POSSSESSION

According to “possession” beliefs, the bodies of human beings may be controlled by spirits or demons. Such beliefs are ancient, widespread and linked to concepts of the duality of the human person, consisting of a body and a separate animating entity (one or more souls, a spirit, etc.,) which may be replaced by another being. Comparisons between Possession and Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) have been made.

In Western tradition, possession beliefs are rooted in Jewish and Greek sources. Among non-Western people, Christian missionaries have often misidentified positive possessions by ancestral spirits with demons to be expelled.

Ritualized possession generally involves an altered state of consciousness (trance, dissociation). In Haitian vodou, a religion that combines Catholic, African and local elements, a spontaneous trance state, illness, bad dreams and personal problems may be interpreted as calls for initiation by a spirit. These symptoms themselves are not considered to be evidence of possession. Initiation turns the spirit into a protector and helper. It is the spirits who claim their human servants. A woman possessed by a male spirit enacts a male personality, a man possessed by a female spirit, a female personality.

The majority of possession trancers are women, most of whom have male spirits. Spirits are invited to participate in ceremonies by means of drum rhythms, songs and dances. Each has its own personal attributes, as well as songs, dances, tastes in food, drink, adornment, and colors. They interact with each other and with their human faithful, state their demands and give advice.
Women possession trancers are referred to as wives of spirits. Men may marry a female spirit in a ceremony where a possessed woman acts as the spirit's vehicle. These men may then experience the presence of the spirit in dreams. Spirits are said to "mount" their human hosts who are also referred to as "horses." The dances of some aggressive spirits are also more sexually suggestive, even orgasmic.

Haitian spirit possessions and rituals are related to those of Cuba, Trinidad and Brazil and derived from the same African origins: both men and women may be possessed and may be priests, and the majority of possession trancers are women. In Brazil the strong value placed on assertive masculinity may inhibit men's participation as possession trancers in African derived religions. Men who do participate are often perceived as effeminate; many are homosexuals.

The predominance of women in possession trance religions has been noted from many parts of the world. In Burma, for example, where the dominant religion is Theravada Buddhism, a woman medium undergoes a formal marriage ceremony with a spirit who has fallen in love with her. Refusing this the call to her profession, she risks illness and misfortune. Her work requires the help of this spirit. She may have a human husband. Few such practitioners are men.

In Bali, where the dominant religion is Hinduism, possession appears in many forms: among women healers, little girl trance dancers, men and women kris dancers, male hobby horse dancers, masked ritual dramas, where men act out the role of female characters. Ritual possession is common, controlled, socially useful, highly valued, encouraged and satisfying. This is in contrast to parts of India where negative possession and exorcisms are found. The possessing spirits are those of the dead and the victims are
most frequently young married women. The exorcism is harsh, seeking to drive out the spirit by causing it pain.

In traditional Judaism also the victims of possession are frequently young women and the possessing spirits are those of dead sinners, mostly men. The exorcism ritual, conducted by a rabbi, involves questioning the spirit about its identity, its sins and the sins of the victim that made the attack possible.

Possession has a long history in the U. S., yet virtually disappeared in the 19th century. It has experienced a revival since the 1970s and has become the subject of mass media attention, both as reportage and as fiction. In this context, possession is understood as harmful, causing physical and mental disorders. The possessing spirits are demons and the cure is exorcism by a Catholic priest, Protestant minister, or lay self-trained exorcists who take their scriptural authority, in part, from references in the Gospels (Luke 8:30, Mark 5:1-13, Matthew 10:11). Exorcism is now seen as a means of treatment of a variety of perceived social and psychological maladies, which are understood as due to possession by demons. These range from schizophrenia and depression to alcoholism and apparent character changes. There is also a recent movement that links “treatment” of homosexuality and the forcible expulsion of presumed demonic possession that causes individuals to succumb to the homosexual way of life (see for example the current Exodus movement).

Several television programs, including primetime specials on ABC television and widely syndicated newspaper stories demonstrate the widespread popularity and growing faith in the efficacy of exorcism as a form of intervention and treatment. In the American theater and cinema classic, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, George, the male protagonist,
mockingly recites a lengthy passage from the Rite of Exorcism of the Catholic Church to rid his wife of alcoholism and other demons that seem to plague their lives.

In some recent real-life cases demonic possession was thought to impel adolescent girls to behave in ways considered excessively or inappropriately sexual. In other cases, where homosexuality is the presenting problem, families have sought the intervention of exorcists. These are sometimes lay persons who are prepared for their tasks in a set of community (not church) recognized practices. At other times, ordained Catholic priests, who are not assigned the position of Exorcist in their Diocese, perform the rites in violation of Church prohibitions against their practice.

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References


The Holy Bible, King James translation


“Lou Sheldon Suggested Exorcism is Necessary to ‘Release’ a Person from Homosexual Lifestyle.” Available from http://mediamatters.org/items/printable/200510130006