

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Prayer Has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger.* Adeline Masquelier. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001. xix + 348 pp. (Cloth US\$89.95; Paper US\$24.95)

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This intriguing ethnography explores *bori* possession ceremonies in the Hausaphone Mawri community of Dogondoutchi, a midsize rural town in south central Niger. *Bori*, “invisible beings that populate the bush” (p. 3), possess devotees (*yan bori*) both inside and outside ritual contexts. Many Mawri believe that spirits cause certain illnesses and afflictions and, thus, *bori* ceremonies (*wasani*) serve to alleviate conflict and renew the ties between human beings and spirit beings. Based on more than a year of fieldwork and archival research in the late 1990s, Masquelier writes in an engaging, captivating manner, utilizing short anecdotes to illustrate various phenomena experienced during her fieldwork. The ethnography, written from the *bori* practitioners’ point of view, vividly describes *bori* in Dogondoutchi and its conflicts, negotiations, and resistance to Islam on many different levels.

Chapter One reviews several bodies of literature and provides a history of Mawri society as well as religious practices in contemporary Niger. Chapter Two discusses the spiritual background and landscape from which *bori* emerged. An overview of *bori* ceremonies and their participants is provided in Chapter Three, while Chapter Four explores how the boundary between ritual and everyday practice is often blurred in the embodied practices of *bori*. The fifth chapter focuses on the *Baboule* in particular, demonstrating that when people are possessed by these spirits, they mimic the comportment and behavior of French colonial authorities. Masquelier investigates the market in Chapter Six, including the ritual economy of *bori* and *doguwa* market spirits that influence the success and prosperity of the market. Chapter Seven describes the concept of “sweetness” as embodied in the *bori* pantheon’s Maria spirits. Lastly, Chapter Eight discusses rituals performed to protect people from *Zarma* spirits of rain, who cause lightning.

Masquier makes several main points. First, in contrast to the lack of change in the *bori* tradition that *yan bori* themselves emphasize, Masquelier notes that *bori* is altered to reflect novel social transformations. “*Bori* possession has been constantly changing to accommodate new spirits that are chronicling the unfolding and complex engagement between Mawri society and the outside world” (p. 291). Thus, the *bori* pantheon expands to include a diverse cast of “female warriors, French soldiers, noble Taureg, seductive prostitutes, Zarma blacksmiths, doctors and lorry drivers, Muslim clerks and bank thieves” (p. 292). In this regard, *bori* is used both as “a form of anchorage into the past and as a locus for the mediation of historical transformations” (p. 6).

Second, various transformations in Mawri society are actually embodied in the bodies of *bori* devotees. Masquelier’s focus on embodiment both inside and outside *bori* ritual contexts reveals that there is no strict division between the “sacred” and “profane” worlds for *bori* practitioners in Dogondoutchi, with examples ranging from everyday interactions between people affected by alternate spirit identities to spirit possessions that occur unexpectedly in various nonritual settings. According to Masquelier, “Mawri understanding is often embedded in praxis—that is, enveloped in bodily attitudes—rather than enunciated through words, concepts and formulas” (p. 185). The body is thus the most accessible medium for the Mawri to articulate their understanding of changes in their society, as revealed through the conduct of spirit personas from the seductive gestures of Maria to the military salutes of the *Baboule*. Masquelier’s analysis resonates with Rosalind Shaw’s (2002) study of Temne divination in Sierra Leone, showing how memories of violence and other experiences during the slave trade are embodied in current ritual practices, such as witch finding and techniques of divination, thus reflecting changes in the region over time.

Third, *bori* is a site of resistance to some of the major transformations in Mawri society, particularly the advent of Islam. Reflecting on detrimental changes that Islam has wrought, such as abandonment of the *bori* spirits, an informant keyed the phrase that became the book’s title, “prayer has spoiled everything.” Many rituals of closure and protection that the Mawri used to perform,

Masquelier demonstrates, have disappeared with the influence of Islam. However, she presents *bori* as a site of power and resistance for its practitioners, a living and resilient tradition in the face of Islamic suppression and scorn. Unfortunately, Masquelier's discussion of Islam is one of her book's few shortcomings. Written from the perspective of *yan bori*, her ethnography tends to portray Muslims negatively. Although Masquelier touches upon how Islam and *bori* influence one another, it would have helped to include more about the Muslim perspective, as well as to explore further the ambivalent spaces within which Islam and *bori* coexist, such as examples of practicing Muslims who turn to *bori* spirits periodically or Muslim spirits that influence their devotees to build miniature mosques (p. 222).

Despite this bias, Masquelier's rich ethnography makes *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything* worth reading seven years after its publication. It remains a welcome addition to the cultural anthropology of Niger, perhaps the Sahelian country about which the fewest English-language ethnographies have been published. At the same time, the book makes an important contribution to studies of possession and embodiment informed by theories of power and resistance.

#### REFERENCES CITED

Shaw, Rosalind

- 2002 *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.