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Spirituality, Power, and Feminism: Historical Narratives of Bori Practice among the Women in Sabon Birni District of Sokoto State

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Abstract

From time immemorial, human beings and humanity in general have been guided by intangible spiritual and supernatural forces. This is mainly through religious associations. Indeed, any type of religion usually comes along with distinct ideological beliefs. These beliefs guide its followers along the distinct religious practices, as well as the social, economic and political lives they should practice. These religious beliefs and practices as they satisfy the needs of their believers in many facets of life, forms intangible dimensions of reality. They, therefore, form an integral part of human history because their influences on historical processes are extremely profound. The people inhabiting sizable portions of the defunct Gobir Kingdom in particular and Hausaland in general are not left behind in this sense. This is because; they have their own distinct traditional religious beliefs and practices, mainly based on the belief in, and the worship of *Iskoki* (spirits). One of the major ideologies and practices in this respect is the *Bori* practice (that of Spirit Possession). This paper has examined Bori practice which is a female domain among the Gobirawa, led by a female priestess called *Inna*, who was both spiritually and politically influential in the defunct Gobir Kingdom. The paper also discussed the persistence,

continuities and changes in the practice of *Bori* among the Gobirawa women in Sabon Birnin Gobir as affected by the introduction of Islam, the 1804 Jihad, and more contemporaneously, the infusion of modernity

Key words: Gobir, Women, Bori, Religion and Politics

Introduction

One of the most ancient religious beliefs and practices with strong admixture of cultural heritage that is common to the Hausa people is the *Bori* practice. However, the Hausa people do not basically see themselves generally as Hausa; rather there are Hausa sub-groups as subtly demarcated by the defunct Hausa kingdoms, and each define itself and been referred to by its counterparts by the specific version of the dialect of Hausa language that its people speak. For instance, the people of the defunct Katsina Kingdom define themselves as *Katsinawa*; those of Kabi Kingdom- *Kabawa*; Kano Kingdom- *Kanawa*, and Gobir Kingdom- *Gobirawa* among others. Therefore, although there were key cultural unifying factors that cut across all these Hausa subgroups, as the case is, say, in the language spoken generally, the practice of *Bori* and the dominance of women in such practice as well as the general belief in *Iskoki*, there are subtle and in some cases clear differences in various aspects, such as tribal marks, the language dialects and even the kind of importance and political relevance given to some cultural and spiritual practices, *Bori* inclusive.

In essence, the focus here is on the practice of *Bori*, specifically among the Gobirawa Women in the current Sabon Birni District of Sokoto State. It should, however, be noted that the Gobirawa women and men in Sabon Birni did not originate in the present geographical expanse they occupy. Their ancestors lived in the defunct Gobir Kingdom and were forced to resettle variously in different geographical locations up to their present location in Sabon Birni by different human and natural factors such as the famous 1804 Sokoto Jihad and flood etc. Therefore, concise discussions will be made on the historical processes and changes from the defunct Gobir Kingdom down to Sabon Birni. Then, we will move further to discuss the social (not necessarily the nitty-gritty of spiritual) role of women in *Bori* practice, enumerating clearly, the role of *Inna* and *Sarauniya* among other important politically and spiritually influential women among the Gobir people. Then, the persistence, continuities and changes in the practice of *Bori* among Gobirawa women will be discussed especially as affected by the introduction of Islam, the 1804 Sokoto Jihad, the Izala movement and more contemporaneously, the infusion of modernity. Before moving further in doing so, however, attempt will be made to discuss what really *Bori* in a general sense.

What is *Bori*?

The meaning of *Bori* in its literal and cultural (practical) contexts is still open to debates among scholars. This is more so because of the unavoidable subjective nature of the various people including the researchers, the *bori* adepts themselves as well the general public who at various instances attempted to define *bori*. Everybody perceives *bori* from a different angle inherent from their personal ideological inclination, educational levels as well as personal experiences with regards to it. Indeed, for this reason, the attempt here will not be on going into detailed discussions and explanations on the literal, technical and cultural meanings of *bori* among the Hausa people, which is of course out of the scope of this paper. Rather, the views some scholars on the definition of *bori* will be presented and an appraisal will be made for clarity purpose.

With respect to the literal meaning of *bori*, one of the most comprehensive explanations was presented by Bunza (2015). He posits that the word *bori* was probably founded from the Hausa words of *Bore*, *Borewa* (all- meaning perversity or rebellion), *Bori* (as in the case of boiling over of contents of pot), *Bororo* (relating to blister), *Bobbowa*, *Bobbotai*, *Bobboce* or *Boce*, (all meaning the natural cries of wild animals when gamboling or when wounded; of a horse when roused by nearness of rival; or of a camel in which it roar and produce foam from its mouth when being loaded). It is an abstract noun and from its etymological study, Bunza (2015) has proposed that the word is indigenous to Hausa language. In saying the word, it includes grammatical gender for instance *Dan bori* is Masculine singular, *Yar bori* feminine singular and *Masu Bori* or *Yan bori*, is unisex plural. *Bori* was looked at through the lenses of idioms, adages, and its day to day usage by various groups of people in the Hausa societies including musicians, to come out with its nature and *raison d'être*, at the end of which it was defined as:

A special form of social gathering, which brought together (adult) males and females with the acts of drumming, dancing, and singing. The drumming is said to be played for *Iskoki* (spirits) and for that some refreshments were prepared and kept for them at the scene. Nobody participates in this social gathering except those trusted people who were initiated into it (through the initiation rite) *Girka*. It is from this social gathering that provision of medication through the usage of spirits emanated. From this understanding of the *bori*, its practitioners are deranged especially because they were being possessed by spirit (Bunza, 2015).

Coming down to its meaning in terms of cultural practice, *bori* is perceived differently by different people. Some locates *bori* as part and parcel of Maguzanci as it includes sorcery (Danfulani, 1999). To many others, *bori* is a female domain which was founded and dominated by women to fight for their rights and contribute also to the development of their societies (Bawa, 2011). Some see it as a traditional drama play in imitation of *Iskoki*. To some, it is not more than a religion on its own because the kind of devotion in it is equal to that obtainable in any religion. Some people see *bori* as *Bokanci* (magic) because it is the spirit-inclined people who provide medications that mainly benefit from it. To many others, *bori* is simply an entertainment play that is carried out at special occasions. While others hold that it is a relationship developed between people and spirits for the purpose of helping one another (Bunza, 2015).

However, if one takes a close look at all of these views, it will be found out that *bori* is more of the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Hausa people, which were indigenous to them as it was believed that they are as old as the emergence of the earliest rudiments of state formation in Hausaland (Bawa, 2011). When closely examined, the indigenous Hausa worldview of religion, which “involves the belief in a high and distant god not actively linked with the daily life struggle of men, but rather with an array of mediating super natural forces which are directly in touch with mankind and controlling its destiny”(Yandaki, 1990), it will be find out that the underlying principles and meaning of *bori* as opposed to its apparent manifestation in all the above given views about it have been unitively and dynamically summed up to be part and parcel of the traditional religious beliefs and practices. This is more so when it is clearly understood, the broad-spectrum meaning of religion (as the belief in and worship of a supernatural controlling power, especially a god or gods), and that “the high god of the Hausa people was *Ubangiji*, the nearer spirits, *Iskoki*, the maintenance of correct relations with which was considered a ritual rite. Thus, communion with the spirits was done partly

through sacrificial procedures by family heads and also by this possession termed *bori*” (Yandaki, 1990).

Explanations and lore on *bori* abound, different paraphernalia have been identified to be used in its practice. Different types of it have been identified and its practitioners or adepts, themselves, have been perceived differently by various people. For instance, in the contemporary times, while most of the researchers label them as members of spirit possession cult, and many others in the Muslim dominant societies sees them as pagans and polytheists, the *bori* practitioners perceive themselves differently (Andersson, 2002). To them, if they have anything to do with a grouping, it is not more than an organization of which they do not believe themselves to be in possession of any secret in relation to the society. They constantly stressed that they did not choose *bori*, rather it is the *Iskoki* (spirits) that choose them through illness. And generally speaking, *bori* practitioners constantly refer to Allah in their conversations and they all describe themselves as good Muslims (Andersson, 2002). Whatever the case, this does not only indicate the kind of influence Islam came to have on *bori* as will be discussed later, but also the type of situation many Hausa people found themselves in- having to practice Islam which they mostly inherit at birth, which also dominate their societies, while being ultimately unable to abandon *bori*, certainly due to the benefits they derive from it.

Having concisely seen what *bori* is an attempt will now be taken to bring out the origin of the Gobirawa people of Sabon Birni Local Government Area, especially the women folk among them. This leads us into the next section of the paper.

The Gobir People

The origin of the Gobirawa people like that of the meaning of *bori* is still much open to debate among scholars. It is not the aim here to go seriously into the debates as exegeses on such debates have been fairly conducted by various scholars such as Augi (2011) and Maikassoua (2012) among others. Rather, attempts will only be made to present the major among the debates and take an appraisal. Indeed, the tradition of origin of the Gobirawa as presented by the Oral Traditions which was utilized by the earliest writers on Gobir such as Urvoy (1936) the views of whom impacted many subsequent writers such as Nicholas (1979) and Nadama (1977) could be conveniently situated within the jacket of “Hamitic Hypothesis”. This is more so because as he presented the history of Gobir based on Oral Traditions, Urvoy (1936) began with purporting that the Gobirawa were Hausa Speaking people who originally occupied the region of Azbin (Air), which is situated north to the Rima Basin. However, as some oral traditions suggested that the Gobirawa are from Egypt, Urvoy (1936) came up with the view that the Gobirawa were originally of a mixed race made up of black and white populations settled in Azbin and they eventually became assimilated into that group. This view portrayed the Gobirawa as predominantly migrants who from Azbin migrated southwards around the eleventh and twelfth centuries to settle in the region of the Gulbin Kaba, a place where they also vacated and expand southwards in the direction of the town of Kornaka and establish their second kingdom in Birnin Lalle. Then from the thirteenth century, they continued to expand, and this expansion became stabilized in the 1400 AD but resumed in the seventeenth century. This time around, Urvoy explained that Gobir specifically occupied Kwanni in the west, parts of Kabi and Zamfara and again southwards as far as Katsina (Urvoy, 1936 paraphrased by Augi, 2011).

In similar vein, there is the Daura version of their origin as associated with the *Bayajidda* legend which claims to explain the origin of the Hausa Bakwai, among which Gobir is part and parcel.

This as explained by Maikassoua, is well known as has been discussed in various literatures and with regards to its authenticity Smith has provide a thorough examination (Maikassoua, 2012). Therefore, there is no need to waste much time on it here. At our disposal, the most comprehensive attempt to provide the origin of the Gobir people was that provided by Augi (2011). He believed that the explanation on who the Gobirawa are will only be clearly understood by first understanding their land, that is the geographical expanse of *Kasar Gobir* (Gobir Land). Augi (2011) defined the territorial extent of *Kasar Gobir* to have stretched roughly “from the valley of Tarka in the north to the Gulbin Maradi in the South, in the west it shares border with Kasar Adar at the Valley of Ma (Rafin Majiya) whereas in the east it extended a little southward of the present town of Tsibiri (Tibiri) and the region of Tessawa (Tessaoua) in the Republic of Niger”. But according to him, due to varying historical fortunes the rulers of Gobir in the eighteenth century were able to push the borders of this territory southwards into the regions controlled by Zamfara.

Thus, by this, the region as defined above, which became Gobir should be the area associated with the formation of Gobirawa because by focusing on the region it will be easier to clearly discern the various processes which produced the various dimensions of the history of the area including the evolution of the Gobirawa and the Gobir State or more specifically the *Sarautar Gobir* (Gobir Royalty) (Augi, 2011). Thus, after extensive study of the ancient local population and settings of the area (including the Mazuzawa, Gurnarawa, and Nayawa), as well as its geography, with references to the writings of Grebenert (1979) and Echard (1975), who established the probabilities of the existence of people in the above defined region since the Stone Age era, Augi (2011) suggested that:

The processes which were associated with the evolution of man possibly from stone age period in this region leading to the formation of Mazuzawa, Gurnarawa, etc. and even those who might have immigrated from Azbin or the Middle East have to be perceived as part of the long and unbroken chain of history which eventually produced the *Kasar Gobir* and the Gobirawa as distinct from other *kasashe* and their communities around. This was not simply produced by the immigrants from Azbin or Middle East and it is therefore necessary for us to consider all the possible factors associated with this development.

Thus, whatever the origin of the Gobirawa, it is established that they were once settled at Birnin Lalle, a site north of the valley of the Gulbin Kaba (about 12 Kilometres from the present settlement of Dakoro in the Niger Republic.) (Augi, 2011). From there they moved to Gulbin Maradi Valley area and later to Alkalawa on the Gulbin Rima region. It was at Alkalawa that Gobir reached its peak of power in the 18th century. Alkalawa was then disintegrated by the Jihadist in the 19th century and this led to the dispersal of the Gobirawa to different places. They settled in many places, for example, they settled first in Birnin Kadaye, secondly to Gawon Bazau and some left to Tsibiri (now in Niger Republic), while some under the leadership of Yariman Gobir Dan Halima founded the Sabon Birnin Dan Halima near River Bunsuru in 1853 (Maikano, 2012). Later, around 1939/40, they relocated to the present Sabon Birni after flood from River Bunsuru destroyed the old Sabon Birnin Dan Halima (Gobir, 2018).

As a result of colonial intrusion and artificial border demarcation, Sabon Birni Sabon Birni came under Nigeria, and more specifically, the Sokoto Province and from 1976, under the Sokoto State. Today, it is a Local Government Area under Sokoto State in the federal republic

of Nigeria. It is located about one hundred and thirty kilometers North-East of Sokoto town, shares a border with the Republic of Niger to the North, in the west by Goronyo, and Gada in the North-west, in the South-east bounded by Isah Local Government (Maikano, 2012). Thus, by Gobirawa Women of Sabon Birni Local Government, we are referring to those female folks, of Gobir origin as discussed above that lived or are living in the geographical expanse defined as Sabon Birni above.

Bori Practice among the Gobirawa Women: History, Changes, Persistence and Continuity

The origin of the practice of *bori* among the Gobirawa as in other Hausa people, contrary to the proposition of Echard (1989) who believed that it was a recent development, it is after all not. It predated the introduction of Islam among the Gobirawa and have since time immemorial been helping the Gobir people, especially those who deeply believed in it, in different facet of their lives. Of course, *bori* since its inception among the Gobirwa people have been purported to be basically the domain of women. This is unconnected with the image *bori* present of an institutional area in which male-female social relationships are egalitarian (Echard, 1991), as opposed to the wider society which was patriarchic in nature and male-dominated. Thus, even after the introduction of Islam to the Gobirawa in the 14th century (Bawa, 2015), instead of its outright eradication as it means polytheism to many Muslims, *bori* persisted but taking a new shape, that of the rise of new Muslim spirits such as *Al-haj* (the pilgrim), *Al-Majir* the disciple, and the *Wazir* (Veziar) etc.(Abdallah, 1989) in addition to the already existing pagan types such as *Doguwa*, *Magajiyar Magajiya*, and *Asarkin Ajiya* etc.(Yandaki, 1990).

More specific to the Gobirawa, was the political relevance given to *bori* and the participation of women in it, especially with the presence of the office and institution of *Inna*. Starting with the *Inna*, according to various sources, the *Inna* of Gobir Kingdom was the second most important person Sarkin Gobir. To show the great importance attached to *Inna* and the activities she carried out both spiritual (with respect to *bori*) and political, it may amuse people to know that she was a woman chosen from the royal lineage, more precisely the King's sister or his daughter (Bawa, 2015), (Yar Inna, 2018). She is also a *bori* initiate (even though she hardly performs *bori*) and she has the overall control of all the Gobirawa women and more precisely the *bori* adepts in the kingdom. She is considered superior in healing and divination all over the Gobir Kingdom (Bawa, 2015). Indeed, the *Inna* was described as:

A very commanding figure, her booked feet were not allowed to touch ground; mats were laid for her to walk on. She was very intelligent and took care of widows and orphans. She was relaxed and pleasant except when circumstances demanded that she behave otherwise. She was generous and distributed body fairly; she never betrayed any trust placed in her and stood by her kinsfolk (Bawa, 2015).

It is obvious that most of the *Innas* over the years were of the above described characters because of the criteria used in their appointment- they must be from the royal family, they must be patient, generous, just and most importantly, trustworthy and all-accommodating (Yar Inna, 2018). The *Inna* also goes out for *rangadi* (local tour) just like the *Sarki*, acted as a regent if she stayed in the capital in the absence of the King, and even go to battle fields on occasions (Bawa, 2015). Thus, under the supervision of *Inna*, *bori* continued to be practiced considerably among the Gobir people up to the 19th century. The 19th century served as a turning point in the history of not only Gobir kingdom, but Hausaland in general as it witnessed the 1804 Jihad

Movement. This gave rise to profound political, social, demographic, cultural, religious, economic and intellectual changes. In essence, this movement condemned *bori* practice as unreligious devil possession.

However, *bori* became even more important to Gobir refugee women who came under the Caliphate through conquest. The women needed healing and rejuvenation to enable them to cope with the realities of their new situation. Some of them suffered physical and psychological illnesses as they grapple with loneliness, disorientation and personal loss (Mary, 2011).

Bori, therefore, despite being suppressed by the Jihadists and later discouraged by the Colonialists, especially as they started spreading the western imperial idea of modernity as opposed to continuing indigenous acculturation, it still persisted especially in the refugee Hausa states of Konni, Dogonduchi, Tsibiri (all today located in Niger Republic) and Sabon Birni. Meanwhile, immediately after the successful execution of the Jihad before the coming of the Europeans, the roles of women as exemplified by the *bori* priestesses such as *Inna*, in some cases disappeared and in others, were transferred to Muslim women in scholarly and educational leadership roles and not in politics.

But more specific to the Sabon Birni Local government area, *bori* continued to be practiced very openly and freely despite the dominance of Islam in the area. In fact, the office of *Inna* was upheld in addition to other political offices held by the *Sarauniya* was answerable to *Inna* (Gwamma, 2018). For Instance, by 1939/1940, when the people of Gobirawa people migrated from the old Sabon Birni Dan Halima to the current location of Sabon Birni as explained above, one of the first buildings to be erected, after the House of *Sarkin Gobir* of Sabon Birni, was the House of *Inna*. According to the available oral sources, during the time of the migration, the reigning *Inna* was *Inna* Kilo, a Sister to the then *Sarkin Gobir* Umaru Shawai (1920-1948) (Gobir, 2018). Then in the late 1940s, due to political reasons, *Inna* Kilo was deposed and replaced with *Inna* Bahillata, a sister to *Sarkin Gobir* Salihui (1948-1962) who was given the house of the *Inna*, who also reigned up to 1969. *Inna* Bahillata was succeeded by *Inna* Ta Allah who reigned from 1970 to 1974 and she was succeeded by *Inna* Atumbulla who was the last of the *Innas* that reigned from 1974 to 2003 (Bawa, 2015). Apart from *Inna* Atumbulla no other *Inna* was appointed.

Meanwhile, during the successive reigns of the various *Innas* from *Inna* Bahillata to the last *Inna*, *Inna* Atumbulla, an Islamic movement eventually emerged in Northern Nigeria by the year 1980, under the banner of *Izalatul Bidi'ah wa Iqamatul Sunnah* (movement for the eradication of innovations and institutionalization of the *Sunna*). This movement, which was principally emerged as an antithesis to the *Sufi Tariqah*, which it dismissed as practicing shirk (polytheism) or *Bidiah* (innovations), soon spread to most of the towns and cities in Northern Nigeria (Yandaki, 1990). However, this movement did not have any profound impact on the practice of *Bori* among the Gobirawa Women in Sabon Birni until in the late 1990s down to 2003 when the last *Inna* died.

This period also coincided with the period of *Shari'ah* rule in Zamfara as well as the presence of a Local Government Chairman who was reportedly said to have been an Izala adept. This local government chairman who was said to be a great grandson to the aforementioned *Inna* Kilo demanded that he and his relatives should be given the official house of the *Inna* because they are the inheritors of that house. The house was handed over to them and the official house of *Inna* was destroyed, and in its stead, he (the Chairman) and his other relatives develop their

own personal houses at the place. Also, the *Sarkin Gobir* of that time, Alhaji Muhammadu Bawa 1975-2004, as well as his successor, Alhaji Abdulhamid Balarabe Salihu (2004-2018), firmly embedded with their Islamic traditions saw no need of the appointment of a new *Inna*. With the growing population of *Yanboko* (people trained in Western education) in the area, as well as Izala adepts, the *bori* adepts were being molested and condemned not only as prevaricators but also outdated and conservative unreligious devil possessors. Therefore, while the government and the traditional leaders did not out-rightly ban the practice of *bori* in Sabon Birni, their actions, coupled with the dominance of Islam and the spread of modernity did so (Gobir, 2018).

In response, most of the *bori* adepts in Sabon Birni, today moves into Tsibiri to perform their activities and come back home, especially during festivals. They also since 2003, continued to persuade the royal house to bring back the institution of *Inna* to them. These people, especially the women folk among them, today have been estimated by a *bori* adept in Sabon Birni called A'I diyar Inna (who was brought up under the custody of Inna Atumbulla), to be more than two thousand in number, even though today quite a number of the initiates do not open it out to the larger society apart from their fellows. Also, being them Muslims, quite a number of them tends to be adherent of *Tariqah* brotherhoods as it has less hostile tendencies towards them (Idi, 2018), (Yarbaka, 2018). But a question to be considered here is that- Why did these people continued to stick to *bori* practice despite the challenges? Indeed, as rightly observed by Mary, the views of whom were synonymous to what was obtainable in the field during research,

Bori survived (in Sabon Birni) because of its feminine nature; it is controlled and dominated by women and it provides freedom for women... further more *bori* provide an avenue for socio-cultural performance, festivals and other types of interactions. It offers traditional medical and health care services to the public endearing *bori* to both members and non-members, as well as the contemporary belief of both the people and their dominant religion, Islam in the existence of spirits (Mary, 2011).

It should be noted, however, that despite its persistence this date 2018, the *bori* adepts are mostly hiding their identity in public. Nevertheless, during the field work, information which indicates that hope for the *bori* adepts will once again be rekindled was received. As earlier mentioned, a new *Sarauniya* have been appointed and it has been said by various informants, that there is currently a plan to appoint a new *Inna*. In fact, a woman has already been nominated for the prestigious position. If this is done, then optimistically, *bori* will once again be practiced freely, and it will have a role to play in the lives of the people of Sabon Birni, although, not as it has done in the earliest times of course. This clearly shows the legacy which the practice of *bori* and the institution of *Inna* left among the Gobirawa of Sabon Birni. It may amuse one to know that a government girl's secondary school is presently named after *Inna* Yarbukuma.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to discuss, from a historical perspective, the participation of Gobirawa women in the practice of *bori*. From what have been discussed so far, it is the contention of the paper to establish that women in Gobir Kingdom and later in Sabon Birni have shared and controlled of power. The office of *Inna* has played significant role as the chief of all women who practiced *bori* and whose consent was sought in matters affecting the state. In both her capacity as a political office holder and a leader of the *bori Inna* was actively involved in fighting the oppression, exploitation, discrimination and subjugation of women which have

today became a global issue for the International organization and many non-governmental organizations.

In conclusion, the political power women had in most Hausa societies disappeared with the onset of the Islamic Jihad and colonialism. However, in Sabon Birnin Gobir the institution of *inna* and many female titles have survived to the contemporary period.

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- Alhaji Aliyu S. Gobir, 67 years, Member of Gobir Royalty in Sabon Birni, Sabon Fegi, Sabon Birni LGA, 24th June 2018.
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- Hajiya Halima Yar Baka, 84 years, a retired *bori* adept, Sabon Hegi Sabon Birni, 24/06/2018.