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POSSESSION STATES AND TRANCE CULTS:
A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Possession States and Trance Cults:
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Erika Bourgingnon and Louisa Pettay (1964), in a review of the literature on spirit possession covering approximately the 30 years prior to their writing, suggest that both possession states themselves and their cultural explanations have been neglected. The authors state that they are particularly interested in seeing increased studies linking trance states to dissociative phenomenon, and suggest psychiatric and psychoanalytic explanations are inadequate to explain the phenomena at this time.

This somewhat negative evaluation is not completely borne out by an overview of the literature itself. While not extensive, much of the work done in this direction has been quite productive of useful hypotheses for trance states and has suggested the importance of cross-cultural similarities. In fact, the search for differences may be illusory if one expects cultural rather than psychological phenomena to be more important in the genesis of such states, rather than in the form of their manifestations.

What may be critical in understanding possession states is the same kind of perspective which permits an integrated overview of such "bizarre" behavior as shamanism, witchcraft, and even suicide as we have suggested before (Rippler 1969, 1971a, 1971b).

In many cases the cultural peculiarities of these behaviors may mislead the observer into viewing them as phenomena unique to a given people. That is, distinct elements of form, ritual, stated meanings and other cultural attributes may actually obscure the structural aspects which we suggest have broad cross-cultural similarity.

Anthropologists especially may often be victimized by their desire to uncover the unique and their traditional a-theoretical bias (Hippler 1969). What we are suggested here as elsewhere (1971a) is that in effect such behavior should be seen as reflecting different techniques of psychotic, neurotic, or phobic preoccupations at differing levels of personal integration within differing cultural matrices.

What we would suggest as necessary research in this area is a serious attempt to relate the psychological and social concomitants of various magical practices. Witchcraft, shamanism, possession, various forms of ethnopsychiatric practice and culture-specific psychiatric abnormalities should be discussed in a fashion that permits them to be seen as varieties of expressive and instrumental behavior related to different modal psychic structures. Kiev (1966) has suggested this for ethnopsychiatric practices, but the approach should not be so limited.

In this more holistic perspective, these individual behaviors would be seen as reflecting different kinds of defense systems dependent upon such things as basic child rearing patterns of a group, modal adult psychic defenses, and differences in the ability between and within cultural styles and culturally defined realities -- themselves complexly related to the unconscious dimensions of members of the group.

Far from narrowing research perspectives, such an analytic approach would provide tools which, if used with sensitivity, would effectively explain much that passes currently for inexplicable, and allow for the isolation of more obscure and difficult human behavior

not so easily explained. This process would, I believe, enhance our ability to speak of man as a social animal.

There have in fact been a series of works which attempts to relate, with some degree of success, the global aspects of possession to specific cultural conditions. For example, from his work on Tefaluk, Spiro (1952) argued that possession by devils allows the projection of aggression onto ghosts which can then be introjected. This displaced aggression allows the Tefalukians to do without sorcery, since all disease, etc. is explained in terms of possession.

Spiro appears to be saying that possession in this case, because of the strong component of projected and then reintrojected aggression, functions as if it were sorcery. In this matrilineal society whose members share a strong ethic of cooperation, helpfulness and non-aggression, a theory of disease, which stresses the impersonal possession by demons and reduces anxieties about others which would result from a belief in sorcery, would thus be counterproductive in terms of this culture's stated needs.

Walter and Frances Mischell (1958) suggest a partially "instrumental" theory of possession. They see possession states in Trinidad as permitting the individual to control the activities of others around him. Expressive aspects are also involved in that change of social sex role is thereby sanctioned as well. In a well-known equation, passivity can be combined with power.

In this culture, pressures for independence and self-reliance, impossible to attain with any ease as an adult, conflict with a very

dependent child rearing. Achieving power through passivity seems a very logical and parsimonious method of handling both passive and aggressive needs. Since this occurs within a framework of traditional West African belief systems, there is strong cultural support for such an approach as well.

Others have used a functionalist model with psychiatric overtones to explain trance and possession. Kiev (1961) in discussing Haitian spirit possession suggests that it is similar to a psychotic state. The trance state, he says, functions to allow institutionalized and symbolically invested means of expression in action of various ego dystonic thoughts and impulses. He argues that it also provides an explosive behavioral outlet for the impoverished masses.

Wittkower (1963), agreeing generally with Kiev's observation on Haitian possession, adds that the normally inoffensive possessed person may become very aggressive, which suggests that an important emotional outlet for which the individual does not have to fear the consequences is provided for his anger. Moreover, he adds, the state should be seen in general as a regression to an infantile passive mastery in individuals whose attempts at mastery through active achievement have failed.

Ravenscroft (1962) goes into more detail about the genesis of the particular aspects of Haitian vodun possession by relating it to traditional child rearing patterns and social structure. Early severe punishment leads to mastery submission conflicts. Self-assertive independent aggressive impulses come to be associated with a deep

anxiety. This is especially so since early emotional gratification and concomittant expectations of social and physical gratification are followed by quite harsh and direct disciplinary activities.

To become an adult, the individual is expected to exhibit exactly those mastery behaviors prohibited and prevented in childhood and still, in the mind of the adult, associated with high anxiety. First, he adopts the adult pattern, then the spirit possession occurs. The imminent crisis which results from these antagonistic attitudes is resolved through a personality reorganization, involving the reformation of the defense system surrounding the conflicts; thus, both mastery and dependency needs are gratified. This seems to suggest both instrumental and expressive functions similar to those noted by the Mischells.

A very clear expression of this instrumentality in possession is described by Harper (1962) in his description of possession states in Southern India where young married women often use such states to their advantage. Men in this community, if they are oppressed by their kin, may leave and set up a new homestead but women may not. However, in addition to conscious weapons of hunger strikes and suicide, they use unconscious possession to attain the same end. The possessing spirit may demand costly sacrifices and/or demand that the girl must be sent home for a prolonged stay away from her patrilocal marital residence. About 20 percent of the married women appear to have been possessed at one time or another in this society.

Here again it would seem as though a passive "helpless" state can be manipulated for reasons of self-interest. Since there is a

strong cultural value on passivity in women in this culture, the possession state seem actually to allow women to act out this passive role, and gain indirectly what they could not gain by direct means.

Jakovljevic (1962) notes a similar phenomenon in the Slavic areas of Europe where the Russalka cult holds sway. Here many unmarried young women or spinsters become possessed at the Russalka Festival and seem to have a substitute orgasm. Though this is a more directly expressive activity and also appears to have overtones of hysteric behavior, it nonetheless also provides a simulacrum of sex which would otherwise be unavailable without censure outside of marriage.

Davidson (1965) also suggests that trance is an adaptive mechanism that protects the individual by withdrawal and at the same time facilitates the expression of hidden feelings. He gives examples of such behavior from the Southeastern part of the United States and of the Balalu cult in Cuba.

He further suggests that there are certain cross-cultural similarities in all such behavior. Such trance cults seem to flourish mostly among the underprivileged members of a culture who usually find the formal conservative aspects of religion unsatisfying. They usually involve "body language" of regressive behavior and the overexpression of repressed anger and love. There is the possibility to "lose oneself" and merge into an ecstatic group, and dependency on a cult leader is fostered as LeBarre (1962) has detailed in his study of snake-healing cults.

Bourgington and Pettay (1965), using Hallowells concept of the self and its behavioral environment, suggest trance states are psychological states essentially self-serving, and wonder if such states can be seen as regression in the service of the ego as Kris (1952) suggests for artistic work.

Closely related to the concept of trance as useful behavior is the use of trance states by shamans, suggested by Kiev (1962), Rogler and Hollingshead (1961), Nadel (1946), and our own work as well. We would, however, argue that "true" shamans may be at times more "mature" than the accidentally possessed (Hippler 1971a).

Other more descriptive and less analytic discussions of trance states have been provided by Zimmerman (1952) who mentions possession as an aspect of Brazilian candomble cults, Kagwa (1964) who discusses a mass trance-like affliction in Uganda related to conflicts about acculturation, and Whisson (1964) who notes the existence of possession syndromes among the Kenya Luo. All of these seem to have in common that the behavior appears to be ultimately determined by psychological characteristics such as passivity and a need for aggression. However, they are obviously colored by the cultural context in which they occur. Yap (1960), for example, compared French and Hong Kong rates of possession and found them similar, but with a different meaning and content among the religiously skeptical Chinese and the Catholic believers of Satan in France.

Overall, we believe that possession states are one aspect of dealing with frustration and anxiety and are essentially regressive,

but not necessarily in the "service of the ego," unless, of course, they lead to new levels of integration which permit a healthier adjustment. On the other hand, they are "adaptive" in the sense that other neurotic behavior is adaptive in that they permit the continued functioning of an emotionally crippled individual.

Such functioning, as we have seen in Harper's, Spiro's and Raven-croft's work, actually means that a cultural support is provided for individuals whose passivity, inadequate social position and aggressive needs demand an occasional release. This release is usually in the form of passive aggression defended by claiming "It is not my fault." If we are correct, what we are viewing in trance and possession states is the combination of instrumental and expressive needs within a framework of a more or less creative, religious and culturally supported overt behavior.

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