HUMAN NATURE AS "DEEP STRUCTURE."

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Introduction

Can a concept of a universal human nature be reconciled with the observed diversity of cultures? A question as old as anthropology, it arguably constitutes one of its central problems. At any given time, primacy has been assigned either to the universal, or to diversity of behaviors and institutions. Emphasis on the latter characterized most of American cultural anthropology in the first half of this century. Its rejection is illustrated by Clifford Geertz, (1973:43-44) who speaks "of becoming lost in a whirlwind of cultural relativism" and cites Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* "with its strange conclusion that anything one group of people is inclined toward doing is worthy of respect by another". Anyone who accepts that human beings constitute a single species and that they have bodies, and who also rejects a Cartesian mind/body dichotomy, infant admits to a "human nature," however defined. Edgerton (1971:xi) writes: "if we accord man a common nature, and if we also admit that all social systems have many similarities, then we must expect to find a common core in the psychological relationship of any population to any environment" (italics in original). Moreover, anyone wishing to move from single case descriptions and analyses to a comparative science must find ways of coming to terms both with the unity and the diversity. Yet how the "common core" is conceptualized and its putative relationship to cultural and social diversity formulated remains at issue.

A debate between relativism and anti-relativism risks slighting a dimension of the problem that needs serious consideration in any attempt at systematic comparative research: the well-documented observation of recurrent but non-universal cultural phenomena. These may be considered to constitute an area intermediate between the unique and the universal, one that may shed light on the diversity/universality issue.

Spiro’s concept of Universals in Human Personality.

In a number of publications M.E. Spiro has employed the contrasting concepts of "deep structure" and "surface structures," drawn from linguistics. He has used this opposition both narrowly for the cultural sub-system of religion, and more widely, for
As Spiro (1978:xxiv) tells us, to study myth and religion as culture-specific and variable is to see only their surface structures, which involve conscious meanings and symbols. When their unconscious meanings are uncovered, the universal deep structure is revealed. He argues (Spiro:xxvi) that "underlying the cross-cultural diversity in the surface meanings...there are important cross-cultural uniformities in their deep-structure meanings: the culturally parochial external symbols constitute symbolic transformations of culturally universal internal symbols." As in grammar, the deep structure (universal) and the surface structures (culturally variable) are linked by means of transformations. And "the interpretation of cultures consists in part in the translation of surface-structure cultural symbols into deep-structure meanings" which "are grounded in the psychic unity of mankind" (Spiro 1978b:xviii-xix).

Spiro sees human nature, or personality, as "deep structure," while cultural diversity is synonymous with variable "surface structures." Thus: "personality is to culture what [in language] deep structure is to surface structure, and it is to social action what competence is to performance" (Spiro 1977:xii). Elsewhere (Spiro 1978a:354) he speaks of "the fallacy of not distinguishing([in a] fashionable metaphor) surface structure from deep structure, in culture." He argues that "the much heralded plasticity of human beings is rather narrowly limited by the constraints of an underlying and universal human nature, and...to a large degree the variability of human cultures represents a 'surface structure' transformation of underlying and universal 'deep structural' themes" (Spiro 1982:xvi). He goes on to refer to "basic similarities in human nature that cut across and underlie surface structural differences in time and space" (1982:xix).

What does this deep structure consist of? What are its source or sources? "Personality," we are told, "refers to the configuration of cognitive, motivational, affective and perceptual systems which characterize individual actors" (Spiro 1977:xii). Certain "cognitive orientations and motivational dispositions...are panhuman in their distribution" and constitute "basic similarities in human nature" (Spiro 1982:xviii-xix).
Among the constant motivational dispositions are competitive and hostile ones, and although their intensity "is culturally (and individually) variable and although culture can tame and domesticate these motives, it is culture itself (interacting with man's mammalian biology) which also, and universally, creates them" (Spiro 1978a:346). Thus created and variably tamed (or fostered), they must be expressed, diverse avenues of expression being, theoretically, available.

As there are invariant motivational dispositions, so there are constant cognitive orientations: "some basic cognitive orientations...are not culturally variable (though they may be culturally determined)" (Spiro 1978a:349). Like the invariant motivational dispositions mentioned above, they are products of both culture and human biology. Examples are to be found in such beliefs and values as the desirability of life, of material and physical pleasures, and "belief in superhuman beings, both of good and evil, and the corollary belief that human action (religious ritual, etc.) can influence their activity by invoking the assistance of the former and repelling the harm of the latter" (Spiro 1978a:349). These "same underlying cognitive orientations...being culturally conditioned, take different forms" (1978a:349). And, Spiro concludes (1978a:350): "These invariant dispositions stem, I believe, from pan-human biological and cultural constants and they comprise...universal human nature..."

As ethnographic research has documented again and again, "normative values and official codes" of given cultures may not be congruent with the invariant motivational dispositions and constant cognitive orientations of human beings. Indeed, Spiro's selection of cultures for study suggests a search for what might be called "limiting cases": In Ifaluk, a cooperative social system, and ethos valuing non-aggression, and few pressures for competition for scarce resources (Spiro 1978a:339); in the kibbutz, in addition to a cooperative social system and emphasis on non-competition, a strong stress on sharing and communal living, including communal childrearing; in Burmese Buddhism, a religion whose official and normative teachings are in direct opposition to some of the constant cognitive orientations (Spiro 1978a:349).
How, then, can societies operate in the face of such apparent denials of human nature and such glaring contradictions of what is invariant and constant in the deep structure? How do cultures tame and domesticate hostile and competitive motives? How do they deal with the universal need for dependency? What happens when the constant cognitive orientations are officially denied?

In Ifaluk (Spiro 1978a:342) hostility created through the harsh experiences of infancy is expressed by adults symbolically through religious belief and ritual, and is "tamed" through the institution of the chieftainship. Now, should both the expressive and the taming institutions be abolished--as indeed appears to have happened since Spiro's 1947 fieldwork--and "if there were no functionally equivalent structural alternatives for these institutions--hostility should be expressed in overt social aggression, or, (if it is inhibited by external sanctions), in predictable clinical symptoms" (Spiro 1978a:343). (The possibility of a change in the intensity of the hostility arousing experiences of infancy is not considered.)

The harmonious life of the people of Ifaluk, Spiro (1978a:339) tells us, was particularly impressive to him by its contrast to that of the Lac du Flambeau (Wisconsin) Ojibwa, among whom he had recently conducted fieldwork. There, the overt expression of aggression had been rife. Hallowell considers this group as most highly acculturated compared to related groups. Writing of the Canadian Ojibwa (Saulteaux) prior to the Lac du Flambeau research, he noted their characteristic mildmanneredness, with overt aggression in face-to-face situations notably absent. Hostility was expressed in covert ways through sorcery and fear of sorcery, while (male) ego-strength was gained though power acquired from a guardian spirit, through the vision quest. Yet Hallowell (1955a:278): remarks "if some of the basic beliefs and concepts of these people were changed their aggressive impulses would be reconstellated and the personality traits referred to [placidity, patience, self-restraint] would no longer assume their characteristics form." Among the Lac du Flambeau people, in 1946, he concluded, there "seems to be a lack of any positive substitute for that aspect of the aboriginal value system that had its core in religious belief" so that they live "under conditions which,
as yet, offer no culturally defined values and goals that have become vitally significant for them" (Hallowell 1955b:375). The old mechanisms, that had held aggressive impulses in check, were no longer operative.

A different type of resolution of a conflict between "human nature" and cultural norms and values is offered by the historical development of the Israeli kibbutz. Here, Spiro (1979) argues, the norms of communal childrearing came into conflict, after two generations, with the "pre-cultural" nature of motherhood. As a result of a young women's "counterrevolution", the norms were altered.

If we accept Spiro's interpretation that these changes reveal evidence of a contradiction in the original kibbutz society between an aspect of human nature,--a precultural need for mothering,--and the organization of the society and some of its values, we are led to important research questions: under what circumstances do societies reorganize themselves to eliminate such contradictions, or to develop improved methods for dealing with them?

It is noteworthy that there was no power structure, either within the kibbutz itself nor in the larger society of which it is part, to enforce the values embodied in the earlier social organization of the kibbutz. Communal childrearing was not left unchanged, over the opposition of the women, by the force of the state, nor were other changes in kibbutz life style suppressed by powerful sanctions. In these small, democratic communities, the people were free to make the changes they wished. Is the size of the community relevant to the apparent ease of transformation? Is its prosperity and its transformation from pioneer to social elite? What influence has the surrounding society exercised, and the larger world, including the international media? Did the cultural ideal of equality between the sexes facilitate the change? The kibbutz example suggests that there are political, economic and social factors to be examined, as well as psychological ones, when we find a striking discrepancy between human constants and observable institutional forms as well as in cases where we see their dramatic transformations.
Spiro's work also deals with possible outcomes in the event of a discrepancy between official norms and values, and the cognitive orientations for which he claims invariant status. In Burmese Buddhism, we are told, only a minority is able to fulfill the demands of a religion that requires detachment from human ties and earthly goods and pleasures. Yet, a way of living with this discrepancy has been worked out and rationalized. Burmese society has done so, in fact, by offering two parallel, if contradictory, cognitive systems: Buddhism and supernaturalism. Since members of the society participate in both to a greater or lesser extent, these alternate systems of belief and ritual are not, for most people, mutually exclusive. Each offers a different set of avenues for the expression of motivational dispositions as well as different cognitive orientations. They fulfill different and complementary psychological functions, both for the individual practitioners and also for the society at large. "The world-renouncing Buddhist monk" (Spiro 1978a:xxxi) symbolized the ethical principles of that great religion. By contrast, supernaturalism (the nat religion), is represented by a "world embracing cult specialist" who "is the Dionysian inversion of the Buddhist monk" (ibid.). Buddhist monks embody the ego-ideal, the nat cult reflects the "real" world, one that recognizes human attachments and strivings. The monks, we are told, represent a special group of individuals, persons who experience severe psychological conflicts which they resolve "by utilizing elements of [their] religious heritage as a culturally constituted defense" (Spiro 1965:110). Unable to function well in the ordinary course of Burmese familial and social life, they can, in the special role of monk, express the ego-ideal of the society: "The monastic system...serves the important social function of allowing potentially disruptive, anti-social drives to be channeled into culturally approved (institutional) behavior" (Spiro 1965:112).

The co-existence and mutual tolerance of Buddhism and the nat cult seems to show how it is possible to aspire to a denial of constant cognitive orientations, derived from human culture and biology, and yet not impose their full realization on all. A special segment of the society "gains merit" for those too "weak" (or too human) to do so for themselves.
We may thus summarize Spiro's position: Although certain motivational dispositions and cognitive orientations are constant, their intensity and forms of expression vary. Different "functionally equivalent" institutions allow for their harmless venting. However, if symbolic forms of expression and institutional "taming" of, for example, aggressive motives are not available, overt aggression or individual pathology result. Parallel outcomes may also be expected for others of the constant motivational dispositions.

The people of Ifaluk appeared to have solved their problems, under aboriginal conditions, through religious and politico-religious institutions, the Burmese, through alternate religious systems and the members of the kibbutz, though cultural and social transformations. Under conditions of acculturation, shifts from the successful symbolic expression and "taming" of hostile impulses in traditional societies to a breakdown of these institutions and a lack of their satisfactory replacement by functionally equivalent new structures appear, as among the Ojibwa. We may paraphrase Spiro to say that if the constants are violated, this is done at a cost--to society and to the individuals of which it is composed. An optimal society, then, is a society that accommodates the constants. Because, however, there are functionally equivalent solutions, no single socio-cultural system needs to be preferred. There is still room for diversity in this scheme of things.

Recurrent phenomena: The case of possession trance.

As we have seen, Spiro seeks to relate the observable surface features of various societies to underlying regularities of deep structure, or human nature. Expanding the sample of societies under investigation, we note the recurrence of apparently common surface features in some but not all of the sample. Features that appear in many but by no means all societies pose a special problem. Rather than a series of unique solutions related to a common base, we find the same or similar solutions. Addressing these repeated methods of resolving certain problems we operate at a level of analysis somewhere between the culturally unique and variable surface structure and the universal deep structure.
Spiro, who refers to "the needs for aggression and dependency" as "two especially important characteristics of the human mind" (1978b:xxx), has been particularly interested in religion. He argues that because of the "polysemic character of religious symbols, religion can be used as a culturally constituted defense mechanism for the unconscious gratification of the needs of dependency on and aggression against parents" (ibid.). And, he remarks: "in most traditional societies...religion is the cultural system par excellence by means of which conflict resolution is achieved. In such societies...religion serves as a highly efficient culturally constituted defense mechanism" (Spiro 1965:113).

Spiro's fullest exploration of religion as a culturally constituted defense mechanism is found in his extensive work on Burma and its two religious traditions. Because of the striking continuities—and some important differences—between Burmese shamanism, and possession belief and possession trance religions elsewhere, a brief exercise in comparative anthropology ("is there any other kind?", as Spiro [1978b:xviii] asks), may be profitably attempted. The institutionalization, in a religious context, of dissociational or trance states is, indeed, virtually universal in traditional societies. Possession trance appears in societies of one widespread type, exhibiting distinctive structural features as well as certain geographic distributions. By contrast, visionary trance, involving psychological "absences", often conceptualized as "trips" or "journeys," are much more likely features of the religious systems of a different type of traditional society. The two trance forms co-exist in an intermediary type (Bourguignon 1973, Bourguignon and Evascu 1977). The cases selected for comparison with Burmese supernaturalism, somewhat arbitrarily, are Haititan vodoun and Tamang shamanism, as described by Peters (1981).

Speaking of Burmese nat religion, Spiro refers to it as "shamanism." This religion involves a belief in spirit possession, expressed both in illness and in trance. Shamans, for the most part, are women, so that they are the inverse of male Buddhist monks, not only in their expression of impulses which are denied or repressed by the monks but also with reference to their gender. In emic terms, shamans are recruited to the role when a nat (spirit) falls in love with the individual and seeks marriage.
Spiro proposes four types of explanations for Burmese spirit beliefs: an historical or "background" explanation, and a cognitive, a motivational and a perceptual explanation. Burmese supernaturalism has its roots in ancient animistic beliefs and also in some incorporated Buddhist influences. It co-exists as a folk religion with Buddhism. Essentially the same thing can be said for the shamanistic beliefs of the Tamang of Nepal. In Haiti, vodoun beliefs can be traced to various West African societies, but there are also Catholic influences and some local developments. Vodoun, like shamanism in these two Asian societies, co-exists with a world religion, and its participants consider themselves Catholics, as the Burmese and Tamang villagers consider themselves Buddhists. However, the Catholic church has, at various times, engaged in vigorous anti-vodoun campaigns, and the Protestant groups, particularly the Pentecostalists, have declared open warfare against the traditional religion. In all three societies, traditional beliefs offer explanations of certain experiences, or symptoms, as representing the call of the spirits. This constitutes the cognitive explanation of behavior eventuating in the assumption of the role of spirit "expert". And it offers the basis for the perception of signs and symptoms as a spirit call both by the afflicted and by experts. In all three of the societies one does not simply "choose" to become a shaman or possession trancer, but responds to a call. This is generally at first resisted and the resistance is followed by a variety of troubles: illness, bad dreams, harm to family members, violent dissociated behavior and so forth. If the troubles bring the individual so afflicted to a practitioner, this expert may have several diagnostic options, one of them being the "call," and advice to accept this call, with warnings of more dire things to come. This much seems to be true for the three societies under discussion, and many others as well.

In addition to the historical, cognitive and perceptual explanations, Spiro seeks a motivational explanation for the recruitment to the role of the Burmese shaman. He argues (Spiro 1978b:217) that nat beliefs offer extra-natural satisfaction of needs and therefore encourage individuals to seek this satisfaction and that there is an unconscious awareness of a possible resolution to frustrations through the religious
system. Need frustration and a desire for need satisfaction constitute the motivational aspect of this sequence. Finally, there are experiences resulting from the need frustration, which are interpreted as possession.

In his discussion of deep structure and surface structure in religious symbols, Spiro talks of a situation in which "the belief in the external reality of...supernatural beings is assured by their being identified with the reified and externalized images of the parenting figures" (Spiro 1978b:xxv). To this he adds as a footnote:

If, as sometimes happens, parental introjects are not relinquished, or if, having been projected, they are again introjected, the merging of parental and supernatural images in the inner world may be experienced as supernatural possession; that is, a god, spirit, or the like is experienced as having entered into and having seized control of the person (Spiro 1978b:xxvn2).

Regrettably, the point is not further developed: under what circumstances is this likely to happen, in the absence of a pre-existing (traditional or borrowed) cognitive system that structures the experience? A phenomenon that presents some striking similarities with that of possession trance, in the absence of a possession belief, is the multiple personality syndrome (Bourguignon n.d., Kenny 1986). Although there is dissociation and the acting out of alternate personalities as in possession trance, the syndrome appears to be structured by a different set of cultural influences and expectations.

What is the role of shaman/possession trancer in these three societies? In Burma, the shaman is an oracle, medium, diviner and cult officiant. The activities involve impersonating a spirit’s speech and behavior, including dancing, in a dissociated state (actual or feigned); the behavior is interpreted as spirit possession. The shaman is possessed by a single spirit, a single identity. Each shaman is an independent actor, and there is no active national organization or hierarchy that controls role assumption, training, or professional activities.
In Haiti, individual vodoun cult centers are internally hierarchically organized: led by a "priest" or "priestess", a center, particularly in an urban area, includes initiates at various ranks and with specialized functions. In rural areas, the cult is rooted in the family tradition and centers about family members, one of whom may hold the position of "priest". Cult centers and the societies organized around them are autonomous entities. Possession trancers may individually act as mediums, but their primary function is to dance and act out spirit roles in cult centers, under the control of the center’s leader. Each individual may be possessed by numerous spirits, often arriving in sequence. There is, however, one principal spirit, the "master of the head". for whom initiation rituals are undergone.

The Tamang shaman is primarily a specialist in healing rituals. During these, he may become possessed by spirits, but, in the classical North Asian tradition, he also engages in spirit journeys, something which distinguishes him from both the Burmese shaman and the Haitian possession trancer. Like the Burmese shaman, he is an individual practitioner and not part of either a larger organization or a local cult center, although he may have disciples.

Who are the shamans/possession trancers? In Burma, the vast majority (over 95%) are women. The men who occupy the role "with few exceptions...seem to be either homosexual (manifest or latent), transvestite, or effeminate (and sometimes all three)" (Spiro 1978b:220). In Haiti, the majority of possession trancers (and dancers) are women. Leaders may be men or women, with men outnumbering women, particularly in rural areas. Men play various other cult roles: drummers, sacrificers, masters of ceremony. Some male possession trancers or cult leaders, like the Burmese shamans cited by Spiro, are known to be, or appear to be, homosexuals, or effeminate. Among the Tamang, only men become shamans.

How does one get to be shaman/possession trancer? In all three societies, individuals are recruited to the role by a supernatural call. In Burma, it is a nat who falls in love with the chosen person, with the intent of marrying her (or him). Women are solicited by male nats, men by female ones. This may take place in dreams, or
through spontaneous possession at ceremonies. If the shaman candidate resists, she does so at her peril. Yet she will resist, in general, because shamans are held in low esteem. This is so because the relationship between the woman and the spirit is a sexual one and therefore shameful. She is (therefore?) thought to be promiscuous. Punishment for not accepting the marriage or relationship with the nat ranges from financial loss to psychiatric illness to leprosy, as Spiro's informants explained it (Spiro 1978b:210). A fullfledged shaman goes through a complete marriage ceremony, conducted by shamans, which, in effect, constitutes an initiation ceremony. The admitted, (conscious) motivation for accepting the relationship is the fear of reprisals for refusing. The delay between the solicitation and the acceptance is often an extended one, even lasting for a number of years.

In the Haitian case, one becomes a cult member,--and at the lower levels of initiation this means primarily a possession trancer,--as a result of having experienced a demand by a spirit. As in Burma, this call may be expressed in dreams or in spontaneous possession, or in illness. In each case, the interpretation of a diviner/cult leader is likely to play a decisive role in deciding what actions the particular case calls for. Incoherent dissociated behavior or unconsciousness may be interpreted as possession by a "wild" (untamed) spirit, requiring a first level initiation to teach the spirit to express its identity and the trancer the appropriate controlled behavior. Yet the cult specialist may, diagnose not possession but disorder due to other causes, e.g., witchcraft, and prescribe a different course of action. In the role of diviner and healer he or she has considerable latitude to steer and manipulate the course of the disordered behavior either into cult membership or into an illness/healing episode (Bourguignon 1984).

Since there is likely to be affliction at each level of initiation, these rites may, be considered healing rituals. There is resistance to undergoing them, ostensibly because of the substantial cost involved as well as the fear of the proceedings. Each initiation is preceded by a period of seclusion and deprivation, symbolizing death followed by rebirth in the concluding ritual. Some women, however, liken it to a
marriage ritual, observing that the ritual establishes or strengthens a relation with a spirit personality; the seclusion involves being put to bed, but also the acceptance of a spirit necklace, equivalent to a wedding ring, all following the collection of a veritable trousseau. (Marriages of humans to spirit spouses--both for men and women--do exist, but these are not part of the initiation sequence.) Each level of initiation strengthens the supernatural power of the possession trancer, who gains greater control over the spirits; in etic terms, this means that she learns to control trance behavior to a greater extent. The possessing spirits are both male and female. They are generally acquired through family lines; some are divinized ("canonized") ancestors.

Although some shamans among the Tamang may choose the role for various practical reasons, Peters (1981:62) is primarily concerned with the type who "becomes a shaman from personal necessity and not from choice. [He] experiences a 'calling' which is an initial affliction whose only cure is to shamanize". The Tamang believe that the initial state of "crazy possession" affects a young man because he is chosen by dead shamans as their patrilineal heir. When he accepts the calling he is apprenticed to a living shaman, and may undergo up to four levels of initiation, each increasing his supernatural power and control over trance behavior.

Spiro discusses the sequence of illness, resistance and final acceptance of the calling by Burmese shamans. He suggests that the symptoms interpreted as spirit possession are largely the psychosomatic consequences of need frustrations and that the fact that the calling is accepted only after considerable resistance gives evidence of "their ambivalence about recruitment to this status. That they finally feel compelled to do so...indicates...how strong is their desire for recruitment" (Spiro 1978b:218). What is the relationship between the spirit and its human vehicle? For the Burmese, it is the love of a spirit, confirmed in marriage; though sexual, the relationship is said to be spiritual. The woman is known as the nat's wife. Her marriage to the spirit does not preclude her ties with a human husband.

In Haiti, initiated possession trancers are known as hunsi, a Dahomean term meaning "spirit wife." However, no Creole equivalent of the term is used. Spirits are addressed
as father or grandmother, or mistress, but male spirits may address women as "my wife." One group of spirits is addressed as "cousin." In possession trance themes of power, dominance, seniority and kinship are expressed more directly than sexual ones. Possession is termed "mounting" and the possessed individual is referred to as the spirit's "horse." The spirit is also said to be in the person's head or to dance on the person or on her head. Complex spirit roles are acted out, often involving personalities that develop over a period of time.

The Tamang shaman experiences visions and is possessed by a tutelary spirit, often an ancestor. In the initiatory sequence, the disciple must first learn from his human shaman guru how to go into trance for the spirit to speak through him. In the second stage he learns how to call the spirit, by whom he is said to be ridden, or whom he is said to have on his shoulders. With greater control, at the third stage, the shaman "is now 'riding the guru'...: the shaman is now master of the spirits and thus of the affliction initially caused him" (Peters 1981:86). The final stage is reached when the shaman "can embark on magic flights...to soul journey to the heavens and underworlds" (Peters 1981:87).

Spiro find the motivations of Burmese women in need frustration and a desire for the need satisfaction that spirit possession provides. He identifies several types of needs: sexual needs, dependency needs, a prestige need and a "Dionysian" need: the performance of the shaman's role usually...gratifies these needs in an undisguised and, sometimes, in a direct fashion...the shaman's role explicitly permits the expression of needs which are forbidden to non-shamans (Spiro 1978b:219).

These needs and their satisfactions as described by Spiro for Burma maybe compared to what we can infer from the behaviors and associated beliefs of Haitians and Tamang. Sexual needs of prohibited kind find satisfaction in being loved by and married to a nat: premarital, extramarital and polyandrous needs for women, perhaps homosexual ones, and homosexual and incestuous needs for men. Married to spirits of the opposite sex, and acting out the roles of the possessing spirit gives expression to identification with females for men and with males for women. Some male shamans refer to their nats as
"sisters" or "mothers" which may involve a sexual component. Largely the same thing may be said for Haitians, who may act out opposite sex roles during possession trance; the reference to marriage is not explicit although the sexual component of the symbolism may be transparent and that of the behavior may be quite explicit. Some spirits (i.e., possession trancers) engage in openly erotic behavior. By contrast, the sexual behavior, at least overtly, does not appear to be present in the case of the Tamang: There are no cross-sex possessions, no reference to love or marriage.

Spiro also mentions dependency needs: reference to a naţ as mother may indicate the fantasy satisfaction of regressive dependency, and identification with a baby naţ may express dependency. Regressive dependency, satisfied and expressed, loom by far larger both in the Haitian and the Tamang context. Haitian spirits are addressed by terms for parents and grandparents, and sometimes are thought to be the spirits of ancestors. They are inherited in family lines. They are believed to be very powerful and represent higher ranks in the social hierarchy. Possession trancer identify themselves with these entities. They demand obedience. And yet, in a reversal of the dependency needs of their faithful, they must be fed. There is some indication that the spirits represent not only infantile psychological dependency needs but also physical needs. Quite strikingly, Kerboull (1973) reports for a region of Northern Haiti, that, as the practical situation of the peasantry has worsened, the protective and benevolent hereditary spirits were increasingly replaced by fiercer and more insatiable ones.

For the Tamang, the shaman's tie with his titular spirit is one of kinship. This spirit, which becomes the shaman's protector and guide upon initiation, initially caused him to become mad, yet provides him with a solution to his problem once he is obeyed. On further initiation, the shaman gains mastery over his ancestral spirit. Instead of being ridden, he rides him.

More important than dependency needs, for the Burmese, appear to be prestige needs. Self-esteem and, at least temporarily, social identity are transformed by identification with and marriage to a spirit. This, Spiro suggests, may account for the attraction of
the shamanistic role for women, and the poor who hold a low position in the status hierarchy.

This argument is even more significant for Haitian possession trancers, particularly for lower class men, who are status-deprived and may be possessed by important and powerful spirits. Being given obeisance by their community and members of their own family, if only on a temporary basis, appears to be very rewarding. Impersonating important spirits provides time-out from the daily humiliations of poverty and oppression.

Because the Tamang shaman's position is quasi-hereditary, it is less clear whether and how prestige strivings contribute to role recruitment. However, as a guru to disciples, as one who has overcome the powers that made him ill, as one who can heal others and retrieve stolen souls, he exercises power and gives convincing evidence of it to others. We may assume that this demonstration of success in dealing with dangers that beset his clients, as well as himself, must be gratifying to his self-esteem and increase the esteem he receives from others.

Spiro lists one final group of needs for the Burmese: Dionysian needs. He notes that "as Buddhists, the Burmese are constrained to act in measured ways, taking their enjoyment in moderation and renouncing the orgiastic in all forms" (Spiro 1978b:222). Possession by a nat permits tabooed behavior, since it is not the shaman but the nat who is responsible for it. To an extent this fits the Haitian situation as well. Spirits challenge the social hierarchy—to a degree; non-drinkers consume alcohol; dancing is vigorous and ordinarily inappropriate sex role behavior is engaged in.

Nepalese shamans apparently neither act out spirit roles nor engage in behavior that is appropriate for spirits but not humans.

In addition to the needs Spiro lists two others seem relevant to both the Haitian and Tamang case, however dissimilar they may be in other respects: needs for mastery and for oral satisfaction.

The theme of mastery is in some ways related to dependency and sexuality; it also has a developmental dimension. Although the symbolism of mounting and riding may be seen
as containing a sexual reference, the imagery of mastery and control is quite explicit. It is the rider who controls the will and the action of the mount. The imagery exists both in Haiti and among the Tamang; in the latter case as the shaman grows in spiritual strength, he also grows in his mastery over the spirits, who are likely to be his own ancestors. The developmental aspect of both mastery and sexuality is even more striking if we consider that most first possessions—or behavior diagnosed as such—in all three of our cases apparently occurs in adolescence, when conflicts both over dependency and sexuality tend to surface. Why they are more likely to do so for women in Burma and Haiti, and for men among the Tamang, is a question suggested by this comparative analysis.

The expression of dependency and the gaining of mastery appear to be linked. The trancer is dominated (or mastered) by the spirit who takes over the individual’s mind and body, speaks through the medium and performs a variety of actions. There is an apparent abandonment of self to a greater power, one whose identity as a once powerful living person or as an ancestor or spirit ally of ancestors enhances his (or her) prestige. Yet the actions and speech of this powerful being, through an essentially passive human being, act on that individual’s environment. When the Tamang shaman reaches his highest level of mastery, and goes to confront spirits in their own domains,—heavens and underworlds,—to retrieve the soul of a patient, the drama is carried out entirely on the fantasy level: The shaman is totally immobile, and unconscious. Peters (1981:125-26) says that he prepares for this undertaking by rousing his anger and calling on his helping spirits to protect him in this dangerous mission. Anger and aggression, dependency (on spirit helpers) and mastery (over evil spirits), passivity (physically) and mastery (in fantasy) are all combined in this scene.

In the Haitian case, the individual ideally grows in (esoteric) knowledge and power and in time increasingly is able to control the coming of the spirits. In older persons, possession trances appear to be rarer and lighter. Perhaps, for them, conflicts over sexuality and dependency have been largely resolved.
A final theme is that of sacrifice, of feeding the spirits. An expression of oral needs and need satisfactions may be hypothesized. In Burma, offerings to the nats including various types of foods are a part of rituals, and of the care of shrines. Haitian and Tamang spirits also require sacrifices. For the Tamang, Peters (1981:59) quotes his guru: "The spirits are hungry; if they are not fed, they will eat the people," adding "when evil spirits attack, they are believed to cause illness by consuming their victims."

In Haiti spirits are said to be controlled by what and how they are fed; sacrifices are viewed as central to rituals, more important than possession trance. Spirit rituals are referred to as "feasting" the gods and "feasting" the dead. Attacks by spirits and other harmful beings are often phrased as being "eaten." As Kakar (1982:99) writes of the Oraon of India, whose possessing spirits demand to be fed: "people who have known hunger will breed hungry spirits and must constantly struggle with the persecuting spirit of greed." The theme of hunger and hungry spirits seems to fit the Haitians and the Tamang better than the Burmese.

Finally why is it that in two of our three cases possession trancers are, in the majority, women? Among the Tamang, they are not. Spiro (1978b:224n12) tentatively suggests three possible factors:

a) There are systematic, sex-linked, constitutional differences which render Burmese females more susceptible to possession. b) Burmese males suffer from less intense conflict than females, with respect to at least those needs which are importantly satisfied by the shamanistic role. There is some evidence that this might indeed be the case. c) There exist for Burmese males, but not females, institutional alternatives which serve as functional equivalents for the shamanistic role. The monastic role, for example, may satisfy at least some of the same needs that are satisfied in shamanism.

If constitutional differences exist in Burma this is either not the case among the Tamang or is denied expression there. The second point says that Burmese women
experience greater conflicts than men with regard to frustrated sexual, prestige and Dionysian needs. (The examples given for dependency needs refer to male shamans.) Conflicts result from the inability to act on needs blocked by social norms and values. Prestige needs are of particular interest here. Spiro (1977) points to the existence of a striking structural equality of male and females in Burma, expressed in legal, economic, political and social spheres of life; an equality typical of Southeast Asia. Yet there is an ideology of male superiority, spiritual, moral, intellectual and social, shared by women as well as men. Since women hold status through marriage with human mates, they can also gain special status through marriage with a spirit. And yet, Burmese women are not downtrodden.

The broader question, then, is this: do women's possession trance activities reflect a suppression of women (Lewis 1971) or their freedom (Devereux 1974). The "freedom" of Burmese women, or of the Haitian women who are economically independent or of the Theban women (Devereux 1974) means only that it is possible for them to seek alternative need satisfactions in religion, not that their relative freedom and equality reduced psychic conflicts.

The case of the Tamang women may suggest an avenue for research in this regard. There, some men become shamans and other Buddhist monks (lamas). For women, neither role is available. However, women do suffer from hysterical symptoms, and, (Peters 1981) notes, the great majority of healing rituals conducted by shamans are performed for women. In a case described by Peters, attack by hostile spirits is diagnosed by the shaman, who induces an incoherent possession trance in the patient. The aim of the ritual is to cure her, not to turn her into a shaman candidate. As Peters puts it (1981:149) "In Tamang society, it is men who become shamans and women who are primarily beset by illness." In Nepal, as in Burma, women are believed to be spiritually inferior to men. But among the Tamang, they are also economically and politically inferior, and are insecure in the marriage relationship. Nor do they have religious options: they can become neither shamans nor nuns.
Thus, though Tamang women have the belief in possessing spirits (cognitive orientation) and the interpretation of psychogenic symptoms as possession (perceptual orientation) and they suffer from need frustrations and conflicts surrounding them, when they give this sequence expression it can only be perceived and treated as illness. Mastery of the illness through control over the spirits, long term resolution of the conflicts in fantasy and ritual acting out, is denied to them. And this denial may well be considered an expression of the unequal powers of men and women. Spiro's explanatory sequence requires a power situation that tolerates it. When it is not, the expression of conflict in the spirit possession idiom becomes subject to exorcism; it becomes, in psychological language, pathological dissociation.

In the comparison between the Burmese, the Haitians and the Tamang, it has been possible to discuss recruitment to the role of shaman/possession trancer only at the level of belief system and institutional structures: what roles exist, who fills them, and how the recruitment process is conceptualized. We can infer needs and need satisfactions only from behavior in the ritual context and its symbolism. Information about the strength of drives and their sources in socialization practices is lacking. Yet, as Spiro (1978b:223) points out, the existence of unsatisfied needs and differential drive strength among individuals is not sufficient as an explanation. There is also differential cognitive strength: people with greater exposure to spirit beliefs and hence greater awareness of possession as a possible means of substitute need satisfaction, are more likely candidates for the shamanistic role. Note that in all three societies the role is more likely to be assumed by kin role incumbents.

As mentioned, individuals will be more susceptible to suggestion and psychological contagion at certain critical period in their lives. The role of the diagnostician should not be neglected, since a choice of diagnoses may well be available. And finally, there is the matter of differential access to the shamanistic role. Becoming a shaman or possession trancer, is one solution to need frustrations. But even where the necessary cognitive and perceptual orientations exist for spirit possession to be possible psychological option, one in which the individual can grow and gain control indirectly
over the psychological pressures at work, this role may be available only to some. People of the "wrong" social category will be treated as patients, and the development of their "faculties" will not take place. Instead, they are likely to fall ill again, at some future crisis. This is the situation of Tamang women. There are other societies where the necessary cognitive and perceptual orientations exist but no shamanistic role, only that of victim of demons to be exorcized, as illustrated in the long history of demonic possession in the Judeo-Christian tradition, or in the example of the Jewish women in Morocco studied by Bilu (1980).

For the Burmese men, Buddhist monks and shamans alike, religious roles act as "a culturally constituted defense, which, by satisfying the shaman's frustrated needs and thereby precluding the need for idiosyncratic defenses, serves to avert the outbreak of psychopathology" (Spiro 1978b:229). This works, by all indications, equally well for the Haitian possession trancer and the Tamang shaman. It does not work for the Tamang woman, although the healing ritual will give her relief. However different Tamang shamanism, Burmese shamanism, and Haitian vodoun may be, they function as culturally constituted defense mechanisms for their practitioners, in addition to whatever other functions they fulfill. As such they are both functionally equivalent solutions to characteristically human conflicts and expressive of locally typical stresses. Under what circumstances such culturally constituted systems of defense are constructed and to whom they are available, remains to be studied. As in the case of the individual, so for the society: the existence of unsatisfied needs is not enough as an explanation.

Conclusions

Spiro speaks of religion as a "culturally constituted defense mechanism", one that is "highly efficient" in traditional societies (1965:113). He discusses at some length why religion serves this function less well in other types of societies. He does not speak of universal patterns of belief and behavior but of one whose efficacy is limited to certain kinds of societies, the "traditional" ones. Now, within the scope of such religious institutions, possession trance specifically acts as a culturally constituted defense mechanism, helping both to express and to resolve conflicts. It is both an
indicator of specific stresses and a safety valve. As we have seen, dissociation (trance) and illness interpreted and experienced as possession by a spirit entity, women possession trancers, spirit marriages and a sexual dimension to the relationship between human beings and spirits, none of these are unique to Burma, however special the Burmese context framing these aspects of religious belief and behavior.

Since some of the needs expressed and satisfied appear to be pan-human, this leaves the question of why this particular vehicle is so very widespread, a finding which suggests a special kind of effectiveness.

Our understanding of specific cultures is enhanced, it is argued in this paper, if we are able to recognize not only their uniqueness and the underlying common deep structure but also their special utilization of features they share with other societies of their type. This utilization involves not only the special coloration of belief, practice and experience that affects the cognitive and perceptual dimensions of their lives but also the special stresses that give strength to certain needs and thus favor particular direct and indirect need satisfactions. They thus provide the motivational bases for the existence of the institutions and for the behavior and experience of individual participants.

The range of solutions to shared human problems, rooted in constant needs and persistent characteristics of the human mind, though theoretically infinite, is in fact more likely to be circumscribed and variants of recurrent solutions are more likely to be found in societies that share basic structural characteristics as well as those related by geographic or historical connections.

As a result, it is useful to attend to that intermediate region between the unique and the universal, the local elaborations of differences and the common human nature in which they are rooted, that region where societies of a similar type may be identified and to study their varying utilizations of recurrent solutions in an attempt identifying the determinants of these variations. Such a focus on the middle distance will help us, it is hoped, in dealing with differences hidden behind the apparent similarities of religious institutions and their psychological functions.
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