HAITIAN VOODOO AND THE RITUALIZATION OF THE NIGHTMARE

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Approximately eighty years ago one of the pioneers of modern anthropology, E. B. Tylor (19) attempted to show that belief in the survival of the soul after death could be derived from the fact that it was possible to "see" the dead in dream. Since Tylor's time large amounts of new data have revealed the importance of dreams and visions for a proper understanding of the latent meaning of social practices and institutions. In view of these facts it is rather surprising to note that the general problem of the institutionalization and ritualization of dream experiences has received only very scanty attention. In fact, psychoanalysts often tend to work in the opposite direction, seeking to derive insight into the latent meaning of dreams through a study of the manifest content of social practices and institutions. Thus, in seeking to interpret the meaning of nightmares, psychoanalysts have drawn heavily upon anthropological data (9, 17).

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that experiences resembling the nightmare can be ritualized in a manner which was first described in Freud's analysis of primitive ritual (7). It must be understood, however, that, as Röheim (15) has shown, these collective "neurotic symptoms" differ from individual ones, in that they are socially conjunctive, rather than disjunctive, and frequently promote adjustment to reality.

The Horse in Haitian Voodoo

Voodoo is the animistic religion of the rural population of Haiti, a former French colony which, for more than 150 years, has been an independent republic, populated chiefly by the descendants of imported African slaves.

The Haitian peasant believes that the world is ruled by a Master, supreme dispenser of all worldly goods, who punishes the sinner and rewards the virtuous. He also regulates the seasons, giving (*don-

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ne") droughts which burn the crops, as well as rains which moisten the soil. Lightning is his wrath. Riptides and earthquakes are his vengeance. The ups and downs of human fortunes are proofs of his infinite power.

The Master does not act directly, however. He usually manifests himself through the medium of his deities, i.e. of gods and goddesses, to whom he delegates, or upon whom he bestows his powers, and whose intimate contacts with mankind enable them to intervene day after day in human affairs. These divinities are called the *Loa*, or spirits.

The Loa manifest their presence by means of "possession." This type of relationship between spirits and mankind is rather widely distributed, and is known to occur not merely in Africa and among American Indians (18), but in many other parts of the world as well (14). The "Loa" possess human beings by bestriding ("monter") and by riding them as though they were horses. The Loa who possesses a human being is able to regulate the conduct of his human "horse," causing the possessed to be innocent, contrary, perverted, good or evil. Sometimes the possessed act as though they were children. At other times they seem barely able to drag their bodies along, as though they were old persons hobbling along on crutches. Regardless of whether the possessed act like children or like old persons, they frequently display a tendency to commit theft, and also manifest other foibles, character-traits and modes of behavior which differ from those which they exhibit in their normal state. Last, but not least, the Loa sometimes invade even the sexual life of their servants. Thus, some of the Loa are thought to become the spouses of the possessed, inducing their human mounts either to remain chaste, or else to become homosexual. In brief, the state of possession seems to be a state of dissociation, characterized by a return of the repressed, and brought about by a massive invasion of the Ego by Id-representatives.

The possessed disclaim all responsibility for their acts, and profess to be merely the "horses" of the Loa possessing them. They allege that it is their Loa who induces them to gossip, slander, lie, steal, prophesy, strike persons or caress them, etc. In brief, it is the Loa who induces the possessed to be good or evil, since the latter is merely the horse ridden by the Loa (13).

Before we undertake to discuss the role of the horse in Haitian dreams, a few words need to be said about the term "nightmare." The second syllable of this word is usually derived from the Indo-
European root *mr or *mar, which refers to horses (9). It is noteworthy that, in accordance with Abel’s (1) and Freud’s (6) remarks concerning the antithetical sense of primal words, the root *mr can be found both in terms referring to male horses and in those referring to female horses. Thus, in German Mähre denotes a broken-down nag, usually a stallion or a gelding, whereas in English the term mare applies only to female horses. In addition, the root *mr may also be found in words pertaining to witchcraft and violence. Thus, in Slavic, mora means fury, while mara means witch. The root *mr also occurs in words denoting the nightmare. Thus, in Slavic one meaning of mora is “nightmare,” while the French word for nightmare, cauchemar, also contains the root *mr, even though in modern French the root *mr no longer occurs in words designating horses. Conversely, words denoting nightmare-like phenomena often contain elements pertaining to horses, although these elements may not be derivations of the root *mr. Thus, in medieval France, the “cheval gallipotte” was thought to gallop through the towns at night, shaking its huge iron shoes. The belief in the cheval gallipotte was introduced into Haiti by French colonists, and was readily adopted by the rural masses, who, to this very day, believe that old women, and adolescents living under strict parental control are the principal groups to be haunted by this phantom, whose footsteps they hear reverberating through the night.

The Haitian term for nightmare is the French word “cauchemar,” whose second half is, as we have just shown, derived from the root *mr, i.e. “horse.” The first half of the word is derived from the term “calcare,” which means “to trample repeatedly,” and also denotes the treading movements of the copulating rooster. The sexual implications of the word “calcare” are also strikingly revealed by French folk etymology. It should be noted in this context that folk-etymology often plays an important role in the formation of new words (16), and therefore often reveals the unconscious meaning both of the initial word, and of the derived one. As regards the term “calcare,” in the dialect of Picardy it is corrupted to cauquer (koke:), this latter word being linked by folk etymology with the word “coq” (rooster). Now, in the dialect of Northern Haiti, as in English slang, the word “coq” (cock) denotes the penis, while the term “cauquer,” which, in France, denotes primarily the treading of the hen by the rooster, is also applied to human coitus. Thus, it is rather probable that one of the latent meanings of the word “cauchemar,” in France and in Haiti alike, is “being violently possessed sexually by a horse-demon.”
According to Haitian belief horses occurring in dreams and in
nightmares are demons, who sometimes ride the dreamer. Thus, the
dream is the reverse of the state of possession, in which a spirit turns
the human being into a horse. In brief, the state of possession may
very possibly be a representation of the nightmare-experience by its
opposite.

In nightmares, as well as in the belief of the Haitians, the horse
is also identified with the wind, which is a rather striking symbolism
in view of the fact that nightmares are often accompanied by a feeling
of suffocation. It is also interesting to note that the equation horse =
wind is also reported from Europe, Ethiopia, West Africa and North
Africa. Thus, European folk-tales often mention horses "flee as the
wind," while Arab tribes sometimes designate their fine steeds as
"drinkers of the wind." Now, it is a striking characteristic of air (and
of certain other odorless gaseous substances as well), that it is the
only material object perceived solely by means of the tactile nerv-
endings, and then only if either the air, or else the body itself, is in
motion. Thus, air is almost the prototype of insubstantiality, and,
therefore, in a way, a rather uncanny substance. One is not surprised
therefore to find that among the Indochinese Sedang (4) "wind" and
"ghost" are denoted by practically identical terms. The tendency
to equate horses with the wind thus suggests an ontogenetically
primitive experience, elaborated once more on the oedipal level, since
the infant's first perceptual experiences are tactile ones.

Still another important part of Haitian beliefs pertaining to pos-
session is the fact that the experience of possession is believed to be
a very exhausting one; after possession the human "horse" is usually
very fatigued, and, sometimes, even on the verge of collapse. This
belief is also found in other areas in which possession is a recognized
"religious" experience. Thus, in mediaeval Europe, the Devil was
believed to ride his human mounts during the witches' sabbath, until
these "mounts" were utterly exhausted by their aerial gallops.

Comparative Data

Suriname: The beliefs of the Bush Negroes of Suriname, who,
like the Haitians are descended from Negro slaves, resemble Haitian
beliefs rather closely. The Bush Negroes call the possessed the
"horse" (asi) of the possessing spirit. An analysis of the plural mean-
ings of the word asi will shed some light upon the unconscious mean-
ing of possession. In ordinary parlance asi means merely "horse." In
the figurative sense it means, however, "the person who carries the
spirit, or the servant of the spirit." (8) The word asi is used in still another sense by the Fon-Ewe speaking tribes of Togo and Dahomey. In this region the word asi, used in a religious context, denotes the "wife of the spirit." It seems probable that some of the feminine connotations of the word asi continue to survive among the Bush Negroes, since possessed men sometimes wrap large kerchiefs about their loins, in token of their temporary femininity.

Lybia: According to Oesterreich (14), Tremearne found that the Lybians apply the term "horse" not to the possessed, but to the possessing spirit. If this information is correct, the Lybian possession-pattern is a direct, rather than an inverse representation of the nightmare experience. One of Tremearne's informants stated that he did not know how the spirit "horse" entered him. "He is sitting on me. His legs are on my neck and shoulders, and yet he is within my head." As in Haiti, the possessed dancer must wait until the spirit has mounted him completely and is well seated in the saddle. Sometimes the possessing spirit slides about in the saddle, causing his mount to "act." According to the Lybians it is dangerous to give the possessed person anything to drink while he is in a state of possession. It is also noteworthy that, just like the Haitians, the Lybians, who call these spirits "Bori," tend to equate them with the wind. Summing up, in Lybia the possessing spirit is spoken of as a "horse," although, at the same time, the possessed human being is spoken of as the mount of the spirit.

Northern Ethiopia: According to Leiris (11) the possessed human "horse" is ridden by a Zar spirit. The act of possession is described in terms which constantly refer to equestrianism. "The Zar is agitating his horse." "During possession (gurri), the horse is unconscious," etc. The Northern Ethiopian's conception of the relationship between the Zar and human beings closely resembles the relationship between a strict parent and an intimidated, dutiful child. Thus, it is believed that the Zar constantly intervene in the daily affairs of men, and hedge them about with a network of strict taboos. They also protect the faithful from illness, guide them through the crises of life (marriage, divorce, the birth of twins, etc.), and punish them for their sins. The Zar never lose sight of their human charges; they watch them constantly, and even spy upon them. Sometimes the Zar descend upon the human "horse" as suddenly as a "swarm of bees." The Ethiopians therefore deem it advisable to make their peace with the Zar, and to propitiate them by means of oaths, vows and sacrificial
offerings. The sexual nature of this relationship between the Zar, as parent surrogates, and the human being, as a feminized dutiful child, is also underscored by the fact that the act of possession is specifically compared to sexual relations.

The Mossi: This tribe, which lives near the bend of the Niger river, believes that if one dreams of being bitten by a horse, it means that one is being watched by, or even spied upon, by a witch. (2) This belief is a rather interesting one, since, in the Mossi language, the term “nightmare” does not include any element which designates the horse in any manner whatsoever. For this reason the Mossi belief concerning dreams about horses strongly underscores the nexus between horse and nightmare.

COMMENT

The data just presented reveal a rather intimate nexus between the subjective experience of a nightmare, and the highly ritualized and institutionalized experience of possession. The most striking feature of this nexus seems to be the role which horses and riding play in both of these phenomena. Furthermore, in view of Jones’ (9) demonstration of the unconscious tendency to identify the horse with the rider, one need not be surprised to find that in one area at least it is the possessing spirit, rather than the mounted human, who is spoken of as the “horse,” nor that, in possession, the nightmare experience should be repeated, with the difference that in possession the ridden human, rather than the riding spirit is usually designated as the “horse.”

The data also tend to support Jones’ (9) thesis that the nightmare experience is closely related to the incest and primal scene problem, the nightmare-horse and the possessing spirit being symbolic of the sexually aggressive parent.

The history of the domestication of the horse also throws some light upon this problem. It is rather probable that the first animal domesticated in Central Asia was the horse. It should be remembered in this context that, at that time, Central Asia was inhabited not merely by Mongolic and Turkic tribes, but, probably, also by “Aryan” ones. The horse-pattern, first established in Central Asia, was a rather stable one. Thus, when the Siberian tribes began to domesticate the reindeer, they treated this animal in accordance with the horse-pattern. Conversely, when the horse was first introduced into the Mediterranean world, the borrowers, who had already domesticated and har-
nessed the ox, used the horse primarily as a draft-animal, the way they had used oxen. Hence, when mounted tribes, warring on horseback, appeared at the edges of the Mediterranean world, their appearance caused a great deal of anguish, both in the Near East and in the Greek culture-area. (12)

Now, it is of the utmost importance to recall here that the horse was not merely the principal means of transportation, and the chief battle-beast of these tribes, but also the principal sacrificial offering of groups who adhered to the cult of the Great Mother (5). Since these sacrifices closely resembled totemic feasts (7), the conclusion that the horse was a parental symbol is a fairly plausible one.

Equally interesting is Engle’s finding (5) that the Amazon legends reveal an intimate nexus between horse-riding, horse-sacrifices, the cult of the Great Mother and man-destroying, breast-less Amazons. In fact, the riding of horses by women struck the Greeks as something rather scandalous. One suspects that this indignation was partly elicited by the fact that women, who are usually “ridden” in coitus, should presume to ride male surrogates in a mock *coitus inversus*. In this connection it is necessary to recall that the fact that man is usually “on top” during coitus is one of the unconscious—and sometimes not so unconscious—“justifications” of man’s claim that he is superior to woman. An inverted echo of this is to be found in the writings of a recent adherent to the cult of the Great Mother; The scholarly and eminent novelist and poet Robert Graves, in his novel “*Hercules, My Shipmate,*” which depicts the struggle of the patriarchal Greeks against the cult of the Great Mother, took pains to stress that the Balearic priestesses of this Goddess insisted on practicing *coitus inversus*, as a means of demonstrating woman’s superiority over man. Among the Mohave Indians *coitus inversus* is also consciously interpreted either as a sign of masculine impotency, or as an attempt to degrade man (3).

One would therefore expect that men would especially favor the riding of mares. While the favorite mount of many Arabs is, indeed, the mare, and the female racing camel, the Mongols, who milk their mares, ride mostly geldings or stallions, while in French Indochina even today it is almost a disgrace to ride a mare which is, by definition, a pack animal.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to discuss the psychological complexities of riding, which may, conceivably, have deeply influenced the history of the world, by pitting nomads against agri-
culturalists. The present discussion of the ritualization of the nightmare in possession may, therefore, be concluded with some hypotheses concerning the origins of this ritualization. It is conceivable that the institutionalization of the nightmare, in the form of possession may, in certain areas at least, have its roots in the cult of the Great Mother, who is probably a maternal imago: The mother with the phallus. With regard to the Haitian peasant this hypothesis is supported by the important role assigned to the Mamaloi priestesses in voodoo ritual, and by the fact that cult matriarchates apparently survive to this very day among the Negroes of Bahia, Brazil (10) whose ethnic origins are similar to those of the Haitians.

**Summary**

Possession in Haiti, viewed as a religious and socially recognized phenomenon, and as an important component of the voodoo ritual, may, perhaps, represent a ritual elaboration of the nightmare. The tendency to ritualize the nightmare may have its roots in the cult of the Great Mother, to whom horses were formerly sacrificed.

**Bibliography**

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AGORAPHOBIA AS A MANIFESTATION OF SCHIZOPHRENIA: THE ANALYSIS OF A CASE

By Walter Schmideberg

Our knowledge today has enabled us to examine the structure of mental diseases, and to develop therapeutic techniques. Many of the milder types, particularly psychoneurosis, have been successfully treated, but there was a general hesitancy to tackle the more severe ones, such as the psychoses. Freud himself expressed scepticism in this regard. He told me personally that psychoses seemed to have a nucleus similar to that of cancer, which resisted therapeutic efforts. My reply to him was that in the cases I treated I had found that there were several nuclei, rather than a single one, and that I, as well as a number of my colleagues in London, seemed to have grasped the structure of these nuclei. When I related to Freud extracts of the case that I will describe in this paper, he referred to this method of working as "promising."

Ruth, a girl of twenty-two years of age, came to the clinic for treatment at the end of May, 1933, accompanied by both parents. She was a child of very poor people from the Jewish East End. She was suffering from very severe agoraphobia which had been developing gradually since her fourteenth year. She feared then that she would become dizzy or faint in the streets. The range of her travelling had been more and more restricted and from the age of 17 she had been completely tied to her home. She had lost contact with all her girl friends and had had to give up her work as apprentice in a tailor's shop.

Ruth was the second child and eldest daughter. A younger brother died when Ruth was 6½. From her earliest childhood the patient was extremely difficult. As a baby she cried so much that the landlord threatened to give the family notice. The difficulties and irritability increased after the birth of a sister when Ruth was two years and nine months old. In the latency period her disturbances diminished and she entered school in an acceptable condition. Being away from her home circle brought about an improvement. During puberty her condition grew worse, particularly after the birth of the youngest sister when Ruth was 14. She became very timid and secretive, and her agoraphobia began to develop.