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**Learning possession in the Xangô Cult in Recife
(Brazil)
Outline of an emotional process**

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Introduction

My communication is part of an anthropological investigation into Spirit possession learning process in an Afro-Brazilian cult (Xangô) located in the Northeast of Brazil (Recife). Drawing on first-hand ethnographical data, gathered during a 14 months fieldwork between July 2001 and September 2003, its main purpose consists in presenting an original theoretical framework of Spirit possession learning process borrowing concepts from psychology and neuropsychology of emotions. Neither purely speculative, nor strictly descriptive, our analytical perspective stands between these two poles, suggesting what we could call a “cognitive ethnography¹”. Our first concern here consists in suggesting a comprehensive explanation of how culture influences Spirit possession’s psycho-affective mechanisms, and *vice versa*.

Why such a concern in studying the learning process of possession? Firstly, few ethnographical studies focus on the way possession is actually learned by members of a religious community. We have plenty of precise descriptions of fully expressive (and legitimate) possessed people behavior, but very few (or vague) ethnographical material of how they learn such a cultural skill. Secondly, this diachronic approach of possession lead me to take seriously and develop theoretically an hypothesis that Gilbert Rouget first formulated in the conclusion of his magistral work on music and trance:

*« Dans la genèse de tout culte de possession, et donc de toute transe possessionnelle, il a dû y avoir, à l’origine, un état émotionnel vécu par un individu et susceptible d’être vécu à nouveau par d’autres, soit spontanément, soit par apprentissage. »
(Rouget 1990 : 557)*

What I suggest here is that possession learning process presents various common features with what we know about emotional learning process. A soft

¹ The expression “cognitive ethnography” was first coined by Olivier Wathelet (personal communication). We will define this analytical approach in more detail later.

version of my argument would say that to learn possession *looks like* to learn emotions. But my claim is a stronger one. I argue that a central part of possession learning process *is* of an *emotional nature*. In other words, learning possession means largely learning emotions.

To make things as clear as possible, what *I do not say* is that Spirit possession can be *strictly reduced* to an emotional learning process! Specific mental representations about body and spirit interaction (Cohen 2007; Cohen and Barrett 2008) as well as other psychological phenomena like dissociation (Seligman 2005 and Seligman and Kirmayer 2008), absorption (Luhrmann 2005) or hypnoid states (de Heusch 2006, Hell 2008) are constitutive ingredients of possession, and they contribute to give it its special flavor. But what our ethnographic data clearly suggests is that learning possession consists in learning how to deal with special kind of affective states.

To defend that point of view, four questions will guide our analysis:

- 1) Is possession an emotional process?
- 2) What do people learn in the possession learning process?
- 3) How do they learn it?
- 4) How possession learning develops through time?

In my communication today, I will restrain my analysis to the first question, bringing some ethnographical data that incite me to answer it positively. I hope we will have time to discuss the other points in the following discussion.

Spirit possession in Xangô cult

The *Xangô cult*², an Afro-Brazilian possession cult of Yoruba origin³, is located in Recife, the capital of the Pernambuco State, in the Northeast of Brazil. According to Roger Bastide (1960), its denomination would come from the popularity of the African deity *Xangô* in the city. Its genesis in Recife took place in the late 19th. Quite restrained during the first half of the century, the cult expanded rapidly through the city in between the fifties and seventies thanks to the influence of charismatic cult chiefs (de Carvalho 1987).

The social organization of *Xangô* cult is based on « families-of-saint » (« *familias-de-santo* »). Such collective entities rely on initiatory links between their members, elaborated on the model of the biological family. The initiators are called “father” and “mother-of-saint”, initiates “son” or “daughter-of-saint” and co-initiates of a same initiator “brothers” and “sisters-of-saint”. The temple (“*casa-de-santo*” or “*terreiro*”) is conducted by a « father » and/or a « mother-of-saint ». Every initiate is potentially a future cult chief. This is why initiatory parenthood is at the core of social networks linking various temples through space and time, allowing the spread of knowledge and a constant negotiation of power and leadership.

Two categories of « spiritual entities⁴ » are worshiped in the *Xangô* cult: the *eguns*, or family ancestors, and the *orixás*, the Yoruba deities associated with natural elements like river, sea, thunder (...) or with human activities like hunting or forge. Due to the syncretism with popular Catholicism, the word « saint » (“*santo*”) is frequently used as a synonym of *orixá*.

² Or “candomblé Nagô de Recife”, as members usually name it.

³ The Yoruba are an ethno-linguistic group of approximately 30 million individuals throughout the region of West Africa (mainly western Nigeria but also Benin, Togo and Ghana). A significant percentage of Yoruba people has been enslaved and brought to Brazil (but also other regions of Latin America such as Cuba) during the late period of Atlantic slave trade (19ième siècle).

⁴ The vernacular expression « spiritual entities » designates all the spiritual beings present on the Afro-Brazilian scene, without distinguishing them.

Possession by orixás is highly valorized in the Xangô cult, by contrast with possession by *eguns* that is expressly proscribed as it is conceptualized as a direct contact with death, and thus a potential source of danger for oneself. *Egun* possession is rare while *orixá* possession is part of everyday ritual life.

Possession might happen in numerous contexts. But what is important to keep in mind is that its triggering conditions are very well specified, and that its expression is submitted to strict cultural criteria. Most of the time possession occurs during ritual events. It is expected in public festivals (“*toques*”), but also in private ceremonies such as sacrifice (“*obrigação*”) and leave’s baths (“*amassi*”). These private ceremonies are part of the initiation process where first possessions – called “birth” of the *orixá* - are frequent. But most of private ceremonies also precede public festivals given to specific *orixás* that take place during the all year.

Possession may also happen in the initiate’s day-to-day life. In such cases, possession often reveals a dissatisfaction of the *orixá* who decides to punish his “son” or “daughter”, for example by possessing him during his job, in a public transport, on a public place, etc. Extra-ritual possessions can also be interpreted as an election of the “child” by his *orixá*. In that case, it will be interpreted as a call for initiation if the possessed is not initiated yet. Initiates also told me that on rare occasions the *orixá* might possess his “child” to help him to face a danger.

In all cases, possession context and its conceptualization by Xangô members play a determinant role in the decision of encouraging or, on the contrary, preventing a trance. Body treatments and collective responses may sharply differ from one situation to the other. In our analysis of possession, we will mainly focus on the most common situation of possession by orixás in a

ritual context. The main reason of that choice is that it is during such occasions that learning actually takes place.

Analytical tools and methodology

Concepts as descriptive tools

What is an emotion? There are numerous possible answers to that question. The way emotions are perceived and conceptualized may vary considerably in accordance with the researcher's discipline; but also with his own questioning and theoretical sensibilities inside his field of research. As an anthropologist, what interests me first about emotions is the way culture is able to shape their perception and expression. So, instead of giving an arbitrary selected and context-free definition, I will prefer starting from ethnographical accounts and descriptions and then recruiting a series of concepts able to shed a light on various aspects of the emotional process involved in possession. As already mentioned, I use concepts as descriptive tools. As I will try to show, recent concepts and hypothesis coming from psychology and neuropsychology might be helpful in two ways: 1) they can enrich ethnographic description of possession; 2) they might suggest new theoretical hypothesis.

Cognitive ethnography

Our analytical perspective is thus cognitively oriented – meaning that we are looking for the cognitive causal structure constraining cultural transmission, as firstly suggested by Sperber 1996; Boyer 2001 and Barrett 2004. But it diverges from this mainstream cognitive approach in anthropology in two ways.

Our first divergence consists in privileging an analysis of the *pragmatic conditions* constraining communication and cognitive processes, as suggested by Carlo Severi (2007: 27). In other words, we believe that some special and recurrent features of cultural transmission might be found not only in

conceptual forms⁵, as cognitive anthropology frequently defends it, but also *in how* cultural knowledge is performed and organized - involving not only cognitions, but also actions, interactions and emotions⁶.

The second divergence, especially visible in the case of possession, is our insistence on emotions, and their central role in possession phenomena and its cultural success around the world. Cognitive anthropologists interested in possession are firstly interested in describing “patterns of thinking” as well as “recurrent sets of concepts” (Cohen 2008: 106-107). What we want to suggest is that “patterns of feeling” as well as “recurrent sets of emotions” should also be taken into account when we try to describe people’s cognitions and their influence on cultural transmission. As I will try to show, Spirit possession in the Xangô cult in Recife gives a striking example of the tight and dynamical interaction between thinking and feeling, and its importance in learning processes associated to it.

Describing experience

As most researchers in emotions stress it, the study of affective life brings up important methodological difficulties. May be the most evident is how to access and describe others’ emotional experiences. In another paper (Halloy 2007), I suggest that in the case of possession, three (potential) categories of data might help the ethnographer to give a *close description* of others’ phenomenal experience of possession⁷. First, a precise description of other’s expressive behavior: facial expression, body posture and movements, patterns

⁵ What is well-known today as “minimally counter-intuitive concepts” (Boyer 1997).

⁶ We think that the mainstream cognitive approach develops a too strictly “cognitive” approach of cognition. Focusing on the performative contexts of cognition shed light on a distinct and complementary level of the described realities. Of course, comparative studies as well as experimental designs might be extremely useful in testing the hypothesis and theoretical insights emerging from a strictly “cognitive ethnography”.

⁷ In a famous article, Nagel (1979) claims that other people’s phenomenal experience (the *qualia* of their experience) is just inaccessible. If it is true we will never know “how it is like to be a bat”, to take the philosopher’s example, I think it is possible to give a *reliable description* about how it feels to be possessed by a spirit or a deity in a determined culture through a “crossing data” methodology, as I suggest it below.

of interaction, etc. A second ethnographical source is the indigenous words, expressions and discourse about possession: how do people speak about possession and their own experience of it. Finally, we can also consider a third (and more unusual) category of knowledge: the ethnographer's own experience of possession. *Per se*, introspective knowledge resulting from such an experience can't in no way be *identified* with native people's experience of possession. But it can tell us *something* about it if the first-person description of possession by the ethnographer is *compared* with his third-person description of people's expressive behavior and discourse about possession. He might also take into account the indigenous discursive feedback about his own experience of possession (Halloy 2007). The result of that comparison would allow him to approach a reliable and relevant description of how it feels to be possessed by a spirit or a deity in the religious community he is studying.

Varying sources of ethnographical data is a first step towards a phenomenal account of possession experience. A further qualitative step can be given by incorporating conceptual tools into description, as suggested above. In other words, an analytical description of possession *in context* might be considerably refined by psychological and neuropsychological concepts about emotions. Social scientists are, for more than three decades, a privileged (and most of the time annoying) interlocutor for psychologists, because they force them to take into account real life situations and the way ecological factors constraint cognition. But the reverse should be true too, because specialists of mind and brain force social scientists to take into account how mind/brain architecture constraint cultural learning.

Possession as emotional process

I will start our analysis by suggesting a general framework allowing a first approximation between emotions and possession. In order to do so,

Antonio Damasio's theory of emotions seems quite appropriate because the way possession is perceived and described in the Xangô cult shows an astonishing « air de famille » with the way Damasio perceives and describes emotions⁸.

In order to answer our first question – Is possession an emotional process? - I will present three categories of ethnographic data:

- 1) Vernacular vocabulary of possession
- 2) Xangô members' accounts of their own experience of possession
- 3) Description of possession episodes

Then, I will confront this ethnographic material with Damasio's description of emotions. If they “match”, we will be able to conclude that possession and emotions are may be not the same, but two very similar phenomena.

Vernacular vocabulary of possession

If we have a look at Spirit possession vernacular terms and expressions in the Xangô cult, we observe that three trance stages are frequently distinguished by cult members. To each stage corresponds a set of specific psychosomatic states varying in accordance with the moment of their appearance in the possession process:

- 1) The “irradiation” stage precedes the “full” possession state or “manifestation”. It is often described by sensations such as goose bumps, dizziness, prickling in hands and feet, uncontrollable shivering,

⁸ A second good reason is that Damasio's theory is widely approved by the scientific community. Of course, criticisms have been addressed to it. A first category of criticisms underlines the importance of “appraisal” in the emotional process, a dimension that is poorly developed by the neuropsychologist. We will take that point into account in the second part of our analysis. The second one insists on the existence of “purely” cognitive emotions. In other words, they underline the existence of emotions that would not have the body as their main theater. It seems to me that this second point is too severe when we know that Damasio (1995) also suggests a “simulation loop” of emotions that mainly takes place in people's brain. As we can see, Damasio's theory's criticisms mainly focus on what he did not sufficiently develop, but it seems to me that the core of its theory is accepted by everyone.

lack of balance, hot flush, feeling like wanting to cry, tears in the eyes, etc.

- 2) The « manifestation » stage is characterized by « the full presence » of the *orixá* that should ideally lead to lose of consciousness and total amnesia.
- 3) The third stage, called « *axerado* » state, refers to the resolution stage, meaning the transition state between possession and the return to the normal. People in “axerado” state frequently look like “absent” and/or groggy. They might cry or laugh without apparent reason.

A diversified vocabulary tries to capture and describe the way the *orixá* interacts with his “child” [“fillho” or “filha”] or his “material” [“*materia*”], meaning the body of the possessed person. People say that the *orixá* « manifests himself or herself », [« *se manifesta* »], that he « takes » [« *pega* »], « embodies » [« *incorpora* »] or, more generally, “acts upon” [« *atua* »] his “son” or her “daughter”. It is also frequently heard that the “child” “receives” [“*recebe*”] his or her *orixá*. This first set of expressions underlines the imperious action of the *orixá* and the passive attitude of his or her “child”.

A second set emphasizes the perception of a co-presence of two entities: the *orixá* and the possessed. A frequently used metaphor says that the *orixá* get close from his “child” (“*se aproximar*”⁹). He can do it slightly [“*de leve*”] or, at the contrary, suddenly and violently. In this case, it might be said that the *orixá* nails down [“*se cravar*”] his “child”. But independently from the smooth or violent way the encounter between the *orixá* and the child’s body takes place, a general rule wants that the closest the *orixá* is from his or her “child”, the more

⁹ The Portuguese verb « *se aproximar* » refers to a spatial metaphor. But it also connotes an affective closeness between the child and his divinity, underlining the “intimate” nature of the relationship between the *orixá* and his “child”.

intense are the somatic changes. How orixá/mind/body interaction is conceptualized by Xangô members?

Xangô members' understanding of orixá/mind/body interaction

« Manifestation » is characterized by the full presence of the *orixá* in his « child's » body (ideally) leading to the vanishing of his own consciousness¹⁰. Xangô members use the expressions “the person is sleeping” [“a pessoa esta durmindo”] or “she switches off” [“ela apagou”] to depict her mental state during “manifestation”. The following commentary of Paulo, the cult leader of the family-of-saint I studied, illustrates that the presumed vanishing of consciousness is a necessary condition for an ideal “manifestation”. He is commenting his conversation with one of his initiates after the latter exceptional « manifestation » during a private ritual of *amassi* (leaves' bath):

That day I tested him. I asked him: “My son, were you with me dancing? Didn't you dance with me? “No... Did I dance? » - « Of course you did! Don't you remember? – « No, no... » - Where were you? » - « I don't know...” You see, I tested him... I mean that I confirmed, isn't it? I confirmed...

As we can see, a fully possessed individual is supposed to forget everything that happened during possession because his own mind was replaced or substituted by the orixá's individuality, with his own way of thinking, speaking, moving and interacting¹¹. This is the general and ideal conceptual framework through which possession is understood by Xangô

¹⁰ By « consciousness » we mean a « un mode d'accès sélectif à des opérations perceptives, motrices, mentales qui, dès lors que ce mode opère, prennent une qualité particulière, celle d'être conscientes » (Jeannerod 2002 : 114-115).

¹¹ As Emma Cohen (2007, 2008) demonstrates it convincingly, the conception of the relation between mind and body in Spirit possession corresponds to a minimally counter-intuitive conceptualization that would explain why it is so widespread through the world. This conceptualization of mind migrating and temporarily investigation besieging one or various bodies seem very similar in most cultures where “executive possession” is at the core of religious experience.

members. But what an alternative discourse suggests is that access to perceptive, motor and mental operations might just be *restrained* and amnesia only *partial*. The first and ideal discourse about full “manifestation” leading to complete amnesia needs to be nuanced by the distinction between what people call “conscious” and “non-conscious” mediums.

Here is how Zite, a sixty years old mother-of-saint, conceptualizes this distinction¹²:

The unconscious medium does not remember anything, isn't it? You don't remember anything of what happened. And for the “conscious” (medium), you are “manifested”, but you know what is happening (...) The orixá speaks, isn't it? The person speaks with the orixá... But she is conscious... (...) There is also the “unconscious” (medium), who doesn't know what is happening to him, who doesn't know anything. There are others who know that they are with the spirit, the master, who know what they are doing... But this does not mean that for the conscious medium the master¹³, the guide, the orixás don't “take” everything!

Lucínha, an eminent mother-of-saint, found a very elegant way to differentiate the two kinds of mediumnity:

The unconscious medium loses his ratiocinio [raciocínio]... The (spiritual) entity dominates him entirely [toma conta de tudo]. The conscious medium, he knows that he speaks [fala] but he does not know what he says [diz]. He knows he is acting [agindo] but he does not know what he is doing [fazendo]... He is conscious of something.

Thanks to Lucínha's description, we are able to underline two levels of action associated with speech or gesture. The mother-of saint makes a

¹² On retrouve cette distinction dans le culte des *caboclos* à Belem (Brésil) admirablement décrit par Véronique Boyer Araújo (1993 : 141).

¹³ *Master* and *guides* are spiritual categories of entities who are worshipped in another well present Afro-Brazilian modality of cult in Recife called *jurema*.

distinction between the *level of motor action* – to speak and to act – and the *level of meaningful action* - to say and to do. The unconscious medium would not have access to any of these two levels of consciousness, whereas the conscious medium (or “quasi-conscious” medium, as Xangô members call it too) would only have access to the level of “motor action” – I am doing something but I don’t know the meaning of my action¹⁴.

This general conceptual framework through which Xangô members think and understand Spirit possession is central for our purpose because even if a central part of possession learning process is of an emotional nature, as I will defend it, possessed people only have a restrained (conscious) access to it¹⁵. Most first-person accounts are thus limited to the “irradiation” stage that directly precedes the “manifestation” stage, characterized by (real or social) amnesia and (total or partial) unconsciousness. Another important theoretical consequence is that possession phenomenon is not conceptualized by Xangô members as unique and monolithic state but it is rather seen as a *continuum* of mental and body states oscillating between consciousness and unconsciousness, but also between light and intense somatic changes, as we now will see.

Xangô members’ accounts of their own experience of possession

We can go a step further in our description of possession by listening to Xangô members’ account of their own experience of possession. In the preceding section, we observed that the “manifestation” stage is characterized by a restrained access to consciousness. We also stressed that even if the possessed person’s amnesia was incomplete, there is no social advantage in

¹⁴ We can find a similar conceptualization between two levels of action in Eugênio Barba’s distinction between “expressive” and “pré-expressive” levels of action, as well as in Pierre Livet’s distinction between “predispositional” and “terminal” actions (1994).

¹⁵ Disruptions in attention memory, attention and awareness are typical symptoms of dissociative experiences, even if their (neural) reality is not yet well-known and still under debate (Kihlstrom 2005; Seligman and Kirmayer 2008). But what interests us in the first place here is how affective states contribute to the experience, recognition and expression of possession, that may involve dissociative symptomatology or not.

showing that the “manifestation” was only partial, because the ideal trance should be marked by complete amnesia. Thus, as already stressed, what we can hear from Xangô members about their own possession is about the “irradiation” stage that directly precedes “manifestation” or full possession.

A first interesting account comes from Maria-Helena, a young priestess who is talking about the first time she felt her saint “acting upon” her:

I felt an emotion, something like that, an emotion that made me feel like wanting to cry... But I was not really « irradiated »... I did not really feel the orixá. When I came to feel (the orixá) it was in Paulo’s cult house (terreiro), in my [initiatic] grand-father’s house¹⁶. It was Oxum’s celebration (toque). They started to sing for Yansã [Maria-Helena’s orixá¹⁷] and I felt such “flightiness” (“leveza”), and that’s it. Then I fainted [literally: “I lost my senses”] ... But I was not « manifested”. I felt like I fainted... I felt my blood as if my blood pressure was going up or down... I just know that I felt my body fainting...

A second account is from Yguaracy, a priest of 40 years old who is making a commentary on an unusual possession by Orixalá, his second orixá:

I felt it was not an « approximation » of my mother Oxum [Yguaracy’s main orixá). It was an “approximation” of my father Orixalá [Yguaracy’s second orixá or « juntó »]... It was something different... And it took time for me to realize what was happening in my own cult house, because I asked myself: « Ave Maria, do I have Parkinson disease? » Because my muscles were trembling... It was something different... And I think... I am sure that it was the first time I was feeling something like that with Oxalá...

¹⁶ Paulo’s father, Malaquíás, is one of the main spiritual figures of the recent history of the Xangô cult in Recife.

¹⁷ At least two orixás are ascribed to every initiate in the Xangô cult. The first one is called “orixá-de-cabeça”, literally “orixá-of-the-head”, and the second “juntó” or “adjuntó”, which means “together”. Every initiate has to worship his orixás by offering them an annual sacrifice and receiving them in possession. Every initiate might be possessed by his or her orixás, but possession is not a condition for initiation.

Two constitutive elements of possession experience are clearly expressed in these two short accounts: the passive attitude of the individual and the lack of control over the changes that occur in his own body. These descriptions clearly suggest a first conceptual parallel with Antonio Damasio's description of emotions. According to the neuropsychologist, "in essence, emotions are ... constituées par des changements survenant dans l'état du corps, induits dans ses nombreux organes par les terminaisons nerveuses issues d'un système neural spécifique, lorsque celui-ci répond aux pensées évoquées par un phénomène ou un événement donnés » (1995 : 183). For Damasio, a central point is that « la capacité de ressentir des émotions passe par la "prise en compte" des changements corporels » (*Ibid.* : 203).

Possession, like emotions, is clearly anchored in the perception of somatic changes. Like emotions, it seems to impose itself upon the (passive) individual, offering very little control over it¹⁸. Possession also involves, as stressed before, a change in the perception of our body: it is characterized by a restrained access to perception and it is (ideally) followed by amnesia.

But Damasio tells us more about emotions. As he defends it, the perception of an emotion involves not only the perception of a "somatic state", but also the association of that perception with a particular image (olfactive, visual, kinesthetic,...) which works as a repère or as a "marker" (*Ibid.* : 225). He calls such a learning process the 'somatic markers' hypothesis'. To show how such a hypothesis might be useful in the case of possession, I will give a short description of a possession episode during a sacrifice ritual.

Description of a possession episode

The following sacrifice ritual, called "*obrigação*", was organized for the *orixá* of Taísa, a young initiate of 14 years old:

¹⁸ This general conceptual framework needs to be nuanced. We will see later how experienced possessed persons seem to exert a better control over their own possession.

*Táisa is knelt down in front of her orixá's altar [assentamento¹⁹]. From the beginning of the sacrifice, she shows the first signs of an "irradiation": goose bumps, shivering, **regard vitreux, traits du visage tirés, vibration du buste qui balance légèrement d'avant en arrière**. After cutting the animal's throat, her all body shivers and begins to vibrate perceptibly when the animal's blood is poured on her head and chest. Her initiator asks her to sustain the pork's head over her own. She obeys with some difficulties... It looks as if she did not control her own movements anymore. Present initiates help her to maintain the animal's head stable. Warm blood keeps on leaking on Táisa's shoulders. A few minutes later, the pork's head is presented to Táisa's mouth. She must drink the blood directly from the flesh of the cut chest. First she is quite reluctant and touches the animal's flesh half-heartedly... But a few seconds later, the girl looks more and more determined and she ends burying her face in the warm flesh, drinking the animal's blood avidly. Songs are now switching to the orixá's repertoire²⁰. The gluttony of the young girl is welcomed by the assembly with enthusiasm and salutation to Ogum, Táisa's orixá. Táisa's head begins to swirl around. Her bust is now balancing (**d'avant en arrière**) powerfully. Until the last animal is killed, the orixá will have to stay knelt down on the floor. But the initiator is maintaining the emotional climax by invoking Táisa's orixá, by singing loudly and emotionally, by encouraging everybody to follow him. Then, the orixá is invited to stand up. Táisa's male and female*

¹⁹ Altar of the *orixá*, the *assentamento* is compound by a large earthenware, wooden or clay plate containing various consecrated objects, among others stone or iron pieces. "Assentamento" also designates these objects' consecration ceremony.

²⁰ Until that moment, the accompanying chants were part of what the Brazilian ethnomusicologist José Jorge de Carvalho calls the "functional" repertoire of the cult. It differs from the "orixá's" repertoire semantically, but also in its performance. The functional repertoire comes with specific ritual actions. Les chants « fonctionnels » sont peu sujets à interprétations et « traductions » spontanées. Lorsqu'ils le sont, les commentaires portent essentiellement sur « la situation et le moment précis où ils doivent ou ne doivent pas être chantés » (*Ibid.*). Au niveau de la performance, ils sont également peu émotionnels. The "orixá's repertoire", par contre, se distingue par « une capacité exacerbée d'imputation de sens » (1993: 205), celle-ci reposant sur certaines associations ainsi que sur des concordances phonétiques entre la langue Yoruba et le portugais. Au niveau de la performance, les chants pour les orixás sont également très investis émotionnellement.

initiators are now dancing in front of her. They dance like Ogum, slashing the air around them with their extended arms, like swords. The novice tries to imitate them clumsily. She has difficulties to coordinate her movements. After two or three minutes, the emotional climax is slowly coming down. Taísa's orixá shows the first signs of tiredness and her male initiator asks the orixá to sit down on the floor. He is not authoritative anymore and he now speaks to Taísa's orixá with tenderness: « Tomorrow... Tomorrow you will come back and play once again²¹ ... » Then Taísa slowly comes back to consciousness... Her initiator teases her saying: « My dear daughter... Do you think it is time to sleep? »

Taísa's episode is paradigmatic of the way numerous possession trances happen in the Xangô cult. Possession occurs most of the time during ritual action²² and we can observe a strong correlation between intense sensorial stimulation and emotional outbursts on the one hand, and the happening of possession on the other. To say it differently, sensorial and emotional climax seem to facilitate the happening of possession. As Gilbert Rouget (1990) demonstrated it convincingly, such a learning process cannot be confounded with a "conditioned reflex": it is neither automatic, nor invariant in its expression. It is better conceptualized, as I defend it, as an emotional learning process. And what Taísa's episodes reveal is that possession's triggering is facilitated in certain learning conditions.

²¹ The verb « to play » is not frequently used in possession context. But the meaning the father-of-saint gives to the word underlines the playful nature of public festivals in the Xangô, where orixás come to express himself almost exclusively through dance.

²² Possession might also take place outside ritual context, as already mentioned. In this case, it might be quite awkward (or indeed compromising) for the "child" if, for example, it happens in the street, in a public transport or in during his job. Most of the time, it will be interpreted as a punishment or, at least, as an advertising from the individual's orixá who wants to express something important. Such a context is not propitious to learning because of the absence of initiators or any experienced Xangô members.

Ritual action plays a central role in the organization of these pragmatic conditions, leading to a powerful *associative* or *coupling process* between, on the one side, different perceptual registers²³ and, on the other side, between potential somatic markers and specific contextual stimuli. In order to describe more precisely how such a process might work, we need to take into account some evident features of ritual actions:

- *Conventionality*: Ritual actions are part of a cultural and/or traditional repertoire that determines what should be done and when. Thus, as Humphrey & Laidlaw stress it, they do not depend on individuals' intentions to be identified. Rather they are « perceived as discrete and named entities, with their own characters and histories » (1994: 89);

- *Stability*: at each occurrence ritual action's elements are very similar (blood, smells, objects, sacred songs, invocations,...) and they are organized in a very similar way thanks to a quite rigid and complex ritual syntax (McCauley & Lawson 1990) – or script (Boyer 1997)- highly valorized (and thus preserved) in the Xangô cult;

- *Regularity*: ritual activity occurs at least once a year for every initiate and most of them also take part in public festivals sometimes various times in a month, where possession is quite frequent;

- *Repetitivity*: actions are highly repetitive during a same ritual (Lévi-Strauss 1971). Exposure to potentially facilitating stimuli of possession is thus frequent.

What I suggest here is that ritual actions *organize* and *facilitate* a special kind of emotional learning process similar to Damasio's somatic marker's hypothesis. In the case of possession, such a process could be defined as a particularly powerful associative process linking the perception of specific

²³ Leading to a special kind of synesthesia between, for example, haptic and olfactory stimuli, or between proprioceptive and auditory stimuli...

somatic changes with a *ritualistically* organized *group of images* – that we could call “constellation”.

Images’ organization inside the “constellation”, as we have seen, is determined by ritual action. If we take into account the main features of ritual action mentioned above, it means that ritual context is propitious to triggering possession (meaning the somatic changes associated with possession) because *potential possession elicitors* correspond to conventional actions – they don’t rely on the individual’s intentions and they are part of a cultural repertoire -, because they are stable and strictly organized during ritual action, and because they are regularly and repetitively presented to the initiate²⁴.

But evident features of ritual *actions* would not be sufficient in triggering possession if they would not be are not the only possession facilitators. Ritual *interactions* between the initiate and his initiators, as well with the assembly also create a powerful relational context for the emergence of possession symptoms. Such a relational context is coherent with what Carlo Severi (2007) calls a “situation of counter-intuitive communication”, as well with Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi’s concept of “ritual condensation²⁵” (1994). In our case, interaction between the initiate, his initiators and the assembly is characterized by a *default condition* and the condensation of (at least) two normally antagonistic relational forms.

The default condition characterizing the relational pattern between the initiate and his initiators is *trust*. In the Xangô cult, the initiators are the necessary mediators between the initiate and his *orixás*. And male initiators – helped by their close initiatical male relatives - are the only ones who are habilitated to perform most of rituals for their initiates. Thus the latest need to trust in their male initiators in two ways: they have to trust the initiator’s expertise, meaning

²⁴ We will see later how responses to these elicitors evolve with time and experience.

²⁵ « Distributed relational condensation » : A développer

his religious know-how able to act upon his own orixás; they have to trust their initiator's motivations and intentions, because their ritual expertise can be used to affect positively or negatively who they want to.

But what seems to characterize possession's relational pattern in the Xangô cult is a relational condensation between what we could describe as authority and mothering. As a matter of fact, the candidate to possession is firstly submitted to the authority of his male initiator that invokes – sometimes imperatively - the initiate's *orixá* to come down and possess him or her. In this relational context, the initiate knows he has no choice: he must obey his initiator and behave according to cultural expectations. But the initiate is also under the authority of his own *orixás* who, according to Xangô members, are the ones who ultimately decide when and how they will possess their child. A psychological consequence of this submissive interaction for the initiate is a reinforcement of his passive attitude: the situation is not under his own control but in the hands of his male initiator who knows what to do in order to provoke his own possession. On the other side, the female initiator frequently shows herself to be reassuring and tranquillizing, leading to some kind of “letting go” (*lâcher-prise*) that facilitates the emergence of possession symptoms²⁶. Some individuals designated by the initiators might play a similar role, taking care of initiates during possession²⁷. Finally, the assembly might also intensify possession symptoms when it welcomes first possession symptoms with enthusiasm, shouting the orixá's name, singing louder and accompanying their chant with dance.

²⁶ Dans un article issu d'un ouvrage entièrement consacré à la transe et à l'hypnose, Luc de Heusch (1995) insiste, à juste titre, sur la forte relation affective - de « maternage » - qui lie le possédé à ses initiateurs ou au maître de cérémonie, et qui produirait, citant Jean Rouch ([1960] 1989 : 148) une « intense suggestion », rendant ainsi la fonction du prêtre proche de celle d'un hypnotiseur.

²⁷ Most of the time they choose experienced initiate who, ideally, are never possessed. But it is not always the case in the Xangô cult where every initiate is potentially amenable to take care of another initiate during possession because there is no clearly defined function such as “ekedi” as we can find in the Bahian Candomblé.

In substance, what I suggest is that specific features of ritual actions and interactions are able to create an environment propitious to reinforce and facilitate a two way associative process, leading to what I suggest to call a “sensory” and a “symbolic” captures:

- 1) *The sensory capture* focuses the initiate’s attention on sensations (mostly haptic, olfactive and proprioceptive) associated with *body treatments* and *movements*, resulting in a specific synesthesia between different sensitive registers such as taste and smell of warm blood and/or leaves’ baths, body postures, dancing and singing, etc.
- 2) *The symbolic capture* associates the sensory capture with meaning. By symbolic capture I mean the evocational process through which thoughts and imagination of the initiate are cognitively reoriented by the highly evocative content of orixá’s song and invocations, leading to what Gilbert Rouget calls “identification” to the deity. Such “identification” takes place at the same time of body exposure to specific ritual treatments such as blood ingestion, leaves’ bath, body postures, etc., creating some kind of conflation between sensuous and symbolic dimensions of religious experience.

Sensory and symbolic captures are may be the most powerful tools by which emotional reactions associated to possession such as goose bumps, shivering and other emotional reaction as the ones described by Maria-Helena and Yguaracy - among many others - are actually triggered during ritual action. Their occurrence during ritual awakes an immediate emotional reaction from the assembly that starts to sing louder, to invoke the initiate’s orixá with enthusiasm and to accompany their singing with body movements and dancing. A frequent effect of that spontaneous collective participation is an

intensification of the possession symptoms and, eventually, the “manifestation” of the orixá.

To conclude this first part and answer our first question – Is possession an emotional learning process?-, we would say that, relying on our ethnographical data, the answer should be a positive one. Possession corresponds to Antonio Damasio’s conceptualization of emotions, and his “somatic markers” hypothesis appears as a useful starting point for a reformulation of our understanding of possession’s learning process.

But if possession is (at least partly) an emotional learning process, we should be able to describe more precisely *what* Xangô members actually need to learn, and *how*. The following chapters try to answer these two questions.

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