Belief and Experience in Folk Religion: Why Do Women Join Possession Trance Cults?

An observation appears repeatedly in both popular and scholarly descriptions of certain folk religions for which, so far, no fully satisfactory explanations have been offered. I refer to the puzzling reports that certain religious institutions (ones in the course of whose rituals human beings are believed to be—and believe themselves to be—vehicles for a spirit presence) are highly attractive to women. This is true whether the description refers to cults in South or West Africa, to Afro-American cults of the Caribbean and South America, to the Dionysian cults of ancient Greece, to cults of East Asia and South Asia, to contemporary spirit mediums in the United States, or to worshippers manifesting signs of the Spirit in Pentecostal churches. The question is, why? What is there about these cults that attracts women? What is there about women that draws them to these ritual practices?

To approach this problem, I propose to use a familiar idea: the idea that there exists a relationship between belief and experience, and, moreover, that this relationship is reciprocal and multi-leveled. Belief is both coherent with life experience and symbolic of it. "Experience" here refers to the subjective side of the ordinary events of everyday life, to the less ordinary events that occur in ritual settings (where belief is acted out in symbolic as well as in concrete terms), and, at times, to events that occur outside of organized settings as well. Experience gives support to belief, and is structured and informed by belief. It occurs in both sacred and secular contexts. The very enactment of belief may constitute a significant experience.

In the types of societies where women's possession trance cults flourish, we may expect to find certain characteristic correspondences between women's experience at various levels and
that which is expressed—directly as well as symbolically—in several aspects of the total phenomenon: the concept of possession, the behavior and experience of possession trance, and, finally, the structure of the religious institutions themselves.

In ritual situations in which spirit entities are believed to take over the body of a human being as their vehicle and to act by means of that body, the relationship between belief and experience is shown in a dramatic and apparently self-evident manner. During this "take-over"—or "possession"—the individual's ego is in abeyance: the executive functions of the personality are assumed by an "other," by a different identity. The experience is that of an altered state of consciousness, or "trance," and the belief involved is in "spirit possession." For simplicity's sake, we may speak of such a combination of belief, behavior and experience as "possession trance," and of institutions built around such ritual practices as "possession trance cults." It must be stressed that in these cults, the spirit presences are invoked intentionally, the experience is desired and valued, and the context makes it a controlled phenomenon, the limits of which are clearly set. These always include limits of safety for the actors and for other participants, and limits of decency as defined in the context of the society and of the ritual situation. These are not wild, uncontrolled, pathological, fearful seizures, though, at times, they may appear in this light to the outsider. The altered states are induced and terminated by traditional techniques.

Both a belief in the possibility of possession by alien spirit entities and the ritualized experience of altered states of consciousness are enormously widespread and enormously ancient among human societies. However, they need not be linked, and often appear separately. For example, meditation states and hallucinatory drug trance states, in the present-day United States, are not connected to possession beliefs. Indeed, meditation states and hallucinatory (or visionary) states, whether or not induced by drugs, generally are not linked to such beliefs. On the other
hand, we find numerous examples in the ethnographic record of beliefs in types of possession that are not manifested alterations of awareness. Nonetheless, the combination of possession belief with trance behavior and experience is found frequently, particularly in certain parts of the world and in certain types of societies. That is to say, although the pattern is a recurrent one, it is not universal: it is more likely to exist under certain specific socio-cultural conditions than among others. What, once more, is there about this complex of belief, behavior, and experience that, over and over again, marks it as peculiarly female and places it in the women’s sphere?

A specific example may be of help; Nigerian anthropologist Michael Onwuejeogwu described the Bori cult among the Moslem Hausa people of Northern Nigeria. Here, in public rituals, women possession trancers enact various spirit roles. When a woman

is possessed by the spirit called Mallam Alhaji, she walks around bent and coughing weakly like an old learned mallam [teacher] and reads an imaginary Koran. If she is possessed by Dan Galadima, the prince, she acts like a noble man wearing kingly robes. She sits on a mat hearing cases, and people make obeisance. . . If possessed by Ja-ba-Fari . . . a spirit that causes people to go mad, she eats filth and simulates copulation. . . . Spectators wishing to obtain a favour or appease the spirit that has mounted her place their gifts and alms on the mat. . . .

There are many spirits, each with its own particular characteristics, attributes and powers. At the public rituals in which they appear, the husbands of the possessed women may be present. As Onwuejeogwu remarks:

The spirits are beings of great force and objects of attitudes of marked submissiveness on the part of those who come into contact with them. Husbands treat wives who are possessed with a deference and submission that are totally absent in their normal relations.

The spirits by whom the women are believed to be possessed are
male, and the women who incarnate them are given the respect and the gifts to which these powerful beings are entitled. By their actions, the men give evidence of their belief in the existence and the presence of the spirits. Their wives are dramatically transformed and evidently are no longer themselves. Thus the pre-existing belief of the people is reinforced at such ritual occasions, which provide them with the experience of what is, apparently, direct contact with spirit beings.

Onwuejeogwu tells us that Bori rituals are female dominated and the rare men who participate in them as possession trancers are regarded by the community as either impotent or homosexual. He interprets his observations in the following terms:

The spirits of the Bori, he says, represent and symbolize Hausa values such as status, authority, political power, prosperity and the pomp of public life. Since women are, by Hausa marital ideology, excluded from public life and from holding state offices, and since the compound is a physical barrier which helps to shape and intensify their psychosociological isolation, it appears that in Bori Hausa women experience in fantasy the trappings of officialdom...it is a symbolic way of escape from the role of female to that of male.

Onwuejeogwu here tells us that Hausa society is described as stratified; holders of public office have high status; women are restricted to family dwellings, or compounds, and they are isolated from the most desirable aspects of social life—the pomp and ceremony and the power and authority of public office; Hausa women feel it is better to be a man than a woman, and they resolve this frustrating reality, temporarily at least, by denying it. In fantasy, they become not only men, but male beings who are more powerful and authoritative than ordinary men. The description, however, indicates that the women not only deny this reality in their private fantasy worlds but act out this fantasy in such a way as to get their husbands and others in the community to participate in that denial.

We shall return to this point in a moment. First, however, it
may be useful to suggest that there are other possible interpretations of the activities in these public rituals. Is it not conceivable that the women, in a disguised way, mock the social pretentions of the men, by playing out the various roles in exaggerated and stereotyped ways? I am reminded of Haiti, where one sees women possession trancers on Halloween, particularly in the market places of the capital city, incarnating the spirits of death (called Gueude). They wear sun glasses, top hats or bowlers, and portions of male upper class attire—an old tail coat or a vest, and they go from stand to stand begging or stealing amidst great hilarity and some obscene joking. These spirits are powerful male embodiments, not only of death and fertility—hence the obscenity—but also of lower class protest against upper class pretensions.

Another interpretation of Hausa public Bori ritual is suggested by Grace Harris, who studied a form of women's illness and curative ritual among the Wataita of Tanzania. During the ritual dance, women wear items of male clothing or carry out acts associated with male achievements. Yet, Harris noted, there is "no serious attempt to impersonate men. Desired objects and items of the costume are provided for women as women, by their husbands, in the fulfillment of the general duty to succor an ailing wife.” Rather than being a statement of envy and a ritual reversal of roles, the dance affirms the rights of the women as economic and jural dependents to make claims on their husbands.

Clearly, further analysis is required, and the statement that the Hausa public Bori ritual can be understood by considering it as a "symbolic way of escape from the role of female to that of male" is an oversimplification, and a misleading one at that. In effect Onwuejeogwu's own information shows, as we shall see, how the women's incarnation of the spirits affects their everyday lives and modifies the actions of the other members of their households. On the simplest level, the cult reflects the experienced reality of Hausa life. In the ritual, the public life of male office holders
is transmuted to the spirit plane. At the same time, the private life of the household is reflected in the reversal of ordinary roles: the women's deference and submission to their husbands is replaced by the obeisance men offer to wives who are enacting spirit roles. When the women's own personalities are replaced and overpowered by those of the spirits, the familiar rules of husband-wife relations are suspended. For the women, their temporary psychological absence represents a time out from the order of married life.

In spite of their official adherence to Islam, it appears that neither the women who experience spirit possession trance, nor the husbands who observe and respond to it, are ready to question the reality or the authenticity of the spirit presence in principle. (There may be occasional specific instances of questioning whether or not a given enactment is "real," but this does not affect the belief in the spirits or in the possibility of their appearance through human vehicles.) Furthermore, Moslem Hausa men and women who participate in the rituals of the Bori cult do not see in it what appears to be so obvious to an outsider, that is, an occasion for Hausa women to "experience in fantasy the trappings of officialdom...a symbolic way of escape from the role of female to that of male." On the contrary, to the Hausa participants, the scene is not a theatrical enactment of roles, a psychodrama or socio-drama organized to compensate for the frustrations of everyday life through carefully planned role reversals. Rather, it is a convincing demonstration of the reality and the power of the spirit beings; it is a demonstration, through the immediacy of their contact with them, of an experience that is so personal and so intimate that it defies all argument and establishes a reality beyond questioning. Such dramatic alterations of behavior and appearance command respect and carry conviction, for bystanders as well as for those who experience these states. How can one question the reality of such bodily experienced presences? The spirits exist, and belief in them is intact, because they have
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worked their wonders in the very bodies of their human vehicles.

Onwuejeogwu also argues that the Bori spirits represent the
pre-Islamic religion of the Hausa. Once the people were converted
to Islam, the men abandoned their religious duties to the old
spirits, and the cult was relegated to the women, for whom there
was no active role in Islam. Indeed, such claims have been made
with regard to the various African peoples, converted to Islam over
the centuries, among whom women’s possession trance cults exist.
However, the French anthropologist Jacqueline Monfouga-Nicolas, in
a study of the Bori cult of the Moslem Hausa in the Republic of
Niger, documents in considerable detail the difference between that
cult and the traditional religion of non-Moslem Hausa. Clearly,
Bori is a result of the contact of diverse cultural traditions and
is also significantly different from the religion that continues to
be practiced in non-Moslem groups. The idea that women have been
more conservative than men and have maintained traditions that men
have abandoned appears to be a distortion of the historical and
social facts. On the other hand, there is some evidence to indi­
cate that Bori, for women, in some ways balances the place Islam
has in the lives of men.

To understand more fully why men do not question the trans­
formation their wives apparently undergo in the public Bori
rituals, some additional information seems required. First of all,
the participants in the rituals we have described share the world
view on which the cult is based. They come, at least in part, to
have their pre-existing beliefs confirmed rather than as dis­
passionate or skeptical observers. Secondly, such public rituals
are not single or rare events. On the contrary, they occur
repeatedly and women act out the same spirit personalities over and
over again, so that they ultimately constitute more or less fully
formed alternate identities. A woman cult member, consequently,
will entertain two kinds of relationships with her husband: that
of her ordinary self and that of the various spirits she incarnates
on ritual occasions. As Onwuejeogwu points out, a spirit possessing
a wife—that is, a woman through whose mouth a spirit is believed to be speaking—may exert various pressures on a man; such as forcing him to give away goods and money on the threat of losing face, or obliging him to make gifts to her. In polygynous households, this may lead to jealousy and competition among co-wives, and even to divorces, which are expensive for men. In other words, the behavior of the women in ritual contexts or—from the Hausa point of view—the behavior of the spirits, has a direct impact on the ordinary life of the women and of their households. The consequences of spirit possession spill over into the experiences of everyday life. Thus, on the one hand, as we have seen, the experience of domestic life is reflected in the Bori ritual in its role reversals; on the other hand, the experience of spirit possession in its turn affects the households through the impact the spirit presences have on domestic arrangements and human relationships.

The picture of the position of women among the Moslem Hausa of Niger Republic, as revealed in the writings of Monfouga-Nicolas differs in some respects from that offered by Onwuejeogwu. In the Niger Republic, though they may not hold public office, women are not without informal power; as traders, women may be wealthier than their husbands; and, in many instances, polygyny may work in the women’s favor. The public rituals we have referred to represent only a small part of the total ritual activities of the cult. Women who join Bori—and by no means all women are members—do so as a result of prolonged initiation which they undertake generally in search of cures for various ailments. Under these circumstances, the Bori cult is not merely a religious institution or—as suggested for northern Nigeria—an arena for sexual politics, but it is an important therapeutic institution that is oriented around women and that offers significant opportunities for the social advancement of women. Among the Hausa people, all illness is seen as having a spiritual dimension, and the help of religious experts is required to set matters right. Bori cult heads are widely known
as healers, so that entry into the cult is a first step for some women toward an important career, one that is open only to women. The Bori healers treat men and children, as well as women; for only a few of the men, but for most of the women, healing involves cult initiation and a lifetime commitment to a therapeutic group that is essentially an association of women. Male patients are treated by women healers and their spirits. That is, during part of the curing process, the spirits will be invoked and the healer will be in possession trance. Sacrifices may be required—and also various medications and manipulations—to reestablish good relations with the spirits.

Contrary to our first impression, we learn that the Hausa believe in a complex pantheon in which there are female as well as male spirits. Male impotence may be caused by the jealousy of such a female spirit. Since all illness is magico-religious in nature, diagnosis is primarily a matter of divination, that is, of communication with the spirits to discover the source of trouble. When spirits are displeased at some negligence or disobedience, illness appears both as punishment and as a supernatural message indicating that there is something amiss in relationships between humans and gods. For women, cult initiation is both a way of undoing the guilt that has caused the punishment and a means for establishing a positive relationship with a number of protective spirits. In some instances, primarily those involving psychosomatic ailments, the cure may be effective. In others, it is more the healing of a lifestyle, of a personal identity, than it is an alteration of physiological processes. Under these circumstances, the disorder does not disappear but instead (as in many instances of Christian faith healing) changes its meaning.

The Bori cult, as an association, is based on familial principles: the initiates establish relations with a new group of quasi-kinswomen—a ritual mother and sisters. The cult, as an institution, demonstrates that men and women have different possible life paths; in that sense, it represents a counter-
institution to Islam. The power and prestige of the healers outside the cult is an important part of the total picture, of which possession trance is only one segment (albeit an impressive and dramatic one).

So far, we have seen that the pantheon of the Bori cult, and some aspects of the public ritual, represent certain elements of Hausa society. We have also seen that both undergoing possession trance and interacting with persons who are in that state are experiences that confirm and verify belief. On the other hand, in a society in which such belief exists, the characteristic behavior of possession trancers occurs in a sanctioned and patterned context. The belief structures the behavior and the experience. The experience itself reinforces and, sometimes, modifies belief. That is, a familiar spirit may make new demands or may introduce new items of behavior into its repertoire. Different individuals, acting out the personalities of the same spirits, may do so in somewhat innovative and personal ways. Possession trance may thus be a conservative force as well as a force for innovation.

Possession trance plays a role in the way in which women cult initiates deal with problems in their daily lives: in making demands on their husbands through the mouths of the spirits; in dealing with co-wives; in seeking healing; and, for some, in developing careers as healers. Monfouga-Nicolas views possession trance behavior of the Bori women as normal, valued, cathartic behavior in a sacred context.10 Much of the behavior is not so neat and orderly as that which occurs in the public ritual. It is dramatic and expressive, and often approaches that which would be seen by the Hausa as madness were it to occur in a secular, uncontrolled environment. Achieving catharsis for emotions of guilt and ambivalence in a controlled and sacred context is, to the contrary, therapeutic.

The rituals of initiation into the cult are long, complex, expressive and rich in symbolism. The idea of death and rebirth to a new identity, with new relations to a series of protective
spirits, is foremost in the imagery of the rites. The link of the initiate to the spirits is expressed in three metaphors: the women are called the "mares of the Bori", and the spirits are said to "ride" or "mount" them, and sometimes the women are also said to ride the spirits. Secondly, the women are called the "wives" of the Bori. And thirdly, the spirits, during possession trance, are said to displace the indwelling soul. All of these images for possession trance are very widespread, and by no means limited to the Hausa.

The idea of riding or mounting clearly reflects a relationship of domination, of power and authority. The spirits overpower their human mounts and control their actions, thereby also taking responsibility for them.

The suspicion that the concept of mounting has a sexual connotation is confirmed by the second phrasing of the relationship, according to which the initiates are the "wives" of the Bori. (Interestingly, the concept of "wife of the spirit" is applied, in various places, not only to women but also to male initiates). The recurrent symbolism of marriage in the relationship between humans and spirits has been interpreted by I.M. Lewis as "partnership" and "inseparable conjointness," a relationship of mutual dependence and mutual control. However, the most obvious aspect of marriage, neglected by Lewis, is sex. The image of a woman as the "wife" of the spirit implies that her relationship with the spirit has a sexual dimension, and that her husband, far from being permitted to express jealousy, must indeed submit to such a polyandrous arrangement. Note that on a world-wide basis it is rare for young girls to be possessed, that this is typically a state of married women. The sexual reading of the concept of "possession" requires little ingenuity. Even in English a man may be said to "possess" a woman sexually. If that image is to be taken seriously as reflecting an aspect of the subjective experience of possession trance, then we have a clue to the source of the idea of possession. It appears to be based on a sexual model, and one of a female sexual experience
at that. This may well help us to understand why men who experience possession trance, in Brazil as well as among the Hausa, are thought to be effeminate, to be like women.

Yet the symbolism of possession is not exhausted by the two images we have discussed so far. There is a third that is of at least equal importance. Among the Hausa, as among many other peoples, there is a belief according to which the human body is animated by a soul that, normally, inhabits the body. During possession trance, this soul is temporarily displaced and, in its stead, the possessing spirit dwells in the body. This image constitutes the third model for possession trance: we observe one body in action that is inhabited by another. Only in pregnancy is a human being double, in this sense. In a discussion of the sculpture of Henry Moore, the Jungian analyst Erich Neumann wrote:

The mother-child relationship, which as the primary relationship, between the containing mother and the contained child, determines the life of man and characterizes his existence in the world, expresses itself over and over again in Moore's work as a participation mystique. On a deeper archetypal level, this relationship forms the background of the mythological relationship of body and soul, where the soul appears as the body's inhabitant.12

In possession trance, the place of the soul is usurped by another entity--a spirit husband, not a spirit child.

Our analysis of the symbolic dimension of possession trance among the Hausa suggests what possession trance is all about: it is about identity--actual or potential. It is about social action--power and authority, dominance and submission, active and passive roles. It is about sexuality and about motherhood. These interrelated dimensions, I venture to say, are present not only in the Hausa case, but also wherever the possession trance institution exists. Although sex and motherhood are universal female experiences, the possession trance phenomenon is linked to societal complexity, where multiple identities may reflect a variety of social roles, and when issues of dominance and power are critical.
Under these circumstances, possession trance becomes a vehicle of personal expression and societal interaction, as well as a reflection of the culturally constituted behavioral environment of a people. Only then do these fundamental images take on ecstatic and ritual form. Only then, when the patterns are overdetermined, do we find the phenomenon of the women's possession trance cult. Experience on multiple levels forms the unconscious basis for belief that is acted out in ritual behavior and lived in ecstatic experience, in turn reaffirming belief.

We can tie the specific aspects of cult institutions to the particular stresses of individual societies. The underlying structure of experience and belief, which provides the underpinning for widespread and recurrent religious forms, cannot be understood in local terms, but must be seen within a broader human framework. Human beings live in a world whose reality is culturally constructed, culturally variable. Experience, however personal, is interpreted and shaped by evolving cultural traditions. Yet, however much we may stress cultural diversity, this diversity must be seen within the context of a human nature, the nature of the species to which we belong. In the case of possession trance cults, we see the universal at work in a number of aspects: in the capacity for altered states of consciousness, in the basic experiences of sex and motherhood, in the actions of symbolic transformation and ritualization experience. The similarities in form are linked to the common problems faced by societies at certain levels of complexity. Finally, the unique elements of each culture are expressed in specific details of belief and practice, of local symbolism in the local idiom.

Our analysis suggests that women, over and over again, have transmuted their psychobiological experiences and specific psycho-social stresses into systems of beliefs and ritual behavior which provide, through temporary identity changes, channels of social action and means of psychic and physical healing. They have done so under specific conditions. Under other conditions, we may
expect to discover different types of responses rooted in universal aspects of human experience.

NOTES


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3. Onwuejeogwu, 289.
4. Onwuejeogwu, 289.
5. Harris, "Possession "Hysteia,"" 1054.
10. Monfouga-Nicolas, Ambivalence, 176-80, 344-6 and passim.