ILLNESS AND POSSESSION: ELEMENTS FOR A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Erika Bourguignon
Department of Anthropology
Ohio State University

During the past five years, in cooperation with a group of associates, I have been conducting a long-range, comparative study of dissociational states.¹ I should like to draw on this study, as well as on my own ethnographic field work in Haiti as a basis for my remarks. The term "dissociational states" (or "states of altered consciousness") is very general indeed and our work has addressed itself to a variety of phenomena, yet possession cults must necessarily constitute an important aspect of such a broad investigation. Possession cults have attracted the attention of a number of scholars in recent years and a variety of publications on this subject have appeared. It has, therefore, been striking to me to discover that perhaps no example of possession cult has received as much attention, and one might say, publicity, as the vodû cult of Haiti. There have been both scientific and sensational accounts, and the political events of Haiti's turbulent history have at all times played a role in the attitude of writers on the subject, from Moreau de St. Méry (1797) to Loederer (1935) and Seabrook (1929) and more recently Rémy Bastien (1966) and Francis Huxley (1966). Vodû has been the subject of a significant number of sober and scientific papers by such scholars as M.J.Herskovits (1937), Alfred Métraux (1959), Price-Mars (1928), and Louis Mars (1946). Psychiatrists too are becoming interested in vodû, in the comparatively recent fields of ethnopsychiatry and transcultural psychiatry (cf. Kiev, 1961a,b; Wittkower et al 1964).

It may be a matter of selective perception on my part, yet I seem to find references to vodû in a great many things I

¹. The original French version of this paper was presented to the Colloque International sur les cultes de possession, convened in 1968 in Paris by Professors Roger Bastide and Jean Rouch, under the sponsorship of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

². This study was supported in whole by PHS Research Grant MH 07463 from the National Institute of Mental Health, and was carried out at The Ohio State University during the years 1963-68.

This draft is from Erika Bourguignon's personal records and may not exactly replicate the authoritative published document. See http://www.paulbourguignon.com/Erika.html for more information.
read which deal with other matters and other parts of the world: Michel Leiris (1958) draws attention to similarities between vodô and the zar cult of the Amhara; Bruno Lewin (1958) compares it to the zar cult of Egypt; Eike Haberland (1960) finds it similar to the zar cult of the Arusi, while at the same time contrasting the zar cult of the Arusi and that of the Amhara; Jane Belo (1960) speaks of vodô in an analysis of Balinese possession cults and Robert Graves (1959) mentions vodô in the introduction to his new translation of the Iliad. Clearly, there are some shared elements to be found among all these groups: the very fact of possession trance, or crise de possession in the more usual French expression; the playing of a role with all the theatrical elements that this implies which have been studied in such detail by M. Leiris for the Ethiopian zar cult and by A. Métraux for Haitian vodô; the participation of a group or society as actors and spectators; and even the verbal convention of calling the possessed the "horse" or mount of the possessing spirit; all are common to Haitians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Balinese and perhaps even the Ancient Greeks.

Yet the differences must not be lost sight of, nor the problem which underlies this somewhat casual drawing of analogies: it is based on the urgent need for comparative materials against which one can test one's own data. As indicated above, the literature on Haitian vodô has been both extensive and widely disseminated and, therefore, readily available for that purpose. What appears to be needed now, it would seem to me, are more complete and standardized forms of reporting to allow genuine comparisons and not merely fragmentary ones, based in part on inferences and extrapolations, and the development of a typology which would permit us to distinguish different varieties of possession cults from one another and to proceed, therefore, to a more meticulous and detailed comparison of the individual specimens of possession cults constituting each type.

It is tempting to proceed on the basis of known or suspected historical connections or diffusions, yet if we do this, we soon find ourselves in the realm of speculation. For example, striking similarities between the zar cult and the Ancient Greek mysteries of Dionysos and of the Corybantes have been pointed out by Jeanmaire (1951), who shows how knowledge of the zar cult sheds light on the fragmentary records of Ancient Greece, which have for such a long time puzzled classical scholars. Yet, does this entitle us to infer historical connections? Because of the treacherous nature of such an enterprise, based as it must be on limited information, I would prefer another approach. I should like to select a typological criterion and see whether this might help us to put some order into our data.
Before doing so, however, let me begin by attempting to define the term "possession cult" as I understand it and as I shall use it in this paper. I shall assume that we are dealing with groups or societies made up of individuals who participate periodically in certain rituals. During these rituals, various members--and not only a single ritual specialist--will experience trance states. These trance states are interpreted as due to the possession of the individual by spiritual entities, one or more, individually or in succession. The personalities, behavior patterns, speech, habits, tastes etc. of these spirits are acted out by the possessed in trance; the actions are considered to be those of the spirits and not those of the actor. This definition, which may seem to say only the obvious, does serve to exclude certain types of trance states and also certain types of beliefs in possession. It consequently limits our field of investigation significantly. (We have, for example, eliminated shamanism from our considerations not only the classical form, in which the shaman, in trance, sends his soul, or one of his souls, to distant places, but also shamanism in a somewhat broader sense of the term, the shaman through whom spirits speak).

Having narrowed our range of phenomena to more manageable dimensions, we may now attempt to work out a typology of possession cults based upon illness beliefs including both explanations of illness and treatment. We will begin with a brief review of Haitian data.

Haitian folk beliefs concerning the causes of illness and death fit into four broad categories: (1) illness and death sent by God; (2) illness due to natural causes; (3) illness (and other disorders) sent by the spirits of the vodû cult; (4) illness due to witchcraft i.e. illness due to actions of evil human beings. (It will be noted that in what follows, my interpretation differs from that of A. Kiev (1961a, 1961b).) Illness and death sent by God must be accepted with resignation. Illness due to natural causes can be fought with various remedies: plant and animal substances, patent medicines bought at the pharmacy, or even by seeking help from a dispensary or physician. It is categories (3) and (4) which will concern us here. Illness and other troubles (barrenness, loss of children, disturbing dreams, marital and economic difficulties etc.) are taken for diagnosis to a vodû priest or priestess --hoûgâ or mambo--who use a variety of techniques to arrive at their decisions. If the illness or disorder is held to be due to the spirits of the vodû cult (10a), then it is said that the spirits "hold" (kembe) the victim. They,
or sometimes the patient's deceased ancestors, who are likened to the loa in many ways, use such forms of punishment to remind the person of his (or her) duties toward them. The houga may then suggest initiation into the cult or advancement within the cult, or the offering of feasts or other rituals (mâgé loa, mâgé morts, etc.) as required to fulfill the neglected duties. Such a fulfillment of one's obligations is then expected to appease the supernatural agency who will then withdraw the illness or other difficulty. For example, one peasant woman of my acquaintance was saving money to meet the expenses of a kazo initiation, which, she had been told, was needed to meet the wishes of her principal loa and thus to rid her of chronic leg pains. The concept of such illnesses of supernatural origins does not involve any ideas of possession. The spirits send illness, they catch and hold the person, they do not get into or upon the person. It may be expected that one or more spirits will possess the person, if an initiation ritual is performed, but this is likely to have occurred on some other occasion previously. There is, however, no ritual of exorcising the illness here, of questioning the possessing spirit concerning it, or any variation on this theme. We may state quite emphatically: illness or other difficulties sent by the spirits are not thought of as possession and are, therefore, not treated as such.

Our second category of Haitian beliefs concerning illness involves witchcraft. As elsewhere, witchcraft in Haiti is motivated by two principal drives: greed and jealousy. Again, the houga or mambo acts as diviner to identify the source of the difficulty or the spirits themselves do so during possession ceremonies. There is a connection here with our first type of explanation, in that it is believed that the faithful will be protected by their loa against the evil actions of witches. This is shown, for example, by the observation that persons may, in moments of great fear, be spontaneously possessed by a loa. Of the various types of witchcraft, only one will be dealt with here - one that evokes special horror and that involves a sort of possession: this is the causing of illness and possibly death, by sending the spirit of one or more dead persons to possess the victim. The cure was performed by a vodô specialist, with the help of her loa. The contrast between this illness-causing type of possession by the dead and possession by the loa is striking and merits detailed comparison. To begin with, possession by the dead is manifested as illness; possession by the loa involves a state of dissociation, of trance. Possession by the loa is not only desired but is intentionally induced as part of group ritual by means of singing, drumming, dancing and group contagion. It appears to occur spontaneously only under two sets of conditions: either in a situation of great
fear or as a first possession among adolescents, often when youngsters (and sometimes adults) imitate states of possession, often under circumstances which greatly resemble actual possession rituals. In contrast to all of this, possession by the dead is believed to be caused by witchcraft, i.e., sent by other human beings and thus neither at the will of the possessed person nor at the will of the possessing spirits. Rather than dissociation we find illness. There is no singing, dancing, drumming; nor is there a group ritual. Possession by the dead is an individual rather than a group activity. What ritual activity there is occurs not to produce possession but to terminate it and is directed at exorcising or driving out the illness-causing spirits. Exorcism expresses hostility against the spirits of dead, and the process may punish the body in which they reside. In contrast, the loa, having been invited, are made welcome with food and drink and entertainment. In the case of first possessions, ritual acts will be undertaken to establish the loa in the head of his "horse". The relationship is a permanent one and the spirit is ritually removed only after death. While many loa may possess a person, they do so in sequence or on different occasions; on the other hand, several of the dead may possess a victim at the same time. While the dead are thought to be "in" the patient, they are not said to be "in his head" and while they are sent "on" him, unlike the loa, they are not said to "mount" him nor is he said to be their "horse". There are still other differences between the two kinds of possession, which relate to the points already mentioned. The loa "mounts" a "horse" who, for the duration of the possession is in trance and acts out the part of the loa. It is the loa who eats and drinks, dances and sings, smokes and talks, answers questions, gives advice and may carry on a great many other activities. Afterwards, it is expected that the "horse" will remember nothing that went on. The victim of the dead, however, is not in a trance state, he does not act the role of the spirits possessing him (although his body may be convulsed and racked by various symptoms of his illness, that is, of the presence of the dead inside of it). The dead are not differentiated entities: it is not their identities which matter, but the identity of the sender. They are not questioned about their wishes, or the sender's identity or indeed about anything. The presence of the dead and the identity of the sender are discovered through divination and through the action of the curer's loa; the sender is known in advance to be an enemy of the victim. The events of illness and cure are not covered by amnesia. The dead are driven out once and for all and no relapse is expected, no continuing relationship with the intruder spirits is foreseen or developed.
While such possession illness is part of the universe of vodû, it is not part of vodû as a possession cult. It represents a separate series of rituals, only tangentially connected with vodû. We might add that persons possessed by the dead are considered ill, not mad, and indeed madness is explained as due to other types of witchcraft or punishment by the loa. Furthermore, the symptoms of such possession illness, those described by Métraux and others described to me, appear to be more physical than emotional, although this is not to deny their possible psychosomatic nature. There is also a question here about the possible origins of these possession illness beliefs. While it has been long established that the African contributions to vodû must be sought for primarily among the Dahomeans and the Yoruba, evidence for African origins of this type of possession illness seems to me to be lacking. On the other hand, the European concept of possession illness seems to involve symptoms that are primarily hysterical in nature. Furthermore, the identity of the spirits is important and they are questioned in the traditional Christian and Jewish rituals of exorcism of persons suffering from demoniacal possession.

If we wish to focus on the subject of illness as a criterion for the development of a typology of possession cults, our findings with respect to Haiti must be: possession illness beliefs and rituals in Haiti do not constitute a possession cult. Vodû, which is indeed a possession cult, is not centered about the concept of illness. How does vodû then compare to its West African, specifically Dahomean, antecedents?

While there is much continuity, we are also struck by the many significant differences in ritual and belief between Haitian vodû and its Dahomean counterpart. First of all, there are the factors of syncretism and reinterpretation, which have led to a fusion of several African traditions, as well as to a fusion between African and Christian elements. Secondly, there are those distinctive features of vodû which have developed in its nearly 200 year history in Haiti itself. With respect to social structure, vodû also differs from its African ancestral forms in that it is a folk religion, a religion of the masses. Prior to extensive Europeanization, the spirit cult was the "official" religion of Dahomey, with significant ties to sources of social and political power (Herskovits, 1938; Verger, 1957). Yet we suggested above the development of a typology of possession cults on the basis of the criterion of illness. With respect to that criterion, Haitian vodû and the vodun cult of Dahomey appear to belong to the same group. While the spirits may both cause and cure illness, possession by these spirits does not
constitute illness, and a type of illness possession not manifested in trance is not part of the possession cult in either society.

These features place the Haitian and Dahomean possession cults in sharp contrast to the possession cults of East Africa, which appear in a virtually unbroken distribution from the Zulu in the South to the Ethiopians and Egyptians in the North, with similar possession cults also appearing among such West African Moslem groups as the Hausa, the Wolof and the Lebou. A prominent common feature of all the possession cults of this second group is found in their central concern with spirits causing illness. This feature is striking, in spite of whatever specific aspects may distinguish them from one another. Author after author tells us of patients, who are taken to a diviner and whose illness is diagnosed as due to possession by a spirit. A ceremony is then organized at which the patient is made to dance and a state of trance is induced. The state is taken as a sign of the presence of the spirit, who is questioned, his identity is revealed and his desires are made known. Only rarely is such a spirit exorcised and driven away. More typically, his wishes are complied with and the patient is then expected to be relieved of his symptoms. Usually he, or more often she, joins the possession cult. The spirit is transformed into a protector, who possesses his human medium only on specified occasions in a ritual manner at a particular time and place. It is noteworthy that initiation into the cult starts with illness and that possession trance, in the view of the society, represents a therapeutic procedure, while the possession cult group represents a therapeutic milieu. The cult group itself is made up of former patients—indeed illness and its treatment seem to be the principal method of entry into such groups. Thus while the possession trance, with its theatrical enactment of the roles of the various spirits resembles in many ways the possession cult of what we might call the West African type, the illness and therapy complex sets the possession cults of this second or East African type sharply off from the former. If we wish to pursue the contrast between the two types of possession cults, we must note that there is little to suggest that the West African type has its origins in methods of dealing with illness in general or with nervous or emotional disorders in particular. Among the Dahomeans, and the Yoruba especially, the great concern with the ancestors' spirits of the royal household and the characteristic structure of the various cult centers seems to show the political aspects of the possession cults. This is not to deny the concern of the spirits with illness or the possible prophylactic or therapeutic functions of the cults. Nonetheless, it should be noted that we know, particularly for the Yoruba, of the quite
distinctive organization of native healing practices (Prince, 1964). Furthermore, the ethnographic literature on the West African kingdoms makes little reference to the typically hysterical disorders among women, which play such a prominent role in the areas of what we have here called the East African type of possession cult. This seems to be the case wherever we find these cults, whether we speak of the so-called "Bantu illness" (Ukuthwas of Calloway, 1870; Krige, 1936, Lee, 1950, etc.) of the Zulu and related peoples, the sheitani illness of the Swahili coast, the phenomena associated with the zar cult or the illnesses found among the West African Moslem groups, such as the Hausa, Lebou, Wolof or Serer.

The concern with illness and perhaps more importantly, the form which both illness and therapy take, may then be seen as a possible basis for an initial typology of possession cults. This, we might add, follows the suggestion of Bastide (1965) as to the structuring of illness which each culture provides. Who belongs to such a cult group represents a second question, which may point to a further refinement of our typology. Thus, it has been noted that possession cults of our second type are predominantly or even exclusively made up of women, particularly in the various Moslem societies. Various and sometimes contradictory hypotheses have been offered for this observation: rituals of rebellion, (Gluckman, 1954; Harris, 1957; Henney, 1966), cults of deprivation (Lewis, 1966), matriarchal societies (Hausman and Westermann, 1962) etc., all have been drawn on to provide an explanatory framework. It is apparent that a more detailed further analysis is required. For example, we must note that the preponderance of women among those experiencing possession has also been referred to by various observers of the West African cults and those in the New World. Yet the organizational role of the men in this type of cult remains a significant factor in the life of these groups, and the divergent roles of the sexes in the cults may provide us with a further clue to their understanding. On the other hand, it should also be noted most emphatically, that for those groups that are not exclusively female in membership, the data on the respective roles and numbers of the sexes are either impressionistic or totally lacking. Our first need would seem to be for adequate and systematically gathered comparative information and reliable statistics.

In summary, then, we may conclude:

1. Our task of a comparative study of possession cults will be furthered by developing a typology of these cults.
2. Two types of cults, "West African" and "East African" are proposed using the subjects of illness, diagnosis and therapy as initial criteria.

3. Sex distribution of membership constitutes a possible second criterion for the refinement of the typology. Adequate data, however, are at present lacking for its satisfactory application.

4. There is a great need for standardized and exhaustive reporting in order to be able to carry out a genuine comparative study.

REFERENCES


(1961b) *Folk Psychiatry in Haiti*. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease 132: 260-65


Verger, Pierre (1957) *Notes sur le culte des orisa et vodun,* Memoir d'IFAN No. 51, Dakar.


ETHICS AND MYSTICISM: PART I

Cand. Philol., Nils Bjorn Kvastad
Fredensborgveien 22
Oslo, Norway

Many mystics have felt that their mystical experiences had ethical implications which led to a moral transformation and became the basis for ethical beliefs. A modern example is Arthur Koestler who has stated that his mystical experiences had profound ethical significance for him. The ethical conclusions he drew from them were very central in his first books. In Hinduism and Buddhism the ethical implications of mystical experiences are also important.

The purpose of this article is to point out the implications mystical experiences have for the more important problems of ethics. I will also review the views of various mystics and scholars of mysticism regarding these problems and mention moral conclusions mystics tend to draw from their experiences.

---

1. Part II of this essay will appear in the next issue of this Newsletter
I will, however, only discuss those ethical views that ultimately stem from the mystical experiences themselves, not those which some mystics have developed independently of their experiences. An example of the latter is Spinoza who constructed a whole ethical system in which important parts were probably independent of the more mystical aspects of his philosophy (the third kind of knowledge, *amor intellectualis dei* etc.). It is not always easy of course to make such a distinction between what is ultimately rooted in mystical experience and what is not. But it can be done in an approximate way.

Most mystics have probably been quite unsophisticated and unphilosophical people. One can therefore not usually expect to find philosophical problems explicitly and clearly treated. Instead one can often find the probable answer to some problem implicit in various mystical texts. This method will often be used here.

The complexity and diversity of this subject must also be stressed. Mysticism has existed in almost all cultures and epochs. Thousands of descriptions of mystical experiences have been recorded. No one, therefore, can know this field in its entirety. One is also seldom able to reach valid conclusions for the whole mystical tradition. Usually one has to say that a conclusion is true for most mystics or for some sub-group, such as Christian mystics, Zen-Buddhist mystics and so forth.

A common view among mystics is that a virtuous character and the following of certain moral principles are an asset in attaining mystical consciousness. It is not only that the experiences themselves give ethical insights, but certain moral qualities ought to exist beforehand if the seeker shall succeed as quickly as possible. In some yoga schools it is even maintained that unless certain moral principles, sometimes called *yama* and *niyama*, are followed, the seeker will be unable to attain mystical illumination at all.

Also in the West certain moral principles have been followed in order to attain mystical enlightenment. In ancient Greece, for example, Pythagoras led his pupils toward mystical illumination by recommending a pure and ethical life in addition to a type of meditation.

But the history of mysticism shows that moral qualities are not indispensable to have mystical experiences. Many artists and poets have been mystics without being models of virtue.