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Bori Practice Among Enslaved West Africans of Ottoman Tunis: Unbelief
(*Kufr*) Or Another Dimension of the African Diaspora?

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Abstract:

Building on Ahmad ibn Yusuf b. al-Qadi al-Timbuktawi's treatise entitled *Hatk al-Sitr Amma Alayhi Sudani Tunis min al-Kufr* (Piercing the Veil: Being An Account of the Religious Practices of the Blacks of Tunis), this paper examines the implications of the Hausa non-Muslim Bori cult practice in Ottoman Tunis on enslaved West Africans' retentions of religious and family values from their original homelands. Specifically, the paper traces and analyses the evolution of the bori cult practice in the Tunisian milieu and places in its proper historical and diasporic contexts. To this end, the paper goes beyond questions that were not central to al-Timbuktawi damnation of the enslaved West African community of Tunis, but which nonetheless attracts the attention of scholars interested in the diasporic and historical significance of the bori cult practice in the Maghreb.

Keywords: Ottoman-Tunis, Bori Cult, Enslaved West Africans, African Diaspora

During the mid-eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries, Tunisia along with the Maghreb states of North Africa and the Ottoman Empire had witnessed an increased influx of indigenous African religious beliefs, particularly the Hausa-non Muslims bori cult from West Africa. Variations of the bori cult were observed in many cities of the Maghreb and the Ottoman *Porte* (Hunwick, 2004; El-Hamel 2008; Toledano, 2007). By the early nineteenth century, Ahmad b. Al-Qadi Ab Bakr b. Yusuf b. Ibrahim, a Fulani Muslim religious reformist from Timbuktu upon returning from *hajj* (pilgrimage) was shocked and horrified by the degree of tolerance of the bori cult practice in Tunisia and Morocco (Harrak & Mansour, 2000). In Tunisia, al-Timbuktawi condemned the cult practice, accused its practitioners with unbelief and called upon the Bey of Tunis, Hammuda Pasha (1782-1814) to suppress the cult in Sfax, Kairaoun and Souse. Al-Timbuktawi's main reason for attacking the cult practitioners whom he labeled *Sudani-Tunis*, (blacks of Tunis) owes to their animistic practices such as possession trance, animal sacrifices, and the cult perceived links with Jinns and evil manners. Significantly, he slandered the *Sudani-Tunis* as *Kuffar* (infidels) and to urge the Bey to do away with their

infidel practices, he wrote a short treatise, entitled: *Hatk al-Sitr Amma alayhi Sudan Tunis min al-kufr* (Piercing the veil: Being an account of the infidel religions of the Blacks of Tunis) which he addressed to Hammuda Pasha and appealed to the ulama and religious authorities of Tunisia to suppress the cult (Al-Timbuktawi, 1813). Eventually, the cult was repressed, even though it was not until the last days of the Husaynid era on the eve of Tunisian independence that religious ecstasy owing to the bori cult's legacies begin to disappear (Temimi, 1981).

Building on Ahmad ibn Yusuf b. al-Qadi al-Timbuktawi's treatise entitled *Hatk al-Sitr Amma Alayhi Sudani Tunis min al-Kufr* (Piercing the Veil: Being An Account of the Religious Practices of the Blacks of Tunis), this paper examines the implications of the Hausa non-Muslim Bori cult practice in Ottoman Tunis on enslaved West Africans' retentions of religious and family valued from the original homelands. Specifically, the paper traces and analyses the evolution of the bori cult practice in the Tunisian milieu and places in its proper historical and diasporic contexts. To this end, the paper goes beyond questions that were not central to al-Timbuktawi damnation of the enslaved West African community of Tunis, but which nonetheless attracts the attention of scholars interested in the diasporic and historical significance of the bori cult practice in the Maghreb.

The Bori Cult Defined

Before examining the syncretic religious practices of the enslaved West Africans of Tunis, which caused them the wrath of al-Timbuktawi, it is worth exploring the meaning and the context in which the bori practice arose in Tunis. The meanings of bori and its developments in the academic literature may serve as a point of departure. According to H.R. Palmer, bori is a Hausa common noun, and means a sacred and occult force. It is distinguished from *maita*, which is the power exercised by certain persons such as *mai ju* (witches) over *bori*, and the objects in which it is resided in. Origin of the word bori according to Palmer can also be traced to the same root as the Hausa word *borassa*, which means distilled spirits, as opposed to the native palm wine and other drinks (Palmer, 1914. 113). A.J.N. Tremearne, who studied the cult both in West and North Africa takes a more gendered approach and relates etymology of bori to "*bora*". For Tremearne, the word "*bora*" in Hausa means despised and neglected wife (Tremearne, 1968, 395).

Leo Frobenius, the German ethnologist and archaeologist who visited the Western and Central Sudan in 1918, concurs with Tremearne in the gender dimension of the bori cult's origins (Frobenius, 1980, 569-70), but argues that the Hausa bori was not a local animistic cult,

but a reflex of the Berber religions of North Africa, and that bori dances were held in honour of a mother goddess called by Libyans, under Carthage, as Tanit (Frobenius, *op. cit.*).

In line with Frobenius, Murray Last also contends that although bori is associated widely with the Hausa, and often with the Maguzawa (non-Muslim Hausas) in particular, Last argues that the etymology of the term bori is not certain and thus may not have originated with either group. According to Last, bori as it now practice is structurally marginalised to Maguzawa (non-Muslim Hausas) religious usages. According to Last, it has no central place in the annual cycle of rituals for the households or for the any wider kinship grouping other than a performance open to all though with some lineages socialised in it more than others (Last, 1991, 56).

Whether the bori cult has a Hausa origin or not, the cult has received increased attention among historians as well as anthropologists in recent academic works. In West Africa, the cult has been noted by many scholars to be historically and contemporaneously one of the largest and most widely spread possession cult in the last two centuries. Historically, bori occupied an important place in the main religious stream of the Maguzawa or the Hausa people of northern Nigeria. Its initiation attracted a large number of different groups of people. According to Marc Piault, who worked in the Arewa region of Niger, bori is a recent phenomenon. Piault believes that because of its strong influence in the nineteenth century, bori could only have developed in this period, and not earlier.

Seen from a societal context, Piault thus defined bori as a "refuge cult" with origins from the stressful situation in the Hausaland in the aftermath of the Sokoto Caliphate Jihad that targeted the non-Muslim Hausa communities labelled as Maguzawa. Approaching the cult from this perspective, bori is, therefore, related to the individual's responses to crisis when placed in a challenging or threatening environment (Echard, 1991, 65).

Piault is not the only scholar who sees bori as "a refuge cult" in relation to the stressful situation in the northern Nigerian especially in the aftermath of the Sokoto Caliphate Jihad wars.ⁱ Jacqueline Monfouga-Nicolas is among many other scholars, who have studied religion and cultural development in northern Nigeria and Niger in the aftermath of the Sokoto Jihad and tends to support Piault's view. Monfouga-Nicolas postulates that bori developed as a reactive barometer to the adaptation and acculturation crisis that follow the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate (Monfouga-Nicolas, 1972).

Contrary to the above position, Nichole Echard argues that the bori cult, with its elaborated spirits hierarchy as recorded in detail by Tremearne in 1914 in West and North Africa cannot possibly be regarded as a late nineteenth century product (Echard, 67). Rather he attributes the bori origin to the pre-Islamic culture of the Hausa and their neighbours, either in

the *asna* ancestor's cult, or perhaps in the specialist hunting tradition of the Hausas whose ethno zoological and botanical lore parallels the medical expertise of bori priest and priestesses (Echard?). During the course of its Jihad, the Sokoto Caliphate discouraged traditional West African masquerading culture which, according to Last, may have encouraged the development of bori as a possession cult that dispensed masques in its rites (Last, 56-60). The post-Islamic form of bori, hence, bears the firm imprint of the 1804 Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio.

In analysing the origin of the cult from a gender perspective, Abdalla considers the cult as an ancient practice among the Hausa. Its development in the previous two centuries bears much imprint to the Sokoto Caliphate Jihad (Abdalla, 56-60). According to Abdalla, the advent of the Sokoto Caliphate in the Hausaland changed the position of women and led to a rapid diffusion of the cult. Under the new faith of Hausa men and the loosening position of Hausa women, the cult became attractive to women peripheral position in the Muslim society. Abdalla concurs that ideological changes considerably strengthened the bori ability to survive in Hausaland; there are other equally important circumstances that helped bring such an outcome. One significant consideration in this regard has been women's seclusion in urban centres. Hausa men acquired some Islamic education and accepted women's seclusion as religiously binding. In addition to their ability to afford outside errands for their housebound wives, the Hausa men enforced purdah and restricted women in the households (Abdalla, 46). Like Abdallah, Michael Onwuejeogwu, also attested to the socio-economic context of cult. As he describes:

It appears that in Bori Hausa women experience the world of men, the world of political power, and the world of supposed splendour society has denied them. Bori is therefore a mechanism through which women escape the seclusion of the inner compound and enjoy at least in fantasy, the public life outside the compound. Thus, it is a symbolic way of escape from the role of female to that of male. . . . Bori episodes in such a way as to reduce their husbands' social and economic straits. Hence bori is not a symbol but also a real way of defying the male dominance, which pervades Hausa society. In bori women find escaped from a world dominated by men; and through bori the world of women temporarily subdues and humiliates the world of men (Onwuejeogwu, 1969, 290).

As Onwuejeogwu has correctly shown, the bori cult in the nineteenth century was a product of cultural change brought by the Sokoto Caliphate. Prior to the Sokoto Caliphate, Hausa women had the same political equality with men. Some women were even rulers and held political offices. How the bori cult was transported to Tunisia or even survived the Islamic

setting since its resurgence in the aftermath of the jihad in northern Nigeria needs to be understood within religio-polico strategy of the rulers of the Husaynid dynasty.

Background to the Bori Practice in Tunis

BY the early nineteenth centuries, variations of the bori cult were observed in Tunis, Tripoli, Algiers and Morocco. In Tunis, bori practice was first reported by Ahmad ibn al-Qadi al-Timbuktawi who interned in Tunis on way his way to hajj around 1809, but scholarly documentation of its origin in North Africa can be traced to M. J. N. Tremearne. Writing in 1914, Tremearne attributed the origins of the bori cult in North Africa to slavery though a few adepts of the cult came to North Africa voluntarily, either on trading expedition or on a pilgrimage to Mecca (Tremearne, 1914; 25-26).

The cult as had been documented by al-Timbuktawi and Tremearne was clearly linked to the voluminous importation of enslaved West Africans to Tunisia. At the height of the trans-Saharan slave trade, Tunisia became a transit center for transportation of slaves to the Ottoman Empire (Brunschvig, 1960). The import of enslaved West Africans from Tunis to the Ottoman Porte was driven by a decline of White and Christian sources of slaves) Valensi, 1967: 1267-88; Davies, 1919: 84-89). In their introduction to their book, *Slavery and Muslim Society*, Allan Fisher and Humphrey Fisher explain that "the Russian occupation of Georgia and the Caucasus, in the late eighteenth century closed a well-established source of slave trade from those areas and stimulated the demands for African slaves" (Fisher and Fisher, 1970: 1, Mahadi, 1993: 111, 117, 124-5). In parallel to the demise of slavery in the Caucasus, the upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries Jihad in West Africa led to upsurge enslavement and increased importation of slaves across the Sahara to the Mediterranean destinations of North Africa. Rachad Liman describes the impact of the importation of West Africans to Tunisia in the following terms:

With the passing of years, the number of Negroes in Tunisia from black Africa increased, especially during the second half of the eighteenth century. Their presence resulted in various manifestations on the part of the Negroes, coming from the fact that most of these [slaves were] atheists or pagans. Although some of them had converted to Islam, their new beliefs had remained very superficial. As a result, this minority gathered into groups and communities in order to practice their religious rite, beliefs and previous traditions (Liman, 1981: 315; Limam, 1980).

Thus the bori practice in nineteenth century Tunisia was consequently the product of the increasing expansion of trans-Saharan slave trade that was hatched after the mid-

eighteenth century. As the trade increased in the mid eighteenth century, the number of enslaved West Africans entering Tunisia also rose approaching 1000 to 1, 300 per annum. To be sure, female slaves entering Tunis outnumbered men by two to one ratio. This ratio corresponds closely with the women's domination and manning of the bori cult religious liturgy and activities as will be detailed in the following sections.

The Bori Cult and Religious Pluralism in Husaynid-Tunis

Origins of the non-Muslim Hausa *bori* cult practice in Tunisia during the nineteenth century in retrospect can be examined within the context of religious pluralism in Husaynid dynasty founded in 1705 (Jankowsky, 2010). From the early part of the century, Husaynid Tunisia was an Ottoman regency that tolerated accommodation between orthodox Islam and Sufism or Islamic mysticism under a banner of state religio-polico strategy aimed as societal control of the populace (Chérif, 1983, pp. 41-61; 1980, p. 581; Abun-Nasr 1982, pp. 38-39). Patterns of accommodation between the orthodox Islam and Sufism was thorough and consistent both on the level of theology and in the institutional and personal relationships that characterized the daily life in Ottoman Tunis. *Sufi* ideas, such as saints' intercession between the individual believer and Allah (God) were rife and widely accepted (Brown, 1972, p. 50). The outcome of this pluralistic climate on the religious and daily life had been such that the Tunisian beys or rulers encouraged the growth of popular religious fraternities. Among these was the bori centered-*Stambali* brotherhood. The *Stambali* brotherhood derived its adherents, principally, from slaves and ex-slaves brought to Tunisia largely during Husaynid era. Its founder, Sidi Saad, was himself a former slave believed to have originated from Borno in the central Sudan but came to Tunis via Istanbul and established himself among Tunisian Sufi and marabouts establishments (Ferchiou, 1991).

The *Stambali* adopted *Sufi* ritual and incorporated numerous black African religious beliefs into its religious rites and ceremonies. Because of this, its version of *Sufism* was not to the liking of al-Timbuktawi. This admixture of the indigenous beliefs with Islam and the Tunisians tolerance of such practice outraged al-Timbuktawi.

It should be stressed that the *Stambali* brotherhood mixing *Sufi* rites with tradition sub-Saharan African beliefs was not the sole source of al-Timbuktawi's trouble without the dissension of the bori adherents and their syncretic ceremonies. While the *Stambali* brotherhood could well have been integrated within the Husyanids' religio-polico stratagems of societal control, this was not always the case. In cities such as Tunis, Sfax, Susse and Kairaoun, there

existed secluded West African communities who practiced only the bori the cult. It was this isolated communities and their deviant religious practices that struck the Tunisian guest and his denouncements of the Blacks of Tunis as (*kuffar*) infidels.

The importance of religious pluralism that nourished the enslaved West Africans' religious practices in Tunisia can also be demonstrated through the role Sufi brotherhoods played in the Husaynid Tunisia. As elsewhere in North Africa, there were many important Sufi orders in Tunisia such as the *Qadiriyya* and the *Shadhiliyya* that had been entrenched since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In this context, new brotherhoods organized around charismatic leaders were always in the process of formation. In order to develop into a proper Sufi brotherhood, some popular religious brotherhood such as the *jama`at Stambali* (Stambali group) established their affiliation with the *Sufi* brotherhoods. As such, the *Stambali* developed into a type of a Sufi-like brotherhood but was strictly speaking not a *tariqa* (Sufi order) in the real sense of the term. Notwithstanding, compared to the mainstream *Sufi* orders, the popular religious brotherhoods such as *Stambali* played important social roles within the framework of the Husaynid religio-politico policy of societal control. Socially, a man could participate in the religious ceremonies (*dhikr*) special to each of the religious brotherhoods the Husaynid ruler encouraged and thus become affiliated into that *tariqa* (brotherhood). Out of his association with a brotherhood, he could establish a sense of intimacy and common bond (Brown, 1972, p. 83) with fellow disciples. The main characteristics of the *Stambali* order that sprang in tandem with the increased influx of enslaved West Africans from the central Sudan was characterized by their apparent mixture of *Sufism* with local and indigenous African beliefs practices, the purpose of which was to foster a sense of fraternity, and mutual-aid association.

The above religio-politico strategy of societal control instituted by the Husaynid beys encouraged the bori practice in Tunis. Most of the beys were members of the Sufi orders. Major A. J. N. Tremearne, a former British anthropologist who studied the cult extensively in northern Nigeria and was among the first writers to document the cult in North Africa, observed that the bori-centered *Stambali* brotherhood was an important part of the local popular religious establishment so much that statesmen in Tripoli and Tunis were rumored to have ties with the *Stambali*. Tremearne cited *Dar Beylik*, one of the major bori households in Tunis, to attest to bori ties with the Husaynid Beys in Tunis (Tremearne, 1968, p. 23).

The repercussion of the Wahhabi controversy in Tunisia on the intellectual debate on *bid'a* (religious innovation) deserves mention. Al-Timbuktaw was motivated by the theological controversy generated by the Wahhabi movement that reached Tunisia during his stay in Tunis. From the early nineteenth century, the wave of Wahhabism had reached almost every quarter of

the Islamic world denouncing saint worship as *shirk* (polytheism) and Sufism as *bid`at* (innovation). This movement calling Muslims to purify Islam from religious innovations was becoming source of trouble for Sufism. As such, the Wahhabis bitterly attacked Sufism, because of its thaumaturgy, intercession and ecstatic ritual, as being unsanctioned by the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah (sayings of the prophet Mohammad). A Wahhabi letter appealing to Muslims to denounce *shirk* (polytheism) and entreating to a return to the pure practice of Islam was sent to the Tunisian ruler, Hammuda Pasha (d. 1814). But the Wahhabi's appeal was met with zealous resistance on the part of Sufi establishment propelled the Pasha to summoned Tunisian ulama (scholars) to respond to the Wahhabi proclamation denouncing Sufism in Tunisia (Green, 1984).

The Bori Practice in Tunis: Unbelief or Another Dimension of the African Diaspora?

In branding the bori practice in Tunisia as *kufur* (unbelief), Ahmad b. al-Qadi al-Timbuktawi did not only reduce the bori cult practice in Tunisia from its historical context, but overlooked the psychological factors that gave rise to the bori in Ottoman Tunis in the Maghreb. What then was the historical context in which the bori cult was transplanted in North African Islamic milieu? Can the cult practice in Tunisia be interpreted as a manifestation of the African Diaspora? What contribution would such interpretation add to our understanding of the complexity of the African Diaspora that until recently has been dominated by the paradigmatic interpretations of the African diaspora across Atlantic world?

From a historical standpoint, the bori cult in North Africa can be said to have been documented in the Mediterranean Islamic rim only during the early nineteenth century, although its practice in Tunis can now be linked to the presence of elite slave soldiers that were imported to Tunis following the succession crisis between Ali Bey I (reigned 1740-1756) and cousin Husayn Ibn Ali (reigned 1738-39). According Abdelmajid al-Sabai, Ali Bey I imported the slave soldiers from the central Sudan and built a number of clubhouses (*nawadi*) for these soldiers to practice their indigenous religious beliefs freely (Limam, 1980, p. 241). Although the nature of the indigenous African beliefs the slave soldiers practiced is unclear from al-Saba'i's account, it can be surmised that because they were drawn from the Hausaland where the bori cult was prevalent it is highly likely that their religious beliefs might have been none other the bori cult (Montana, 2009, 159). John Hunwick, citing Ahmad Baba (1556-1627) however, maintains that the influx of non-Muslim Hausa slaves into North Africa who were responsible for

introducing the bori cult in Tunis may be traced as far back to the late sixteenth century. Hunwick believes that by the early seventeenth century, slaves of Hausa origin were already crossing the Sahara to North Africa through the caravan slave routes bringing slaves from Kano and Katsina, and Burno to Ghadames, Tripoli, and Tunis (Hunwick, 2004, pp. 152-53). As such, it is likely that the bori cult practice may have been introduced in North Africa by Hausa slaves whose presence predate the eruption of the Sokoto Caliphate that in turn sent thousands of non-Muslim Hausas to enslavement who according to Tremearne constituted the vast majority of the bori practitioners in Tunis (Tremearne, 1968).

The question of historical context aside, the extent to which the bori practice in Tunisia may be attributed to psychological symptoms and cultural manifestations of the African Diaspora also warrant a scrutiny similar to what scholars of the African Diaspora in the context of Atlantic world have done. A careful examination of the process through which the bori cult was transplanted across the trans-Saharan trade to North Africa can be correlated with the development of indigenous African religions in the Americas. As has been established by scholars of the Atlantic world, whenever enslaved Africans of diverse origin were transported to an alien land as a result of the African slave trade, a support system developed and enabled the enslaved West Africans to cope with the crisis brought about by the alienation that accompanied their displacement from their original homelands. Such a support system was crucial in providing the cultural and family needs for the enslaved West African diasporas in the Islamic milieu in Ottoman Tunis. In Tunis as was the case in the rest of Tunisia, the support system created through the framework of the bori religious practice was patterned along the line of cultural kinship and mutual aid organizations similar to those established by enslaved West Africans in the Americas. At the top of these organizations were strongly revered old women often referred to by the enslaved West Africans as (*aja`iz* sing. of *ajuz*). Each of these old women served as a chief priestess of a group of West Africans affiliated to her household on the basis of ethnicity or regional place of origin from West Africa. (Montana, 2009, p. 163). Thus beyond their liturgical duties within the circles of the bori ceremonies, the bori priestesses played a key role in preserving indigenous African religious and family values they had derived from the original homelands from West Africa.

Thus examining the cause of the bori practice in the Muslim North Africa notwithstanding the enslaved Africans conversion to Islam can be interpreted, not as *kufr* (unbelief) in accordance with al-Timbuktawi's dogmatic stance, but rather as a form of diasporic consciousness associated with the "psychological crisis brought about by enslavement, and transplantation into an alien environment" (Hunwick, 2004, p. 149). This interpretative

framework and perspectives in a context where the development of black African religious practices until very recently has been timidly discussed will require a radical reassessment and re-examination of patterns of slave treatments and more generally how the Africans responded to the conditions of enslavement. This is beyond the confines of this essay. This approach would also necessitate consideration of a range of theoretical models that seek answers to the diffusion of indigenous African religious practices in the context of slavery or force displacement. In this respect, Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers' African kinship (Kopytoff and Miers, 1977) and Robin Horton's (Horton, 1971) two-tier cosmology models used by Monica Schuler and Karen Fog Olwig to study African religions in the Caribbean would prove useful. Using these models, Schuler argues that the circumstances under which enslaved Africans in bondage maintained African beliefs systems should be seen not as an end in itself, but as an important adaptive strategies to survive the adverse implications of slavery (Schuler, 1978).

When considering the ways in which bori cult functioned among the enslaved African and free blacks of Tunisia in the early nineteenth century, it is strikingly similar to Schuler's analysis of the survival of Africans religions in the Caribbean. As Tremearne has also shown, although most of the enslaved sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia came from the same cultural zone in western and central Sudan, not all of them, however, shared the same ethnic background or language. Yet considering the solidarity they forged and the manner they dealt with their alienation through the mechanism of the bori cult, the cult should be seen not just as syncretic religious practices, but also as a crucial support system that was central to their survival under the conditions of slavery. In this regards, the bori cult among the enslaved West Africans of Tunisia, served multiple roles in maintaining social harmony, promoting and protecting communal values that were central to the survival of the enslaved West Africans in their alien environment.

Karen Fog Olwig's analysis of the process of how African cosmological principles shape the development of slave culture in the Caribbean also call our attention to reconsider the relationship between the bori cult practice and the survival of enslaved Africans under the diasporic conditions. According to Karen Fog:

Membership in secret cults, operating independently of kin groups, offered protection against abuses of power. These cult were tied to certain places regarded as residence of particular spirit that could be worshipped and invoke human beings. Such local religious cults drew their members from several different kin groups. Through secret rituals, a close, personal relationship was established with a guardian spirit. This relationship was one of dependence and subordination to that spirit, and for this reason cult members became partially freed

from the ties of subordination and dependence binding them to others (Olwig, 1995, p. 28).

Like Olwig, I. M. Lewis who worked extensively on the Zar and similar spirit possession cults in Somalia analyzes bori development in the Muslim periphery and concluded that:

I think in the case of slaves, the bulk of expenses involved in such bori therapy fell upon their masters, and thus gave the former a lever with which to manipulate the latter. In a more general sense too, these bori brotherhood protect the interests of their members, providing food and lodging for the temporary indigent, and while slavery still existed would sometimes buy a slave his freedom. With the abolition of slavery, these organizations more than any others have come to provide the primary focus of allegiance and social identification for the ex-slaves community. They champion their members' rights and protect them against the harassment or abuses from their Arab and Berber superiors. Here the black brotherhoods act as pressure groups, which enjoy a special ritual cachet though, their association with the widely feared bori spirits. (Lewis, 1989, p. 103).

Another example that echoes how African religious practices in the Mediterranean Islamic world strengthened the sense of solidarity of the enslaved West Africans in their dispersal across the western Mediterranean rim is attested by the following account of, Lucy Garnett, a wife of a British diplomat in Istanbul:

Low, however, in the social scale as are the negresses of Turkey, there exists among them an *esprit de corps* which has led to the formation of a society for mutual defence and protection, not only against the tyranny of masters and mistress, but against sickness and other accidents of life. This Negro association forms also a center of reunion for the observation of those superstitious rites which its members brought with them from their native land, and which they still cherish notwithstanding their profession of the Moslem Faith. The society is divided into a number of local lodges, each of which is under the direction of a negress called the *Kolbashi*, who is at the same time its president and the priestess of a divinity, worshipped by the negress under the name of Yavroubé. (Garnett, 1891, 2: 415-6).

Thus the Yavroubé, a variant of the bori cult, as described above attests to how enslaved West Africans coped with the adverse realities of estrangement from their homelands. In her capacity as the leader of her community, the *kolbashi* or *godiya/godya* (priestess) would free slaves who had badly treated by their owners. Slaves freed through the Yavroubé cult were cared for by the *kolbashi* who kept them in her lodge.

Conclusion

Despite al-Timbuktawī's dogmatic approach condemning the enslaved West Africans engaged in the bori cult practice as deviants and infidels, his account of the bori cult practice in Tunis is a very useful source to reconstruct the extent to which enslaved West Africans invoked the bori cult to deal with the conditions of alienation and estrangement in Ottoman-Tunis just as their counterpart had done across the Atlantic world. The treatise is thus a retrogressive step for scholars of African diaspora to rethink the trans-Saharan slave trade's dimension in the making of the African diaspora. As such, this paper has argued that just as scholars of the African diaspora in the last several decades have been concerned with the religious expressions of the enslaved Africans in the Americas, the study of religious practices of enslaved West African religious practices in the North Africa and the Mediterranean Islamic rim may help broaden our understanding of the scope of the African diaspora.

Under the umbrella of the bori cult possession, the enslaved West Africans in Tunisia especially and the Ottoman Porte grouped into kinless organizations to find ways to express their shared grievance, alienation and psychological crisis brought about by the condition of enslavement. For many of these Africans in the Mediterranean Islamic Diaspora, their links to their homelands were best served by the medium of such African practices which did not only provided them with protection against the tyranny of slave master when abused, but served to maintain their cosmology through the macrocosm that these cults provide as means to maintain and ascertain their self-identity.

Note:

This is a version of a paper entitled: "Redefining Bori Practice in al-Timbuktawī's *Hatk al-Sitr*: Infidelity (*Kufr*) or Another Dimension of the African Diaspora?," originally presented at a workshop on How to talk about the non-Muslim experience in the Ottoman society: From narrating community life to integrating plurality, July 13-14, 2009 Zentrum Moderner Orient, (ZMO) Berlin. I thank the Ottoman Urban Seminar at Zentrum Moderner Orient and The Europe in the Middle-The Middle East in Europe for the Postdoctoral Research Fellowship for the support to carry out my research in Berlin in 2008-2009.

ⁱ For a general survey on the cult development under the Sokoto Caliphate, see Fremont, E. Besmer, "Initiation into Bori cult: A case Study in Ningi Town", *Africa*, 47 (1), 1977, 1-3; Dean S. Gilliland, *Africa Religion Meets Islam: Religious Changes in Northern Nigeria*, University Press of America, 1986, Joseph Greenberg, *The Influence of Islam on Sudanese Religion*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, rpt 1966, p 69-70; "Some Aspects of

Negro-Mohammedan Culture Contacts Among the Hausa", *American Anthropologist*, 43 (1941), p. 55-61 and Jerome H. Barkow, "Hausa Women and Islam" *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vi, ii (1972), 324-28.

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