Women and Religion: A View from Anthropology*

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I have come to my topic by a somewhat circuitous route. That is, I began by studying religions where possession trance plays a significant role, and arrived, as others have before me, at the discovery that this is largely the domain of women. And while there is considerable agreement on the observation itself, drawing on many different cultures and traditions, there are diverse explanations and no fully satisfactory answers to date.

I should like to begin by offering some examples that will allow us to get a closer look at what I am talking about. But let me first set out some basic definitions and background for this discussion. By possession trance I mean an altered state of consciousness (ASC) (the trance) in which an individual presents herself, or himself, as someone else, exhibits a change of behavior, a change that is sometimes striking and dramatic. This transformation is believed by all concerned to be due to a takeover of the person by some other entity, a spirit of one sort or another, that temporarily dislodges and replaces the individual’s familiar, ordinary personality. This, then, is the "possession." Without such a belief or interpretive concept there may be an altered state of consciousness, that is, a form of dissociation, but not possession trance. Other non-religious explanations may then be offered for a personality change: "multiple personality disorder" might be one such explanation. The takeover of the person - the possession - may be in response to an invitation in the course of a group ritual, or it may be a spontaneous event, one that may be considered either helpful or negative and fearful.

I first encountered this type of belief, and the rituals and behaviors expressing it, in Haiti more than 40 years ago, in the folk religion known as vodou. I then discovered that it was not unique to Haiti nor even to the Afro-American regions of the Caribbean and South America, such as Cuba, Trinidad or Brazil, or even the African regions from which many of the beliefs and practices had come.

In the 1960s, in a large scale project supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, we reviewed a sizable number of societies on which adequate information could be found (Bourguignon 1973). After inspecting the literature on some 1100 societies, we settled on a sample of 488. And there we found that 90% made use of Altered States of Consciousness in their religious practices. Not all of these involved a belief in possession, but 52%, more than half of the sample societies, did. And where we found possession trance, it was most likely to be women who engaged in this behavior.

The other type of ASC, non-possession trance, involved instead contact with spirits, visions, spirit journeys and so forth, features often associated with shamanism. It is this latter type that, unlike possession trance, is often induced by psycho-active substances. Also, it is more likely to be engaged in by men rather than by women.

Now, let me turn to my examples. The first comes from my Haitian field notes:
struggle. Indeed, this corresponds to local expectations: if you attempt to restrain the spirits, for example by tying your headkerchief in a certain manner, and they come against your will, they may come with such force as to harm you, perhaps to kill you, as a punishment for having obstructed their path. Again, in etic terms, the conflict between the conscious intent and the force of the cues requires a struggle and indeed, the overcoming of obstacles. Ida, then, has not only been caught in contradictory demands: she embodies them quite literally. She expresses in dramatic ways the conflicts of her group.

The group here is a local one, a family. Larger groups may be riven by conflicts on a greater scale and individuals may then appear who embody and express these conflicts and, sometimes, their resolution. Before we move on to another example, let me quickly note for this dramatic and unusual scene some underlying constants.

In Haitian vodou, possession trance occurs in rituals contexts. These involve drumming, singing, dancing, and offerings in forms specific to given spirits. It is expected in these settings and generally considered desirable. The possession trance performs behavior that is learned as well as expected, with some personal modifications and elaborations. The behavior is cued by elements of the situation. It involves stereotypical features by which the spirit in question is recognized, but also individual variation relevant both to the situation -- for example, the type of advice that may be offered by the spirit -- and also to the particular "horse," i.e. the possession trancer. It is likely that the Ibo-Lélé, who habitually "mounts" Ida behaves somewhat differently from the Ibo-Lélé "in the head," as they say, of someone else. Possession trance is not generally feared or unexpected spontaneous behavior, although it may be in a crisis situation or as a first initial possession trance. It is not induced by chemical substances. The behavior changes are of finite duration. The possession trancer is most often a woman, between adolescence and old age. More rarely, a man. The drummers are always men. The ritual expert, the vodou priest, is frequently but not always a man. The possessing spirit is frequently, but not always, male. There are female spirits as well.

As noted, then, a given instance of spirit possession expresses traditional and group themes as well as individual and situational ones. There is room for personal variation and elaboration. Ultimately, the priest or priestess is in control and must be able to limit the range of permissible behavior, and when required, to dismiss an undesirable or unruly guest, whether spirit or human.

If we want to understand what we observe and what people say about it, we must listen not only to what people say but also to how they say it. In local, emic, terms the possession trancer is referred to as the spirit's "horse" and the spirit is said to "mount" or ride her. The event has an audience and constitutes a performance. The spirit addresses himself to that audience, not to his horse, for whom he can, at the most, leave a message: Tell My Horse is the title of Zora Neal Hurston's (1938) book on Haiti. If the possessing spirit is the woman's "master of the head," that is, her principal spirit, she will have been initiated for him. She may also be possessed by several other spirits. Male spirits call their faithful "wives," and are addressed as "papa" - father. Initiation, which involves a retreat, preceded and followed by ritual, is said to be a death and rebirth. However, I have also heard women compare it to a wedding, a marriage.

With some variations, many of the themes described here can also be found in other African-American spirit religions as well as in Africa - West Africa principally, but other regions as well.

Here is a different example from another time and place: In 1688 in the
marriages, and a rejection of the domination of life by male elders. Other women began to have similar experiences and so Ntombikwe became not a lone voice calling for change but a leader of a substantial movement, one that the government considered to be subversive.

Here is another example of a somewhat different kind: In Malaysia, there are frequent reports concerning what are termed in the newspapers incidents of "mass hysteria" among women factory workers and students in girls' schools. The women and their families speak of "spirit attacks," "spirit possession." Here are some examples: 40 women in a large American electronics plant, 120 women operators in the microscope section of another factory, 15 in a third - an American micro electronics plant, where production was disrupted for three days. And others. The popular explanation is that the factory sites are polluted, thereby angering spirits called Hantu. Some companies have assumed the hiring of exorcists as part of the cost of doing business. Ahiwa Ong (1987) in her book Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Work Discipline, says, "The eruption of spirit possession episodes in transnational companies discloses the anguish, resistance, and cultural struggle of some neophyte factory workers" (p. 270). She speaks of "spirit attacks" as "indirect retaliations against coercion and demand for justice in personal terms in the industrial milieu" (p. 270).

I have cited these somewhat arbitrarily chosen cases to discover whether they might tell us something about why possession trance is found in so many different societies and why, where we find it, it is so often an activity of women. I might have drawn on other examples such as Brazilian materials from the work of your colleague Patricia Lerch (1982) or on those contained in Princess Murasaki's Tale of Genji, which Doris Borgen (1986) has analyzed, speaking of possession as "female protest."

It is clear that for each of our examples, the behavior and its interpretation are deeply rooted in the rituals, traditions and beliefs of a particular group of people. In the case of women preachers, like Isaboe Vincent and Ann Lee on one hand and Ntombikwe on the other, it is important to note that what they said evoked significant echoes in sizable numbers of people, so that they became leaders with substantial followships. Through their possession trances, they gave voice to social dissatisfaction and thus were instrumental in creating what A.F.C. Wallace (1958) has called "Revitalization Movements," and others have spoken of as "crisis cults." In all of these, the phenomenon of trancing was given a particular religious interpretation. As such, it could be integrated into a larger world view. Such an integration, however, is in sharp contrast to most social contexts in current American society, although there are some, more than 50 years ago, where such construction would indeed be put on spontaneous behavior of this kind. In all instances, even among the Malaysian factory workers, who did no initiate a movement for change, the women possession trancers reveal profound conflicts in their societies.

The situation for Ida, in Haiti, is somewhat different. She did not experience a spontaneous possession trance, but one in a religious context where ordinarily, such alterations of consciousness, behavior and personality are called for. She did not become a leader or an innovator and did not reveal an explicit message. Her behavior was interpreted as experiencing the spirit's anger by her (or his) unusual and violent behavior. At the same time, she appeared to exhibit, to an outside observer, a personal reaction against a prohibition that ran against the common expectation, as well as her own, that she would embody the spirit Ibo-Lélé on the occasion of a ceremony held in his honor.

It is tempting to see each of these cases as unique and to seek to account
homologies. We may begin by looking at some statistical information. As I noted earlier, we found ASC institutionalized in a religious context in 90% of our sample societies taken from the ethnographic literature. Most of these societies were pre-industrial, small scale societies. Nation states represent somewhat more complicated problems. We distinguished, as I mentioned, between states of consciousness interpreted as due to possession, in which an alternate personality is embodied and states not so interpreted. Interestingly, possession trance and non-possession trance have, to a large extent, different distributions. Not only are women most often possession trancers, men visionary trancers. Non-possession trance is statistically associated with hunting and gathering societies, possession trance with societies having more settled economic systems involving agriculture, larger communities and therefore greater political complexity. While there is great diversity in each of the major regions into which we divide the world, societies of native North America are statistically associated with non-possession trance and those of sub-Saharan Africa with possession trance.

This immediately raises some questions. How do we account for these associations? It has been suggested that there is something about women that makes them more likely to go into an altered state. For example, Elaine J. Lawless (1982), writing about Pentecostal women in the United States, summarizes some of the explanations for women’s greater participation in this religious activity. She quotes George Cutten who writes, in 1927, about glossolalia (tongue speaking) and its associated behavior as revealing a form of nervous instability and hysteria much more frequent among women. Men then are reluctant to participate because such behavior is seen as "unmanly." We can find similar explanations from Brazil.

Lawless (1982:161) concludes her review as follows:

"The implications inherent in the scholarship on Pentecostals rely on the supposition that women, because of their 'natural' bent, are more uninhibited and have access to all possible emotional outlets."

A much more sophisticated and elaborate model has been posed by Raybeck et al (1989), who, in their words, "seek to relate stress to both calcium deficiency and possession symptoms." This model, which still needs to be tested, ties together the sociocultural, the psychological and the physiological level. Difficulties at the sociocultural level produce perceptions of stress which in turn affect the calcium metabolism producing symptoms such as tremors, convulsions, headaches, etc., experienced again at the psychological level as dizziness and dissociation; these are then diagnosed and treated at the sociocultural level in terms of spirit possession. Two preconditions are necessary for this model to be meaningful. One is the evidence of sex differences in calcium metabolism, making women more vulnerable than men to this sequence. Also, women have greater need for calcium during gestation and lactation, and may also be deprived of adequate calcium intake by either dietary rules or food availability. The test here comes in the form of elevated numbers of cases of possession trance symptoms and diagnoses during these critical times, evidence which is not available at this time. The second precondition comes at the sociocultural level: is there a pre-existing belief in possession integrated into a ritual complex of initiation, curing, and so on? And then we are back to the question: why only in societies at some level of demographic and societal complexity? Why is it that in small scale, hunter-gatherer societies it is more likely to be men rather than women who seek and exhibit such intense involvement with supernatural experiences? Might it be that there are more stresses on men than on women in those societies? That women’s calcium intake is more adequate and reduces the
the spirits. As we have seen in the case of Isabeau Vincent, this works only if the powerful accept the message as being indeed that of a spirit or of the Spirit.

The calcium deficiency model we have considered suggests that the stress on the socio-cultural level, perhaps induced by aspects of powerlessness and a subordinate status, can produce the symptoms of illness or trance interpreted as evidence of spirit possession. The two kinds of explanations, then, are not mutually exclusive. The stresses on women in agricultural societies, however, come not only from social inequality but also from illness: their own and that of their children. Women everywhere make greater use than men of medical facilities, whether these be biomedical resources or so-called native healers. In societies where there is a premium on having children, reproductive problems are often central to what is presented: infertility, child death, menopause. Agricultural societies prize fertility in humans as well as in plants and animals. Traditionally, they do so because large families provide for the future of the lineage and hence the temporal and spiritual power of elders and ancestors, whether living or dead. They also provide the labor force necessary in labor-intensive economies; they form the basis for marriages, and hence alliances or linkages with other lineages. Wealth, and hence power, traditionally was reckoned in the number of descendants and of allies who could be mobilized to aid in times of need. Women’s fertility and nurturance, their ability to produce live and surviving children is at the core of this system. Where difficulties arise, recourse may be had to the world of the spirits. Janice Boddy, in her 1989 book Wombs and Alien Spirits, a study of the Zar cult in Sudan, found that women who had marital and/or reproductive difficulties were more likely to participate in this possession trance religion than those who did not experience such problems.

By contrast, let us look at a situation where men seek visions and the help of a spirit guardian. I have in mind the Vision Quest among Plains Indians of North America. Here a young man would go out on his own to seek a Guardian Spirit. He would do so by exposing himself to isolation, fasting, perhaps engaging in various austerities, praying for a spirit to take pity on him. A vision, a song, a promise of protection and power might then be forthcoming after four days. The young man in search of this boon is one who is launching out on a life of hunting, raiding, love, gambling and other forms of achievement where self reliance is demanded. What matters here is courage in the face of danger, initiative in confronting new situations, self reliance in a solitary enterprise. This is a search for a short but glorious life, not the ancestry of numerous descendants. This is a life of risk, where boys are, of necessity, socialized for self reliance and Independence, where the only helper is a private one, a personal guardian spirit. This is in sharp contrast to the agriculturalist’s concern for tradition, obedience and accommodation to a larger group and a more complex hierarchy.

There are many differences between traditional hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists by virtue of the way in which they make their living. What is expected of men and women is among these differences. And so are the typical stresses experienced and the individuals on whom they impinge. Indeed, by looking to the persons who experience altered states and the circumstances and the symbolism by which they are surrounded, we may find clues to the strains characteristic of a particular society.

Religions that focus on women possession trancers have often been discussed in terms of power or its absence. With I.M. Lewis (1971), they have been seen as protest movements of sorts. Adeline Masqualier (1993), discussing
had some observers speak of female hysteria and to explain it as due to sexual repression of women in patriarchal societies.

A particularly striking aspect of the Yoruba material concerns the observation that this female imagery of relations between humans and gods is applied to males as well as females. For part of their careers, Yoruba priests of the god Shango may also be transvestites. The power is not only that of the king or ancestor, the rider, or the husband, it may also be that of foreigners; other tribes, outsiders, or Europeans. Fritz Kramer's (1993) book The Red Fez discusses representations of Europeans in spirit possession and in the art of Sub-Saharan Africa. He speaks of "mimesis" or "imitative representation," which, he says, constitutes a way of "assimilating modern culture" (p. 257). In Freudian terms, one might speak of identification with the oppressor, a manner of mastering the strange and the dangerous by temporarily becoming it, embodying it, becoming its medium and vehicle.

The spirit is figured as a rider who masters his mount or as a husband who dominates his wife (or wives). If this is to be seen as an intimate and even a loving relationship, the sexual and erotic serves as a model. This may be expressed literally as well as symbolically. I am reminded in this context of Jeannette Henney's (1980) description of the Spiritual Baptists, a Christian possession trance religion on the island of St. Vincent. Henney observed the recurrent sequences of collective trances, including men as well as women, that in their physical and emotional expressions resembled the stages of the repeated patterns of the female sexual response as reported by Masters and Johnson (1966).

On still another symbolic level, we need to note the Yoruba equation of brimming pot, head and womb. The spirit is lodged in the person's head and her own spirit may be stored, as it were, in a pot on the altar of a shrine. I shall not pursue these matters here, but these linkages are not unique to the Yoruba and their African-American descendants.

What is one to make of this? The image of the possessed person is one of a double unit, of two in one. The body is the container, the spirit is contained in it. The model for this, it seems to me, is the only situation in which there is indeed a doubling, quite literally a two in one, and that is pregnancy.

What we have seen in this brief sketch is a symbolic complex that links various levels or aspects of women's experience, but one that ultimately centers on fertility, the enduring concern of a farming society, where it is the great good, the expression of health and productivity, for the family and for the society as a whole.

To sum up, we have seen that possession trance religions are very widespread. They have been so in the past and at present, they are gaining in both diversity and appeal in many parts of the world. They are frequently characterized by having a majority of women participants. Often, these religious groups are entirely made up of women. The spirits, who are frequently male, are embodied by the women. The selection, or self-selection, of the participants, and what happens on ritual occasions, may reveal conflicts and needs present within the group as well as the individual.

Much of the conflict and the symbolism as well, concerns issues of power. There are also important sexual and erotic elements. These are revealed not only by the language and other symbolic means, but, at times, also by the erotic, even orgasmic behavior of possession trancers. On the other hand, it is also revealed by prohibitions on sex. These were most striking among Ann Lee's Shakers, but also appear in the rules of temporary abstinence as part of ritual preparation
References


