SPIRIT POSSESSION IN HAITI

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Spirit possession is a phenomenon known to mankind since Biblical times. It refers to a relationship existing between spirits and humans manifested by the possession or incorporation of the human being by the spirit, so that the behavior of the human is taken as the behavior of the spirit. This phenomenon is widely present throughout the world and has been reported not only in Africa and Asia but on other continents as well(10). Perhaps the most complete survey of the subject was undertaken by T. K. Oesterreich who published the classic volume Possession in 1930 wherein he considered the phenomenon among primitive races, in antiquity, in the middle ages and in modern times(14). The behavioral character of the phenomenon, most writers agree, has much the same range of appearances from one society to another. Explanations have always differed, however, as have attitudes toward the possessed. Oesterreich has suggested that throughout the ages and at all levels of civilization the phenomenon has been a manifestation of a psychic compulsion.

There is an extensive literature on the subject which has been analyzed in a number of ways. All the theories, metaphysical, theological or psychological have been characterized by a necessity to explain the origin of the new personality emergent in the possessed. Thus the Biblical interpretation concerned notions of the Devil and demons, explanations which persisted in the Western world late into the 19th century. Moving from animistic assumptions of spirit movements, psychological interpretations have sought the explanation in psychic processes. Thus possession has been explained by psychoanalytic theorists as a return of the repressed, wherein id representatives overwhelm the Ego in a state of dissociation(8, 10). Others, describing the phenomenon in Haiti, have considered it as theatre(13), as a confessional played but not spoken(13), and as a controlled means for communication normally with the supernatural(6). Perhaps most interesting in the literature on Haitian possession are the personal accounts of individuals who have themselves become possessed. In one subjective account one senses the emphasis placed on the situational stimuli necessary to enter into the trance state of possession(2).

The phenomenon of possession has an important role in Voodoo.² For adepts it is the means by which the Voodoo loa (spirit deities) interact with mankind. Through possession of a member of the congregation the loas enter the midst of the congregants to punish, admonish, reward and encourage them as well as treat and cure their ills and worries. For the adept the loas are recognizable by their appearance, behavior and temperament and other human qualities and characteristics as they are manifested in their human agents(4).

Possession occurs when a loa selects “to mount” or “enter the head” of his cheval (person possessed). The soul of the person (gros bon ange) is replaced by the loa. The possessed loses all individuality and becomes the vehicle of the loa. All his thoughts and behavior are attributed to the loa. Many speak in African dialects, the languages preferred by most loas. Some possessed by Damballa, the snake god, may perform extraordinary feats of agility and balance, such as tree climbing and branch swinging, often climbing down the trunk head first. Others may hold hot irons in their hands, chew broken glass or walk bare-footed over hot coals. After the possession, most are amnesic for the preceding events(11). As Madame Tisma Innocence, an old and revered mambo (Voodoo priest-

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² Voodoo, the Haitian folk religion, is derived from a syncretism between African animism and Catholicism. This religion is an elaborate one containing a hierarchical structure of gods, saints and angels, a sacred cult, propitiatory rites, temples and a stratified clergy. It has been practiced secretly for many years because of religious and political pressures but currently enjoys relative freedom, and ceremonies take place under the aegis and approval of public officials.
ness), said: "You lose your consciousness. You have only your body. Your soul is replaced by the loa. The loa controls your brain, you forget everything."

The disorganized, theatrical and histrionic quality of possession varies from one individual to another, but usually the more experienced individuals have smoother and less chaotic transitions to possession. Exceptions to this exist and depend on the nature of the loa possessing the adept so that a violent loa will be expected to possess his cheval in a violent stormy way. The struggle the cheval has in bearing his "mount" is considered as manifestation of this difficulty of "bearing a loa." Most Voodoo audiences show great sympathy for the person struggling with a loa.

Possession is a usual feature of ceremonies but it is also seen during divination and treatment situations in the hungan (Voodoo priests) who invoke the power of their loas for these purposes. Occasionally some have observed it in such non-religious surroundings as market places (13). Others have identified the phenomenon outside Haiti occurring in Negroes many generations removed from their African heritage (1).

POSSESSION OF A HUNGAN

For purposes of divination, fortune telling and curing, most hungan invoke their loas through incantations, prayers and symbolic offerings. In the hounfort (temple) and seated before his altar with visitors seated behind him, the hungan performs such rituals as reciting the rosary, dropping holy water in patterns of three and lighting candles. He gradually becomes absorbed in prayer, softly singing religious chants and crossing himself innumerable times. There is then gradually and progressively an involvement of his back, shoulder, neck and face muscles which contract first independently and then in unison, the hungan progressing to a state of shaking tension where his entire body seems involved. Previously articulate speech turns to grunts and his face is painfully twisted until it is unrecognizable. When possessed, the hungan turns and greets his audience with his loa's characteristic salutation. Henceforth communication is between the loa and the audience. All demands for money, sacrifice, adherence to particular treatment regimens, etc., are requests of the loa, not the hungan.

The characteristic feature of the hungan's possession is the facility and ease of transition to such a state. This can best be attributed to his familiarity and extended experience in entering such states. Save for the changed voice, posture and facies, most hungans preserve an amazingly keen awareness and consciousness of the ongoing situation and their role in it, and are able to rely on their vast resources of knowledge and intuitive talents in diagnosing and treating, while being possessed.

Throughout the ceremony the participants depend on the hungan who both encourages their self abandonment and controls the limits. The hungan himself would seem to be able to do this by virtue of the authority vested in him by his office as priest and undoubtedly because of the belief the congregants have in him. Usually he is a sincere individual. Occasionally, however, he is a psychopathic individual who consciously recognizes the culturally defined needs of his congregants which he manipulates for his own profit. In the case of the sincere hungan his possession is mild because of the minimum anxiety he feels in becoming possessed. There is little difficulty for him to control his behavior in this culturally sanctioned role. In essence most hungans can readily give up those characteristics defining them as individuals, making themselves into religious personalities and becoming thereby culturally recognizable individuals only. All hungans in effect are known by the spirits possessing them and not for their own personality attributes.

POSSESSION OF AN ADEPT

Most Voodoo ceremonies begin as the hungan kneeling before his altar invokes the spirits and gradually becomes possessed. During the ceremony, influenced by the dancing, drinking, singing and convivial atmosphere, the other congregants frequently become possessed. Their crises, however, are marked by a greater loss of self control and consciousness than are those of the hungan. During one ceremonial, I was able to observe closely the
behavior of a hunsí (advent) who became possessed. The main feature of the ceremony was the ritual sacrifice of a goat, without a knife. The hungan had donned a bright red military uniform and all the female congregants were brightly garbed in red dresses. The ceremony had been going for several hours and there had been much dancing and drinking.

As the seemingly "drugged" goat fell to the floor and convulsively died, a hunsí lurched forward through the crowd and screamed. As if crazed by the death of the goat, she threw herself on the floor beside it and lay dishevelled on the floor, her body writhing and arms and legs flailing. She seemed out of contact with her surroundings and quite unconcerned with the possibilities of self injury. As she stumbled up from the floor her swinging arms brushed closely by the bystanders. She doubled up, her face contorted into a mask of agony, and kicked her feet wildly in all directions. Her head bobbed to and fro and she spit blood from a bleeding nose. She was constrained from further violence by two male assistants who gripped her arms tightly. In time she calmed down and only slowly seemed to regain her senses and composure.

According to the congregants this woman had become possessed by the spirit of the dead goat. The hunsí's behavior is indistinguishable from hysterical or dissociative behavior trends. This hunsí seemed less comfortable and less in control of her behavior during possession than did the hungan and unlike the hungan did not retain complete control of her consciousness. However she undoubtedly felt sufficiently comfortable in the role of the possessed to permit herself this self-abandonment.

**Possession of a Non-Adept**

Not infrequently persons several generations removed from a milieu of Voodoo belief and custom present what to believers are clearly the manifestations of possession. These people, unlike adepts who view such experiences as divine approbation, struggle against these manifestations. They refuse to "accept the call of their loa" according to Voodoo belief.

Of interest in regard to this phenomenon of possession outside of Voodoo circles is the description of a clinical syndrome recently described in Haiti, a syndrome quite comparable to the Voodoo possession and labeled as such by Voodoo adepts.

L'antite clinique la plus frequente est certainement la psychose aigue rappelant la description de la "bouffée délirante aigue": installation brutale, confusion marquée, excitation psychomotrice avec conduite, demudavve et aggressive et souvent délite religieux hallucinations visuelles et auditives parfois; le tout de courte durée et ne laissant que peu on pas de deterioration(15).

This description corresponds almost exactly to that of a hungan who characterized this illness as a form of possession due to the individual's unwillingness to accept a loa. According to Sanseigne and Desrosiers, such patients initially diagnosed as hysterical often deteriorate into chronic schizophrenics after repeated episodes. The hungan too, stated that the course was usually short but that occasionally the patient remained "crazy as a punishment from the loa."

Of interest is that oftentimes this picture of bouffée délirante aigue is accompanied by paranoid elements with religious delusions based in general on the themes of Voodoo and associated with delusions of persecution. Here it would seem that though such individuals are still affected by elements of Voodoo culture which call forth marked anxiety reactions, they are sufficiently alienated from the peasant culture to be unable to use the cultural mechanisms of anxiety reduction through such recognizable role playing.

**NATIVE THEORY OF INSANITY**

According to popular belief, human beings are composed of the body, the big good angel (soul) and the small good angel (guardian spirit)(7). It is the big good angel which can leave the body without death occurring. This sometimes occurs during sleep. When an individual is ceremonially possessed, the loa supplants the big good angel in the head of the individual. Similarly a sorcerer can force the big good angel from the head of a victim using various magical means, with the soul of a dead person or animal causing the in-
individual to lose his mind, his insane behavior being considered as the manifestation of the dead soul or animal spirit reincarnated in him. This is one of the main causes of supernatural folie. The other cause which follows from ignoring the dictates of a loa follows a similar pattern, the loa supplanting the big good angel and refusing to leave until the individual has accepted Voodoo, although this does not guarantee sucrease of the illness.

In both instances of supernatural folie the mechanism of replacement of the big good angel by an outside entity producing insanity is identical with the replacement by the loa during ceremonial possession. This fact suggests a close tie between genuine folie and ritual possession. Further evidence suggestive of a close association between the two phenomena is the oft repeated and commonly acknowledged fact that the first indications that a man is receiving the call to be a hungan from a loa are indistinguishable from folie. If the individual does not accept the call of the loa he may be punished in the form of sickness or insanity. Further suggesting the tie is the fact that hungans are believed to be more prone to folie than anyone else.

**DISCUSSION**

We have here sketched out three different patterns of behavior and the native theory of insanity all of which share in common the Voodoo explanation of spirit possession. Certain features related to a predisposition to possession seem clear. Firstly, certain personality traits would seem to predispose an individual to possession phenomena. Secondly, early and long enduring observation of the possession of others makes for familiarity and acceptability of it. Lastly, practice and experience in becoming possessed makes for relative ease in negotiating the transition from the normal to the possessed state.

Furthermore, certain features of the syndrome seem clearly definable. Possession is usually characterized by a reduction of higher integrative functions such as articulate speech, social inhibitions and muscular coordination with a concomitant increase of reflex behavior such as trembling, convulsive movements, muscle twitching, teeth grinding and sucking movements. In many instances of possession, a sensory anesthesia exists allowing the individual to expose himself to noxious stimuli which normally would be harmful. Such phenomena have been explained in terms of hysterical or auto-hypnotic losses of perception. Injury does, however, often occur accordant to many Haitian physicians who frequently see burn cases following Voodoo rites (12).

The question arises on the basis of the examples cited as to whether the phenomenon of possession is a form of psychiatric disorder or merely a culturally acceptable patterned role playing. The hungan enters into a well-controlled, learned, complex and refined, self-induced trance, through autosuggestion, probably on the basis of a personal propensity. In the hunsi it has the quality of a dissociative state precipitated and reinforced by a highly charged emotional atmosphere accompanied by an excessive barrage of sound, light and drug stimuli. The last type cited, that of bouffée délirante aigue would seem to represent a disorganizing psychotic illness in a culturally alienated individual. These three different explanations, although somewhat reasonable in themselves, fail to consider the unifying cultural aspects of this phenomenon. If in Haiti all such behavior is explainable in terms of a single notion of spirit possession, then any discussion of possession should perforce include such a unifying cultural insight.

A concept of a culturally recognized and accepted way of “going crazy” would seem to best incorporate both sets of notions. From this viewpoint the role of the possessed is a culturally sanctioned and governed role, applauded in some circumstances (as in ceremonies), vaguely tolerated in other situations (as in market places), and frowned upon or condemned in other contexts and when differing in degree (as in forms of folie). It is a role offering opportunity for the expression of much repressed and suppressed feeling and thought. It

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3 The concept of a culturally acceptable form of “going crazy” was suggested by Linton’s remarks on “patterns of misconduct” (9) and Devereux’s remarks on the borrowing from culture by genuinely ill people “the means for implementing their subjective derangement in a conventional way” (3).
provides the poor, downtrodden and oppressed peasantry with an opportunity to enact the parts of gods, becoming for brief periods lordly, omnipotent figures. For the possessed and for observers who can vicariously participate in the possession of others and share the good fortune of being in the company of the gods, possession is a cathartic and spiritually uplifting experience.

Indeed from an early age the peasant child is exposed to ceremonial possessions. He is made aware of the prestige of the hagn and the possessed. He sees how applauded are the possessed and learns of their good fortune. Observing the possessions of his elders, a Haitian peasant child grows up with the hope that some day he too will be possessed. As one well educated Haitian told me: “Everyone in Haiti is trying to catch a loa”(5). It is obvious that for the non-literate, uneducated peasant “catching a loa” by possession is far easier than it is for those more educated, intellectual and sophisticated.

We have presented evidence suggesting that possession is a learned pattern of role playing. The selection of roles and the appearance of the possession are seen as dependent on personal factors. The range of loa is so great that a great number of patterns are acceptable as loa possessions. This fact accounts for the recognition of the possession in non-Voodoo adepts such as Maya Deren and for the frequent confusion of hysterical or psychotic behavior with possession. Although selection of this role suggests that the role is compatible with the possessed person’s personality, it is not in itself sufficient evidence for making a clinical psychiatric diagnosis. The hysterical or psychotic cannot however control the onset, the extent and the completion of his uncontrollable behavior as can the possessed.

The impromptu nature of ceremonial behavior further suggests the conscious role playing aspects of possession. There is frequently much personal imaginativeness expressed by the possessed and much interplay with the congregants who join in the merrymaking, solemnity or other prevailing moods of the ceremonies. The same individuals are possessed year in and year out by the same loa. Occasionally an individual is possessed by several different loas in the same evening but this too is characteristic for the specific individual. Each adept is identified with a specific loa or behavioral pattern from the time of his or her first possession and it is truly rare for an individual to become possessed out of context, possession being considered expected behavior for ceremonials only.

According to most natives the loas prefer “to mount” people who are most like themselves. Thus aggressive individuals are mounted by stormy loas and passive mild mannered individuals by gentle and friendly loas. Occasionally the opposite takes place as if by “reaction formation.” Metraux in his recent work has suggested a number of points which argue against the dissociative quality of the possessions(13). He has pointed out such things as the retention of memory of events during the possession, the self protective caution against bodily harm during possession and the expression of feelings by the loa consistent with the possessed person’s personal attitudes towards others.

CONCLUSION

Possession as seen in Haiti is a culturally sanctioned, heavily institutionalized and symbolically invested means of expression in action for various ego dystonic impulses and thoughts. It provides a behavioral outlet for much of the impoverished and oppressed peasantry of Haiti. For those who are Voodoo devotees it provides legitimized public roles for private repressed impulses and needs. It serves different needs for different people. For the hagn it provides a flexible and recognizable set of ideas which makes possible the translation of private needs into a publically acknowledged religious chosenness. For the hunsi it is an opportunity for the expression of behavior and emotions. The last type of individual “possessed by a loa” would seem to be unable to channel his uncontrollable impulses into such an acknowledged and useful role for various reasons, usually ones which have alienated him from the main-springs of the Voodoo cult.

In essence, possession is a useful and culturally sanctioned form of role playing
which serves public as well as private needs and is legitimized only insofar as it occurs in the context of Voodoo and in the correct proportions. For those who are out of touch with Voodoo or for those whose possessions last longer than the ceremonials warrant it is not legitimized and is considered a form of folie. The similarity of possession phenomena and psychiatric illness plus the identical explanations for loa possession and supernatural folie suggests a strong relationship between the two and adds weight to our formulation of ritual possession as an acceptable form of “going crazy.”

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