslims tend to downplay the differences between denominations (Sunni, Shi'a) and Sufi brotherhoods, and emphasize the unity of all Muslims. At the same time, the decades of cohabitation with Christian communities (both Catholic and Protestant) has influenced Ivoirian Muslims in unique and interesting ways.



Kassim Touré was the first Ivoirian singer to start his own Islamic Choir. He was born, in the 1950s, in the Southeastern city of Aboisso, into a family from the Northwestern town of Odiene. After finishing his primary schooling he continued his university and religious education in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Ghana, simultaneously studying Islamic history and the Koran. Of particular importance to him were his years of study in Mali; he studied with the renowned Islamic scholar Sada Touré in Ségou, and with the singers Racine Sall and Cheikhna Diawara in Bamako. Mr. Touré told me that he was a member of a Sufi brotherhood, but that it did not matter which one. 'What is important', he told me, 'is that I am a Muslim'. In 1979 he returned to the Aboisso region and started to teach, eventually opening 'L'Ecole Confessionnel de Kossikro', a Franco-Arabic school that teaches both the national public school curriculum, and Koranic studies.

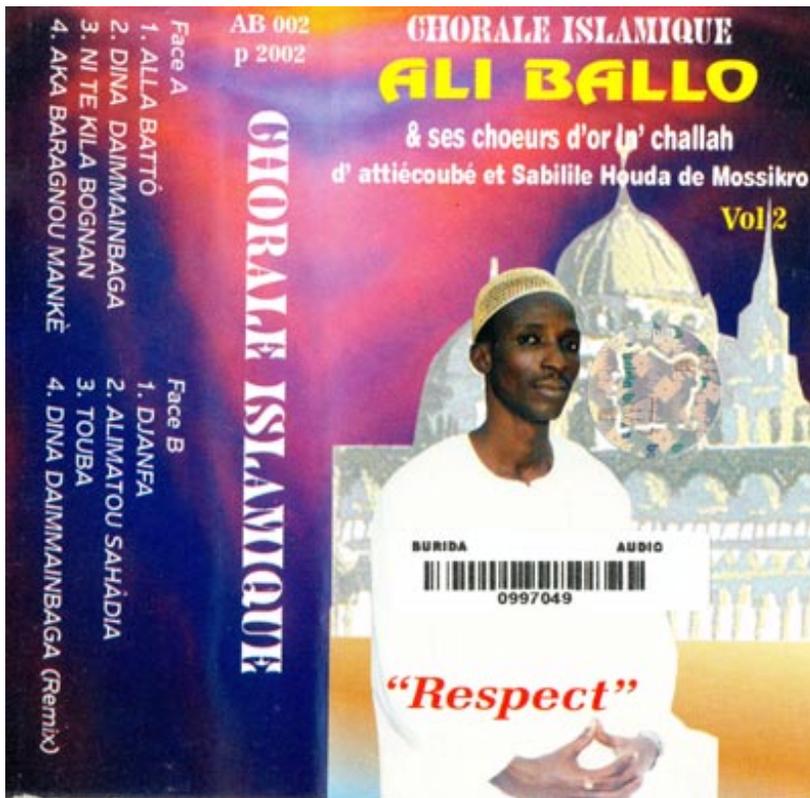
↳ [Kassim Touré et ses Eleves 'Shawki'](#)

Several years later he organized and trained a group of his students to accompany his performances of the Islamic songs that he had composed. (It is highly probably that the idea of organizing school children into a religious choir is one, of the many, that Ivoirian Muslims borrowed from their Christian neighbors. Many of the organizing bodies and institutions of Ivoirian Muslims were inspired by the structures of the Catholic Church). After what he described to me as some very difficult and discouraging years, his choir finally started to get some attention in 1984/1985 when they started to make regular appearances on 'Allahu Akbar', an Islamic television program hosted by Souleymane Doumbia.

His growing popularity led him to a recording studio, when a pharmacist from the Southeastern Bassam region, named Mrs. Ballo Fatou funded sessions at the famed JBZ studio. Today, Kassim Touré has released six cassettes, and his preparing two more. His songs, in both Djula and French, are mainstays of Islamic radio programming throughout the Cote D'Ivoire, Burkina Faso (especially in Bobo Dioulasso), and in Mali. He continues to receive invitations to perform at religious ceremonies throughout the Cote D'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea. When I recently spoke to Mr. Touré he was in Gurdaspur, Punjab State, northern India, continuing his research into Islamic history and music.

#### ↳ [Kassim Touré et ses Eleves 'Sayadethoungaye'](#)

One of the many singers that Kassim Touré inspired was Ali Ballo. He was born in Abidjan, in 1971, into a family from Tingrela (in the far North close to the Malian border). Ali Ballo grew up in Abidjan and started singing during his early years of Koranic school. He started his own choir in 1988, organizing his fellow students at a Koranic school in the Abidjan suburb of Attiecoubé. Today, Ali Ballo is the director of the school and leads a choir of several hundred girls.

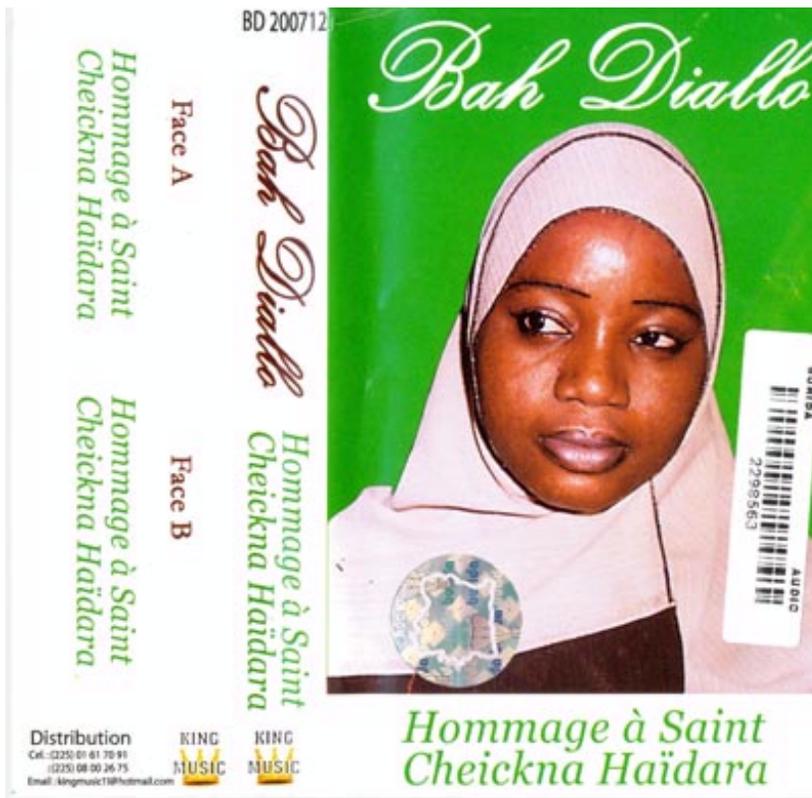


Mr. Ballo told me that he started the choir after seeing how many people were drawn to Christian churches by their choirs and liturgical music. He said, 'I realized that sermons were not enough to draw the faithful, we needed to pull them in with music'. Ali Ballo and his choir have released two cassettes, and he is currently working on a third. He continues to perform throughout the Cote D'Ivoire.

#### ↳ [Chorale Islamique Ali Ballo 'Djanfa'](#)

#### ↳ [Chorale Islamique Ali Ballo 'Dina Daimmainbaga \(remix\)'](#)

The young singer Bah Diallo currently lives in Abidjan. She was born Aicha Koumah in Segou, Mali in 1977, and took the name 'Bah Diallo' to honor the mother of the Tijani Sufi master 'Cheickna Haïdara Ham'allah'. This is her first cassette.



↪ [Bah Diallo 'Hommage a Saint Cheickhna Haidara \(excerpt\)'](#)

I particularly love these next two tracks. They are excerpts from a longer Yoruba-language religious program that was broadcast on Gulf Fm in Cotonou, Benin during Ramadan 2005. I heard the program one night in my hotel room and was knocked out by the warmth of these voices and the melodies. The next day I went to the radio station and they burned me a copy of the program. Unfortunately, the program manager wasn't able to identify the singers, and I haven't had any luck since.

↪ [Gulf FM, Cotonou, Benin track 1](#)

↪ [Gulf FM, Cotonou, Benin track 2](#)

This final track features the Nigerian singer Sheidat Fatimoh. She belongs to the Tijaniyya brotherhood, and I think is from Kwara State. This music is very similar to Fuji, which has deep roots in Yoruba Muslim music.



In this next track Sheidat Fatimoh praises the Senegalese marabout Cheikh Ibrahim Niasse from Kaolack, Senegal. (Cheikh Ibrahim Niasse passed away in 1975.) The Niasse 'house' of the Tijanniya has followers throughout all of West Africa.

↪ [Sheidat Fatimoh 'Sheu Ibrahim Niyas'](#)

This post is based on interviews with Kassim Touré, Ali Ballo, and Doumbia Issiaka. I also drew on the research of Marie Miran on Islam in the Cote D'Ivoire.

