Comment on L. Shaara and A. Strathern:
"A Preliminary Analysis of the Relationship between Altered States of Consciousness, Healing and Social Structure."

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We were pleased to read the Research Report by Shaara and Strathern (AA 94:145-160). Their study, which builds on our earlier work at the Ohio State University (not the University of Ohio), confirms important parts of our findings. We are also interested in the support their research gives to Greenbaum's (1973) hypotheses regarding the relationship between possession trance and societal rigidity. It should be noted that our book, Diversity and Homogeneity in World Societies (Bourguignon and Greenbaum, 1973) was co-authored by both of us.

It is striking to note how much ethnographic work has been done on trance and possession trance in the last 25 years. Indeed, two-thirds of the sources cited by Shaara and Strathern were published after 1968, the final year of our study. Also, data on a number of their sample societies were not available to us. This is important with reference to their specific concern with ASC and healing. More recently literature, particularly that influenced by transcultural psychiatry, has stressed therapeutic activities in religious contexts, where earlier research was by far more interested in worship, divination and other matters.

In comparing societies with different institutionalized forms of ASC we utilized a tripartite division: Trance only (T), both Trance and Possession Trance (T/PT) and Possession Trance only (PT). Although this is not stated explicitly, Shaara and Strathern appear to have grouped the latter two types together. For most of our variables, the T/PT societies tended to be intermediate between the other two, or to be in some aspects like T societies and in others more like the PT group of societies. With reference to the use of dreams, for example, T/PT societies were found to be more similar to T societies than to PT societies (Bourguignon 1972).

Like Shaara and Strathern, we were interested in questions of gender stratification, in part because of the importance of possession trance in the Central African matrilineal belt. Indeed, Baumann and Westermann (1962) saw it as a characteristic of "matriarchal" societies. We used kin groups, mode of marriage, and marriage form, all of which we found to be statistically significant. On the other hand, Greenbaum (1973) found female participation in agriculture not to be statistically significant in sub-Saharan Africa.

In this connection we strongly recommend intensive regional studies rather than or in addition to, the use of world-wide samples. Regional differences are often very great, but they are easily, and often necessarily, masked by coding requirements that fit all data into a limited number of alternative codes. Shades of difference that can lead to deeper understanding risk getting lost in the complexity of statistical procedures.

Nominal coding categories may seem similar because the same words are used (e.g., head man selection by election; or: one jurisdictional level above the local level). But on closer inspection of the literature, where greater detail is available, the actual situations so coded may be quite at variance with one another. There is also a big difference between statistically significant findings and an understanding of the dynamics of a societal trait like T or PT.

Statistical findings are valuable in pointing to areas for further research. This further research, however, should include refining and redefining the relatively gross variables used for statistical purposes. Making these variables more precise often leads to insights not otherwise available.

The suggestion that PT arises out of illness and T out of choice is interesting. Here sample size may be of importance: with such a small sample, societies where T arises out of illness and PT out of choice or obligation may have been missed. Eliade (1964) wrote at some length on the "initiatory illness" of the shaman, who is, for the most part, a trance healer (TH). There is also the
sizable literature arguing about whether or not shamans are insane (e.g., Devereux 1959, Boyer 1962). On the other hand, there are numerous societies where the office of possession trance is taken on, at least by some individuals, as a family responsibility, by assignment or to fulfill a vow. The Kalabari seem to be an example of that (Horton 1969).

With regard to the issue of the trance healer, Murdock’s (1980) material on illness and health might provide some helpful coded variables. And, of course, beyond that, other to date uncoded variables on illness and health should also be sought. That is, materials coded to date, whether by us, in the Ethnographic Atlas, or elsewhere, however important these may be, need, of course, to be transcended.

Similarly, we believe that the great explanatory power of the variable "societal rigidity/flexibility" (Greenbaum 1973) invites further exploration and experimentation.

Given the greatly expanded literature on the religious and healing uses of ASC and the great advance in statistical tools for comparative analysis, it is a pleasure to see the work of Shaara and Strathern. They are engaged in an important task and we look forward to their findings as their research continues.
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