

Boko Animism - what is it?



- ❖ It is a world view, a belief in spiritual forces that effect humans in their daily lives. Black magic too.
- ❖ **God** (Lua) exists and is all powerful, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and the one who controls the weather. The Boko (autonym = Boo) are strictly monotheistic. Heaven/sky is God's

home. A fireball is God the king's axe. What God gives is your lot or destiny.

- ❖ **Diviners** 'maso' are people who advise people who come to them what to do in a crisis. They may send the person to a priest and suggest they take a black chicken or the like.
- ❖ **Priests** 'sa'ona' are people who sacrifice an animal or bird brought by someone and who invoke the spirit sacrificed to at the place associated with that spirit, maybe a river, rock or sacred tree. In olden times everyone had his personal spirit that he should keep in harmony with. There are also powerful spirits that anyone can approach with a sacrifice and make their request. Diviners and priests are ordinary people in the community, fulfilling a spiritual role.
- ❖ **Nature spirits** 'táa' are non-human supernatural beings who live in association with a tree, river or rock. They have their own personal names and are sacrificed to. The earth as provider of food can also be sacrificed to by pouring a little drink on the ground. The Bokobaru also have territorial spirits who control an extended area. Small clay

walled huts without windows and doors are built for them and sacrifices can be made on a stone beside the wall. Kaiama is named after a territorial spirit named Kaama, which is the Bokobaru pronunciation of the town name, Kaiama.

- ❖ **Possessing spirits** are also called ‘táa,’ because they are similar to the previous spirits. Possessing spirits are not sacrificed to and don’t have names. There are different types of possessing spirits. The ‘gai’ are spirits who possess mainly women. and these women form a ‘gai’ society. When a ‘gai’ possessor ‘gaide’ dies, recruits are sought to take on the spirit of the possessed women who died. There is no shortage of recruits because being a ‘gaide’ gives power and prestige. People fear these women. Trances can be induced by the constant beating of calabashes and the possessed woman may give directions as to when the community can start eating pounded yam or start collecting shea nuts. ‘Gai’ women wear a thread around their heads and often suffer from headaches. After the death of a ‘gaide’, when recruits are found to receive the ‘gai’, calabashes are beaten and the

dead women's body is propped up against an overturned mortar with nobody supporting it. When the dead body starts vibrating, then the transfer takes place to the new initiate who will swoon at the time. There are other kinds of possessing spirits, like 'wɛlɛna'. These possessed women do not speak their own language when the spirit speaks through them. One group give their directives in Hausa, even though they know no Hausa. Another group speak Busa, a language related to Boko, but spoken several hundred km away in Nigeria. When in a trance these women can jump very high and exhibit supernatural strength. The women are regarded horses, ridden by the 'gai' spirit, who sits on the shoulder. The Boko do not think of these spirits as demons. Although possessed people are adversely affected, the overall purpose is to maintain harmony with the spirit world. The women are regarded as mediums. and it is sometimes claimed they can call up the dead. Trances are not frequent, but 'gai' women always exhibit a dark scowl. When the 'gai' spirit is on its 'horse', the woman becomes courageous and says what a normal

person wouldn't say, and they can say things as a 'revelation' which may be true or false. The spirits/demons spoken of at the time of Jesus were more powerful than these. People can invoke spirits to kill other humans.

- ❖ **Welena** maybe fortune tellers, they seem to have supernatural knowledge, but can't be trusted. People consult them to find a solution to a problem. Some 'welena' can deliberately and happily tell other people's secrets. Anybody can be affected by a spirit. This usually starts with a dream in which a spirit, sometimes referred to as a 'po' (thing) speaks to a person and tells them to do something, maybe to murder someone. The person will then feel trapped. Either he will find himself guilty of murder, or he will suffer the consequences of being disobedient to a spirit. Wearing a bangle or charm or some other 'spiritual' behaviour can cause a person to be oppressed by a spirit. This can result in irrational behaviour, speaking in tongues, depression etc.
- ❖ A **medicine man or herbalist** is called 'esede.' 'Ese' is the Boko word for medicine or magic,

especially black magic. A medicine man is a member of the community who understands herbal medicine which may be used for health purposes. Parts of dead bodies are also used. He may be sought to improve health or prosperity. But more often he will be consulted to remove health or prosperity by means of curses or black magic. Some herbal medicines are beneficial, others are used simply because of association. A plant that bears a bunch of many berries may be boiled for a barren woman to wash in. If that plant bears so much fruit, surely it will help someone conceive.

- ❖ **Witchdoctors** are more malevolent than herbalists and medicine men. A Boko seeking prosperity will often be asked by witchdoctors in nearby Nigeria to bring a human head to be used in preparing the necessary 'ese'.
- ❖ A **curse** is simply a word spoken in seriousness against an enemy. "You will die soon" or "you will have an accident" are malicious statements which can have a real outcome. Black magic is often associated with an invocation. It is the spirits who

are invoked. An evil prayer. Herbalists aren't paid much. The more malicious ones are called witch doctors or sorcerers. They may give you some 'εε' to put in your enemy's food. The 'εε' is black magic, not poison. Or they may ask you to bury a package containing 'εε' on a path that your enemy frequents. When he walks over the buried 'εε', he will get sick and die. To put a thing 'pɔ' on someone is to put a spell on him. The 'pɔ' is an invocation to a spirit. Curses and spells are more powerful when pronounced by a medicine man.

- ❖ There are other supernatural beings that the Boko see in the bush, although this is dying out. Such things as **fire spirits** 'gãwa' and **dwarfs** 'asaona'.
- ❖ **Twins** are more prone to spiritual activity than other people. When a twin dies a fetish is made and kept in the household. It is made of wood and looks like a small quoit peg. When a new cloth is bought by the surviving twin, he/she will cut a piece of cloth off it and spike it on the quoit peg, thus clothing the dead twin. Porridge and other food can be poured or rubbed on the peg, thus feeding the twin.

- ❖ There is not much **ancestral worship**. At the burial of an older person, the Boko are concerned that the dead person finds his people and does not continue to roam and return to the village to bother the living. So an egg or cola nut is often buried with the corpse with the words “here are your children, don’t come back looking for them.” The spirit of a dead person (**ghost**) is called ‘gyaade’ which literally means the possessor of a widow/widower. A widow may burn her old clothes and wear new ones, so she won’t be recognised by her dead spouse. The place of dead spirits is called ‘geɔbe’ (home of the dead). This is not a cemetery, but rather Hades.
- ❖ **Charms** ‘zĩadɔabɔ’ are rings or little leather sachets containing words of the Quran etc. that protect people from evil, danger, curses, sickness etc. The Boko often have charms in the form of a ring on the finger. A herbalist may boil a simple ring in a cauldron with dead scorpion remains and give an invocation. The ring is worn to ward off scorpion bites, because “a scorpion would not sting its own.” Muslims reject the use of priests and sacrifice but believe in good and bad spirits

(**jinn**) and that the good ones should be placated. Folk Islam people are keen on wearing charms. It is not uncommon to see some herb or animal part on the wall inside a house. It is there for protection.

- ❖ **Taboos** ‘tē’ are common. In the past when everyone had their own personal spirit, they also had a taboo that they must avoid. The taboo was usually a prohibition on the consumption of a certain animal. There may be only one taboo or several. The penalty for eating your taboo, maybe blindness, sickness, death, calamity etc.
- ❖ **Defilement** ‘gbā’ is a spiritual defilement that may result from your wife being pregnant or from committing adultery. A defiled man should not walk past a woman making soap or the emulsion will be spoilt. Hunters must not go hunting with defilement, so there are rituals to remove defilement. Good hunters have spiritual power, simply called ‘kā’ (hair). This ‘kā’ is spiritual power or confidence which enables a person to defeat the inherent power of savage animals. Not everyone can go out and kill an elephant or a lion.

In Boko idiom if your 'kã' died, you are discouraged. If somebody kills your 'kã', he has discouraged you. The smoke of certain burning leaves or bark is called 'duu,' a sort of **healing incense**. Walking through that smoke will remove defilement that is preventing conception. Herbs are often burnt near a sick person and thought to have healing properties.

- ❖ **Offerings** 'saaa' are given to spirits to appease them. Cola nut is a favourite and may be left at the crossroads of paths for spirits who pass there at night. Drink offerings are poured out on the ground and dripped at fetish sites where animal sacrifices are made.
- ❖ Boko animism is not a very organised religion. However, it is a traditional religion, and people will be insulted for not doing what is seen as necessary for the health or wellbeing of an individual or the community or for doing something which is seen as offensive to the spirit world. Christian converts are eager to disassociate themselves from activity which they regard as demonic or Satanic. An early female convert, who

gave birth to twins, refused to sleep with another man to remove the defilement, which was the requirement before returning to her husband. She also broke the taboo of returning to the village where a former husband was buried. She said Jesus would protect her from anything his ghost might like to do to her. Her relatives were not happy about her Christian funeral. They wrapped her in a white cloth and buried her straight, whereas according to her ancestry, she should have been wrapped in a black cloth and buried in the foetal position. They arranged another funeral and during this second funeral there were brawls, and a child got lost in the bush and died. They went to a diviner to ask why things went bad at their funeral. The diviner said the dead woman wanted the first funeral, but not the second one. Sometimes they are right!