Stress, Symptom, and Symbol: Women as Patients and Healers in Possession Trance Religions.

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My title is drawn from two previous publications by anthropologists: A.I. Hallowell’s 1939 paper, with a similarly alliterative title: “Sin, Sex, and Sickness in Saulteaux Society,” and Joan Koss-Chioino’s 1992 book: Women as Healers, Women as Patients: Mental Health and Traditional Healing in Puerto Rico. Hallowell notes that among the Saulteaux, a group of Canadian Ojibwa, sickness required public confession, for it was believed to result from sin, often a sin of a sexual nature. Some people got better after confessing, others did not. Thus belief was reinforced inconsistently—the best type of reinforcement. And those who are simply witnesses to the confessions are shown, dramatically, what happens to sinners. In this process, the symptoms of sickness are given meaning: moral and symbolic meaning. They acquire meaning for the individual patient and also for the community. Moreover, this meaning, it appears, is likely to be consistent with a pre-existent, shared system of beliefs.

Koss-Chioino’s book deals with her extensive work with Puerto Rican Spiritist healers, in the context of a project that brought together Spiritist healers and biomedical mental health practitioners. Where the sickness sanction among the Saulteaux works automatically, as immanent justice, the Puerto Rican Spiritistas involve spirits in their diagnostic and therapeutic practice; one of the ways they do this is by acting as trance mediums who are possessed by spirits. Here too, the symptoms of sickness are given meaning, both for the individual and the group. The patient, the healer, the patient’s family, and perhaps others, are thereby provided with means for coping with the sickness. Moreover, other problems may be revealed in the...
diagnostic process. And overall, the process teaches, or reinforces, a worldview, a system of beliefs and actions.

In what follows I want to talk about the larger, world-wide context of possession trance religions, which, frequently are settings in which women appear as both patients and healers. Although such religions exist in all parts of the world, they are particularly concentrated and well studied in two major areas: Sub-Saharan Africa—and the African Diaspora—, and in Southern and Southeastern Asia. They are, as Judith Rosenthal (1998) says of Gorovodu, a Possession Trance religion among the Ewe of Togo and neighboring areas, “marked by femaleness.” And one, and only one, of the things this means, is that the majority of possession trancers, as reported over and over again, are found to be women. It means other things as well; we shall return to that topic shortly. One of the questions I wish to address here is why that should be so. The answer to the question about female participation was easier when it could be asserted that possession trance is hysteria and hysteria is a female disorder. But this once fashionable idea won’t do and we’ll have to come up with something better. And we shall do so—at least in part—by looking at the larger socio-cultural context, at the systems in which the beliefs and practices of possession trance religions are embedded.

I just noted that these religions have been widely studied—by anthropologists as well as others. However, this has been primarily in the context of the anthropology of religion or of general ethnography rather than either in that of psychological anthropology or feminist anthropology. A lot of feminist anthropology has dealt with women’s status and arguments about universal male dominance, about the projection of U.S. middle class concerns on women in other parts of the world, ethnographic descriptions of women’s lives in various cultures, specific
problems women face, women in the context of development and so forth. Sometimes gender has been emphasized at the expense of systems of age ranking, gerontocracy, or class. Concern with women and religion has been minor.

In psychological anthropology, too, interest in possession trance and other types of trance religions has been limited. The question of women's participation has received some attention, but at best only partial answers have been suggested. If, indeed, possession trance is virtually everywhere more frequent among women than men, we must look not only to the specifics of given societies and cultures, but more broadly at regularities in women’s experience. Questions about the relationship between human nature and cultural diversity are once again inescapable.

Possession Trance involves a type of Altered State of Consciousness and as such it is of obvious psychological interest. And if indeed women’s participation in these religions is so prominent, then feminist anthropology, as well as the anthropology of religion, needs to consider the matter. And so it seems to be time that we bring these three areas together; when we do so, such a multifaceted perspective turns out to be provocative and productive.

Let me start by saying something about the terms of my title: first Stress. We have learned and continue to learn about the impact of stress—physical stress, psychological stress, any kind of stress,—on the individual. We are learning much from immunology and particularly from psychoneuroimmunology. And one of the most important things we have learned and are learning, in addition to the destructive potential of stress, is how limiting traditional Western dichotomous thinking has been, how deeply rooted the body/mind dichotomy is in Western thought and how difficult it seems to be to deracinate it. Stress results from a variety of sources, but to return for a moment to Hallowell’s paper, a guilty conscience may indeed be a source of
stress. Stress may have a variety of sources leading to symptom formation and though that is an important topic, it is not one we can deal with here. Let us assume that symptoms are the result of precipitating factors and that stress, in the largest sense of the word, can direct us to an understanding of the process. My specific interest in this topic concerns the observation that psychological stress can produce physiological symptoms and disease. The reverse is true as well.

Some anthropologists (Cf. Worthman and Dade 1997) are investigating immune function in the relationship between physical health and mental well-being. Both physical and mental symptoms can be turned into symbols.

We become aware of the impact of stress by observing (or experiencing) changes in function: the observable evidence may be primarily physiological or primarily psychological, though at some level it is likely to be system wide. These observable changes are “symptoms” but it is as yet unclear what they are symptoms of, or better, how they are to be understood. Until they are understood, interpreted in whatever framework is at hand, they lack meaning, that is, they are not “understood” either by the patient or the patient’s group (family, whatever).

Obviously, to speak of “understanding” is just another way of speaking of “meaning”. Without understanding or meaning, a strategy for dealing with symptoms will be lacking, particularly an appropriate or effective strategy.

A strategy for change—amelioration, treatment, removal of the symptoms, or accommodation to them—comes only when we have a diagnosis, that is, an understanding of the symptoms in whatever diagnostic or meaning system is at hand. At this point, we are dealing no longer with raw, anxiety-producing, experience, but with what Susan Langer called the “symbolic transformation of experience.” She notes that “the human brain is constantly carrying
on a process of symbolic transformation of experiential data." And that "[all] registered experience tends to end in action" (Langer 1948:34). "Registered" is a key word here; it implies not only awareness, but, most likely an affective impact; and that impact may be expected to be anxiety producing. One type of action toward which "registered experience" tends, is ritual. "Ritual," Langer writes (p.36)," is essentially the active termination of a symbolic transformation of experience." If the ritual is one of divination (or diagnosis), the symptom is given meaning, it thereby becomes a symbol or acquires a symbolic dimension. Most likely, it will then be part of a larger system of meanings. In its turn, this diagnosis may undergo another symbolic transformation, a modification of meaning by means of a ritual of healing.

In Medusa's Hair (1981), his study of ecstatic priestesses in Sri Lanka, Ganath Obyesekere addresses the transformation of psychological symptoms into personal symbols. In a more complex and theoretically elaborate manner, he takes this issue up again in The Work of Culture, subtitled Symbolic Transformations in Psychonalysys and Anthropology (1990). Finally--but probably not indeed finally--Melford Spiro (1997) has subjected Obyesekere's treatment to a lengthy and highly critical analysis. Both of these authors build on a voluminous literature on the subject of symbolism and symbolic transformations. To deal with their positions here would lead us too far afield. Nevertheless, at least mention should be made of this particular polemic. To the extent, however, that I am interested in the symbolic transformation of physiological as well as psychological symptoms, these discussions are only of marginal interest here, at least for the moment.

Possession Trance religions take many forms and not all are primarily healing systems, but in most, if not all, diagnosis (or divination, if you prefer) and healing play at least some role.
Possession trance, it should be noted, involves not only an alteration of consciousness but at the same time one of identity—and that may include gender as well as age, social position, ethnicity, and so forth. Such temporarily altered identities offer opportunities for the exercise of license for expressive or cathartic release, and also for instrumental behavior—that is, for actions that may have long term implications for the possession trancer, or for others in the family or community.

In what follows, I want to address three issues:

1. One I have already mentioned: Langer’s “symbolic transformation of experience,” specifically as it applies to the move from symptom to symbol, that is, to a meaningful phenomenon which is capable of resolution. “Symbolic transformation” applies, of course, to a great deal else as well, with important implications for human psychocultural evolution.

2. The frequency of women as possession trancers and, more broadly, the “femaleness” of possession trance religions. And this includes their role of both healers and patients in these institutional contexts. (The topic of women as either healers or patients, has, for some time, been of considerable interest to feminist scholars in several disciplines. For example, in Women as Healers, (Carol Shephard McClain, 1974), we find women healers in a variety of cultural and social contexts, many of a secular nature.

3. And finally, I want to consider the observation that ritual trance often looks to observers like frank pathology. Where it is intentionally induced—as is typically the case in possession trance religions—it would seem that such pathology serves as a model for learned and intentional behavior. Theodore Schwartz (1976), in speaking of Melanesian cargo cults, has called this behavior “pathomimetic,” and W.G. Jilek (1974), in his work on the Coastal Salish, speaks of it
as "pathomorphic." Just why pathological phenomena should serve as models for ritual behavior is a question that deserves some consideration.

Let me begin, then, with some examples of how physical symptoms have been interpreted in the context of cultural systems and given a symbolic dimension, and see what we can learn from them:

My first example is one that has been made rather well-known by the neurologist Oliver Sacks. In his book on *Migraine* (1992), he cites artistic renderings of phenomena he interprets as migraine auras, experienced and recorded by Hildegard von Bingen, the famous 12th century German nun. She spoke of one of these visions as "The Fall of the Angels," and described it as follows, as quoted by Sacks:

> I saw a great star most splendid and beautiful, and with it an exceeding multitude of falling stars which with the star followed southwards... And suddenly they were all annihilated, being turned into black coals... and cast into the abyss so that I could see them no more. (Sacks 1992:301).

Sacks calls this an "allegorical interpretation," and provides his own description of what she must have seen: "a shower of phosphenes in transit across the visual field, their passage being succeeded by a negative scotoma" (ibid). Sacks goes on to remark that, "[i]nvested with this sense of ecstasy, burning with profound theophorous and philosophical significance, Hildegard's visions were instrumental in directing her towards a life of holiness and mysticism. They provide a unique example in which a physiological event, banal, hateful, or meaningless to the vast majority of people, can become, in a privileged consciousness, the substrate of a supreme ecstatic inspiration." Sacks speaks of migraine auras as "banal, hateful or meaningless." At first,
as a novel, unexpected experience such an aura, consisting of scintillating scotomata, is likely to be anxiety producing. What is it? How long will it last? It lasts typically thirty-minutes, but its connection to migraine headaches is not obvious, for there may be no headache or it may come only hours later.

Clearly, Hildegard was a brilliant woman, profoundly rooted in a religious tradition that provided her with materials she could draw on for her interpretation of her entoptic experiences, turning them into mystic visions. While these were personal experiences, they occurred in a society in which it was believed that humans could have visions of supernatural import and significance, and though she elaborated on the tradition, she did not create it. Rather, she contributed to the general fund of cultural symbols. Speaking of the symbolic transformation of entoptic phenomena, there is now a school of thought that argues that prehistoric rock paintings in general, but perhaps most particularly those of southern Africa, are renderings of such phenomena (J.D. Lewis-Williams and T.A.Dawson 1988). In the 1960s, in the US, there was a group of artists who sought techniques to provoke entoptics in order to use them as basis for their paintings. The pursuit of these op artists, however, addressed abstract aesthetic values, not symbolic meanings.

Hildegard’s visions, and they were numerous, extending over a long period of her life, raise another question: did she experience them first as phosphenes and scotomata and then interpret them to fit into her mystical system of meanings or, as I am tempted to argue, did she experience them as already interpreted? That is, was the interpretation itself part of the experience? I think there is much evidence from the world of dreams in which precisely that kind of simultaneous process-- or better, processing-- occurs. For example, Obyesekere
(1981:57) reports the account of a dream as given to him by a Sinhalese ecstatic priestess in which the god Isvara came to her and asked her to follow him. When asked what the god looked like, she said "my uncle; he wore a familiar checked sarong and broad belt." Obeyesekere comments: "Another person having the same dream might simply have said that he saw his uncle" and suggests that this case "illustrates the tendency of ecstasies to invest ordinary events with extraordinary significance." But the way the woman tells her dream seems to me to suggest that the "investment with extraordinary significance", that is the translation of the dream events into the supernatural realm, is not a secondary elaboration but rather part of the experience itself. Such an experience of a dream event as already interpreted is likely to be widespread among people who have such intimate relations with spirits, spirits who appear in human form, particularly spirits who are known through their impersonation by humans in the context of spirit possession (cf also Bourguignon 1954 for a Haitian example).

Here is quite a different example of the symbolic transformation of an experience: In her book, Margery Kempe, said to be the earliest English woman to have written an autobiography, writes, speaking of herself in the third person:

"Our Lord gave her another token, which endured about sixteen years and it increased ever more and more, and that was a flame of fire, wonderous hot...burning in her breast and at her heart, as truly as a man might feel material fire if he put his hand or finger therein." She says that at first, this experience frightened her greatly, but then: "The Lord answered to her mind and said: "Daughter, be not afraid for this heat is the heat of the Holy Ghost, which shall burn away all thy sins. The fire of Love quenches all sins. And thou shalt understand by this token that the Holy Ghost is in thee" (S.B.Meech,1940).
The medievalist Philip Adamo (n.d.) has suggested that Margery Kempe experienced menopausal hot flashes and translated them into the mystic realm. This story is quite different from the dream interpretation we just considered. Margery Kempe experienced a symptom she did not know how to explain or deal with. This worried her and made her anxious. Only when, as she tells it, "our Lord answered her mind," did she learn what to make of the experience, did the experience undergo a symbolic transformation. Whether she hallucinated a voice and message in a waking trance, had a dream or worked out an interpretation for herself which she invested with supernatural meanings, we do not know. What matters to this discussion, is that the raw experience may come first and be only secondarily interpreted—in this case, by the subject. In other instances this may be done by a diagnostician, diviner, or healer. However the interpretation occurs, there will be consequences for appropriate actions, or reactions. In Margery's case, no ritual action, of an overt kind, appears to have followed up on this revelation, but she did have a revised or reinforced personal understanding of her own value and divine election. Apparently, it made her a difficult person to live with.

Here is one more, very different example:

In 1902, a French woman, living in Cairo, and writing under the name of "Riya Salima," published a book of letters (Salima 1902). In it she described local customs, particularly with reference to woman. Among her descriptions are some of a possession trance religion popular among Black women. Here the spirits were called on in ceremonies called zar. Much of the activity at these ceremonies involved healing. Here is a description and an explanation, couched in the language of the period:

"[The leaders, called sheikhas or goudias], mistresses in the art of suggestion, persuade
those who consult them that their headaches,...etc. are imaginary or rather are due to the presence in their body of one or more effrit [spirits]. Thus they substitute, for the obsession with a real pain, belief in diabolic possession, which it is easy for them to conjure with the help of their zar ...”

Salima then goes on to give the example of one of her Black women servants:

“Thus, the hysterical ball [globus hystericus], which rises in her throat, has become a mean little girl that tries to strangle her, but who is calmed by the sound of the magical drums; the paralysis and the contracture which keep her sometimes lying on the ground, are due to the mischief of another little girl who wants to play with her and makes her wear [heavy anklets].” (My trans. Salima 1902:293. For more on R. Salima, see Bourguignon 1993-94).

Here we have a rather clear statement by a perceptive observer of how the transformation of conversion symptoms into the symbolic realm may be made to work, so that they become amenable to ritual healing.

Finally, an example from the contemporary US.: Marge is a middle class housewife in a middle-sized Midwestern city. She and her husband have a severally handicapped teen-age son, and also two young adopted sons. The older boy, with a very severe case of cerebral palsy, is totally dependent and has periodic medical emergencies. Marge is a member of an evangelical church and considers her son’s handicap and the great load of physical and emotional effort she suffers as God’s will and her cross to bear. She has transformed the experience—the symptoms—which in this case involve her, the handicapped son and, indeed, the whole family, in symbolic terms. I do not know to what extent this symbolic transformation was mediated by the minister; clearly it is not her own “invention” but utilizes the ideology, the symbol system, made available
to her by the church.

These four cases are drawn from widely disparate sources and places. All deal with women, but examples of the move from symptom to symbol can be found for men as well. Our examples, however, illustrate some of the diverse modes and contexts in which this process operates:

Hildegard was not part of a possession trance religion, but she did live in a setting in which visionary trances are considered not only possible, but desirable. She does not speak of a need for healing. She does make her experience valuable by endowing it with mystical meanings.

Margery Kempe similarly is not part of a possession trance religion; she too, lives in a world where it is possible to have visions—more specifically, auditory experiences. She, too, is able to find meaning in her experience. She is not “healed,” i.e., her symptoms do not disappear, but acquire meaning so that she experiences a change of personal value and life style.

Riya Salima tells us of a full fledged possession trance religion, in which women are both healers and patients, and in which symptoms are translated and thereby become accessible to treatment. How often these treatments need to be repeated, however, we do not know.

Marge finds solace in a the message of her evangelical church, by seeing the suffering of her child, herself and her family, as divinely ordained, thereby gives it a larger, symbolic meaning. This, in turn, helps to give her the strength to carry on.

In each of these four “cases,” or stories, the transformation from symptom to symbol takes places in a different way: for Hildegard von Bingen, the interpretation and transformation appears to be simultaneous with the experience. It is an intrapsychic process. For Margery Kempe, it also appears to be a private, internal matter. However, it occurs only as a result of a
lengthy period of anxious suffering. For the Egyptian woman, on the other hand, the transformation is skillfully mediated by a healer in the context of a possession trance religion. It occurs in a public setting. For Marge, the transformation is based on the mediation of the teachings of her church; it is not a personal delusional notion.

Let me now turn to my next question, the “femaleness” of possession trance religions. First, the often noted preponderance of women as possession trancers: reference here is not only to tradition and modernizing societies, but to post-modern America as well. Thus, M.F. Brown (1996) notes that most channels are female and the spirits they channel are mostly male. A great variety of explanations have been offered for the observed frequency of women as possession trancers, whether or not the groups are led by men, and whether or not possession trance is considered positive, desirable, intentionally induced or negative, undesirable, spontaneous. Charcot noted the similarity between his hysterical patients and the history of demonic possessions in France; Baumann and Westermann (1962) linked women’s possession trance religions to matrilineality in Central Africa, but in fact the pattern is a great deal more widespread. Other explanations have implicated women’s nutrition (Gussler 1973, Keohoe and Gilleti 1981), their physiology, specifically women’s reaction to stress together with their characteristic calcium metabolism (Raybeck et al. 1989), as well as a range of social, economic and political factors. Here are some examples:

Herskovits (1966 [1955]: 232), speaking of Afro-Brazilian religions, offers his own explanations in contrast to some previous ones: He argues that the explanation “reaches back to Africa,” and that both in Africa and in Brazil the explanation lies in economics. Since initiation is a process of several months or more, it is easier, he says, “to release a woman from her
accustomed routine” than a man, since a man requires the income from his work to support a family. Speaking of Northern Brazil, Seth and Ruth Leacock (1972) note that the predominance of women in the Batuque religion they studied does not fit this scenario: there are neither lengthy initiations nor significant African traditions. Instead, they observe that men’s participation is inhibited by the dominant macho ideology. Wearing ritual costumes, dancing in public, being submissive to spirits who choose to possess them, makes men appear to be passive. Men as well as women may be possessed by and impersonate female spirits and do so in manner, expression and general appearance. Men who are possession trancers, then, are widely believed to be either effeminate or homosexual or both. In fact, some are neither, but the macho ideology inhibits male participation.

Patricia Lerch (1980, 1982), dealing with Umbanda in southern Brazil, also finds an economic element in women’s possession trance participation, particularly in its leadership: cult houses are part of the informal economy, and as such provide women with some income-generating opportunities. Also, they allow women to work at the redistribution of income among their clients. This, however, is not the whole story. The development of mediumship is undertaken at the call by spirits—that is, illness or other problems that are so interpreted by an established medium, offering the client a move from symptom to symbol. Even a husband’s alcoholism—or better, the woman’s suffering caused by his drunkenness—may be interpreted as such a call. As such, the will of the spirits overrides that of husband. Women thereby acquire a degree of independence—from husbands, if not from spirits who claim them. Moreover, submission to possession trance and the will of the spirits, and the suffering that is entailed in this process, is something for which women are said to be particularly suited, since women’s
lives generally are full of suffering. Similarly, Koss-Chioino (1992:32) says of women Spiritist healers of Puerto Rico: “Dealing with one’s own suffering becomes central to the challenge of developing powers to heal others. Thus inward threats are highly significant to women as healers, even more so than the destruction and evil emanating from the world outside.” Part of this development involves age and maturation; such maturation is not everywhere linked to women. For example, in US Pentecostal Churches, it appears men are likely to postpone conversion, being “reborn,” until they are ready to “settle down,” after a period of “sinfulness,” involving sexual exploits, and other activities inconsistent with holiness.

Starting with his fieldwork in Somalia, I.M. Lewis (1971:31), on the other hand, has argued that women’s possession trance religions are “thinly disguised protest movements directed at the opposite sex...” and part of “the sex war in traditional societies.” He goes on to argue that possession trance religions are generally protest movements of the downtrodden, of men as well as women.

Clearly none of these explanations completely account for all these examples, or all the others that could be cited. For example, if the physiological explanations apply, are they universal or dependent on local variations in stress, nutrition, etc.? How general is the image of women as more exposed to suffering than men and more capable of dealing with it? What are the societal factors that further such experiences and perceptions? Yet when possessed by aggressive male spirits, such female mediums present an aggressive rather than a mild and suffering self.

In an analogy between multiple personality and spirit possession of a negative kind, sexual child abuse has also been cited, specifically in the case of India, although Caldwell (1998) is careful to note that this is only one possible etiology of South Indian spirit possession. There
are others, which involve oracles, who are men and male actors in ritual dramas impersonating the goddess. In the case of individual problems, we may not be dealing with women’s groups at all. Rather, the response to negative possession may be exorcism, performed, for the most part by male exorcists. Demonie, that is negative, spontaneous possessions, linked to exorcism, are part of the European traditions, whether Catholic, Protestant or Jewish, and also part of the Islamic tradition. We also find it in India, as just mentioned. The African and Afroamerican traditions often have a place for accommodation with spirits, spirits that can, through initiation and appropriate rituals be turned from harassers into allies. Crapanzano (1973), dealing with the Hamadsha fraternity of Morocco, notes that both exorcistic and symbiotic methods of healing are utilized with regards to individuals who have sudden, disorganized seizures that are interpreted as possession by certain demons. Here, victims of demons may be male or female, and the spirits or demons also may be either male or female. Exorcists/healers are often women.

So far, we have dealt with the predominance of women in possession trance religions. In many instances, initiation is a response to some sort of crisis or need, interpreted as a call by spirits. And we have seen some explanations for this predominance, and some indications of how possible explanations are linked to the “femaleness” of these religions. For example, the Brazilian association of suffering—a particularly female aptitude—and the development of mediumship capacities, as well as the conflict between macho ideology and submission to spirits involved in undergoing possession trance. The connection between women, suffering and mediumship also appears in European 19th century Spiritualism, to which some of the Brazilian religions are indebted. I have drawn attention elsewhere (Bourguignon 1994) to the language
frequently associated with possession trance: the reference, in Africa and Afroamerica, to possession trancers as the spirits' "horses," to being ridden or mounted by spirits, of being "wives" of spirits and so forth. Power, sex and gender are involved. And the observation that those who are possessed, in trance, acting out the personalities and roles of spirits, are passive objects to active subjects. They gain power, temporarily at least, by being powerless and passive.

In areas where the horse and mount metaphor is absent, possession trancers may be referred to as "vessels" of the spirit—for example in the Euro-Christian tradition,—here too to be filled by a spirit presence. In this symbolic language there clearly is reference to sex. In Haitian vodou, for example, some men, quite formally, contract marriages with a female spirit. In Burns, it is women who enter a formal marriage relationship with a spirit, who then possesses his wife, so that, in trance she may heal and perform other ritual activities (Spiro 1967). The relationship between spirit and vessel, or soul and the body as its vessel, suggests pregnancy (Bourguignon 1994).

The most detailed ethnographic statement of this femaleness of possession trance religions has been given by Rosenthal (1989) in her recent work on the Ewe. Here all people who experience possession trance, men as well as women, are "wives" of the spirits and female spirits as well as male spirits are "husbands" to their "wives." A woman, the wife of a male spirit, as the host of her spirit husband, acts out his male persona when the spirit possesses her. A man may be the wife of a male spirit or of a female spirit. In possession, he will act out his "husband's" persona. As identities change under possession, they allow for a masculine self presentation by women, a female self presentation by men. Priests may be women or men, but the majority of possession trancers are women.
Any conclusion here has to be preliminary. We need to attend to a great number of aspects of these situations. Some are of specific local significance and unlikely to apply elsewhere. For example, it is unlikely that calcium deficiency plays a major role among American Channels. Some physiologically based experiences, ranging from female orgasm to seizures and auras seem to play and to have played a role in the ritualization and high valuation of possession trance. While there has undoubtedly been significant cultural diffusion, much of the experience and ritual appears to have been reinvented over and over again. Some aspects are tied to particular social and economic conditions of women, but the symbolic dimensions draw heavily on women's experience as females. The sexuality of mystic experiences is not a new subject; indeed, it is one with a significant literature. The relationship between men and spirits, in the Judeo-Christian tradition is often phrased as a father-son relationship. But dependency and subjection are frequently seen as female or feminization. The very interpretation of the Biblical Song of Songs, with all of its sexual imagery, into a relationship between God and Israel or God and the Church, speaks to that issue.

My final question concerns the relationship between pathological and pathomimetic behavior. The similarities have been observed often but no systematic explanation has been offered. They do suggest, however, that a good deal of learning is involved—that spontaneous states are impressive, both to the subject and to the audience. A person having experienced such a state may wish to recover the experience by intentionally inducing it and, perhaps, aiding others in learning to induce it under controlled conditions. We know, for example, that among some native American groups, trance (though of a visionary rather than a possession variety) may be induced initially with hallucinogens, and then, having been thus experienced and
learned, re-experienced without drugs. The over-all suggestion must be that the experience is rewarding, sufficiently rewarding, to reinitiate it. These rewards, I suggest, may range from the therapeutic and orgasmic, to the social, political and economic. For women, and some men, they may the first steps to a career as leaders, healers, innovators, even political leaders. Their personal needs and experiences are processed and transformed through the altered state of consciousness, the acting out, the verbalizing and mythifying by the subject as well as by the observers. We cannot go back to the evolutionary origins of religious institutions, of course, but we can see how new religions appear through the subjective experiences and revelations of potential leaders, who make converts, and how the experiences are modelled, taught and learned. Learning may take place through suggestion, use of special cues and the application of systematic techniques. Some possession trance religions are known to teach novices techniques of breathing, the use of austerities and so forth. In persons others than innovators, spontaneous trances are generally controlled through appropriate teaching. The needs to which these experiences respond are as variable as the sociocultural historical situations in which we find them. So both the universal and the local, the psychobiological and the ideological, the historical and the contemporary, the individual and the collective all appear to play their roles.

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