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978-0-521-28255-0 - Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte

Michael Lambek

Excerpt

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Introduction

This work is a cultural account of trance as it occurs among the Malagasy speakers of Mayotte. It presents a detailed description, analysis, and interpretation of trance behavior, elaborating the cultural system of “spirit possession” by which such behavior is organized.

Fieldwork in Mayotte

Mayotte, or *Tany Maore*, as it is known in the local Malagasy dialect, is the southernmost island of the Comoro archipelago, lying in the Mozambique Channel between the coast of East Africa and Madagascar. Mayotte is approximately 250 kilometers from the northwest coast of Madagascar and twice that distance from the mainland. Some 375 square kilometers in area, with fertile volcanic soil and a surrounding reef, Mayotte appears to the outsider as something of a tropical paradise. On the west coast the villages lie along sandy beaches, dwarfed by the peaks and ridges that rise behind to a maximum of 660 meters. The gentler east coast faces the rocky outcrop of Dzaoudzi, the base, since the end of the eighteenth century, for successive groups who have claimed dominion over the whole island.

The history of the western Indian Ocean is complex and as yet poorly understood. For nearly two millennia the area has been the scene of extensive trade, population movement, and the emergence of stratified societies. With population, cultural, and linguistic influence from three major original sources—sub-Saharan Africa, the Muslim Middle East, and insular Southeast Asia—a basic matrix has formed from which new institutions and societies have regularly emerged (cf. Ottino 1974). In contemporary Mayotte it is relatively easy to divide the population of approximately forty thousand into two cultural and linguistic groups: speakers of Comoran, a Bantu language closely akin to Swahili, who comprise approximately two-thirds of the inhabitants, and speakers of Malagasy, an Austronesian language. Only the

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An audience of women and children.

speakers of Shimaore, a dialect of Comoran, claim and are recognized to be the original inhabitants of the island. But not only do these categories incorporate much cultural and dialectical variation, they have relatively little historical depth as discrete units. Malagasy culture itself has a strong African component (Kent 1970), and what we perceive today is merely a moment in a long process of cultural fusion, fission, and refusion along new lines. Furthermore, the ethnic and linguistic labels have relatively little immediate sociological significance. Inter-marriage and bilingualism are common, and group membership in Mayotte is defined according to principles of residence, ownership, and participation in ceremonial exchange networks rather than more abstract ascriptive criteria. Mayotte is an open society; despite the great cultural heterogeneity there is a vigorously affirmed social unity, based on Islam and a common loyalty to the island as an indivisible whole.¹

The claim, therefore, of this monograph to be a study of “the Malagasy speakers of Mayotte” is something of a convenient fiction. In fact, fieldwork was carried out concurrently in a pair of adjacent villages of Malagasy speakers and was conducted entirely in the local dialect.² Although many of the village members trace their ancestry to Mada-

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gascar, a significant proportion are the descendants of East Africans brought to Mayotte as indentured laborers or of Comoran speakers. Even though the majority of cultural features are held in common, there is much internal variation within these villages and presumably between them and the villages of other Malagasy speakers. I cannot claim either that the facts described here are common to all the Malagasy speakers of Mayotte or that they are unique to them; I do suggest, however, that they emerge from a common underlying matrix. I assert that the institution of spirit possession as described here is *intelligible* to all members of Mayotte society.

This book is the product of fourteen months' (May 1975–June 1976) ethnographic fieldwork in Mayotte.³ I did not go to Mayotte in order to study trance; the research focus emerged gradually, during the course of more general investigations of social and cultural life. Trance is most evident in the riotous public spirit dances. These celebrations, characterized by an enthusiasm, an energetic and total involvement of the sort that Lewis (1971) has called “ecstatic religion,” were hard to study. Never quite as captivating to me as to the central participants, at the beginning they were reduced by their volume and energy to a noisy blur. In the absence of movie camera and adequate sound and lighting equipment, they were also impossible to record with any precision. I was fortunate, then, to discover calmer and less public contexts in which possession could be observed and in which its principles could be learned and discussed. I have tried to convey something of the nature and style of this activity in the Preface.

In particular, it should be clear that my interaction with hosts and spirits was one of participation as much as observation. This was so despite never entering trance myself. There were two main aspects to this participation. In the first place, I was engaged in active communication with the spirits. More precisely, the spirits engaged me in communication. In the incident recorded in the Preface, I could not have sat quietly, pen in hand, trying not to affect the situation. Spirits rise precisely in order to interact with people. Upon arrival, they always shake hands and engage in formalities with everyone present. Having asked to be present, I was committed to establishing a relationship with the spirit. Over time, I increased my ties of friendship with this and other spirits, as we engaged in conversation and asked and received favors from one another. Much of my understanding of the spirits has been achieved through reflection on my own position. In particular, such reflection assisted the development of the view of possession as a system of communication to be presented in Chapter 5.

Tumbu's spirit was eager not only to talk to me but to create a particular kind of impression, to mold an experience. My experience

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during the first encounter is in itself a valuable source of information, perhaps not too dissimilar from the experience of the villagers themselves. My reactions stemmed primarily from the uncertainty of knowing neither what to expect nor what was expected of me. Struck by the contrast between particular cultures (mine and theirs), I was brought to a state of emotional suggestibility and to a consideration of culture in the abstract. The villagers who observe spirits are brought to a similar condition (presumably with somewhat different results) by the contrast of their culture with that of the spirits.

I am acutely conscious that the people of Mayotte, influenced, perhaps, by the dominant ideology of Islam or by the attitudes of European observers, are not particularly proud of their interaction with spirits. I may, therefore, owe them an apology and an explanation for having chosen to write on this aspect of their life first. Most important, I wish to offset the impression I fear this work will give the reader that the people of Mayotte are solely, or even predominantly, concerned with spirits. This is by no means the case, and this work makes no claims to “open up” Mayotte culture in its entirety through the analysis of a single institution.

Like other members of their society, Tumbu and Mohedja claim to view possession not as a vocation but as an affliction that they wish would go away. Yet they are also aware of the subtlety and complexity of possession. Through their generous tutelage I learned much about the symbolic richness, the humor and compassion, skill and sensitivity that spirit mastery entails. However, despite their frequent appearance in these pages, I did not rely entirely on Tumbu and Mohedja. My research on possession was at all times grounded in the daily particulars of village life and I interacted regularly with the vast majority of the inhabitants. I observed several spirit curers at work and discussed possession with large numbers of individuals, both hosts and nonhosts, curers and laity.

The cultural basis of trance

The narrative that follows is about spirit possession in Mayotte; more precisely, it is concerned with what possession is about. It thus falls into the broad category of recent anthropological work whose central concern is with meaning and whose primary goal is interpretation or explication. The activity of the anthropologist here, like that of the philologist, is one of “contextualizing conceptually distant texts” (Becker 1979). More simply put, the goal is to reduce the strangeness of other people’s symbolic constructions without thereby sacrificing

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their richness and complexity. This aim is more ambitious than is often realized, and its success can only be a matter of degree.

At the same time, this approach contrasts with most previous studies of possession. In general, and with some notable exceptions (e.g., Crapanzano 1977, Obeyesekere 1970, Métraux 1955), the literature on trance and possession has focused on explanation (in terms of function or cause) to the neglect of meaning. That is, it has tended to ignore the fact that the elements of possession may form part of a coherent symbolic system that, in turn, may be of deep significance for the generation, ordering, and interpretation of experience by the members of a society. Important previous studies have been concerned primarily with epidemiological matters, with the incidence of trance in particular societies (e.g., Bourguignon 1973) and in particular individuals and classes of individuals within these societies (e.g., Lewis 1971). Among the questions that commonly appear to guide such investigations are the following: Why do acts of trance and beliefs in spirit possession occur and co-occur in particular societies? Why do certain individuals enter trance and why do they belong predominantly to particular status groups within the societies in question? What are the positive effects of such behavior? These approaches tend to ignore the fact that behavior is mediated by thought structures, guided and constrained by cultural models.

This relationship between trance behavior and cultural models is worthy of further consideration. Trance itself may be viewed as one kind of “altered state of consciousness,” a phrase referring to a family of rather ill-defined conditions such as sleepwalking, hysterical fugue, hypnosis, psychomotor epilepsy, various drug-induced states, and so on (Ludwig 1968; cf. Zaretsky and Shambaugh 1978, Bourguignon 1976). For our purposes the following facts are relevant. First, although individuals are not all equally susceptible to particular trance-inducing stimuli, the potential for trance appears to be universal. In a recent cross-cultural survey of 488 societies, “90% are reported to have one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned forms of altered states of consciousness” (Bourguignon 1973:11). Thus, the potential for trance, which, in any case, includes a broad and ill-defined range of behavioral changes, may safely be said to be biologically inherent, or “natural,” in humans. One may reasonably suspect, then, that the presence of trance is not necessarily a sign or consequence of psychological or social pathology.⁴ Second, despite this universal potential, the incidence and frequency of trance vary widely cross-culturally. Third, the forms that trance behavior takes, although obviously constrained by biological factors as well, vary cross-culturally yet are standardized within cultures. Fourth, although specific states of

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trance may erupt “spontaneously,” stimulated by the trancer’s immediate psychological and physiological condition (involving such factors as excitement, stress, hypoglycemia, and hyperventilation), trance usually follows certain cues in the outer environment. In fact, trance appears to be learned behavior. The original incidence of trance in an individual is usually induced with the aid of deliberately applied techniques, most frequently including drumming, dance, and hypnosis.

Taken together, these facts suggest that whereas the potential for trance is normal in humans, the appropriateness of its manifestation is frequently a matter of cultural definition. Furthermore, spirit possession is not a naive folk theory developed *ex post facto* to explain or rationalize the incidence of peculiar behavior. Rather, the symbolic structure is necessary to form and generate the behavior in the first place. As Walker concludes in a recent survey of the subject:

It is ultimately the belief system and values of the society which determine the existence, nature, and psychosocial function of the complex altered state of consciousness known in folk theory as possession. It is the cultural beliefs which make possession a positive phenomenon in the societies in question [Walker 1972:150].

In other words, the potential for trance has to be activated through specific cultural means, given specific cultural form and substance.

Geertz has argued cogently that “there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture” (1966a). Humankind and, in particular, the processes we call the human mind evolved together with culture and are literally unthinkable without it. Following Geertz, “symbols are thus not mere expressions, instrumentalities, or correlates of our biological, psychological, and social existence; they are prerequisites of it” (1966a). A human being without culture would be an “unworkable monstrosity.” Now, if this is true for humans in an ordinary state of consciousness, then it must also be true for those in a state of trance. To the extent that trance blocks off memory and, therefore, culture, it must replace this with a special “trance culture.” The nature of such trance cultures can vary widely, just as do the particular cultures of which the trance cultures form a part. It is precisely Mayotte trance culture we are after here.

This view suggests that we must be wary of possible biases introduced by our own cultural models of trance. In point of fact, trance holds a particular and extreme position in contemporary mainstream Western culture. With the significant exception of certain subcultures (or “peripheral cults”), the West of the present day is quite unusual by world standards in radically devaluing the trance state, providing few, if any, control mechanisms, positive models, or integrated symbolic structures with which to organize it. As a result, trance is peculiarly

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empty, a virtually cultureless state to which no one but the insane could have consistent recourse.⁵ In Western culture, the individual in a deep trance may become, in a very real sense, Geertz's cultureless "unworkable monstrosity." If not that, he will develop a private, idiosyncratic mode of behavior. Such behavior reinforces the extremely negative cultural models of trance as insanity or possession by the devil. Because there is no positive cultural model for trance behavior, it must be abnormal. And because it is relatively undirected, trance can be a terrifying experience for a Westerner, a "bad trip" (cf. Wallace 1959).

The trance state is thus often frightening and extremely perplexing to members of mainstream Western society, appearing to run counter to basic assumptions concerning the nature of human experience. The occurrence of trance in other societies is considered exotic, crying out for "rational explanation." Many investigators, fascinated by the "noise" of possession and armed with a number of psychological hypotheses to explain it, never even considered the possibility of patterns and context behind the noise. Métraux lamented of this approach, "must we attach the label 'hysterical anesthesia' to the impressive spectacle of men or women inhabited by Gods . . . ?" (1955:30). In many societies possession is largely a matter for women (Lewis 1971), and there has probably also been a bias against according women's activities the status of cultural performances with import for the entire society. But in point of fact, the unusual society in this case is the West. Most societies do provide models for trance behavior (Bourguignon 1973:11), albeit of varying degrees of specificity, elaboration, and integration with the wider symbolic system. These symbolic structures are logically prior to behavior. In the case of Mayotte we will see how trance behavior is symbolically organized and governed by a collective system of constraints and rules. Trance, in this sense, is merely an aspect of "spirit possession" (as it is defined in the culture), not vice versa. The question for the West becomes one of understanding why trance has been so rigidly excluded or ignored. Why have we forbidden or lost the cultural forms that could shape and control it?⁶ But for Mayotte, the focus must be on understanding the structure and meaning of possession as a whole.

The model of the text

If we are to understand trance behavior, then we must start with trance culture, that is, spirit possession. The organizing model or metaphor here will be to consider culture as a "text" or series of texts (Geertz

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1972). The theoretical basis for such a position has been established by Ricoeur as part of his project to reconnect explanation and understanding in a dialectical theory of “interpretation” (1978, 1976). In brief, Ricoeur argues that just as the fixation or inscription of discourse in a written text preserves or extends meaning while also separating it from the subjectivity of the speakers, so too can the objectification of action preserve meaning while separating it from the event. A dialectic between a work or act and its interpretations is set up such that, whereas “the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transcends the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts,” such reenaction inevitably “‘opens up’ new references and receives fresh relevance from them” (1971:543–4). In consequence, human action, as observed in ethnographic context or, more precisely, as inscribed by the ethnographer, can be interpreted, or “read,” like texts, without immediate recourse to either socio-economic infrastructures or the subjectivity of actors or authors. In sum, as Geertz has said, “culture is public because meaning is” (1973a:12).

This approach is at once broader in scope and more precise than traditional forms of anthropological inquiry. For example, in his study of the aesthetics of Javanese shadow-puppetry “texts,” Becker (1979) suggests a minimum of four kinds of contextual relations that have to be described—the constraints upon coherence, invention, intentionality, and reference. These refer, respectively, to the relations of units within a text, the relations of a text to other texts, particularly those in the same genre, to the creators and audience of the text, and to nonliterary events outside the text. Although Becker meant his ideas merely as a solution to the particular rhetorical problem of organizing his understanding of the Javanese material, it is possible that all texts conform to similar sets of constraints.

The scope of relations proposed by Becker as necessary for an adequate description of the Javanese texts contrasts with the narrower concerns engendered by defining the object of study in more substantive terms. Where the object of study is defined as a specific category of activity, such as “art,” “ritual,” or “poetry,” the basic cultural assumptions by which these categories are rendered natural are taken for granted and therefore concealed. Whereas this merely restricts the depth of analysis when the analytic categories are indigenous, it fatally biases the interpretation when the categories are transposed from another culture. In other words, we cannot assume that our analytic constructs correspond to natural classes of activity, whether in our own or in another culture; in consequence, the constructs must be relational rather than substantive. One could, for example, derive definitions of “art” in different cultures in terms of particular intersections of

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Becker's four kinds of contextual relations;⁷ in contemporary North American culture, the category of "art" tends to exclude those activities where the intent is pragmatic and the constraints on invention severe.

How then to describe the interaction of human beings and spirits in Mayotte? If we were to focus, as American culture tends generally to do, on the aspect of intentionality, we could label the activity "curing." Were we to focus on the formal order, we could label it "ritual." An emphasis on the inventive aspect suggests "drama," and on the referential, "symbolic activity" or perhaps "myth." The point is, of course, that possession juxtaposes a number of different contextual relations and therefore corresponds to no one of these categories in particular.⁸ However, the notion of text subsumes them all, furnishing the possibility for a flexible, yet well-rounded, understanding of the observed behavior. To speak of possession as text is to avoid the biases and constraints imposed by a narrower approach.

In spirit possession as it is practiced in Mayotte, the intentional, or curing, aspect of the activity is the most explicit. The larger feasts and ceremonies are held with the express intent of effecting cures in individuals afflicted by spirits. Possession cures belong to a large class of activities and performances labeled *asa*. This includes individual life-crisis rites, ritual feasting, and all intravillage and intervillage religious and political gatherings of a special nature. *Asa* is derived from the verb *miasa* 'to work' and also means 'work,' 'occupation,' 'doings,' 'workmanship,' and the like.⁹ *Asa* contrasts with both *service*, meaning 'chores' or 'odd jobs,' and *soma*, meaning 'play,' 'amusement,' 'entertainment,' 'celebration.'¹⁰ *Asa* conveys a sense of seriousness and responsibility, an activity carried out in the context of long-range goals and of a moral system. The spirit cure is *asa* in that it is serious business and entails intensive preparation and eventual participation by a group of individuals larger than the nuclear family household.

This local view of things is powerful but insufficient. That possession is culturally placed in a "medical" domain tells us nothing about its material or formal nature. Possession has a precise internal structure or coherence independent of the biological and psychological dynamics of human disease. Indeed, as I will argue later, were it not for possession, the individual might never feel sick in the first place. Furthermore, there is scope for invention and elaboration in possession. Spirit representations incorporate elements from the periphery of the culture, from the past, and from neighboring and intrusive cultures, combined in the intriguing and sometimes surprising manner that Lévi-Strauss (1966) has labeled "bricolage." Collectively, possession transforms details of an otherwise not wholly comprehended history into atemporal structures.

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Although historical change may be brought about by political, economic, and demographic forces largely beyond the immediate control of the islanders themselves, the surface details of the structures change according to a local aesthetics working through the historical material. Yet the conflicts of history are fought, as it were, in the bodies of individuals. These individuals may also be able to reorganize or refocus details from their respective pasts and personalities (Lévi-Strauss 1966). At the same time, the creativity of the individual is a factor in the pursuit of private ends through the public medium of possession.

Trance is symbolically ordered, and the spirits who constitute the trance world are not outside culture, yet, as we shall see, they are viewed as being outside the particular culture that constitutes ordinary life in Mayotte. We can recognize a degree of the fear and astonishment with which we ourselves view trance. However, in Mayotte this juxtaposition of human culture and spirit culture, and the possibility of movement between them is essentially constructive, providing a fertile field for the generation of novel intellectual and emotional experience. In this way possession may be considered a system for thought and expression.

If possession can be viewed in this general manner, what are the procedures by which particular instances of trance should be analyzed? The text model suggests turning to literary criticism, as Geertz suggested some time ago (1964). The field of structuralist poetics seems an appropriate place to start, because it asserts, for heuristic purposes, the autonomy of the text and shares with much of anthropology a theoretical grounding in linguistics. The movement, then, is from language to action by way of literature. A key insight of structuralist poetics is its focus on the activity of reading (Culler 1975). The aim is not to ascribe a particular meaning to a work but to account for the work's intelligibility, that is, to discover the system of conventions it allows the reader to apply in order to produce meaning from it. In Culler's words, "the semiological approach suggests . . . that the work be thought of as an utterance that has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated. If other conventions were operative its range of potential meanings would be different" (1975:116). Thus, "the task of a structuralist poetics, as Barthes [1966] defines it, would be to make explicit the underlying system which makes literary effects possible" (Culler 1975:118). In sum, Culler speaks of a theory of "literary competence."

I will follow this general approach in Parts II and III, introducing my methodological concepts as I apply them. For the moment, the Preface presents an example of this problematic in the field of action, demonstrating the incompetence of someone confronted for the first time