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Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

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Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Spirit Possession Experience

- First time people struggle against it
- Overwhelming presence of something / someone else in the mind
- During possession stage different behaviour -> different personality
- Often no memory afterwards
- Physically exhausted but also liberating

Excerpt from an interview

- “At the first time I remember nothing, the sensation was a strong heat, sensation of heat, at the same time a sleep, a huge weight in a part of the back, of the neck and I began to feel my heart. The heart accelerated! And it was the sensation of two hearts beating inside me. In my throat it was like a force, a very strong energy in the throat that I felt that it would begin to speak. But in that moment, at the first time, I was very afraid. Because when it began to happen, I had doubts whether it would be good or bad and I tried to stop it and I left with the sensation that it felt as it would begin the communication in trance.” (Brazil, 2010)

Spirit Possession in Afro-American religions

- => enables communication between human beings and spirits /deities
- It is open to everyone but one should be trained in handling the spirits
 - > first possession experience often interpreted as call to become initiated into religion

What is spirit possession?

- Spirit possession involves rituals ‘in which one, or a few, or even several, of the participants in a public ritual behave in ways which believers interpret as signifying that “spirits” haven taken “possession” of them’ (Platvoet 2000: 80).
 - > term contains ‘a meaning which believers themselves attached to what they believe happen during a spirit possession ritual’ (2000: 81).

Ethnographic documentaries

- *Divine Horsemen* by Maya Deren
 - [Link to YouTube](#)
 - Filmed in Haiti in the 1940s and 1950s
- *Voodoo Mounted by the Gods* by Alberto Venzago
 - [Link to YouTube](#)

Possessed women

- ‘Where individuals have little opportunity for achievement and little control over their daily activities, possession trance is more likely to occur’ (Erika Bourguignon 1976: 31).
- Spirit possession = ‘a universal human capacity’ which is ‘culturally modulated’ (Bourguignon 2004: 558)

Women and spirit possession

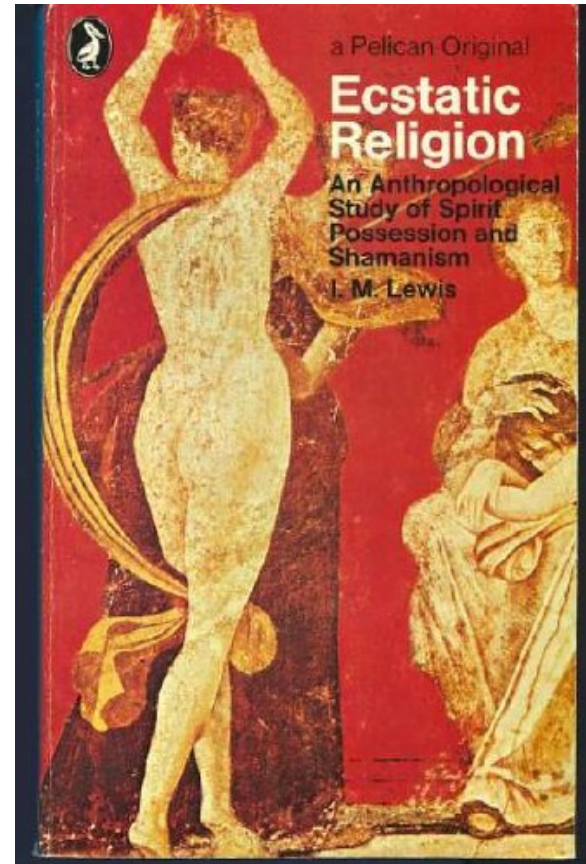
- The simple equation women equals possession trance is not justified by the data we have at hand, despite impressionistic accounts of a predominance of women in possession trance cults (Bourguignon 1983: 414).

Melville Herskovits (1948)

- He argued that the reason for the higher number of priestesses in Afro-Brazilian religions was that women were less occupied than men and had therefore more free time than men for religious activities.
- However: no correlation between occupation and religious commitment (Miller/Hoffmann 1995)

Ioan M. Lewis

- Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at LSE
- Author of *Ecstatic Religion* (1971)



Central and peripheral

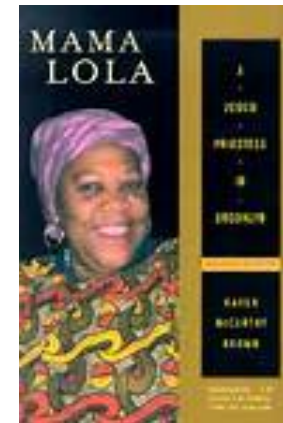
- differentiation is based on ‘whether they [=the cults] are inspired by spirits which directly uphold public morality (central) or those “peripheral” agencies that threaten public order’ (Lewis 2003: xiv).

Link to gender

- Lewis argues that in societies where central and marginal possession religions exists side by side, the first (central) is primarily reserved for men, while the second (peripheral) is restricted essentially to women, or men of lower status' (Lewis 1971:135).

But

- Mama Lola, a Haitian Vodou priestess
- Lives in Brooklyn, NY
- Biography by anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown
- Respected figure today



Gender roles in Vodou

- Rural settings (Lewis)
 - Traditionally divided along gender lines
 - Male dominance: male-headed extended families
 - Women gain prestige as midwives, herbalists and mambos (=Vodou priestess)
- Urban settings (Brown)
 - Increase autonomy of Women because of their selling skills and money managements as marketers
 - female-headed extended families
 - Vodou-Temples as religious extended families

Women's possession cults according to Lewis

- 'thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex. They play a significant part in the sex-war in traditional societies and cultures where women lack more obvious and direct means for forwarding their aims. To a considerable extent they protect women from the exactions of men, and offer an effective vehicle for manipulating husbands and male relatives.' (Lewis 2003: 26)

However....

- Lewis vehemently disagrees with the assumption he would present spirit possession in general as ‘a product of the deprivation of women in male-dominated societies’ (1967: 626)
- => reference to St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

St. Teresa of Avila

- typical marginalised figure in society due to her gender, marital status (single) and social status as member of a family of (forced) converts from Judaism to Christianity
- => The case of St. Teresa shows the impact of empowerment 'conferred by possession on those disadvantaged by gender and other social disabilities' (Lewis 2003: xv).

Deprivation theory

- ... assumes 'that people (and it seems, especially women) behave religiously because of the social and psychological reasons rather than for religious reasons' (Sered 1994: 65).
- Possession is interpreted by scholars in this perspective 'as a *symbol* of their deprivation', and women become perceived 'to be needy bodies rather than firm minds' (Keller 2002: 58, 88).

Susan Sered's critique

- Challenging the deprivation theory Sered stresses the voluntary character of possession rituals and argues that women have other choices for opposing the social situation.
- Sered especially criticises the negative evaluation of women implied in deprivation theories and regards them as misrepresentation of possession as a symptom of disempowerment.

Janice Boddy's feminist critique

- Boddy sees *zar* cult as counter hegemonic for the women, 'a feminine response to hegemonic praxis and the privileging of men that this ideologically entails' (Boddy 1989: 5).
- She elevates the function of the *zar* cult for the women from a form of resistance to a sphere of dominance and creativity, of feminist consciousness.
- => the female practice of spirit possession is not a peripheral cult but a central one as women have 'real' dominance over men (Boddy 1989: 136).

Susan Sered argues...

- Spirit possession as normal human experience
- woman's experiences during childbirth and heterosexual intercourse makes them more receptive to others
- The boundary between a women's self and other is thinner than in the case of men -> women are more vulnerable for possession

Important is to note that ...

- ‘a person’s gender does not determine religiosity [though] it does influence the kinds of religions, rituals, communities and experiences that one is drawn to or which one finds meaningful’ (summarised by Hayes 2010: 121, with reference to Sered 1994).

Durre S. Ahmed's post-colonial critique (2001)

- interpretation of spirit possession biased because of the Western education of the scholars
- We regard possessed women through a male lens,
- 'faith and reason are incompatible' is part of our Western intellectual heritage