

SPIRIT POSSESSION REVISITED: Beyond Instrumentality

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INTRODUCTION

Spirit possession commonly refers to the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she. These forces may be ancestors or divinities, ghosts of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien. Some societies evince multiple spirit forms. Depending on cultural and etiological context such spirits may be exorcised, or lodged in relatively permanent relationship with their host (or medium), occasionally usurping primacy of place in her body (even donning their own clothes and speaking their own languages) during bouts of possession trance. *Possession*, then, is a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable. Recent studies (e.g. 39, 114, 173, 210) suggest that spirit possession rests on epistemic premises quite different from the infinitely differentiating, rationalizing, and reifying thrust of global materialism and its attendant scholarly traditions. Because it appears dramatically and intransigently exotic, unrecognizable to those so schooled (but see 1, 34, 79, 103, 104; also 147:132), possession continues to hold the anthropological gaze despite heroic attempts to tame it, render it harmless or understood. In contrast to anthropological accounts of the body (145) or of time (162), spirit posses-

sion has long been an explicit topic of inquiry; it has rarely missed a theoretical beat. Discourse on the subject is thematic for the discipline as a whole in its confrontation with the Other, continuously affirming our identity as anthropologists (eg. 48:15, see also 61).

In the revision of his influential book *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, Lewis (138:14) responded to critics of the first edition (135) by asking, "How else can we understand 'other cultures' except comparatively in terms of our own concepts, constructs and language?" His remark is telling, commonsensical, and marks a good point of departure for this review. The recognition that scholars are inextricably embedded in cultural frameworks is welcome, though too frequently obscured in ethnographic writing (73), too often reserved for defense of problematic interpretations in later editions. When spirit possession is at issue, the need to demystify analytical terms and resist being seduced into thinking that they dispassionately reflect reality is especially keen. The Otherness of the phenomenon demands explanation. Yet the very categories that describe the field are inescapably ideological and preconstructed (27:189; 38a), freighted with cultural meanings and valuations, and laden with traces of their repeated reformulations as a subject for scientific investigation over time. Although it may be necessary to work with such categories in the interests of comparison, it is not necessary to concede that they transparently capture an essence, an autonomous human behavior.

Several recent studies (eg. 20, 37, 38a, 39, 93, 114, 118, 123, 124, 173, 203, 212) have tried to break through prior restrictions to examine possession on its own terms in the societies where it is found. These studies locate it in wider social and historical contexts, describing how it acts as a prism through which naturalized constructs (e.g. of person, gender, or body) are refracted or undone. This review places such developments in context, traces some principal trajectories in the field, and suggests where they might be going. The literature clusters around salient issues and does not parcel out into neat subdivisions of concern. I present the issues accordingly, risking an impression of scholarly integration that may not in fact exist. Recent reviews on shamanism (8) and the body (145) inevitably complement the topics and literatures addressed here.

PARAMETERS

This review covers mainly English language sources, and I am convinced it would be possible to write a rather different review citing only sources in French (cf 51; see 189), German (114), or Portuguese (see references in 35, 212). Though found in many societies, phenomena glossed as possession and/or possession trance (30, 31, a distinction critiqued in 121) are manifestly

different in each; we do well to remember this when tempted to ascribe to them a unitary character.

In distribution, possession cuts a broad swath through Asia, Africa, Afro-America, and Latin America, with some incidence in Oceania and historical and contemporary (chiefly Mediterranean) Europe. As Karp has noted, "a single researcher would have difficulty in reviewing the literature on spirit possession in Africa alone" (99:91). Africa is therefore a good place to start; see references 4, 13, 18, 20, 39, 43, 48, 60, 62, 63, 75–77, 90, 93, 99, 107, 118, 123, 124, 126, 134, 139, 140, 150, 161, 163, 164, 193, 196, 203, 211, 217, 220. Some of the better known African cults or terms for spirits are *bori*, *zar*, *sheitani*, *ngoma*, *hauka*, *mhondoro*, and *mzimu*. As in other regions, terms if not pantheons often overlap and interpenetrate (77, 93, 140). Possession forms similar to and even historically continuous with those in northern Africa are found in the Levant, Arabia, and Iran (7, 43, 94). In the Americas, mainly in Brazil and the Caribbean where African influence has been considerable, better known varieties are Vodou, Umbanda, Candomblé, Shango, Kardecismo (see 35–37, 58, 82, 87, 92, 99a, 99b, 112, 115, 144, 176, 209, 212, 213). For Asia, see references 3, 38a, 68, 81, 88, 98, 153, 160, 165, 168, 171, 173, 174, 180, 191, 198, 201. In East Asia spirit mediumship is usually described as shamanism (86, 101, 111; see 8:318–319). Examples from Oceania are reference 192 and *Pacific Spirits*, a forthcoming collection edited by A Howard & J Mageo. For southern Europe, see references 15 and 179. Possession narratives have in some cases eclipsed the possession experience (179; see also 45). On Catholic Pentecostalism and charismatic healing, see references 50 and 52–55.

An assumption, now widely disputed, that spirit possession constitutes an independent category of behavior or natural field of inquiry has predictably spawned some influential typologies seeking to transcend folk epistemologies and provide an objective framework for analysis. Lewis (135, 137, 138) encompasses shamanism and possession under the rubric *ecstatic religion*, but distinguishes between main or central morality cults and peripheral ones that are incidental to a society's moral system. De Heusch (56) differentiates between exorcism, which expels intrusive spirits, and adorcism, which accommodates and establishes them in a medium. He further distinguishes shamanism from possession, each of which has an authentic or ideal type corresponding to one of these treatment vectors. The result is a complex "geometry of the soul" (56:158), a four-part structure in which each form is a cultural, historical, or logical transformation of the other. Bourguignon (30, 31) has found correlations between type of social organization and the presence of possession or possession trance, with simpler, more individualistic societies less likely to evince possession trance than are those in which strong social hierarchies exist (59, 194; see also 44, 144). Kramer's (114) recent permutation of the center-periphery model distinguishes between charismatic cults that generalize mean-

ings and foster social unity, and acephalous cults that emphasize social differentiation; instead of morality *per se*, personal and political identity are the salient issues here (see also 190).

Typologies, of course, are achieved at the expense of context and inevitably reflect the interests, values, and fascinations of the analyst's society. Though heuristic, they are often mistaken for explanation or interpretation when applied, and using them as predictors can blind researchers to the complexities of the situations they describe. Indeed, Janzen recently argued that the foregrounding of possession trance in studies of sub-Saharan African therapeutics has greatly exaggerated its significance there (93:140).

THERAPY, RELIGION, AND COMMUNICATION

Spirit possession research has been characterized by a fundamental tension between reductive, naturalizing or rationalizing approaches on the one hand and contextualizing, more phenomenological approaches on the other. Studies constructed along lines of the former are more readily amenable to comparison, but insofar as they render phenomena in Western commonsense or scientific terms, they suspend epistemological inquiry of those terms (221) and are at best incomplete, at worst culturally solipsistic.

Csordas (51) tracks the rationalizing tendency by charting a progressive medicalization of possession in the Anglo-American literature. He suggests that, in contrast to the majority of studies in French (eg. 14, 129, 157, 159, 187, 189), the religious, aesthetic, and quotidian significances of possession were repeatedly eschewed in deference to its function as group therapy (64, 102, 156, 183), even when informants described their experiences as religious (46, 182).

Lewis's (135, 138) cross-cultural account lent sociological support to the medical tack by distinguishing central possession cults, where possession is a positive experience involving spirits who uphold the moral order (ancestors, culture heroes) and typically speak through men, from peripheral ones, where possession by amoral spirits is locally regarded as a form of illness that typically afflicts women and other individuals of marginal or subordinate status. This model and its assumptions guided a generation of scholarship in which peripheral possession signaled personal or social pathology, eclipsing investigation of its wider social, cultural, and aesthetic significances (38a, 51), and preventing possession systems from being discussed on their own terms (121). Instead, attention was directed to instrumental, strategic uses of consensual beliefs by socially disadvantaged (so-called status-deprived) individuals who, in claiming to be seized by spirits, indirectly brought public attention to their plight and potentially achieved some redress (eg. 78).

With Ward (214, 215) religion fades into the background and all forms of possession are reduced to medical terms. She argues that central possession is a ritually-induced therapeutic defense, while peripheral possession is "induced by individuals' stress" (214:158) and provides a cultural explanation for psychopathology. The road of rationalization heads deeper into the individual and now physiochemical body with Kehoe & Giletti's (100) calcium deficiency hypothesis and its subsequent refinement (185; for responses see 33, 136). Reductive tendencies culminated in a recent, if culturally sensitive, proposal to include Trance and Possession Disorder in the official nosology of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV), based on a reified center-periphery scheme in which peripheral possession indexes aberrance requiring therapeutic intervention (see 38; for responses see 5, 22, 32, 105, 109, 113, 122, 141).

The cumulative direction of these models owes much to their sometimes unacknowledged concern with understanding trance rather than possession (i.e. behavior rather than belief). Yet few researchers regard trance as inherently pathological (9, 38, 216, 219; see 8). Lambek (121), echoing Csordas (51) in a plea for more contextually appropriate, balanced, open-ended accounts of possession and arguing for firmer recognition that trance, too, is culturally mediated and socially tuned, pithily compared the relationship between them to that between marriage (a social institution) and sex (the behavior it legitimizes) (p.46; see also 16, 69). Rouget's (189) cross-cultural analysis of the role of music and rhythm in inducing trance points to socially learned aesthetic cueing, thus, challenging Neher's (166) auditory-driving hypothesis. Even viewing trance as unconscious protest invokes an idealistic, agentive concept of self that some say cannot be presumed (e.g. 212). Moreover, because the body is both the existential ground of belief and the locus of engagement with the spirit world, it is not surprising that possession is often expressed in physical terms, as somatic change or illness (20, 40, 47, 98, 118, 121, 170, 171). The fact that possession [or pre-possession (203, see also 29)] is phrased as illness does not imply that these states are fully transitive, nor should it foreclose our questioning the meanings of illness, possession, or spirits in specific local contexts (20, 51, 123). It should not blind us to how religion and medicine subtly interweave (51, 93, 161).

Studies of Brazilian cults deemed peripheral (vis-a-vis Christianity) have largely eschewed a medical focus in favor of a religious one (e.g. 14, 125, 127, 213). Several factors are probably relevant here: significant middle class and professional participation in these cults; their importance, in part through the legitimating efforts of anthropologists, in shaping Brazilian nationalism (hence their doubtful marginality); their text-based cosmologies; and their historical links to the Catholic Church which, from the nineteenth century, exercised weak control over urban slave populations mainly through voluntary brotherhoods organized on the basis of race and ethnic affiliation (35). These condi-

tions provided an environment in which African religious practices were maintained under a cloak of Christianity and became merged with Catholic belief. Although religious interpretations would seem consonant with Brazilian realities, healing and spirituality are in fact reciprocal in Candomblé (212), Kardecismo (82), and Umbanda (35). In the last this takes a biomedical idiom: Umbanda mediums wear nurses uniforms; spirits acting through their mediums hold clinics for spiritual healing; and if biomedical attention is required, spirits help to arrange it (35).

Publication of Crapanzano & Garrison's collection *Case Studies in Spirit Possession* (49) reflected a change in English-language studies, a waning of medicalized and individualized paradigms and a shift toward more context replete accounts. When Leacock (128) chastised the volume's emphasis on ethnopsychological rather than religious elucidations of possession, Garrison & Crapanzano (71) responded, "Why limit it to a form of religious behavior? What indeed is the virtue of placing it in a Western category at all? What is important is to understand its multiple significance within the particular contexts in which it occurs" (71:424). In his introductory essay, Crapanzano (47) suggested that possession be viewed as "an idiom for articulating a certain range of experience" (47:10; see also 12, 170). Seeing possession as an idiom of communication enjoins consideration of how the idiom is constructed and used in specific societies; it requires acknowledgement of the existence of spirits in the believer's world and asserts that possession is about meaning. The move echoes a discipline swing away from positivist, decontextualizing approaches (including structuralism in its epistemological guise) toward cultural interpretation (eg. 72).

Crapanzano's poignant interactive biography of Tuhami, a Moroccan man married to a she-demon whose victims seek healing from the Hamadsha, a popular Islamic brotherhood (48), requires him to question the ethnopsychological validity of notions such as projection and the presumed boundedness of the self. Where spirits are consensually understood to enter human bodies, it may be more appropriate to speak of introjection (47). Crapanzano suggests that Tuhami is afforded a "shift of responsibility...from self to Other" (48:20) through the possession idiom; he is able to objectify his feelings "in terms that transcend him"; yet the result of his demonic relationship is a "frozen identity," not curative transformation (48:86, 151; see also 179).

Obeyesekere's (171) sophisticated study of Sri Lankan ascetics possessed by ghosts and avatars of deities in the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon grapples with how cultural symbols inform and are informed by individual experience. Adopting a psychoanalytic perspective (as much to place himself in reciprocal idiomatic relationship to his informants as to universalize their problems), he demonstrates how matted hair, a sign of the god's favor (possession), is a

locally meaningful idiom for articulating travail; yet, it is created anew by each who avails herself of it, and continues to have practical significance only as long as this is the case. Here the possessed are indeed unwell, and mainly subordinate women, but the analysis surpasses a static relative-status model to emphasize the flexibility and ambiguity of the spirit idiom, its capacity to enable personal growth, and the optional, manipulable nature of "personal symbols": socially and emotionally meaningful at once. These insights relieve what in less able hands might have been a reductive analysis insensitive to local concerns; instead, Obeyesekere demonstrates the potential congruity of psychoanalytic and religious interpretations.

Obeyesekere and Crapanzano focus on those who are clearly troubled. Lambek (117–121, 123), on the other hand, shows how in Mayotte possession operates as a system of communication whether or not one is, by Western definitions, distressed (see also 3, 86, 90). Lambek regards Mayotte possession as a complex semi-independent cultural domain that, lacking direct equivalent in the Euro-American West, should not be reduced to naturalized Western forms. He productively likens it to a text or genre with its own interpretive conventions. An emphasis on analytic form rather than categorical substance links his approach firmly with those of Crapanzano and Obeyesekere. And Lambek takes seriously Crapanzano's point (47) that an adequate account of possession must grant the spirits' existence in lives of their hosts. Spirits, he notes, are social beings who interact with their hosts and hosts' families not just during public ceremonies, but in everyday domestic life as well, where their presence enriches and modulates human relationships, contributing to health (117, 118, 120; see also 63). Moreover, because spirits' identities and behaviors contrast with those normative for Mayotte, they furnish an implicit commentary on human order and morality. Possession intersects with numerous cultural domains including medicine and religion, but is itself reducible to none.

Kapferer's (96, 98) analysis of demonic exorcism in Buddhist Sri Lanka is rooted firmly in the context of colonial history and social class. Sinhalese Buddhism is premised on an elaborate, coherent cosmos with humans situated between superordinate deities and subordinate demons. As a legacy of colonial revision and rationalization, the middle class devote themselves to the deities, key symbols of cosmic power and domination. Practices of working-class and peasants, however, "address the pantheon in its hierarchical totality" (98:48). Demonic attack contradicts the order of the cosmos in which demons are subjugated and restrained; it represents the unleashed hidden power of the lower orders, and is thus "metacommunicative of the dynamics of class" (98:51). Kapferer shows how the intricate rites of exorcism give external form to the victim's existential state of solitude and fear. Through music, song, dance, masked drama, and possession trance, the demonic temporarily mani-

feats itself in the human world, gradually drawing the audience into the victim's experience. Having linked their perceptions, the ritual shifts to a comic mode that, in lampooning the quotidian world (including bureaucracy and social hierarchy), cleverly traps the demons, reasserts cultural order, and leads victim and audience back into the world of shared understandings (cf 208). Kapferer highlights the role of cultural aesthetics in effecting personal transformation (see also 81, 165, 186), without losing sight of wider political, economic, religious, or healing dimensions of the rite.

Anthropological accounts of spirit possession are no longer dominated by a few linked master narratives that endeavor to make sense of it by reducing it to behavior explicable in (largely unexamined) universal and substantially medical terms, to discover its presumed logical basis as folk psychiatry or status compensation. If loss of faith in structural and functionalist models is attributed to their limitation in enabling ethnographers to grasp the whole of what they've observed, or to a general postmodern malaise, the result is the same. Reductive models ultimately fail to comprehend phenomena that, as imaginative productions, evade all rational containment (23, also 39:263). Cults and the spirits within them continuously reinvent themselves (eg. 20, 106–108, 150, 151). By heeding cultural logics and attending to histories, the literature discussed below implicitly takes an extensive or expansive approach compatible or homologous with possession's own epistemological and etiological vectors, whose elusive dynamic was neatly captured in Matsuoka's study of fox possession in Japan (153). In these studies possession takes shape as a form of cultural knowledge and a means of knowing and healing, whose direction is both extensive and incorporative. Unlike biomedicine, which collapses into the body,¹ possession widens out from the body and self into other domains of knowledge and experience—other lives, societies, historical moments, levels of cosmos, and religions—catching these up and embodying them. Their direction ensures that possession cults are flexible and continuously transformative. It enables adherents to explore multiple refractions of order and morality; to distill the lessons of history; to sift, evaluate, and situate external influences; and to respond. Phenomena we bundle loosely as possession are part of daily experience, not just dramatic ritual. They have to do with one's relationship to the world, with selfhood—personal, ethnic, political, and moral identity. In several societies they have much to do with gender and subordination, though in less instrumental ways than were formerly supposed.

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But see 149 on the ambiguous relationship between the body and the world in electron micrographs, or 148 on social entities within the body depicted in immunological research reports. And an extensive direction does not characterize all forms of 'ecstatic' healing (see 116).

GENDER, POWER, EMBODIMENT, AND RESISTANCE

Conflict models depicting possession as women's indirect claim for redress (135, 138, 139, 218) tacitly depend for their authority on the perspectives of socially dominant men and the assumptions of an androcentric anthropology (20, 199). They leave much to be explained: By whose evaluation are women marginal? Does economic or political subordination fully determine women's positions in other spheres of life? Most importantly, what do women and men themselves think possession is about? And how are we to make sense of possession forms, of spirits themselves?

Concern for context has meant attending to gender imagery and dynamics in the search to understand why women preponderate in possession cults. Taking seriously the givenness of spirits in the everyday lives of their hosts entails consideration of women's and men's cosmological statuses, their culturally attributed abilities, vulnerabilities, and constraints (20, 26, 98, 118, 123, 158, 165, 167, 180, 195, 198). Kapferer points out that because Sinhalese women are considered more firmly attached than men to relationships of the human world, their femininity culturally prefigures them as being prone to demonic attack (98:140; see also 20). Elsewhere such prefiguring depicts women as stronger than men, more capable of enduring hardship, taking responsibility, suffering the privations that spirits exact (37, 131). In Islamic societies where traffic with spirits is formally discouraged, men's public religiosity may require them to handle possession via exorcism instead of mollification, or refrain from acknowledging themselves to be possessed (20, 118, 123). The idea that possession is a sex-war salvo implies that the genders are homogeneous groups. Yet researchers find considerable disagreement among various concatenations of the religious and those they consider impious, women and men, old and young, over how to cope with intrusive spirits (20, 26, 77, 123, 150, 197, 198). Not long ago Lewis (137:106) wondered whether *zar* possession and Islam in north-east Africa might be gender complementary domains of religious responsibility. This has been confirmed to a degree (20, 40, 106, 107). However, the relationship of Islam to *zar* and other forms of possession—as of Christianity to Vodou or Candomblé (37, 212)—is subtle and historically complex (4, 20, 75–77, 123, 137, 146, 150), and it would be unwise to polarize them as gender distinct domains of knowledge or activity (cf also 152, 181).

Several studies describe how possession's instrumental and articulatory dimensions interlace, emphasizing the benefits of membership in a group or the idiom's flexibility in shifting between rural and urban milieux. Zebola possession in rural Zaire is family focused, with afflicting spirits likely to be ancestral and symptoms well-patterned and interpretable; but in Kinshasa, where maintenance of extended kinship is curtailed, spirits are more autono-

mous, oriented to individual needs, and symptoms are more diffuse (44). Cult membership can provide not only health care but also important social networks for women, enabling them to glean information and practical support that is particularly valuable in urban settings where kin are not close by (41, 106–108, 130, 131). Spring (199) shows how a women's possession cult among the Luvale (Zambia) positively addresses ailments affecting their fertility and responsibilities as mothers; healing rituals are occasions when matrilineal kinswomen otherwise separated by virilocality can learn from each others' expertise. Some authors note the use of kin terms to describe cult leaders or address fellow participants (35, 37, 39, 92, 106, 107, 212), which suggests that such groups are, in a sense, reconstituted families. In Brazil the role of spirit healer has been considered an extension of women's domestic service into the public domain, financially more rewarding than housewifery, and entailing less dependence on men (131; see also 37). The issue that some possessed women go on to become healers who attract large and sometimes lucrative followings has been raised frequently (17, 42, 86, 101, 107, 197). Still, leadership roles in possession cults are sometimes filled by men (4, 35, 106–108, 131, 212), and DG Brown's (35) observation that male leaders in Umbanda are nodes of articulation between the cult and the wider polity evokes a domestic-public gender dichotomy familiar to Euro-American societies.

If we focus on what women do, rather than what they cannot, we find them working in the spiritual realm on behalf of themselves, their families, households, or communities, channeling spirits' assistance or heading off their wrath, protecting future generations, even protesting injustice. Here so-called peripheral possession is concerned with social domains for which women are typically assigned primary responsibility: the maintenance of kin ties and family health, the social reproduction of their communities, often in the face of radical social change and erosion of prior supports (4, 20, 37, 42, 99, 117, 120, 165). It is about morality and social identity. Scholars responsive to the insights of feminist anthropology bracket the issue of instrumentality without denying the relevance of subordination per se, and endeavor to situate women's possession in wider social discourses and practices of power (19, 20, 37, 86, 101, 161, 173, 174, 196, 197).

My own work on the *zar* cult in an endogamous Sudanese village stresses the relationship between the informal logic of everyday life and that of possession as a subordinate (or subaltern) discourse (19–21, 24). Drawing on Bourdieu's (27) elaboration of the concept of *habitus*, but also on the insights of Gramsci (80) and Foucault (65–67), I point to a fundamental relationship between women's embodiment of gender-appropriate dispositions—most patently instilled through pharaonic circumcision—and the proclivity to become possessed. Women's bodies are both metonyms and icons of the enclosed, fertile, moral village, repositories of its salient values and more vulnerable

than men to their rupture. A threat to women's fertility is a serious threat to their gendered sense of self, but also to the community as a whole (see also 42). Women are responsible for ceremonies and practices ensuring the continuity of social life. Men are responsible for those that extend beyond the village—to other groups, places, and the afterlife assured by Islam. Gender relations are thus both complementary and politically asymmetrical.

Zar spirits are incorporeal social creatures. They are culturally foreign, often the parallels of historical humans, and always contradictory, but firmly of this world, thus, the province of women to treat. And it is women whom spirits most afflict, mainly with fertility problems, in a bid to gain access to the material world through rituals of appeasement. There they descend into their hosts, dramatizing their Otherness, playfully and frighteningly opening a space for reflection and ambiguity by decentering or reshaping accepted meanings. The possessed learn a spirit anti-language that metaphorically alters quotidian terms (20, 21; cf 85; see also 132). The rite is patterned on the local wedding and burlesques its assertions of gender propriety and morality. Participants are engaged bodily, emotionally, and intellectually. They are expected to acquire a visceral sense of the spirits' distinctiveness from themselves, yet to recall their experiences during trance and the messages of spirits manifest in other women's bodies. *Zar* is at once a healing rite and a parodical means to domesticate male and alien powers, an ambiguous metacommentary on local morality, and a history and anthropology of life in colonial and post-colonial Sudan. I accent its comedic and aesthetic dimensions by comparing it to satirical allegory, where the historical consciousness of the village is vividly dramatized in challenging but also reinvigorating its embodied, engendered, moral order (19–21, 26).

A similar concern for community, commentary, and morality informs KM Brown's account of a Vodou priestess and her family in Haiti and New York (37). Juxtaposing analysis, narrative, and fictionalized distillations of stories told about the family's forebearers, KM Brown convincingly portrays Vodou religion as experienced, as "embedded in the vicissitudes of particular lives" (37:14, 15), including her own. She disputes the view that Vodou *lwa* are amoral, observing that, like humans, they are willful beings capable of good and evil, "larger than life but not other than life," whose benevolence demands human attention and care (37:6; see also 20, 217). Here more clearly perhaps than in *zar*, women, but also men, live with and through the spirits. Everyday acts are given meaning by the spirits' insistence on being served, and their ministering of guidance, healing, and protection in return. A helpful spirit might spontaneously assume the place of its host in a disempowering situation. Like *zar* spirits in Sudan, *lwa* condense and represent in their complex, contradictory personalities the lessons of history, but in Haiti these are the hard and bitter lessons of slavery, hunger, perennial violence. Spirits "bind up the

wounds" of social change (37:37) and evolve in tandem with it. KM Brown's portrait of Vodou as subtle wisdom and practical activity linking humans to powers beyond themselves engages fully with its multiplicity and its morality.

Other recent accounts of spirit possession affirm it to be a gendered moral activity in specific locales. Werbner (217) points out that among the Kalanga of Zimbabwe, virilocally married kinswomen offer themselves to be possessed by "lions" (capricious, wild, and predatory demons) in order to thwart danger and cleanse the domestic domain. Skultans (198) writes about a healing temple in Maharashtra, India, where women enter therapeutic but painful trance on behalf of their possessed kin, thus shifting to themselves the direction of spirit attack (see also 180). In Korea, women's shamanic rituals ensure family well-being by appeasing household gods lodged in the structure of the house itself. These rituals are, as Kendall claims, religiously crucial if less accessible than men's ancestral rites (101; see also 86). In these cases, disorder is circumvented or transformed by female kin through what has been called peripheral possession. On the other side of the ledger, cremations in Hindu Nepal that fail to transform a suicide's spirit are reperformed by inducing the spirit to possess a close male agnate who, dancing entranced on the coals of a sacrificial fire, effects the spirit's transition to ancestorhood and rebirth (81). The first three cases here differ from the last not on the grounds of moral centrality but on those of gender and gendered domains of concern; apropos of this, Kendall notes that the few Korean men who become shamans must wear female dress to perform their work (101:26 ff).

Zar spirits in Sudan are often inherited matrilineally. Their movement from one relative to the next charts an embodied woman-centered history opposed to regnant patrilineality, echoing local conditions before the coming of Islam, and affirming current realities of labor emigration (20, 24; cf 220). KM Brown likewise finds parallel spirit matriline buried beneath official kin structures among practitioners of Haitian Vodou (37:16). Korean data suggest that important links between generations of in-marrying women are formed through their relationships with household gods (101, 86), although wives' own ancestral spirits might also afflict their children and husbands' kin (101). Pandolfi's (177–179) insightful accounts of the discourse of women's suffering in southern Italy are germane to these observations. Tarantula possession (tarantism), which Pandolfi observed in the 1960s, no longer happens to rural women; nonetheless, it is still expressed in narrative accounts of their bodies in which iconic language links "a heritage of symptoms in the maternal line" (177:264). What Pandolfi describes is a kind of verbalized possession of women by other women, their history, and the history of the village as a whole (179). It is a politics of presence, of individualized yet also generalized resistance to domination on a number of levels at once. Here the shift from active to verbal possession mirrors the extension of state hegemony, such that bodies im-

mersed-in-the-world become bodies increasingly fragmented, bounded, and controlled; bodies that have partially internalized a reifying biomedical idiom (see also 208).

Indeed, a view now widely held is that possession is an embodied critique of colonial, national, or global hegemonies whose abrasions are deeply, but not exclusively, felt by women. Morsy (161), writing of northern Egypt, links changes in the epidemiology of spirit possession to the context of "dependent capitalist development and unequal exchange" (161:207) in which growing participation in the international petroleum labor market is transforming gender dynamics and kin-based property relations. Ong (173, 174) investigates the case of young women employed by multinational electronics firms who periodically experience possession trance on the factory floor (see also 3, 195). Mass possessions express muted opposition to inequitable, inhumane treatment and are the spiritual consequences of violating moral boundaries of gender. Managers who concede the spirits' reality by exorcising factory buildings persist in rationalizing the incidents as only, for example, psychiatric or dietary disorders, thus reproducing the logic of global capitalism as it intersects with local beliefs in producing a possession response (174).

Comaroff's subtle, historically-grounded account of Tshidi Zionists in South Africa (39) documents how profoundly Tshidi categories of subjectivity and practice—time, space, gender, person, and productivity—have been transformed in interaction with those of the white elite. Zionist practice attempts to reverse colonial reifications by subjecting such symbols and values "to indigenously derived notions of practical control" (39:193). Colonial and precolonial Tshidi concepts are combined with the body language of European oppression—uniforms, mitres, staffs, and insignia—in an imaginative but acutely serious bricolage. Christian pentecostalism resonates with indigenous views of pragmatic spirit force (39:186). During ceremonies, adherents possessed by the Holy Spirit channel its power toward the healing of bodies personal and social. This process is not unambiguous. Those who enter Zion undergo a "holistic transformation of personal identity" (39:221), but do not fully image themselves anew. Hierarchies of gender in the wider society are, for instance, reproduced in possession forms. Yet Comaroff challenges utilitarian views that depict symbolic resistance as ineffectual. She asserts that Zionism and similar iconoclastic movements are both politically and imaginatively engaged with the wider society in "commenting upon relations of inequality both local and more global, and communicating [their] message of defiance beyond [their] own limited confines" (39:262; cf 193). Together such movements constitute "a second global culture, lying in the shadow of the first" (39:254).

Most would agree that possession cults are or have become historically sensitive modes of cultural resistance (see also 36, 202, 203); others document their potential for violent praxis. Echard (60) reminds us that *bori* spirits led a

revolt against the colonial regime in Niger in 1926. Involvement of Shona hero-ancestor spirits in nationalist movements that defied white settler rule is well documented (69, 70, 74, 184), as is the relationship between Zimbabwe's guerrilla forces and spirit mediums during the subsequent civil war (124, 184). Lan (124), like Comaroff, illustrates how spiritually-reformed bodily practice is an assertion of power and identity. Speaking through their mediums, Shona ancestors offered protection to the guerrillas if the latter followed a dietary and behavioral regimen that identified them simultaneously with the precolonial ancestral past and the wild. Spiritual endorsement was crucial to the legitimacy popularly accorded the guerrillas' violent roles.

That spirit movements are often suppressed or subject to strict political controls should dispel any doubt that states perceive them as subversive (see 26, 35, 86, 126, 134, 164, 203). In reshaping lives and communities, engendering a sense of identity, cohesion, and self-respect, and shattering naturalized categories, such movements threaten the reproduction and maintenance of docile bodies, work and gender disciplines, and the like. Their charismatic nature confronts and confounds established power relations (39:186). Their elusiveness is also structural. Parodical spirits appear or historically shift identity with the vagaries of domination (20, 106, 134, 150, 151, 196, 202–204, 212). And as Masquelier observes, they may even resist being objectified by their human hosts (151).

Although some possession cults are recent and several may be spreading (35, 106, 133, 134, 146), others seem to be waning, curtailed less, perhaps, by overt suppression than by the quiet revolution of capitalist reification and the contradictory marginalizing and homogenizing pressures of pluralistic states. Sharp (197), for instance, analyzes Sakalava women possessed by royal ancestors who seek to dispossess themselves because of the hardship and expense that mediumship entails. Avenues open to them are psychiatry and Protestant exorcism, both of which enjoin repudiation of Sakalava identity. Yet the latter is more effective because it does not deny the reality of their original experience and, through conversion, provides a plausible alternate life. Steedly (200, 201), taking her lead from Jameson, discusses the effects of religious rationalization in urban Sumatra where, under Indonesian state policy, *adat* is separated from *belief* and reduced to secular custom. Those who continue to venerate ancestors or placate spirits must do so under the aegis of an officially sanctioned monotheistic faith. Given Sumatra's religious pluralism, spirit healers cannot rely on support from the patient's full range of kin, which jeopardizes ritual efficacy. Social and cultural integration is now a nostalgic goal of these rites. Instead, Steedly claims, they have begun to work reductively, to contain social and cultural tensions. Symbols and spirit offerings shorn of their contingent, kin contextual significances become "self-contained moral objects" (200:850), moral fetishes. The flow of experience fragmented

into its component parts is thereby rendered manageable (200:850). For Afro-America both Littlewood (144) and DG Brown (35) have noted a gradual and official disaggregation of religion from healing as the latter has been naturalized and spirits absorbed into the Christian pantheon as deities or devils (cf 83). Similar changes have occurred in Sudan. Kenyon (107) describes a successful woman healer possessed by a male spirit whose characteristics are similar to those of a well-known *zar*, but who speaks as a servant of Allah. And following the 1983 declaration of Islamic law, *zar* itself began a gradual transformation. In the late 1980s several urban cults distanced themselves from Islam by registering as national folk theater groups (89; cf 35, 93, 126, 212, 213) or professionalizing under the leadership of a male healer (108). After seizing power in 1989 the current Islamist regime banned possession ceremonies as heretical and superstitious (26; cf 77). But in Toronto, *zar* has surfaced among the regime's female refugees as part of a conscious strategy to create an African, not Islamic, national identity (26).

Still, fragmenting and objectifying trends do not go unopposed. During rituals Kalanga women possessed by "lions" wear store-bought cloths with lion designs or *LION* printed on them. Werbner (217) suggests that such semantic conversions (217:69) deobjectify trade goods and help countermand the threat commodity relations pose to domestic morality (cf 45). Masquelier (151) notes the emergence of a new group of spirits in Niger who contrast with the avaricious *bori* in stoically rejecting Western goods and modern conveniences. In Madagascar, spirits of royal Sakalava ancestors impose tastes and taboos on their mediums that effectively bar their participation in the exploitative plantation economy (62, 196). Shona mediums hearkening to ancestral ways revile commodities produced by the white-dominated industrial establishment, whetting people's consciousness of the oppression it has brought (124). In short, spirit practices and narratives often interrupt the extension of Western hegemonies by refusing to endorse the naturalization of the commodity form (see also 45, 173, 174, 191, 209, 210).

Comaroff's insight that iconoclastic movements form a global subculture "lying in the shadow of the first" (39: 254) needs to be taken seriously. It is here that gender and subaltern resistances intersect. Possession cults are embedded in local contexts that are never only local and are always complex. With other spiritual philosophies (cf 209), they provide ways of understanding, trying out, coming to terms with, and contesting modernity, colonialism, capitalism, and religious and other hegemonies. They allow the implicit synthesis of the foreign with the local and historically relevant while reshaping all in the process. They heal and they teach; they are intellectually empowering (e.g. 193). They may pave the way for overt political struggle (207:319); yet, they might also (re)insert disaffected individuals into the very structures of domination they contest (20, 200; cf 97, 208). A spirit's host or medium is a

malleable metonym for her society, both expressing and embodying its moral conundrums (19, 20, 39, 195, 196). It is hardly surprising that some spirits should fetishize the past in resisting an inequitable present or conventionalizing what is new or that others should abhor change, and still others be hedonistic and enamored of novelty. Because possession is about morality, it is crucial that neither they nor their hosts be *indifferent* to novelty (20, 118, 124, 151, 160, 176, 200, 203, 204; cf 114).

SELF AND OTHER: IDENTITY, AESTHETICS, MIMESIS, AND EMBODIMENT (AGAIN)

An issue threading throughout the literature is that of selfhood or identity: how possession creatively resituates individuals in a profoundly alienating or confusing world (19, 20, 29, 37, 38a, 39, 48, 117, 118, 120, 121, 123, 167, 171, 203, 204). Taking the givenness of spirits as a matter of salience, three parties of variable inclusiveness are implicated in any possession episode: a self, other humans, and external powers. The ritual reordering of their relationships is a process of self-construction and healing that takes place on several planes at once.

Kapferer (95, 98) provisionally mobilizes Mead's theory of social dynamics to analyze how the experience of demonic possession in Sri Lanka is culturally understood. He suggests that the reciprocity of perspectives constituting the victim's identity is disrupted by her illness, dissolved or negated by pain and the social isolation that intimations of demonic agency entail. Such conditions impel loss of the ability to treat herself as an object (95:116). As the mutual interpenetration of self with social other that comprises the *me* abates, a demonically overdetermined *I* takes hold; this is both experienced and objectified during ritual demonic trance. A successful exorcism distances *I* from *me* and reconstitutes the dynamics of self and now social, not demonic, Other.

Although Mead's model is derived from Euro-American templates of contestable universality (and Kapferer's analysis must be held to the same account), its terms are ambiguous enough to encourage consideration of how the parameters of selfhood might shift or be constituted differently in societies other than the anthropologist's own. My analysis of *zar* possession in Sudan uses a similar heuristic (19, 20), noting that instead of overwhelming subjectivity, what seems problematic for women there is a culturally overdetermined sense of self, an inherently fertile, objectified, yet fully embodied self-image that the vicissitudes of life make it impossible for them to sustain. In contrast to the exorcised Sri Lankan, the *zar* victim acquires a pantheon of spirits who permanently attend her self. And unlike her equally well socialized kin, the spirits are ineluctably Other; they form a non-self component of her person

that continuously affirms the veracity of her self by providing it negative ground and assuming some blame for its violation. De Heusch's distinction between exorcistic and adorcistic possession is relevant here (56).

Several authors remark on how possession thickens interpersonal ties. Many spirits have coherent public identities and, as social actors, mediate among kin. Lambek, for instance, broadens the self-other dialogue in Mayotte to include domestic interactions between spirits and the spouses of their hosts (117, 118, 123). Elsewhere he notes that a spirit who possesses two generations of kin both articulates social continuity and becomes a reciprocally internalized third party enabling them to negotiate their self-constitutive interaction or maintain it when separated by distance or even death (120, 123). In rural Sudan, where the density of localized kin ties is pronounced, possession by the same or different spirits enables kinswomen to open up convoluted, overlapping relationships produced by endogamous intermarriages (20, 24). Spirit inheritance often defies politically dominant forms or furnishes alternative genealogical connections by which to map out or modify effective alignments of kin (13, 20, 24, 37, 69, 77, 94, 106, 107, 120, 123). Among Kel Fadey Twareg, however, women's spirits validate a dominant yet threatened matrilineal ideology (220); and Songhay spirits reiterate patrilineal sociality (203). Whether possession clarifies, modulates, or obfuscates kin ties, it invariably denaturalizes them, and undermines their givenness.

Spirit assertions of difference or identity are metastatements: coded moral and political acts of the humans they possess, derived from thinking about one's relationships to others by thinking through the Other writ large. This point accommodates a widening of perspective from specific spirits to their imagined worlds, which are in various and subtle ways alien to their hosts'. To some investigators spirit mythologies constitute reservoirs of cultural knowledge, about illnesses and medicines (eg. 169, 175, 203), but also about ethnicity, history, domination, social propriety, and caprice (20, 37, 92, 118, 176, 196, 202, 203, 212). During possession rites when human and spirit realities most obviously interpenetrate—or fuse, as Stoller suggests (203)—this knowledge is momentarily embodied, expressed indirectly via the images and antics of the alien performance, and undoubtedly changed. Without denying their seriousness to participants, possession ceremonies have been described in aesthetic terms as theater, allegory, satire, and burlesque (20, 37, 98, 118, 129, 203), as witty and historically perceptive metacommentaries on the human world.

Inspired by Bakhtin (10, 11), Wafer (212) extends this analogy, claiming that spirits in Brazilian Candomblé display elements of the carnivalesque. In that these spirits are images of what Bakhtin calls "the grotesque body," they challenge the dominant social order and regime of truth. Unlike the "bourgeois body," which Wafer describes as atomized, completed, and the locus of social

control, reductive analysis, and fixed meanings,² "the grotesque body" is open to the world. It goes out to the world through its appendages, allowing the world to enter via its apertures and convexities (212:59); it is unrestrained and unbounded. Candomblé spirits, like those in other cults, are variations on the grotesque. Some are embodied (and thus behave) as unsocialized children, others are socialized but perverse, and still others are oxymoronic, naive, and only incipiently social (212:62 ff). Wafer suggests that Candomblé plays with and across social, spiritual, and physical boundaries. And it resists formal analysis, for one can never stand outside its game; it is "an interplay of identities that are constantly being tested, circulated, transformed" (212:182; see also 20, 37, 118, 123, 203).

From the evidence above it is clear that aesthetic and performance dimensions of possession are inseparable from its spirituality, its capacity to reformulate identity or to heal. This observation leads to a consideration of what may be the most important but potentially most problematic addition to our current understanding of possession, the newly reinvigorated concept of *mimesis* or quotation.

In a recently translated work on possession and art in Africa, Kramer (114) explodes the category spirit possession as conventionally portrayed. His approach is comparative but not universalizing. Rather than presume a naturally bounded subject matter, he begins with an image found in several African possession cults, the red fez—one of the details of colonial habit and dress that was seized upon as crystallizing Europeanness (cf. 143), and is still commonly requested by spirits in possession rites throughout the continent. Kramer notes that just as Europeans use images of the Other in articulating their sense of self, so do Africans (114:2). The point is hardly news. Yet in following this lead while staying close to cultural logics, Kramer productively links phenomena that anthropologists usually keep distinct: ancestor reverence, popular culture, secular dance, religious masquerade, rules governing the status of strangers, spirit mediumship and possession, and forms of art.

Kramer's book is a rich compendium of materials and ideas that deals with issues of identity, of social differentiation via the Other. More novel is Kramer's view that possession and other indigenous aesthetic genres are not just forms of knowledge; they are also ways of knowing. Such epistemic styles have been subordinated, rendered illegitimate by Western scholarly paradigms, and depicted as exotic, even aberrant, as we've seen. Despite this they persist. Unlike globally dominant positive science, they presume no Archi-

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This is not to say, of course, that all societies in which the image of an atomized body prevails are bourgeois. In India, for example, a different concept of atomization based on the significances of the humors has its own implications for possession beliefs and experiences. I am grateful to EV Daniel for suggesting this clarification.

medean point; rather, both knower and known are engaged in a reciprocal and reversible relationship. The knower, implicated in the subject of her knowledge, is moved by it, to the extent of being bodily possessed by it (114:60; see 25). Kramer does not imply some essential cultural or physical difference between African and European, but points to a Western rationalization of holistic human experience, a separation of "cosmology from psychology in their entirety" (114:59), elsewhere described as reification.

Kramer builds on Lienhardt's (142) concept of *passiones*, the self as being acted upon and affected by unwilling experience [an idea to which others have been drawn as well (46, 103, 123, 172)]. He suggests that "unfamiliarity with the other can overwhelm" and "compel" to mimesis (114:251). Compulsion notwithstanding, mimesis, then, is the human faculty by which *passiones* are expressed. By replicating an experience in gesture and art, the experience becomes known and familiar, incorporated by the individual and her society. But it is also interpreted and thereby transformed.

Mimesis as a pedagogical process, both embodiment of knowledge and bodying forth of knowledge, has been more discerningly depicted by Taussig (210) and to a lesser extent, by Bourdieu (28). Mimetic actors do not lack agency. We are all mimetic actors insofar as mimesis is the way in which the *habitus* is learned, through profound identification, and made self (28, 210). It is thus that social convention acquires its quotidian naturalness (210:xvi-xiii). Mimesis is a two-layered notion, Taussig suggests, "a copying, or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived" (p. 21). Thus, knowing is at once an intimate corporeal act, the ability to "yield into and become Other" (210:xiii), and an ideational activity, a trying out of perceptions (210:46). Mimesis is dependent on alterity, the existence of an Other (114, 210); hence, there always exists the possibility of what Taussig (210) calls second contact, seeing one's own ethnic group, material objects, and personal traits, in the images produced by others (eg. 20:359, 188, 206). This is the basis of allegory and quotation, the synoptic principles behind possession performances where, among others, white colonial officials appear as they were observed.

The notion of mimesis could well enable us to recognize and analyze with greater clarity the multidimensioned resistances possession cults evince to Enlightenment myths of context-free Reason, the mischief they work with capitalist reifications, their iconoclastic interpretations of commodities and bodily disciplines (cf. 210:133), and the morality of their aesthetics. It surely affords increased insight into possession forms. Perhaps most relevant, however, is its role in destabilizing scholarly assumptions about objectivity and rationality, and in challenging intellectual categories. It provides no harbor for the analyst outside of the processes she studies. Being possessed by possession is symptomatic of the interpenetration of realities that it is possession's task to

make clear. Taussig impassions us to welcome the vertigo that acknowledging mimesis entails, to resist appropriating it by means of explanation (210:237), to remain, as it were, possessed, and to let that condition work its effects. He has a point. Like trance before it, mimesis is in danger of becoming a reductive behaviorist explanation for possession, which would neutralize its power to disconcert (cf 206) and depoliticize it by categorical fiat. Instead of collapsing possession into a generalized human body, we need better to understand embodiment as a contextually nuanced project.

Two recent attempts to do so return us to more familiar terrain. Lambek (123) takes a classical social constructionist approach in addressing the dialectics of embodiment and objectification in three domains of knowledge in Mayotte. He suggests that in any form of knowledge, one part of this dialectic will be privileged over the other. Possession privileges embodiment, yet not to the exclusion of objectification, because manifest possession—active embodiment—produces objectified knowledge of spirits, and of their implicit or emphatic commentaries, for hosts and observers alike (also 20; cf 2, 205). This in turn becomes part of the host's lived experience of her body when, for example, she conforms to spirits' demands to eat or abstain from certain foods (123:305–309), or walk rather than ride in a car (124, 151). If the body is the ground for legitimating objective knowledge, internalizing it, and making it experientially real [or originating it (cf 171)], objectification is the process of rendering embodied knowledge graspable by others through performance and conversation (see also 45, 191). Mimesis encompasses both, but Lambek's argument enables us to see the process as contextually variable and potentially reflexive.

Csordas draws from Bourdieu's account of the socially informed body and Merleau-Ponty's focus on the pre-objective act of perception (154, 155) in constructing a sophisticated provisional model of embodiment (53–55). He suggests the term "somatic modes of attention" to specify the various culturally elaborated ways in which we attend to, attend with, and objectify our bodies "in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (55:138), and looks to the healing practices of Puerto Rican spirit mediums and Anglo-American Catholic Charismatics for clues to the phenomenology of religious therapeutic transformation (52–55). Csordas is analytically rigorous and mindful of his model's indeterminacies. Still, his concepts of intersubjective embodiment and somatic modes of attention echo Taussig's and Kramer's invocations of the mimetic faculty and suggest directions for its theoretical and pragmatic elucidation (see also 57, 91, 110, 145).

Yet do we not, even here, in attending so fully to embodiment, risk denying the whole of the possession experience, which our informants insist is embodied and disembodied at one and the same time?

CONCLUSION

The literature on spirit possession has changed direction in the past twenty years, as concern for behavioral and psychological rationalization gave way to increased attention to local contexts, cultural logics, human imagination, and creativity. To be sure, rationalist reduction was a humanizing enterprise, an attempt to render familiar what had seemed to be so strange. Deeper realization of the situatedness of knowledge, our loss of Olympian privilege, has led many scholars here reviewed to eschew it as dehumanizing; ironically, the projects were not dissimilar in intent.

There has also been a gradual dismantling of the category spirit possession as an autonomous subject of inquiry. Where the 1960s and 1970s saw several collections (e.g. 16, 30a, 49), the field is now dominated by finely situated ethnographies in which possession figures, yet not exclusively (but see 140, 216). Researchers currently locate possession in wider spheres of human endeavor, as speaking to quotidian issues of selfhood and identity, challenging global political and economic domination, and articulating an aesthetic of human relationship to the world. And whether central or peripheral, possession has been shown to be about morality, kinship, ethnicity, history, and social memory—the touchstones of social existence. Here morality and resistance are one.

It is too soon to gauge how the recent revival of mimesis and its history will influence analysis. The development merits careful thought but its potential for misuse as evolutionary rhetoric means we would be unwise to install it as a new master narrative. Yet it is undeniably provocative. It shifts the question from “How is it that other peoples believe the self to be permeable by forces from without?” to “How is it that Western models have repeatedly denied such permeability?” This gives new relevance to Kenny’s (103, 104) important observations on the relationship between spirit possession and Multiple Personality Disorders burgeoning in North America today (see also 6, 84). It requires us to rethink Western cultural assumptions of an integral self, sheds new light on religious and psychiatric iatrogenesis, and pathological forms of embodied aesthetics like anorexia nervosa. If, as Taussig (210:20) suggests, modernity’s technologies offer new schooling for our mimetic powers, then possession, which has ever foregrounded them, can perhaps provide some sense of this process.

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