Possession

"Possession" refers to a widespread type of beliefs to account for changes in behavior, capacity or health. In one form or another it appears in a large percentage of the societies of the world. It has been reported for 74% of pre-industrial societies, also in segments of industrialized societies (Bourguignon 1991). Concepts of possession seem to have been developed more than once in human history and also to have spread among societies. They have been integrated into larger belief systems and utilized variously for social ends. A belief in possession may serve to explain changes in behavior involving apparent alterations in personality, in sensory modalities, including amnesia, anesthesia, speech patterns and voice quality, etc. Such transformations in behavior and experience may involve an altered state of consciousness. When this occurs in the presence of a belief in possession, it may be referred to as possession trance.

Possession trance may be intentionally induced (voluntary) or spontaneous (involuntary). It may be desired (positive) or feared (negative). In the latter case, rituals are likely to exist to compel the possessing entity to depart (exorcism). The term "possession" is ancient in its use. It appears in Biblical accounts in the New Testament, and later phenomena in the Christian world have often been patterned on these. Exorcism is still practiced by Christian Churches. However, enthusiastic religious behavior, as in pentecostal churches, is also a form of possession, in this case by the Holy Spirit, rather than by harmful beings. Belief in negative possession and associated ritual practices exists also in other world religions: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. These are often older than the world religion in given localities and are integrated into the larger pattern, although frequently rejected by more sophisticated levels of these complex societies.

A belief in spirit possession, in the absence of an altered state, often referred to as "spirit intrusion," is a widespread explanation for various types of illness. In the New Testament a spirit causes muteness in a man, excessive menstrual bleeding in a woman, etc. Among various African traditional societies such spirits may be said to cause sleeping sickness as among the Hausa. On the other hand, among some Native Americans we find a belief in a type of "power" that enters a shaman giving him the ability to cure, as among the Makah of the Northwest Coast, the Southern Utes, or the Teton, for whom we read that a shaman had "a mysterious being dwelling within himself" which made it possible for him to cure. In many African societies there is a belief in a witchcraft being that, often unbeknownst to the host, dwells inside a person and is able to cause harm. The presence of such a witchcraft being may be tested for in an autopsy when the reputed witch dies.

Who the possessed persons are varies among different parts of the world and from society to society. As we have seen so far, the non-trance possessed may be patients or healers, witches or shamans. Possession trancers may be patients or healers, but also prophets or politico-religious leaders. There are no systematic data on the distribution of possession and possession trance by gender. However, individual reports give examples of both women and men in both categories. In Africa, for example, diviners who use various mechanical devices for diagnosing problems are generally men, whereas diviners who are also mediums are most generally women. Similarly, the Delphic Oracle was a woman, although her pronouncements were interpreted by male priests. In the European tradition both among Christians and Jews the demon-possessed are generally described as being women. This is true also for
the teenage girls in the Salem witchcraft trials. Here, however, they were said to be possessed by the witches, not by demons. The possessed nuns of Loudon in 17th century France were women, as are often cited cases of various women in Hindu India or women possessed by fox spirits in Japan. The classic French cases were studied by Charcot in connection with his research on hysteria, and he found many similarities between hysteric patients and the possessed women described in the literature of past centuries. It is clear that in both cases a good deal of cultural learning was involved. Hysteria of the type studied by Charcot is no longer seen in clinical settings and the category of "hysteria" has been dropped from medical classifications. Demon-possessed individuals are cases of negative spontaneous possession. Cases of religious leaders represent positive spontaneous possession.

There are a number of famous cases in the western tradition, e.g. the founder of the Shakers, Mother Ann Lee, or the "sleeping" preaching girls among 17th-century French Protestants. Joan of Arc heard voices but though she was judged to be a witch, the question of possession was not raised in her case. Other cases of possession appear among charismatic leaders in historic and contemporary modern and modernizing societies. There is also the role of possessed women in the New Age Religions currently in the US. Although in most cases the remedy for possession deemed harmful is exorcism, in parts of Africa as among the Bori cult among the Hausa or the Zar cult throughout East Africa, the diagnosis of possession is often considered a step toward accommodation with the possessing spirit which usually requires membership in a cult group providing for the periodic feasting of the spirits. Societies vary in the amount of importance given to possession beliefs. Bali, for example has many different types of such beliefs associated with different social roles. Healers and diviners are usually women. Kris dances may be both men and women. Masked actors in possession trance dramas are men though they may be impersonating female characters, hobbyhorse possession trancers are men. Entranced little girls, possessed by a village deity, who dance on the shoulders of men, are a particularly striking example of Balinese possession trancers.

Why women predominate among possession trancers has been a subject of debate; suggested reasons include female psychophysiology (hysteria, calcium deficiency), women's conservatism or their response to an inferior social status. No single explanation accounts for all examples (see Possession trance cults).

Erika Bourguignon

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