

## **Da'wah towards alleviating spirit worship and devil possession (bori) in Hausaland (Northern Nigeria)**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This research is a contribution and a piece of Da'wah work towards alleviating Spirit worship and Devil Possession (Bori) in Northern Nigeria. A detailed description of these un-Islamic trends was highlighted. The research also acknowledged the role of Da'wah of Shaykh Uthman bin Foduwe and other Muslim Scholars and religious organisations in their effort of educating the people on Islamic ideology and its practice, this has aided the reformation of the people and its impact is felt in reducing the evil of Spirit worship and Devil Possession (Bori) in Northern Nigeria. The research also acknowledged the introduction of Shari'ah legal system in Northern Nigeria starting from 2000 where Zamfara State implemented it and other states followed it. This had helped in reducing the practice of these un-Islamic Ideology/worship because under the new law they became punishable.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Da'wah, Description, Spirit worship, Devil Possession (Bori), Northern Nigeria, Alleviation.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

*Da'wah* is derived from the verb *da'a* (to call/invite), *yad'u* in the past continuous tense and the root is *Du'a* or *Da'wah*. In literal meaning, it is an attempt in the form of speech or activity for inclining or bending people to believe and have faith on certain idea which one is calling to.<sup>1</sup> Al-Ilori defined it as drawing people's attention and rationality toward an ideology which is of benefit and advantage to them. It is also, rescuing people from going astray or from tribulations which beset them.<sup>2</sup> It is the duty or profession of all the Messengers of Allah (The Almighty) and the very purpose that Allah sent them for the guidance of mankind. Their task without exception is to invite/call their various peoples or communities to believe in Allah, and to worship Him alone. Also *Da'wah* is the main pre-occupation of the Muslim scholars. They take the path of the Messengers of Allah by inviting and guiding people to Allah as well as fighting corruption in both ideology and practice prevalent in their communities. (See Q36:20 – 25; 41:33; 40:28 and 12:108). The following are some of the subject matter attracting *Da'wah* in Northern Nigeria. Wherever *Da'wah* exists, such societies are generally refined and polished. They gradually purge the evil tendencies and imperfections of their human nature to the life full of spiritual engagement.<sup>3</sup> (See Q3:110; 9:71; 7:157; 3:104 and 5:2)

### **II. SPIRIT WORSHIP**

Northern Nigeria was dominated by spirit worship before the arrival of Islam. Each clan had its own form of spirit worship. Everyday problems were ( and still are among the *Maguzawa* (the animists ) often thought to be caused by offending a spirit or ancestor. Good spirits are often called upon to help solve everyday problems.<sup>4</sup> According to Emeka C. Ekeke<sup>1</sup> and Chike A. Ekeopara:

Spirits are nondescript, immortal and invisible entities. This is because they do not possess material body through which they could be seen but they may incarnate into any material thing in order to make themselves seen for any reason or purpose...They are considered as powers which are almost abstract, as shades or vapours which take on human shape; they are immaterial and incorporeal beings. As immaterial and incorporeal, it is possible for them to assume various dimensions whenever they wish to be seen.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, they believe that spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, and rivers, in mountains, hills, valleys or just around the village and at road junctions. In fact they also live in the same environment with men; therefore, man has to try through various means to protect himself from their harmful touch since the spirits are stronger than him. This led to usage of various charms and amulets including magical powers, sacrifices and offerings to these spirits to please them and control and change the course of their action.<sup>6</sup> George, Tayo and Amusan, Tolulope also states that:

Amongst the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria also exist some elements of traditional acts of worship. An example is the "*Maguzawa*", the animist religion, which was practised extensively before Islam. In the more remote areas of Hausaland, *Maguzawa* has remained fully intact, although it is rarer in more urban areas. It often includes the sacrifice of animals for personal ends, but it is thought of as taboo to practise *Maguzawa* magic or harm. What remains in more populous areas is a "cult of spirit-possession" known as *Bori*, which still holds the old religion's elements of animism and magic. The *Bori* classification of reality has countless spirits, many of which are named and have specific powers.<sup>7</sup>

The spirit worship existed in Northern Nigeria long before the acceptance of Islamic religion after their conversion to Islam very few who remained pagans and also some ignorant Muslims continue to adapt the spirit worship. Examples of the spirits worshipped by the Hausa include "*Dogon Daji*" the Tall One of the Forest, "*Sarkin Rafi*" the Chief of the River, "*Kure*" the Hyena, and "*Gajimare*" the God of Rain and Storm. The worshipers would pray and perform rituals to any number of their spirits based on their belief. Spiritual possession is popularly a belief of the *yan bori* and though they had many named spirits to govern over their world, they also believed in nameless spirits which could possess a man and had to be cleansed from his body.<sup>8</sup> Belief in the invisible forces of spirits had for long existed among the Hausa people. This religious belief required ritual invocation as well as veneration of the tombs of the dead with the belief that the human souls in the tombs could take the shape of spirits, who were generally believed to possess super natural powers. It is generally believed that the force or spirit power is capable of controlling lives, fortunes and even the daily affairs and issues of their existence. Spirits possession and exorcism were practiced today by very few *Maguzawa* (pagans) in some parts of Hausaland. Pre-Islamic belief of the ancient Hausa speaking *Maguzawa* (pagans) revolves around an infinite number of spirits or (*Iskoki*, singular - *Iska*) and are to be found everywhere; in the sky, forest and hills, inside water and in the cities of men. There are about 3,000 *Iskoki* in the religion and they are also referred to today as *Al-Jannu* (singular Jinn).<sup>9</sup> *Magiro* cult is also identified as ancient and powerful cult of the Hausaland which developed out of the worship of the spirit of the ancestors and is often regarded as a grandfather of all fetishes. The baobab and tamarind trees are also considered as sacred and abode of the spirits, so is the riverside areas, thus, *Sarkin Rafi* – the king of the river refers to a water spirit, and also *Ayu* is a spirit living in water that is believed to be dragging people deep down into the water. Also among the hunters is the belief in the spirit referred to as *Uwar dawa* – a female goddess of hunting or forest mother. Similarly, *Uwar dawa*- corn mother is also a female goddess of agriculture having great spiritual influence on the ancient farmers. So also an evil spirit which makes men fight was referred to as *Kaura*.<sup>10</sup> Also the six major spirits are, the *Sarkin Aljan* the husband of *Mai'iyali*, a black spirit; king of all the spirits who is believed to cause headache among people. *Mai'iyali* "possessor of a family" is the wife of *Sarkin 'Aljan*, *Waziri* "vizier" is the Vizier of *Sarkin 'Aljan* who distributes the presents of *Sarkin 'Aljan* among the people. *Babban Maza* "great among men" and husband of *Inna*, *Manzo* "messenger" Son of *Babban Maza*, a hairy dog who devours souls and *Bagiro*, another Son of *Babban Maza* were all believed to cause loss of souls among people. The spirits are believed to dwell in the termite houses, garbage or refuse site, caves, rocks and hills.<sup>11</sup> Another aspect of ancestral worship among *Maguzawa* (pagans) people is "*Kangida*" (Totem), they were usually animals adored by respective families in which they took oath of allegiance to be ever ready to protect it and none of the family member will ever kill that animal or eat it. If any member of the family had eaten it he will certainly become ill and in case he had intentionally killed it, he will die, the punishment being meted out perhaps by the spirit of the totem.<sup>12</sup> Sacrifices to the spirits were offered, consisting of slaughtering of sheep, goats, or fowls, each spirit having its appropriate sacrificial animal. The purpose of the sacrificial acts is to furnish a spirit with the blood, which they believed to be part of spirits sustenance. Sometimes a model of the object connected with the spirit's activities is placed at the sacred tree; a bow and arrow for hunting spirit, a thunderstorm for the thunder deity, or an anvil for the spirit of iron working. And over this objects the blood of the sacrifice is made to flow.<sup>13</sup>

The above rituals were maintained by some Muslims who mixed Islam with syncretism practices after the advent of Islam in Hausaland. This is one of the reasons for the *Da'wah* of Shaykh Uthman bn Foduwe in 1804. It is also important to state here that even though some of them claimed to be Muslims by their praying, fasting and performing pilgrimage, yet they have faith in all that have been explained above about the spirit worship and accordingly committing *Shirk* as contained from the following evidences in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Allah the Almighty said:

And verily, We have sent among every *Ummah* (community, nation) a Messenger (proclaiming): 'Worship Allah (Alone), and avoid (or keep away from) *Taghut* (all false deities) (Q.16:36)

And Allah (SWT) said:

And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honor. And lower unto them the wing of submission and humility through mercy, and say: 'My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy as they did bring me up when I was small. (Q. 17:23, 24)

Again, it is narrated on the authority of Mu'adh b. Jabal that he observed:

I was riding behind the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) on an ass known as 'Ufair. He (Mu'adh) observed: He the Holy prophet said: "Mu'adh, do you know what right has Allah over His bondsmen and what right have His bondsmen over Him"? Mu'adh added: I replied: Allah and his Messenger know best. Upon this he (the Holy Prophet) remarked: "The right of Allah over His bondsmen is that they should worship Allah and should not associate anything with Him, and the right of His bondsmen over Allah the Glorious and Sublime, is that He does not punish him who associates not anything with Him". He (Mu'adh) added: I said to the Messenger of Allah: Should I then give the tidings to the people? He (the Holy Prophet) said: "Do not tell them this good news, for they would trust in it alone".<sup>14</sup>

### III. DEVIL POSSESSION (*BORI*)

Devil possession, popularly known in Hausaland as *Bori*, it is a practice through which its adherents claimed to be helping the public with protection of all kinds and cures from all types of diseases.<sup>15</sup> *Bori* is commonly described as a pre-Islamic spirit possession cult practiced by non-Muslim *Maguzawa* before the arrival of Islam in Hausaland. However, the cult has survived among some Muslim Hausa speaking population, who live mainly in the Northern part of Nigeria.<sup>16</sup> *Bori* practitioners constantly stressed that they did not choose this and that if they have had a choice, they would never have walked down this path. It is the spirits, called *iskoki* (singular *iska*), *bori*, *jinn* or *aljanu* (singular *aljan*) who have chosen them through illness. As a common religious healing cult to its adherents, it involved casting out of spirits during which sick women, especially, those with psychological problem were believed to obtain relief. According to *Bori* ardent, diseases which failed to respond to treatment through medical healing were referred to the '*Bori*' cult which involved the use of hallucinating herbs, hypnotic drumming and animal sacrifice. The king's sister, 'Inna' (mother of all) was the leader of devotees. According to them they were responsible for protecting the society from malevolent forces through possession dances as well as providing healing and divination.<sup>17</sup> According to Abdullahi Smith, "*Bori* is a belief in a high and distant god and nearer *iskoki*. Correct relations with the *iskoki* were partly achieved through sacrifices made by the family head, but also by means of spirit possession, which he refers to as *bori* and asserts that this cult is still widely practiced in Hausaland".<sup>18</sup>

Though, both men and women were possessed by the '*Bori*' spirit, it was more common among women. '*Bori*' rituals provided a powerful corporate identity for women who belong to them through the practice of traditional healing as well as through the performance of '*bori*' festivals like the '*girka*' initiation ritual. Furthermore, Hausa belief in the existence of spirits even in contemporary times also aided the growth of '*Bori*'.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, this un-Islamic trend has survived in Northern Nigeria and is still practiced though not as widespread as before. According to Badejo:

*Bori* is a religion in which the worshippers communicate with the Supreme Being, ancestral spirit of the natural forces, all of whom dwell on the land on which they live. It is (their belief) that these spirits control every aspect of their lives. Hence it is very necessary to maintain harmony with them in order that they may fulfill the needs of the society.<sup>20</sup>

*Bori* adept believe that spirits or animate beings (souls) exist and are active on people's behalf. These spirits can attach themselves to, or acquire the form of, either people, or animals, or inanimate objects (mostly rivers, trees, or mountains). They are worshipped or appeased through special rituals, and are called on for help in times of distress.

However, the process through which they performed these rituals contained many un-Islamic trends such as claiming the knowledge of the unseen, offering of sacrifices to the devils as well as attributing divine powers to them. Obligatory prayers and fasting (even Ramadan fast) were suspended by the person who was to go through the ritual, and sometimes this would last between one to three weeks or even three months. Another ritual act performed by the *bori* adherents is that at the end of initiation ceremony they take the initiate (sick person) to the bush under a tamarind tree and sacrifice seven different chickens to the Jinn (*Iskoki*). Then all those who are present knelt down before the Tamarind tree and prayed that their wishes should be granted by the Jinn (*Iskoki*).<sup>21</sup>

No doubt that *Bori* cult is an un-Islamic trend which involve acts of *Shirk* such as sacrifice to other than Allah (SWT). In Islam sacrifice is done only to Allah (SWT) as have been stated in the following verses of the Qur'an: Allah the Exalted said:

Say: Verily my prayer, my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for Allah, the Lord of the worlds. He has no partner. And of this I have been commanded, and I am the first of the Muslims."(Q6:162,163)

Allah the Exalted also said:

Therefore turn in prayer to your Lord and sacrifice (to Him only) (Q108:2)

Also Abu Tufail reported: We said to 'Ali b. Abi Talib: Inform us about something which Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) told you in secret, whereupon he said: He told me nothing in secret which he hid from people, but I heard him say:

Allah cursed him who sacrificed for anyone besides Allah; and cursed him who accommodated an innovator; and Allah cursed him who cursed his parents and Allah cursed him who changed the boundary lines (of the land possessed by him).<sup>22</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The above are but few un-Islamic trends that Shaykh Uthman bn Foduwe's Da'wah and reform movement checkmated. It was not only directed at converting pagans (*Maguzawa*), but also reforming lax Muslims, who were mixing Islam with syncretism. The success of his Da'wah led to repentance and reformation of the society. After the success of the reform for a century, the British colonial administration was introduced and many of the above un-Islamic trends resurfaced back and continued to be practiced in Hausa land, they were however checkmated with the Da'wah of many Islamic scholars and religious organizations particularly the *Jama'atu Nasril Islam* and *Jama'atu Izalatil bid'ah and Iqamatus Sunnah*. Also with the introduction of Shari'ah legal system in Northern Nigeria as from 2000 many of these un-Islamic worship became punishable. In Zamfara state for instance, a law banning the practice of these un-Islamic trends was imposed. According to the new penal code law, it is a criminal offence to worship gods other than Allah: "whoever . . . takes part in the worship or invocation of any juju . . . shall be punished with death." The term "juju," refers to various forms of magic and traditional religious practices: The penal code classified indigenous forms of religion as godless and wicked such as witchcraft, magic, *Bori* cult, worship of Spirits and Jinn, atheism, idolatry and all forms of invocation of any object or being other than Allah by a Muslim carries the death penalty because it tantamount to Ridda.<sup>23</sup> Other states of Northern Nigeria also followed the examples of Zamfara state.

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