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Human spirits: A cultural account of trance in Mayotte

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In memory of Jane Katherine Sallade, 1949–1979

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In the object which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself; consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man. We know the man by the object, by his conception of what is external to himself; in it his nature becomes evident.

Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*

A work does not only mirror its time, but it opens up a world which it bears within itself.

Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text"

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PREFACE

Cultural zero

Lombeni, Mayotte, Comoro Islands, July 6. It was the heart of the winter season, when the sun shone all day and the older people complained of chill at night. During the day, children and anthropologist continually had to be reminded to stay out of the direct sunshine, but in the evenings everyone settled on mats spread wide under the clear and perfect sky to enjoy a leisurely dinner and conversation.

Tonight I was eating in the compound of Tumbu and Mohedja, in the other section of the village from which my own house lay. A young man whom I did not know had reached the climax of some amusing incident and, with barely a pause to deliver a last spoonful of rice to his mouth, began another. Tumbu, conscious of his responsibility as host, quickly turned to me and inquired whether I had understood the story. I returned my gaze from the stars and replied that it had been too difficult. "Which word didn't you understand?" demanded Tumbu. "There are still so many of them—" I began. "Well, if you don't stop and ask questions," replied Tumbu, "how will you ever learn anything?" I smiled at this, remembering all the times I had been told not to ask so many questions during meals. In truth, tonight my silence had not been out of consideration (the anthropologist who is too considerate about these matters is, as Tumbu realized, lost), but from exhaustion after a long and busy day. I had been in the village of Malagasy speakers for only a little more than a month, and my concentration in conversations that were not of my own construction was destined to falter for several more months to come. Furthermore, I was trying to keep my wits in reserve for whatever I was to face later that evening, a meeting that I anticipated with curiosity but without the slightest idea of what would happen or what would be expected of me: I was to meet my first spirit.

The assignation had come about in the following way. Before moving to Lombeni I had learned that there existed a belief in what the French colonials called *diabes*, that these 'devils' or 'spirits' tended to establish ties with particular individuals, and that no one ever seemed

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to admit being party to such a relationship. Upon moving to Lombeni, I had decided to wait until the villagers themselves chose to bring up the subject.

It happened quite by accident. In the hot hours of the early afternoon I came upon my friends Tumbu and Mohedja sitting together on a mat spread in the narrow patch of shade cast between the badly decaying wall of their small wattle and daub hut and the larger, taller, and airier two-room house of raffia poles they had built for their married daughter Nuriaty. Tumbu invited me to join him in the typical noon meal of *batabata*—boiled green bananas and manioc. The fishermen had been unlucky that night, so we had to be content to dip the starchy food into a relish of freshly crushed black pepper and sour tomato. There was nothing unusual in the encounter; perhaps I was contemplating a year of eating *batabata* for lunch. Mohedja sat beside us sewing strips of red material onto a fringed, bright blue cloth unlike any piece of clothing I had ever seen before. Idly, with no great interest, I asked about it. To my surprise, both Mohedja and Tumbu responded with embarrassed and quite uncharacteristic giggles. They said the cloth belonged to Tumbu's *fundi*, his 'teacher' or 'master.' Who was that? I asked. Tumbu replied that Mohedja wished to give a gift to his spirit. It soon appeared that the spirit itself had requested the cloth and that Tumbu had just returned from an excursion to purchase it. They planned to give the spirit the cloth that evening, after dinner, when everyone would have left the compound.

Somewhat more hesitantly, I inquired if I might stay to watch. They appeared to be incredulous. Did I really want to see a spirit, they asked, as if nothing could have been expected to be of less interest to me. I did, if it was possible. For an instant they paused and looked down at the ground. With hindsight I can surmise that they were foreseeing and considering the implications this would have for our relationship. Eventually they replied with a single word, *mety* 'permissible.' They were being very kind but were clearly inclined to drop the subject. I was excited but willing, too, to drop the conversation and wait. I fantasized that at last I would be able to see the "real" world at motion there, behind the facade of everyday domestic concerns, of sleepy afternoons and boiled bananas.

And so, some eight hours later, I rejoined them. Tonight the neighbors and sons-in-law seem slower than usual to retire to their homes. It strikes me that I am the only one present to know of Tumbu and Mohedja's plans. The invocation of the spirit is to be a private affair between husband and wife; even their close kin are excluded. One by one our friends disperse—even Tumbu retires to the hut—until only Mohedja and I are left behind. Mohedja acknowledges my presence

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with a dry, "What, are you still here?" I realize they have been assuming I would forget or lose heart to stay on. Clearly, they were not planning to remind me. But now Mohedja scoops up some embers from the dying cooking fire into an empty coconut shell and motions for me to follow her into the hut.

It is late, the village dark and absolutely silent; the small, low, rectangular room is lit by a single, flickering kerosene lamp constructed from an empty beer can discarded by a Frenchman on the far side of the island. We are all cold and very tired. Tumbu sits with his legs up on one of the small beds. Mohedja motions me to a place just across from him, at the foot of the other bed, upon which their baby son lies fast asleep. Mohedja herself crouches on a block of wood on the floor between us, huddled from the cold and facing Tumbu. She places the coconut shell by her feet and adds a piece of incense to the embers. As the smoke curls up, Tumbu silently rubs his shins and forearms, from the cold, I believe. I wait for something to happen. Tumbu's motions appear a bit obsessive. He starts to breathe heavily; now and then he snorts. I begin to wish I were back in my own house, safely ensconced within sleeping bag and mosquito net and escaping into my current bedtime reading of Simone de Beauvoir's autobiography—into the orderly world of bourgeois French childhood, of clean, hard-edged rationality.

Tumbu now closes his eyes and tenses, as though in pain. He emits a few low whistling noises. This lasts some minutes, intensifying and then subsiding. He opens his eyes and slowly looks about. The eyes start with a peculiar intensity. I have the strong feeling that this is no longer the Tumbu I know but someone quite different, perhaps a little mad. What is a spirit? What do spirits do? Do spirits like foreigners? It is the middle of the night; no one else in the village knows that I have come to this house to meet a spirit; the tiny flame of the lamp flickers over the narrow, shoulder-high mud walls; I am apprehensive.

The spirit (who has replaced Tumbu) reaches out to shake our hands, addressing Mohedja directly by name and asking us, in the form appropriate for a person of higher status addressing someone of lower status, how we are. I reply automatically, "fine." The spirit asks me who I am and bids me welcome, reassuring me. Its attention switches back and forth rapidly between Mohedja and myself. It inquires if indeed I come from very far away, a question that is commonly among the first asked me by new acquaintances in Mayotte, and then brags that it can go to Canada and back in a day, that it will one day soon. Its speed is like that of an airplane, the spirit says. It tells me that I have letters from my mother and father, with photographs in them, awaiting me in the post office. A kind thought from a spirit for a

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perhaps lonely anthropologist who has traveled so far; I recognize Tumbu's considerate nature behind the intense gaze, the abrupt manner, and the bravado of the spirit. As if reading my thoughts, the spirit adds that it is a good spirit, that it doesn't fight, that it likes human beings.

I am no longer frightened, but still uncertain. How does one talk to a spirit? Which of its bodily movements are significant and which of its remarks require formalized responses? What is the proper etiquette? I have no idea. Mohedja is of no help. She sits, staring at the floor, listening carefully to the spirit when it addresses her and answering in an even tone. I try to maintain a friendly and frank manner. The spirit continues to sit up on the bed, looking about with a sometimes vacant, sometimes piercing, stare. It appears to be enjoying itself; occasionally, for no apparent reason, it grins broadly or laughs. The spirit takes down the new cloth from where it has been hanging on the rafters and wraps it around its head like a turban. Then it winds it around its neck. The spirit smiles, strokes the scarf, and tells Mohedja it is pleased with it. It asks for some cologne to drink. Mohedja replies that there is hardly any cologne in the house. The spirit insists, and she fetches a small bottle with less than half an inch of liquid. The spirit drinks some of this, with exaggerated smacking noises, pours some on its hair, and then gulps the rest, assuring me that spirits love cologne. I wonder whether it really drank any or poured all the cologne on its hair.

For the first time since my arrival on the island I feel entirely within a foreign culture: without knowledge; without even intuition for what the appropriate conventions might be; for what, after all, it is I am after; for what we are supposed to be doing together here in this dark room in the middle of the night. I am even at a loss for questions; I am totally confused. Then an idea creeps into the back of my mind. This is the experience that is supposed to lie at the base of the anthropological venture, the experience that validates the world view of my profession and marks the real beginning of my own enterprise. A month ago I put on weights and jumped into a strange ocean. For a month I have been bobbing fitfully, now sinking slightly, now floating free. Finally, tonight, I have touched bottom, cultural zero. This is the point from which all my future progress at understanding must be measured.

I do not know how Mohedja and the spirit are experiencing our interaction here. Certainly, being ignorant of my culture, they can have no full idea of the meeting's significance to me. And yet the spirit is trying to impress me, trying to make me feel something. Now it leans up at me and says it will visit me again, later tonight, in my own house. I am not certain if the spirit means it will appear in the flesh or in my dreams. It asks me whether I will be scared. Determined to steer a

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course between foolhardiness and total loss of face, I reply “maybe.” The spirit laughs and instructs me to be sure and tell Mohedja the next morning whether I have seen and talked to it again during the night. The spirit refers to Tumbu in an offhand way, as if he were a third party, of no great interest to us here.

The spirit then prepares to take its leave. Mohedja, ever mindful of my role as student, asks me whether I don’t have any more questions. I gather my wits a little and discover that it is a *patros* spirit, that its home is in the sea, that it is decidedly not the spirit of a dead person, that it visits several other individuals besides Tumbu. Just now, these matters seem quite beside the point.

The spirit stops talking. For a few moments it sways its head and upper body as if in a dance, then begins to rub and scratch as at the onset of the trance. The figure scratches its head and neck vigorously and rubs its arms and legs, perhaps in exaggerated reaction to the cold. The spirit lies back on the pillow. There is a momentary pause, and when he sits up again he begins to rub his stomach. In a tone of wifely concern, Mohedja asks her husband if he has a stomachache. It is her tone of voice that tells me Tumbu is out of trance. The spirit has gone and the man returned. Tumbu appears extremely tired, as indeed we all are, and lies back on the bed. Without further ado, I bid them good-night and retire to my own little house of wattle and daub across the village.

I do not know whether further communication ensues between Mohedja and Tumbu, but for me the event is not yet quite over. Later that night, about four in the morning, I am dreaming that the spirit is on its way to visit me. It has the appearance of Tumbu. Suddenly, I am awake in the darkness and there is a loud knocking at the door. Surely not Tumbu in trance . . . ? Nervously I ask who’s there. It is only my neighbors, wishing to borrow my flashlight so that they can get an early start on the trail for a distant festivity. A coincidence; but if I am so impressionable, how much more convincing must the spirits appear to the local people? The neighbors make fun of the way I started, and I reply testily that in my country it is not the custom to go banging on other people’s doors in the middle of the night. The neighbors go off with the flashlight, and the next time something interesting happens during the night, no one comes to wake me because they have learned that I don’t like to be disturbed.

In the morning, Tumbu does not mention the previous night’s activities at all. Mohedja enlightens me considerably on the “business” transacted during the session that, because of my lack of fluency in the language and ignorance of spirit affairs, I failed to pick up. The spirit said it was very happy with the new cloth and as a result would stop

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bothering Tumbu. Apparently, when its original demands for a cloth had been ignored, the spirit had made Tumbu ill. All week long he had been taking medicine for a disorder in the belly. I remark on the contrast between the import of this circumstance and the spirit's assurances to me that it is perfectly friendly and well meaning. In fact, the villagers never know what to expect from the spirits. At one moment Tumbu's spirit asserts that it is unwilling to harm humans; at another, it announces that it will make Tumbu sick until its demands for gifts are met. Somehow, spirits always manage to disconcert.

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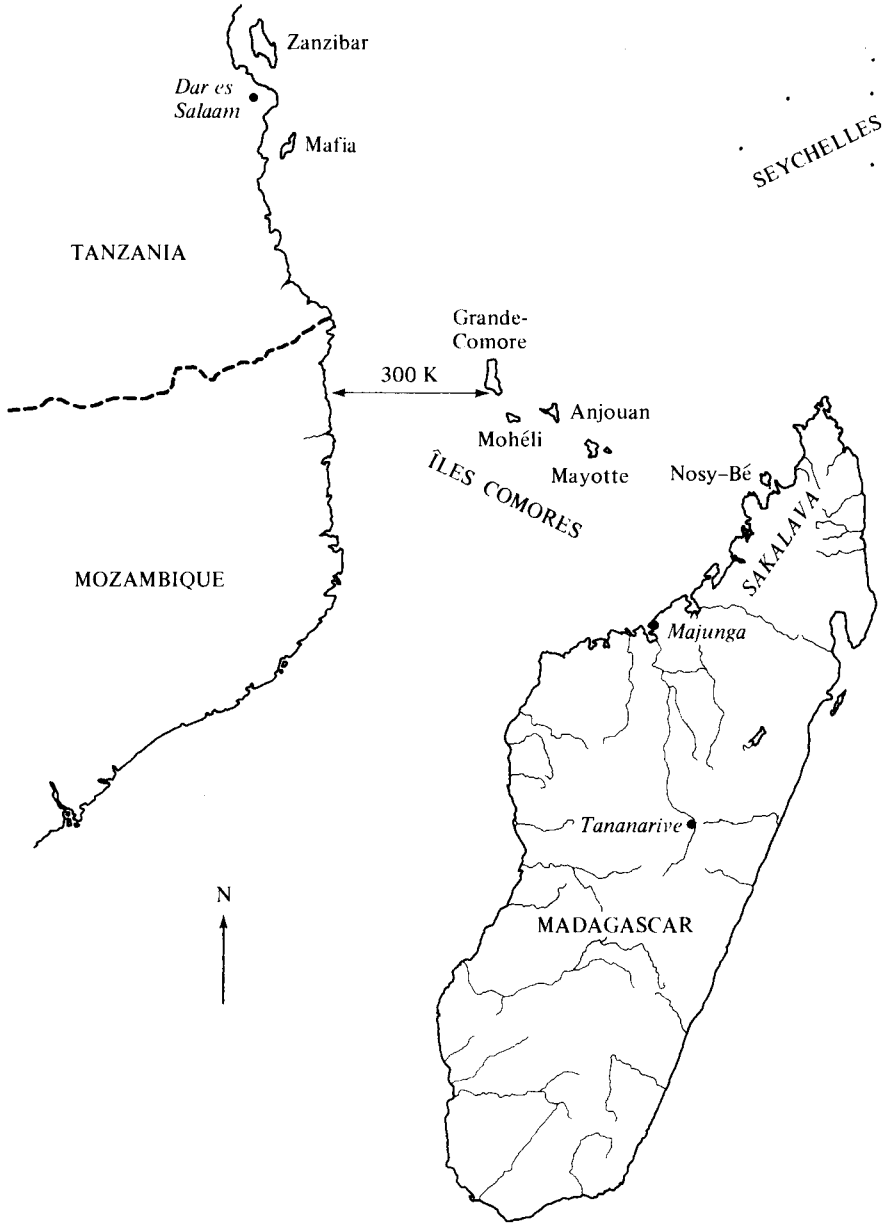
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Stylistic conventions

My orthography is rather idiosyncratic. Because Malagasy, Swahili, Arabic, and French systems do not always coincide with one another, nor yet with Mayotte pronunciation, I have tried to borrow from each of them whatever seems easiest for English readers. The main differences from standard Malagasy transcription are distinctions between *o* and *u* and between *s* and *sh*. Malagasy does not normally include markers for the plural, and I have adhered to this where possible. Whether the sense of a Malagasy word is singular or plural must be gained from the English verb. Final *e* is always pronounced *é*. I have found no completely satisfactory way in which to refer to the spirits in the third person. Although spirits have gender, I refer to them in the neuter in order to clearly distinguish them from their hosts. Because most hosts are women, I refer to hosts using feminine pronouns unless referring specifically to male hosts. This should not be taken to indicate that possession is restricted to women.

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