

GOLDSMITHS Research Online

Article (refereed)

Okagbue, Osita

Deviants and Outcasts: Power and Politics in Hausa Bori Performances

Originally published in New Theatre Quarterly Copyright Cambridge University Press. The publisher's version is available at:
<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=2023004> Please cite the publisher's version.

You may cite this version as: Okagbue, Osita, 2008. Deviants and Outcasts: Power and Politics in Hausa Bori Performances. New Theatre Quarterly, 24 (3). pp. 270-280. ISSN 0266-464x [Article]: Goldsmiths Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/2515/>

This document is the author's final manuscript version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during peer review. Some differences between this version and the publisher's version remain. **You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.**

Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners.

Osita Okagbue

Deviants and Outcasts: Power and Politics in Hausa *Bori* Performances

The *jihād* of Uthman dan Fodio in the early nineteenth century had by 1806 established Islamic cultural and religious hegemony over the Hausa territory of present-day Northern Nigeria. In the process, Islam had succeeded in pushing indigenous religious and cultural practices such as *Bori* to the margins or underground. However, while most of the other indigenous forms died or became inactive and ineffectual, *Bori* has managed to hold its own against the persecution and cultural war waged against it by Islam, mainly because of the belief in the power and ability of the spirits to influence human life which is at the centre of *Bori* practice was never lost. In this article, Osita Okagbue argues that marginalization has made *Bori* attractive to groups and individuals in Hausa society who feel themselves similarly marginalized and oppressed for articulating alternative identities and viewpoints to those of the mainstream society. He also examines how the possession performances of the *Bori* cult enable members to subvert and occasionally to use moments of trance and possession to invert the power relationships between oppressed groups and their oppressors. Osita Okagbue teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is the author of *African Theatres and Performances* (Routledge, 2007). He is President of the African Theatre Association (AfTA) and editor of *African Performance Review*.

THE HAUSA, a relatively large ethnic group spread across the Savannah regions of many countries in West Africa, have a religious practice called *Bori* – based, as are most traditional African religions, on a belief in the existence of spirits and the power of these spirits directly to influence life in the human world. *Bori* rituals very often involve spirit possession and trance. In principle, *Bori* and its rituals are contexts and mechanisms through which the indigenous Hausa are able to actualize and keep alive an interdependent relationship with the spirit forces of their universe. *Bori* is also a means through which the Hausa are able to exact a measure of control over their environment.

However, as a cultural practice, *Bori* has had a truncated history among the Hausa of Nigeria, which makes it especially suitable for exploring the theme of the intersections of religion, performance, politics, and power that will be my concern in a paper intended to explore the nature and politics of power relationships in contemporary Muslim Hausa society, and how a performance practice such as *Bori* plays a key role in contextualizing,

negotiating, and mediating the power politics involved and the complex relationships thus engendered.

The *Bori* Cult of Spirit Possession

The Hausa believe in the existence of powerful spirits who, although held to live far away – in the mythical city of Jangare – are able to come and possess their favourite mediums during *Bori* ritual performances. The spirits are also believed significantly to influence life in the human world through their ability to afflict humans with all manner of diseases. But the spirits can also bring good fortune and wellbeing to those they favour.

The indigenous Hausa and their culture became victims of the Islamic *jihād* of Uthman dan Fodio in the early nineteenth century, and by 1806 the whole of Northern Nigeria had been conquered and incorporated into the vast Muslim territory that stretched from Sokoto in the north west to Ilorin and parts of the former Oyo Empire in the south west, eastwards through Katsina,

Kano, and Kaduna to Maiduguri in the north east, and from Bauchi southwards centrally through Jos in Plateau State to Makurdi in the Middle Belt.

This conquest led to the establishment of a dominant Muslim culture in most of Northern Nigeria. From the very beginning, the two religions and cultures were strongly antagonistic towards each other – not least because the spirit-centredness and performative flamboyance of the indigenous *Bori* clashed with the austere and often anti-performance perspective and style of Islam. Their coming into contact with each other thus set in place a context for a fierce struggle for political and cultural dominance. Of course, *Bori* and the indigenous Hausa culture that it represented, in losing the military battle had also lost the political battle. However, the cultural contest was and is a different matter, as this paper sets out to show.

The struggle for cultural dominance between *Bori* and Islam has continued, and is reflected first, in the membership of the cult; second, in the attitudes of the politically dominant Islamic elite; and third, in the attitudes of other members of the society to the activities of the cult. Although Islam eventually took root in Hausaland in the nineteenth century, it did so, according to Wall (1988),

upon a pagan foundation that still exerts strong influences throughout much of rural Hausa life. . . . Rarely did Islamic practices extend to the mass of the population, and in times of crisis traditional beliefs often reasserted themselves, pushing Islam aside. (p. 115–18)

Belief in the spirits and their powers is still widespread in Hausa society today. History having cast Hausa indigenous culture and its major religion into a marginalized position, led many, especially those who were themselves oppressed and marginalized, to identify with *Bori*. The cult often provides these groups with a sense of identity, a place of refuge where they can share the companionship of the oppressed.

More significantly, though, it gives them a space or platform from which to take on their oppressors. It is hardly surprising therefore

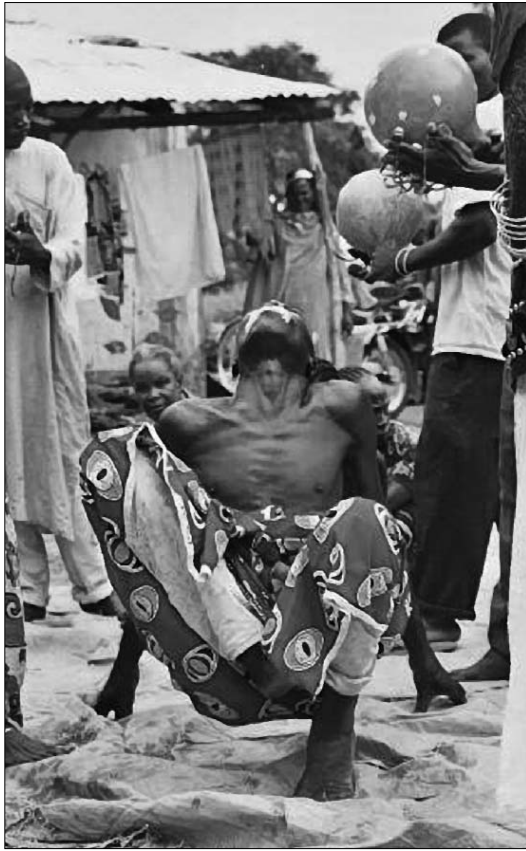
that membership of *Bori* is drawn from a host of oppressed groups in Hausa society, with women, prostitutes, homosexuals, lesbians, transvestites, the mentally ill, and former victims of other stigmatic illnesses attributable to the spirits forming the majority. A major characteristic of the cult is that its members are often non-Muslims, or those with only a superficial commitment to Islam.

The Pantheon of Spirits

As with most religions, the followers of *Bori* have constructed an elaborate pantheon of spirits in which, according to Andrew Horn (1981), the social organization and relationship patterns 'reflect the fundamental social and economic relations of the human community which has generated it' (p. 184). Every idea conceived by the Hausa or any phenomenon in their universe is believed to have a spirit counterpart; so the pantheon keeps growing as the Hausa experience or come into contact with new things, peoples, and cultures. The *Bori* pantheon is therefore the Hausa mechanism of coming to terms with the realities of their world.

There are animal spirits, human spirits, and spirits of natural phenomena such as the streams, springs, rocks, paths, forests, the fields, rain and storms, war, disasters – even human emotions such as wrath, happiness, and laughter. There are also masters and servants, Muslims and pagans, spirits of the town and spirits of the bush, ethnic spirits including those of the neighbouring Gwaris and Fulanis, Arabs from across the Sahara, and later Europeans (*Bature*); there are spirits that represent warriors, drummers, lepers, hunters, scholars, weavers, alcoholics, and prodigals.

Each spirit has ascribed attributes or traits and mannerisms by which they are known and recognized. Mediums master and display these attributes during possession, and a medium's performance is judged good or bad according to how closely he or she has been able to show or suggest these characteristics. As with the social organization, the character traits, social gradations, and patterns of behaviour found among the spirits



The medium Kuturu in a state of spirit possession.

are much the same as those found among humans. Like other religions the world over, the Hausa *Bori* adherents have, in fact, created their gods and spirits in their own image. This anthropomorphizing of the gods and spirits achieves two things: first, it enables the human community to establish a comfortable and usable relationship with the spirit world; and second, it helps the humans to give order and meaning to the chaos of the unknown world which surrounds them.

Spirit–Human Relations: a Power Paradox

Spirit–human relationship in the indigenous Hausa culture is a power relationship, one in which, because of the spirit-centred nature of Hausa religious thought, spirits are placed above humans. This means that, in general, the spirits are believed to have power and influence over humans. Because of this power relationship, spirits are highly respected, and

sometimes even feared. Humans do their utmost not to anger or disobey them for fear of punishment. But having said that, one should also point out that there is an inherent paradox in this relationship in the sense that spirits and gods are perceived to be only as powerful as those who worship or venerate them make them.

This paradox is a common feature of most indigenous African religious thought and practice, and means that because it is the humans who create the gods and spirits, it is therefore humans who give the gods and spirits whatever power they are perceived to have. A similar paradox of power notionally allowed is ironically repeated in the power and status relation between members of the *Bori* cult and mainstream Hausa society. On the one hand, the mainstream, dominated by the Muslim elite, marginalizes and wields power over the indigenous culture and all those who subscribe to indigenous beliefs and cultural practices. The mainstream, for instance, has the power to ban *Bori* activities and it also has the power to punish those who disobey.

On the other hand, a significant percentage of the population who are not cult devotees (and some of these are Muslims) still believe in the existence of spirits and the power of these spirits to influence their lives. It is not surprising therefore that *Bori* adherents who are believed able to communicate with and control the comings and goings of the spirits are deemed to have some kind of power, which is both feared and respected. This perhaps may explain the ambivalence in attitudes in mainstream society to *Bori* practice and to the cult members.

Conversion to Islam, in general, had been superficial, with the result that the core belief in the power of *Bori* spirits has remained and people are quite comfortable going to the mosque on Friday while consulting the *Bori* expert on other days of the week to deal with pressing matters of health, wealth, and well-being. This attitude exists across all segments of Hausa society, as is evident from this comment (Smith, trans., *Baba of Karo*, 1981) on the attitude of the clan head of Karo, a village near Abuja:



Fulani maids at a *Bori* performance.

He likes the *Bori*, but only in private because he is afraid. . . . All rulers like the *Bori* – if they didn't, would their work be any good? Of course, they all agree with them. So do the *malams* secretly. The *malams* call on the *Bori* in private, in the darkness of the night. Everyone wants the spirits, kings and noblemen want them, *malams* and wives shut away in their compounds – it is with them we work in this world. (p. 222)

This comment also illustrates the point made earlier that there is a genuine belief in and reliance on the powers of the spirits within Hausa culture. It is a world in which humans have a role to play, but so too do the spirits. This is a universe based on a mutually beneficial relationship in which the humans venerate and offer sacrifices to the spirits, while in exchange the spirits ensure less troublesome lives for their followers. But each has to play its part for this relationship and the world which it sustains to work.

Bori practice therefore ensures that negotiations and exercise of power between the human and the spirit worlds take place. On the one hand, *Bori* possession performances demonstrate the power of the spirits to cause

and cure illnesses but, on the other, they also enable the humans to have some control, since through the rites the spirits can be restrained or called to account for their actions.

The Relationship with Islam

Whereas Islam dismisses all *Bori* practice and knowledge as pagan and evil, *Bori*, on the other hand, successfully assimilates Islamic theology and spirits into its doctrine and pantheon. It has also successfully taken on board new experiences that the indigenous Hausa have had to deal with – not only Islam and *jihād*, but also the experience of colonialism. One finds in the *Bori* pantheon European spirits such as Baturen Gwari (the European from Gwari country), the cigarette-smoking colonial administrator, a host of Islamic spirits such as Mallam Alhaji (the Muslim scholar), and a few Arabic spirits from North Africa.

By embracing such spirits, *Bori* believers are able to enter into dialogue with these previously terrifying forces and through the process of negotiation and appeasement they



are able to control these forces. This eclectic approach has enabled *Bori* to bestride the two contesting worlds and cultures of their Hausa society in such a way that it appeals to and fascinates members and non-members alike.

However, *Bori* is still despised and feared, especially by devout Muslim leaders, who take every opportunity to persecute and try to drive the practice away or underground, occasionally blaming it for immorality and other forms of 'deviant' behaviour in society. In fact, according to Sarkin Wakili (the leader of a cult compound in Ungwar Rimi near Zaria), whom I interviewed during my research (27 June–14 July 2003 and 17–23 June 2004), persecution of *Bori* adherents has been a way of demonstrating Islamic hegemony over the conquered Hausa culture. Punishments, we were told, were more severe in the past, especially from the immediate post-*jihad* period to Nigeria's independence in 1960. As Besmer's study (1983) points out:

Devout Muslims regard *Bori* as only one step removed from paganism; indeed the post-*jihad* Fulani rulers made little distinction between *Bori* possession and pagan spirit worship (*tsafi*). *Bori* was prohibited and the performance of it was punishable by death; later, *Bori* dancers were merely taxed – a good example of the state attempting to regulate

an unpleasant social reality rather than suppress it entirely. (p. 166)

This claim is supported by other studies such as King's (1966), Tremearne's (1981), and Wall's (1988). In fact, at the time of the trip for this research, all *Bori* groups in the predominantly Muslim city of Zaria had been expelled in another wave of Islamic fundamentalism, and all *Bori* activities, especially public performances and demonstrations of the practice, banned.

Prior to this, a tax regime had been put in place, *Bori* groups being required to obtain local authority licences or permits before they could practise or perform their rituals publicly. As far as this study was aware, only *Bori* practice had been singled out in the city for such regulatory treatment. Interestingly though, clients who had need for *Bori* services still sought them out for therapeutic consultations or performances. And in spite of their expulsion, the groups organized and carried on with their annual calendar of performances among and for themselves in their temporary places of exile.

This is the context in which *Bori* practice has existed in Northern Nigeria since it came into contact with Islam. It was a case of an indigenous culture and its practices being

marginalized by an invading and occupying cultural and political power. But *Bori* has demonstrated its resilience through its ability to exist and function within and outside the dominant Muslim socio-political structure. It has managed to maintain this paradoxical position of victim/oppressed and manipulator/wielder of power in its relationship with mainstream Muslim Hausa society.

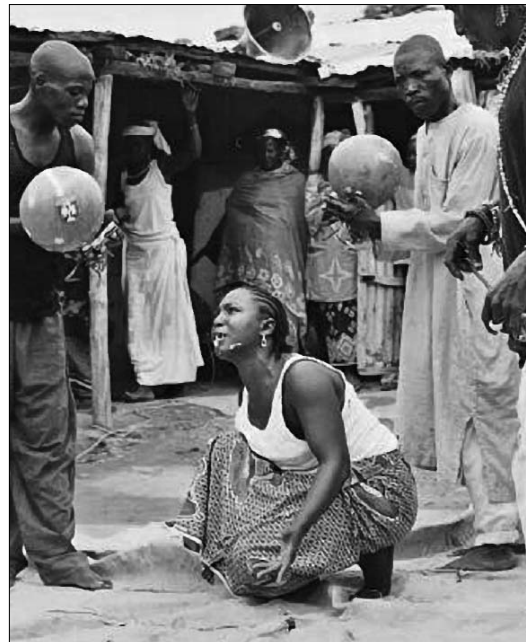
Cult members capitalize on the belief that, deep down, their Muslim persecutors believe in and are afraid of the spirits and therefore would often leave them alone to practise their religion. The mainstream can ban the public performances, but it cannot banish the belief in spirits. And while it has the power to chase the *Bori* members out of the city, it does not have the power to prevent the spirits from possessing whoever they choose and at any time of their liking. This unhindered ability of the spirits to choose whom to possess and when is illustrated by this example from another part of Northern Nigeria:

Twenty days ago Fagaci forbade *Bori*-dancing in the town. . . . Then Tanko's wife went to Fagaci's compound to greet his wives, and as she came out from the women's quarters she had to pass through the room where he was sitting. She and her three co-wives knelt down to greet him, and as she was kneeling down the *Bori* came and possessed her – it was Baturen Gwari, the European from Gwari country. 'Imprison me, bind me, call the police and lock me up. Isn't there an order forbidding *Bori*? Very well, look at me, I have come. Lock me up then!' (*Baba of Karo*, p. 223)

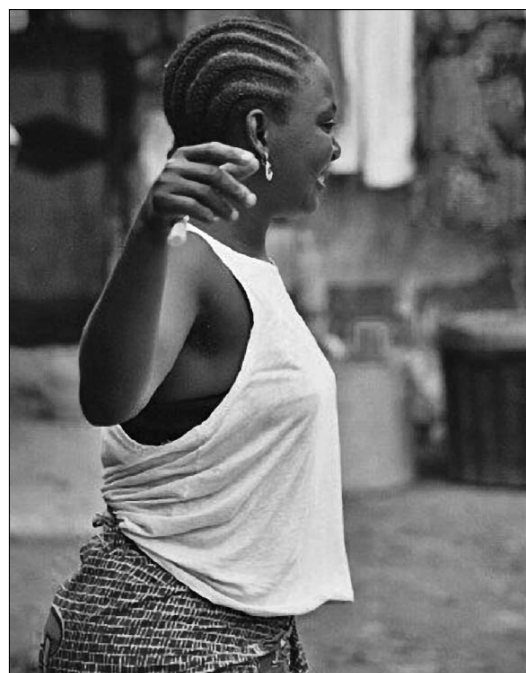
This particular spirit remained defiant of Chief Fagaci's authority till the end, and the chief of course did nothing. Still singing her defiant song, the possessed medium was led out by a group of women.

The Spirit and the Medium

Quite often, possession or trance performances are dismissed by outsiders, especially the Muslim elite, as the actions of deranged or irresponsible people. This in fact suits the devotees as it leaves them in peace to practise their culture and beliefs. It is not surprising that *Bori* worship and its cult, being an oppressed cultural practice itself, attracts the



Top: a spirit medium becoming possessed. Below: in a state of full possession.



oppressed and other victims of power in Hausa society. However, the practice also serves as an instrument for the oppressed not only to come to terms with their oppression and marginalization, but also to confront and in some instances to impose their own will on their oppressors.

According to cult members interviewed, wives and daughters have been known to use their moments of *Bori* association and possession to get tyrannical husbands and fathers to do their bidding. A few women, it was also claimed, have used their cult activities to get out of unhappy marriage arrangements. Such women are perceived as being unpredictable and thus difficult to control, but essentially their ability to influence the course of events or get their way is made possible by the underlying spirit-human power relationship of pre-Islamic Hausa culture from which *Bori* practice originated.

Spectators regard the possessed medium as the spirit that she or he is representing; this is because there is no separation between spirit and medium in a *Bori* possession performance. Thus, 'performing' in a *Bori* ritual is not similar to a Brechtian actor showing the character, but more like the performer becoming the character. This belief is so strong and the merger so complete that extraordinary things, especially healing and magic, are expected when spectators or supplicants clamour to touch or be touched by specific spirits during a performance.

During a performance in Zaria a female spectator eagerly presented her two-year-old daughter to Sarkin Rafi (the Chief of the Rivers and Water Wells) to be touched. When she handed the child over to the possessed medium, the latter gently wiped the child's body and forehead with his sweat-soaked *gwado* (long coarse cloth tied round the waist by male mediums during possession), muttering inaudible incantations as he did so. When he finished, he handed the child back to its mother. On receiving her, the woman bowed her head so she too could be touched by Rafi, after which she offered the spirit some money in thanksgiving.

Politically, it is this implicit acceptance on the part of the onlookers that the medium has become the spirit which makes it easy for the performance to be manipulated by cult members, since people are generally loath to disobey spirits. When spirits speak, humans listen. The respect and awe which the spirits elicit and command from humans momentarily belong to the possessed mediums.

But, widely accepted and well attended as *Bori* events usually are, a stigma still attaches to participation in them. For some people, even being in the vicinity in which a *Bori* performance is taking place creates an ethical and religious problem. In fact, one of the local Hausa field assistants on the research team, a devout Muslim himself, asked for reassurances that pictures of him at the event would not be circulated in places where he might be recognized, and that where possible he should be edited out from sections of the video tapes that were made of the event. He was very nervous about being recognized as having even been around when this 'disreputable' practice was taking place.

However, for one who did not want to have anything to do with *Bori*, he showed a remarkable knowledge of *Bori* lore and a degree of ambivalence in his thinking about the substance of the practice. And he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself as he watched some of the humorous antics of the possessed mediums. Even more surprising, on our last day in the village he was seen secretly consulting the Sarkin *Bori*, who generously offered him some medicinal packs for his ailments and some reassuring words about his future.

Performance and Power in *Bori*

The play on power in *Bori* operates on two levels. The first is the spirit-human level, while the second is the human-human level. The spirit-human relationship places the spirits in positions of power *vis-à-vis* humans because of the spirit-centred nature of Hausa traditional thought. Spirits come first in any dealings with humans, and it is for humans to establish a harmonious relationship with them because of their power, which they can use for either good or evil.

Ultimately, it is this spirit-human power relationship that is transformed into a human-human relationship during possession performances. When a spirit possesses a medium, spirit and medium are perceived to have become one, and the power of the former becomes embodied and manifested in the latter. Thus, for the spectator, the possessed

medium ceases to be himself or herself and takes on the attributes, including the power, of the possessing spirit and is treated as such. At another level, the possessed medium becomes a liminal figure who is both present and absent at the same time in the performance space. This means that, on the one hand, the medium is not the spirit, but at the same time he or she is *not not* the spirit.

It is this possibility of 'double negativity' inherent in a *Bori* possession moment which enables hitherto oppressed and marginalized individuals to take centre stage, to command the attention and respect of the spectators (see Schechner, 1985, p. 110-13, and 2002, p. 98-100, derived from Winnicott's theory explaining 'transitional objects' and the child-mother relationship, 1971, p. 89). And because the spectators themselves accept this transformation, or manifestation of the spirits among them, they are willing to allow the impositions the possessed mediums make on them in the name of the spirits.

Underpinning most African peoples' religious thought is the belief that 'a spirit will always have its way'. It is also believed that superior powers 'may be manipulated and placated but never opposed' (Bucher, 1980, p. 98). This aptly describes the nature of the power-flow in the spirit-human relationship, the paradox mentioned previously notwithstanding. In *Bori*, this relationship is captured in the metaphor of 'horse and rider' (Besmer, 1983). *Bori* mediums are referred to as horses of the spirits: *doki* (stallion) if they are male, or *godiya* (mare) if female. During performances possessed mediums are seen as horses being mounted by their spirit riders. The spirit controls the medium's behaviour; in fact, his or her entire mental and physical capacities are subject to the whims and intentions of the possessing spirit.

The spirits, it is believed, choose which mediums to mount, when, and for how long. On the surface, one is inclined to conclude that the mediums have no choice in the matter. They are meant to wait for whichever of the many spirits summoned to arrive and possess any of their fancied or favourite 'horses' or 'mares' for the event. However, because musicians and mediums (through

their leader) determine which spirits are called, when they are called, and when they are sent back, spirits cannot come without their music being played; and it is through their individual *kirari* (praise chants) that the spirits possess their mediums. It is also through music that the 'spirits' perform their stories and roles. Thus cult members, with the help of the musicians, actually control the comings and goings of the spirits and also control what the spirits do or say during a performance.

It is this dynamic which allows the *Bori* members to utilize the power resulting from their special relationship with the spirits. Ultimately, it is through the medium that the spirits are revealed; it is through his or her eyes that the spirits see, and it is with their voices that the spirits speak. And since no human spectator would dare to challenge a spirit, one can understand how whatever a 'possessed' medium desires can become a command from a spirit which the human spectator dare not refuse.

Empowering the Oppressed

Strategically, therefore, the human-human power relationship enables members of the cult, who in reality are mostly poor, marginalized, oppressed, and very often outcasts and 'deviants', to assume positions of power in their relationships with the spectators. By becoming embodiments of the spirits, what is essentially a human-human relationship is transformed into a spirit-human one, and the possessed *Bori* devotee thus has power and dominance over the human spectators, irrespective of their external socio-political and economic status – that is to say that the power which traditionally resides in the spirits becomes transferred to the mediums during their possession, and the latter are thus able to exercise this power over the spectators. Performance becomes a means of transference/inversion of power: spirit-over-human becomes spirit-over-medium, which in turn becomes spirit-medium over human (spectator).

For the spectators, there seems to be no problem in accepting the authority and power

of the spirits, even when they are being represented by the mediums. During the Zaria performance, the spectators clamoured to be touched by Sarkin Rafi for healing, or scrambled to catch the imaginary coins being thrown about by Dan Galdima, since this was believed to bring good luck to whoever caught any of the money. It is not surprising to see marginalized, secluded (in *purdah*) and thus excluded, oppressed wives and women using their moment of possession to get their husbands, fathers, or men-folk to carry out orders or commands being handed out by the visiting spirits.

And since the spirits are never disobeyed or questioned, because of the belief in the power of the spirit world to influence the human world, this momentary inversion or transformation of the power relationship actually works. A *Bori* performance event is like time out of time, in which normal rules are suspended and roles are reversed so the poor play the rich, and rulers become the ruled. However, unlike in carnival or other festive times, the ritual framework ensures that there is an underlying belief in the truth of this inverse power play which is not *just* play or a willing suspension of disbelief.

It is not only wives or women who use this power over tyrannical husbands and fathers; other oppressed and marginalized groups, such as prostitutes, transvestites, and individuals who have been afflicted by diseases attributable to the spirits, along with others whose existence and behaviours are deemed deviations from the norm (these others often associate with cult members, or find a welcome within cult compounds and end up becoming members themselves), also find themselves momentarily in a position of power over those who oppress or look down on them.

The possession performances provide these people with a chance to take centre stage, be listened to, and have their wishes carried out by some of those who are otherwise usually in authority over them. Cult activities also give them the chance and the means to assert cultural, gender, or sexual identities that are normally clandestine or driven underground. *Bori* membership, in the eyes of mainstream

society, is synonymous with deviance and abnormality, since every performance is seen as a challenge to the dominant Islamic and Christian ideologies of Northern Nigeria.

But many *Bori* performances are, in reality, concerned with finding answers to social and psychological problems; they are concerned with divining causes and finding cures for illnesses and diseases which afflict people; and the widely perceived ability of *Bori* experts and mediums to discover causes of problems and the cures for them gives them enormous power and clout. People, the most influential in a society among them, come to consult the mediums on many issues, including finding out about the future. And in a world steeped in spirituality and uncertainty, such as that in which the Hausa live, what power is greater than that of being able to commune with spirits, and through knowing and becoming them in performance be able to tell and even affect the future?

Political leaders take the support of the *Bori* into account, even if only to strike the fear of the spirits and gods into opponents. In recent years, especially in the northern states of Nigeria, *Bori* groups have become fashionable accessories for political parties to deploy for campaigns and party conventions. *Bori* leaders, usually either a *Sarkin Bori* (Chief of the *Bori*, if male) or *Magajiya* (the Mother of the Compound, if female), use this leverage to gain political capital from political parties, and sometimes from governments.

The Force of Time-out-of-Time

So, while ostensibly being a cult dedicated to the cure of diseases and ailments – what Victor Turner (1968) refers to as a ‘cult of affliction’ – *Bori* practice is inextricably implicated in Hausa cultural and social politics. *Bori* represents a way of seeing and orientating to the world for indigenous Hausa, in the same way that Islam is both of these things for a Muslim. It was therefore inevitable that these two modes of perception should clash with one another; and it is possible, given the dominant status of Islam in contemporary Hausa society since 1806, to see every *Bori*



Sarkin Rafi during the Zaria performance.



act, whether public or private, as one of defiance and a challenge to the authority of a dominant cultural and political dispensation. Every *Bori* performance is an affirmation of a pre-Islamic Hausa culture, and therefore a cultural and political threat to the dominant Islamic culture.

Bori devotees are aware of this, and so perform their cultural and political defiance in the name of their spirits who, they argue, are characters over whom they have no control. It is the spirits, they claim, who choose where and when to appear, who determine how long they stay, and what they do or say

while they are in command of their horses (mediums). Most mediums claim total ignorance and amnesia of what they do or say while possessed, so do not expect to be held answerable for those actions or utterances – a good example of how relationships of power, status, and identity can be mediated by and negotiated through performance.

According to Edith Turner (1992), Victor Turner's three-year study of the Ndembu *Ihamba* convinced him that:

ritual did not merely preserve or reflect social structural laws, it often broke them. For a time ritual created an anti-structure, a temporary liminal world of reversals that was oddly satisfying, something different from everyday laws of social custom and political strategies. (p. 6)

The liminality and anti-structure created by *Bori* rites enable role or status reversals and power shifts to occur. The result is that cult devotees, who are often on the margins, take centre stage as spirits who can exercise power over the human spectators, which in some cases may include people who are in positions of power and influence in their society. Within the time-out-of-time framework of the *Bori* rites, existing or prevailing power structures and relationships are suspended or substituted as the unquestioned power of the spirits over humans becomes established and remains in force for the duration of the performance. In this way the rites act as mechanisms and processes of negotiation between contesting power centres in Hausa society. They also help to create a redressive balance between these centres, since the momentary shift can act as a safety valve which enables a periodic release of the pent-up frustration arising from situations of oppression and marginalization.

The levels of politics that feature in the practice and performance of *Bori* range from the cultural politics of Muslim and indigenous Hausa identities in confrontation to the gender politics of men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, masters and mistresses. There is also the class politics of an economically powerful male Islamic elite against an impoverished, mainly female, and

non-Muslim majority. Then there is the religious politics of Islam being constantly challenged by the indigenous Hausa religion. And finally, there is the politics of sexuality which pits a mainstream heterosexual culture against marginalized homosexual and transvestite groups. In incorporating all these forms of cultural politics within its sphere, *Bori* can be seen as another good example of an African indigenous theatre form whose value and philosophy are based upon its functions.

References

- Adelugba, Dapo (1981), 'Trance and Theatre: the Nigerian Example', in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: a Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine), p. 203–18.
- Besmer, Fremont E. (1983), *Horses, Musicians, and Gods: the Hausa Cult of Possession-Trance* (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey).
- Bucher, Hubert (1980), *Spirits and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Horn, Andrew (1981), 'Ritual, Drama and the Theatrical: the Case of Bori Spirit Mediumship', in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: a Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine), p. 181–202.
- King, Anthony V. (1966), 'A Booori Liturgy from Katsina: Introduction and *Kirdarii* Texts', in *African Language Studies*, VII, p. 105–125.
- McAlpine, Alison (1985), *The Cult of Bori among the Hausa: a Kinetic Event*. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Leeds.
- Okagbue, Osita (1993), 'Invisible Presences: Masks and Spirits in Igbo Society', in *Assaph*, No. 9, Section C, p. 9–18.
- (1997), 'When the Dead Return: Play and Seriousness in African Masked Performances', *SATJ*, XI, Nos. 1–2, p. 89–107.
- Schechner, Richard (1985), *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- (2002), *Performance Studies: an Introduction* (New York; London: Routledge).
- Smith, Mary F., trans. (1981), *Baba of Karo: a Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press).
- Tremearne, A. J. N. (1981), *The Ban of Bori: Demons and Demon Dancing in West and North Africa* (London: Heath, Cranton and Ousley).
- Turner, Edith (1992), *Experiencing Ritual: a New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- Turner, Victor (1968), *Drums of Affliction: a Study of Religious Processes Among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Wall, L. Lewis (1988), *Hausa Medicine: Illness and Well-Being in a West African Culture* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press).
- Winnicott, D. (1971), *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock).