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Bori

Healers of the Soul

By (photographer) Caroline Alida

Contributions by Adeline Masquelier

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The Bori is a kind of African shamanism, an animist cult centred on possession by the spirits of the ancestors, which has spread throughout West Africa. Its followers, priests (also known as Bori) and assistants are clairvoyants or faith healers. They perform ecstatic ritual dances to conjure up the djinns-spirits-that they hope will protect society and its individual members from evil powers. Faith healers (Boka) employ traditional plants to heal the sick. Although living in societies which are for the most part Islamic, women play an important role in the Bori and sometimes occupy key positions. Caroline Alida's black-and-white portraits do not depict the often brightly coloured and seductive clothes/costumes of the Bori any more than they dwell on the objects used in ritual practices. The dim natural light, which barely leaks into the confined spaces, makes all the peripheral details disappear, drawing out only the essential elements and imbuing the photos with a contemplative atmosphere.

Caroline Alida has used the medium of photography to continue her study of the power of the intangible. Since 2001 she has made regular trips to the regions of Agadez and Dogondoutchi, in Niger, to research traditional figures and has met several Bori, Marabouts,an Imzad musician, etc. Adeline Masquelier is Head of the Department of Anthropology at Tulane University, New Orleans.

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