

Trance and Possession Rituals of Africa and the African Diaspora:

Bori, Voodoo, and Santeria

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2.05.13

Transcription:

One of the first things I want to take up on is that Dr. Breen talked about agency, and how a lot of times performances are just that. They provide the context for the group that is performing to somehow acquire the possibility of agency. That was one of the things that fascinated me with the possession and trance performances that I am going to talk about to you today. But before I do that, the link I want to also make is that the same possibility of agency exists in a lot of religious practices. I always amuse my students when I introduce them to the concept of culture and performance by saying that one of the differences between African religious philosophy and Christianity is that in Christianity human beings are made in the image of God. In Africa, on the other hand, we make God in our own image and we do that because of one basic reason, because we want to be able to control what God does. We want to understand Him. Limit His power. We can control Him, especially in relation to what He does, because whatever He does affects us as individuals or as members of the culture. I wanted to think about that because that is what religions are based on. Religion is about trying to understand things that are especially not visible to us. We want to make sense of them. We want to control them. We want to make the world and the universe work for us. And so, when I encountered the *Bori* trance possession rituals of the Hausa, one of the things that fascinated me was the close similarity that I found between this form of religion and the religious practices in the Caribbean and in North and South America and a lot of the trance and possession rituals that are found in West Africa. I will also say that Africa is joined by an umbilical cord to her Diasporas in the Caribbean, South America and North America. That umbilical cord is basically characterized and informed by cultural practices that travelled with the African slaves, and African enslaved children who went across the Middle Passage to the Caribbean. I however do not want to talk about transatlantic slavery. We all know what happened and that millions of African children, Africa's productive work force, were transported to the Caribbean. Now, the cultural and psychic links between Africa and the Americas, as I said, exist because of the things that these enslaved children carried with them. Because of what the children who survived the middle passage carried with them, and this embodied knowledge of Africa was the only thing that they could keep. It was their embodied knowledge of who they are and they tried as much as possible to represent this and to pass it on to their children. That was my fascination with the Caribbean. I grew up in Nigeria. I was never taught about transatlantic slavery in a History class. I studied the history of Canada, North America, and Europe. I never studied the Caribbean. I never studied South America. I never even studied African history. That was because of my colonial heritage. The first time I was introduced to a Caribbean play, one of the things that struck me was the language that the characters spoke. The play I was introduced to was Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and I started asking questions. Why does this play resonate with me? Then I even

tried to change my PhD thesis while at the University of Leeds to look for what it is that resonated with me when I read the play. That is how I came through the backdoor to study transatlantic slavery and that has remained my study and research ever since.

One of the things I want to talk to you about today is that I want to look at three practices I have identified: *Voodoo*, *Bori*, *Santería* as cultural practices. Basically, I am more interested in these forms than in a host of others. The subtitle of my paper states that there are enactments of transference of power and that one is not surprised that it is through religion, as I said, that humans acquire agency for themselves. It is no surprise that religion or religious practices, no matter that the slave masters in the New World tried to prevent the slaves from practising it, or in the context of *Bori* in West Africa among the Hausas, that no matter how hard Islam tried to suppress *Bori*, the *Bori* still remained active. One of the first things that drew me to *Bori* because it is a practice that is in the Northern part of my country, very distant and different from where I grew up; the first thing that struck me about *Bori* was that I thought it was mainly by women. Women remain the main members of the cult. Women were the main mediums that the spirits mounted or used when they wanted to come. And what struck me was that the north of the country was very strictly Muslim and of course we know the position of women within Islamic/Muslim society. And so to have a religious practice, a ritual performance that allowed these women to somehow wrest to power from their husbands, their fathers, their brothers, and their uncles who control the main Islamic power structure that keeps them on the margins was very fascinating for me. The second thing is that it was not only women that belonged to this cult in the *Bori* Houses, that there were also a lot of the oppressed groups in society that somehow found a home within the *Bori* cult. That therefore was my fascination with *Bori* and when I started looking at *Santería*, and when I started looking at *Voodoo*, I started seeing similar patterns. I began to see the same kind of patterns and the possibility one can imagine that gave the slaves the ability to somehow frame and manage to create a space for themselves where they could yourself where you engage with their embodies and remembered African cultures through invoking their African gods and spirits who had the qualities of at least terrorizing their masters, because from evidence the slave masters were really terrified of these spirits.

This takes me back to a recent incident in 2004 when I was documenting the *Bori* in Zaria Northern Nigeria. I had set up a meeting with the *Bori* group to study them, and when I arrived I found out they had been chased out of the city of Zaria by the Islamic fundamentalists, so the *Bori* had run away to the forest and I was led to them. One of the things that struck me about the *Bori* and its relation with dominant Muslim authority was that even people who were devout Muslims, and who viewed *Bori* as a very devilish sect, would go to the Mosque on Friday but on the other days of the week, when they had difficulties or issues, they would go and consult the *Bori* to see what the spirits had in store for them. I could see that kind of similarity in terms of the slave masters actually believing in the power of the spirits and in all of the *santero* and *santera* (male and female spirits) to be able to call on the spirits because in *Bori* it was known that the women, for instance, used it against their husbands to get what they wanted by getting them to do what the spirits ask them to do. This

was because when Africans were converted to Christianity and Islam, the spirit centred nature of their indigenous African religions never left them.

I now want to look at what the structures of these religious beliefs are and what they have in common. Alfred Metraux on *Voodoo* says that “the slaves imported from Africa in the eighteenth century, were baptized, forced to go to church, but they received no religious education. Thus they remained faithful to the one possession they had been able to bring with them, that is their beliefs. They remained even more attached since they were thus able to guard some hope, and in spite of the reality, to give their lives some meaning, thanks to certain values that these beliefs preserved ... (in Bing 1964, 28-29)”

Santeria gave them a sense of hope, something to cling on to. Something that would allow them to fashion their lives for themselves in spite of the slave environment they found themselves in. In spite of this environment, it gave their lives a meaning. It allowed them to organize themselves and it is thanks to this that some of these practices, that some of the values embedded within the African cultures that crossed the Atlantic with them, became preserved. In spite of the brutality of being put there from their indigenous African environment, they found themselves in the New World trying to resurrect in the various conditions of exile the religious framework with which they had been brought up in their former African homes. It is thanks to them that what today we regard as African Caribbean, African American practices, ideas and cultural values have remained.

Just to explain the connection that I found in terms of looking at the similarities between the three forms. Essentially, an African metaphysical framing of the world underpins the beliefs in the existence of spirits and in the power of the spirits to influence life on earth. Within *Bori*, for instance, the *Bori* pantheon started with the community that wanted to be able to control what happened to them and the idea that there is nothing that happens in the world that cannot be explained; that there is nothing that happens to human beings that is not attributed to spirits. If you have a spirit to be responsible for what was wrong or what is happening, whether good or bad, then you have the ability or you have placed yourself in the position to be able to appease that spirit. That is centrally what the *Bori* practice is about. If you had a headache, there is a spirit that is responsible for your headache. So, what do you do? You invite that spirit, and you play the spirit's music. Each spirit has music, a kind of music by which it is invited, by which it is recognized and appeased, and by which it can be negotiated with. So you play the music and you bring up the spirit into play and interact with it. That is basically what *Bori* is about; it is to give the human community the ability to deal with the human problems it faces. That, in fact, is what all religions do, they explain the universe and then the ritual practices attached to them are used to actualize the thinking behind the religion. That is what underpins the three practices that I am looking at here; whether it is *Santeria*, whether it is *Bori* and whether is *Voodoo*, it is this will of the spirits (whatever you call them, *Iwa* in *Voodoo*, the saints in *Santeria* or the will of saint, but actually it is the will of spirits, and I am happy to use the word *regla de ocha* which is the will of the Orixas which is a Yoruba word). It is the will of the spirits. We understand the spirits, then we understand ourselves. But we create the spirits. That is the paradox.

We humans created the spirits and all the attributes they have. What does it mean that they are responsible for or have power in our lives? That we are responsible for ourselves? There are basically three levels of life or planes of existence in African religious thought. We have the invisible world and we have the visible world. Within the visible world you have the world of the living and you have the world of the dead which is visible up to point. That is to say, you have the world of the ancestors and you have the world of the humans. Of the three worlds, the human world is in-between the other two. You have the dead, and you have the unborn. The two worlds at the extremes are invisible: they are spirit worlds. The human world is the material world. It is the material world that controls the spirit world, even though it looks as though it were the other way round. These religious practices are simply ways of controlling, ways of achieving agency for humans.

In terms of the enactments of subversion of power one of the things I found especially in studying *Bori* was that because when African people, even though they were converted to Christianity or to Islam, that their sense of the power of the spirits has never really left. What it means is that a lot of the marginalised people within society found in the *Bori* practice, and I am sure it is the same with the Orixas in the Caribbean, they found that if the spirits said something, because the spirits are perceived in the hierarchy above humans, so what the spirits say will be, takes precedence over what humans say. So anybody who has the power, the ability to invite the spirits, to control the spirits, to bring them, and make them say things -I deliberately use the word 'make them say things' - has the power to influence people. If you take that and transpose it to the IslamBori dynamic within Hausa society, the Muslims are powerful, politically and economically because it is a patriarchal society. Because they have not lost their sense of the power of the spirits, because they still go and consult the *Boris* in private, what it means is that the *Bori* who have the power to bring the spirits and let the spirits speak, automatically have the power to control those politicians and economically powerful, to tell them what to do, even to sometimes to tell the people who to vote for. I have not studied this paradox and dynamic within the Caribbean and the South American environments, but I find that it really does work in terms of using the spirits; and I find it fascinating that the women who are supposed to stay indoors in a predominantly Islamic society manage to get their husbands and their fathers, brothers, and uncles to actually do what they want them to do by telling them it is the spirits who are asking them to do it and it is that, within this particular dynamic of the belief in the power of the spirit, the wisdom of the spirit to know what is good for us, that the inversion of power takes place within these particular practices.