Mediumship and Spirit Possession in a Cross-Cultural Context

In the ethnographic literature, the term ‘spirit possession’ is often used to describe what parapsychologists refer to as ‘mediumship’. A standard parapsychologicical definition of ‘spirit medium’ might be: ‘A person who regularly, and often at will, receives purported communications from the dead (‘mental medium’) and/or causes physical materializations (‘physical medium’).’[1]

By contrast, in the parapsychological literature the term ‘spirit possession’ seldom refers to mediumship, as it carries connotations of involuntary and demonic possession, while mediumship is usually held to be a voluntary and deliberately initiated activity.

It is also clear that the term ‘mediumship’ refers to different phenomena even within the Western context. Indeed, Spiritualist mediumship, as the above definition suggests, can be broadly split into two categories. There is ‘mental mediumship,’ which itself can be split into two distinct forms of clairvoyant/telepathic/clairaudient/clairsentient mediumship, often also known as ‘platform mediumship,’ and trance mediumship, during which the body of the medium is temporarily occupied by an ostensible spirit entity. Physical mediumship can be defined as the ‘purported ability of the medium to channel unknown energies’ to create physical changes in the immediate environment’.[2]

This article is mainly concerned with trance mediumship, a category to which the anthropological label of ‘spirit possession’ is well suited. The phenomena and experiences associated with platform mediumship fall closer to the anthropological category of shamanism, while the kind of physical mediumship known in the West is a surprisingly singular phenomenon, with few cross-cultural parallels.

Here the term ‘spirit possession’ will frequently be employed synonymously with ‘mediumship’, as the bulk of the literature surveyed is concerned with voluntarily-initiated spirit possession.

Approaching Spirit Possession

Early Years

Anthropology has had a long relationship with the social and psychological phenomenon known as ‘spirit possession’. As early as 1890, James Frazer, in his voluminous exercise in cross-cultural comparison *The Golden Bough*, noted that the belief that ‘certain persons are supposed to be possessed from time to time by a spirit or deity’ is a worldwide phenomenon, thus indicating an awareness of the near-universality of spirit possession.[3]

The interpretive framework employed by early commentators such as Frazer tended to be dismissive. Frazer referred to this ‘temporary inspiration’ as an ‘abnormal state,’[4] indicating a pejorative attitude. According to this perspective, spirit possession practices represented little more than delusion or folly. In the words of Frazer’s contemporary EB Tylor, it is merely a surviving remnant of primitive mentality.

Yet it is interesting to note that, despite Tylor’s public dismissal of spiritualism, he was nevertheless perplexed by the phenomena he witnessed with some of the Victorian era’s great Spiritualist mediums.[5]

Other Approaches

More recently, Paul Stoller has suggested that anthropological commentaries on spirit possession have tended towards five dominant explanatory frameworks (excluding the dismissive framework of the earliest anthropologists), which include: ‘functionalist, psychoanalytic, physiological, symbolic (interpretive/textual), and theatrical’ frameworks.[6] These perspectives will be used to structure what follows.

Functionalist Interpretations

Functionalist approaches suggest that social phenomena perform specific social functions that help to maintain the solidarity and cohesion of the social group.

Arguably, the most widely-known functionalist approach to spirit possession is IM Lewis's social-protest theory; this suggests that spirit possession groups perform the essential social function of allowing women in male dominated societies (or any other socially peripheral group) to express their discontent in a socially-acceptable manner. When in the possessed state, Lewis argues, an individual is 'totally blameless' for his or her actions; the responsibility lies rather with the spirits.[7] This interpretation sees mediumship and spirit possession traditions as 'thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex,' or group.[8]

Functionalist analyses of spirit possession in this vein have been popular among anthropologists, applied to numerous societies worldwide.[9] These include accounts of the Zar possession cult of Northern Sudan,[10] spirit possession amongst the Digo in Southern Kenya,[11] the case of spontaneous epidemics of involuntary spirit possession in Malaysian factories,[12] and even in a Spiritualist home-circle in 1960s Wales.[13]

However, as John Bowker[14] and Janice Boddy[15] have noted, although the functionalist approach does possess considerable explanatory power, it ignores both the significance of subjective experience for believers and also the possibility that genuine psi phenomena/spirits might actually exist, assuming as it does that the objects of supernatural beliefs are cultural constructions with foundations in misperception, delusion and fraud.[16][17]

That said, mediumship, and the ability to incorporate spiritual entities, can undoubtedly provide women, and other socially-marginalized groups, such as homosexuals and factory workers[18], with significant social benefits that would not otherwise be available. Kilson[19] has written of the transformation in status that spirit mediumship brings about in Ga society in Ghana, for example. At the time of Kilson's fieldwork, the Ga considered women to be innately inferior to men, which when combined with illiteracy, unmarried life and, potentially, an inability to conceive children, frequently resulted in a particularly low social standing. By becoming spirit mediums, women in Ga society were able to achieve a degree of status they could not have attained under normal circumstances, taking on a vital social role, and one imbued with supernatural authority.

Peter Wilson,[20] perhaps somewhat naively, disagrees with Lewis's protest hypothesis on the grounds that within 'male dominated societies', in which males and females operate in different spheres, it is not clear that women necessarily feel downtrodden and neglected. Wilson comments that 'deprivation surely implies withholding that which is due', and goes on to ask, 'in what traditionally male dominated society is it ever regarded as a woman's due that she be granted access to the man's domain?' There are of course problems with this statement, but it nevertheless highlights one potential pitfall in Lewis's theory.

As another counterbalance to Lewis's model, Susan Rasmussen has highlighted the practice of spirit possession amongst the Kel Ewey Tuareg of Nigeria, noting that Tuareg women 'are not subjugated, but enjoy high status and prestige', and so do not fit the standard social-protest model.[21] Owing to these obvious discrepancies between Lewis's general theory and the ethnographic reality, Donovan (2000) has argued that Lewis's hypothesis, although generally applicable to many possession cults, ought not be thought of as a complete theory, but rather should be supplemented by other approaches. In other words, while it is undoubtedly the case that spirit possession performs a range of social functions, this is not necessarily all that is going on.

Therapeutics

In her study of a Spiritualist home-circle in a Welsh town in the late 1960s, Vieda Skultans (1974) focused on the therapeutic and supportive elements of Spiritualism as its main attraction for adherents. She interpreted Spiritualist practice and belief as a coping strategy for the women of 'Welshtown' in light of their traditional feminine roles as 'housewife, mother and sexual partner'.[22] According to Skultans, and in line with Lewis's hypothesis, Spiritualism provided these women with a means to escape their normal day-to-day circumstances, at least for the duration of the circle meetings:

Indeed, this is where the contribution of Spiritualism lies. For the weekly repetition of healing activities and the exchange of messages 'from spirit' constitute a ritual of reconciliation to a situation which does not permit any radical alternatives to itself.[23]

More recent research has focused on the therapeutic potential of mediumship practices for the bereaved, especially in the Western context.[24]

Psychoanalytic Interpretations

Castillo (1994) has argued that pathological approaches to the study of spirit possession in anthropology have traditionally tended towards one of three dominant perspectives: Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Pierre Janet's dissociation theory and the generic nonpathological altered states of consciousness perspective (see below).

The Freudian psychoanalytic perspective treats spirit possession as a form of culturally shaped hysteria, which itself refers to an 'irrational emotional state caused by repressed oedipal desires in the unconscious'.[25] Other psychoanalytic interpretations of spirit possession emphasize 'past traumatic and distressful experiences'[26] in the lives of the possessed, and suggest that the behaviours and psychological sensations associated with the possession state are symbolic symptoms of the unconscious repression of such experiences, converted from the psychological to physical symptoms through a process known as 'conversion' or 'somatization'. [27]

Gananath Obeyesekere's study of ecstatic priests and priestesses in Sri Lanka is perhaps the best example of a psychoanalytic approach to spirit possession. Obeyesekere interpreted possession, or *arude* (divine possession),[28] as a symptom, along with other physical expressions (for example the matted hair of the priestesses), as outward symbols of repressed negative life experiences. Psychoanalytic interpretations consider spirit possession performances to be culturally accepted expressions of underlying pathology, which will be addressed in more detail in the next section.

Spirit Possession as Pathology

Hysteria

Early approaches to the study of spirit possession emphasized the 'abnormal state'[29] of the possessed, associating it, by virtue of certain behavioural similarities, with newly identified neurological disorders such as hysteria and epilepsy.[30] [31] Herbert Spencer, for example, in the first volume of his *Principles of Sociology* writes:

> [...] during insensibilities of all kinds, the soul wanders, and, on returning, causes the body to resume its activity – if the soul can thus not only go out of the body but can go into it again; then may not the body be entered by some other soul? The savage thinks it may. Hence the interpretation of epilepsy. The Congo people ascribe epilepsy to demoniac possession [...] Of Asiatic races may be instanced the Kalmucks: by these nomads epileptics are regarded as persons into whom bad spirits have entered.[32]

Early ethnographers of spirit possession practices often concluded that the possessed person was, in actuality, suffering from the psychological disorder known as hysteria, and by so doing attempted to reduce profound cultural and spiritual practices to the level of illness and disease.

In the nineteenth century, pioneering neurologists like Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) at the infamous Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, carefully documented the symptoms of hysterics, often through the pioneering use of photography as a medical tool – a testament to the highly somatic nature of hysterical symptoms.[33] The symptoms of hysteria manifested in a wide variety of ways, including 'amnesia, blindness, anaesthesia, hallucinations, excited and inappropriate behaviour, together with fits and paralyses'.[34] Symptoms such as these overlapped so comfortably with the purported experiences and observed behaviours of the possessed, it is little wonder that ethnographers, anthropologists and psychologists were quick to label spirit possession as just another form of hysteria. Freed and Freed (1964), for example, went so far as to suggest that 'almost all who have written on spirit possession regard it as a form of hysteria'.[35]

This association of spirit possession with pathology has been a persistent theme in both anthropology and psychology.[36] While it is true that in many cultures spirit possession, more specifically 'spontaneous' or 'pathogenic' possession, is associated with illness,[37] recent neurophysiological research has demonstrated distinct differences between the underlying neurological activity of individuals experiencing spirit possession as a voluntary practice, on the one hand, and epilepsy on the other.[38] Further research in this direction promises to differentiate pathological conditions from the trance states associated with spirit possession practices,[39] and may also point towards neurophysiological differences between specific forms of mediumship,[40] for example differences between psychic readings and communication with discarnate spirits.[41]

Nutrient Deficiency

Another pathological interpretation of spirit possession that was, until relatively recently, popular in the anthropological literature is the 'nutrient deficiency hypothesis'. This essentially suggests that instances of spirit possession, particularly in women, occur as a result of – and in response to – extended malnourishment.[42] Kehoe & Giletti write:

> There is a strong correlation between populations subsiding on diets poor in calcium, magnesium, niacin, tryptophan, thiamine, and vitamin D, and those practicing spirit possession; conversely, populations reported as having probably adequate intakes of these nutrients generally lack culturally sanctioned spirit possession.[43]

Kehoe & Giletti suggest that spirit possession cults represent 'institutionalised recognition of class endemic symptoms of nutrient deficiency'.[44] However, the idea has been subject to much criticism, as it is easy to see instances where the hypothesis fails to stand up to scrutiny, for example within the modern Euro-American Spiritualist tradition. Bourguignon *et al.* (1983) have provided several counter-arguments to the nutrient deficiency hypothesis; for example they highlight:

> (1) A confusion between possession belief (emic) and possession trance behavior (etic); (2) a confusion between 'sumptuary' rules (ideal culture), diets (real culture), nutrient intake (biochemical constituents of foods) and nutritional status; (3) although impressionistic accounts suggest that women often predominate in possession trance cults, the simple equation women = possession trance, is not justified by the available data; and (4) even if a coexistence of women's participation in possession cults, women's nutrient deficiencies, and sumptuary rules were to be established, our understanding of the cultural explanation of trance behavior as possession by spirits would not be advanced.[45]

Lewis (1983) has also criticised Kehoe & Gilleti's approach as excessively reductive.

Dissociative Identity Disorder

One of the most commonly employed analogies in discussions of spirit possession is that made between spirit possession and dissociative identity disorder (DID), previously known as multiple personality disorder (MPD), a condition which undoubtedly bears striking resemblances to incidences of spirit possession.[46] Adam Crabtree, for example, describes DID as 'a condition in which two or more personalities manifest themselves in one human being',[47] and the psi researcher David Scott Rogo refers to the 'infinite boundary' of 'spirit possession, madness and multiple personality'.[48] Goff *et al.* (1991) have suggested a correlation between belief that one is possessed by another person or spirit and chronic psychosis.

A distinction can be made, however, between the pathological condition of dissociative identity disorder and controlled mediumship on the grounds that the presentation of alter personalities in DID is usually associated with negative consequences for the lifestyle of the individual.[49] Mediumship, however, more often than not, does not impede on the everyday life of the medium in such a negative way. This could be seen as the result of a 'domestication' process, whereby regular séances provide a set time and place for personalities to express themselves, thus allowing the medium's primary personality to dominate in everyday circumstances. If, therefore, we were to consider mediumship and DID to be homologous phenomena, structured mediumship development and regular controlled séances could be seen as useful tools for improving the quality of life of the afflicted individual, by providing a safe environment and rigid structure in which alter personalities can manifest.[50] This may be another therapeutic application of spirit mediumship.

Moreira-Almeida *et al.* have noted that in a comparative study of Brazilian Spiritist mediums and North America DID patients, when compared with individuals suffering from DID, 'mediums differed in having better social adjustment, lower prevalence of mental disorders, lower use of mental health services, no use of antipsychotics, and lower prevalence to histories of physical or sexual childhood abuse, sleepwalking, secondary features of DID, and symptoms of borderline personality.'[51] Similarly Roxburgh & Roe, in a study comparing Spiritualist mediums and non-mediums in the UK, concluded that 'it does not seem tenable to characterise mediums as psychologically unhealthy or dysfunctional.'[52] Indeed, Cardeña *et al.* (2009) have argued that 'greater control over one's possession abilities, perhaps gained in part by a more extensive or rigorous training regimen, may characterise nonpathological possession.'[53]

So while it is true that spirit possession does bear some surface resemblances to DID, it does not seem appropriate to consider it a disorder in the strict sense of the term, especially when the possession state is actively induced as a culturally meaningful practice, as in most traditions of spirit mediumship. Spirit mediumship may even provide a therapeutic benefit to practitioners.

Pathological ?

Many anthropologists have directly questioned the idea that spirit possession is a pathological condition.[54] Budden, for instance, argues that the prevalence of dissociative possession and possession-trance states across the world, and the extent to which such states are 'embedded within historical and cultural contexts' indicates that the phenomenon is far from abnormal, indeed, as we have seen, in many societies it may be a desirable state, with those able to incorporate spiritual entities at will being granted higher social status than would otherwise be attainable. As an illustrative example, Thomas Csordas recounts a Candomblé (Brazilian syncretic religion) case in which an individual was denied initiation because subtle behaviours were recognized in his performance that were indicative of pathology rather than ecstasy,[55] thus demonstrating an awareness among spirit possession practitioners themselves of essential differences between spirit incorporation and pathological states, as well as an ability to actively distinguish between them.

Cognitive Approaches

The cognitive approach to spirit possession does not see it as a pathological phenomenon, though in essence it does suggest that spirit possession beliefs and experiences arise from cognitive illusions and category errors.

In her paper 'What is Spirit Possession?', cognitive anthropologist Emma Cohen suggests that the apparent similarities in spirit possession practices and beliefs across cultures arise from innate human cognitive processes. This work draws heavily on the writings of of cognitive scholars of religion such as Pascal Boyer[56] and Justin Barrett.[57] According to Cohen's model, spirit possession is a complex phenomenon involving multiple cognitive processes, and which usually takes one of two distinct forms: voluntary and involuntary. Cohen suggests that these can be explained in the following way:

> Pathogenic possession concepts result from the operation of cognitive tools that deal with the representation of contamination (both positive and negative); the presence of the spirit entity is typically (but not always) manifested in the form of illness. Executive possession concepts mobilise cognitive tools that deal with the world of intentional agents; the spirit entity is typically represented as taking over the host's executive control, or replacing the host's 'mind' (or intentional agency), thus assuming control of bodily behaviours.[58]

According to Cohen, spirit possession practices and beliefs are widespread because they make intuitive sense, owing to their dependence on otherwise normal cognitive processes, such as recognizing agents. She suggests that 'these concepts spread successfully because they are supported by panhuman mental capacities that are employed in the resolution of everyday, common problems.'

Spirit Possession as Performance and Embodiment

The performative aspect of spirit possession has been a key area of study within anthropology and the social sciences more generally. Spirit possession rituals exist at the threshold between subjective trance experience and public performance. The performative aspect can take the form of elaborate enactments of cosmic dramas, as in the case of South Indian Theyyam performances,[59] or elaborate rituals of self-mortification, as found in traditional forms of Taiwanese spirit mediumship,[60] or simply as subtle bodily alterations to distinguish between personalities in Spiritualist trance mediumship.[61]

Paul Stoller has emphasized the importance of the concept of embodiment in understanding spirit possession. He writes, '[t]here can be little doubt that the body is the focus of possession phenomena' and that spirit possession is a 'commemorative ritual' utilising 'gestures, sounds, postures and movements'.[62] Amongst the Songhay, with whom Stoller conducted extensive fieldwork, possession involves the bodily incorporation of spirits from six different spirit families, each one representing a particular period of Songhay history. Similarly, Michael Lambek has noted the use of spirit possession among the Sakalava of Madagascar as a means to retain their history. Spirits representing different epochs of Sakalava history possess the bodies of mediums in order to give advice on the decision making activities of the present. There are many benefits to discussing such issues with the ancestors: for instance it is possible to produce 'historically informed' responses to modern situations in a way that is 'pragmatic' while acknowledging the 'concerns of earlier generations'.[63] Through embodiment the ancestors can be conversed, and interacted, with and so maintain a central role in social life. Nils Bubandt has made similar observations with regard to the people of North Maluku, for whom ancestral spirits continue to play a central role in contemporary political life when they return through the bodies of their mediums to give advice and guidance on matters of politics.[64]

Cross-culturally, spirit possession practices share a distinctively somatic component.[65] The body is the physical means of expression for non-physical entities, and as such must be used in a variety of very specific ways. Methods for recognizing the presence of spirits within mediums vary across cultures, with each culture having its own distinct means of discernment.[66]

Consciousness and its Alteration

Since altered states of consciousness (ASCs) are central to most mediumship traditions,[67] it seems reasonable to present a short examination of the concept of consciousness in general so that we can better understand what we mean by altering it. After all, if defining what we mean when we refer to consciousness is difficult, it must be even more so to define an alteration of it. The psychologist Charles Tart provides us with a useful starting point, describing ASCs as states 'such that the experiencer feels her consciousness is qualitatively (and often radically) different from the way it functions in the baseline state'.[68] By the term 'baseline state', Tart is referring to our 'normal' everyday waking consciousness, which in Euro-American culture is perceived as the dominant, most practical, form of consciousness. Of course it would be unreasonable to suggest that Western culture is entirely monophasic (as contrasted with polyphasic cultures),[69] but it is nevertheless clear that our culture places a special significance on one specific form of consciousness – normal everyday waking consciousness – while other forms of consciousness are perceived as either inferior or useless.[70]

Our concept of the ASC is, therefore, built upon this foundational perception of a generalized productive waking consciousness. ASCs from this perspective are modes of experiencing the world through forms of consciousness different to our 'everyday waking consciousness'. Of course there is a wide range of these alternate modes of consciousness, including everything from early morning drowsiness and caffeine rushes to dreams, trances, ecstasies and psychedelic states.

This lack of precision causes some researchers to express doubt as to the usefulness of the concept of 'ASCs' in understanding mediumship and spirit possession.[71] They argue that, although it is clear that an altered state of consciousness is more often than not involved in the mediumship process, the term covers a wide variety of other experiences that are in no way related to mediumship or spirit possession. Mediumship also clearly involves components which are not inherently related to ASCs. Levy *et al.* write, for example, that '[f]ull possession behaviour is highly skillful. It requires mastery of playing and of subtle, specialized kinds of communally significant communication.'[72] Seligman has argued that altered states of consciousness should not be thought of as the central feature of mediumship practices, and instead emphasizes the 'combination of social conditions and somatic susceptibilities' that cause 'certain individuals to identify with the mediumship role.'[73] Mediumship cannot, therefore, be understood without reference to these other components.

In spite of this, the concept of altered states of consciousness is still a useful tool in the study of mediumship, enabling us to develop a continuum of states of consciousness and to place the ASCs associated with spirit mediumship and possession within the broader context of human consciousness. There is a danger, though, that the scholarly use of the ASC concept lends itself to a reduction of the phenomena of spirit possession to the simple formula of 'spirit possession is just an altered state of consciousness, and as such has no basis in reality.' This kind of interpretation is inherent in Western culture's general monophasic attitude to consciousness. Another view is that altered states of consciousness should be thought of as preconditions for the experience of spirit possession, not necessarily as its cause. We might say therefore that 'spirit possession involves the use of altered states of consciousness, but is not necessarily synonymous with them.'

Trance

The term 'trance' is often employed in the anthropological literature to refer to particular states of altered consciousness common in many spirit possession traditions. Etymologically the term's roots go back to the Latin word *transire* meaning to 'cross over,' and the Old French word *transe*, meaning 'to die' or 'pass on'. Historically in the European context, then, the word has usually been associated with liminal states of consciousness, and with the threshold between life and death.

Erika Bourguignon, in a cross-cultural study of 488 widely distributed societies,[74] determined that 90 percent of her sample societies employed some form of institutionalised altered state of consciousness (trance), and that 70 percent of the sample societies associated such states with the notion of spirit possession.[75]

The use of the term 'trance' in anthropology, however, is particularly broad, and may appear meaningless without further descriptive detail.[76] For instance, while many spirit possession traditions undoubtedly do employ some form of altered state of consciousness during their incorporation rituals, it is not necessarily true that all of these various traditions employ the same alteration of consciousness to initiate the incorporation.[77] How can we say, for example, that the form of trance utilized in Haitian Vodun possession rites[78] is the same as that employed by Spiritualist trance mediums in the UK, or that the trance of the Candomblé medium is the same as that of traditional Taiwanese spirit mediums? We may well find similarities in terms of neurophysiological activity, but the subjective element may vary considerably.

Moreover, it is not even possible to state conclusively that individual mediums within a particular tradition employ the same form of altered consciousness during their trance state. Indeed, mediums often distinguish between different degrees of trance, usually ranging from ‘light’ to ‘deep’. Trance is, therefore, a term that refers to a broad spectrum of related, but not necessarily identical, states of consciousness. This comes across clearly in scholarly definitions such as that provided by historian Brian Inglis; in his book *Trance: A Natural History of Altered States of Mind* (1989), he identifies a wide variety of experiences and states of consciousness encompassed by the term:

At one extreme it is applied to what can loosely be described as possession, in which the individual’s normal self seems to be displaced, leaving him rapt, or paralyzed, or hysterical, or psychotic, or taken over by another personality. At the other extreme is sleep. Between the two are conditions in which consciousness is maintained, but the subliminal mind makes itself felt, as in light hypnosis or the kind of reverie in which fancy, or fantasy, breaks loose. [79]

Judith Becker (1994), in a slightly more specific manner, attempts to define trance as:

> a state of mind characterized by intense focus, the loss of the strong sense of self and access to types of knowledge and experience that are inaccessible in non-trance states.[80]

These definitions encompass a variety of different experiences and bodily states, including meditative states, possession trance, shamanic trance, communal trance, aesthetic trance and other moments of transcendence. Similarly, Kelly & Locke identify a variety of experiences and behaviours included under the umbrella of ‘trance’, including ‘hallucinations, obsessive ideas, dissociation, compulsive actions, transient loss of contact with the sensory environment, physiological collapse, and a number of other aspects.’[81] They further distinguish between different degrees of trance, ranging from ‘the visionary experience or journey which opens the sacred realm to the shaman,’ which the shaman is usually able to recall, to possession trance ‘in which the central element is the apparent temporary displacement of the ordinary personality by that of a possessing spirit, force, or god,’ which ‘generally appears to leave the fully possessed individual amnesic for the period of possession.’[82]

More recently, Halloy has argued that possession trance, as a distinct category of trance, is not itself a single, easy to define, phenomenon but rather represents ‘a continuum of psychobiological changes that vary from slight emotional arousal to the ideal possession state.’[83]

Morton Klass argued that a distinction be made whereby the term ‘trance’ is used solely to describe the shamanic experience of soul-flight, and journeys to other worlds, and suggested that the notion of ‘Patterned Dissociative Identity’ be used to refer to instances of possession trance, in which the personality of the medium is altered or displaced.[84]

Mircea Eliade also sought to distinguish the altered state of the shaman from that of the possessed, by emphasizing the shaman’s ability to control spirits without ‘becoming their instrument’.[85] Eliade also emphasised the difference between the shamanic and mediumistic trance state with regard to the individuals ability to recall what took place during the trance. In shamanism, it is essential that the shaman be able to recall what took place during their soul-flight, as they must personally bring back information from spirit worlds. Mediums, however, will generally report an inability to recall what took place during their trance state, owing primarily to the fact that they were ‘not present’ during the possession – their body occupied by another entity for the duration of the trance.

More recent research, however, has demonstrated that the distinction between the ideal shaman as a controller of the spirits, and the ideal medium as entirely under the control of the spirits, is often blurred.[86] Wilson has also criticised the classically assumed distinction between spirit mediumship and shamanism, and has proposed that spirit mediumship, and in particular Euro-American Spiritualist mediumship, can be thought of as a variety of shamanism, with mediumship development seen as a form of shamanic apprenticeship.[87]

It is clear that further research into the phenomenology and neurophysiology of trance states is required. In the context of spirit mediumship, the term ‘trance’ might best be understood as referring to the state of consciousness in which the medium’s personality is purportedly ‘dispossessed by an intruding intelligence’.[88]

Conclusion: Cross-Cultural Features

Some of the key cross-cultural features of spirit possession practices can be summarized as follows:

Altered States of Consciousness Most spirit possession practices employ some form of altered state of consciousness to initiate spirit incorporation. The state is usually referred to in the literature as ‘trance’, but this is a particularly broad category and there are a range of different trance states.

Performance Most spirit possession practices involve some form of bodily performance, again ranging from elaborate culturally-recognized dances, movements and gestures, to subtle transformations in bodily demeanour.

Amnesia The altered states of consciousness associated with spirit possession are frequently associated with amnesia.

Social function Spirit possession usually performs important social functions, including, for example, enabling marginal groups to protest, and for making important community decisions.

Therapeutics One of the social functions of spirit possession practices is often therapeutic. They may be therapeutic for both mediums and sitters.

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References

Footnotes

1. ^ http://www.spr.ac.uk/page/glossary-paranormal
2. ^ (Klimo, 1987)
3. ^ (Frazer 1993 [1890]:108)
4. ^ (Frazer 1944:152)
5. ^ (Stocking 1971)
6. ^ (Stoller 1994:637)
7. ^ (Lewis 1971:31-32)
8. ^ (ibid.)
9. ^ (Giles 1987:235)
10. ^ (Boddy 1988)

11.^ (Gomm 1975)
12.^ (Ong 1988)
13.^ (Skultans 1974)
14.^ (Bowker 1973)
15.^ (Boddy 1988:4)
16.^ (Nelson 1975:167)
17.^ (Turner 1992)
18.^ (Ong 1988)
19.^ (Kilson 1971)
20.^ (Wilson 1967:367)
21.^ (Rasmussen 1994:76)
22.^ (Skultans 1974:4)
23.^ (Ibid.)
24.^ (cf. Beischel, Mosher & Boccuzzi, 2014; Osborne & Bacon, 2015)
25.^ (Castillo 1994:1)
26.^ (Budden 2003:28)
27.^ (Freud & Breuer 1974:146)
28.^ (Obeyesekere 1984:56)
29.^ (Frazer 1993 [1890]:108)
30.^ (Taves 2006)
31.^ (Maraldi *et al.* 2010:182-183)
32.^ (Spencer 1897:227)
33.^ (Hustvedt 2011)
34.^ (Littlewood 1995:154)
35.^ (Freed & Freed 1964:165)
36.^ (Csordas 1987; Zingrone 1994:102-103; Carrazana *et al.* 1999; Jilek-Aall 1999; Emmons 2008:72)
37.^ (see for example Freed & Freed 1964; Cohen 2008)
38.^ (Hageman *et al.* 2010:103-105; Peres *et al.* 2012)
39.^ (see for example Oohashi *et al.* 2002)
40.^ (Hunter 2014)
41.^ (Delorme *et al.* 2013)
42.^ (Kehoe & Giletti, 1981; Bourguignon et al., 1983:414)
43.^ (Kehoe & Giletti, 1981:550)
44.^ (Kehoe & Giletti, 1981:551)
45.^ (Bourguignon *et al.*, 1983, p. 414)
46.^ (Braude 1988; Taves 2006:123)
47.^ (Crabtree, 1988:60)
48.^ (Rogo, 1988)
49.^ (See Keyes, 1995 for a particularly extreme example)
50.^ (Seligman, 2010)
51.^ (Moreira-Almeida *et al.* 2008:420)
52.^ (Roxburgh & Roe 2011:294)
53.^ (Cardeña *et al.* 2009:178)
54.^ (Budden 2003; Klass 2003)
55.^ (Csordas 1987:9)
56.^ (Boyer, 2001)
57.^ (Barrett, 2000)
58.^ (Cohen, 2008)
59.^ (Freeman, 1998)
60.^ (Graham, 2014)
61.^ (Hunter, 2013)
62.^ (Stoller, 1994, pp. 636-640)
63.^ (Lambek, 1998, p.109)
64.^ (Bubandt, 2009)
65.^ (Pierini 2014)
66.^ (Hunter, 2013)
67.^ (Bourguignon, 1973; Kelly & Locke, 2009)

68. ^ (Tart, 2000, p. 259)
69. ^ (Laughlin, 2013)
70. ^ (Haule, 2011, pp. 11-14)
71. ^ (Levy *et al.,* 1996, p.17)
72. ^ (Levy *et al.*, 1996, p. 18)
73. ^ (Seligman, 2005).
74. ^ (Bourguignon, 1973:11)
75. ^ (Bourguignon, 1973:9-11; 2007:375)
76. ^ (Levy *et al.* 1996:17)
77. ^ (Winkelman 1986:174)
78. ^ (cf. Deren, 2004)
79. ^ (Inglis 1989:267)
80. ^ (Becker 1994:41)
81. ^ (Kelly & Locke, 2009:30)
82. ^ (Kelly & Locke 2009:30-31)
83. ^ (Halloy, 2010:168)
84. ^ (Klass 2003:118-119)
85. ^ (Eliade 1989:6)
86. ^ (Cox 2008; Jokic 2008b)
87. ^ (2011, 2013)
88. ^ (Gauld, 1982:29)

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