SPIRIT POSSESSION

Beliefs in spirit possession are both very widespread in human societies and very ancient. Such beliefs are present in large portions of the contemporary world and find expression in ways that closely tie into concerns with various aspects of cultural and social change. This includes many current issues, such as physical and psychological ailments, be they AIDS or depression, economic displacements and other matters directly or indirectly involved with what has come to be termed globalization. They appear in many different contexts, exhibiting great adaptability and innovative potential.

In some sense, spirit possession is about identity—short or long term. In the context of change and globalization, identity, personal and collective, has become a major issue. It is manifested in many ways, in choices people make in areas ranging from clothing to house styles, food and medicine, religion, work and sports, politics and child rearing and much else. Contact with outsiders, be they missionaries (Russel 1999) or tourists (Costa 2001), produces the observation that some people have more power than others. This power may be presented to the group as being of a supernatural nature or it may be perceived as involving access to resources. It also raises questions of identity; the question then is not only "who am I" but also "who am I in relation to, or in comparison with, these others?" Globalization has affected the most intimate aspects of peoples' lives virtually everywhere, including their relation to spirits and ancestors, and their sense of self and of who they are.

Of special interest are the ways in which responses to change are expressed through the relationship between spirits and humans. These responses range from resistance to change and to its human agents, from rejection of some aspects of the new to its partial acceptance. This may
involve intragroup and intergroup conflict, but also illness and healing. It is a context of learning about the world, a theater where issues of power and means of coping are played out. Much of this may be expressed through the appearance of new spirits. The identity of the spirits and their often novel demands will particularly concern us here.

To consider the forms these beliefs take and the rituals in which they are expressed, some background information is required. A major cross-cultural study (Bourguignon 1973) found that possession beliefs existed in 70% of 488 sample societies. Altogether, 90% of sample societies had institutionalized some form of trance (altered state of consciousness) in a ritual context. That is to say, some of these societies used trance in a religious context that does not involve a belief in spirit possession. This suggests strongly not only that trancing is a universal human capacity, with its own evolutionary history, but also that human societies structure its experience, meaning and performance. An intimate personal experience—trancing—is utilized not only for personal but for social ends. That in turn suggests that trancing is shaped through cultural learning. It is therefore not surprising to see the transformations it has undergone in response to various aspects of change in the public as well as the intimate dimensions of peoples' lives. By contrast, belief in spirit possession, of whatever kind, is significantly rarer. This suggests that it is a cultural creation and has been subject to both diffusion and modification over time. Indeed these two processes,--diffusion and modification-- can be observed at present; they will be the subject of much that follows.

Most, but not all, societies considered in the cross-cultural study referred to above were pre-industrial, and had been reported on by anthropologists in the course of the last 100 years. Two major types of beliefs were identified: Possession Trance (PT) and non-Trance Possession (P). The former refers to a ritual practice in which a psychophysiological state (trance) is
interpreted by participants as due to possession by a spirit entity. The latter does not involve a psychological or physiological alteration, but rather refers to changes in capacities or powers. The two types of possession beliefs may occur in separate groups in a given population, but more typically appear in different types of societies. In particular, PT is highly correlated with sub-Saharan Africa and consequently is also frequent in the African Diaspora, both in the Americas and in North Africa. In many of these societies, trance is intentionally induced, that is, the spirits are invited to participate in ritual occasions. The majority of Possession Trancers, as reported over and over again, are women. In some other societies, particularly in Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as those of South Asia, the spirits thought to possess individuals are seen as evil and subject to exorcism. Here too, the majority of victims are women.

In Possession Trance, the identity of the host is displaced, temporarily, by another entity: the actions are those of this "other" and so are the words spoken. Yet the behavior and speech of the Possession Trancer have an impact on the participants in the ritual and perhaps also on the non-ritual life of the host and of the wider community. It is this change of identity which is of major interest at a time when identities are of central interest in many places and the shifting and redefinition of individual identities are of concern both to individuals and communities in the current world situation.

Examples of non-Trance Possession are also found in many parts of the world. They tend to be reported more frequently for men than for women. For instance, Evans-Pritchard (1937), in his classic work on the Azande, reports on the belief that some people, mostly men, are "witches." This means that they harbor a witchcraft being in their bodies, which causes harm to others. It acts independently of its host. Evidence for the existence of such beings is sought in autopsies of suspected witches. Evans-Pritchard observed that such evidence may consist of liver
abnormalities and other such bodily features. (Hallen and Sodipo [1986] warn that this
description of Azande witchcraft must not be generalized across Africa, as has been done by
various authors.) Quite a different example of non-Trance Possession appears in North America,
as among the Havasupai (Spier 1928), where a healer's powers reside in his or her body. While
the Havasupai are not unique with regard to this type of possession belief, other kinds have also
been reported from the Americas. For example, Harner (1962) notes that among the Jívaro of
South America men acquire certain types of souls, in addition to their own, as a result of a vision
quest or by killing another person. The acquisition of such a soul is said to be felt as a sudden
surge of power, self-confidence, intelligence and physical strength. It also protects its host
against being killed whether by warfare or sorcery. Under the name of "spirit intrusion", non-
Trance Possession has also been considered to be a major explanatory theory for the presence of
disease.

Belief in such non-Trance Possession has been found to be correlated with hunting,
fishing and gathering societies, whereas Possession Trance societies are more likely to have
agriculture and to be structurally more complex. The Azande, incidentally, have not only non-
Trance Possession, as noted above, but also women diviners who engage in Possession Trance.
While Possession then empowers the individual, whether positively or negatively, and often does
so on a permanent basis, Possession Trance, turns the individual, at least temporarily, into
another, thus producing a change in identity. This other is likely to be more powerful than his or
her host. In the following discussion, the primary concern will be with Possession Trance in its
many contexts and forms in the contemporary world.

Possession Trance is based on a conception of the human person as consisting of multiple
separable elements, such as body and soul (or multiple souls), or self, mind, identity, name and
so forth. One of these may be replaced temporarily by a spirit or other entity. During this takeover, the soul or self of the host is in abeyance. Therefore when the soul returns, there is no memory of the events. Such amnesia is culturally normative and is probably genuine, at least in part. (It is likely that if the altered state of consciousness during which the possessing spirit presents itself is of extended length, perhaps several hours, it will vary in depth. That is, the host may be aware of what is going on, including his or her own actions, for at least part of the time).

Where there is a belief in non-Possession Trance as discussed above such a conception of the human being is not a necessary precondition, since the acquired soul or intrusive spirit does not replace the host's soul or self, but rather is conceived of as being present in addition to it.

The societies reviewed in the cross-cultural study referred to above constituted a sample drawn from those coded in the Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock 1967). The ethnographic literature on these societies on the whole represents rather static pictures of the social structure and of local beliefs and practices. The emphasis in the present discussion, by contrast, is on the dynamic nature of beliefs and practices in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, the findings of the cross-cultural study provide two important assets to this discussion: 1)-They show us that the beliefs under consideration are not simply products of present-day conditions, but are rooted in human history and in common psychological and biological features, while, on the other hand, also providing information on correlations between beliefs and practices on the one hand and sociocultural features on the other. That is to say, variations among groups and regions are not random or arbitrary. And 2)- they provide a classification and terminology that offers a means of ordering data. The literature both at the time of this study, and still at present, employs diverse terminologies, often using the word "possession" and "trance" as synonymous, even in the same sentence. For example, the well-known British anthropologist, Raymond Firth, in his 1959
Huxley Memorial Lecture says:

"Spirit possession is a form of trance in which behaviour actions of a person are interpreted as evidence of a control of his behaviour by a spirit normally external to him. Spirit mediumship is normally a form of possession in which the person is conceived as serving as an intermediary between spirits and men." ( Italics in original.)

This statement ignores the possibility of spirit possession without trance and also seems to imply that there are types of Possession Trance in which people act but don't speak, that is, that there are contexts in which the possessed person does not serve as a mouth piece for the spirits. Firth bases his distinctions largely on his own fieldwork in Kelantan, (Malaysia) and Tikopia, (Polynesia).

Moreover, many authors tend to treat their specific ethnographic cases without reference to the broader context. Yet while individual cultures and societies are indeed likely to be unique in significant respects, this should not be assumed a priori, nor are they likely to be unique in all respects. A comparative perspective allows us to see the larger picture.

The literature strikingly reflects the preoccupations of the authors. This can be seen clearly, if we consider the history of the study of vodou, the Afro-Catholic folk religion of Haiti, and of Possession Trance as a prominent feature of that religion. Thus we see how the shifting interest of writers and researchers, and indeed their own identities and the political as well as intellectual context of their studies, directs their orientations. Haiti is here to be taken as an examplar, for similar histories could be written for other Possession Trance religions.

During the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), numerous American authors presented a picture of vodou as savage and barbaric. At the same time, the occupation stimulated a reaction, which, among Haitian intellectuals, strengthened their sense of Haiti's African roots,
and the role vodou played in the Haitian revolution against the French colonial power at the end of the 18th century. The Haitian physician, J.C. Dorsainvil (1931), under the influence of French psychiatry, saw Possession Trance as pathological behavior, related to what he saw as the Haitians' "hereditary nervous instability," to be explained by Haiti's terrible history. For him, Haiti is a special case, with its unique history and without a larger context. This theme of pathology was taken up by Catholic, as well as Protestant missionaries, who added the possibility of a demonic intervention. That is, they identified the spirits of vodou with demons and the Devil.

In his 1937 study of a Haitian village, the anthropologist and Africanist M. J. Herskovits speaks of the Possession Trance as culturally normal and related to Haiti's African ancestry. He thereby gave support to the intellectual movement restoring interest in Haitian folk culture and its African background. In addition to the work of social scientists, in the 1940s and '50s some romantic writing associating Haitian vodou with various metaphysical positions, came to the fore. In the 1960s, when transcultural psychiatry developed, some American psychiatrists began to look at the role of the vodou priest as a healer, and at Possession Trance as prophylactic or therapeutic, thereby coming full circle from the position of Dorsainvil. On the other hand, under the dictatorship of Duvalier, father and son, vodou became intensely enmeshed in Haitian politics and has remained so since.

A further word of caution needs to be introduced here, which is indeed relevant to the above. Beliefs in spirit possession of various types come to us from both New Testament sources (Mark 5:1-17, Luke 11:14-15), as well as from ancient Greece. This has colored the perception of Western observers among non-Western peoples. That is, they have been liable to interpret unfamiliar behavior in familiar terms. The case of Haitian vodou, cited above, exemplifies this tendency. Moreover, "possession," as translation of native terms, can at best, as we shall see,
involve only an approximation of local meanings and requires elaboration if serious study is to be undertaken.

The "trance" or altered state of consciousness, which is linked to possession beliefs may take many different forms. If such a state occurs spontaneously, it may be interpreted in local terms by diviners or other diagnosticians as due to possession or intrusion by a spirit entity. In biomedical terms these spontaneous states may include such varied conditions as seizures, fugue states, even coma, as well as dissociational states. Some, but not all of these may be understood as pathological. Dissociation, as a psychological mechanism, may occur in the context of a major psychiatric disease such as schizophrenia. In other situations, it may be learned--even taught systematically,-- in the absence of psychiatric disease. Some altered states are induced by various psychoactive substances (hallucinatory drugs). However, it should be noted that these are rarely used in the context of possession rituals. They are frequently associated with other types of practices and beliefs, such as those of classic shamanism where the soul leaves the body to seek contact with the spirit world. As Fernandez (1965:905) writes, with reference to a reformative cult among the Fang people of Gabon: "An alkaloid intoxicant, eboga (Tabernenthes eboka), is taken...to achieve an ecstatic state...[T]he intoxicant is taken... 'in order to make the body light and to enable the soul to fly.' " The spiritual world...does not, in this cult...come to possess the worshipper. It is rather the worshipper who must leave himself in order to make contact with the unseen." Fernandez stresses how unusual this is in Africa, where possession by spirits is a great deal more typical as ritual behavior. In fact, it is practiced, without the use of drugs, in the traditional ancestor cult among the Fang. In his study of the reformative cult of Bwiti, which seeks symbolic consensus among its members, Fernandez points to significant changes among the Fang, such as the growth of economic individualism and the abandonment among many of
traditional ceremonial institutions, resulting in mutual distrust. The Bwiti cult attempts to restore (or develop) a sense of social harmony in the face of social disruption. This then is one way in which contemporary religious movements respond to social and economic change. It constitutes an example of a conscious attempt to create a better society. Wallace (1966) has termed such innovative religions Revitalization Movements. We shall consider other types of responses in what follows.

The date of Fernandez' research should be noted: Economic individualism developed in many places during the colonial period, when European influences in parts of Africa were strong. Such influences are not limited to the current period of "globalization." They have, however, been accentuated and extended to areas previously touched to a lesser degree.

Before turning to specific examples illustrating a relationship between Possession Trance religions and contemporary sociocultural and economic change, it will be helpful to consider three major types of ritual contexts. We may refer to these as involving three different sorts of relationships between the spirits and those they possess. These are: 1- service on the part of the human hosts and protection by the spirits, 2- illness and harassment of certain humans on the part of the spirits, but protection and healing by them once the human host offers service and meets the spirit's demands. And, finally, 3- possession by evil spirits, who harm human individuals and must be exorcised by ritual specialists. We may refer to these three types of relationships between humans and spirits as "service and protection," "propitiation and alliance," and "harm and exorcism." It must however be remembered that these are rough groupings and that each sociocultural context may be expected to have its own characteristic features. In considering specific examples in each category, the effect of economic and social modernization can then be considered.
In the first category, we find various West African groups, such as the Fon of Benin and the Yoruba of Nigeria, where spirits are invited to participate in rituals. Here Possession Trance is seen as desirable. This invitation is expressed by means of specific drum rhythms, songs, dance steps and other elements of rituals. Neither drugs nor masks are used on these occasions, although drugs may be used during the initiation process. The hosts of the spirits, who are in the majority women, are termed the spirits' "horses," and possession is referred to as "mounting." This symbolically expresses the idea that the relationship between spirit and human is one of power. This metaphorical expression of the relationship between the spirits and their human hosts has a very wide distribution in Africa and beyond. The women are also called "wives" of the spirits and possession is referred to in sexual terms. This is a theme that has even wider distribution. One aspect of this refers to the experiential dimension of Possession Trance as a specifically female experience. This is dramatized in some societies where men as well as women Possession Trancers are understood to be wives of their spirits.

A first Possession Trance may be induced or, more likely, occur spontaneously. It will be followed by initiation rituals. Motivations for undergoing initiation vary, but often individuals are believed to be possessed by spirits who claim them as representatives of their kin group, and might expect punishment from them if they did not follow the spirit's demands. Alternatively they are called to serve because they had attracted a spirit's attention in some way.

This is the overall pattern that we also find in the Americas, where a variety of Afro-American (or Afro-Catholic) religions flourish: vodou in Haiti, santería in Cuba, Candomblé, Xango, Macumba, Umbanda and others in Brazil. Many of these are now represented in the United States and in Europe as well. It should be noted that while some spirits are ancient and familiar, in many groups new spirits have made their appearance, or old spirits have acquired
new functions and behaviors. An example of a novel spirit appeared among the Yoruba when a woman was possessed annually by the spirit of the sanitary inspector. In a film by Raymond Prince and Frank Speed she is seen checking out various items on a list. Prince (1964), himself a psychiatrist, saw this novel ritual, enacting a new type of spirit, as a prophylactic practice, keeping her from having recurring psychotic episodes.

In Brazil we find, in addition to spirits of various African pantheons, spirits of American Indians (caboclos) and of "old Blacks" (pretos velos). There are also exus (tricksters, experts in magic), and child spirits. In her study of the Umbanda religion in São Paulo, Pressel (1973) has suggested that this combination of four different categories of spirits represents the different aspects of modern Brazilian identity.

The propitiation and alliance pattern as well is found in Africa, as in the Bori cult among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria and Niger, or the zar cult of Eastern Africa, which has a very wide distribution: from Somalia in the South to the Sudan and Egypt in the North. It appears among Moslems, and Christians and in Ethiopia also among Jews. This last group has brought the zar cult to Israel in recent years. These are largely healing religions, to which women are drawn by physical and often reproductive complaints. The woman leader diagnoses the complaint by inducing Possession Trance in the patient, so that the possessing spirit can be identified and his or her demands specified. If the patient then will comply with the spirit's demands a permanent relationship is established and the spirit is turned from a harasser into an ally.

In her study of a village in the Northern Sudan, Boddy (1989) notes that among the spirits that possess the women in the local zar cult some are foreigners, males and prostitutes. Among the foreign spirits are several kinds of Ethiopians; large numbers of refugees from Ethiopian wars had come into the region. Some are Europeans and Americans. One such character is an
"American doctor and big game hunter, who drinks prodigious amounts of whiskey...his prey are small antelopes...he is a lascivious character" (p.289). Boddy suggests that such spirits, caricatures of foreigners, constitute a warning against Western technology, including medicine. (The zar spirits prohibit the use of Western medicine, a form of resistance against modernity.) One important aspect of this temporary incarnation of a variety of powerful spirits is that they behave in ways that break a whole range of taboos in this Moslem population: they drink and smoke, appear to chase women, and the female ones behave provocatively. The Ethiopians are Christians and have Christian symbols, such as crosses. As Boddy says: "...a potential enemy is dealt with...by acknowledging His [existence and power], by inviting Him into the villagers midst in a controlled if evanscent manner."(p.290). One might argue that in an altered state of consciousness these Sudanese women try out what it might be like to be a different kind of person: a man, or a prostitute, a Westerner, a Christian, a person with power.

A different example of the alliance type of relationship between women and spirits is found in the Zebola cult in the Congo. This cult originated among the rural Mongo, but has spread to the capital city of Kinshasa. Corin (1989) describes it in its urban form. There women of different classes and ethnic groups participate. In this cult, certain illnesses experienced by women are explained as due to the malevolence of others, often due to jealousy over a woman's advantages. (This is in contrast to the zar cult where the illness is sent by the spirits themselves.) Here, too, diagnosis is made by inducing Possession Trance in the patient. It is the spirit--that of a dead Mongo woman-- who identifies herself and announces demands to be fulfilled in exchange for a cure. Therapy, however, consists of controlling the presence of the invading spirit, that is, inhibiting trance. This is achieved by means of an initiation into the cult which lasts several months, during which the patient lives with other women at the healers compound.
Medications are administered and complex dance performances are taught to the patient. Through group membership in the cult and participation in recurring rituals, the patient then maintains a lifelong relationship with the spirit, who has been transformed into a protector.

It is noteworthy that what began as a cult based on kinship and ethnic community among the Mongo has become, in the urban environment, a voluntary association of unrelated women, brought together by the need for a cure.

Corin (1998:102) concludes her lengthy analysis by noting cautiously that "[i]t is possible that the importance of spirit possession in modern Central Africa...could provide an escape from some of the dehumanizing features of (post)-modernity and contribute to the creation of an African...[new] "Person."

There are many examples of such religions. Only brief mention can be made here of a number of these. The Haouka of the Songhay were made famous of through their portrayal in a remarkable film Les maîtres fous by Jean Rouch (1954) and in more recent studies by Stoller (1998) in Niger. Because this cult began among male migrant workers to Ghana, it is primarily a men's religion. The spirits they embody are modeled after various French and British colonial authorities: The General, the Colonel, the Doctor, the Doctor's wife, but also the train (or the train conductor), the truck driver and so forth. They appear as caricatures or parodies of their human models, but they are also powerful and fearful. As with the zar spirits in the Sudan, we may ask whether the behavior of the spirit possessed trancers is a parody only in the eyes of the Western beholder. By enacting the identities and behaviors of these strangers, the hosts of these spirits are investigating what it is like to be one of them, to be this Other. The spirits and their powers are thereby made familiar and domesticated.

A more recent phenomenon, that of the Dodo spirit mediums of Niger, has been
described by Masquelier (1999). These spirits cause illness in their chosen "horses", and tell them to hold ceremonies. The former patient becomes the spirit's medium, and as such, a powerful healer and diviner. The distinctive feature of these spirits is that they prohibit certain aspects of modernity, although which ones varies among them. They resist not only Westernization but also aspects of both Islam and the more ancient bori cult, that has been commercialized in the region. Prohibitions range from sexual promiscuity, to charging significant fees for healing services, from the use of rubber sandals to motorized transport and literacy. As Masquelier puts it:

"...[T]he conventions of Dodo mediums constitute an imaginative, yet no less pragmatic, effort to regain control over a moral order whose viability hinges on the strength of the spiritual bond rather than the power of market relations."(p.37).

This pattern, with illness as possession and cure by means of possession trance is also found in Mayotte, in the Comorro Islands. Here too, women are the majority of the Possession Trancers. Lambeck (1981) sees this as due to the inhibiting effect of Islam on men, keeping most of them from accepting Possession Trance. He finds no evidence for the argument made by Lewis (1989) that possession is due to women's deprivation or their attempt to compensate and retaliate for this deprivation. Moreover, here "participation in possession activities by women is not so much an expression of opposition toward Islam as freedom from it "(p.64). In Mayotte, as in Haiti, the relationship is a triangular one between the host, the spirit and an interlocutor. In Mayotte this is usually the host's husband, who develops a special relationship with the spirit. The spirit and the husband can discuss family matters in a manner that is not available in the husband/wife relationship.

It should be noted that in modern or modernizing societies traditional healers may not be
available, families may be reluctant to use their services or, indeed, their treatments may not be effective. Sometimes, too, family support may not exist for migrants. Under such circumstances patients may be taken to Western biomedical services and given a diagnosis and treatment consistent with that approach. The literature is not clear on how effective such treatments are. Some psychiatrists have become aware of the incongruity of the biomedical approach with the patients' and often the families' explanatory systems (cf. Witzum et al., 1996; Littlewood, R. and M. Lipsedge, 1989).

A third type of Possession Trance involves quite a different relationship between spirit and human host. In Christianity, it finds its model in several accounts in the New Testament. The spirit is seen as harmful, causing illness or bad behavior. It is defined as either demonic or as the soul of a dead sinner. Its attack may be directed at religious belief and at the community, or specifically at its host. There is no accommodation with the spirit—it has to be exorcised. In mainline Christianity, possession and exorcism had virtually disappeared in the 19th century. However, in the last thirty years, it has made a major comeback, both in Catholicism and in the various Protestant churches. Historically, possession and exorcism, linked to beliefs in witchcraft as well, have had a role in both American and European history. The 19th century French psychiatrist J.M. Charcot and members of his school were was impressed by the similarities between the behavior of their hysterical patients and such famous historical cases, as that of possessed nuns of Loudon (Certeau 2000). The best known American case involves the witchcraft accusations and trials at Salem (Starkey 1973). Possession trance behavior requiring exorcism is to be found in Judaism and Islam as well. Islam, however, in the regions where it is the official religion, has accommodated itself to the existence of various spirit cults, some of which are based on the local pre-Islamic practices.
What we may call "negative" possession trance, requiring exorcism may be of a collective or of a personal, individual nature. Ong (1987) describes trance epidemics among women factory workers and students in Malaysia. These are interpreted by the women and their families as possession, requiring exorcism. Exorcists explain the outbreaks as due to some form of contagion of the premises, or the result of some offense to the local spirits. Entrepreneurs see exorcism as a necessary cost of doing business. Biomedically such epidemics have been explained as examples of collective contagious hysteria. Ong sees these cases as reflecting resistance by the women to a capitalist discipline of work, quite alien to their traditional village life style.

Negative possession exists in India, where ghost possession has been studied by Kakar (1982), a psychoanalyst and himself an Indian, and by anthropologists such as Freed and Freed (1985).

Kakar describes and discusses exorcistic rites at a temple. The people treated are primarily rural young married women, and the possessing spirits are those of people who have broken moral rules. In Kakar's view (p.76), the ghosts are those of forbidden sexual and aggressive wishes (that is, the ghosts symbolize such wishes). The illness represents the women's "accumulated and repressed rage, their helpless anger... at the lack of their social emancipation." These young women are suffering in the transition from life in their family of origin to the home of their new husbands and their domination by their mothers-in-law. As for those young men who suffer from possession illness, in Kakar's view, they are those who find the responsibility of autonomy and individuation at marriage threatening.

The Freeds provide a complex, long-term psychomedical case history of a young village woman of North India, which illustrates Kakar's description. They first met Sita in 1958, and
again twenty years later. During this time Sita's life changed in many ways, and so did the Freed's anthropological perspective. In 1958 Sita was a young bride in her parents-in-law's home. The spirit she was possessed by, and who spoke through her, was that of a childhood friend. This girl had committed suicide after she became pregnant by a village boy. She was rejected by the husband to whom she had been engaged and his family when the pregnancy was discovered after the wedding. She was also rejected by her own family. Such a possession indicates the stresses Sita experienced as a new bride; it also expresses a warning to the community about what bad behavior is and how it is punished both in this world and the next.

Witnessing this first possession the Freeds also had occasion to observe the attempts at exorcism. This consisted largely of trying to question the rather uncooperative spirit, in order to discover its identity. It also involved applying pain to Sita's body. Several more exorcisms by different professional exorcists followed. She had remissions but also suffered periodic recurrences. For a number of years when these came on, she would be sent home to her natal village for a prolonged visit. The Freeds visited her and her family again in 1978. Sita now had five children and had had a variety of illnesses. Although she was no longer possessed in the earlier manner, she now had periodic "fits" which involved loss of consciousness as well as screaming and other types of aggressive behavior. She herself attributed her fits to worries and stress.

In the years since 1958, a public health system has developed in India and Sita has been treated at a hospital for various ailments, including kidney stones. The Freeds take a close look at her medical history and consider how her physical health and its problems interacted with her psychological stresses so that together they offer some insight into her possessions and fits.

Although the various examples cited here differ with reference to their specificity they
have a good deal in common. There seems to be an overall concern with the restoration--or establishment--of a moral order. Often this involves an idealized picture of a past and a concern with a recent disruption of social relations. A great range of items is selected by the spirits--or their human stand-ins--and often in a way that may seem arbitrary to us, to represent the ancient moral order and the present-day moral decline.

The spirits with whom humans interact through possession may be ancestors or ancient nature spirits or ghosts (i.e., the souls of dead sinners) or demons. They have a symbolic dimension. Where exorcism is practiced, it may be that witchcraft has caused the victim of the evil spirit to be vulnerable to the attack. In others, as in some contemporary American Protestant cases, the victim may simply have frequented places that were haunted by ghosts of dead sinners. In the Jewish tradition, possession by a dybbuk, the spirit of a dead sinner, occurs because the victim has made herself vulnerable by her own sinful behavior.

It should be noted that Possession Trance religions or cults are not limited to traditional or modernizing societies. Spiritualism developed in 19th century America and spread to Europe and Latin America, developing a large continuing following. Most of the mediums, presenting the recent dead, were women. Channeling is a more recent form of mediumship. Most of the Channelers are women, most of the spirits who speak through them are male. They are however entities of the distant past, whose personal characteristics are not clearly defined. Moreover, Channeling is linked to a belief in reincarnation and multiple lives (Brown 1997).

Relation with the spirits reflects a limited number of principal themes: power, aggression, sexuality. The Possession Trance and the symbolic language in which it is spoken of (horse and rider, wife and husband, container and contained, etc.) alert us to the underlying issues. Possession by alien and powerful spirits involves identification with these entities. The
phenomenon is reminiscent of what George Herbert Mead called playing the role of the other and is familiar to us from studies of child development, but of course not limited to that. Often, what we see is, in psychoanalytic terms, "identification with the aggressor." This has been referred to as mimesis and is one way of achieving mastery over fearful beings and interactions with them, a strategy (albeit an unconscious one) for gaining intimate acquaintance with strangers and the power to deal with them. Also more generally, it is a way of learn about the world beyond the direct experience of the spirits' hosts and their communities. As suggested above, what Boddy sees as parodies may not seem such to the cult participants at all.

An interesting aspect of Possession Trance is that the hosts of the spirits are generally women who do not have the power to speak in their own voices. Possession Trance involves a range of activities: acting out the characteristic behavior of the possessing spirit through dancing, singing, curing, responding to questions, making demands and other interactions with other spirits present and with an audience. This active Possession Trance is enacted by a human host and is represented by a passive imagery. The Possession Trancer is the spirit's wife, his mount, his vehicle or vessel. She is mounted, ridden, entered, indeed possessed by the spirit. She is no longer herself and for the duration of the possession, becomes another. As the passive instrument of another, she achieves mastery by abdicating her own self. A more powerful being takes over her body and performs actions while residing there. In brief, the active performance is linked to a passive fantasy. The Possession Trancer is not responsible for any of the spirit's actions, and this is emphasized by the fact that she does not, and is not expected to, remember any of the events. This separation of the spirit from its host is so great that there is no direct communication between them. Any communication must always involve a third party. The spirit who wishes to give a message to his host must leave a message with another individual. In the Haitian phrase,
the spirit says: "Tell my horse..." As noted above, Lambeck (1981), too, speaking of Mayotte, tells us that the relation between spirit, host and interlocutor, is a triangular one.

In Possession Trance women's requirement to be obedient reaches a maximum, yet it may become a means of manipulating the woman's own life circumstances and to affect the lives of others. Lewis (1989) has argued that women's Possession Trance is an element of a war between the sexes. He observed that, in Somalia, women who became ill and whose spirits required expensive gifts, might thereby keep a husband from marrying an additional wife in this polygynous Muslim society.

The symbolism of the relationship between humans and spirits as love, marriage and sex is not limited to Africa and the African Diaspora. We find it, for example, in Korea and Burma as well. The sexual aspect of the spirit/human relationship however has another dimension as well. Beyond horse and rider, wife and husband, there is the metaphor of the vessel or container and that which it contains. In other words, there is an image of two in one. This applies not only to the image of possession but also to its pre-condition, the image of a soul contained in a body. The model for this seems to be pregnancy. Curiously, this is confirmed in the metaphorical language used in the Jewish tradition concerning possession, for here the term for possession is *ibbur*, impregnation. A number of recent accounts of possession and exorcism in the Israeli press told stories in which the exorcist/diviner was said to have been able to see the spirit curled up, like a fetus, in the possessed woman's abdomen (Golden, 2002).

These several, somewhat arbitrarily chosen examples used to illustrate the suggested typology also serve to highlight the distinctive character of each of the cases. It is important to stress this diversity among them in spite of the significant features they share. Dissociation, a psychological mechanism, looms large among these common features and so a word on that
Subject is indicated. Dissociation occurs in pathological and non-pathological settings. It is learned and therefore can be taught. While initial spontaneous trance may, as we have seen, be of various types, induced trance, as part of ritual, is most likely to be dissociation, regardless of the specific context. Possession Trance religions require the spirits' hosts to be in control, at some level, of the ritual performance. Disordered, unpredictable behavior, outside the ritual context is generally considered dangerous and requires treatment by experts.

Individual spirits have their own characteristics, involving such matters as physical appearance, movements, music, colors, tastes, and many more. Over time, these may take on the features of true secondary personalities, with memories of their own. This has led to comparisons with what has been called, in Western psychiatry, MPD (Multiple Personality Disorder) and, more recently, DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder).

In spite of the striking similarities between the spirit personalities that appear in Possession Trance and the alters of DID, there are also important differences. One of these is that Possession Trancers learn roles that have cultural meaning in their group and that thereby they fulfill a significant social role in our three types. One important role concerns a warning about breaches of morality. In situations of the third type, where exorcism is practiced, this is a process which is diametrically opposed to that of the psychotherapist who attempts a cure in a case of DID: the exorcist identifies the strange presence as an intrusive spirit and seeks to get rid of it. The therapist claims the alter or secondary personality as part of the patient's own and attempts to integrate what is seen as the split off part of the personality with the rest.

Human beings have the ability to share their private experiences, be they dreams, visions or fantasies, by means of language and other symbolic systems. Thereby these experiences can be integrated into existing belief systems or can be used to develop and elaborate new beliefs,
together with the corresponding systems of rituals. As we have seen, power and aggression, sex and reproduction are recurrent themes in the relations between humans and spirits. But so are issues of morality in interpersonal relations and how these are perceived to have been affected by ongoing social and economic changes resulting from innovations and globalization.

The main concern of this discussion has been with beliefs and states that are culturally patterned in a ritual way and that are given religious meanings. It is clear that the universal psychological and physiological raw material has been used over and over again in human history, and in the process has been culturally shaped in very particular ways which are coherent and consistent with the needs of different types of societies. Moreover, this is an ongoing processes, in which new conditions create new needs; some of these are addressed in the examples cited above --and in many others as well-- in ways that are a mixture of the old and the new. Other cults and religion, utilizing the themes discussed here, may be expected in the wake of further social and economic changes and the stresses they bring in their wake.

Reference


Starkey, Marion: The Visionary Girls. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973)


Further Reading


Films


Prince, Raymond and Frank Speed: Were Ni: He is a Madman. The Management of Psychiatric Disorders by the Yoruba of Nigeria. (1964, 60 min).


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