

SPIRIT POSSESSION, TRANCE AND CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH¹

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THE STUDY of religious phenomena has recently stirred renewed interest among anthropologists and other social scientists: this symposium itself is evidence of that fact. Perhaps one of the sources of this current concern is to be found in the involvement of some anthropologists with psychological and psychiatric problems. Our own interests in studies of dissociational states and theories of spirit possession derive from a desire to add to our understanding of human variability and of the extent of the range of this variability. It is striking that concepts of possession have in so many different times and places been drawn on to explain a variety of "peculiar" states, in which behavior seems to be out of the ordinary, "out of character" with the everyday expectations of society. A belief in the intervention of spirits and the ritualization of the trance experience put the matter squarely into a religious context and into the domain of the study of religion. And it is strange that both the states themselves and their cultural explanations have, on the whole, been neglected in thirty years of culture and personality research.

The systematic, generalizing study of dissociational states, then, has long been overdue, although a relatively small number of excellent monographic studies, dealing with a handful of societies, exist in this area. Those of Bastide (1958, 1960), Verger (1957), Field (1960), Belo (1960) and Rouch (1960) have been particularly noteworthy in recent years.

Part of the difficulty in conducting such a systematic, generalizing study is to be found in the character of the literature. Dissociational states are frequently described as "trance" and/or spirit possession, and these terms are often used indiscriminately and interchangeably. Concepts of possession by spirits are widespread in native world-views, but the fact that they are deeply ingrained in Western tradition, deriving from both Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian sources, has tended to obscure the picture. Indeed, many authors seem to find states of "trance" and belief in spirit possession such an ordinary phenomenon--just the kind of thing to be expected from "primitives"--that they barely mention it

in passing. Indeed, they seem to imply that it is so frequent and familiar an occurrence, that it requires no detailed study or explanation. Those who talk about "hysterical trances" do essentially the same thing, implying or stating that hysteria is a disease of women, of lower class people in civilized society and primitives generally (Linton 1956, Deveraux, 1956). As Millingen, writing in 1839, put it:

May not all these ecstatic raptures be considered as belonging to this third class? [i.e., "mental alienation"] It has been observed that women, hysteric ones in particular, were the most subject to this supposed inspired affection; and amongst men it has also been remarked, that the enraptured individual was in general nervous, debilitated, and bald; and it is well known that the fall of the hair is frequently the result of moral and physical weakness, brought about by long studies, contemplation, grief, and illness; all of which may occasion mental aberration . . . (p. 49).

Another approach seems to lend credence to the existence of possessing spirits, or at least to the extrasensory phenomena of possession (Oesterreich 1922, Winkler 1936, Findeisen 1957), or even to speak of the participation of the devil (Father Labat 1724, Verschueren 1948). That bias in the descriptive literature on world societies is to be found among missionaries of various periods and various persuasions is hardly surprising; that a variety of biases appear to have affected the work of ethnologists is more troubling.

At the turn of the century, the French psychiatrists studying hysteria became interested in phenomena of possession and compared their patients with persons possessed by demons, and retrospectively analysed cases of demonical possession in terms of their clinical findings. They consequently spread the vogue of calling possession cross-culturally a hysterical phenomenon. The behavior of their own patients was apparently somewhat schooled and consequently was something of a cultural phenomenon.

More recently, anthropologists, with their emphasis on social and cultural learning, on functionalism, etc., have placed the emphasis on the rewarding nature of possession behavior, and thus have stressed, in psychoanalytic parlance, "secondary gains" rather than the primary problems which may in fact be present (cf. Harris 1957, Mischel and Mischel, 1958). The very uneven reporting of the phenomena in question, the lack of systematic theoretical concern accorded them, as well as the often clearly tendentious interpretation bespeak a strong cultural bias.

One of the results of this bias has been the casual use of the terms "trance" and "spirit possession." The latter refers to a psychological theory, that is, a theory which attempts to account for varieties of human behavior which are somehow out of the ordinary; the former refers to a psychological or psycho-physiological state, which is as yet very poorly understood. A variety of hypotheses

have been advanced to account for these states among which hysteria (Linton 1956, Devereux 1956), hypnosis (Wittkower 1964), non-pathological dissociation (Field, 1960), cultural learning (Herskovits 1937, 1948), social learning (Mischel and Mischel 1958), histrionics (Leiris 1958, Metraux 1959), epilepsy (Haberland 1960) are the most popular. Yet these explanatory categories are themselves, on the whole, poorly understood and the argument tends to center on the question whether or not these states are to be considered pathological.

More importantly, not much light has been thrown to-date on the processes and mechanisms involved. The study of dissociational states is, among other things, an area of ethnomedicine, ethnopsychology and ethnopsychiatry as well as a question of comparative religion, and as such deserves our close attention.

Some of the difficulty with the studies of "trance," beyond that of bias, lies undoubtedly in the nature of the phenomenon itself, which has handicapped the gathering of significant data. For the investigation of psychophysiological states it would be relevant to gather physiological data, which, in the nature of the case, it may be difficult or even impossible to obtain in sacred contexts.

Descriptive material too, has been most uneven and so far has been more or less subjectively structured by the individual observers, whose attention was not always drawn to comparable aspects of the phenomena under study. Systematic observation on phenomena of trance induction, and termination, as well as on various aspects of behavior during trance would provide much insight into constants and variations in the phenomena in question. Similarly, detailed questioning of informants on the subjective aspects of the states would provide much needed insight. A perusal of this literature provides much frustration and some doubts as to the value of the tons of accumulated ethnographic materials in our libraries. Such doubts have been voiced by others before us (Levi-Strauss 1958, Wallace 1959 and others) and as such state nothing new. However, they raise questions about the usefulness of the current vogue of statistical studies based on library research, since the value of the analysis depends so considerably on the value of the material analysed. We are currently working on an outline for studies of trance and spirit possession, which, we hope, will make it possible not only to tease whatever comparable materials exist out of the literature, but also to serve as a field guide for the future production of comparable studies.

Another handicap for studies of trance states has been the lack of adequate theory provided by psychologists and psychiatrists which might guide anthropologists in the development of consistent observational categories. Thus in their generally excellent Psychiatric Dictionary, published in 1960 (3rd edition), Hinsie and Campbell give the following entry, under the heading of trance: "Trance 1. hypnotism; 2. catalepsy; 3. ecstasy" (1960:750). Turning to:

Trance, ecstatic, we find the following:

In present-day psychiatry, the term ecstasy is confined for the most part to trance states in which religious ideation or similar ideas of dedication and complete surrender occupy almost the entire field of consciousness. (ibid:244)

This tells us little, beyond noting that ecstasy is a (still undefined) "trance state," the content of which concerns matters of religion.

Hypnosis is also frequently used to explain the "trance states" found in the religious context. Hypnosis has become scientifically respectable of late and much has been written on the subject. Well known students of hypnosis have been struck by similarities between hypnosis and trance, particularly as it occurs in Bali. Gill and Brenman (1961) devote a chapter to Balinese trance and are struck by similarities between the Balinese as described by Bateson and Read (1942) and their own good hypnotic subjects, but they are also struck by differences. They say of the process of inducing hypnosis in general:

On the basis of our experience and, more recently, theoretical extrapolations, we have concluded that the induction process of necessity involves not only maximal attention but also a specific kind of relationship to a real or fancied human being (Gill and Brenman 1961:31, our italics).

This raises the very interesting question of the possibility of a fancied personality, namely that of a possessing spirit, playing the role of hypnotist. Indeed, Gill and Brenman present some evidence of a fancied introjection and incorporation of the hypnotist by his subject. Yet they admit to much general ignorance concerning the mechanisms underlying hypnosis. Jane Belo (1960:4) speaks of Dr. Milton Erickson's reactions to viewing films of Balinese child dancers and being able to point out specific similarities in their behaviors to those of hypnotic subjects. Yet until a better understanding of the psycho-physiological processes involved is attained, it seems doubtful that the hypotheses developed in the therapist's office or the laboratory can be tested in the ethnographic field situation.

While we may thus be able to explain our lack of systematic research into "trance" states, as far as their psycho-physiological and psychiatric aspects are concerned, the lack of adequate comparative analyses of cultural data is more puzzling. As stated earlier, the terms "trance" and "spirit possession" are frequently used interchangeably. In fact, however, trance or, better, dissociation may find a variety of other cultural explanations, or it may not be interpreted separately and institutionalized at all but merged into a larger category of disease. It may be explained as due to soul loss or soul migration, to contact with spirits through visions rather than to intrusion by spirits. Long ago, Loeb (1929) made an important distinction between inspirational and non-inspirational

shamanisms which is relevant here.

On the other hand, theories of possession are not limited to those linked with dissociational states. Among some American Indian groups possession of one or more spirits is a matter of power to cure or to fight, etc., and does not involve any alternation of consciousness or of personality. In fact, such possessions may be thought of as permanent, in contrast to the temporary possessions which occur where dissociation is explained in this manner. The Havasupai (Spier 1928) and the Jivaro (Harner 1962) exemplify such a conception of possession. Among the Havasupai, spirits are acquired as part of the vision quest and among the Jivaro, through head hunting.

We have said earlier that studies of spirit possession have been neglected in generalized broad comparative studies. One limited exception to this is found in the work of Whiting and Child (1953). These authors group spirit possession with soul loss for their category of dependency-related theories of illness. Thus they focus on spirit possession as a cause of illness, whether or not the illness involves an altered state of consciousness or dissociation. While they group this theory with, in some sense, its opposite, soul loss, they omit consideration of those types of possession which do not involve illness. Spirit possession and soul loss as theories of disease are related to a negative fixation in the dependency area of satisfaction in earlier childhood, and the investigators do indeed find their hypothesis confirmed. Yet one might argue that soul loss and spirit possession are diametrically opposite concepts, and it would be interesting to see how their results would have been affected by a separation of these two categories.

In our present research, we are particularly interested in those types of spirit possession which are linked to dissociational states ("trance," states of altered consciousness). This association is frequent and widespread and that itself should be considered a significant finding. It remains to be shown why so many societies have hit upon or have accepted a theory of intrusion into the person by alien spirits to account for what is undoubtedly a pan-human phenomenon, namely temporary states of dissociation. However, this linkage of trance and spirit possession is not perfect; as indicated above, altered states of consciousness are not everywhere explained as due to intrusion by spirits, by other selves. Nor is this association uniform where it does occur, and this variety deserves further investigation. As mentioned earlier, only a limited number of monographic studies dealing with the trance and spirit possession exist and these are restricted to a handful of societies. Consequently, the temptation exists to draw on these few studies for any generalized statements on the subject. Thus Jane Belo, in her study of Balinese trance, finds it necessary to draw on comparative material from Haiti for general comments. Michel Leiris (1958),

reanalysing material collected in the zar cult of Ethiopia after having worked in Haiti, finds it necessary to establish analogies between these respective cults. In fact, for a variety of reasons, Haitian cults have been visited by a great variety of Haitian and foreign visitors and investigators who have published their observations and reactions. For variety of observation and easy of accessibility of the published material, the Haitian cults easily rank in first place. Furthermore, the Haitian possession phenomena were the focus of a debate on the normalcy of "trance" behavior, which has given them a certain additional notoriety in the anthropological literature (Dorsainville 1939, Herskovits 1937 and 1948, Deren 1953, Metraux 1959, Devereux 1956). There is, then, a tendency to treat spirit possession linked to trance as a unitary phenomenon, and to support discussion of phenomena observed in one society with reference to phenomena observed in another. Yet one might argue the differences are at least as important as the similarities and that an investigation of the contrasts between the Balinese situation on the one hand and the Haitian situation on the other would be instructive. In Bali, trance occurs in a great variety of ritual occasions and by people occupying a great variety of roles. In Haiti, the ritual occasions are limited to those of the cult centers: there are no great theatrical occasions, there are no clubs of trance dancers, there are no seances and no mediums who answer questions in trance. Trancers are adults; rarely if ever do prepubescent children go into such states, and if they do it is a matter of much comment. The little girl trance dancers of Bali, who cease trance activities as they grow up, are totally in contrast to Haitian patterns. So are masks wherein spirits, which enter the masked performer, reside. There is nothing in the Haitian pattern that compares to the Balinese folk trancers, possessed by various animal spirits. That comparisons may be made and a great number of similarities found between the Haitian and the Balinese trance-possession complex is the more remarkable.

Michel Leiris was much impressed with the theatrical nature of the Ethiopian zar cult and he found a similar histrionic aspect in Haitian Vodun. Yet the central concern of the zar cult with illness is absent in the Haitian cults. It is clear too that the Balinese cults have the histrionic element, and perhaps this is necessarily inherent in the very notion of possession, which requires the individual to act or at least to play the role of another, namely that of the possessing spirit. To develop a meaningful typology, then, we must attempt to separate those features of the trance-possession complex which are generally shared and thus become definitional and those which differentiate the various sorts of trance-possession complexes. Two approaches may be used in this attempt and it would appear that they do indeed dovetail into one another: a functional distinction of complexes into ritual cults, cults concerned with disease, etc., entering on the roles of those who go into trance, and, on the other

hand, a series of distributional studies.

Luc de Heusch (1962), in a recent paper, makes much of the contrasting pair: spirit possession--spirit (or soul) loss; i.e., in order for possession to take place, room has to be made for the possessing spirit by the absence of the soul, or, as in Haiti, one of the souls. He differentiates between possessions in which illness results and those which are desired for ritual purposes. He treats both shamanism and possession under the headings of "adorcism" and "exorcism." Adorcism in shamanism involves the return or recapture of a lost soul, and, in possession, the introduction of a new soul, particularly of a possessing spirit in a ritual context. Exorcism on the other hand involves the extraction of a foreign presence in shamanism and the extraction of a foreign soul in the possession category.

This parallels the older distinction made by Oesterreich (1922) between "voluntary" and "spontaneous" possession. Voluntary possessions are those in which the presence of the spirits is desired and induced in a ritual context through a variety of means. Spontaneous possessions are those over which the individual has no control and which are therefore uninvited, perceived as invasions by alien forces. Both of these authors consider this latter, negative variety of possession in terms of the Judeo-Christian model: cure is effected by exorcism, by driving out of the possessing spirit. They overlook a very widespread and important category, which represents a third possibility and in which "cure" is effected by coming to terms with the possessing spirit. Such a type of possession is very widespread in Africa, and has been well described for a number of societies, most particularly perhaps by Jean Rouch (1960) for the Songhay, which, curiously, de Heusch uses as one of his detailed examples of adorcistic possession, identifying it thus with the ritual cults of the Yoruba and the vodun cult of Haiti. Among the Songhay, as Jean Rouch describes them, as well as in the zar cult of Ethiopia (Leiris 1958, Messing 1958), and of Egypt (Riya Salima 1902), among the Digo (Gerlach), perhaps, too, in the ancient Greek Corybantic Cults (Jeanmaire 1951, Linforth 1946), the process of trance and initiation begins with an illness. This illness is diagnosed by a cult leader, who suspects possession by a spirit. This possession so far is latent, that is, expressed only in the illness, but not in dissociation. As part of the diagnostic procedure, the diagnostician induces an active possession, he causes the spirit to "mount his horse," i.e., he causes the subject to go into trance. The spirit is, then, questioned and typically an arrangement is made, whereby the spirit will receive offerings or some degree of compliance with its demands, in exchange for appearing henceforth only in the controlled environment of the ritual, and not to cause illness. The patient thus becomes a member of a curing society or spirit cult, whose members participate in the curing rituals for others. Eventually, the individual may become a leader of such a group. Another variation,

closer in this respect to the often reported patterns of Siberian shamanism, is found among several other African groups such as the Zulu, and the Akan (Field 1960). Here the possessed person passes through a prolonged period of illness and then, with the help of the spirits, becomes a curer himself.

This "coming to terms with illness" is in marked contrast to the New Testament model of spirit-possession, in which "impure" spirits must be driven out and no compromise is envisaged. Parenthetically, this polarization seems to fit F. L. K. Hsu's (1960) comments on Western society, particularly in regard to witchcraft, where he argues that Western society is the only one that killed its witches, where witches could not atone and buy their way back into the good graces of their neighbors. Be this as it may, it is noteworthy that in the medieval conception, possession and witchcraft were linked, in that both were thought of as implying demoniacal, diabolical involvement. Furthermore, from the point of view of the present discussion, it is important to note how such polarized conceptions structure the reporting and classification of data, and therefore, how difficult it is to break out of the mold--or the bias--imposed by the tradition of Western thought in dealing with the phenomena of trance and spirit possession.

The New Testament model of possession illustrates another important point: it shows how expectations structure both the experience and the observation of dissociational states. Demoniacs were expected to be tormented by conflicting feelings, by a discrepancy between the things the possessing spirits said and did and what they themselves wished, by conversations between the spirits and the person himself--or herself.

This is also true for reports of demoniacal possession among Jews. Thus a description of a ceremony of exorcism in which the spirit (dybbuk) is driven out at the beginning of the 19th century in Russia (Fromer 1812) closely parallels the earliest such report from 16th century Germany (Ma'aseh Book, ed. Gaster, as cited by Trachtenberg 1939).

This alternation between the spirit and the victim's own soul and particularly the subject's consciousness of what is taking place is in great contrast to the type of "possession" experience reported in the ethnographic literature, in which a total displacement of the soul by the possessing spirit takes place, that is, in which there is, temporarily, a total loss of personal awareness and identity, and amnesia following the trance state. One is tempted to wonder, how the shared expectations of subject and observer tend to reinforce each other. In fact, Oesterreich (1930:32) states, "To theology, which until recently has alone had occasion to concern itself with this question, the reality of an inner division in the state of consciousness is clearly evident." However, "We discover with surprise, that such a duplication of consciousness is not by any means present in every case. It is lacking in many

cases, even in most."

It is clear, that the bias of the observer here, too, has played a role in the manner in which accounts have been recorded.

Because of the difficulty inherent in comparative studies of any magnitude, which, of necessity, must be based on the literature, it seems advisable to become aware of the various sources of bias and to analyze their possible effect on the sources which must be used for a given type of investigation. We have attempted to do this for certain aspects of the literature dealing with the phenomena of trance and spirit possession as we have become aware of them in an initial survey of materials on some two-hundred and fifty societies.

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NOTES

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