

## **The *Loa* Mounts: Physical, Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Aspects of Possession**

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Possession of a living person's body by the spirit of another being such as a deity, a demon, or an ancestral spirit is a central feature of the African Diaspora religions of Vodoun, Santería, and Condomblé. Possession or trance behavior is known in many other cultures as well, including the American Christian sects of the Shakers and Pentecostals. How do trance states and possession occur, and what does possession accomplish for the individual, the religion, and the community? This paper examines possible answers to these questions.

The human brain is a complex organ that receives and processes information in several ways. It constantly monitors both the internal, bodily state of being as well as input from the external world. How a person reacts to either is mediated by the brain. While many reactions are automatic and unconscious (such as flushing to dissipate heat when the internal temperature is too high), many human reactions take a more convoluted path. Inputs from the five senses as well as inputs from the internal state are received in different areas of what is called the posterior brain, which excludes the frontal lobes (Solms and Turnbull 25). The posterior brain then collates and "projects" this information internally in a manner not unlike the creation of a virtual model in a computer (Solms and Turnbull 64). Basically, the posterior brain builds a model based on the information received and presents this model to the frontal lobes for processing. The highly developed frontal lobes of the human brain are what distinguish adult humans from other animals (and young children), for only the frontal lobes can determine the veracity of the information presented and reason out the appropriate action to take, especially when this means to override an instinctual reaction (Solms and Turnbull 173). Judgment and conscious action

originate in the frontal lobes, as does the ego or sense of “I”—the idea of Self (Solms and Turnbull 77).

This is not very different from the West African belief that we control what is done with our feet, hands, and mouth, but not what is received by our eyes, ears, and nose (Grillo). Humans have no conscious control over what they perceive. We can only control—and not always—what actions we take as a result of those perceptions.

The human capacity for judgment and decision depends heavily on memory. As Solms and Turnbull put it, humans reconstruct reality from memory, not from what is actually going on around them (155). Memories are encoded in three ways: as experiential episodes, abstract facts, and habitual responses. The first kind, episodic memory, is the process of *reliving* past events. We all think we recall events as they actually happened, but in fact these memories are primarily encoded as emotions in the limbic system of the brain—the same brain structures that are responsible for consciousness (Solms and Turnbull 107). “Emotion and consciousness turn out to be inextricable” say Solms and Turnbull (28). What we remember through episodic memory is not what happened, but what we each *felt* about it.

The second type of memory is abstract or semantic memory. This includes learned facts, rules, and acquired beliefs. Semantic memory is not based on physical experience but rather gained through a conscious effort of “learning” using the prefrontal lobes. Semantic memory is primarily retrieved through conscious effort. This form of memory is also subjective; learned beliefs have been proved to color perceptions just as emotions do (Solms and Turnbull 153).

The third type, habitual or procedural memory, consists of learned motor skills that a person has practiced to the point that he or she no longer needs to think about doing them, like walking. Athletes who talk about “being in the zone” mean that their bodies automatically make

the appropriate movements before the athlete even thinks about what to do (Solms and Turnbull 159). Procedural memory comes from physical experience and is unconscious, in that the person is usually not aware of “remembering” how to do a learned skill. In fact, people who consciously *think* about how to perform a skill based on procedural memory often become clumsy.

Memory that is accessed unconsciously is also called implicit memory (Solms and Turnbull 147). It represents the bulk of the memories humans use when they decide how to act. Neuroscientists agree that only 5 percent of the actions humans take are consciously determined (Solms and Turnbull 84). This ability to function “unconsciously” or automatically has a great deal to do with what happens to people in trance states or states of “altered” consciousness such as possession.

As noted above, the limbic system of the posterior brain constantly mediates between direct sensory perceptions and conscious thoughts by projecting a model of what is going on that includes all emotional memories as well as unconscious or conscious beliefs about life. This internal model can and usually does override objective outer perception, particularly if the emotions or beliefs are strong (Solms and Turnbull 103). Humans experience life as virtual reality (Solms and Turnbull 110). In essence, we live in a constant state of autosuggestion.

Another factor in possession is the ease with which a human can go into trance. According to I.M. Lewis, a trance state can be induced by alcohol, drugs, inhaled vapors, hypnotic suggestion, rapid over-breathing, chanting, singing, listening to music, dancing, meditation, or fasting (34). All of these activities release endorphins into the brain (Lewis 34). Endorphins are chemicals “readily triggered by sensory stimulation” that lower perception of pain and cause feelings of euphoria (Holm 10). Feelings of euphoria are a signal to the brain that some need has been gratified (Solms and Turnbull 119). A great deal of unconscious life is

aimed at need gratification (Solms and Turnbull 116); this drive is so powerful that it can counteract the conscious brain's reluctance to give up perceived control. Once again, human behavior is largely dictated by how we *feel*, and what we really want is to feel good. Endorphins feel good—hence the tremendous addictive power of substances and activities that cause their release.

All this can be seen in Maya Deren's description of her experience of being possessed during a Haitian Vodoun ritual. She begins with a description of the place and people, but soon she focuses on the sounds:

The tight staccato Yanvalou beat of the *petit* sets in; now the rounder tone, the more rolling rhythm of the *seconde* slides in under it; and then one feels a vibration beneath one's feet even before one hears the beat of the *maman*, which rises as if from some unfathomable depth, as if the very earth were a drum [. . .] the very air vibrates as if with tones above and beyond the reaches of the ear's intelligence. For a brief moment this towering architecture of sound [. . .] seems to advance without movement, like a title wave so vast that no marker exists to scale its progress for the eye. Then the chorus of voices [. . .] hurls forward over that crest, and the whole structure crashes like a cosmic surf over one's head (251-252).

Under the pressure of the drums and music, Deren begins to feel strange. "There is an unpleasant lightness in my head, as if the many parts of the brain were being gently disengaged" (Deren 253). She leaves the area for a while. As soon as she is away from the pounding drums, she begins to notice what is around her again and feels that "my head is tightening, integrating, becoming solid once more" (Deren 254). Her observation of how it feels to enter and leave the trance state is an accurate description of how conscious thought and control over action becomes disengaged and then engaged again.

But she has obligations in the ritual and returns to the peristyle. As soon as she does, she begins to feel herself slip back into the trance state. "I now know that, today, the drums, the singing, the movements—these may catch me also" (Deren 256). She fears this but although she

knows she can choose to leave, she stays because of a “sense of contract” (Deren 258). Now her focus shifts from the sounds to the dance. She dances until she becomes tired and wonders how she can keep up. And then “the pace which had seemed unbearably demanding” suddenly becomes easy, and “what a splendid thing it was, indeed, to hear the drums, to move like this, to be able to do all this so easily, to do even more if it pleased one” (Deren 258). She has slipped into a euphoric state. In addition, procedural memory is starting to take over. Deren was a dancer, and dancers are trained to pick up dance steps quickly, often after only seeing them performed once.

Next she feels numbness—another sign of endorphin release—in one leg. Her body starts to make involuntary movements, a sign that motor memory is replacing conscious control of the muscles. Again she provides us with a beautifully precise description of the struggle between her body’s desire to experience euphoria and her rational mind’s fear of loss of control: “I must call it a white darkness, its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror” (Deren 259). But she has already made that choice in the full understanding that “the self must leave if the loa is to enter” (Deren 249) and the white darkness overwhelms her.

Her description of what happens next, although poetic, is not, in fact, a description of being possessed by a spirit. She assumes, as do all the people in the ritual with her, that the goddess Erzulie came down and took over her body for a while. But what she *experiences* is a transcendent “knowing” remarkably like many other descriptions of transcendent experiences. “How clear the world looks in this first total light. How purely form it is, without, for the moment, the shadow of meaning. I see everything all at once . . .” (Deren 261). Contrast this with the report of an LSD test subject, who is sure that while under the influence of the drug he has had an experience that gave him “. . . but the barest hint of the infinitely more complex and

enormously vast macrocosmic Mind of God” (Lewis 33). Or with Elizabeth Gilbert’s story of what happened to her while meditating in an ashram in India: “Simply put, I got pulled through the wormhole of the Absolute, and in that rush I suddenly understood the workings of the universe completely” (199). The experience is the same; it is the *interpretation* of the experience that varies. The interpretation the individual puts on the experience depends on what that individual has been conditioned to expect.

In Deren’s case, she was at a Haitian Vodoun ritual, one that she had participated in before. She knew who the players were and what the behavior of the person possessed by a particular loa was supposed to look like. Lewis defines possession as a “culturally specific theory of trance” (9). Who possesses the person, and why, is dictated by belief. As Laura Grillo puts it, the possession trance “embodies a mythic conception shared by the community.” Deren was an initiate in that mythic conception. Her motor memory undoubtedly allowed her to *act* as Erzulie, even while her mind was in a transcendent place.

Still, it is interesting that she had that transcendent experience. Gilbert was actively seeking and therefore likely to expect and interpret her trance state as a transcendent experience, but we cannot say the same for the LSD subject or Maya Deren. At least, if Deren was ever given the suggestion that to be mounted by a god was an ecstatic experience, she does not say so; rather she stresses how hard it is for the person to be displaced by the god (249). The endorphins coursing through her body might explain the euphoria, but not why she felt such a strong sense of seeing the world as it truly is when she did not expect such an experience, if indeed she did not.

There are many other reasons besides euphoria why a person would seek a trance or possession experience. Psychologically, the trance state offers an opportunity for abreaction—for

emotional catharsis through action that either relives or reframes a situation. As has been said, memories of events are encoded as emotion. Emotion has a compulsive aspect that moves people to act it out in some way (Solms and Turnbull 111). The emotion represents a problem; to feel an emotion is to want to *do* something about it. The possession trance is cathartic, says Lewis (167), for it allows a form of abreaction usually denied to people who occupy a subordinate position in society. Such people cannot, as someone in a dominant position might, project a complex onto others and act it out by, for example, getting angry at them. Instead, they do the opposite: they internalize or introject an ability or power that they cannot claim in daily life when they are mounted by a spirit who represents this power (Lewis 180). P.M. Yap says that possession “is a condition where problem-solving processes result in an unusual dramatization of a certain part of the ‘me’ aspect of the self, that part being constituted by forced and urgent identification with another personality credited with transcendent power” (Lewis 179). In depth psychological terms, the possessed person takes on the qualities of an archetype. Deren, who was conversant with Jungian thought, agrees: “The serviteur must be induced to surrender his ego, that the archetype become manifest” (321, n. 5). In Jungian terms, archetypal behavior representing a cultural interpretation of an instinctual drive is constellated—activated—and takes over the person.

A person in the possessed state may give advice to others or tell them off. They may also behave in ways usually denied them, as with the Yoruba women who, when possessed, act out sexual aggression towards men by miming the act of thrusting while the audience laughs—a safe, socially sanctioned way of saying “fuck you!” to the men who normally keep these women in their place. Oppression, in fact, may enable possession; “those whose lives flow smoothly [. . .] are rarely summoned by the spirits” says Lewis (60). Yet the truly mentally disturbed seem to

be incapable of being possessed (Lewis 176). Possession is a protected state that allows an abreaction to those most in need of it and able to take advantage of it. It is not a flight from life, because it helps the person to deal with their life, says Lewis, adding that “a great deal of psychological satisfaction may result” from the experience of possession (175). And as discussed above, humans are hard-wired to seek satisfaction.

Claude Levi-Strauss notes that the trance induced in a patient by a shaman appears to be the opposite of psychoanalysis, yet achieves the same goal. Levi-Strauss theorizes that in traditional Freudian psychoanalysis, the patient, with the aid of the analyst, constructs a personal myth based on elements from his or her past. The patient is analyzed so that he or she may be freed from certain elements of the past. In the shamanic tradition, however, the patient *receives* a social myth that has nothing to do with his or her personal life (Lewis 173-4). The abreaction occurs within the context of the culture and serves to connect that person to the community. This is not so different from depth psychology with its theory of the collective unconscious and cultural expressions of archetypes that inform art as well as behavior. Indeed, in many cultures the shamanic approach may be the more effective; as S.M. Shirokogoroff, writing about Tungan shamans, posits:

The phenomenon of psychic life is not understood in the same form as modern science would understand it, but it is regulated, and its components are perhaps better analyzed (in spirit symbols) than is done by psychologists operating with such conceptions as ‘instincts’ and ‘complexes’ (quoted in Lewis, 173).

In cultures more responsive to mythic symbols than scientific explanation—a word defined by the Dogon as “to make flat” (Grillo)—possession can also provide catharsis for the community. Lewis insists that despite the common view of possession as something exotic and set apart from ordinary life, “mystical experience, like any other experience, is grounded in and must relate to the social environment in which it is achieved” (5). Possession occurs primarily in

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societies that are under stress or dominated by another culture (Lewis 11). The possession rituals of Vodoun, Santería, and Condomblé were essential to slaves struggling to retain a sense of identity in the New World. “The slaves’ very survival,” say Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, “depended on their ability to resist their complete absorption into the core values of the plantation masters” (2). This resistance took the form of a community religion practiced under the very noses of those masters. After the slaves were freed, they remained—as most of their descendents still do—in need of a way to make sense of and thereby cope with a disenfranchised position in society. Eugenio Matibag, in his discussion of the Santería divination rituals of Ifá, concludes that such a ritual “exemplifies the practices by which a community can preserve order, and transmit narratives capable of providing coherence and structure to experience” (167). Grillo adds that these traditions are inherently adaptive in two senses: they not only allow their followers to adapt to life, but they themselves undergo constant innovation, which has allowed them to remain vital to this day.

To keep the community safe and control the catharsis, possession is ritualized. Deren notes that the rituals of Vodoun, properly observed, assure the individuals who may be mounted that the personal cost will “not be unpredictable or excessive” (250). Not just the individual, but the community has cause to fear what will happen if someone who is not properly trained in how to accept the god is mounted, for their behavior may be unpredictable and even dangerous (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 19). Ritual helps ensure the safety of both the individual and the community.

When the community feels safe, the ritual can take on the character of theater. In addition to the psychodrama of catharsis, the rituals of Diasporan religions, like the plays of classical Greece or Shakespeare, “capture powerful metaphors” of the extant social milieu (Grillo). The

adaptive capacity of these religions is made evident through the inclusion of images borrowed from *commedia del'Arte* farces, Catholic hagiography, and paintings and photographs of kings like the Emperor Napoleon to represent Diasporan divinities (Grillo). The participants do not just follow a script and act out a prescribed role, but are appropriately costumed and given props by a vigilant backstage crew. The ritual occurs in on a carefully prepared stage, which is also a liminal space where, as Victor Turner would say, structure is overcome so that the community can let go of the usual hierarchy and experience *communitas*, a sense of unity (Garrett 6).

Last, but not least, possession takes place within a *religious* context. Whatever the psychological or cultural needs that underlie the phenomenon of possession, it is first and foremost a religious experience. It is a psychodrama, but it is also sacred theater. Unlike the Levantine religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, with their emphasis on a remote, transcendent God apart from man, West African and Diasporan religious rituals assume that the gods can and do become immanent in us (Grillo). Possession is “the seizure of man by divinity” (Holm 15). Ritualized possession, therefore, is an interactive form of theater where the audience can dance and talk with the gods.

Possession helps verify the existence of the divine for believers. When Deren was overtaken by trance, the people around her shouted “Erzulie!” in welcome and took her possession as proof that Erzulie exists, here and now, with us. Clarke Garrett admits that “even today the idea of the immanence of a divine presence that can be sensorily experienced is enormously attractive” (2).

The interpretation of the possessed experience is culture-bound (Holm 10). For those who believe in spirits, it’s only logical to believe that those spirits would communicate through people, says Garrett (5). But he adds that each religion has its own interpretation of what

possession entails that reflects the particular assumptions of that religion (Garrett 4). For example, Catholic priests who have been inadvertently possessed while witnesses to a Vodoun ceremony tend to believe they were taken over by a demon of some kind. Likewise, the audience sees what it has been taught and expects to see. Maya Deren interpreted her experience solely in terms of the contextual religion. But then Deren never pretended to objectivity.

Possession can also confirm the tenets of a religion when it gives the adepts of a particular religion the claim to direct knowledge of the divine (Holm 15). Such people may become *houngans* or *mambos* or *babalayos* who then guide others to the same kind of experience—and so reinforce the community’s belief. (And, perhaps, make a living thereby).

But as we have seen, the process of making a god immanent can also make the mind transcendent. Deren’s actual experience was not of *being* the goddess Erzulie and interacting with the people in the peristyle in that character, but of seeing the world with the eyes of a god: “The sun-door and the tree-root are the same thing in the same place, seen now from below and now from above and named, by the seer, for the moment of seeing” (262). And what she “sees” is “the sound of light.” As with most mystical utterances, it is clear that words fall far short of the actual experience, which cannot truly be explained or made flat for another.

Neuroscience tells us *how* possession occurs; psychology, social anthropology, and religious studies may give us some ideas as to *why* it occurs; but ultimately, what we know is this: human beings are capable of giving over the conscious, rational ego so that they may have an experience that not only brings the gods down to earth to help us solve our problems here, but lifts the mind to God and lets us see that our problems don’t really matter. And who is to say that it was not *le bon dieu* who made this possible?



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