
This book is based on several periods of lengthy fieldwork between 1971 and 1991 among the Tuareg people of the Air Mountain region of Niger and treats materials the author has dealt with, in different form, elsewhere. Here her intent is to focus on the aesthetics and symbolism in exorcism rituals. She clearly has enduring and intimate knowledge of this complex stratified society, and of the individuals whose cases histories are presented.

Among the Tuareg, possession is considered an illness, and, as in many other parts of Africa, it primarily affects women, here especially middle aged women. Possession involves spirits spoken of as "people of solitude" and requires rituals of exorcism. There is much relapse, so that some women undergo these ceremonies of exorcism repeatedly. The symptoms, typically, are those of depression, although some physical symptoms are also mentioned in specific cases. During exorcistic ceremonies possession trance is induced. The patient, who initially lies on her back, sits up and dances in a seated position, swaying with loosened hair. She does so until she falls back exhausted. The dance is the spirit's dance, the collapse is the spirit's departure. Spirits are mute and are not questioned, although they may communicate by gestures.

The ceremonies are public events, held in the evening; they are treated as entertainment and as occasions for flirting among young men and women. There is some tension between illness and healing of the patient and the enjoyment and flirtatiousness of the audience, and there is some criticism of old women who claim to be possessed. Rasmussen comments that "tamazai" (craziness") is an "inner illness and a dangerous sentiment, and the basis for possession affliction" (p.1). It is not clear whether this is meant to suggest that neither the sentiment nor the affliction itself constitute possession. She also says (p. 2) that possession is not simply the outcome of intense inner conflict but also the stimulus for it. She speaks of illnesses and depression that cause trance. Unfortunately the meaning of the terms "trance" and "possession" and the distinction between them are not clearly spelled out. For example: "Trance among the Tuareg represents neither rebellion nor social control, but rather a reconsideration of previous social relationships. Possession, viewed from this perspective emerges not only as
A response to conditions, but also as a factor in creating or rearticulating them" (p. 12). Aside from the lack of conceptual clarity exemplified here, I find that the data presented do not clearly support these claims, perhaps because of the very brevity of the book.

Anthropologists have been dealing with the subject of possession since the beginning of the discipline. In the sentence cited above, Rasmussen is critical of I. M. Lewis' social protest view of possession, but, curiously, she speaks with reference to him and others writing in the 1960s as "early anthropologists."

The work is set in the context of post-structuralist anthropology and there is much concern with art, aesthetics and symbolism of the healing rituals. Regrettably, some important material is relegated to footnotes. Much of the aesthetics and symbolism appears in the song texts and the music that are part of the exorcism rituals. There is also reference to "personhood." However, this important term is never defined nor is the concept discussed so that neither its meaning nor its contribution to the analysis are made clear.

In contrast to other Islamic people of Niger, such as the Hausa, the Tuareg do not have organized spirit cults, spirits do not have personal identities that are acted out by possessed women in trance, nor is any accommodation between the patients and their spirits achieved. It would be interesting to explore these contrasts between groups who have long been in contact. Yet here, too, the women are said to be "mounted" by the spirits, and the ritual constitutes a public performance. While men, too, may be diagnosed as suffering from possession illness, their cures are performed by Islamic healers. As among the Hausa, ritual possession trance behavior, as performed by women, is considered inappropriate for men among the Tuareg.

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