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Suffering and Healing, Subordination and Power:
Women and Possession Trance.

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Abstract. This paper argues that for women possession trance constitutes a psychodynamic response to powerlessness by providing them means for the gratification of wishes ordinarily denied to them. Powerful alters enable them to act out wishes they cannot express directly. Possession serves both as an idiom of distress and of indirect self assertion, facilitated by ritualized, culturally structured dissociation.

INTRODUCTION

It is the argument of this special issue that, as Susan Seymour puts it in her Introduction, "academic feminism and psychological anthropology have much to offer to each other." Here I wish to suggest that a third important perspective that has much to contribute to the other two is that of the anthropology of religion.

Women’s predominance in possession trance religions has long been documented. As has been reported again and again, it is primarily women who evidence possession by spirits, enacting their presence. This is the case where spirits are invited to participate in rituals, whether for worship or for accommodation and
healing. In such situations, women are often both participants and leaders, patients and healers. Where illness and disorders of various kinds are ascribed to malevolent entities that take control of human bodies and must be exorcised, it is mostly women who are their victims. Men are generally the exorcists.

Why should there be such a predominance of women? The question has elicited a variety of explanation from both observers and theoreticians of various sorts, anthropologists among them, and also from participants. Emic explanations are important because they provide us with insight into the phenomena as understood both traditionally and individually in a given society. We need to know these explanations, but we cannot stop there; they cannot be our own explanations (pace Keller 2000). In earlier work I have referred to possession trance as "dissociation in the service of the self" (Bourguignon 1994). In this paper I add a feminist perspective: Acting out the identity of spirits in ritual possession trance offers women an acceptable, and consciously deniable, way to express unconscious, forbidden thoughts and feelings, particularly in situations of social subordination.

WHAT IS POSSESSION TRANCE?

The answer to the question of female predominance in possession trance religions was easier when it could be asserted that possession trance is hysteria, a female disorder. Charcot, the foremost student of hysteria, discovered however that men as well as women could suffer from this disease as a consequence of traumatic experiences. At the same time he was impressed by the histrionic, theatrical aspects of his patients' behavior, and he saw striking similarities between their symptoms and
those of famous historical cases of possession (Charcot and Richer 1887, Richer 1895). The type of dramatic hysteria seen in Charcot's clinical presentations no longer occurs and is now considered to have been an artifact of Charcot's own procedures. Current psychiatric classifications no longer recognize hysteria as a nosological category. We now have groups of what were formerly hysterical symptoms, such as "Dissociation" and "Dissociative Identity Disorder" (DID) (formerly Multiple Personality Disorder [MPD]). Clinically, these are often linked to traumatic experience.

Dissociation is a psychological mechanism, producing an alteration of consciousness, so that there appears to be a discontinuity of identity, accompanied by alterations in self presentation and appearance, in sensations such as analgesia, in memory and more. Dissociation is seen in normal individuals as well as in pathological cases. For example it is produced in hypnosis and, more generally, can be learned intentionally. We know it to be a universal human capacity that, like other such capacities, is culturally modulated. The mechanism of dissociation is central to the experience and performance of possession trance. As such it provides for the expression of personality aspects, strivings and motivations, which, for the most part, remain unconscious in everyday life. Possession trance, as a psychophysiological state involves alterations of consciousness, of personal identity, and some bodily changes as well. In the ritual context, it includes the shared belief that such changes result from the take-over of the body and person of the actor by another entity--a spirit, an ancestor, another living person, even an animal. The self of
the actor is then in abeyance and the behavior presented is that of the other, so that major transformations are accepted. By all indications, much suggestion, expectation, learning and overall cultural patterning is implicated in this process.

Like masquerades and carnival, possession trance gives actors license for actions and expressions not available to them in their "ordinary" state. There is, however, an important difference: in masquerade and carnival, the actors behave with conscious intent. In dissociation, by definition, they do not. Dissociation is structured as an expression of the total identification with and submission to powerful others who temporarily displace the personality or self of the human individual. In local terms, this may be phrased as displacement of the (or one of several) soul(s). Yet these powerful entities may appear to the observer to be remarkably compliant, that is, to express what seem to be their human host's wishes.

EXPLANATIONS

One repeated explanation for the predominance of women in possession trance religions points to women's subordination, domination and powerlessness, in the societies where such religions are found. How is women's powerlessness related to possession trance? Is it a tactic, or malingering, a weapon of the weak? Is it hysteria, a form of madness? Here I first want to take a look at various explanations and to see why they are not fully satisfactory. I shall then propose a formulation of my own: I shall argue that women's possession trance must be understood as a psychodynamic response to, and expression of, their powerlessness. It is not an
attempt to gain power for its own sake, but rather an attempt to gratify wishes whose satisfaction is ordinarily denied the women, wishes rooted in their situation. In support of this thesis I want to look at regularities of women's experience in certain specific societies. This includes a necessarily brief exploration of the symbolic dimensions of possession trance, as they are expressed among the people under discussion. Since the symbolic language, in which possession trance and its rituals are formulated, is clearly derived from women's experience, it provides an important key to what is going on. There are enough commonalities, both in the behavior of the possessed and in the symbolism associated with the concepts and experience of possession, to allow us to arrive at some generalizations.

To gain insight into possession trance it is important to examine it as it is lived and understood in the individual societies. This, however, is only a beginning of a larger project. Do the specific situations we might examine, whether in the Sudan or in Haiti, in Israel or in the United States, share significant features with one another and with other ethnographic cases? Such an examination is indeed what I propose to present here. I begin with a brief review of some of the explanations that have been put forth.

On the basis of fieldwork carried out in 1955 and 1957 among nomadic herdiers in Northern Somaliland, I. M. Lewis (1969:204) describes what he terms "women's possession afflictions." Possession by saar spirits, he writes, "is regarded (especially by women) as a disease which is often serious." It requires exorcising the
spirits by means of expensive ceremonies that include lavish gifts to the spirit in the body of the possessed woman, and to the "medium," the woman exorcist. "The saar sprites (sic) are always described as liking and coveting 'all good things', all the things every Somali wife hankers after" (205). The married women's husbands defray the cost of these cures, but are said to be unsympathetic, suspecting their wives of extortion and even more, suspecting the healers, "old crones," of promoting these practices for their own gain. Moreover "women are considered [by men] as weak and foolish and easily swayed"(210). Yet while men are said to be skeptical about saar possessions and the expenses they entail, they apparently do not refuse to pay. Although this discussion is largely based on what men told Lewis, a number of relevant, and as we shall see recurrent, features of women's lives are noted: the frequency of illness requiring a spirit cure among young married women, the sense of poverty, isolation and deprivation of married women among these nomadic people, possession as an indirect means of influencing a husband's actions, for example in spending his money so that he cannot go through with an intended second marriage, that is, the expression by spirits of what appear to be the women's own wishes.

In a later publication Lewis (1971:31) generalized these points to argue that the sar cult, and other women's possession trance religions elsewhere, are "thinly disguised protest movements directed at the opposite sex...." and part of "the sex war in traditional societies," where women "manipulate" the men by means of their spirits. He further expands this argument by saying that such possession trance religions are protest movements of the downtrodden, of men as well as women. Such movements
are said to have "amoral" spirits and to be "peripheral" to the main morality cults of their societies. For the Somali, who live in an Islamic society, sar (or saar) is said to be as marginal as the position of women.

Reporting on the zar cult in a Sudanese village, Boddy (1989:356) takes a different view. In her conclusions she writes:

If possession ultimately cannot assuage women's chronic subordination, it clearly works to cultivate awareness, feminist consciousness, in the possessed.

In a later publication, she summarizes her views:

Zar is at once a healing rite and a parodic means to domesticate male and alien powers, an ambiguous metacommentary on local morality, and history and anthropology of life in colonial and post-colonial Sudan (Boddy 1994:417).

Unfortunately, Boddy does not cite evidence of "feminist consciousness" as enhanced by the zar experience among the women of her village. As to the element of parody she perceives in the enactment of powerful others, this is reminiscent of earlier discussions of African art, which saw representations of colonials as caricatures, and which, among other things, ignored the traditional local conventions of art production. For example, Lips, in his book *The Savage Hits Back* (1937/1966), speaks of satire and resistance. This may be usefully compared with Kramer's (1993:93) discussions of such representations, in art as well as in possession, in terms of mimesis. He speaks of "a lasting mark or 'imprint' left by a particular encounter."

That is, Africans and others experiencing the colonial encounter have explored the identity of the stranger by means of representations of his appearance and behavior in
the plastic arts and in the drama of spirit possession. Outsiders may perceive
 caricature and distortion in these mirror images in which they recognize their likeness.

Lewis' claim to a "sex war" and the manipulation of men by women by
mystical means doesn't seem to work in Boddy's village, since men are largely absent,
often as migrant workers. Here two anthropologists, studying variants of the same
cult tradition (sar or zar) in two Islamic societies, both recognize women's
subordination, yet come to quite different conclusions, writing within a different
conceptual framework. In spite of the fact that both are Moslem societies, that the
spirits in both instances are referred to as sar (or zar) and that they require feasting
and gifts, there are differences between them. In the one case, among the Somalis, we
learn of a nomadic society, where men have the major economic responsibilities,
while in the other, the Sudanese case, we have a village in which women are the
majority of resident adults. There is also a difference in the gender of the
ethnographers and hence in their access to women, as well as a difference in their
theoretical orientation. Lewis is a functionalist, dealing with fieldwork carried out in
the mid-1950s, and one cannot imagining him writing, as Boddy (1989:358) does:

Both fieldwork and possession are, in a special sense, forms of aesthetic
perception. Both stem from what are basically gnostic traditions, rooted in the
conviction that knowledge is achieved through the transcendence of self in the
other...[B]oth rest on a tacit acknowledgement that what is attained is self
knowledge as much as it is knowledge of an alien reality.
Evidently, the differences in these analyses of related possession trance religions reflect the real diversity among such religions with regard to historical circumstances, including the economy and political and social structure of the society, the position of women within it, and the larger context of religious and healing practices, among others. Specifically, we are told that for the Somali woman possession is diagnosed by a woman medium and requires exorcism. In the Sudan, a woman is initiated into a group under a female leader, and establishes a permanent relationship with the zar, and with the group. Rather than exorcism there is accommodation, alliance and, on specific occasions, embodiment of the spirit and identification with it. During the rituals, Boddy reports, the women embody the spirits, acting out their presence in possession trance. Lewis (1969:206) tells us of "elaborate cathartic seances" where the patient is roused "to a pitch of hysterical frenzy" until she collapses in a swoon, that is, she loses consciousness.

Reviewing again what Lewis and Boddy tell us about different types of zar (sar) in the two societies under discussion, we see that dissociation, a type of altered state of consciousness or trance, appears in the rituals but takes on a different form. For the most part, it is not reported as occurring spontaneously. It is induced during the Somali exorcism, and we do not know whether spirits speak or act either through the "medium" or the patient. Among the Sudanese women, during the initiation, a spirit is invited and the possession is expressed in an alteration of behavior and experience on the part of the patient. Boddy speaks of the initiation as a parody of a wedding, but insists that women are not considered married to the spirit. While this is
not clear for the Somali, in the Sudan possessing spirits are males, or foreigners (sometimes female), and prostitutes.

Yet there is much that these very different studies share: the emphasis on women's lack of power and their subordination to men, the relevance of marital conflict to possession, women's health concerns and sar (or zar) as a curing rite, spirits who must be appeased and whose wishes must be satisfied to achieve a cure. Note that, in contrast to exorcisms in the Jewish and Christian traditions, there is no attempt to punish the spirit in the body of the possessed person in order to expel it, though here too, spirits are said to "enter" the bodies of their hosts. More generally, the wishes of the spirits seem to resemble those of the women, appearing to give support to the men's interpretations of women's possession as malingering.

An important role of many possession trance religions is diagnosis and healing. Since women (and children) are the majority of patients everywhere, this activity draws women to these religions. The particular types of presenting illnesses and disturbances are noteworthy. Boddy, for example, shows that among the people with whom she worked, the women who participated in zar were more likely than others to have reproductive and/or marital problems. Here, and in other such groups, if diagnosis reveals a call to initiation, the patient becomes a member, a possession trancer, and sometimes begins the route to leadership. (In some instances, for example among the adepts of Bori--a cult similar to zar--among the Hausa, a man can be a patient but he cannot become an adept. The route to a "career" as a cult leader and healer is open only to women [Monfouga-Nicolas 1972].)
Although both authors recognize women's subordination and relate the spirit cult to it, they posit what appear to be conscious motives: deliberate resistance for Lewis or a newfound feminist consciousness for Boddy. This neglects the significant unconscious processes at work in women's possession trance religions. The recognition of women's subordination itself constitutes only a starting point as we search for an explanation of religions that utilize ritualized forms of dissociation.

EMIC EXPLANATIONS

There are a variety of explanations people themselves give for the greater rate of women's participation in possession trance religions. Some say that the spirits love women and seek them out. Other explanations refer to women’s suffering. Koss-Chioinio (1992:32) says of women Spiritist healers in Puerto Rico:

[D]ealing with one's suffering becomes central to the challenge of developing powers to heal others. Thus inward threats are highly significant to women as healers, even more than the destruction of evil emanating from the world outside.

There is an interesting transmutation here: suffering and the capacity for suffering become preconditions for the acquisition of power, including the ability to heal.

And why is it that relatively few men are possession trancers in most of these societies? One example is discussed by Seth and Ruth Leacock (1972) who point out, with reference to a possession trance religion in Northern Brazil, that there men's participation is inhibited by the dominant macho ideology: being submissive to spirits
who choose to possess them makes men appear to be passive. Worse, being possessed by female spirits, impersonating such spirits and to do so in manner, expression and general appearance, makes men appear effeminate. The Hausa (Monfounga-Nicolas 1972) take a similar view. Yet such behavior, highly sanctioned in Brazil and among the Hausa, is freely accepted by the Ewe (Rosenthal 1998).

The Symbolic Dimensions in Emic Explanations.

The gendered and sexual dimensions of possession trance symbolism help us to understand the unconscious desires at work and the predominance of women trancers, even in societies where men participate as well. Rosenthal (1998), in her book on Gorovodu among the Ewe, says that spirit possession is linked to "femaleness." Here men as well as women are among the possession trancers, and both men and women are said to be "wives" to their spirits. There are both male and female spirits, who are "husbands" to their human hosts, whether men or women. A woman, the wife of a male spirit, acts out a male persona in possession trance. A man, if the "wife" of a male spirit, acts out a female persona. The changes of identity under possession allow for a masculine self presentation by women, a female self presentation by men. Priests may be women or men; the majority of possession trancers are women.

Bilu (2001:5) notes that "the embodied dimension of possession makes it an apt idiom of female-specific experiences, particularly in the realm of sexuality. Marriage, explicit or implied, is a frequent formulation of the relationship of the relationship between the human host and the possession spirit. in Haitian vodou, a
male spirit refers to his woman host as his "wife," and, although this is not the
normative version, some women speak of the initiation as "like a wedding." [Even in
the all male Nya cult of Mali, Colleyn (1999:72) tells us that the spirit entity Nya is
referred to as he or she: "A man contracts a marriage and becomes the husband of
Nya. Possessed, he calls the chief 'my husband.' "] Reference to the relationship
between spirits and humans as marriage is not limited to Africa and Afro America.
For example, Spiro (1967) reports that in Burma, female "shamans' enter a formal
marriage relationship with a spirit, who possesses his "wife," so that, in trance, she
may heal and perform other ritual acts. In all of these rituals of marriage ther is
implicit, if not explicit reference to sex ("entering," "mounting") and reproduction.
There is also, it should not be overlooked, likely to be reference to subordination and
domination of the wife, if that is a significant aspect to marriage in that society.

In the symbolism surrounding possession, reproduction and birth are less
frequently found in explicit form. However, a striking case is that of the Bijago
Islanders, where women are possessed by the spirits of young men who died without
undergoing initiation. The women do this in their stead for in order to reach
adulthood, a woman must be invested by the spirit of a dead man (De Sousa, 1999).
Here "incomplete" males need women to ring them into a successful afterlife, as they
needed a woman to bring them into life in the first place. For a woman to reach full
adulthood, she needs to not only to give birth but ritual birth as well, for giving birth
is women's special power. It is therefore to be expected that the imagery of
reproduction and birth appears among the symbolic dimension of possession, albeit at
times ambivalently so, as we shall see below.

In the language of West African and Afro-American possession trance religions the human hosts of spirits are their "horses," ridden or mounted by them. As noted, they--or at least the women, are also their "wives." To ride, to control a horse, is a demonstration of power. Yet "mounting," has a sexual connotation as well and, indeed, we have seen references to marriage. The reference to horses appears to derive from a historic memory, the invasion of the area by mounted horsemen from the North (Matory 1933). In West African art, as in Haitian vodou iconography, powerful male figures are represented on horseback.

The sexual symbolism of spirit possession is also found where the horse and mount metaphor is absent--for example in the Christian tradition, where possession trancers may be referred to as "vessels," to be filled with the Holy Spirit. In this symbolic language there is clear reference to love and sex--the soul is female, the spirit is male. The libidinous aspects of mystical experience and verbal references to its sexuality is surely not a new subject--indeed, it is one with an extensive literature. More generally, the very interpretation of the Biblical Song of Songs--with its sexual imagery--as referring to a relationship between God and Israel, or God and the Church, speaks to this issue. Here God is the Bridegroom and Israel, or the Church, is the Bride. In Christianity, the human relationship to God is often phrased as the "Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Men," but there is also much reference to human weakness, subordination and dependency, characteristics which frequently are seen as feminine or feminization. In this tradition, the soul is feminine, often yearning
An theme, less frequently expressed explicitly, is that of pregnancy and birth. The concept of an indwelling soul has a very wide distribution in human societies, with its image of the body as container, the soul as the contained. Only in pregnancy is such a relationship found in life, where one being exists inside another. The Jungian analyst, Erich Neumann (1959:125,127) noted it as a prominent theme in the work of the sculptor Henry Moore:

The mother-child relationship, which is 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 of body and soul, where the soul appears as the inhabitant of the body* (Italics added).

In the case of spirit possession beliefs, where the soul is replaced by a spirit, it is the spirit that fills the body in its stead. In the materials discussed so far, this symbolic meaning is implicit, but not explicitly expressed (Bourguignon 1982-83).² That however is seen in another set of examples, as will be seen in the following.³ Sometimes such beliefs appear idiosyncratically, at others they are part of an ancient and elaborate tradition. Lebra (n.d.) presents an account of a post World War II Japanese cult in which the meaning seen so far only as implicit, is given explicit form. In Japanese tradition, "the body, like a shrine, is a vessel or container of a kami
(god)." The woman founder of the cult in question claimed that a god dwelled in her womb, who spoke both to her and through her. While possessed, she preached in a decidedly authoritarian, male style and voice. The spirit was both lodged in her womb as a fetus as well as a god and as her 'dad.' She was both pregnant with and by this spirit. Other developments of this imagery are discussed below, in the context of other examples.

The themes noted here are interrelated as seen both in the situation in which they are dramatized and in their social contexts. Marriage involves sex and procreation, power and control. Relations between humans and spirits dramatize these familiar themes of human life.

SPIRIT POSSESSION, WOMEN AND POWER

Power is one of the major recurrent themes in the symbolism of spirit possession. At times, the fact of being hosts to such particularly powerful beings may give women some power in their ordinary lives, whether domestically or in the larger community, as in the development of mediumship, by becoming diagnosticians, healers and leaders of a cult group. To cite just a handful of examples, both from the literature and from my own fieldwork: A Haitian vodou priestess, powerful in her own right in her own house, when possessed by an important male spirit, admonishes her "children"--the members of her house--to respect her and to be obedient to her at the risk of punishment from him. A woman, possessed by a powerful female spirit, demands marriage from her ex-common-law husband as a condition for healing him. The same woman, frightened by a stranger, is possessed by a strong male spirit, who
gets rid of the intruder. When she wanted to influence my actions, her spirits spoke for her: through possession, when she wanted me to move to the country and through a dream, when she wanted me to return to the city (Bourguignon 2003).

Lerch (1982) reports on the Umbanda religion of Southern Brazil. Here mediumship is undertaken at the call of the spirits--that is, illness or other problems are so interpreted by an established medium. Even a husband's alcoholism--or rather, a woman's suffering caused by his drunkenness--may be so interpreted. The will of the spirits overrides that of the husband, who may not wish to have his wife leave the house in the evening. Women thereby derive a degree of independence, from husbands, if not from the spirits who claim them. Becoming a medium gives a woman power with respect to her clients, making life decisions for them, including telling rich individuals that they must help some of her poor clients--it is the spirits who require them to give charity. In the process, the medium becomes an independent entrepreneur, wielding supernatural as well as earthly power.

Women's resistance to male domination and their own subordination at times takes explicit form, while still appearing as of a religious movement, expressing the wishes of a male god. An example of such a women's revolutionary movement as part of a new possession trance religion is reported by De Jong (1987) for Guinea - Bissaou. Here a male god, speaking through a woman leader and her followers, demanded among other things the abolition of elaborate, expensive ancestor rituals and of arranged marriages, thereby reducing the power of male elders.

EXORCISM AS CURE AND SOCIAL CONTROL
So far the discussion has been limited to situations where spirits are invited, in a positive relationship or in a symbiotic one, in which they are accommodated. The situation is somewhat different where spirits are seen as harmful and must be expelled. My examples here come from Israel, where two contemporary cases have recently been reported, although they are now also frequent in the United States.

In Jewish mystical tradition there are two very different forms of spirit possession. These are grounded in a doctrine of the transmigration of souls, developed in the 10th century, and a later doctrine according to which the soul of a dead person may enter the body of a living one. This doctrine is called *ibbur*, "impregnation." There is a positive form of ibbur, in which the undetected soul of a good person is added to that of a righteous man. That is, impregnation of a mystical sort is potentially a male attribute. The good deeds of that soul are thereby increased while the righteousness of the person so impregnated is enhanced. Note that this added soul does not replace that of the man so "impregnated" and it is not manifested in an alteration of behavior or consciousness. This is a type of "possession" which has a mystical but not a psychological reality. Unlike the types of possession discussed so far, it does not involve dissociation (trance, altered state of consciousness). It may be referred to as Non-Trance Possession.

The negative type of *ibbur* (possession) to the contrary involves the soul of a sinner, a *dybbuk*, causing dramatic changes in behavior, and at various stages, alterations of consciousness. Here we are in more familiar territory. Yoram Bilu (2003) presents an analysis of sixty-three cases of dybbuk possession documented
over a period of four hundred years. These "case reports" were generally written by
witnesses to the exorcism, some of them participants in the ritual. All of the reports
were written by men. Dybbuk possession was and is defined as a disease. Exorcism is
its cure. To expel the spirit, the exorcist questions it about its sins and also about how
it was able to enter the victim. This generally refers to infractions of some sort by the
victim, who thereby risked penetration by a dybbuk. Of the sixty-three cases
reviewed, 75% of the victims were female. Of the spirits, 92% were male; all the
female spirits possessed women--there were no female spirits possessing males. As to
age, Bilu (2003:47) writes: "Generally speaking, spirit possession is a drama for the
young." The females were "predominantly newly married women," which echoes
reports in the cross-cultural literature. While the sexual sins confessed by the victims
are minimal, those the dead sinners report are scandalous, including incest, adultery,
prostitution. Aberrant impulses of male victims include temptation by Christian
rituals and resistance against ritual obligations. Blame is placed both on the victim
and on the dybbuk. Exorcism frees the victim, acting as a cure for the disease of
possession. It also helps to redeem the spirit for the sins of his past life. The dramatic
ritual, with all the accoutrements of a trial, not only "tames the deviants" (the
victims), but also "strengthens the conformity of the community," by demonstrating
dramatically what happens to sinners.

The contemporary cases also involve possession of young women by dead
persons, in one case a man, in the other a woman. Only the briefest summaries of
these cases can be given here.
The first case concerns a 38 year-old woman, a widow, and mother of eight. Her exorcism received wide publicity: it was videotaped and the tape was shown-- in a shortened, edited version-- on Israeli television, as well as widely distributed. In the ensuing heated debate in the media, both practical and mystical questions were raised. Interestingly this, as well as the other case of exorcism to be discussed, arose in part from the enormous cultural diversity and complexity of Israeli society. The victim is a woman "of Jewish-Indian extraction." The exorcist is a kabbalist rabbi, descendant of a famous rabbinical family of Baghdad. Bilu (2001) studied the video tape and was able to interview the possessed woman and some of her kin.

The exorcist found that the woman was possessed by her dead husband, who spoke through her in a rough, strikingly aggressive voice, but also expressed care for her well-being. The exorcism relieved the woman of her symptoms. Subsequently, she recanted, claiming she had never been possessed, demonstrating that she could intentionally produce the male voice. Some time later, however, she was again ill, she believed because of her recantation. From the point of view of the mystical doctrine of ibbur, this woman was impregnated by the spirit of her husband; she was pregnant both by him and with him. It also says that he was a horrible sinner, too wicked to be allowed into Paradise. He had, in fact, been an abusive husband, yet she had been devoted to him.

In addition to the personal and mystical dimension, there is, in this story, also a dimension of cultural conflict: the victim is caught between two radically different analyses of her "case." The exorcist and one portion of the Israeli press and public is
opposed by the secular, rationalist segment of the society. The case of one woman and her personal struggle comes to stand for the larger struggle about the identity of Israeli society, of whether it is a secular society or a theocracy.

Alexander's (2003) report deals with a different but equally interesting case. The subject is a seventeen-year old girl, whose family immigrated from Russia. The father decided "to renew his faith" that is, he converted to an ultra-orthodox form of Judaism. He worked as a beadle for a kabbalist rabbi of Moroccan background and the girl was placed in a women's religious boarding school of strict observance. Witnessing a fatal traffic accident, in which a girl on a motorcycle was killed, was a traumatic event for her. It caused two transgressions on her part: going into the street, she came into contact with the dead girl's blood. Also, ignorant of the girl's name, she was unable to say the appropriate prayers immediately. At about the same time, the possession victim had met a soldier at a military cemetery and they had fallen in love. The meeting was discovered, she was shamed at school and taken back home by her angry parents. Once at home, she began to behave strangely, atypically: she cursed, used obscene language and gestures, was sleepless, misbehaved, laughed wildly, etc. Her father took her to the rabbi, who declared that she was possessed by the dead girl, and that the dead girl was the soldier's girlfriend. As the victim told Alexander, the rabbi said of the soldier: "He loved her very much. She came back to him through my body "(2003:324). The rabbi proposed an exorcism; however since he already knows the identity of the possessing spirit and why she returned, there is no need to question her. Here it is clear how the interpretation given by the diagnostician shapes the
experience. This, he declared, was not the spirit of a sinner—the dead girl returned because of her love of the soldier, whom she wishes to reach through the possessed girl. She, in turn, opened herself up to possession by contact with the blood, and by "weak faith." In the end the exorcism is not performed, but, quite exceptionally, by the rabbi's wife. She claims to sees the dead girl: "Now she is in your belly. She is lying there like a fetus" (Alexander 2003:327). In other words, the exorcist has taken quite literally the doctrine of possession as impregnation, a doctrine that might otherwise be understood as a an abstract, mystical doctrine. Parenthetically, we may note the striking contrast between the dead girl and the victim: she is free and independent, riding a motorcycle, wearing a tee shirt and jeans. The victim's life, however, is controlled and constrained. By his identification of the dead girl as the soldier's girl friend, the rabbi in fact reinforces the victim's ties to her boyfriend. Both the rabbi and his wife agree that the father is too strict; they have investigated the boyfriend and approve of him. At the end of Alexander's report, the girl is well, but still maintains the forbidden relationship.

It seems clear from this brief account, how much of the meaning of the possession in this case was shaped by the rabbi's interpretation, and supported by the exorcist, his wife. By all indications this is an atypical case, but it, too, draws on culture conflict and a girl's resistance against authoritarian dominance both by her father and by the school. Sexual awaking is at the heart of the drama, as the rabbi and his wife recognize, and as the girl's father suspects.

What then, is one to make of all this? Bilu (2001) suggests that dybbuk
Possession is a type of culture-bound illness, an emotional illness for which exorcism is the healing ritual. It serves as an idiom of distress. These comments apply equally to cases where healing is central to the possession trance complex, although in other groups, as in the zar cult for example, accommodation and initiation, rather than exorcism are the appropriate therapy.

CONCLUSIONS

In possession trance, human hosts ("horses," "wives") act out the personalities and the roles of the spirits. The performance of such possession in trance demonstrates the total identification of the human individual with the possessing entity, including state dependent learning and state dependent memory. Their own personalities displaced and their identities (temporarily) abolished, the possessed are the passive objects of active subjects. Possession trance is generally, normatively, followed by amnesia, which forms a wall, a barrier, between the self and the identities acted out. Gaining power, at least temporarily, by being powerless and passive, women can deny to themselves as well as to others that they are powerful. Women who do not have access to power directly in what are often societies in which power is concentrated in men, are socialized to accept their subordinate status. They reproduce this subordination ritually, dramatically, symbolically, in possession trance, which they experience as the takeover by an external, ego-alien, powerful entity. For women, being receptive and passive to such entities, is a situation that makes them powerful--at least while they are possessed and sometimes afterwards as well.

What are we to make of all this from a psychodynamic perspective? De Vos
(1986:25) views dissociation as a form of coping "when affect laden ego-alien dissonant experiences are...prevented from entering consciousness," serving as an "exclusion mechanism in the maintenance of the self" (Italics added). Dissociation, in its ritualized form as possession trance-- as well as in visionary trance--is a coping strategy that, as an institutionalized practice, signals the presence of critical stresses within the society. The predominant participation of women alerts us to the stresses in their lives, expressed in the symbolism of the ritual.

A striking feature of possession trance is the fact that the personalities that appear maintain the person's basic motivations, the motivations of the self, in spite of the temporary changes in identity. We can therefore speak of "dissociation in the service of the self" (Bourguignon 1994). Since we must be mindful of local contexts and variations, we must ask both about the local, emic and about outsider's, etic perspective. For example, from the perspective of Haitian vodouists, and that of many Africans, the individual has multiple "souls" or selves. One of these is displaced in possession trance. The replacement of identity is linked to displacement of a soul (or part-soul). In Haiti, an individual may be possessed-- in sequence or alternatively-- by a variety of spirits, a personal pantheon. Possessing spirits act as part-souls. The embodiment of these spirits is linked to dissociation. And this, to follow De Vos, helps in the "maintenance of the self." The evidence of a continuity of self, in dreams as well as possession trance, is clearly seen in the continuity of motivation (Bourguignon 2003). What I have called the compliant nature of the spirits gives evidence of that continuity.

Obyesekere (1981) speaks of personal symbols and their therapeutic functions. These differences may reflect local variations as well as differences in theoretical positions. Identification with and acting out the personality of a powerful, helpful being is different from the expression of a harmful one. The former is empowering, self enhancing, the latter is a symbolic expression of conflicting desires, as illustrated in some of the examples cited above. On the other hand, the alter (soul or demon) may be an exorcist's conceptualization and thereby recasting of physical illness or misfortune-- a way of formulating the problem by defining the suffering as an enemy to be overcome. While for some then, possession may be an idiom of distress, for others it maybe an idiom for the assertion of (indirect) authority.

Socialized to be subordinate and submissive, women work by indirection. The ultimate indirection is, indeed, acting through the spirits, for when the spirits take over, women can do unconsciously what they do not permit themselves to do consciously. The demands that are made, the orders that are given, are those of their spirits; their hosts, or "horses," depend on others to tell them of the spirits' doings and sayings. They are neither responsible for nor aware of what is going on and do not remember it after the fact. They have ultimate deniability.
Notes

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1 Circumstances where possession trance is primarily or exclusively male behavior differ in significant ways from those discussed in this paper.

2 Graham (1973) reverses this image and speaks of pregnancy as possession.

3 In the current, best-selling novel Da Vinci Code (Brown 2003), the Holy Grail, a cup or vessel, is "revealed" to be Mary Magdalene and her female descendents.

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