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Folk Islam: The Case Of The Hausa Of Northern Nigeria

by George Foxall

Summary: The brand of Islam brought to Northern Nigeria in the Middle Ages bears little resemblance to orthodox Islam. Today Islam among the Hausa people is dominated not by the worship of Allah but by fear of the spirits, trust in diviners and reliance on magic. How can we bring the gospel to the Hausa? Some of the conclusions drawn by the author include proclaiming the gospel in a way that confronts the Hausa worldview; meeting the felt needs of the Hausa by giving them hope that the power of the spirit world can be broken; and, finally, providing powerful witness to the Hausa through the transformed lives of true and sincere converts to the Christian faith.

The Historical Interaction Of Animism And Islam Among The Hausa Of Nigeria

The early recorded historical accounts of the Hausa people are found in *The Kano Chronicle*, and the *Wakar Bagauda* ("Song of Bagauda", giving a king list and homily).¹ According to the *Chronicle*, Wangarawa missionaries from Mali arrived in the city of Kano during the reign of Yaji (1349-1358), bringing the teachings of Islam. This resulted in a confrontation between the animistic beliefs and practices of the Hausa people and Islam which has remained to this very day. Other historical sources also make it clear that Islam was brought to the Hausa by non-Arab Muslims from the west. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Islam was nominally accepted by the ruling class; animism

persisted among the people (*talakawa*). Semiliterate *mallams* (Islamic teachers) actually perpetuated animism and at the same time diluted Islam. A number of attempts to purify Islam of animistic practices were made.²

A Maliki scholar of strict orthodoxy, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Maghili of Tlemcen, at the end of the fifteenth century initiated an attack on bogus *mallams* and advocated the establishment of a strong central imamate as the only authority capable of enforcing government according to the *shari'a*.³ He visited Kano during the reign of Mohumman Rima (1463-1499). His concept of retaining orthodox Islam by political authority is still reflected in current political struggles in Nigeria. His attempts were revived three hundred years later by the Fulani Revivalist Shehu Usumanu Dan Fodio (1754-1817), who was born in Gobir and was of the tenth generation from that of Musa Jakollo who had first led the Fulani into Hausaland. Shehu Dan Fodio defeated the Habe kings and set up a system of emirates ruled principally by members of his own clan. His primary accusation leveled against the Habe kings was that they failed to govern according to the *shari'a*. He insisted that the *shari'a* of Malik be enforced. The Habe rulers had continued to use pre-Muslim titles, social and political order, resulting in an accommodation and eventual synthesis of animism and Islam. This situation was the grounds and justification of Shehu's *jihad* into Hausaland. But how lasting were these reforms? An Islamic imamate was established which the British colonial powers significantly entrenched. Theological literature in Hausa was established to uphold the discipline of a hierarchical Muslim society. However, it appears that the reforms did not survive the second generation of Shehu's descendants. Traditional titles and offices remained. That which long ago the *Wakar Bagauda* condemned still existed, viz., the village *mallams* rather than propagate orthodox Islam through literary tradition deluded Islam by the admixture of animistic custom and popular magico-religious practices.⁴

Hausa Folk Islam Described

Given the historical roots of Islam in Northern Nigeria, it is no surprise that today the Hausa hold to a form of folk Islam far removed from Islamic orthodoxy. Let me describe the beliefs and practises of this folk Islam under

six headings: practitioners, spirits, diviners, saint veneration, the nature of man, and rites of passage.

1. **Practitioners.** Both the Muslim *mallams* and the traditional priests (particularly among the mugazawa)⁵ compete with one another to have the right of explanation and action in the magico-religious fields. These competing systems may be categorized as (1) *boka* (medicines), which act by principles of sympathetic and contagious magic; (2) *arnanci* (animism), the worship of *iskoki* (spirits), particularly the *bori*, a spirit-possession cult; (3) Islam, which incorporates animistic elements, such as *jinn* and magical elements in charms.⁶

2. **Spirits.** Both muslim and animistic Hausa have an explicit and strong belief in the power of the spirits. The famous Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of the Northern Region (early 1960s), states in his autobiography⁷ how spirits influenced his childhood:

They believed that the bush, or certain parts of it, was haunted by spirits, most of them evil. We were frightened of them too, but more of the great wind-devils. Baba of Kano (in the book of that title) said, 'All the rulers like the *bori* . . . all agree with them. So do the *malams*, secretly.'⁸

Learned Muslim men retain the belief in the power of animistic spirits which creates the situation which permits the survival of spirit cults among the Hausa people.⁹ When asked about this apparent inconsistency, a *mallim* replied that one should not confuse *al'ada* (custom) with *addini* (religion).¹⁰

An obvious pre-Islamic practice still prominent among the Hausa Muslims is *bori*.¹¹ In pre-Islamic times *bori* occupied an important place in the main religious life of the Hausa people. Since the *jihad* of Shehu Dan Fodio with its intensification of Islamization, *bori* was relegated to a secondary position. However, syncretism has occurred as evidenced by the increase of the number of spirits, including Muslim and Fulani names of spirits. Since independence in 1960 the influence of *bori* has increased as women *bori* leaders have become the leaders of the women's wing of political parties.

Participants of *bori* are called *masu bori* (spirit owners), or *yan bori* (spirit children), or *dawakin bori* (horses of spirits). To be possessed means to be mounted by a spirit (*iska ya hau*). The person mounted is considered as a horse

of the spirit and the spirit rides him. To the Hausa a horse is a noble animal and a symbol of aristocracy. Both men and women participate in *bori*, but normally a woman is the head of the cult, known as the *magajiya*.

On one occasion while visiting a village in Sokoto State, my wife and I encountered a *bori* seance. The participants were dramatizing features of certain animals, and the *iskoki* (spirits) were said to have mounted them.

The Hausa believe that the spirits live in a spirit world called *jan gari* (red town) located somewhere unknown in the Hausa physical world. The spirits can be grouped in categories¹² with both animistic and Muslim overtones: (1) the Muslim spirits are called *yan riga* (clothed spirits) who live in towns and whose chief is *mallam alhaji* (teacher who has completed the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca); (2) animistic spirits are called *babbaku* (black spirits) who live in rural villages and are farmers and hunters and whose chief is *mai-ja-ciki* (one who crawls); (3) the warrior spirits are called *yan garki* (children of the shield) whose head is called *garki baba* (big shield); (4) the *samari* spirits (youth) are Muslim spirits like their parents and whose leader is *ba-gudu* (runner) or *mailema* (owner of an umbrella); (5) the children of smallpox are called *ya'yan zananna* (children of smallpox) who cause smallpox and other diseases; and (6) the bush spirits are called *yan dowa* who are spirits of wild animals, groves, forests and water.

The influence of Fulani domination brought the spirit *inna* (term for mother used by Fulani) who presides over markets and sometimes is considered the mother of all spirits.¹³ As a Fulani maid, *inna* owns cattle (like the Fulani) and lives on milk. A number of Mugazawa keep a model of her inside their compounds in a hut, where she is to live and with other related spirits. When she returns from herding her cattle at sundown, she rests on a small stone seat erected for her. A calabash of milk is kept for her, and when empty is refilled. A worshipper of her spills a few drops of milk on the ground as an offering to her before he begins to milk. *Inna* also cares for the farm as the principle giver of crops, guards the property of her worshippers, pursues thieves, causing their stomachs to swell with deadly effects. This is the chief reason the Mugazawa do not steal.

Inna's son is *gajimari*, a serpent-like being who lives in wells and ant hills and who controls the rain. To the Mugazawa, *inna* is their totem and the one to whom sacrifices are made. Another son of *inna* is *kura* (male hyena) who is

associated with boxing, a favorite sport of the Mugazawa. *Duna* is the son of *gajimari* who is said to be the son of *mallam alhaji* and *sarauniya* (queen) who is a handsome young man, popular among women, a spend-thrift, and a gambler. His three wives are gamblers. Sheep with a black circle around the eye (representing the mascara a young dandy paints his eyelids) are sacrificed to him. These spirits are considered to be especially operative on Thursday and Friday evenings and prescribed colors of animal and fowl sacrifices are kept, e.g., red he-goat sacrificed; a red chicken with tail and feathers set at an angle; a black chicken with white feet, and so forth.

After the death of a *bori* cult member, appropriate music to the spirit that mounted the deceased person is continually played to her children until one of them becomes possessed. It is then assumed that the child has inherited the parent's *bori*. If the *bori* member fails to effect a cure on an ill person, they will then initiate the person as a *bori* cult member. This initiation takes about seven days and includes drugging the initiate, teaching him *bori* music, dancing, going into a trance, foretelling the future, and treating or prescribing remedies for diseases. Before intensified Islamization, sacrifices were made at each stage of the initiation. Today alms are given as directed by the person possessed or by the *magjiya*.

Bori dances are conducted in times of national or communal crisis, such as epidemics, the abandonment of an old town, or the establishment of a new one, crop failure, lack of rain, when opening new and closing old markets, and on market days. Among the Hausa, women are more susceptible than men to spirit possession. The spirits are regarded as beings of great force and people who come in contact with the spirits demonstrate attitudes of marked submissiveness and subservience. Husbands will treat their wives who are possessed with great deference, contrary to normal relations. Some men run from their homes when their wives become possessed and are ready to meet the demands of their wives in order to calm them. Women when possessed will defy their husbands, their menfolk and political authorities. The spirits of the *bori* represent and symbolize Hausa values of status, authority, political power, prosperity and the pomp of public life. Since women are normally excluded from public life, kept within the compound physically and in psycho-sociological isolation, women experience in *bori* the pomp of officialdom, the world of men, the world of political power, and the world of glory -- all in fantasy.

Spectors who are seeking health, prosperity and other needs from the spirit will put questions about the future to the possessed women. The spirit reassures the supplicants and asks them to offer certain sacrifices or alms.

3) **Saint Veneration.** Most authorities do not include saint veneration and the Muslim Hausa would deny the practise. Nevertheless, there is a degree of saint veneration among Muslim Hausa. In Katsina there are a number of tombs of saints.¹⁴ The legend of Dan Marina, (name of the son of a dyer) tells that his mother died during childbirth and was buried before he was actually born. He emerged from his mother's grave. The owner of the dye pits noticed that the indigo in his dye pits were being disturbed at night. He found that a tiny child played in them. He took the child and raised him with his family. The child, Dan Marina, grew to become a very learned *mallam* (teacher) and a poet in the Emir's court.

Near the famous Gobirau Mosque tower in Katsina city is buried another venerated Islamic scholar. The shrine is a small white-washed hut, shaded by large tamarind trees. Inside the shrine is a grave covered with fine white sand. People, especially women who are praying for fertility or good fortune, enter the shrine and take away small handfuls of the sand which in contrast to the local red soil seems to appear miraculously. Unknown to them is the fact that the custodian replenishes the white sand from the river outside the city.

The tomb of Shehu Dan Fodio in Sokoto City is to many a shrine. "Both Hausas and Fulanis believe that the founder of the empire, Dan Fodio, possessed supernatural power, that he ranks next after Christ, and that his power of blessing or banning has descended on his successors."¹⁵ Many people make pilgrimages to his tomb, including many from other countries. I have heard many Hausa people in the Sokoto area swear an oath by the name of Shehu Dan Fodio. The song of praise to Shehu by Aldaya thanks him for answering his (Aldaya's) prayers to Allah and acknowledges him as the one who cares for the needs of the saints.¹⁶

4) **Diviners.** The Hausa Muslim sees little or no distinction between helpful magic (*rugya*, as allowed in the Koran) and harmful magic (*sihr*, as condemned in the Koran). The functions of the diviners is to counteract witches, to heal, to administer oath-medicine, interpret dreams, and such like. The boundaries between helpful and harmful magic is vague in Islam.¹⁷ Harmful magic is considered legitimate if there is no other way to rid society of an evil person. To

do this the Muslim *mallams* recite the Koranic chapter *Ya shin* while a rooster is slowly killed "over the name" of the victim. They have a vast inventory of harmful charms .¹⁸ Charms may be vocal or material and often a combination of both is used. On her way into the village accompanied by a young teenage boy, my wife noticed that the boy became frightened. When asked the cause of his fear, he pointed to a stone near the path which he recognized as containing evil medicine. When my wife went over to pick it up, the boy ran for his life.

Helpful magic is found in the form of amulets to be worn on the body or placed on animals or in places for protection. Amulets are usually made like a small leather bag and may contain written Koranic verses, names of angels and *jinn*, mysterious formulas, the cabalistic table, certain written taboos and sometimes certain herbs and/or animal parts. This type is the dominant protective magic used by the Hausa. Two charms, *baduhu* and *layan zana*, are said to make the wearer invisible. *Mallams* often instruct the wearer of an amulet of certain taboos if the charm is to be effective. Taboos may include instructions that the amulet must not be opened, be left by itself, or touch water, and when removed for bathing it must not touch the ground. Certain acts may diminish its power, such as sitting on a mortar in which corn is ground, showing the soles of one's feet when seated, walking over a hearth, and standing to urinate. This often means that Islamic teachers require non-Muslims who use their amulets to observe Islamic practices and taboos.

Another common practice is the writing of Koranic verses with charcoal on wooden slates. The writing is then washed off, and the water either drunk or rubbed on the body. It has many uses: to drive out possessive spirits, to cure illnesses, to help women obtain divorces from their husbands, to help politicians win elections.

6) **Nature of Man.** An old Hausa belief is that every living thing has a body, *rai*, and *kurwa*. *Rai* is said to be the vital force that animates the body, which muslims say is the personal spirit which goes to *lahira* (hades). *Kurwa* is connected with the body during life and it never dies. *Kurwa* is the double of a person which travels in one's dreams and plays an important part in *bori* possession. When Allah snatches a person's *rai*, death ensues; one's *kurwa* hangs about the body until burial and then, according to Muslims, enters heaven, or, according to the Mugazawa, enters the well of life. At birth one is

given a personal *iska* (spirit) of the same sex which remains with him for life and another *iska* of the opposite sex which normally leaves him upon marriage.

With Islamization a division of persons according to their *iskoki* (spirits) has been introduced, into categories of fire, wind, earth and water. Only the *mallams* can divine to which group one belongs. The importance of knowing one's group is seen, for example, in marriage. If fire marries water, the result is disastrous. Fire can marry wind; earth can marry water. The betrothed person is carefully watched for any unhappiness. If there is something significantly unusual, it will be interpreted that their *iskoki* are incompatible. The man will say, "*Kafadanmu bai zama 'daya ba*" ("Our shoulders are not one") and the engagement will be called off.¹⁹

6) Rites of Passage. The Mugazawa have given the Hausa *mallam* the right to administer the rituals of birth, marriage, and death. Only within the past thirty years has the Mugazawa followed the rites of Muslim burial.²⁰ The actual situation is that though the Muslim rituals give a sense of legality, traditional rites are also carefully conducted.

Missiological Implications

An in-depth understanding of folk Islam as it relates to the Hausa people is essential, if the Gospel is to be communicated meaningfully and effectively within the Hausa cultural context. This brief overview of the interaction of animism and Islam among the Hausa reveals a number of important missiological implications.

First, communication of the Gospel must be within the world view of the Hausa people. Their wholistic worldview requires the presentation of the Gospel in both supernatural and natural dimensions and realities.

Second, perception of the basic felt needs of the Hausa and our compassion towards these needs will determine the parameters of our message and thrust. Felt needs must be ascertained, analyzed and encountered with the Gospel in its fulness. The Hausa have an (a) ubiquitous fear - fear of the spirit world, of evil from spirits, of harmful magic, of the unknown, of the future, of taboo, of shame, of infertility, of isolation. Certainly the Gospel has an answer and the power to overcome such fears. (b) Sickness is a common need. The Gospel can bring spiritual, psychological, emotional and physical healing. The need of (c)

belonging, a sense of community and fellowship, can be experienced through the Gospel and the local church. The Gospel can give meaning and purpose to those who find (d) life empty and meaningless. "Islam presents itself more as a belief system and can seem irrelevant, even powerless."²¹

Third, a demonstration of the power of the Gospel, by means of changed lives of Hausa Christians, by evident blessing of the Gospel on Christians, by actual power encounter, is necessary for the Muslim to clearly understand the power of Christ as presented in the Gospel message. May the Holy Spirit guide both Nigerian and expatriate missionaries in the presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Hausa people.

Endnotes

¹ *The Kano Chronicle*, English translation by Sir Richmond Palmer, Sudanese Memoirs, Vol. 111, (Lagos, 1928).

² Kritzeck, J. and Lewis, H.W., *Islam in Africa*, (Van Norstrand-Reinhold Co., New York, 1969).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁵ Mugazawa are generally referred to as the "pagan" (*arna*) Hausa who have resisted Islam. Being surrounded by their Muslim Hausa brothers and the using of the common Hausa language, Islamic influence can be seen, though superficial. In recent years there has been significant Christian conversion among them. The Nigerian Evangelical Missionary Society has reported over 200 new congregations the past few years.

⁶ *Human Relations Area Files*, (Smith), p. 215.

⁷ Bello, Adamu, *My Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 5.

⁸ *Human Relations Area Files*

- ⁹ Greenberg, J.H., *The Influence of Islam*, (University of Washington Press, 1946), p. 68-70.
- ¹⁰ Gilliland, D., *African Religions Meet Islam*, (University Press of America, 1986), p. 23.
- ¹¹ A comprehensive descriptive account of Hausa animism is found in Major A.J.N. Tremearne's book, *The Ban of the Bori*, 488 pages, originally published in 1914 and reprinted by Frank Cass in 1968.
- ¹² *Human Relations Area Files*, Smith, 1954, p. 222.
- ¹³ *Human Relations Area Files*, Greenberg, p. 206-208.
- ¹⁴ Dihoff, Gretchen, *Katsina: Profile of a Nigerian City*, (Eastbourne: Praeger International Ltd., 1970). A picture of a saint's tomb is found on page 57.
- ¹⁵ Lenning, L. G., *Blessing in Mosque and Mission*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library Publishers, 1980), p. 50.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ¹⁷ Trimingham, J.S., *Islam in West Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 115.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59, 60.
- ²⁰ Gilliland, p. 119.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.