Society of Young Nigerian Writers

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**Bori religion**

**Bori** is a traditional animistic religion of the Hausa people of West Africa which involves spiritual possession.

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**Terminology**

*Bò̀rì* is a Hausa noun, meaning the spiritual force which resides in physical things, and is related to the word for local distilled alcohol (*borassa*) as well the practice of medicine (*boka*).[1]

The Bori religion is both an institution to control these forces, and the performance of an "adoricism" (as opposed to exorcism) ritual, dance and music by which these spirits are controlled and by which illness is healed.[2]
Pre-Muslim Hausaland

An aspect of the traditional Maguzawa Hausa religious traditions, Bori became a state religion led by ruling class priestesses amongst some of the late pre-colonial Hausa States. Islam, present in Hausaland since the 14th century, was largely restricted to the region's rulers and their courts at the beginning of the 19th century. Rural areas generally retained their animist beliefs and their urban leaders thus drew on both Islamic and African traditions to legitimise their rule: the Bori spirit possession priestesses were one such mechanism. Priestesses communed with spirits through ecstatic dance ritual, hoping to guide and maintain the state's ruling houses. A corps of Bori priestesses and their helpers was led by royal priestess, titled the "Inna", or "Mother of us all".[3] The Inna oversaw this network, which was not only responsible for protecting society from malevolent forces through possession dances, but which provided healing and divination throughout the kingdom.

Post-Islamic and contemporary practice

Muslim scholars of the early nineteenth century disapproved of the hybrid religion practised in royal courts, and a desire for reform was a major motive behind the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate.[4] With the birth of the Caliphate, Bori practices were suppressed, and later outlawed by the British. Bori possession rituals survived in the Hausa refugee states such as Konni and Dogondutchi (in what is today southern Niger) and in some rural areas of Nigerian Hausaland. The powerful advisory roles of women, exemplified in the Bori priestesses, either disappeared or were transferred to Muslim women in scholarly, educational, and community leadership roles. British and French colonialism, though, offered little space for women in the official hierarchies
of indirect rule, and the formal roles, like the Bori, for women in governance largely disappeared by the mid 20th century.\[^5\]

In modern Muslim Hausaland, Bori ritual survives in some places assimilated into syncretic practices. The pre-Muslim "babbaku" spirits of the Maguzaci have been added to over time with “Muslim” spirits ("farfaru"), and spirits of (or representing) other ethnic groups, even those of the European colonialists. The healing and "luck" aspects of Bori members performances, almost entirely women, give new social roles for their rituals and practitioners.\[^6\] Bori ritual societies, separated from governing structures, provide a powerful corporate identity for the women who belong to them through the practice of traditional healing, as well as through the performance of Bori festival like the girka initiation ritual.\[^7\]

References

2. ^ Lewis, Al-Safi, Hurreiz (1991)
4. ^ Robinson, David, Muslim Societies in African History (Cambridge, 2004), p141
5. ^ See Bergstrom (2002)'s discussion of this, particularly under the Zinder caliphate in Niger.
[edit] Sources

