

Possession cults, structure and occult powers in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau

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Possession exists in so many societies that it seems almost banal. But as anthropologists we are always interested by this phenomenon, its structure and its social sense. I am not analysing the possession as a disease, or a pathological disorder of the person. But with Georges Lapassade I think that the capacity of dissociation is an integral part of the human psyche. The capacity of dissociation is interpreted by actors, in an emic point of view, as the emergence of one or more different divinities into the body of a person. Possession can be analysed as an acceptance to unify separated personalities and social roles. The capacity of dissociation is not the result of a process, but the initial condition of the process.

The officiants can bring possession upon themselves by breathing deeply, trying to force themselves to cry, by repetitive music or by wearing some symbolic objects etc. The transformation of the consciousness of a woman or a man causes new standardised attitudes and gestures. Specific roles are preformed in an organised space and time. Each society gives this phenomenon a particular place and meaning within its religious system. The assignment of one or other sex to the possession, its more or less spectacular forms and organized rituals, shows its great diversity in a world that is changing rapidly. However, I will try to provide a global understanding of the possession phenomenon. In order to illustrate this, I will use the Manjak people as an example. I will analyse the structure of the possession by studying the structure and action of the human body and minds of the witches and witch-hunters. The social representations of these actions reveal different types of powers and knowledge among the community members. The power is strongly bound to the knowledge and specifically to the knowledge of the occults. The officiants of possession cults are able to lead an interaction process between the visible and invisible world.

I will also present the symbolic language of the possession and its various codes illustrated by the projection of a short video.

Possession cults with their articulate and body language explain the disharmonies and the tensions of the society. Among the Manjak people of Guinea Bissau and Senegal, the possession contributes to divinatory and therapeutic rituals. The possessed persons are surrounded by a circle of adepts. Between them, we notice strong solidarities. Here there is a symbolic system of empowerment of the women that takes place in a sacred and profane sphere. In a changing world, each person needs to fit his representation of the invisible and

visible strengths to new realities. Men are now occupied by better paying activities and they become dependent upon women to solve their occult problems. Nowadays these occult problems are growing, as are the number of shrines aimed to solve these problems. Money is given to the officiants for their divination activities and for their therapeutic rituals and some women have become famous and popular, so they now have a remunerative responsibility in their community.

There are different types of possession among the Manjak. Some manifest themselves with an alteration consciousness and others without. The first documented case of possession where the mind is altered is a relatively recent possession cult context, which appeared a hundred years ago. When hurt, the possessed person does not feel pain. In this collective cult (named kasara), there are many possessed people (the nalemp). The majority have proven to be women although men rank among its leaders but they are not possessed. Control of the possession is learned gradually but without any formal initiation, nor recourse to psychotropic substances. By imitation the officiant controls her possession step by step and the alternance of different personalities. In the beginning she can be possessed during a therapeutic ritual lead by the principal officiant of the cult, and she only helps the older possessed persons. Later on she is able to speak to reveal a problem during collective rituals and after she can do divination for patients.






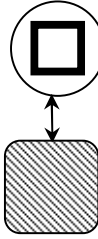
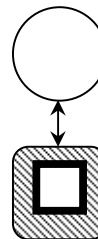
When there is a possessed person in a family, the responsibility is not lost after the death of this person. The responsibility remains in the family. But there is no fixed criterion for that transmission. One day the person is possessed and the community members interpret the phenomenon as a ritual possession by divinity, or the possessed person is designated by divination without any previous possession phenomenon having occurred before the nomination.

The second case of possession without an alteration of the mind occurs in an ancient cult (named bëpene). It's not a collective cult, but the officiant (the napene) can collaborate with the collective one of kasara. This cult, requires a bilinear transmission of the responsibility from a previous dead officiant and after that an initiation. The officiant can be a male or a female, but nowadays, among the Manjak people the responsibility is becoming more feminized. It is a soft possession that can be felt by the officiant as a permanent possession. The officiant stays lucid, clear-sighted. The two personalities coexist; it's not an alternance as in the previous form of possession. The officiant experiences the phenomenon on a permanent basis and plays his sacred role without forgetting the acts that she has already performed.

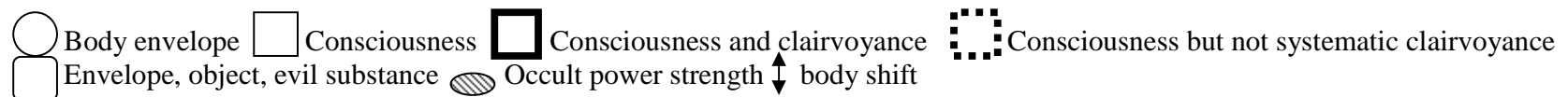
Some persons are able to act as a possessed person with or without a changed consciousness. They have responsibilities in both types of shrine. This is why I do not agree with Lapassade when he says that there is a greater control of the dissociation when the officiant is lucid. It is not a question of more or less control. There are two forms of dissociation. Both types of possession are useful depending on what the officiant has to do. And both types need an apprenticeship in order to improve the control of the possession, even if there is no formal initiation in one case. During the life the officiant continues deepen her knowledge.

There is a structural organisation of the different types of possession, divinatory or therapeutic possession, and of the different types of witchcraft attacks, the anthropophagic ones and the others that are done via a maleficent object as can be seen in the following structure.

Structure with positive and negative forms of action to preserve the world of chaos

Witch hunters			Persons without specific powers but who can acquire certain ones	Witches		
Possessions with or without conscience alteration. Communication with occult entities. Centripetal movement				Neither possessed. Communication with occult entities. Projection of the witch body or substance into other bodies and places. Centrifugal movement		
<i>nalemp</i>	<i>napene</i>	<i>namañã</i>	<i>ñan</i>	<i>nakalam</i>	<i>natapar</i>	<i>nare kakut</i>
+	+	+	+/-	-	-	-
						
The invisible becomes visible, apparition of the power against witches	The invisible becomes visible during an extraction of maleficent substances	Legitimate, rightful public actions	Ambivalent neutrality can transform into witches or witch hunters	Illegitimate, unlawfulness secret actions	The visible becomes invisible during the throw of maleficent substances	The visible becomes invisible, disappearance of the witch
<i>kasara</i> is an association where the clairvoyants et les adepts non clairvoyants collaborate between themselves and with invisible entities				<i>kare kakut</i> is an association where les clairvoyants collaborate between themselves and with invisible entities		

Legend



1- The ignorance of a person without a specific power (the ñān, in the centre of the structure) can lead to the witchcraft or sorcery side of the society or to the positive and therapeutic side. This neutral ambivalence is fragile and sometimes easily influenced by the maleficent entities. There are two sides to the maleficent one and the beneficent one. In each side there are people and occult entities collaborating. Here we are not analysing the structure of the occult entities but only the structure of the occult capacity of witches and witch hunters.

We will see the positive side of the structure

2- The nalemp body and conscience are invested by a beneficent power (therapeutic and divinatory). The human body is invaded and the consciousness too. This possession occurs with an altered consciousness state. The possessed person hunts and escorts the maleficent and savage entities from the domestic places to wild territory. This power is not inherited by a systematic transmission and there is no ritual initiation. As I said, the apprenticeship is observing the elders, and after the first trance interpreted as a possession by a divinity, slowly the officiant will be capable of controlling his possession which becomes less spectacular, receiving softly the invisible entity in her body. The learning is by emotional experience of the possession and an objective imitation and knowledge of the cosmogony. Children are growing up in a favourable environment; they attend rituals and see the possessed act and imitate them.

3- The napene body is invested by a beneficent power (therapeutic and divinatory). The human body is invaded but not the consciousness. The possession occurs without an altered consciousness state. They remove from the bodies of the victims and from the domestic places, maleficent objects. They recover and return to the bodies of sick persons the vital principle that has been stolen by a witch. As I said, this power is inherited from an ancestor and there is a ritual initiation. During this initiation there is a stage with a sort of shamanistic contact with spirits, divinities and ancestors. The initiation includes a journey of the vital principle of the novice into the occult world, as in a shamanistic system. Manjak say that the neophyte is dead. As analysed by Bertrand Hell there is no rigid separation between possession and shamanism, in some societies the two forms of contact with the spirits coexist. The learning is by emotional experience (this ritual death is frightening) and by objective apprenticeship. For one week the novice has to learn, from a teacher, how to lead a lot of rituals and the powers of various plants.

4- Among namañã, consciousness and clairvoyance are unsystematically in the body. The namañã is rather positive. He or She is authorized to use the domesticated power of a shrine. Without possession the clairvoyant can play a role to help the society.

The collective kasara cult gathers adepts, nalemp, napene and namañã. The collaboration between nalemp and namañã is important. The namañã make the libation and the nalemp is possessed but she forgets what she has said, but not the namañã, who can warn people affected by the problem. The namañã is sometimes an ancient possessed person and too old to continue this tiring experience.

These responsibilities are means to improve a certain power and an aura in the community. It's a means of empowerment for the nalemp, napene and namañã, who have the knowledge and the capacity to make decisions that involve the healing or the death of members of the community. Their flexibility in their interpretation of the misfortune ensures and consolidates the continuity of the cult. The cult leaders are able to adapt to a reality, which is constantly changing. The more violent the social crisis, more active the cult, but when there is no problem, the cult tends to be less active and sometimes disappears. But nowadays in rural and urban West Africa witchcraft is growing.

We will see the negative side of the structure

5- The nakalam is a bad person. The clairvoyance is not systemically in the body. Their action is rather negative. They involve wild powers or illegally diverted power of a shrine.

6- The natapar body launches a pathogenic substance which can be innate or acquired. The person is obliged to do this in order to avoid feeling pain. He projects his affliction on to others. There is a projection of a maleficent substance into the body of their victims.

7- The nare kakut human body is left during the night in his bed, while his wild occult body goes away to perform maleficent actions. He invades other bodies to hide himself and steals, the vital principle of the person and transform it into human flesh to eat.

This structural opposition with positive and negative power is not fixed. A person can be a positive officiant one day, and in secrecy, another day or during the night, a witch. An officiant can be a napene and a nalemp or a witch a natapar and a nare kakut.

But as you can see, for one power there is an opposite strength. The most important is the equilibrium between different entities, witches and witch-hunters. In fact Manjak people do not want to eliminate the maleficent, because, without maleficent or affliction, nobody will be interested by their community and life will be very uninteresting and boring. So the possessed persons and the adepts of the possession cult have to maintain the world in a certain

order to avoid the chaos. So everybody, the maleficent and the beneficent entities or humans, can have an existence and the rituals can be performed. Each ritual must be done with a minimal oblation and libation that nurture the occult entities and the witches, witches hunters and the circle of their family and friends. Each one has a role and a function to play in the structure of the system.

There were some possession cults with possessed men like the Nya cult in Mali studied by Colleyn. In this case the cult is central to the religious system. It is a fact that when the cult is more marginalized the officiants are likely to be feminine. In Guinea-Bissau the cult is more masculine than in Senegal where the cult is more marginalized in a migration context. Men leave the position to women who are more zealous and better at assuming that role. But in another side as told previously, the men become dependent upon the women to solve their occult problems. Nowadays, the sorcery and the witchcraft are developing in a context of concurrence. The occult attacks are not regressing. When the cult becomes more peripheral, that does not mean that it becomes less important in the life of a person especially when he feels under threat from the occults strength.

The possession as a human capacity of dissociation is necessary in order to receive a new personality, which fits with the work that needs to be done. This role places the possessed person in a dominant position to control the disorder of the community. The human capacity of dissociation, allows the performance of the possessed person. They can adopt an out of the ordinary attitude to fight an out of the ordinary problem.

Possessed persons discover misfortunes that threaten Manjak society and, by the same way, offer a means to counter it. A sense is given to misfortune by creating answers whose symbolism is recognized by the community members. After each crisis, this system of direct communication and action with the divinities gives a new equilibrium to the community.

As we can see in the video that I will show, Manjak trance is seldom spectacular even if emotions can overflow and make the possessed women become more violent, threatening, or emotional. The vocabulary of the possessed person expresses an active and a passive position. The Manjak say that the person holds the bed on the head (a little bed witch is element of the possession cult) (it's an active position), that the person is catches (it's a passive position) or when the person is speaking with the divinity (it's a neutral position, when the person is in catalepsy).

In oral societies, the knowledge of the possessed person is flexible and bound to the power. This occult knowledge and power are fitting to the reality and integrating news data. It's why possession exists in so many oral societies and when the cult is not too rigid (rigidity

that can be introduced by the writing and a dogma) the cult does not disappear but changes, in a creative adaptation.

5mn maximum video: different forms of possession and corporal language.