

Ambiguities in Santería Possession Trance: Challenges to the Unitary Self

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Introduction

Maya Deren called it the "white darkness," French psychiatrist, Levy-Valensi saw it as the "ante-chamber of the asylum," many people consider it the second-most challenging aspect of Santería after animal sacrifice.¹ Possession trance, the state of being entranced and dominated by another being, is an important part of Santería religious practice. Possession trance allows practitioners to not only talk to their deities and other spiritual beings but for those beings to talk back, to respond in a clearly material fashion.

In this paper I will explore both the place of the individual in this phenomena and investigate the ways in which possession trance challenges our strongly held ideas of selfhood as unique and unitary; in addition, related to that discussion, I will explore the ways in which Santería possession trance not only encourages but actually promotes gender switching and certain types of gender ambiguity.

Santería is one of the many religions created in the Americas by enslaved Africans. Those brought from their homelands to the islands of the Caribbean and to South America carried with them their own religious traditions, including a tradition of possession trance for communicating with the ancestors and deities. After landing in Cuba, Haiti or Brazil, the enslaved were nominally converted to Catholicism. However, they were able to preserve many of their traditions and re-create some of their forms of religious expression. In Cuba, these religious traditions have evolved into what we know today as Santería, Regla de Ocha or Orisha religion.

Among those preserved traditions is the use of drumming and dancing to communicate with and to draw into presence the Orisha, the deities of the religion. It is during communal celebrations like the ritual drum party described below, that the Orisha are made present to the community through the persons of the santeros, the priests of the religion. The Orisha are made manifest to the community through the willingness of initiates to endure possession, to bring to consciousness that special state of mind that indicates one is "in the spirit." Whoever is empowered and willing to thus "manifest the spirit does so," as Joseph Murphy says, "for the benefit of the community to allow others to share in the consciousness...."² Because one is normally entranced while possessed, one does not directly benefit from one's own possession. It is the community that benefits from one's willingness to become possessed, one's willingness to enter that altered state of consciousness.

What is possession trance? Vincent Crapanzano suggests the most liberal description. Spirit possession, he says, is "any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit."³ For the purposes of our discussion we can use Crapanzano's method of accepting as "real" those physical and psychological changes that are accepted by the participating group as legitimate spirit possessions. Santeros recognize that it is possible to fake a possession event and provide tests of the legitimacy of any particular such event. We, however, will not call the reality of these events into question; rather we will accept that possession occurs as described by participants.

As experienced in a Santería tambor (Sp. drum ceremony), spirit possession is a type of trance possession wherein an alien spirit fills the space left empty by the temporary absence of the subject's soul.⁴ As experienced in African and African-derived religious traditions this alien spirit may be an Orisha, a

spirit of an ancestor or the personality of a spirit guide. In religious language, this is a type of hierophany, a manifestation of the invisible into the visible world. Important to these actions is the presence of a community who can receive any communications and insights since there is no direct communication between the invading spirit and the departed "soul". For the medium, the possessed person, there is an experiential "break" in existence during which another is incarnate in "his" body.

Before we begin our analysis of this radical manifestation of the sacred as found in contemporary Orisha religion I want to provide some descriptions of this phenomenon. The first piece describes a tambor held in the spring of 1993. The tambor was a ritual invocation of the Orisha given by a priest of Elegua, the divine trickster, who was to be called from the invisible to the visible world by sacred drums and a type of call and response chanting. Two Orisha graced this event: Elegua, himself, and Aganyu, who is the Orisha associated with the volcano. This was my introduction to the practice of Santería and the first time I watched the bodies of human mediums being invaded by sacred beings, to which I attribute a certain breathlessness of the account.

Our host, Roberto, had changed into a pair of black pants accented with long red fringe, a red shirt and red and black hat--the colors of Elegua. After some warm up drumming, a rhythm to call Elegua began. Roberto danced in the center of a circle formed by the crowd and the drummers and the lead singer. After a while the drumming and chanting got louder and more insistent. Suddenly there was a change--he was no longer Roberto but Elegua. The drumming and chanting continued stronger as the singer called Elegua to be firmly seated in Roberto's body. He chased Elegua around the

room, calling and chanting to him. Soon the glasses were thrown off, then the shoes, then the shirt unbuttoned. When it was determined that Eleggua was truly there, he was led into another room where he would be costumed in the appropriate attire. In the meantime Aganyu came down to possess another santero. His possession was neither as dramatic nor as turbulent as that of Eleggua, but finally he too was led to the back room.

After a few minutes the Orisha were brought back and the real festivities began. It is hard to describe what happened for the next several hours. The two Orisha danced, talked to their devotees, ... preached and danced some more. To an outsider who merely wandered in it would have looked like a really good party with a percussion group, a single male vocalist and the crowd dancing and joining in the singing. But of course there was more to it than that. This was a religious service. Those two, who might be misidentified as overly enthusiastic partiers, were believed to be deities who were temporarily using the bodies of their followers in order to communicate with the rest of the congregation.

Having looked at the phenomena of possession from the point of view of an outside observer, I would like to share another account of possession trance, this time in the words of an accomplished medium. This excerpt comes from a film on the initiation ritual in the Brazilian religion of Candomblé. Candomblé is similar to Santería in many respects including its foundation in the West African traditions. In this excerpt, a woman attempts to describe her experience of possession trance. While in the earlier account we looked at possession from the outside, here we hear the voice of the medium herself.

I feel this way when the Candomblé is playing...that the Orisha wants to get me, my legs tremble, something reaches up that takes over my heart, my head grows, I see that blue light, I look for someone to grab but can't find anyone and then I don't see anything anymore. Then everything happens and I don't see. Then I think that the Orisha must be something like wind, it comes towards you like a wind and embraces you. Like a shock in my heart, my heart beats as fast as the lead drum plays, my head grows, and it seems I see a blue light ahead of me and a hole appears in the middle of the room. Then I want to run, to grab someone, but people seem far away, out of reach. Then I don't see anything anymore.⁵

Sources of the Self

Bodies have provided endless material for philosophical and theological ruminations. For Edith Wyschogrod, saintly bodies provide the canvas for a working out of ethical theory. It is in the presence of the body of the Other, represented by its face, that the self becomes an ethical subject since, as she says, "Once a face is apprehended, it addresses and solicits a relationship with the perceiver an-iconically, not as an image, but as weight or pressure that compels one to see the other as destitute" as demanding radical altruism.⁶ Possession trance causes a radical break in our understanding of bodies and minds, for what was (and will be again) the body of the neighbor, is temporarily a sacred body invaded and controlled by the mind, the consciousness of a sacred being. While the body of the neighbor may demand altruism, the sacred body cannot be seen as destitute, to use Wyschogrod's terminology. Whatever our relationship to the person of the neighbor, while entranced his body and its invading spirit requires

worship—and presents a field for divine revelation. Embodied Orisha preach, teach, heal, comfort, chastise and bless the community both as a whole and as individuals and small groups. Some Orisha enjoy their temporary embodiment eating, drinking, dancing and playing with their devotees. Like a well-trained horse, the medium must give control over to the possessing Orisha and often he returns to find his body bruised and his clothes soiled. As we say in Texas, he has been "rode hard and put up wet."

Western philosophy has posited for each individual a continuous if not unitary self. Although one might not agree with William James that "I am the same self that I was yesterday," there is still an understanding that we remain known to ourselves even as we move through a multiplicity of experiences and temporal phases. When I sleep and wake, if I become unconscious, even if I am subject to multiple personality disorder, both common sense and philosophical analysis suggests that a continuity of being passes through me. However, possession trance, as framed by Santería practice, suggests that what by all appearances is Roberto is actually the presence of a spiritual entity; that through the materiality of his body an Orisha has incarnated and is participating in the world of matter. Through spirit possession the gods, in the form of the Orisha, are brought into the community. For the community, what was the face of the neighbor has become that of the divine Other. Because each initiate is a potential medium, each may participate in any particular event as either embodied Orisha or as a member of the enabling community.

Vincent Crapanzano suggests that even in the Western world, where "possession no longer 'occurs,' it serves nevertheless as a very powerful metaphor for the articulation of that range of experiences in which the subject feels 'beside himself,' not fully responsible for his own condition...."⁷ However, full possession trance, as described in the preceding examples, is more than

merely a metaphor for an unusual experience. Rather it is a penetration of the visible world by beings that are wholly Other. In her analysis of saintly altruism, Edith Wyschogrod says that the "saint's relationship to the Other generates a paradox bound up with saintly self-emptying." In the cases she described either the "Other is swallowed up by the self as an object of utility, desire, or representation and becomes part of the self" or there is a "total emptying without replenishment" so that "there is no subject to engage the Other." In either case, she suggests, "the alterity of the Other disappears, is reduced to the homogeneity of the Same."⁸

Santería provides an opposite example. In these rituals, the Self is overtaken by the Other. Although the body is emptied of human subject, the sacred Other fills the emptiness so that engagement with the observing community is possible. Alterity between the medium and the sacred Other is maintained, homogeneity is avoided. The sacred Other never becomes the self-same subject and never becomes merely an object of utility, desire, or representation. Communication between the visible and invisible worlds is established through the actions of the enabling community. It is from within the ranks of this community that the victim of the possession events is chosen. At the beginning of the ritual, each initiate is an individual, a Self. However as the ritual progresses one or more of these Selves are overtaken by an Other and are temporarily transformed into this Other. And even though the individual's Self is absent and cannot engage that Other, the community can. No one can communicate directly with his own possessing Orisha, but the community stands ready to engage the Other on its own behalf and on behalf of their possessed neighbor. Roberto will never see the face of his Orisha mirrored in his own face, however at another time his presence within the community may enable him to see that Orisha in the face of another medium.

During the possession event the medium maintains his status as the Other whose face demands radical altruism, especially since the community as a whole has accepted the responsibility for the well-being of his body during the trance event—for in this he is truly destitute and in need of protection during the absence of his "self". At the same time, the Orisha-made-present through possession is a sacred and absolute Other who calls the community to a discourse that extends beyond the Self and the Other; who pre-empts the needs of the medium in the service of the community in whole and in part. While ministering to the needs of the community, the Orisha also makes demands on it. Demands that can only be framed as revelation, as the concrete manifestation of the desires of the invisible beings made visible during the possession event.

Conclusion

Finally, we need to ask: can spirit possession as practiced within this community be included within the types of religious experiences we call mystical? Although it has traditionally been excluded from discussions of religious mystical experience, spirit possession certainly contains many of the elements present in other types of mystical experiences. The most significant difference between these experiences and those of traditional mystics are the use of possession trance. The mystical experiences within many spiritual traditions include trance events as they are defined in this paper, most however do not include the possession of the mystic by an alien entity. In addition, unlike many Western and Eastern mystical experiences, which not only do not require a supportive community but also even may reject communal activity, Santería religious experience requires the presence of a supportive community all along the spiritual path. Although an individual may do much developmental work at home or in another type of religious environment (in the woods, for example) it

is only through the community that the presence of spiritual beings (the spirits and the Orisha) can be recognized.

Is spirit possession merely an interruption of one's usual life or does it require profound changes, both interior and exterior? Although one could experience a possession event and not be changed by it, the expectation of the community is that by putting oneself in the way of such an event one is making a commitment to form an on-going relationship with the spirits revealed. Such a commitment requires life changes, changes in how one arranges one's home, how one dresses and how one uses one's time.

This paper is only a preliminary analysis of the phenomenon of possession trance as practiced in Santería. It suggests that students of religion and mysticism should take this event more seriously. Although further study is certainly warranted, a preliminary response to the question of this paper seems to be that yes, possession trance is an example of a Santería mystical experience.

¹ Deren, Maya. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. New Platz, NY: McPherson, 1983 (1953), Chapter VII; Lewis, I.M. *Ecstatic Religion*. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1971, 179.

² Murphy, Joseph M. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the Africa Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, 184–185.

³ Crapanzano, Vincent. *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*. Edited by Crananzano, Vincent and Vivian Garrison. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1977, 7.

⁴ Lewis, I.M. *Ecstatic Religion*. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1971. 29, 46.

⁵ Kondler, Moses, and Geraldo Sarno. *Iawo: Initiation in a Gege-Nago Temple*. New York: Cinema Guild, 1980. video recording.

⁶ Wyschogrod, Edith. *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 232.

⁷ Wyschogrod, 7

⁸ Wyschogrod, 33-34.