



LUND UNIVERSITY

Varieties of possession experience

Cardeña, Etzel

Published in:
AASC Quarterly

1989

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Cardeña, E. (1989). Varieties of possession experience. *AASC Quarterly*, 5(2-3), 1-17.

Total number of authors:

1

Creative Commons License:

Unspecified

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

AASC Quarterly

Association for the Anthropological Study of Consciousness

Volume 5, Number 2-3

June-September 1989

Copyright 1989 by the Association for the Anthropological Study of Consciousness.
All rights reserved. ISSN 1045-4330

VARIETIES OF POSSESSION EXPERIENCE

Eitel Cardeña, Ph.D.

Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University
and California Institute of Integral Studies

I felt an almost electrical interaction between myself and the spectators. Their mounting excitement had the effect of heightening my physical strength until I was dancing with a sustained force that seemed far beyond my reach at other times. For one moment it seemed as if some other person within me was performing the dance. *Massine, in his memoirs for the performance of The Three Cornered Hat.*

Preamble

Even though about an arguably different event, the remarks of the brilliant turn-of-the-century dancer Massine underline some of the principal themes that make the study of possession central to an understanding of human personality. In accounts of artists and athletes there are occasional descriptions of some form of bodily energy and a capacity that apparently goes beyond the self's usual limitations. Less common, but still not absent from some of these reports, are references to actions apparently not initiated deliberately by the person him/herself but by something else, be it inspiration, the "unconscious", or the enthusiasm (etymologically, "being filled with the gods"), that Plato described.¹

Possession, as described in the anthropological literature, frequently involves notions that the affected individual might be in a different form of consciousness or "trance state", and that a common traditional explanation for this alteration is that a spirit or possessing entity has temporarily displaced the personality of the individual to take over his/her physical and mental functioning (Bourguignon 1976). In some instances, the explanation is not that a discrete external entity takes over the person, but that s/he might be "manifestada", or manifesting some form of general universal force that is also a part of the individual.²

SPECIAL ISSUE ON TRANCE AND POSSESSION

Regardless of the forms that possession experience may take,

its sheer presence challenges at least two basic premises of how we ordinarily conceive of our selves: that we have, despite some personal conflicts and contradictions, a basic, *single*, specific identity; and the sense that, other than in disease or decay, we own our bodies and mental life. The treatment of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, but they suggest that functionalistic psychological or anthropological analyses by no means exhaust the implications of this phenomenon.

Possession and Magical Flight

Possession manifestations and the classical shamanic "magical flight" have been considered by some writers on the field as distinct phenomena, with Eliade (1964) concluding that possession is a later, "degenerate" and essentially distinct form of the magical flight (see Lewis 1989). Leaving aside the questionable phraseology of Eliade, some cross-cultural studies support a distinction and suggest that what has been called "magical flight" involves primarily a visual imaginal experience (the shamanic journey) and subtle or absent mobility, sensory stimulation and recollection, whereas "possession" is mainly characterized by intense movement, vocalizations, amnesia (but see below) and a number of other bodily expressions and changes in somatic sensations and body image (cf.

IN THIS ISSUE:

Varieties of Possession Experience	1
From the Editor	3
AASC Annual Conference	3
AASC News	4
Transition	4
Call for Papers	4
Organizations	4
Levels of Possession Awareness in Afro-Brazilian Religions	5
Publications	12
Book Reviews	18

Rouget 1985; Winkelman 1986). Leaving aside the less characteristic instances of simultaneous magical flight and possession phenomenology, possession can be typically conceived as the way through the body to attain the existential unity and continuity, the sacred bind that humans desperately seek; the magical flight has the same existential purpose but through a mostly imaginal, disembodied, non-corporeal path. The beginning and end point of both techniques is the same earth-bound creature seeking to subvert his/her "eccentric" existential position with respect to an ambiguous ownership and identification with the body, the stream of consciousness, and one's actions (cf. Cardeña 1989).

The different manifestations of "possession" and the "magical flight" may be the result of a basic interaction between subjective experience, behavior, and physical activity, rather than solely of local practices or beliefs. For instance, there is some indication from laboratory research that immobility might be associated with increased imaginal experience (cf. Cardeña 1988a); and that intense emotional arousal found in the physically and sensorially charged context of a possession ritual, is associated with amnesia (Christianson 1984). Besides, the importance of cognitive individual differences is stressed by a recent finding that highly hypnotizable individuals can be divided among those who experience a "hypnotic state" mostly through visual imagery and those who experience an alteration of consciousness without a strong imaginal mediation but as a general sense of being in an "altered state" (Pekala 1989). The evidence is still scant and these areas require further exploration, but even if supported they would not imply that "magical flight" and possession may not coexist geographically or be part of the repertoire or even simultaneous experience of some practicing shamans (Rouget 1985; Stoller 1989; Heinze 1988); they are, rather, "fuzzy" categories of associated phenomena that may show areas of overlap among practitioners with unusual abilities or training. Frigerio's (this issue) description of *en transe*, in which the "medium's spiritual self is believed to leave her body to journey to other parts of the city" is an excellent example of this and, not surprisingly, seems to be a rare event, as judging by Frigerio's observations in Argentina and the general distinctions found in the literature.

For the remainder of this paper I will restrict my remarks to possession, hereby broadly defined as an experience involving a radical alteration of embodied identity, in contrast to a disembodied and/or mostly imaginal transformation. The changes of identity in the possessed individual occur, at least partly, within the physical world of touch, sweat, blood, movement, and sound; instead, the magical flier imaginably abandons the "middle world" to subvert in different realms the usual sense of human boundaries.

Not One But Many Possessions

The most common approaches to explain possession events have been psychological/functionalistic (e.g. van der Waelde 1968; Mischel and Mischel 1958), cultural/functionalistic (e.g. Métraux 1972), socio-political (e.g. Laguerre 1980), and even dramaturgical analyses (e.g. Métraux 1955). Almost absent have been what Frigerio (in this issue) calls emic studies and extensive phenomenological description of possession occurrences (for a brief, and rare, exception, see Deren 1953). This lack of information about possessions as lived from within has supported the a priori categories of the usually inexperienced and more or less sympathetic researchers, instead of providing an understanding of what Husserl called "the things themselves". A different approach has been to "explain" possession as a form of hypnotic trance or of multiple personality (e.g. Ravenscroft 1965; Kenny 1981), a dubious strategy that, at best, displaces the problem to an explanation of the nature of the particularly unclear and ethnocentric terms of "hypnotic trance" and "pathological multiplicity".

In the various *vodun* ceremonies occurring throughout the year in Haiti, one of the most striking aspects is the enormous variability of possession manifestations not only with regards to characterization, but to essential aspects of the phenomenon. One might be confronted by a *houngan* (male priest) who subtly becomes silent for a moment and then adopts a nasal voice and a slightly different demeanor to proceed in a melancholic but perfectly rational description of vodun; by a festive ceremony where different initiates display what seems to be a great histrionic ability to characterize the loas (spirits); or by mud covered creatures in loincloth rolling in apparently uncontrollable frenetic madness through a mud pit, limbs flailing at impossible angles, to end their journey with their heads buried in the mud for a few minutes. It seems a disservice to their nature to suggest that these, and other different manifestations, are but small variants of the same phenomenon.

The following classification of types of ritual possession experience is proposed as a working model (see Rouget 1985 for a somewhat different classification of possession and related phenomena). Although mostly analytical and cross-cultural, it centers on the general mode of experiencing of the individual and it is remarkably consistent in many points with the 'emic' model discussed by Frigerio in this issue. The categories proposed henceforth should be considered as general modalities of experiencing at a specific time, rather

Continued on page 12

PUBLICATIONS

The 1989 edition of the "Guide to Sources of Information on Parapsychology" is now available from the Parapsychology Foundation. Revised annually, it has sections on major organizations, journals, books and research. The 1989 edition of the "Guide" is available for \$1.00 by writing directly to the Eileen J. Garret Library or by visiting the Foundation at 228 East 71st Street, New York, N.Y. 10021.

A new magazine, *Business in Transformation: The Journal for the New Age in Businesses and Organizations*, is designed to help both small and large businesses adapt to the increasing changes occurring in our work environment. *Business in Transformation* is based on the work of Alvin Toffler, George Land, Larry Wilson, W. Edwards Deming, John Naisbitt, Marsha Sinetar, Tom Peters, and other forward looking people of our time. In addition to regular columns, book reviews and a calendar section, articles on creativity, New Spirit leadership, productivity, purpose, integrity and vision, JIT, new management trends, principles in business, peak performance, spirituality in business, environmental issues, and other areas of innovation are featured.

Subscriptions are \$24 and membership, which includes a subscription, numerous cassettes and special reports, is \$48 annually. A free issue of *Business in Transformation* is available by writing to Resource, Box 1110, Dyersburg, TN 38025. For more information, contact: Alicia French, 1245 Freeman Road, Hoffman Est., IL 60195, (313) 991-8186.

Paranormal Research '89, Proceedings from the Second International Conference on Paranormal Research, is a 780 page compendium containing 61 papers on the most recent research - including academic, clinical, and experiential data - in various fields of paranormal phenomena. The cost is \$50 (plus \$5 postage and handling). The 1000 page *Paranormal Research '88* is also available for \$60 (plus \$5 postage and handling). For information or to order, contact: Paranormal Research, 203 Weber Building, Civil Engineering Dept., Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, (303) 491-0633.

VARIETIES OF POSSESSION EXPERIENCE

Continued from page 2

than as disjunctive, incompatible categories. That is, during a particular possession event the initiate might experience only a transitional form, or s/he might experience each of the variants with greater or lesser intensity at different times, or have them overlap as one fades into the other. None the less, a full experience of transcendent possession seems to be a rather rare case, particularly in the absence of strong motivation and a prolonged and intense ritual context. But even with those qualifications, this classification should help describe more parsimoniously and understand different instances and manifestations of possession.

Transitional Possession.

The first variant has been named by *vodun* practitioners as *saoulé*, or a state of inebriation, and it corresponds to what Frigerio reports as the *irradiación* state of possession. This category constitutes the transition between ordinary consciousness and a different mode of experiencing. It can be observed more clearly at the beginning and end of possession, although it may also be the predominant mode among novice practitioners who might have difficulties stabilizing another type of possession experience, either by attentional deficits and/or by ignorance of the traditional "syntax" to organize and give meaning to the possession event. But even among more experienced practitioners possession, as any form of conscious manifestation, should be considered a process with occasional changes in depth, involvement, etc., rather than as a "fixed" state of consciousness.

The changes observed in transitional possession can be understood according to Tart's (1975) theory, which proposes that (bio)psychological structures are organized according to a general pattern, or discrete state of consciousness, and that the transition between two states implies a change in functioning characterized by a brief period of cognitive and biological disorganization until the new pattern is formed and stabilized. The concept of a temporary disorganization is congruent with the transitions, usually involving unusual somatic sensations and changes in body image, described while falling asleep (e.g. Foulkes and Vogel 1965), going under anesthesia (Bennett 1987) and initiating a hypnotic experience (Cardena 1988a).

Transitional possession is also commonly described in somatic terms including numbness, dizziness, occasional pain, lightheadedness, precarious equilibrium, cognitive disorganization (e.g. confusion), a sense of loss of control over the body and mental occurrences, and a more long lasting sense of energy circulating through the body (thereby the experience of being "irradiated"). Cognitive disorganization may explain the partial amnesia for this

period that is occasionally reported. Precisely because of the loss of control experienced during these transitions, leaders and advanced initiates learn to make these transitions as brief and smooth as possible, while maintaining some form of organized cognition (Dunham 1989; Cardeña, in press).

In many traditions, the importance of somatic sensations is stressed by a very common technique to induce possession, namely to start whirling (or for the leader to start spinning the person), thereby initiating the dizziness and confusion characteristic of the transition. Evidently, drumming, occasional drinking, dancing, etc. also help to destabilize the ordinary mode of awareness. The end of the transitional period may be marked by the very common sense of a weight or stroke on the neck and/or shoulders,³ indicating to the practitioners that the entity is ready to "mount" the initiate and proceed to behave according to the entity's characteristics. The process of increasing reconfiguration of biopsychological structures into a defined pattern (i.e. the manifestation of the spirit, energy, etc.) would be similar to the *encostamiento* that Frigerio mentions. These transitional manifestations, sometimes considered by practitioners as 'partial possession' (Frigerio, this issue), may occur outside of the ritual context, probably by a process of state-dependent memory (cf. Bower 1981) in which internal (e.g. anxiety) or external (e.g. the drumming in a different temple) cues may come to be associated with - and trigger - transitional possession.⁴

A plausible reason why the belief in a possessing entity is more commonly associated with physical movement, vocalizations, and interactions with the social environment involves the fact that the initiate experiences a number of unusual somatic sensations and body image changes. In contrast with the magical flight where bodily information may be minimal after going through a transitional period, the experience of a transformed body, remains in the foreground of conscious awareness through the constant influx of proprioceptive and other sensory information. The initiate may then question whether this strangely experienced body belongs to, or manifests, something or someone else. This naturalistic explanation, however, does not deny that, at least in some cases, the hypothesis of an external possessing entity may be tenable (cf. Krippner 1987).

Very few observations have been made on the transition from possession to an 'ordinary' mode of experiencing. While in some cases the transition may be gradual, in others it may be dramatic and involve total physical collapse (also observed at times during the transition into possession). Particularly in abrupt shifts, the transition into ordinary awareness may more clearly manifest biological and cognitive disorganization. The actual length of an individual's possession might be determined as much by the ritual context as by changing biological rhythms associated

with changes in conscious experience (cf. Rossi 1986), phrased by Frigerio's (1988) informants as a sense of a diminution of the "vibration" of the entities. The occasional experience of the initiates of momentarily going into a stronger possession while shifting into ordinary awareness (e.g. Frigerio 1988) may indicate the experience of shifting states and is remarkably similar to the frequent reports by hypnotized individuals of momentarily going into a "deeper" state as they come out of hypnosis (cf. Field and Palmer 1969).

Alternate Identity Possession

This variant of possession consists of a clear, differentiated alternate identity, whether human or otherwise, that takes over the usual identity of the individual. Less commonly (although admittedly this may be a report bias produced by the cultural prescription against admitting self-awareness of possession) there may be co-occurrence of the usual identity along with the alternate one. The alternate identity, even if it is considered to be a manifestation of an aspect of the world and the individual, is regarded by the practitioners as patently different from the roles adopted in different social contexts, although it is wise to remember in this regard that, as with "depth", role involvement can vary in intensity (cf. Shor 1979). One of the functions of an - usually culturally prescribed - alternate identity is to stabilize transitional possession into a stable state of consciousness with precise limits as defined by the characteristics of the spirit or force and the ritual context. The group's care in providing the entity's paraphernalia and modifying their interactions with the possessed individual help define and maintain an alternate identity possession (cf. Tart 1975). The transformations in the usual sense of identity crystallize onto a differently defined, unstable identity.

The unusual behavior observed when the person becomes transformed into a spirit, an ancestor, etc. has been frequently described in theatrical terms and, shared curse, both actors and possessed initiates are sometimes referred to as "hysteric", a label with clear pathological shadings.⁵ It is illustrative, none the less, to observe that even the great Charcot, who viewed hypnotic ability as pathological, remarked that hysteria can be described more as a particular form of feeling and reaction than as a pathology. Of course, this does not imply that there might not be specific instances of psychological maladjustment among possession initiates or in possession instances outside of a ritual context, but the same could be said of any human activity.

Besides stating that a change of identity is just a form of role playing does not address the enormous ontological ambiguity of the "acting" experience. Particularly in the province of human experience, the distinction between acting "as if" and "being" becomes blurred frequently and, at times, an initial imposture may end up altering autonomic

arousal and experience such that it becomes a truthful representation (cf. Lanzetta, Cartwright-Smith, and Kleck 1976). Role involvement varies across participants and for the same individual across situations; while a participant may be performing an action, all the time questioning its veracity, another might be so fully involved that s/he does not get distracted enough to doubt. Most of the time it seems that neither of these extremes is maintained for a very long time, but instead there is some fluctuation such that the initiates themselves may have doubts about the "truthfulness" of their possession, or they may doubt that of others (cf. Frigerio 1988).

The experiential reality of a possession enactment depends not only on the deliberate motivation to engage in the action, on the particular involvement in the role, or on the effects of this on the physiology and experience of the individual, but on the individual's general capacity to dissociate, that is, to detach different aspects of the personality from one's experience. The initiate who has become, for instance, Ogun, the fierce warrior, will have a far more intense and reliable experience if s/he does not have to hold that self-definition side by side with his/her usual self-concept as a meek individual. The initiate may be so concentrated on the "possessing" identity and actions that his/her usual forms of behaving and, ultimately, self-definition become dissociated, i.e., they are not a part of the stream of behaviors and mental occurrences. While dissociation is frequently mentioned as psychological maladjustment, it should also be considered a capacity that may liberate the person from unbearable threat and pain or, equally important, from a fixed notion of identity that may be as fictional (or real, if you will) as anything that is enacted.

In addition to a narrow deployment of attention, dissociation frequently involves a change in memory processes, (for instance not remembering, or purposefully distracting oneself from remembering, one's usual identity) as shown by the common thread of amnesia that underlies the so-called dissociative processes (cf. Spiegel and Cardena, in press) and which is frequently reported by possession initiates. In the case of alternate identity possession, dissociation from the usual identity may be present during the possession event and amnesia for what transpired during the possession event may occur afterwards. However, full commitment to the alternate identity may be far less than perfect and, as Frigerio (1988) points out, the loss of personal memory, or what he calls "consciousness", is usually over-represented to convince the initiates and the outsiders of the veracity of possession.

I will briefly address now two marginal issues that frequently appear in the literature. Alternate identity possession has received a number of, usually, functionalistic explanations converging in the notion that possession allows

disadvantaged individuals the expression of impulses and drives that cannot be enacted within the normal thread of society (cf. van der Waelde 1968; Bourguignon 1976). The downtrodden, dusty indigent can become a divinity and obtain the power and respect that s/he usually lacks (Lewis 1989). A more general and accurate statement of this analysis, and one which covers those initiates who have social power outside of the ceremony, considers the multiplicity of being inherent in every human. Our everyday experience and analysis (and some psychological systems such as those of Freud, Jung, Gazzaniga, Ornstein, Gurdjieff, etc. that propose separate and simultaneous psychological/neurobiological processing centers), suggest that we frequently hold simultaneously contradictory emotions, beliefs and wishes, and that we both seem to regard and disregard what we conceive to be the limits imposed by reality. From this broader perspective, alternate identity possession can be conceived as a form of expressing and re-owning a part of our selves that is usually neglected or purposefully vanquished. This explanation is not necessarily antagonistic to the possibility that at least some aspects of what is manifested may go beyond the personal psychological level of the individual (see below).

A final point involves the easy temptation to equate alternate identity possession with the "multiple personality syndrome" (MPD) of psychiatric nosology; a temptation succumbed to by some authors despite a number of inherent problems, not the least of which is the apparent facility with which this connection is frequently "established" (e.g. Kenny 1981). Other difficulties include: 1) the distinctions of some native psychologies between what they regard as a pathological multiple personality disorder (MPD) and religious possession (cf. Krippner 1987); 2) the clear evidence for early traumatic etiology in MPD but not among possession initiates;⁶ 3) the distinction between a voluntarily induced, controlled and contextually appropriate possession (what Walker [1972], regards as involving a "regression in the service of the ego") and the usual experience of uncontrolled and involuntary manifestations reported by people afflicted with MPD; and 4) the phenomenological distinctions between most MPD manifestations and some possession phenomena, particularly transcendent possession.

Transcendent Possession

The final type of possession experience is embarrassingly discussed, if at all, in academic literature, although it probably is the most sought after experience by the practitioner. Without invoking a theological system, this mode of experience can be studied in its own terms (cf. Bataille 1954/1988). As defined here, transcendent possession is a religious experience *par excellence* that provides an option to the experience of limits, constrictions, and discontinuity found in the usual awareness of a person's

body and self. Although alternate identity possession, on its own, provides the option of exchanging the usual limits of a fractured personality for a more powerful and expanded sense of identity, even a spirit or a divinity has a particular cultural and/or personal definition that places it within the boundaries of the finite, definable, and graspable. The option provided by transcendent possession is far more radical than "just" exchanging one identity for another and it is, I think, a far more powerful motivator for undergoing the physical and psychological strain of possession than engaging in some "role-playing" to express repressed wishes.

In transcendent possession, the totally immersed, or "surrendered", individual, if active (and possession is primarily a path through body actions), does not "perform" an act, a song or a movement, but *becomes* him/herself the act, the song, the movement. There is no separation between subject and object or action, because there is no subject to contemplate and provide a fracturing dialogue. In the words of Eliot, "A man does not join himself with the Universe so long as he has anything else to join himself with" (Eliot 1961). If a person carries an internal monologue wondering whether the person is in this state, most certainly s/he is not, as Eliot would have it. Partly through the banishment of splitting internal dialogue processes and personal history the individual may also experience at times an enormous sense of energy (the "boiling energy" of the !Kung) and consciousness change that, not being constrained by space or time, can be experienced as immeasurable vastness and nothingness. This process also brings about the experience of continuity, both within and without, so difficult to even approximate with the analytical tool of language.

To facilitate the elimination of internal dialogue and memory, the ritual context provides constant and intense sensory stimulation (auditory, kinesthetic, visual, etc.) to overwhelm the individual's discursive mode. Furthermore, continuous stimulation in the form of drumming, dancing, chanting, etc., provides a background of continuity that helps maintain the unbroken unity experienced. Intense and continuous rhythmic activity may foster a unified organismic response by synchronizing the individual's own biological rhythms and experience with those of the environment. Instead of a fragmented sum of parts, the experience of the body becomes that of a coherent, single-intention unity. Instead of different ideas, memories and percepts breaking into each other, there is full absorption into an experience where inner and outer are indistinguishable. Other occurrences, either strongly physical (e.g. orgasm) or not (e.g. a creative act) may also produce a related experience of non-directed integration when the person is totally absorbed in them (cf. Cardeña 1989).

But whatever, as yet poorly understood, techniques may be employed to facilitate this experience, it is not a mechanical process that just requires a source of "acoustic driving"

somehow taking control of brain activity and experience, as so many unaffected witnesses to possession can attest. At the very least, it seems to require courage to surrender one's identity and control, a strong intent (in most cases through prolonged physical activity) to maintain the experience, attentional continuity and a facilitating cultural framework (cf. Rouget 1985). During transcendent possession, unless punctured by an intermittent return to other modes, the person unselfconsciously acts and may not fully remember the events transpiring since, for at least part of the time, there is no subject to separate him/herself from the experience.

Transcendent possession primarily involves a bodily path. Common manifestations found in various cultures include in addition to the transitional phenomena already mentioned, being stricken on the back of the neck, unusual vocalizations and movements, shaking, apparent impunity from damage, occasional mouth frothing, unfocused or fixed gaze, eyes rolling upwards, and a few others.⁷ These responses are found essentially unchanged among many different groups presumably because of the common biological inheritance of a human nervous system predisposed to a certain pattern of responses, poorly understood at this time. But to maintain that the somatic manifestations are mediated by the nervous system is not to impute their ontological validity, the same argument that could be made about perception and its underlying sensory processes.

Because of the lack of deliberate control and intense psychological and physical strain, the possession expert may decide to not fully abandon him/herself to transcendent possession but to maintain intermittent contact with the social/physical context (cf. Cardeña, in press). On the other hand and despite all the preparations and conscious motivation, a full sense of transcendent possession (probably subsuming what Frigerio calls in this issue "*incorporación*") is not under the control of the conscious self and seems to be rather infrequent. Most possession initiates may only experience brief and momentary instances of transcendent possession, and therefore remain in doubt about how truly "possessed" or "manifested" they have become (cf. Frigerio 1988). The lack of full involvement, and consequent ambiguity about the status of the individual's possession, can be expected to be more prominent within the context of a discrete and structured setting (e.g. a healing ceremony) in which the initiate is expected to "perform" at a certain time and place, independently of his/her current biological and psychological levels of motivation and preparedness. The difficulty to induce a full transcendent experience at will is not dissimilar to what occurs among those seeking it through other means, for instance, meditation. As with other forms of transcendent experience (cf. Aberbach 1987), I have observed that the return of the possessed individual to the ordinary mode of awareness, to the ambiguity of everyday

existence and to the world of a discrete identity, time and limitations, may bring a deep sense of awe and melancholy. Even transcendent possession can only bring temporary relief from the burden of personal identity.

Conclusions

There are few human phenomena that carry the complexity and ambiguity of possession: it challenges the notion of a unified, immutable self; of a facile distinction between "acting" and reality; of who or what is the source of one's actions; even of humans as single, isolated entities. A thorough discussion of any of these points would require a far more extensive treatment than is possible here and would likely leave the reader, looking for an easy way out of this cloth of ambiguities, dissatisfied. None the less, four points should be stressed:

- 1) the experience of possession is so widespread because it is based on something all humans share, namely a nervous system, a body, and through it a self towards which we relate in an ambiguous and shifting fashion;
- 2) three main modes of experiencing possession, usually included under one heading, are proposed to account for the substantial variability in possession manifestations;
- 3) possession experience may be divided analytically in various fashions (e.g. with regards to control, memory, etc.), but it ultimately requires a description as a whole, organized mode of experiencing;
- 4) much more information is needed from within the culture and the individual's experience to even begin to address possession with respect and coherence.

When we approach possession phenomenology as a fundamental challenge to our convenient sense of a discrete, conscious, controlling self, rather than as an exotic, alien and scary delusion, we might begin to understand the old utterances of the Greek sibyls and the dancing feet of Massine.

Notes

1. This seems to be the case at least among certain Brazilian (Walker, 1989) and Haitian (Cardeña, in press) practitioners.
2. Plato describes four aspects of divine mania (madness): prophetic ecstasy, cathartic mania, poetic mania and erotic mania (cf. Pieper 1964). In the universe of Haitian *vodun* and in other traditions, it is not uncommon to see all four elements appear: some form of prophesy and/or clairvoyance, the notion that possession may be a way to be healed and to heal others, the creative enactment of different roles and the common obscenities and sexual innuendoes of the Guede spirits.

3. Although, as far as I know, nobody has dealt with the issue of why possession so commonly involves sensations in the neck and shoulders, it is likely that the cerebral spinal fluid may be involved (cf. Quincy and Alter 1987).

4. Interestingly, Frigerio (1988) quotes a leader from an Afro-Brazilian temple suggesting that the way to make sure that the person becomes truly possessed is to concentrate "and abandon oneself to the entity", in a similar fashion to highly hypnotizable individuals who spontaneously found that the best way to "deepen" or maintain a deep state was to use a free-floating form of concentration (Cardeña 1988b).

5. It is of related interest that involvement in Dramatic Arts correlates with the ability to experience hypnosis in a structured context (cf. Hilgard 1979).

6. In addition to the very high percentage of reported traumata during childhood across studies and researchers, Coons and Milstein (1986) were able to obtain independent verification of abuse for 85% of their MPD patients.

7. Reference to sources - other than those included in this work - which generally coincide with this description, can be found in Cardeña (1989).

References

- Aberbach, David. (1987). Grief and mysticism. *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 14, 509-526.
- Bataille, Georges. (1954/1988). *Inner Experience*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Bennett, Henry. (1987). Personal communication, University of California, Davis.
- Bourguignon, Erika. (1976). *Possession*. San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp.
- Bower, Gordon H. (1981). Mood and memory. *American Psychologist*, 36, 129-184.
- Cardeña, Etzel. (1988a). The phenomenology of quiescent and physically active deep hypnosis. Paper presented at the *Thirty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*. Asheville, North Carolina.
- _____ (1988b). The phenomenology of quiescent and physically active deep hypnosis. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis.
- _____ (1989). The phenomenology of possession: An ambiguous flight? *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on the Study of Shamanism and Alternate Modes of Healing*. San Rafael, California: Independent Scholars of Asia.
- _____ (in press). An island in an ocean of spirits. In Ruth-Inge Heinze (Ed.) *Shamans of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Irvington.

- Christianson, Sven-Ake. (1984). The relationship between induced emotional arousal and amnesia. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 25, 147-160.
- Coons, P. M. and Milstein, V. (1986). Psychosexual disturbances in multiple personality: Characteristics, etiology and treatment. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 47, 106-110.
- Deren, Maya. (1953). *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. New York: Thames & Hudson.
- Dunham, Katherine. (1989). Personal communication. Stanford University.
- Eliot, Thomas S. (1961). Shakespeare and the stoicism of Seneca. In *Selected Essays*. London: Faber.
- Field, Peter B. and Palmer, Robert D. (1969). Factor analysis: Hypnotic inventory. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 22(1), 50-61.
- Foulkes, D. and Vogel, G. (1965). Mental activity at sleep on set. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 70, 231-243.
- Frigerio, Alejandro. (1988). "Faking": Possession trance behavior in Afro-Brazilian religions in Argentina. Paper presented at the *Fifty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Anthropological Association*. Monterrey.
- _____ (1989). Levels of possession and awareness in Afro-Brazilian Religions. Paper presented at the *Fifth Annual Conference of the Association for the Anthropological Study of Consciousness*. Pacific Palisades, California.
- Heinze, Ruth-Inge. (1988). Personal communication. Berkeley.
- Hilgard, Josephine R. (1979). *Personality and Hypnosis: A Study of Imaginative Involvement*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kenny, Michael G. (1981). Multiple personality and spirit possession. *Psychiatry*, 44(4), 337-358.
- Krippner, Stanley. (1987). Cross-cultural approaches to multiple personality disorder: practices in Brazilian spiritism. *Ethos*, 15(3), 273-295.
- Laguerre, M. (1980). *Voodoo Heritage*. California: Sage Publications.
- Lanzetta, J. T., Cartwright-Smith, J. & Kleck, R. E. (1976). Effects of nonverbal dissimulation on emotional experience and autonomic arousal. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 33, 354-370.
- Lewis, I.M. (1989). *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism*. Second Edition, London and New York: Routledge.
- Métraux, Alfred. (1955). Dramatic elements in ritual possession. *Diogenes*, 11, 18-36.
- _____ (1972). *Voodoo in Haiti*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Mischel, Walter and Mischel, F. (1958). Psychological aspects of spirit possession. *American Anthropologist*, 60, 249-260.
- Pekala, Ronald J. (1989). A cluster analysis of the phenomenology of hypnotized individuals: The presence of subtypes. Submitted for publication. Paper presented at the *Fortieth Annual Meeting of the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*. St. Louis, Missouri.
- Pieper J. (1964). *Love and Inspiration: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Quincy, Cheri and Alter, Joel. (1987). Sonic resonance and its interactions with the dynamics of cerebral spinal fluid in relation to focus of attention and altered states. In the *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Study of Shamanism and Alternate Modes of Healing*. Berkeley, CA: Independent Scholars of Asia.
- Ravenscroft, K. (1965). Voodoo possession: A natural experiment in hypnosis. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 13(3), 157-182.
- Rossi, Ernest L. (1986). Altered states of consciousness in everyday life: Ultradian rhythms. In Benjamin B. Wolman and Montague Ullman (Eds.) *Handbook of States of Consciousness*. New York: Van Norstrand Reinhold.
- Rouget, Gilbert. (1985). *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Shor, Ronald E. (1979). A phenomenological method for the measurement of variables important to an understanding of the nature of hypnosis. In Erika Fromm and Ronald E. Shor (Eds.) *Hypnosis: Developments in Research and New Perspectives*. 2nd edition. New York: Aldine.
- Spiegel, David and Cardeña, Etzel. (in press). Dissociative mechanisms in PTSD. In Marion E. Wolf (Ed.). *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: Biological Mechanisms and Clinical Aspects*.
- Stoller, Paul. (1989). *Fusion of the Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tart, Charles T. (1975). *States of Consciousness*. New York: Dutton.
- van der Waelde, P. (1968). Trance states and ego psychology. In Raymond Prince (Ed.) *Trance and Possession States*. Montreal: R. M. Bucke Memorial Society
- Walker, Sheila S. (1972). *Ceremonial Spirit Possession in Africa and Afro-America*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill.
- _____ (1989). Personal communication, Berkeley.
- Winkelman, Michael. (1986). Trance states: A theoretical model and cross-cultural analysis. *Ethos*, 14(2), 174-203.