Prayer Has Spoiled Everything

ADELINE MASQUELIER

Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger

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POSSESSION, POWER, AND IDENTITY IN AN ISLAMIC TOWN OF NIGER

Adeline Masquelier

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For Margaux, Eléonore, and Julia

In the hope that it will inspire them to do their best
while always keeping a sense of humor and perspective,
I dedicate this book to them.

There is no place that is not haunted
by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can
“invoke” or not. Haunted places are the only ones
people can live in.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

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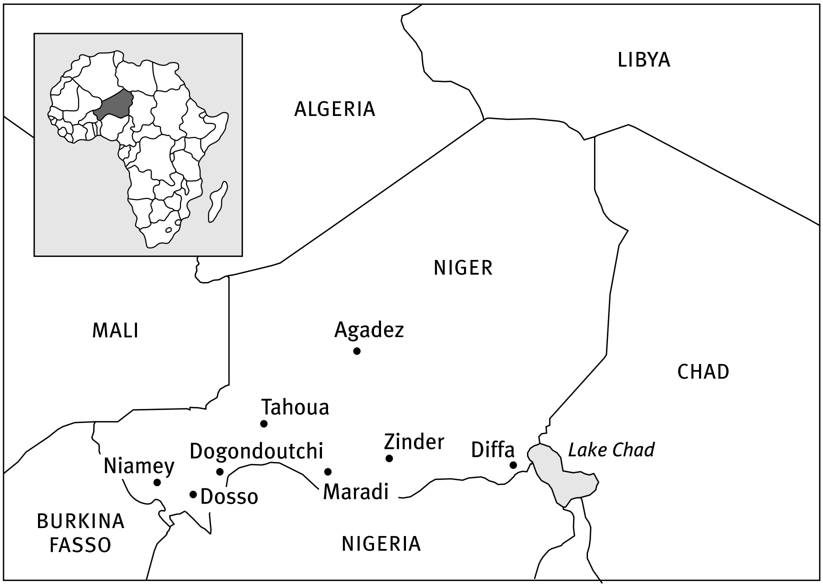
Terms

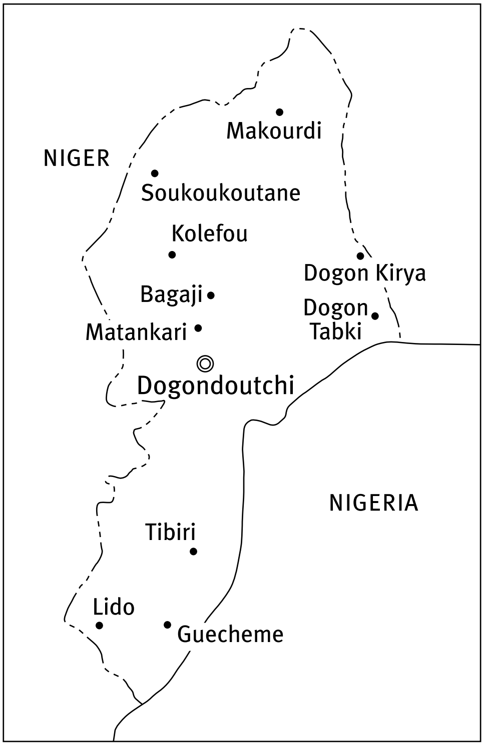
al'ada	custom
alhaji	man who has accomplished the pilgrimage to Mecca
alhazai	the merchant class, most of whom have accomplished the pilgrimage to Mecca (plural of *alhaji*)
aljanu	jinn, spirits (plural of *aljani,* m., and *aljana,* f.)
amarya	bride; *bori* initiate
arme	marriage
arziki	good fortune; prosperity; well-being
Azna	non-Muslim Mawri who worship indigenous spirits under the leadership of the *‘yan kasa,* or local priestly elders
biki	ceremony; celebration for a marriage or a naming ceremony
boka	healer; native doctor (*bokaye,* plural)
bori	a type of spirit; the practices surrounding possession by such spirits; more generally, the worship of these spirits
budurwa	unmarried girl
ci	to eat; to win over someone; to have sex
ciki	belly, stomach, insides; pregnancy
daji	bush; wilderness
‘dan bori	"son of the *bori*"; *bori* spirit medium
‘dan ‘kasa	"son of the earth"; Azna priest
doki	horse; spirit medium
fura	millet porridge
gado	heritage
gargajiya	olden times; tradition
gari	town
garka	fenced plot, open space in front of compound, area where *bori* possession ritual is held
gida	house; household
goro	cola nut
gumba	raw millet paste
gyara	arrangement; *bori* initiation
gyaran gari	seasonal ritual performed to protect a town or village

hajiya	woman who has accomplished the pilgrimage to Mecca
hango	altar for local spirit
hau	to ride; to possess
hauka	crazy; family of military spirits also known as the Baboule
iska	wind; spirit (*iskoki,* plural)
'karfi	strength
karuwa	prostitute
karuwanci	prostitution
'kasa	earth, land, ground; country
kashin 'kwarya	"breaking of the calabash"; *bori* mortuary ritual
kasuwa	market
kumya	shame, embarrassment; respect; avoidance relationship
kunu	sweet millet gruel consumed by new mothers during the postpartum period
kurwa	soul; vital essence
lahiya	health
likita	practitioner of biomedicine
magani	medicine, remedy
mai goge	violinist
mai 'kwarya	calabash player
mai yanka	spirit devotee appointed to perform sacrifice
malam	male Koranic scholar; cleric (*malamai,* plural)
malama	female Koranic scholar
maroka	musicians (plural of *maroki*)
mata	woman; wife
maye	sorcerer; witch (*mayu,* plural)
miya	spicy sauce served to accompany *tuwo*
mutanen daji	"people of the bush"; spirits (*mutun daji,* singular)
namiji	husband
sa'a	luck
sadaki	bridewealth
salla	prayer, often synonymous with "Islam"
sana'a	trade; craft; any income-generating activity
sarauniya	queen
sarauta	ruling elite; aristocracy; official position held by members of the aristocracy
sarki	chief or traditional ruler

sarkin bori	chief of *bori*
saurayi	young unmarried man; youth
sha	to drink; to have sex
shan ice	*bori* initiatory ceremony
shari'a	Koranic law
takarda	paper; divorce papers; certificate
talakawa	commoners; peasants; the poor
tarkama	judgment by ordeal during which the corpse of the deceased Azna priest designates his successor
tuwo	staple food of millet or guinea corn grits served with *miya*
ulema	learned Muslim men
umma	worldwide community of Muslim believers
wasa	play; entertainment; joking; *bori* ceremony (*wasani,* plural)
wasam bori	bori ceremony
yanka	to cut, to slaughter, to sacrifice
'yan bori	"children of the bori"; *bori* devotees (plural of *'dan bori*)
'yan 'kasa	"children of the earth"; Azna priestly elders (plural of *'dan 'kasa*)
zaure	entrance room to a compound


LIBYA
ALGERIA
NIGER
MALI
Agadez
CHAD
Tahoua
Dogondoutchi
Zinder
Diffa
Lake Chad
Niamey
Dosso
Maradi
BURKINA
FASSO
NIGERIA

Niger.

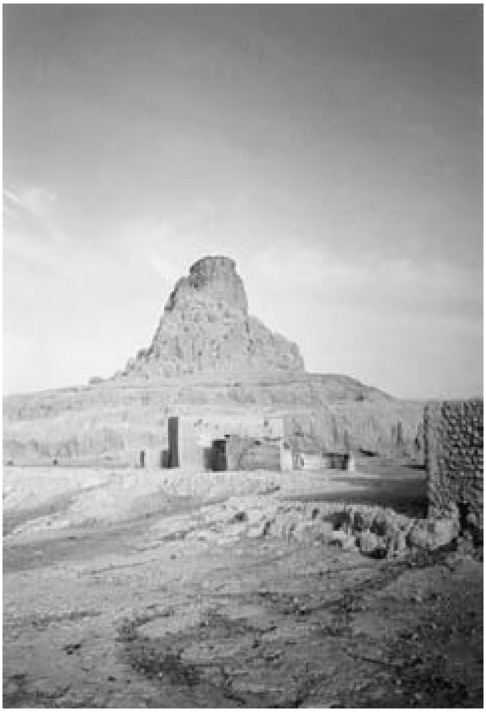

Makourdi
NIGER
Soukoukoutane
Kolefou
Dogon Kirya
Bagaji
Dogon
Tabki
Matankari
Dogondoutchi
NIGERIA
Tibiri
Lido
Guecheme

Arrondissement of Dogondoutchi.

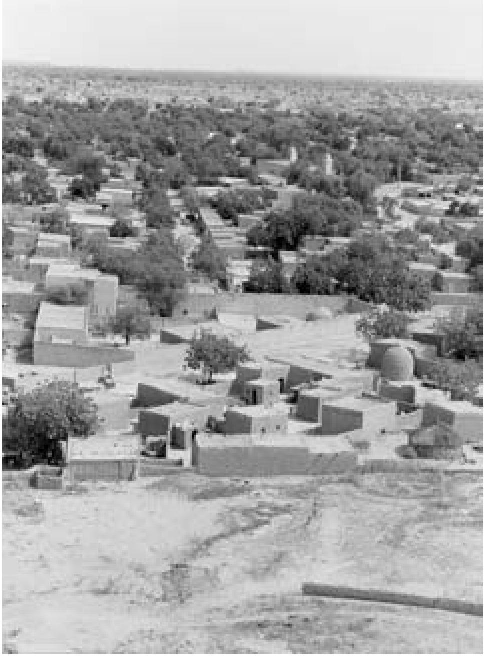
Introduction

Dogondoutchi. The name variously evokes a haven for ancestral traditions, a center of anti-Islamic resistance, or a place filled with spirits dangerous for most Nigeriens, be they Zarma, Hausa, Fulani, or Tuareg. With a population of over 30,000, this Hausaphone Mawri community of northern Arewa is the size of a small regional "urban" center. Yet the collection of earthen homesteads clustered along a grid of unpaved streets that dwindle into footpaths gives it more the appearance of a large village huddling at the foot of the *dogon doutchi*—the "long stone," a rocky peak that towers over the nearly treeless savanna like a giant termite hill visible from miles away. Originally composed of a village core surrounded by small hamlets, Dogondoutchi has grown and progressively absorbed these neighboring communities. The overall town now counts fifteen *quartiers* (neighborhoods) and is the administrative seat of the *arrondissement* (district) bearing its name. It is a magnet for people who live in scattered hamlets throughout the district. They come to visit the weekly market, seek treatment at the dispensary, attend Sunday service at the Catholic mission, register their children in school, or mail a letter from the post office.

Save for a few dozen Fulani and Tuareg families who make a living herding their neighbors' cattle and sheep, villagers are sedentary farmers. They cultivate millet, sorghum, beans, and groundnut, the soil for which they till exclusively by hoe. Rainfall is highly variable, however, and the intensification of cash cropping has impoverished the soil and made good farmland scarce. The overharvesting of firewood has further hastened the process of desertification already under way. Over 140 years ago, the German explorer Barth described Arewa as rugged but "mostly covered with dense forest only now and then broken by a small tract of cultivated ground" (1857, 122). Later, the French geographer Élisé Reclus wrote of a region endowed with thick soils and "palm trees, bushy trees growing in picturesque clusters" (1887, 582). Today, northern Arewa is a dry savanna



The rocky peak after which the town of Dogondoutchi was named stands against the late afternoon sky. All photos by Adeline Masquelier.



A sprawling Dogondoutchi neighborhood with its mud homes and clusters of trees. In the background, the town mosque where Muslims gather for the Friday afternoon prayer.

where large trees remain few and far. While old men recall dreamily a time when Dogondoutchi was surrounded by a thick forest filled with wild animals of all sorts, many, among the younger generation, complain about land shortage. Faced with dwindling opportunities and resources, many of them have had to migrate to the city on a seasonal or even, sometimes, permanent basis.

Despite the unforgiving environment, the cycles of hunger and poverty, and the failure of successive development projects, Dogondoutchi is a bustling community. At sunrise, the soft, rhythmic clunks of pestles meeting the bottoms of mortars signal women's first involvement in the daily culinary preparations. The smoke of cooking fires soon rises in the misty air. As Fulani herders gather everyone's cows, sheep, and goats to lead them to the bush, petty traders are setting up tables covered with various small items they sell by the unit—candy, soap, perfume, medicine, batteries, matches, cassettes. Women sweep their courtyards with brooms without handles made of dried grass while old men, sitting in their doorways, survey the neighborhood. When the heat of midday becomes too oppressive, traffic in the sandy streets slows down to a trickle as villagers cling to the shade provided by acacias, baobabs, or mango trees. In their sun-drenched compounds, women seek shelter against the walls, away from the blistering heat, as they braid a neighbors' hair, roast peanuts, or fry bean cakes. As dusk approaches, the rhythmic thumping of pestles and mortars intensifies. The rising smoke of cooking fires mixes with the thick dust kicked up by the cattle returning from pasture. As men return home for a dinner of spicy millet or rice dishes, kerosene lamps are lit everywhere, their dim and quivering glows breaking the thick night to reveal the outlines of walls and doorways.

On certain nights, the sharp clatter of calabash drums bursts from the mud walls of a compound, drowning out the sound of sun-powered televisions that draw daily crowds of spectators in every neighborhood. People slowly gather in a circle as the musicians sing praise songs. These gatherings are public performances held for the mischievous and invisible beings that populate the bush. Frightening but also comforting, destructive yet, paradoxically, supportive of human projects, the wild forces that are tamed in the context of possession ceremonies are often called *mutanen daji* ("people of the bush") or simply *bori*. This book is an account of how they intervene—sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically—in human lives to provide a constantly renewed source of meaning for Mawri peasants confronted with cultural contradictions and socioeconomic marginalization. In exploring the role of bori possession in local definitions of history, power, and identity, I have focused on the diverse ways in which spirit mediums share, transform, and contest a rapidly changing reality, threatened by Muslim hegemony and financial hardship.

For spirit devotees, the spread of Islam in Arewa has provoked unfortunate and irremediable changes. Prayer, a conspicuous element of daily life that has become virtually synonymous with Islamic practice in this region of west Africa, is thus equated with the loss of tradition and what was once "authentic" value. Hence, the title of this book, *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything,* is drawn from the disabused testimony of Adamou, a fifty-year-old spirit medium who routinely illuminated my understanding of things Mawri with his insightful commentaries on the costs and challenges of modernity. Adamou's disenchantment notwithstanding, the followers of the spirits are hardly powerless or "dispossessed" (Sharp 1993) in this region of Niger (see Map 1). The analyses in this book constitute an attempt to demonstrate how possession is implicated in the *making* of the Mawri lived world by focusing on some of the creative and complex ways that bori at once competes with and borrows from Islam and other wider processes of social transformation to mediate what many perceive as a widening gap between former ways of life and the contradictions of the present.

Prayer Has Spoiled Everything opens in chapter 1 with a discussion of the various theoretical perspectives on spirit possession around or against which I situate my own approach to bori. This review of the literature, which focuses primarily on the issues of meaning and marginality, power and resistance, is followed by a brief history of Arewa. The chapter then ends with a description of some of the orientations, strategies, and limitations of my ethnographic research.

In chapter 2, I lay out the background against which bori has emerged and describe the role played by the spirits in charting the land on which the first occupants established their settlements. I discuss the disappearance of pre-Islamic communal rituals and the sense of loss currently felt by spirit devotees in the wake of Islam's progressive erasure of the moral geography in which non-Muslim Mawri traditionally anchored their history and identity. In chapter 3, I provide a general overview of bori and those who have committed themselves to serving the spirits as musicians, mediums, or healers. In chapter 4, I trace the significance of bori meanings in quotidian discourse and practice to emphasize the contextual dimension of the possession experience and to concretize the tacit and latent communication that exists between spirits and hosts on a daily basis.

I got to know certain spirits quite well during my fieldwork. The fickle Maria admiring her lovely reflection in a looking glass, the fearful Zarma siblings who control rain and lightning, and the fierce Baboule, immune to the effects of fire, have all captured my own imagination. In the process of writing their story, I found myself struggling with the problem of how to translate in anthropological language the rich, vibrant, and multilayered texture of bori experiences when much of the content of these experiences remained unarticulated. Rather than providing an objective—and therefore necessarily incomplete—listing of bori spirits with their basic characteristics,[1] I have opted for a narrower focus on selected members of the local pantheon who typify bori's potential for concretizing many of the elusive processes of transformation that have impacted Mawri society. Such an intimate discussion of the creative or, conversely, destructive role spirits play in orchestrating people's lives allows me to locate bori within the context of quotidian meanings shaping the cultural understandings through which ‘yan bori share, mediate, or contest a constantly evolving reality. In chapter 5, I examine the Baboule spirits, focusing on their emergence in the 1920s. I explore how spirit mediums crafted an alternative economy in their creative efforts to rebel against the French colonial state while paradoxically appropriating its emblems of power and its techniques for producing wealth. The themes of chapter 6 resonate with those of chapter 5: they center around what I call the ritual economy of bori in contemporary Dogondoutchi. Here the contested authority is no longer a colonial administration but the rapidly growing body of Muslims who have taken control of the networks of trade. There again, protest goes hand in hand with compliance in the ‘yan bori's response to Muslim ascendancy over local commerce. As we shall see, the mediums' efforts to appropriate new modes of generating value are motivated by an urgency to reclaim the partially effaced map of the moral landscape onto which, as seen in chapter 2, people inscribed their mythical connections to the spirits in pre-Islamic times.

The recent encroachment of Muslim practices in Arewa has impacted Mawri society well beyond the domain of marketing. Among other things, the progressive adoption of Islamic norms has altered local perceptions of femininity, reinforcing the need to harness female sexuality through the institutions of marriage, seclusion, and motherhood. Mawri women's tendency to embody evil and contradiction is explored in chapter 7 through a discussion of the relationship between female sexuality, power, and possession. Focusing on the semantics of sweetness, I explore how the concept of things sweet meaningfully ties together the contexts of prostitution, alimentation, and obstetrics. As an icon of luxury, pleasure, and eroticism, sweetness in its many forms addresses the threats of uncontrolled consumption through its personification as the enigmatic and perverse Maria spirit. In chapter 8, I discuss yet another dimension of the 'yan bori's ongoing efforts to rework the terms of their authority in communities that have witnessed the growing control of Muslims in village affairs, this time by focusing on resistance to rather than complicity with Islam. I examine bori interpretations of lightning to illuminate how such discourse can become an instrument of coercive power in the hands of a minority seeking both to reassert its indispensability and to redefine the parameters of superhuman justice. By branding on the minds of their opponents an alternative moral order, bori devotees provide a conceptual framework for understanding sudden tragedies while at the same time contesting hegemonic Muslim values. In the conclusion, I reflect upon the seemingly paradoxical implications of change and continuity for spirit mediums who have consistently used the bori both as a form of anchorage into the past and as a locus for the mediation of historical transformations. Since both the spirits and their devotees can be either male or female, the pronouns "he" and "she" will be used interchangeably. Unless otherwise noted, all translations throughout the text are my own.

Chapter 1

Bori, Power, and Identity in Dogondoutchi

The traffic in spirits is almost as widespread and intensive as the teaching of Islam.—I. M. Lewis, *Religion in Context*

In one of her praise songs for the spirits, the nationally known Mawri singer Tagimba declares that "those who say they have no spirits are liars." There is much truth in the *griotte*'s (praise singer) statement for Dogondoutchi residents who take the presence of spirits in people's existence to be a self-evident fact of life. There are spirits in many—some would say, all—Mawri households who attend to the needs of their human counterparts or who, conversely, inflict endless torments on them. The powers of these superhuman forces are sometimes denied by the very people in whose lives they interfere for better or for worse. Yet even those Muslims who most vehemently castigate bori devotees for their "sinful" practices cannot deny ever witnessing in their childhood a grandfather or father's sacrificial offering to the tutelary spirits. While such memories may have become part of the dead stuff of *gargajiya* (tradition) for those who have opted to follow the teachings of the Koran, they remain an important source of meaning for bori mediums who have chosen to serve the spirits. As these mediums eventually age and die, spirits must look for other suitable, yet equally transient, vessels to possess. That these spirits may find no adequate hosts in whose body to incarnate themselves, or that they make no immediate demands on the descendants of their former devotees, rarely means that they are gone forever, as some, who today profess skepticism or indifference, may find out sooner or later. Spirits come and go, but as bori devotees like to forcefully remind their Muslim foes, they are always nearby, waiting perhaps for the right occasion to reinsert themselves in a human frame.

Besides pointing to the inescapable contiguity between the world of humans and the world of spirits, Tagimba's ironic statement also highlights the complex patterns of secrecy, complicity, and competition that characterize relations between members of the bori, who call themselves *'yan bori* ("children of the bori," or devotees of the bori), and Muslims. In their eagerness to demarcate themselves from bori identity, most Muslims will confidently declare that they want nothing to do with fetishes, spirits, or sacrifices. Yet every one of them, bori devotees will tell you, has had recourse to the services of bori healers, and may have even sacrificed to a spirit to insure a son's academic success or a daughter's recovery from illness. In the cautionary message she delivers to her Hausa-speaking audience, Tagimba seems to imply that many Muslims are acting like hypocrites by choosing to ignore, and even disparage, the spirits when they no longer need them.

At another level, the singer's denunciation of Muslim shallowness and duplicity partly illustrates the extent to which Islamic and bori identities overlap despite concerted efforts, on both sides, to reaffirm distinctive forms of knowledge, practice, and morality. The interaction between Islamic and indigenous world views has been extensive and complex; when 'yan bori choose to go on the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) or when Muslims turn up at possession ceremonies, the difficulties one faces in trying to pinpoint what distinguishes a follower of the Prophet from a spirit medium are further compounded.

The problem of analyzing bori in light of prevailing Muslim discourse is a complex one because bori has always maintained an ambiguous relationship with Islam: as will become clear, members of the bori tend to protest the hegemony of Islam while paradoxically borrowing from the Muslim repertoire of signifiers that they see as a reservoir of power ready to be tapped. In so doing, spirit devotees appear to revise the script of Islamic domination at the same time that they reassert the viability and centrality of indigenous values. The fact that those who seek the assistance of the spirits sometimes do so indirectly or secretly so as not to tarnish their Muslim identity only renders more problematic any attempt to locate bori within local networks of power relations, and to assess its continued influence in the lives of Dogondoutchi residents.

Bori is not a refuge from the inequities of modern life. It does not solely address the plight of divorced or childless women—as is mostly the case in the ethnographic realities described by Monfouga-Nicolas (1972) and Schmoll (1991); nor does it exclusively cater to the needs of those who identify themselves as devotees of the spirits. Bori, and this is where its strength resides, knows no boundaries and has no set territory because it often operates through the deployment of powerful tropes that touch the core of Mawri experience. In short, the strength of bori lies more in the grasp spirits have on the collective imagination than in the size of its visible membership. Through its broad concerns with the articulation of conflict-laden experience, bori speaks to a host of issues that transcend the confines of individual afflictions or personal crises to address the problems of entire communities variously confronted with such disruptive circumstances as the impact of colonial rule, the emergence of novel forms of production, or the raw reality of lightning—to cite some of the themes discussed at length in the following chapters.

Despite its centrality in the life of numerous communities, households, and families, in the last forty years bori has lost much ground to Islam on the visible terrain of religious practice. As more youths embrace Islam, and as bori devotees become increasingly pressured by local Muslim elites to abandon "traditional" rituals that, by official Islamic standards, are simply backward and sinful, it becomes relevant to ask whether bori will remain a significant force in Mawri history and society. Despite the fact that the recently adopted Charte nationale of Niger constitutionally guarantees the right of "Islam, animism, Christianity and all other forms of belief [to] coexist to answer the spiritual and social needs of Nigerien populations" (République du Niger 1987, 37), in Dogondoutchi and elsewhere bori is not awarded the same consideration as Islam.

In the face of Muslims' growing control over the nexus of trade, administration, and political leadership, some scholars have expressed the opinion that belief in spirits will fade over time as orthodox Islam becomes more firmly entrenched in rural communities. Guy Nicolas (1975) has suggested, for instance, that pre-Islamic signs and practices, which were intimately linked to a subsistence economy, have been weakened by the arrival of money and the shift to commercial agricultural production. Arguing that commodity capitalism and its socioeconomic impacts cannot be accounted for in the "traditional" system, he noted, for instance, the deleterious effects of the 1968–74 drought on bori: because they were not powerful enough to avert the climatic catastrophe, spirits have lost some of their prestige in the eyes of people. Such interpretation is contradicted by the studies of Échard (1992), who found that the massive hunger of the seventies provided renewed impetus for representing and acting upon historical forces via spirit possession: in the neighboring region of Ader, east of Dogondoutchi, a new female spirit associated with crickets made her appearance on the bori arena in 1973. She went by the name of Bobo, a term that refers to one of the twenty different species of crickets found in Ader. She had come from the west with the crickets, she said, to devastate the country. Other spirits of Zarma origin also appeared at that time to destroy Ader communities by throwing lightning. These dangerous figures symbolized Zarma political and economic domination: at independence, the numerically dominant Hausa—of which the Mawri are a subgroup—became politically controlled by the Zarma minority. Through their possession by violent and destructive spirits who caused hunger and harm, villagers expressed their sense that the famine was caused by the government's mismanagement of the national economy (Échard 1992).

I never heard of Bobo in Dogondoutchi but found numerous expressions of the bori's creative potential for mediating the shift to an increasingly monetarized economy. As will become apparent, bori provides a crucial medium for representing the unseen, interpreting the novel, and mediating the foreign. This ability to explain and act upon the puzzles, paradoxes, and disruptions of Mawri society by investing seemingly unambiguous media—the marketplace, a lightning bolt, or the sweetness of sugar—with newly relevant significations is what makes bori a productive, practical, and viable alternative to Islam for those who experience an increasing loss of control over the forces that give their lives meaning.

This book is an attempt to situate bori at the intersection of local experience and wider, encompassing processes in order to trace the transformations of Mawri symbols and values that, despite predictions of their impending obsoleteness in the face of Islamic expansion, have remained relevant and meaningful for many of those who seek to assert their own agency in contemporary Arewa. In my discussion of Mawri people's engagement with the spirit world, I treat possession as a dynamic force of history and analyze the idioms and tropes of bori as an expression of social consciousness. While bori often provides a lens through which to remember an idealized past, it also serves as an important arena in which to articulate the problems of contemporary life. Such capacity to simultaneously manage the forces of tradition and innovation is what enables bori to transform the experience of novel, ambiguous, or threatening realities into symbols of a shared consciousness. In drawing particular attention to the imaginative and agentive dimensions of possession, one may describe bori as a force in constant flux, whose representations remain perpetually shifting, often contested, and rarely totally articulated. It will be seen that the potency of bori in changing contexts of engagement between the local and the global is intimately tied to the historical circumstances in which its images and practices acquire their meanings.

Anthropological Approaches to Possession

Possession in its various cultural forms has long been an object of fascination for social scientists and psychiatrists attempting to interpret the nature of this profound religious drama. For early anthropologists intent upon classifying the alien and the exotic, possession was a theatrical form of hysteria, a disease that, as its name indicates (*hystera* means "womb" in Greek) prevailed among women. Following Plato ([1929],1981) who diagnosed trance as symptomatic of a distressed womb unable to generate children, researchers insisted on the pathological dimension of spirit possession. Frazer (Beattie and Middleton 1969, xxiv), for instance, wrote that in "savage" societies, possession was:

> commonly invoked to explain all abnormal mental states, particularly insanity or conditions of mind bordering on it. So these persons more or less crazed in their wits, and particularly hysterical or epileptic patients, are for that very reason thought to be peculiarly favoured by the spirits and are therefore consulted as oracles, their wild and whirling words passing for the revelations of a higher power, whether a god or a ghost, who considerably screens his too dazzling light under a thick veil of dark sayings and mysterious ejaculations.

Several decades later, the association between madness and possession remained the operating paradigm. Devereux wrote that shamans should be seen as "suffering from serious neurosis, or even as a psychotic in a state of temporary remission" (1970, 15). Bastide also took for granted the pathological dimension of possession, entitling one of his works *Le rêve, la transe, et la folie* (1972). In an essay on mediumship, de Heusch wrote that "trance can be seen as the cultural aspect of mental illness or as the 'madness of the gods' " (1971, 256). And Jean Rouch gave to his famous film on spirit possession among Nigerien migrants in Ghana the title of *Les maîtres fous* (The Mad Masters) (1956).

With the debate still raging over whether or not religious trance should be explained in pathological terms, anthropologists began to adopt a functionalist framework in their analyses of possession based upon an increasing concern with healing as a concept with the potential to resolve social contradictions. Such efforts were part of a widespread current of change in Anglo-American anthropology as functionalism took over the discipline. In the field of religious studies, such a move was heralded by Ioan Lewis's claim that possession—as a universal category of behavior that, together with shamanism, could fall under the rubric *ecstatic religion*—must be studied as a social phenomenon having to do with power and marginality (1966). Lewis's cross-cultural characterization of the powerless predictably spawned further studies of possession as viable strategies of redress for marginalized, deprived, or subordinate individuals in male-centered cultures or competitive contexts (Besmer 1983; Gomm 1975; Gussler 1973; Onwuejeogwu 1969; Wilson 1967). A parallel focus on possession as problem-solving process led other analysts to privilege the therapeutic dimensions of possession at the expense of its religious, aesthetic, and historical significance (Crapanzano 1973; Field 1960; Kennedy 1967; Messing 1958; Prince 1968; Ward 1980). Similarly eschewing the embededness of trance phenomena in a system of cultural meanings, Kehoe and Giletti have proposed a biological model that links women's participation in possession to calcium deficiency (1981; see also Raybeck, Shoobe, and Grauberg 1989).

The medicalization of possession in the Anglo-American literature can be contrasted with the more meaning-centered approach that has prevailed in French anthropology (see Boddy 1994; Csordas 1987). In the latter, the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions are often the focus of the study (Bastide 1978; Métraux 1958; Rouch 1989; Rouget 1985). Rather than casting ritual in a rationalist framework, some of these approaches have hovered between ethnographic analysis and literary account to become poetic testimonies to the complex reality of possession (Balandier 1957; Gibbal 1994; Leiris 1958; Rosenthal 1998). Such attention to aesthetic issues has led to an increased focus on the theatricality of possession (Leiris 1958; Métraux 1958; Schaeffner 1965). From this perspective, the possessed mediums are cultural actors who enact a play in front of an audience that shares with the performers an understanding of the staged sequence of events. Like a theater play, the ritual drama always reaches a denouement; categories, feelings, and relationships are expressed in an exaggerated manner, and the social processes of everyday life are epitomized in a stereotypical fashion (see Turner 1968).

Yet, as Kapferer notes in his ethnography of Sri Lankan demonic exorcism, performance is not merely the enactment of a text "reducible to terms independent of its formation as a structure of practice" (1983, 7). It is rather the union of text and performance in the sense that a text takes its shape and becomes experienced through performance. In short, the text constitutes the performance as much as it is constituted by the performance. This notion of a dialectical interplay between text and performance has important implications for the way one conceptualizes change and creativity in possession. The case of *vodou* in Haiti is a perfect example of how action as text shapes and is shaped by the actors' experience (Brown 1991). Yet when early anthropologists, who had come to take for granted the precise and rigidly orchestrated performances of Brazilian or Dahomean possession, observed the apparently chaotic displays of Haitian vodou, they saw in them a sign of degeneration. For Métraux, the frantic pace, the violent motions, and the frequent outbursts of passion and frenzy—which were only found in Haitian vodou—were a manifestation of anarchy, an indication that Haitian actors did not "follow the text" (1958). Other scholars interpreted them as a sign that old African ways were progressively being forgotten (Larose 1977).

Fortunately, more contemporary works have demonstrated how a revised concept of possession as a ritually enacted text can shape interpretive analyses of such practices both as lived-in experience and as rich and complex cultural statements (Boddy 1989; Lambek 1981; Rasmussen 1995; Rosenthal 1998). For Boddy, the aesthetic and therapeutic power of a *zar* (indigenous spirit "cults" found primarily in East Africa) possession ritual lies precisely in the fact that when it is enacted, the text takes on a life of its own and is open to multiple readings and interpretations (1989, 150). Stoller put a different spin on the theatrical metaphor to suggest that the sounds of *holey* ceremonies are the voices of the ancestors whose dramatic message is amplified through the musicians' instruments and the mediums' screams (1989a).

Recent ethnographies that explore how possession enables devotees to articulate a wide range of social, historical, and moral experiences have been influential to my thinking about the role and significance of bori in Mawri society. Whether they focus on the performative qualities of possession, its historical significance, or its embededness in quotidian contexts, these studies are largely concerned with the province of meaning. Replacing earlier models that sought to explain encounters between humans and spirits in universally valid terms, they explore the cultural logic of possession in terms of local definitions of identity, morality, knowledge, power, or memory, without losing sight of wider political and historical contexts (Boddy 1989; Comaroff 1985; Janzen 1992; Kapferer 1983; Kramer 1993; Lambek 1981, 1993; Lan 1985; Matory 1994a; Ong 1987; Rosenthal 1998; Sharp 1993; Wafer 1991). Drawing upon Ricoeur's notion of the text—which, once "written," takes a life of its own and opens itself up to the interpretation of cultural actors, audiences, ethnographers, and readers—Lambek argues that possession must be situated "within the wider system of meaning" in which it emerges (1981, 60). This is precisely what is attempted here by taking possession to be a culturally constituted, shared, but also contested idiom for the expression of affliction in its multiple guises. Interpreting possession (see Rabinow and Sullivan 1987) rather than explaining it—in terms of its function—makes it possible to show how its practices are grounded in the encompassing cultural logic that shapes people's quotidian efforts to act upon the world. On the other hand, such an approach has the distinct disadvantage of allowing one to ignore just how important possession "really" is to those who experience it. The symptoms of possession are not free-floating signifiers; they are anchored in an "organic" medium that partly controls their generation, emergence, and proliferation. At the same time, they cannot be isolated and extracted from the social reality through which they are experienced. The challenge, then, is to explain the "real" of possession without explaining it away through a singular focus on the "meaningfulness" of the phenomenon. While this book offers little in the way of a model on how to face this challenge, it nonetheless tries to convey the importance of possession and the reality of its effects through analyses of *specific* situations, particularly as they pertain to the Muslim/bori debate on what possession is and does.

Returning to a discussion of the approaches that have shaped this work, it should be noted how essential to the following ethnographic analysis is Boddy's notion that it is the mundane environment of possession that "empowers it to convey a range of meaning" (1989, 8). In her richly nuanced ethnography of zar in a Sudanese village, Boddy draws on the work of Bourdieu and Foucault to argue that spirit possession in Hofriyat is a meaningful discourse—inspired by a largely implicit cultural scheme—upon which women draw to articulate their experience of everyday life. By carefully locating zar in relation to local constructions of gender, fertility, and morality, she conveys possession as a palpable reality and as a multifaceted phenomenon whose richness and complexity can be uncovered only through a culturally sensitive analysis. In her own words, "Possession is a holistic reality. It penetrates all facets and levels of human life. . . . Possession has numerous significances and countless implications: it defies simple explanation. It has no necessary cause, no necessary outcome. Its province is meaning, and it is best addressed in that light" (Boddy 1989, 136). By focusing on the symbols and images that inform possession practices, and allowing ambiguity to emerge out of their polysemantic nature, Boddy vividly captures the essence of zar's social vitality as well as its ideological power. Just as zar provides an arena in which Hofriyati women can recognize that Islamic values are "cultural constructs, not immutable truths" (Boddy 1989, 1), this ethnography offers analyses of bori's capacity to open conceptual spaces where the givenness of Muslim values and conventions can be substantially undermined.

Marginality Reconsidered

This chapter opened with Tagimba's observation that in Arewa there are spirits everywhere, in order to convey the limitations of classic models of possession that take for granted the liminality of spirits, the polarization of gender-distinct domains of knowledge and power, and the homogeneity of Islamic (or elsewhere Christian) experiences. Before describing how power and peripherality figure in my analysis of bori, a brief review of the literature on gender and subordination is in order. The assumption that going into trance enables the powerless to symbolically express their predicament has long dominated the field of possession studies. It originated in the work of I. M. Lewis (1966, 1967, 1986, 1989, 1991), who, as noted above, argued that possession functioned as the dispossessed and the marginal's thinly disguised means of protest against the powerful. Those who were possessed were by and large women who used spirits as "oblique strategies of attack" when no other means to express frustration or exact concessions were available (Lewis 1967, 626). From this perspective, marginality is the common denominator of spirit possession phenomena. It also the prime explanation for women's involvement in these activities. Marginality thus becomes a sex-specific trait that is found universally rather than being the product of particular social or historical circumstances.

While possession that emerges from the tensions of marital life allows for the expression of social contradiction, such contradiction is never resolved by the staging of a possession ceremony. Nor is the woman's status modified by her momentary display of power. Like rituals of status reversal that "reaffirm the order of structure" (Turner 1969, 177), possession reinforces a wife's subaltern status because as a "mock" rebellion, it only serves to insure that the structures of male authority are preserved from a "real" rebellion. This model of female oppression has been criticized from a variety of perspectives. In her perceptive study of mediumship and migration in a Madagascar town, Sharp provides convincing evidence that *tromba* (possession by spirits of dead Sakalawa royalty) constitutes a central—rather than peripheral—aspect of Sakalava society that permanently empowers its participants (1993). Giles similarly shows that female mediums in Mombasa, Kenya, are not marginal members of their society and that possession is an important component of Swahili society (1987).

Giles further points out that the very idea of marginality often originates from highly subjective and ideological assessments made about the possession group and its members by nonmembers (235). Regardless of women's contributions to their society and of their own vision of morality, their official status is what determines the peripheral status of their possession activities. Lewis, himself, recognized that "the moral status of the spirits is by no means absolute, but *depends upon the position from which they are viewed*" (1989, 115, emphasis added). As I hope to demonstrate in the case of bori, the "liminal" and the "central" are largely imaginative categories of the cultural landscape that shift according to historical, social, and personal circumstances. Whether or not mediums succeed in negotiating their displacement