Chapter 8

The Religious Practices of Black Slaves in the Mediterranean Islamic World

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It is, perhaps, premature to make a general assessment of the ways in which religious beliefs and practices of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa were transformed, reinvented, or syncretized in the Mediterranean world under the influence of Islam. But this study attempts to broach the topic and to illustrate it with some examples of slave religious practices culled from the literature. The evidence shows that the African religious background provided mechanisms in the Mediterranean diaspora through which enslaved Africans coped with the psychological trauma brought about by enslavement, transportation, and transplantation into alien cultural environments. Religious practices from their homelands were transformed in many ways as the enslaved accommodated themselves to their new cultural milieux, displaying differing degrees of Islamization and naturalization. On the one hand, the Hausa bori cult apparently survived through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century in virtual isolation from mainstream Islam. In other cases, African religious practices found a continuing, if modified, expression through certain Sufi practices or were given a new lease on life by being integrated into North African festivals and shrine practices. Above all, religious rites gave enslaved Africans an opportunity to assume control over an important aspect of their lives, and to organize themselves along communal and hierarchical lines.

Under Islamic law, only the “pagan” could be enslaved, but the scattered evidence we have seems to indicate that when black slaves were sold in the slave markets of North Africa and the Middle East, they were presented to buyers as Muslims. Although Muslims might have had no objection to purchasing slaves belonging to the “people of the Scripture” (i.e., Jews and Christians, and perhaps Zoroastrians or others assimilated to that status), they almost certainly would have had grave reservations about purchasing an outright “pagan,” whose religious status in some sense rendered him or her “unclean,” most especially the male if he were uncircumcised. We should remember that the vast majority of slaves in the Muslim Mediterranean world were used in domestic service, living within
the owner’s house and having access to the intimate life of the family.

The transformation from “pagan” to Muslim probably took place somewhere along the route from initial capture to arrival within the Mediterranean world where the slaves were to be sold. The following account is, if nothing more, symbolic of the process that, at least superficially, took place. A caravan of slaves leaving Katsina in the Sokoto Caliphate for Metlili in central Algeria in the early 1830s arrived after some days’ travel at the “zāwiya (hermitage) of Sīdī Aḥmad” at Aghezeur, probably in, or close, to Āir. What followed sheds some light on the transformation:

With our preparations for departure complete we were of a mind to set out on the third day after our arrival, but the marabouts of the zaouia [zāwiya] of Sīdi Ahmed who had come to our camp and called us together for prayer held us back with these words: “O Muslims! These negroes you are bringing are idolaters. We must make them know the One God; we must teach them to pray and how to perform ablutions; we must circumcise them today. God will reward you for it. Make your slaves assemble. By God’s grace we know their language; we will put ourselves in the middle of them and teach them what it is good for them to know.” We understood well, for the Lord loves him who causes the number of His servants to be increased; moreover, there is, from the point of view of sales, a great advantage in turning an idolater into a Muslim. Almost all of our slaves already knew the shahāda and the name of the Prophet and God. Frequently, during leisure time at camp we would teach them the basic tenets of the religion, speaking broken gnāwiyya to them while they spoke broken Arabic to us. To the best behaved we offered some concessions; to the obdurate some harsh discipline; thus self-interest, if not conviction, had readied them for the solemn ceremony which would today make them into Muslims.

The holy men who ran the hermitage apparently spoke Hausa (the source calls the language “gnawiyya,” i.e. “language of the blacks”), and one of their number duly catechized the assembled slaves, preaching them a short sermon on the unity of God. The males were then led away and circumcised. The process complete, the preacher addressed them thus:

O you Negroes, give thanks to God! Yesterday you were idolaters and today you are Muslims. Depart with your masters who will clothe you, feed you and love you like their brothers and children. Serve them well and they will give you your liberty in a while. If
you are comfortable with them you shall stay there. If not you shall
return to your land.\textsuperscript{5}

With this optimistic admonition ringing in their ears they were
dispatched on their way to North Africa. Piety and commerce, then,
were good bedfellows. The slave merchants, having inducted their
acquired slaves into Islam, were assured of profit, both in the here
and now and in the hereafter.

The Swiss traveler J.L. Burckhardt, writing about Shendi in
the northern Nilotic Sudan in the second decade of the nineteenth
century reported that slave boys, when purchased by a Muslim
master, were immediately circumcised and given Arabic names –
often fanciful ones, and seldom names such as Muḥammad, Ḥasan
or Muṣṭafā, which were reserved for free males. According to him,
slaves coming from the west (i.e. from Kordofan, Dār Fār, Wadai,
etc.) were nearly always circumcised by the time they reached
Shendi, and he adds, “I never knew of any instance of a Negro boy
following the worship of his father, and refusing to become a
Mussulman.... In Soudan, the slaves, though made Mussulmans by
the act of circumcision, are never taught to read or pray: and even in
Egypt and Arabia this instruction is seldom given to any but those
for whom their masters take a particular liking.”\textsuperscript{3}

Those who were so privileged became, in Burckhardt’s
view, “greater fanatics than the proudest Olemas [‘ulamā’, scholars],
and...Christians and Franks are more liable to be insulted by slaves
than by any other class of Mussulmans.” This was also the view of
the Dutch Orientalist C. Snouck Hurgronje, who was in Mecca in the
1880s and commented on the sūdān slaves there: “Their education is
generally confined to learning the most indispensable ceremonial
of Islam and, though they are often very negligent in this, the
Mussulman disposition of these big children can be described as
almost fanatical.”\textsuperscript{4} He went on to describe the weekly “festival” that
these Africans celebrated in Mecca on Thursday nights, which
involved singing and dancing, including a performance in which
“two or more slaves dance around with long sticks in their hands,
and make movements as it were of fighting.” It is not entirely clear
what was going on here. Hurgronje mentions the use of a “six-
stringed feathered tumbrah (which word is sometimes used for the
whole orchestra),” and this brings to mind both the instrument and
the cult named after it, a complex possession-and-healing cult
related to zār which is still practiced in the Nilotic Sudan.\textsuperscript{5} Although
Hurgronje does not describe it in terms of a religious ceremony, it is
quite possible that what he was referring to was related to this cult.
In North Africa there is much clearer evidence that African religious practices of non-Islamic origin were continued in slavery and transformed in their new milieux. Some of these were little affected by Islam; others were “islamized” to one extent or another, especially by identifying possessing spirits as jinn and by invoking the names of Muslim saints to exorcise them. In some cases sub-Saharan African cults were reinvented in North Africa by taking over older Berber cults or by being infused into ṣūfī orders.

The most widespread of African cults to be found in the Mediterranean diaspora seems to have been the bori cult, most closely associated with the maguzawa, or non-Muslim Hausa. We do not know to what extent maguzawa were carried off into slavery and transported across the Sahara, or when this might have happened, but, to judge from the extent of bori practices in the Mediterranean world over both time and space, the enslavement of maguzawa must have been extensive. It is also possible that some Muslim Hausa were caught up in the wars and raiding in Hausaland and that bori was also practised by some of them. The earliest reference to Hausa in the literature of slavery occurs in the early sixteenth-century legal opinion (fatwā) of Makhluf al-Balbālī, although he does not actually use the term “Hausa,” but rather refers to the “people of” Kano, Zakzak (Zaria), Katsina and Gobir (i.e., the Kanawa, the Katsinawa, the Zazzagawa, and the Gobirawa), all of whom he considers to be Muslim and therefore not to be enslaved. In the early seventeenth century the Timbuktu scholar Ahmad Bābā again refers to these same groups again in his Miṣrāj al-ṣuʿūd, the replies he wrote to questions from an inquirer in Tuwāt. His response shows that Hausa were, in his day, entering the slave market and, to judge from the inquiry about them coming from Tuwāt, were entering the trans-Saharan trade:

Sometimes the sultans of these lands are in a state of discord the one with the other, and the sultan of one land attacks the other and takes whatever captives he can, they being Muslims. These captives, free Muslims, are then sold – to God we belong and to Him shall we return! This is commonplace among them in their lands. The people of Katsina attack Kano, and others do likewise, though they speak one tongue and their languages are united and their way of life similar. The only thing that distinguishes them is that some are born Muslims and others are born unbelievers.

Since these Hausa groups were known to people in Tuwāt, and their status was known to Ahmad Bābā in Timbuktu, it seems clear that slaves of Hausa origin were passing through Timbuktu and Tuwāt as early as the first years of the seventeenth century, and in all
probability since at least the preceding century. It is also likely that
Hausa slaves passed across the Sahara by more direct routes leading
from Kano and Katsina, and perhaps via Borno, up to Ghadames,
Tripoli, Tuwāt and Tunis. The jihād movement of Usman dan
Fodio in Hausaland produced large numbers of enslaved captives,
and created an atmosphere which encouraged the enslavement of
any non-Muslims within the “caliphate.”

In the early nineteenth century we have clear evidence of the
practice of bori in Tunis, since the term itself is employed by a
shocked Muslim writer, even though his description of its
ceremonials is hostile and clearly distorted. This account of bori is
provided by a Fulani scholar and son of a qāḍī from Timbuktu,
Ahmad b. Abī Bakr b. Yūsuf, who was returning from pilgrimage in
1813 and stayed for a while in Tunis. Shocked by what he saw as the
depravity of black slave women there, he wrote a passionate treatise
addressed to the bey of Tunis, Ḥamāda, calling upon him to suppress
such practices and to compel these slaves to conform to normative
Islam.

He portrays bori as a women’s cult centered round a female
idol, who seems to stand at the head of various other idols whom the
slave women worship and make sacrifices for, especially to cure
sickness. The patient, in our author’s words, “prostrates to their
gods, and if the one in charge of the ceremony is a slave women who
commands the jinns, the patient prostrates to the jinn, who are in her
head. Then they say to him, ‘Your requests are granted.’ and they
order him to make slaughter to their gods every year on the same
day. Every year they take from him what he has and he may grow
poor by this means.” This is apparently an account of being
“mounted” by a bori spirit summoned by the priestess (ʿārifat in
Arabic or sarauniya in Hausa), the spirit then becoming “attached”
to the patient who has to make periodic sacrifices for it. Abī Bakr also describes sacrifices made at granaries. He accuses the
slave women bori practitioners of leading (presumably free) Muslim
women astray and milking them of money which they in turn steal
from their husbands. He says they lure wealthy women into the cult
and “marry” them to the bori, and he even accuses the cult of
practising lesbianism - an accusation not otherwise made about bori.

Garbled as this account of bori practice in Tunis may be, it
is nonetheless (especially in its description of the use of incense and
sacrificial animals) essentially recognizable as bori. Exactly one
hundred years later a British anthropologist, A.J.N. Tremearne,
described bori in Tunis and Tripoli in great detail as a cult in which
women still played a major role, though men also participated. He
has left us detailed descriptions of the gidan ̣ ̣safî (“medicine-
house”), called there Gidan Kuri, which was part of a larger communal building, the Gidan Jama’a, or “House of the Community,” as well as of the various possession rites, the spirits themselves (represented as both pagan and Muslim), and their characteristics. He does not mention non-Hausa as participating in bori, as the earlier account of Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr does, but in other parts of North Africa, Arabs or Berbers did sometimes participate in similar cults, while ṣūfi orders always brought both black and white together.

The communal organization of black slaves (and free blacks after manumission or emancipation) in various places in North Africa is well attested in various eyewitness accounts. In 1903 J. B. Andrews published an account of the ceremonies connected with the “Fountain of the Jinn,” the “seven springs (ṣabṭ ‘uyūn)” in Algiers city, a cult that was probably an ancient Berber water cult taken over entirely by black Africans.12 The cult involved sacrifice of chickens of various colors to propitiate the jinn in order to obtain good health and good fortune. The creature had its throat cut just sufficiently to let the blood flow out, and it was then allowed to struggle until death overcame it. Tristram claimed that the direction in which the dying creature headed was an indication of good or bad fortune, while Andrews asserted that the more the creature struggled, the better the fortune being indicated. Both noted that a little of the spilled blood was daubed on the forehead of the person who brought the chicken for sacrifice.13

The various black groups that managed the shrine had their own communal houses and were organized on the basis of the region from which their members originally came, suggesting that their sub-Saharan African past was not far behind them. Andrews describes these communal groups thus:

The sabṭ ‘uyūn...is principally in the hands of negroes, or rather of the seven religious brotherhoods called diyar (houses) which send their officials on the days of sacrifice. Each dār represents a land of the Sudan and is run by the people of that land. Many negroes, but not all, are affiliated to them. These are the lands and their approximate geographical locations: Dārs of the West: Bambara - of the Upper Senegal to the Niger, Songhai - near Timbuktu, Tombo [i.e., Dogon] inside the buckle of the Niger, Gurma - inside the buckle of the Niger. Dārs of the East: Katsina – Hausaland, Zouzou [i.e., Zazzau/Zaria] – Hausaland, Borno. Each dār has a house where its chiefs live, in which is a room called the jamā‘a (soou in the Sudanese (Manding) language). In it are kept the religious paraphernalia, a bringer of ill-fortune (tabou) for anyone who touches it without authorization. It is there that the jinns
manifest their presence from time to time, either by noises or by entering into the body of one of the faithful. In one of the rooms could be observed a niche set aside for the patron spirit; it was closed off by a curtain. In another room of the dār could be seen a chair where the hounia alone sat to be inspired. The religious paraphernalia consists of musical instruments described below, flags, little incense braziers and the different clothes and arms of the jinns. The four dārs of the west invoke the same great jinns: Bābā Mūsā, al-Baḥrī and Gnāwa or Nana Ḥawwā’. The great jinn of Katsina is Bābā Kūri; that of Zouzou is Bābā Enoua [Inuwa], while the patron of Borno is Sīdī Marzūq, as previously mentioned.14

Bābā Kūri is reminiscent of the name Gidan Kuri (“house of Kuri”)15 given to the principal bori house in Tunis, and the cult being spoken of here certainly bears many resemblances to bori – hardly surprisingly since Hausa seem well represented. All the dārs are organized in the same way.

The jamā’a, or assembly of men, is governed by five great officials, aided by five lesser ones. They are: the muqaddam or shaykh who performs the great in-house sacrifices; the malam, director of the orchestra and sacrificer of chickens at Sab’ ʿuyūn; the ganga-fournia who beats the drum; the kaiboungou who is the treasurer and who receives the money (offered); and lastly the tchaoutch [shā’ush] who is the servant. The jamā’a of women is governed by a hounia and an ʿārifā with their helpers. The hounia is the only true chief of the dār; her counsel prevails. It is she, preeminently, who is in touch with the jinns. She looks after the knife of the house’s patron which is used in in-house sacrifices. When a new malam is named she hands it over to him. She gives consultations, she discovers the cause of illnesses, she knows how to divine. Her deputy, the hounia-ʿaghīra accompanies the Malam to the Sab’ ʿuyūn where she distributes incense and spring water. She has the task of bringing back some of this water to the house to be given to the sick. On Thursdays the ʿārifā burns incense in the rooms of the jinns; she gives out water there, receives offerings in kind - incense or candles donated to the society – and assists the hounia-ʿaghīra.16

The terminology used for the cult shows that it was quite syncretic: Arabic terms such as ʿārifā, muqaddam, shaykh, and shā’ush (originally a Turkish word), mingle with Hausa words like malam and ganga [fournia], Manding soou,17 Songhay (?) kaiboungou,18 and hounia(?). Andrews goes on to describe a jinn-possession ceremony that took place just before the end of Ramadān, the month
of fasting, and uses the term “having the bori” for entering a trance. The cult was in the process of becoming fully integrated, both into the local society and into the culture of Islam. Although the music and words were “Sudanese,” local people who had been adopted by the dār were as much adepts as the former slaves, and the name “Allāh” had been introduced into the litanies. A further sign of its accommodation with Islam was the fact that the principal possession ceremonies took place on Islamically significant dates: (mid-) Shaʿbān, the Prophet’s Birthday (mawlid – 12 Rabīʿ I), and ḥaylat al-qadr – 27 Ramaḍān. In former times it was much more of an African slave cult, and one which, according to Andrews, provided a social anchor for slaves. “Every Sudanese,” he wrote, “is willingly accepted into the dār of his land. When, in former times, he arrived as a slave and friendless, it was greatly in his interest to join.” But in the early twentieth century the cult was dying out for want of new immigrants and because of the apparent failure of the community to reproduce.

Another commentator on black religious ceremonies in Algeria, the sociologist Émile Dermenghem, remarked that in his day (the early 1950s) only the Dar Bambara (run by the only black born in West Africa) and the Dar Zouzou (which had incorporated the other eastern dārs, but which was run by a white and was “hardly distinguishable from one of the white possession-divining societies that have themselves adopted some of the rites that are strictly speaking negro”), still operated. He provides a rich and detailed description of a ceremony of jdeb (possession = jadhb), which took place to mark the middle of Shaʿbān (the middle of the month before the month of fasting, and a time when, according to popular belief, the fortunes of the year are fixed) in the year 1950. The ceremony consisted first of a number of women dancing and allowing themselves to become possessed by spirits, and a healing ceremony for sick children carried out by the “shaykh” (evidently the head of the Bambara dar), who danced with the children on his back to the sounds of drums and iron castanets, while the children’s limbs were massaged with a paste made from roasted corn amid a fog of incense. The ceremony climaxed with the ritual slaughter of chickens, goats, and sheep by the Bambara shaykh after they had been thurred by the incense smoke. Some of the blood of the animals was preserved to be dried and used in medicine. The shaykh made two lines on the wall next to a row of seven candles with some of the fresh blood, and marked with blood the foreheads, throats, and chins of babies presented to him by their mothers. Here again the “pagan” African nature of the ceremony is very clear, but, as Dermenghem remarks, “The black males of the dīwān...make much
of proclaiming their Islamic faith, never failing to offer prayers for the Prophet Muhammad and to invoke Arab saints.” Earlier, he had characterized the relationship between slavery and transformed religious rituals in the following terms:

BORI CEREMONY, TRIPOLI, 1913

The cruel situation, at least in regard to its origin, of the blacks of North Africa has fostered the life of the brotherhoods and the maintenance of a Sudanic ritual adapted to Islam, and it is the liturgical activity of the brotherhoods that has encouraged the maintenance of racial consciousness and mutual self-help. The religious phenomena characterized by the words ġār and bori (spirits, spirit possession) and by dīwān (meeting, assembly, society) are widespread in Ethiopia, North Africa, Hausaland and among the Bambara and Songhay. Similar things, but having their roots farther south than the Soudan, have been observed in the Caribbean and in Brazil. Beneath the symbolism of the spirits the deeper goals, beyond the social effects, are a catharsis, a purification of [psychic] energy, the healing of sicknesses of nervous origin and the calming of the soul through ecstasy. The spirits of Black Africa, having come to North Africa, found there Arab and Berber spirits with whom they could get along well.
Both these and those became *rijāl Allāh*—“men of God”—and the brotherhoods which cultivated their presence placed themselves under the patronage of Sīdī Blāl: Blāl, the muezzin of the Prophet, the Ethiopian ransomed by the Prophet from the persecutors of Mecca, one of the first Muslims, one of the most revered Companions.20

Thus the African rituals survived with an Islamic transformation which also celebrated the first black African convert to Islam and its first muezzin, the freed slave Bilāl.

Another twentieth-century description of black religious practices, this time in Tunisia, further demonstrates the way in which ceremonies of sub-Saharan, non-Muslim origin were gradually acculturated to local Muslim rituals. The observer was M. G. Zawadowski, a former interpreter at the Residence General of France in Tunis; he wrote in 1942, but clearly drew upon recollections of an earlier period when he was resident in Tunis.21 There were two distinct groups of blacks in Tunis, according to him: the Wargliyya,22 a term applied to blacks from the oases, and perhaps referring (mainly) to Ḥarāṭīn, and the *wuṣfān* (plural of *waṣīf*, slave), a term applied to the other blacks. The *wuṣfān* were organized in corporate fashion under the *bāsh-āghā*, who was in former times the chief eunuch of the bey of Tunis, also known as the “governor over the black skin” (*al-Ḥākim fī l-qīshra al-sawdā’*). A mid-nineteenth-century writer, Louis Frank, who had been physician to the bey of Tunis (1806-16), described the internal government of the black slaves of that city:

The Agha, the First Eunuch of the Bey, is the chief, or rather the Magistrate and born judge, of the Negroes and this jurisdiction is the more necessary in that many of them have only an imperfect knowledge of the language of the country. It is he alone who has the right to adjudicate disagreements which arise between them and to hear their complaints. Another prerogative attached to the office of this chief is that if a slave finds the means of taking refuge with him, the owner of that slave cannot regain possession of that slave without making a payment of six piastres in aid of the First Eunuch who takes it upon himself then to put an end to the disagreement between the slave and his master. Since the First Eunuch is obliged by his service to the Prince to live generally at the Bardo,23 there is at Tunis even a Sub-chief of the Negroes who has been given his powers by the First Eunuch and who, like him, is charged with regulating all matters of contention that may arise either between one Negro and another or between a slave and his master. The Negresses also have a chief who governs them,
protects them from harassment and gives decisions in quarrels that may arise between them.24

The corporate organization of the black population of Tunis was described by Zawadowski as more or less coterminous with a black religious brotherhood, called Stanbali (or Stambuli, i.e., from Istanbul), whose meetings were characterized by loud drumming and clashing of iron castanets, as well as “simulated fights in which they brandish sticks which they clash together rhythmically.”25

The Tunisian blacks and their Stanbali brotherhood had “adopted” a local saint,26 Sīdī Sa’d, to whose tomb on the plain of Mornag they made annual pilgrimage, slaughtered a he-goat, and performed certain other (not described, but allegedly “saturnalian”) ceremonies, in which they in part spoke Hausa.27 Also associated also with this patron saint was the Bū - Sa’diyya “masquerade,” which had as its objective the expulsion or driving away of evil spirits. Zawadowski’s vibrant description is worth quoting at length:

The Bū -Sa’di dresses himself up in a costume which is that of the fetishist magicians, that is he puts on multicolored rags on which are hung an extraordinary number of amulets, cowries, little bells, and small mirrors. Around his waist he ties a small skirt, whose hem is decorated with a fringe of jackal and fox tails, while on his shoulders he hangs a leopard skin like a necklace. On his head he places a very tall conical headdress also decorated with animal tails which half covers his face, giving him a fierce look. This is certainly the most bizarre part of his trappings. It is often topped by a pair of horns, ostrich feathers, shiny triangular, crescent or diamond shaped pendants, small glinting mirrors, etc. When the Bū -Sa’di begins to dance his entire outfit produces a terrible din as it is jiggled about. The Negro twists himself about frenetically as if he were afflicted by St Vitus’s dance, or he turns around on the spot uttering horrible cries: ‘Ah! ah!.’ When he spins round thus to make the spectators dizzy, his jackal-tailed skirt flies in the wind. At the same time he holds a little one-string guitar, called gûgêy28 which he strikes forcefully with a bow (qaws), producing raucous and disagreeable sounds.

Often the Bū -Sa’diya roam the streets in groups of two, three or four individuals, but then they no longer wear the magician’s costume which is no doubt kept exclusively for one who works by himself. These groups are dressed like musicians, that is to say in Turkish fashion, wearing a waistcoat and a pleated skirt in the manner of those of the “evzones”, over a serwâl (sirwâl, “pantaloons”) with qandalîsa, all in very bright colors. In Tunisia such a band of black musicians bears the name Sîdî Gnâwa.
Musical performances given by them, if one can apply such terms to their cacophonous shows, are known in the Regency under the name of bānga, taken by extension from the name of their main instrument. This object, the bānga, is a huge cylindrical wooden drum which is beaten rhythmically with sticks and produces a deafening row. It is nothing more than the African tamtam. Others shake the shaqāshiq, which are specifically Negro instruments, or blow ghaytas.29

Zawadowski adds that black Africans were considered very powerful propitiatory agents, their dark color making them an effective “bogeyman” against (evil) jinn in Maghrebi magic. Blacks are invited to family and communal ceremonies to drive away the evil eye, and the image of a black is sometimes made out of cardboard or wood and erected in a highly visible spot to effect the same service. A similar belief in black Africans’ ability to manipulate the spirit world, and to perform feats of magic is widespread in North Africa and the Middle East.

Before leaving religious cults whose roots stretch back into the world of the Hausa bori, we may note that such cults have gone beyond North Africa and across the Mediterranean, carried by African slaves into the Ottoman Empire, and specifically into Turkey itself. A report by Major Frederick Millingen in 1870, although not mentioning the word bori, described a slave possession cult headed by a woman, which is certainly reminiscent of bori.30 The black slave women of Istanbul had their own local lodges where possession seances were held. The lodges, however, provided a much wider range of services for the slaves. “The object of the lodges,” wrote Millingen,

is to afford protection, aid and refuge to the slaves when in want, to rescue and redeem them from the hands of their proprietors when possible, to claim and defend the rights of free negroes either from their employers or before the tribunals, and lastly, in order to provide a place for general meetings. Every member of the lodge pays a monthly contribution, besides which no one omits bringing to the central depot what can be stolen from the white man’s house. The different lodges are united by a common alliance.

Each lodge was headed by a col-bashi, who was revered by the members, had control over the lodge’s funds, and was expected to appear dressed in great finery with pearls and pieces of gold on her head and around her neck. Her position also reflected spiritual power, as she represented the spirit “Yavrube,” and was intimate with many other spirits. But this cult was also partly under the
influence of Islam since “the breath of the col-bashi and her power in reading something from the Koran are deemed to be as good panaceas as the prescriptions of the best of physicians.” She also led possession seances once or twice a month during which, to the sound of the drum and tambourine “the col-bashi attains a state of high excitement and frenzy, becomes an incarnation of the spirit Yavrube,31 and is thus transformed into a male element.” Although this is a thin sort of description of a ceremony probably never witnessed by the author, it does suggest the “mounting” of the cult devotee by the bori spirit. A form of bori was also practiced both in Istanbul and Izmir.

Two later accounts, although neither actually uses the term bori, speak of the godiya, the “mare” which is the mount that the bori spirits “ride,” i.e., the mai bori, or, in the case of the female, the saraunyia. In 1921 and 1922, Laila Hanoum, a former lady-in-waiting to several Ottoman sultans, described bori, although she, too, had never witnessed it. She had learned something of bori, probably from black slave women she encountered and spoke of in her memoirs.32 She describes how a black slave girl became possessed spontaneously through the sounds of metal pot lids being banged (like castanets?), together with burning incense, and how the spirit possessing her demanded to be given certain items, a practice reminiscent of the Sudanese zâr. The description she gives of the godiya’s performance, though lacking any elements of music and dance, is suggestive of bori, while the description of the godiya herself immediately brings to mind the col-bashi:

The Godia is a real power. It is an old Negress who is considered to have hidden dealings with the spirits, the departed, and who is herself perhaps convinced; it is something like the sorcery of the tribe. All the Negresses, although they are Muslims, and probably through some remaining paganism, have a great veneration mixed with terror for the Godia. The Godia wears a fur cape, and on her head a headgear called cache-basti (eyebrow squeezer), made up of a scarf rolled round the head, tightly fastened over the temples and coming down over the eyebrows; she is seated majestically, full of gravity, by a mangal (brazier), with a woolen blanket on her knees. She receives loftily the homage of the Negresses who come and kiss her hands and knees respectfully and bring presents to obtain her good grace, and sometimes to ask for her intervention with the spirits.

To summon the spirits the Godia throws a little incense into the brazier, and the room is filled with a dense smoke and a penetrating odor. Then she rubs her palms on the ground and utters unintelligible words in a raucous but muffled voice; sometimes she rolls on the ground, and strikes herself while giving out strange
little cries and giving the onlookers more or less clear orders, among which however one manages to discern that it is necessary to offer the Godia a sheep with black eyes and a black hen without marks for sacrifice, some sugar and syrups for the libations, and many other things besides.\footnote{33}

The second description is provided by Pertev Boratav, based on information he obtained, ca. 1950, from a Mr Huseyn Avni Sap, a relative of his, who recalled memories of his childhood in Izmir.\footnote{34} The port of Izmir on the western coast of Turkey, was an international city (known to outsiders as Smyrna) and a major point of entry into Turkey. With a black population estimated at some 2,000, it had the highest concentration of persons of African origin in Anatolia. Many of the freed slaves had intermarried with Turks. Boratav’s account is interesting, not only because it confirms the existence of bori in this Turkish city, but because it is clear that bori was also attracting non-Africans, just as bori and related cults did in North Africa. The brief statement he makes about “godiya” is given here in full:

Some customs and traditions that cannot be found elsewhere survive among the Izmir Negroes and have continued to exist until very recently. The Negroes have "godiya" or sheikhs of their own. Although the Negroes are Mohammedans, these "godiya" have special religious functions. Although the godiya are usually men, there are women godiya and in his youth Mr. Avni Sap knew a white godiya named Mustafa Kalfa. This man had succeeded in entering Negro society and reaching the highest rank in their religious organization. A man becomes a godiya when another godiya "gives him the hand," that is to say, when he confirms the candidate’s religious qualities by certain ceremonies. Every Negro who wants to join a mystic religious community must participate in a ceremony in which incense, which is called Arab incense, is burned for him. Once initiated, he must repeat this fumigation annually. One function of the godiya is saving the persons who have fallen into a trance during the religious ceremonies, or on some other occasions. Those who fall into a trance lose their voices or display such abnormal characteristics as reciting prayers and incantations. Only the godiya can save him. He can also give a drink that confers immunity against snakes and other venomous creatures on the recipient. Mustafa Kalfa was famous for this ability.

The final example of sub-Saharan African religious practices in transformation in the Mediterranean world comes from Morocco, where a ṣūfī order, the Īsawīyya or Īsāwa, attracted many black
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African members, especially the royal former slave soldiers, the ʿabīd al-Bukhārī. The order itself was founded in the sixteenth century, and its teachings derive from the tradition of the well-known and widespread Shadhiliyya. Its founder, Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā al-Sufyānī (who died some time between 1523 and 1527), settled in Miknāsa (later to be the capital of Mūlāy Ismāʿīl, creator of the ʿabīd al-Bukhārī) and became the city’s patron saint. The order spread through Morocco and Algeria, with a following in Tunisia and Libya. It is celebrated for the bizarre practices of its adherents, which seem to smack of vulgar showmanship and “demonic” possession and blood lust. The founder is said to have granted his followers immunity from snake and scorpion bites and from the effect of cactus thorns. According to accounts of the order, this immunity seems to have been extended to knives, fire, and boiling water. There has also been injected into the order’s practices elements of animal sacrifice, blood drinking (in normative Islam utterly forbidden), eating of raw (even live) meat, and exorcism of spirits.35

Let us consider the role played in popular Muslim belief by “spirits,” in particular the jinn, but also the various other spirits known as ʿifrī and shayṭān, as well as the “evil eye” (al-ʿayn), and in (the Republic of) the Sudan “evil/magical speech” (sahar).36 The term jinn is to be found in several places in the Qurʿān, often paired and contrasted with the word ins (human kind), or, in the final sūra of the Qurʿān, with nās (people). This last sūra and the one before it, both brief and easily memorized, are in the nature of incantations for protection against evil spirits, practitioners of magic (al-naffāthāt fī ʿl-ʿuqad, women who “blow upon knots”),37 and the evil of every envier (sharr kulli hāsid idhā hasad).38 In the final words of the Qurʿān, refuge is sought with “the Lord of men, the King of men, the God of men...from jinns and from people.” The “evil eye,” while not specifically mentioned in the Qurʿān, is implicit in the phrase “the evil of every envier,” since it is envy and covetousness that provoke the searing, evil-charged glance that causes the person it is cast upon to fall ill, or their child or their livestock to die.39 The term shayṭān (Satan) occurs many times in the Qurʿān, usually standing for “the Devil,” also known under his “personal” name of Iblīs (cf. Greek diabolos). Muslims begin recitation of the Qurʿān with the incantation: “I seek refuge with Allāh from the accursed shayṭān.” But the word is also used in its plural form, shayṭāṭīn, for what seem to be evil spirits or human beings who have been mastered by evil spirits.

The jinn have become the best known and most feared of the invisible beings in the popular Muslim imagination. They are also,
no doubt, the spirits of the Muslim world that have entered most fully into the European imagination, especially through the “genie” of Aladdin’s (ʿAlā al-Dīn’s) lamp, celebrated in pantomime and film. The subject of the jinn (used as a collective noun in Arabic, the singular is ālīnī, hence “genie”) is one that is treated cursorily by Muslim theologians. They admit that the jinn are part of God’s creation, made of vapor or flame, that they may be either good or evil, Muslim or unbelieving, even that they may marry with human beings. But beyond that, no theology is developed. It has been left to the popular imagination to fill the void left by the scholars of Islam, and that has been filled with (perhaps one should say peopled with) an extraordinary variety of spirits, some of which, like Shamharūsh (“king of the jinn”), seem to be widely known, while others are of purely local acceptance. Since the number of jinn is not known and may be almost infinite, it has been easy for Muslims in all parts of the Muslim world to incorporate into an Islamic pantheon of jinn every local spirit that was ever known to the local belief system. This is, ultimately, how, for example, bori spirits and the spirits and lesser gods of many other sub-Saharan belief systems can be accommodated in an Islamic cosmology and made part and parcel of the Islamic expression of converted African Muslims. The same is true in North Africa, where Berber spirits have been incorporated into the jinn pantheon, along with spirits from the wider Semitic world (including Jewish spirits and some that go back to Babylon) brought into the area by Arabs. Brunel described beliefs in spirits in Morocco as follows:

According to popular belief, spirits live like men; they are born, reproduce and even end up by dying. They are invisible and people the skies, the land and the seas. In Morocco their demonology is less well organized than in the Sudanic lands. Among the most important we would mention the Bouoūûâb who holds the keys of the empire of the spirits, Sīdī Mohabba, Sīdī Mīmoûn, the Bahrīyn (sailors), Sīdī Moûsa, Sīdī Ahmed, Sīdī Kommi, Boussû, Sīdī Hammoû, Sīdī Larbî, Al Hojaj (the pilgrims), the Motāllīn Alghāba, masters of the forest, the Samāoûīyah, the Boh’h’âla and finally Semharouj; the chief of all these hordes. We observe, with Salmon and Westermarck, that most of these “jinns” are Sudanic. The spirits can belong to any race, Christian, Jewish, pagan, Muslim. Just as in Abyssinia, in Russia and in Georgia, in our lands spirits are incarnated in the bodies of men and control their worst affective manifestations, above all hysteria, epilepsy and madness. The utterances of these hysterics and delirious madmen are in fact utterances of the demons who torture them. To appease them, prayers, offerings, and above all sacrifices, are necessary. People believe also that the spirits are God’s prisoners from the
first to the twentieth day of Ramadān. Deprived of their liberty, they are not harmful during this time.\textsuperscript{44}

Brunel went on to describe the ceremony of “farewell” to these spirits carried out by members of the ʿĪsāwa brotherhood during the latter part of the month of Shaʿbān, which precedes Ramadān. Only members of the local group were invited along with the “Gnāwa” group (ṭāʾifā) of the quarter.

The Gnāwa, whose name derives from a Berber word meaning “black,” are in origin black slaves and freedmen (many, perhaps, former slave soldiers of the sultans), who have been joined in some cases by “white” Moroccans or persons of mixed race.\textsuperscript{45} They are not a şūfī order in any sense, and do not appear to have an organizational network. They are religious “performers” whose bands play drums and castanets (and on occasion other instruments) and whose members dance ecstatically and chant praise to the Prophet and invoke God, the saints, and the spirits. They perform in public, in the streets and in squares, and collect alms.\textsuperscript{46} They seem to be considered a valued complement to spirit possession or exorcism ceremonies, and are invited to Moroccan houses to “purify” them of evil spirits.

The following account, taken from Brunel, describes an ʿĪsāwī “farewell to the spirits” ceremony during Shaʿbān in Morocco (probably in the 1920s), to which the ʿĪsāwī exorcist (Ṭallā) invited members of his own group of both sexes and the local Gnāwa group – others being excluded, Brunel explains, because “these practices are judged very harshly by all good Muslims.”

The ‘Thllāʾa’ [Ṭallā] of the occasion puts henna on his hands and feet and puts antimony [kuḥl] in his eyes. Those who have been invited come to the place in silence; on entering the dwelling of the ‘Thllāʾa’ the women utter ululations of joy and hand over to the master-exorcist offerings called ‘Baroūk.’\textsuperscript{47} The arrival of the Gnāwa is more noisy; the master-exorcist, surrounded by his acolytes comes out of the house to meet them. A woman carries the censer in which some “jaoûi”\textsuperscript{48} is burning; another bears a bowl of milk and some dates. The Gnāwa approach from the end of the lane playing the tambourine and iron castanets, and singing – always with the same tune – “Al Afoû Ia Moûlânâ” - ‘Pardon O Lord.’ The bowl of milk is presented; before touching it the moqaddem\textsuperscript{49} makes ‘teslim’;\textsuperscript{50} then he puts his lips to it. Then the bowl is presented to the other members of the ‘ṭhāʿifā.’ It is the milk of the ‘Ajoûā’ - ‘the milk of the generous ones, the spirits.’ Usually the milk in the bowl is not completely used up; the remainder is used to sprinkle the four corners of the house of the
‘Thllâ’a’. On the doorstep the ‘Abîd make a sort of genuflection, saying: ‘Ahna Mselmîn! [We are Muslims].’ Inside the ‘thâïfa’ forms a circle and performs the Gnâwiyya dance with demonic gusto. The words remain the same: ‘Al Afoû Ia Moulànnâ.’ The women form a circle around the dancers. If one of them is sick, or makes a wish, or wants to become pregnant, she hangs her headscarf on the drum of the Gnâwî. The dance of the Gnâwâ, at times grotesque, defies analysis: sometimes the dancers make gestures of reverence that are not without grace; sometimes they break off from the circle one after the other to whirl in front of the drums, make their gesture of reverence and return to their place. For the moment the dance is not accompanied by any chant: the ‘Thllâ’a’ remains apart, then suddenly the chants begin again, the drums beat furiously; the dancers sing in ‘Bambara.’ The ‘thâïfa,’ which was occupying the centre of the courtyard, moves to each corner of the house saying: ‘Ia rbû It-taslîm! [O Lord, the taslîm]’ The women utter their usual ululations. When the ‘th,Ôfa’ gets back to its original place the chant ‘Al ‘afoû l’ilâlah Çalât ‘ala n-nabî. Ia rasûl Allah! [Pardon of God. Pray for the Prophet. O Messenger of God]’ is taken up again and is completed by the recitation of the ‘Fâtîha.’ The women, seized by a fresh enthusiasm, give their headscarves to the drummers; they immediately demand ‘fâtîhât’ on their behalf, and promise to sponsor ‘evenings’ or ‘leîlât’ if their wishes are granted. A copious meal rewards the Gnâwâ for their efforts.

The possession session does not begin until after this meal; the Bambara dance had no doubt only been performed to get the ‘Teslim’ that is indispensable for the summoning of the spirits. A Gnâwî equips himself with a ‘gembri,’ the others take up castanets and together they sing in ‘Bambara’ for some minutes, then intone a new chant: ‘Ia Rasûl Allah Ia nabînâ! [O Messenger of God. O Prophet of ours].’ A woman servant places in front of them a tray bearing six bottles of different colors, in particular a white box marked with several spots of blood. This is the blood of the cock whose throat was cut by the ‘Thllâ’a’ – the Sba’toûl Alouan – the seven-colored cock. The chants continue without respite, and the Gnâwâ invite their masters, the spirits, to assemble. The session opens with the ‘Çigha’ of Mûlây fi Abd al-Qâdir al-Jîlânî. Immediately the ‘Thllâ’a.’ dressed in white, gets up, makes the ‘teslim’ around the tray, takes a pinch of the benzoin in the white box and throws it on the censer. Then he begins to perform the Gnâwiyya dance, with his head buried in the benzoin smoke. Another one replaces him dressed in a black djellaba. He imitates the movements of the ‘Thllâ’a’ and dances frenetically to the point of ecstasy. The ‘Abîd’ chant: ‘Çalât ‘ala an-nabî. Ia rasûl Allah! [Pray for the Prophet. O Messenger of God].’ There is a pause for a few moments, then the ‘Abîd start again: ‘Allah. Ia Nabînà! [O God. O Prophet of ours].’ Up to now only the children
of Mūlāy ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī have been invoked. Now it is the turn of Mūlāy ʿAbd al-Qādir himself. The refrain is taken up at an accelerated pace; a black, his head covered with a white cloth, gets up and dances in front of the ‘Abîd, inhaling lungs full of benzoin smoke. Another black brings several candles stuck together. He lights them and passes his hand over the glowing flame shouting ‘Here is the cure’ ‘H’adî Ad-doûa!’ and slips the whole thing under his shirt, runs the fire under his ghzza, opens his mouth wide and swallows the flame. There is no burning and no pain felt, at least apparently. The ‘Thllâ’a’ joins the dancers. In the meantime the adept of Sîdî Ahmad al-Mîlyânî has never stopped hypnotizing those present with his bogus exercises. Now Sîdî Mîmoûn is invoked; the dancers wear bonnets decorated with cowries and black scarves. The dance is always made up of the same movements: the ‘Thllâ’a’ burns benzoin taken out of the black box. Next it is Lalla Mîmoûna; immediately the black scarves disappear; only the bonnets are retained. The jester calls out to those present: he is given a ‘moqrâj’ of boiling water. With a firm hand he takes hold of it and pours this steaming water slowly down his throat, then sprinkles the crowd with it as a sign of blessing. The ‘Abîd chant: ‘O saint Sîdî Mîmoûn! Our master has gone to the Soudan. He has brought back a Gnâwiyya maidservant. O God! O Prophet!’

This close integration of black Africans into popular North African religious cults shows clearly how religious practice served as an integrating factor for slave or ex-slave groups, and how beliefs and practices originating in sub-Saharan Africa were accommodated within a generous Islamic framework and became an important influence in the religious life of North Africans. An examination of the religious practices of the black populations in North Africa, in particular, provides a means of determining how far descendants of slaves have or have not become integrated into Arab-Berber religious life and to what extent they retain aspects of their West African religious heritage.

Notes

3 J. L. Burckhardt, Travels in Nubia, (London: J. Murray, 2d ed. 1819), 293. Most slaves brought to Shendi were below the age of fifteen.
4 C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mecca in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1931; trans. of German ed. of 1888-89), 11. Hurgronje’s view of the “infantility” of black Africans was a commonly held view in the late nineteenth century. He also subscribed to the school of thought that saw slavery of Africans as a form of advancement that exposed them to civilizing influences, a view often expressed by Muslim writers.


6 The slave raids described in Daumas, *Le grand désert*, were sent out from Katsina to Zinder and Zamfara, both Hausa territories, for example.


13 A notable difference between the two accounts is that whereas in Tristram’s account the slaughtered fowl were immediately purchased by a “Spanish market girl,” Andrews said that the supplicant would bring two birds - a cock, which the officiating sacrificer kept, and a hen, which was given back to the supplicant to eat. He claimed that selling the fowls would bring misfortune and nullify the sacrifice. Had the practice then changed over the nearly half century separating these accounts?

14 Andrews, *Les fontaines*, 16-19. Borno is thus the only dār to have a Muslim “saint” as its patron. Ṣīdī Marzūq is also the patron of the black
divāns of the Mzab. (Yacine Daddi Addoun, personal communication, 23 July 1997).


16 Ibid., 19-20.


18 The word has not been traced in available lexicons, but “boungou” suggests the Songhay word bongou – “head /chief.”


20 Ibid., 260-61.


22 i.e., from Wargla, an oasis in south-eastern Algeria.

23 A palace and administrative complex just outside the city of Tunis.


25 This recalls Hurgronje’s description of the tumburah cult in Mecca.

26 According to Sophie Ferchiou (based on Viviana Pâques, L’arbre cosmique), Sīdī Sa’īd is said to have come from Borno via Istanbul in the thirteenth century (sic) when the Turks occupied Tunis; see “The Possession Cults of Tunisia: A Religious System Functioning as a System of Reference and a Social Field for Performing Actions,” in I. M. Lewis, et al., Women’s Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1991), 209-18.

27 Zawadowski described the language as “a corporate esoteric jargon having a basis in diverse Negro-African languages,” but the two greetings he cited – “sennu” [sannu] and “sennu kadey” [sannu kadai] – are certainly Hausa.

28 Hausa: goge, a one-stringed bowed lute.


31 Described by Leïla Hanoum as the brother of the female spirit Roukouche Hanoum; see Le harem impérial et les sultanes au xixe siècle, trans. Youssouf Razi (Paris, 1991), n.p. Hanoum spells the name “Yavrou Bey.”

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 76-77.

Turquie,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 28 (1958): 7-23, where accounts of other black African festivals are given.

35 There are several travelers’ accounts of Ṣawīya ecstatic practices: O. Lenz, *Timbouctou: Voyage au Maroc au Sahara et au Soudan* (Paris: Hachette, 1886), 2:271-74; Tristram, *Great Sahara*, 12-16; F. A. Bridgman, *Winters in Algiers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), 81-83. Not surprisingly, these accounts are lurid and sensationalist, and capture little of the religious fervor, not to speak of the theology, that undergirds the public displays of the Ṣawīya. A more scholarly and sympathetic approach is found in Brunel, *Essai*, upon which the following account is based.


37 Qurʿān, 113:4.

38 Qurʿān, 113:5.


41 Arabic: *bawwāb*, “doorkeeper.”


43 Brunel, *Essai*, notes: “There is a thāʾīfā [tāʾīfā, “group, band”] of Jewish spirits called “thāʾīfā Ahl al-Sbt” [i.e., band of the Sabbath people (JOH)]; male and female blacks with facial scarifications are thought to be their servants/acolytes.

44 Brunel, *Essai*, 156. See also Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: John Murray, 5th ed., 1860), 222-7, for popular beliefs about, including their imprisonment during the month of Ramaḍān.


46 The Bay Fall of Senegal are, in some ways, similar.

47 The root of this Arabic word, *b-r-k*, has to do with blessing and bounty. Brunel in his glossary (*Essai*) notes that this is the term for the gift or offering made when someone visits their shaykh.

48 Arabic *jāwi or lubān jāwi*, “Javanese frankincense,” otherwise called benzoin. It consists of pieces of resin of the tree *Styrax Benzoin*, found in Java and Sumatra, and has a vanilla-like odor.
“Leader,” though in ṣūfī circles it signifies one who has authority to induct new members into the brotherhood.

Brunel (Essai) says that the meaning of “teslim” is difficult to give. Normally taslim means a prayer for the Prophet.

The Fātiha, the first sūra of the Qur’ān.

I.e., that the Gnāwa drummers will utter the “Fātihā” on their behalf, to bring them blessings and good fortune.

A small lute-like instrument.

Brunel (Essai) notes: “Melody, song. Each spirit has, in fact, an appropriate melody which must be sung if one wishes him to respond to the call.” This is precisely the case with zār and bori spirits.

Founder of the Qādiriya ṭarīqa (d. 1166).

Literally “slaves,” perhaps here those claiming descent from the ‘Abīd al-Bukhārī.

Evidently some sort of coloured band worn round the head. See below.

Chéchias – Arabic: shāshiya.

A female spirit.

Brunel (Essai) uses the word “terbouches,” a gallicization of the Arabic ṭarbūsh (English “tarboosh”), which has the same signification as shāshiya.

The Arabic text, given in transliteration by Brunel, reads: khādem gnāoûîya. The word khādem normally means “female slave.”

Brunel, Essai, 156-59.

Sophie Ferchiou’s work indicates that in Tunisia “marginal” practices continue to flourish.