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This paper seeks to address a central problem of anthropology: human beings are a single species, with species-wide common characteristics, yet exhibit considerable cultural diversity in many areas of life. In discussing religion in connection with human cognition, I note that cognitive processes are species-wide; yet in particular socio-cultural contexts constant processes produce, or are connected to, variable beliefs and behaviors. They are seen as embedded in historic, cultural practices, or rather, cultural practices reflect both universal cognitive processes and their setting in historically and socially derived contexts.

I do not intend to speculate on the origins of religion, or its sources in evolution or paleoanthropology, although I confess to the temptation to do so. Nor do I wish to try my hand at a formal or binding definition of "religion." However, for practical purposes, I should like to consider a minimal definition that includes at the least concerns with ritual, belief and experience, and involvement with what for lack of a better term I shall call "spirits." I shall return to these constituent elements of religion presently.

For the purposes of this discussion there are three matters I wish to consider as givens:
1-Humans, as primates, are social beings. Their distinctive characteristics, as a species, include prolonged infant dependency; thus the survival and development of the individual require social interactions and relations, and, as we have been learning increasingly in recent years, interpersonal bonding and attachment.
2- Humans have what has been called "secondary consciousness": that is, they are aware or, if you prefer they are conscious, of being conscious, and thus they are capable of reflecting on their experiences and interpreting them.

3-secondary consciousness in turn is related to the human need for meaning—not as a philosophical quest but as a spontaneous reaction that makes response and action possible. That is, I take it as given that human beings require explanations, assign meanings, to things that matter to them, that evoke an affective response. They may remain agnostic or indifferent, as individuals or groups, to phenomena that do not touch them; they are most likely to seek meaning for phenomena that arouse anxiety. This quest for meaning is defensive not only in practical ways, but also psychologically, to defend the self. Why individuals or societies differ on what requires explanation and what does not is beyond the scope of this discussion. Note however that not all "religions" ask questions about creation or absolute origins or hold a belief in a life after death.

Regarding the first point, that human beings are social creatures, I want to add only that the significant patterns and experiences of social relations are built into religions; that is, into rituals, beliefs and experiences; they are reflected in and reworked into relations with a projected, fantasied spirit world. Consequently, to the extent that early social relations, family and caretaker interactions, are constant cross-culturally and across time, it is not surprising that in certain respects the spirit world and the posited relation of spirits to humans is also constant. To the extent that they are variable, the spirit world and its relations with humans also varies.

It is a consideration of points 2 and 3 that brings me more specifically to my topic: the almost universal ritual uses of psychological states of dissociation, often referred to as "trance," and the widespread, but not culturally universal, beliefs in spirit possession that we find in the ethnographic record.

We found (Bourguignon 1973)\(^2\), 30 years ago, that 90% of pre-industrial societies and some others in our sample, are reported to include some form of trance behavior and experience in their ritual repertoire, that 74% have one or more forms of a belief in possession by spirit entities, and 52% interpreted some form of trancing as involving spirit possession. These findings have since been confirmed by others (Winkelman 1992, Sharaah and Strathern 1992). In addition, I note that these features of religion have distinctive distributions, both with regard to geography and with regard to societal characteristics.

These, of course, are broad statements and involve rather rough categorizations. However, these gross categories allow us to put some initial order into a very large quantity of ethnographic data. The figures suggest an important difference between the psychological mechanism and experience of dissociation, on the one hand, and the culturally structured beliefs involving some form of possession. Dissociation is more widespread than the major types of beliefs and explanations used

\(^2\) for the codes and raw data of this study see Bourguignon and Ucko 1995.
to account for it in the ethnographic record, and may be reasonably said to be a pan-human phenomenon. Yet it is not utilized in the same manner by all societies where it appears in ritualized form. Beliefs in what it is all about vary—a majority of societies, but not all, that involve dissociation in ritual, speak of possession; other societies, or the same societies in different contexts, use other interpretations. In particular, they speak of encounters with spirits rather than possession by them.

There is also a form of possession belief, or belief in spirit intrusion, that does not involve dissociation or altered states of consciousness, but rather disease or empowerment, and this will not concern us here. In fact, however, 57% of our sample societies were found to hold such beliefs.

Returning to the subject of dissociation, I note that this topic is of direct relevance to studies of human cognition. Here is a form of frequently institutionalized behavior that temporarily alters cognitive processes: it involves a narrowed focussing of attention and screening out of some perceptual stimuli, notably but not exclusively perception of pain. In some ritualized types of dissociation memory, and thus personal continuity, is disrupted, at least normatively. There are alterations in the perception of self and others. Various other temporary changes in cognitive processes have been reported. New ideas may be introduced. Suggestibility is heightened and there may be rapid learning. It appears that experiences of such states are widespread and ancient in human history and prehistory, and sufficiently anxiety producing to have called for explanations. Belief in spirits, whatever their source or sources, at some point were marshalled to account for them. Societies we are able to study, whether ethnographically or historically, present us with the case where individuals learned explanatory concepts to account for dissociational states either in the process of growing up, or sometimes later, from neighboring communities. That is, we have evidence for both separate local streams of invention as well as for diffusion of ideas here. However, we cannot find points in prehistory where such explanations were spontaneously invented or discovered. On the other hand, there are accounts of innovators who modified pre-existing ideas in response to subjective experiences. As noted, not only are ritualized dissociational states widely used, but there are two major categories of explanations found in the ethnographic record, possession trance and visionary trance.

If we then turn to the study of specific societies, we find consistent reports that possession trance, as we called it, that is trance, or dissociation, interpreted as possession and the acting out of behavior attributed to a possessing entity, is more likely to occur among women, and visionary trance among men.

Nowhere are these universal phenomena, in the sense that all individuals in a community experience them. Sometimes they are the field of specialists, in other societies they are widespread; in some they require extensive training, in others they are
reported to occur spontaneously. In some sociocultural contexts such behaviors and experiences are required of some categories of individuals, in others they occur only among a limited number of persons. They may be thought desirable and are intentionally induced; in other contexts they are feared and attempts are made to terminate the state. Possession concepts may be used to explain pathological conditions (most famously epilepsy); elsewhere induced dissociation may be used as means of curing.

Here is a striking footnote to these observations: There was widespread interest in these phenomena in 19th century anthropology and psychology—-from Tylor to Bastian to Wundt. This was also, coincidentally perhaps, the time of great interest in Spiritualism in this country and in Europe, of multiple personalities, hypnosis, hysteria and studies of dissociation in psychiatry. While possession, shamanism and related matters continued to be recorded in ethnographic accounts, general interest in these matters waned in anthropology. At the same time, multiple personality disappeared from psychopathology and spiritualism became established only at the margins of Western societies. In general anthropology, references to shamanism and spirit possession cults continued to be part of the ethnography of religion, but psychological anthropology, and its predecessor, culture and personality, for the most part found no place for these matters until the 1960s.

The two related matters that interest me here, let me repeat, are "trance"—-a psychological state and a dimension of subjective experience, and "possession", an explanatory concept. The term trance is vague in psychophysiological terms, as is its broad synonym, Altered States of Consciousness. Technically, these labels may cover a variety of states, some induced by psychoactive substances. A major group of these states can be classified as "dissociation," involving known psychological processes; dissociation does not necessarily refer to a type of pathology. By all evidence, trance or better, dissociation, is a universal human capacity, as is another form of altered state, namely dreaming. It is found in all human societies. It is rooted in human mammalian biology (Wedenoja 1990, Bourguignon 1991). But this brings us back to evolution, which is beyond the scope of my discussion here.

On the basis of what has been said so far, we may posit that the experience of dissociation and other altered states of consciousness, including dreaming, is universal among humans, at least potentially so. Furthermore, we know that these states begin to occur early in the life of the individual. Infants experience REM sleep. Young children enjoy games that test the limits of consciousness (e.g., whirling and spinning, climbing and swinging, breath holding and other types of thrill seeking); they test the limits of social reality as well. TV watching may involve a narrowed focus of attention and absorption in a fictional world, as does intense attention to computer games, among other types of activities. Roger Callois (1961), in his classification of games, draws attention to the element of
vertigo, called ilinx. This may be experienced as euphoria or fear, in either case as thrill. Of course, such games and forms of play are not limited to children, witness the popularity of roller coasters. In this connection it is noteworthy that some types of rotation is used to induce dissociation in many ritual situations.

A second category Callois considers is that of simulation, called mimicry. Where ilinx may lead to dizziness and a temporary loss of one's own sense of identity, mimicry involves the temporary substitution of another identity. George Herbert Mead (1934), among American symbolic interactionists, brilliantly described the importance in the development of the child's self, of taking the role of the other—i.e., trying out what it might be like to be another person. For a 20th century American child the "other" may well be a truck or other mechanical object. The connection to spirit possession is evident (Bourguignon and Haas, 1965).

If we now consider what we have come to call "possession trance," a type of dissociated state structured by a belief in possession, we clearly see that some of the means of inducing it are likely to involve vertigo, and other physiological identity-loosening means, and mimicry, the acting out of another identity, and thus another presence.

Mimicry, imitation, the playing of roles, occur in a number of secular and sacred contexts: in theater and in masquerade—either sacred or secular—as well as in possession trance. For the latter to occur, a further element is required, beyond a capacity for dissociation, and a human tendency to act out mimicry, to take on roles. This further element is a belief in spirits capable of possessing human beings and the complementary conception of humans which allows this to occur.

This brings me back to one of my earlier points, the human need for meaning. Experiences of dreams and dissociation are frequent enough for most, if not all, societies to have interpreted them, to provide meanings. And, as I have suggested earlier, the function of interpretation is to reduce anxiety and provide means of action for the dreamer or trancer, and perhaps for the group as well. For example, when illness is explained as due to human action, a defense or counter-attack becomes possible. For the individual, the quest for meaning is defensive in a narrow sense as well: it serves to protect the self. It follows that the institutionalized explanations, and consequent patterning of behavior, will reflect prevailing stresses. And stresses vary with the economic system, the structure of society and the position of given individuals or categories of individuals in given societies or types of societies. And here it is relevant that trance interpreted as due to possession is more likely to be found in larger, more highly stratified societies than visionary trance.

Belief in spirits is often seen as a defining feature of religion and religion, in some sense, is treated by anthropologists and others as a human universal. This is not the
place to argue these points, nor even to wonder what the source or sources of a belief in spirits might be. Dealing with spirits, who generally have many human-like characteristics, who may even be thought to be deceased ancestors and others who were indeed living humans in earlier times, may be argued to make the universe a more manageable place. My concern here is with spirits who can take over human bodies and personalities. This involves the belief, in one form or another, that human beings are made up of at least two elements, a body and a spirit or soul that inhabits that body and that can be separated from the body and, at least temporarily be displaced by another entity, a soul or spirit. What might be the source in human experience of such a notion, which is one of the preconditions for a belief in spirit possession?

While it is easy enough, on the basis of the available evidence, to understand dissociation as a human universal, and spirit possession as one possible response to the need for meaning, there remains the question of what the source of such a belief might be. While we can look at behavior and at physiological indicators to observe dissociation, to get at the issue of spirit possession, we must ask what people have to say about it, how people talk about it. Let me use Haitian participants in the folk religion of vodou as my example, although people in many African societies use analogous language. While the spirits are invisible in themselves, they may appear in human form in the person of those they possess, as well as in dreams. They may at times chose to appear in animal form as well. They have many human characteristics: they are male or female, old or young, with light or dark skin color and so forth. The spirits, in regard to their various aspects, correspond to types in Haitian society, in physical as well as social features. Spirits are said to "mount" those they possess, who are referred to as the spirit's "horses." Male spirits are addressed as "papa" and their mostly female "horses" may be referred to as their "wives." All of this represents the Haitians' reminiscences of their West African ancestors' conceptions. Haitian "wife" of the spirit or hounsi, which is also used, is a Fon term, as is the word "vodou" itself. While several spirits, in sequence or on different occasions, may possess, or mount, a given individual, one spirit, the "master" of the person's head, is permanently established in the head. Individuals have two souls, one of which is temporarily displaced by the possessing spirit. When the spirit leaves, this soul returns, but cultural expectations are that there will be no memory of the events, since the soul cannot remember what it has not participated in. One of a person's souls can be stored in a jar by a priest or priestess. On the other hand, a sorcerer may steal one of a person's souls and store it in a jar. Initiation uses symbols of death and rebirth, but some women liken the process to a marriage.

Several features of this, admittedly sketchy picture, may be noted: the linkage between the human individual and a vessel, a jar, as a container of souls; the linkage between a person and a
horse, between possessing and mounting, between the possessor/possessed relationship and marriage. Sex and power are both involved, implicitly and explicitly. And these traits, while they have a particular local character in the Haitian cultural context, are familiar from Africa whether the Hausa (Monfouga-Nicolas 1972), the Yoruba (Matory 1993) or the participants in the zar cult that is so widespread in eastern Africa from Egypt to Ethiopia (e.g., Boddy 1989).

Possessing spirits are powerful beings and they speak and act in the bodies of women whose own identity is removed. It is the spirit who is powerful, not the woman. She is merely his vessel or vehicle. Paradoxically, her very passivity, or non-presence, may be her tool for action, for the spirit may do and require things that are helpful to the community or the individual who is the "mount."

Power is only one of the many, intertwined themes of possession trance. The language and the behavior may be symbolically or explicitly sexual and erotic in nature. This has often moved observers to speak of female hysteria, even of orgies.

The symbolism of possession then involves power (horse and rider), and sex ("mounting" and marriage). However, these two images do not exhaust the symbolic dimension of possession; there is a third. In societies in which a belief in a soul exists, the individual is believed to consist of two elements, a body and a soul contained within it. In the relationship between the individual and the soul, the body (or head) is a vessel, the soul or souls are contained in it. We see reference to one entity inhabited by another. Only in pregnancy is a human being double in this sense. In a discussion of the sculpture of Henry Moore, the Jungian analyst and art historian Erich Neumann makes a striking comment which seems to be pertinent here:

The mother-child relationship, which as the primary relationship, between the containing mother and the contained child, determines the life of man and characterizes his existence in the world, expresses itself over and over again in Moore's work as a participation mystique. On a deeper archetypal level, this relationship forms the background of the mythological relationship between body and soul, where the soul appears as the body's inhabitant (1959:14-27).

It is not necessary to subscribe to a belief in archetypes to see the possible significance of the experience of pregnancy as a model for the relationship between the body and the soul, and a forteriori, as a model for women's experience of possession trance. In possession trance, the place of the soul is ursurped by a spirit husband, not a spirit child. It is also noteworthy that in hierarchical societies, where it is primarily women who experience possession trance, men who do so are often feminized and the relationship of men to the supernatural is often phrased in feminized terms. But that, I am afraid is a topic for another discussion.
Possession trance in Haiti then is about identity, social and potential. It is about social action: power and authority, dominance and submission, active and passive roles. All of this is acted out, modelled in behavior and in social interactions. It is about sexuality and motherhood. And it is likely that these generalizations apply to other societies where possession trance is institutionalized and ritualized. Dissociation alters cognition; it gives rise to thinking as well as feeling about the experience; to explanations that open up possibilities of action. And to explanatory schemes that have relevance not only to the experience itself but to the expression of a model of human life in a particular type of societies.

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