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Susan J. Rasmussen

Excerpt

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Introduction

It was past midnight, and the Saharan sky was devoid of moon or stars. The desert winds scattered sand and dust into eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. Shadowy figures arose from mats, clutching at voluminous robes, sleepily weaving their way across the village among rocks and goatsties to the compound where there was to be a possession performance. Asalama, the woman in trance, sat silently in a shimmering white blouse as kerosene lamps flickered in the background. Slowly she arose from beneath a blanket and began swaying from side to side to the sounds of singing and drumming. Her motions became more rapid, and the audience praised her dancing. She then danced wildly, throwing herself from one side to the other, remaining seated all the while, until she flung herself to the ground, exhausted.

I first visited Asalama's compound with mutual friends who told me that Asalama suffered from *tamazai*, "an inner illness and a dangerous sentiment," and the basis of possession affliction. Although Asalama's audience praised some aesthetic aspects of her possession performance, they also ridiculed her for appearing too often at possession ceremonies, for "craning her neck, looking for a man." Asalama's male cross-cousin jokingly warned that their sixteen-year-old female cousin, soon to undergo a possession ritual herself, "would become crazy, like Asalama." He said that Asalama was a *tamazel*, "someone who is bothered by other people, [someone who] can't sit still and be with other people . . ." Later that day, however, other friends told me that many women undergo these rituals, not because they are ill or a *tamazel* but because they "are touched in the heart by beautiful music." Yet despite local cultural values encouraging music and poetry, many residents expressed subtle disapproval of the ritual, warning young girls not to follow this path and become "crazy."

During my study of Tuareg possession rituals over the course of many

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visits and a lengthy residence in the Air Mountain region of Niger, West Africa between 1976 and 1991, I gradually realized that possession was not simply the outcome of intense conflict, but also a stimulus for it. Local debates over its interpretation, moreover, were not limited to the immediate trance situation. Reactions to possession addressed more overarching claims to knowledge, authority, and personhood. In particular, possession imagery and the meanings it evoked became the focus of heated debate, suggesting that much larger issues were at stake. This led me to examine not only the nature of the immediate trance situation and the cure of individual cases, but also the long-term conflicts stemming from the interplay between the public and the personal in possession in general. Thus my goal in this account is to explore how far possession imagery connotes docile endurance and how far it generates critical social commentary.

The Kel Ewey Tuareg of north-eastern Niger speak of possessing spirits called Kel Essuf, or “people of solitude” – solitude in this sense connoting desolation rather than tranquility. Possession, considered an illness, is characterized by muteness, a condition described as “being in the wild” or “in solitude.” The ritual cure for possession, by contrast, reverberates with sounds and visual images: the dancing of the woman in trance, the drumming and songs of curing practitioners, and the joking, flirting, and horseplay of the audience. Vivid tropes of personhood recur throughout the ritual as well as in local exegeses of possession illness and individual case histories. Spirit possession thus provides a lens for examining concepts of personhood enacted during the event, for these concepts are not merely reproduced but also reconstituted as objects of reflection by local specialists. Yet possession also acts within a larger social context, forming an integral part of a pattern in the transfer of knowledge and power. Through an analysis of the visual, verbal, and kinesthetic images in possession rituals, and through an examination of the conflicting local exegeses regarding the meaning of possession, I explore local concepts of personhood in relation to wider processes of social agency.¹

In their local rural Air Mountain setting, approximately 150 miles north-east of the town of Agadez, the spatial organization of the semi-nomadic hamlets of Tuareg herders, caravanners, and oasis gardeners reflects a traditional social order while at the same time suggesting conflicts and contradictions. Internal divisions quickly become apparent in the contrasting features of the ecological and architectural environment. Household composition dynamics through time, and social hierarchies are apparent in the form and arrangement of residences. The distinctive elliptical dome-shaped nomadic tent, for example, set at a distance from a fenced-in

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compound containing other tent residences (an older nomadic tent, a few conical grass buildings, a rectangular grass reception room, and the increasingly common one-room mud or stone house), is the residence of a recently married daughter. Residents typically identify compounds by the names of the women who own the tents. Yet among the well-to-do, there has been a recent trend of adding houses constructed by men, which then belong to the male head of the household. These external characteristics of form suggest internal conflicts between generations and between men and women regarding marriage and property.

Additional features of Kel Ewey communities suggest at least an outward adherence to client–patron relationships. There are patterns of marked residential segregation and differences in wealth, both visually and spatially. The homes of nobles, chiefly and religious clans claiming descent from the Prophet, tributary groups, blacksmiths, and formerly servile peoples are often located in different neighborhoods. Clustered about the mosque are compounds of chiefly and marabout (Islamic scholar) households, neat and encircled by tree-branch fences (or, among the more sedentized, by mud walls) to keep out goats. The homes of smiths are generally older and dilapidated, and located further out. People of servile origin, whom nobles insist no longer work as slaves (“except far away, on Mount Bagzan”), but whom they shun nonetheless, together with families of ambiguous, mixed, or outside social origins, usually build their homes near the outskirts of settlements.

Tuareg men and women told me that the illnesses and depressions that cause trance are the result of spirits passed from mother to daughter. Possession curing rites, usually held publicly and late in the evening, are called *tānde n goumaten*. *Tānde* has three meanings: it is a mortar for crushing grain; a drum constructed from this mortar by stretching a goat hide across the top; and the generic term used for all musical events, including the spirit possession ritual, that feature this instrument. *Goumaten* is the plural of *gouma* in Tamacheq (a Berber language spoken by the Tuareg), and refers to both the patients or possessed persons at these rituals and the spirit (also called Kel Essuf) that possesses them. *Tānde n goumaten* feature: a drummer, generally a lower-caste individual, such as a blacksmith; a player of the *asakalabo* (a calabash floating in a basin of water, beaten with a cloth-covered wooden stick); a chorus of young women; and the *gouma*, or patient.

The curing rite is also a staged performance.² There is a large audience of both females and males, ranging in age from about ten to twenty-five. Audience, chorus, and patient evaluate the ceremony’s effectiveness

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through jokes, songs, and gossip, and criticize singers for laziness, drowning out the solo singer, overwhelming the performance with too much crying and shouting, forgetting the lyrics, or failing to use “proper” Tamacheq (that is, filling in verses with vocables rather than using all the words, thus “distorting” the verse content). Only women learn possession-song texts. Curing practitioners consider healing to be an art form, and performers, audience, and patients alike recognize the importance of the aesthetic – music and song, in this case – in the curing of spirit affliction. Possession itself tends to occur in musical and festival settings: at weddings, at possession rites (sometimes among audience members), and when listening to recordings of possession rite music. Many possessed women are or have been professional singers. Much of the effectiveness of the cure depends upon artistic criteria: how well the drumming and songs are performed according to the precise rules of the ritual.

At the beginning of the ceremony, the patient lies prone beneath a blanket. As the songs and drumming quicken in pace and become rhythmically more elaborate, the patient rises to a sitting position and begins shaking her head from side to side, slowly at first, then faster and more vigorously, in what is called *asul*, or the head dance. Soon the motion includes the shoulders and upper torso. Throughout the rite, the patient remains seated, facing the player of the *tānde* mortar drum, with the chorus on one side and the audience on the other. In her hand she grips a man’s sword, holding it perpendicular throughout her dance. A female friend or close kinswoman covers her entire head and face with a black cloth (typically, only Tuareg men wear a veil, which covers the nose and mouth). At first, the woman in trance sits rigidly while the drumming and singing continue. Then she begins the head dance motion, swaying more and more vigorously, dervish-like, as spirits enter her body. Sometimes women in the chorus and audience join her in these trance motions. For several hours, chorus, drummer, and *asakalobo* player perform a varied repertoire of songs from the *tānde n goumaten* ritual. Often the woman in trance places her hand(s) on the surface of the *tānde* drum to absorb its vibrations. Occasionally, she indicates through non-verbal gestures that the spirit “prefers” one particular song to another. As the songs quicken and include more elaborate drum rhythms, ideally the patient receives praise and encouragement from the audience, and finally becomes exhausted, collapsing to the ground. Kel Ewey interpret her dancing as the spirit dancing, and her exhaustion as the spirits leaving her body.

Yet the Tuareg disagree about the cause, meaning, purposes, and consequences of possession. For some participants, “going to a possession

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rite is like going to a disco,” and the aesthetic quality of the rite is an end in itself as well as the means to a cure. This element pervades contexts outside the immediate curing ceremony, and is the focus of a debate about the meaning and function of possession rites. Because the phrases “spirits are in her” or “she has spirits” may be said of anyone who is transported by beautiful music, singing and drumming style seem to be as important as the content and function of the songs.

Possession ritual has elements that anthropologists conventionally term “carnival,” and, correspondingly, the cure requires jokes and play.³ Rather than approaching the rite with reverence or solemnity, or regarding the illness with awe or anxiety, the Tuareg joke about the rite and even ridicule frequent participants. They also flirt and horse around during the ritual, gossiping and laughing among themselves. This playful element extends beyond the immediate ritual context: my women friends would refer jokingly to the kinks in my neck from travel as “spirit affliction,” and children, with the encouragement of adults, frequently reenact the “cure” in play, complete with standing chorus, drummer, patient prone beneath a blanket, and tiny replica of the mortar drum.

Possession, characterized by an altered state of trance, and public healing rituals featuring song, dance, flirting, and jokes, is partly an end in itself and partly a means to other ends. The possession rite is also a forum facilitating the enactment of wider struggles. Among Tuareg, Islamic scholars scorn possession by spirits, but they also diagnose women for them, in treating a personal depression called *tamazai*. The danger of possession affliction becomes an opportunity for articulating hidden agendas, which, rather than referring only to the immediate circumstances of the possessed person, radiate beyond it to encompass the broader concerns of different interest groups. Early anthropological interpretation of possession trance as an altered state of consciousness that predominantly strikes selected categories of “deprived” persons is now widely regarded as an oversimplification.⁴ This epidemiological perspective assumes that possession is deviant behavior, and results in a portrayal of its idiom as one of “muted” or “non-standard” expression. Wittingly or unwittingly, this view encourages a perception of possession similar to previous perceptions of metaphorical expression as defective and illogical speech, akin to aphasia, rather than as an intentional and rule-governed phenomenon. Such a perspective does not pursue the metacommunication surrounding possession among local participants, who may or may not become possessed themselves. Nonepidemiological studies, however, have all too often assumed that the meaning of these rituals is consensual, and have treated them as aberration,

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paying insufficient attention to the conflicting definitions and viewpoints of persons representing different interest groups.⁵

We need to explore the expressiveness and intentionality of spirit possession for the audience and non-participants as well as for the possessed, who comment on possession in terms of the diverse contexts of gender, social stratum, and age. From this perspective, possession emerges as enabling, but not necessarily compensatory or manipulative, behavior. By focusing on both the symbolic and the epistemological aspects of spirit possession, I hope to illuminate important ethnographic and theoretical issues. For example, why is possession imagery consistently associated with women among the Tuareg? Why are certain gender-specific images used to express possession? And why is there such heated local debate over the meaning of possession? Central theoretical questions are how possession, serious and playful at once, stimulates the cultural construction of personhood, and how possession then encapsulates personhood in all its dependency and contradiction. In exploring these questions, the gradually changing relationships between social strata and between men and women come into view. Possession enacts ambiguities in the relationships between the sexes, charged by issues of marriage and descent.

Most studies of altered states have tended to overemphasize the explicit curing function of these ceremonies and to equate curing with meaning, purpose, and performance style; either ignoring social context altogether or expanding it to crowd out other processes.⁶ An analysis of possession tropes and metacommunication about them in terms of their effects, message and “style,” in Hebdigé’s (1979) sense, as an interplay of cultural and subcultural styles, reveals an ongoing debate over person definition, and provides the key to uncovering the multiple meanings held for different participants. These meanings are expressed implicitly in form, style, and context of aesthetic expression and its unintended consequence, rather than overtly. Among Kel Ewey, the style of curing is as important as the cause, content, and result. Local exegesis reveals that these rituals effect transformations from healing into processes having new meanings, in different contexts, for different participants.⁷

With these issues in mind, I focus not only on the multivocality of meaning but also on the contested meaning of possession tropes, and how they are used by non-possessed as well as possessed individuals to define personhood. Tuareg possession enacts a series of negotiations and promotions of social experience. The conceptualization, acquisition, and manifestation of spirits among Kel Ewey express different situations and vantage points, but in highly symbolic form. In locating these vantage points, I

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focus on the dialogue between possessed and non-possessed individuals, rather than solely upon the causal “arrows” of possession. My data show that trance among Tuareg represents neither rebellion nor social control, but rather a reconsideration of previous social relationships and a quest for new social relationships. Possession viewed from this perspective emerges not solely as a response to conditions, but also as a factor in creating or rearticulating them.

Michel Leiris (1934, 1958) and later Alfred Metraux (1959) have written famous accounts of the aesthetic aspects of possession cults. They described possession songs, dances, and music, as subjects of interest in their own right, but they did not frame this artistry in terms of wider social conflict or process, or in terms of how possession art relates to local knowledge areas and theories concerning personhood. My own work analyses the art of possession in relation to control and power in Kel Ewey Tuareg society. So rather than dwelling upon epidemiological or causal factors and relying on Western concepts of the person, I focus upon expression, style, and unintended consequences of possession in practice. The possession idiom, I argue, metaphorically encapsulates the ironies and contradictions of being a Tuareg. Art and affliction, performance and healing intersect with a number of key cultural values that contradict role expectations of social status in a community characterized by marked stratification of nobles, smiths, and formerly servile peoples. But the interplay of aesthetic form and social intent cannot be reduced to a consciously manipulative or directly causal connection. The art of possession emerges from relationships in the wider social order.

Possession rituals also provide a forum for discourse on healing and competition over claims to medical and other forms of knowledge in Tuareg society. These, in turn, act as a foil, revealing healing paradigms that are not uniformly equated with secularism, colonialism, or other “modern” influences, such as literacy or centralized state authority. This multiplicity of perspectives yields material that challenges the tendency in the anthropology of religion and systems of thought, on the one hand to generalize and establish polarities between “Western” and “traditional” or “non-Western” systems of thought, and on the other hand to demarcate boundaries or sequences between such domains as “magic,” “science,” and “religion.”

It is above all in its curing method that *tamazai*, which often triggers possession, appeals to a power other than that of the Islamic God and marabout representatives. This appeal undermines the established hierarchies of dominance of marabout and noble men over women, but solely in

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the particular context of the curing drama. The subversion of hierarchy is an unintended consequence of other overarching conflicts, which have their bases in social class interests. Herein resides the principal threat of curing to Islam: in its aesthetic form, tropes, images of personhood, and dramatic effect, possession comments upon social hierarchies. This explains why curing rituals stimulate such controversy. Official male-dominated Islam is the medium of expression of wider conflicts, rather than the object of the rebellion in possession dialogue. Possession subverts style in the sense that it addresses broader issues including, but not limited to, official religion, by taking apart elements of local culture and reconstituting them. Its ritual process produces a kind of inverted social analysis or reflexive commentary about being a Tuareg, which includes diverse dimensions of personhood: Muslim/non-Muslim; male/female; noble/smith/former slave.

Tuareg spirit possession thus dramatizes contradictions between what Kenny terms “cultural myth and social reality” (1986: 8). Its ritual imagery not only encapsulates contradictions but also reveals compromises between ideals and actual conditions of existence. Possession imagery expresses a contradiction between the local ideology of the elevated and independent status of nobles – particularly women – and their actual position of economic transformation and uncertainty. On one level, Tuareg possession constitutes “engendered behavior.” Since it is predominantly women who undergo curing rituals, the role of gender in possession has to be taken into account. But class and age also feature. With these issues in mind, I include in my analysis genealogical material, life histories, possession case studies, texts from songs and other oral traditions, household censuses, and epidemiological surveys of women, all of which relate possession to crucial life events, such as marriage and childbirth. A comparative analysis of images of possession and images of other life events reveals that both kinds of ritual dramatize the contradictory roles of women, refracted or mediated through kinship and social class. An analysis of the metacommunication between knowledge specialists about possession and alternative healing systems shows that possession expresses conflicting definitions of personhood, and is the forum for articulating and exploring the identity of Tuareg women and also Tuareg identity in general. In fact, nowhere is Kel Ewey Tuareg personhood so clearly condensed into one discursive symbol than in possession.

Although the “language” of spirit symbolism reflects essentially a counterreality, possession imagery is constrained nonetheless by the knowledge-power system of the society at large.⁸ The broader concern here is the role of symbolic mediation in the relationship of structure and practice of knowledge about the person. This study does not purport to

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show how possession is a tool that serves the immediate interests of specific participants. Nor do I analyze possession art and play as ends in themselves. Rather, I examine possession in a different way, on two levels: the first level approaches possession as a microcosm of the life course, blurring the boundaries between self and other; the second level uses possession imagery as a means to explore the relationship between aesthetics, healing, and ritual, identifying possession symbols with certain aspects of the social structure.

Possession by the “people of solitude” is the ultimate symbolic performance. The case study in chapter 1 which opens the discussion examines *tamazai*. Part I of this study considers possession tropes and symbolism in the *tānde n goumaten*, and includes life histories of men and women who have been possessed. I look at the Tuareg belief system, their ritual and cosmology, and their interpretations of misfortune, and patterns of social organization, including gender. I analyze stories about spirits and illness, notions of power and causation, the relation of the individual to society, images of affliction and misfortune, notions of cognition and sentiments, and character acquisition. I look at how illness and personality classifications are established, the roles of specialists in curing (Islamic scholars, blacksmiths, herbalists), and their explanations of and responses to possession, tales about knowledge and destiny – particularly misfortune – and the relation of these latter to the cultural construction of knowledge about the person and healing.

Part II is devoted to aesthetic details of the spirit possession rituals, in particular how the social organization and cultural symbolic principles analyzed in Part I transfuse and pervade the intersection of art and power in the visual and verbal performance of trance. My methods here have more in common with analyses of possession through the lens of art and literary criticism rather than with epidemiological or positivistic methods. I take the position that possession is a culturally specific metaphor, not a universally distributed mental disorder (although I explore nonetheless Tuareg notions of mental states, including altered states conceived of as “normal” as well as those conceived of as “abnormal”). This idea of possession as metaphor leads me to return continually to a major theme in this book: exploring the relationship between the ideology of personhood and the enactment of possession, as the problem is addressed both through conflicting explanations of female curing and as it is manifested in possession tropes. Through an analysis of case studies interspersed with interpretations of transitional life events and ways of coping with conflicts and contradictions, I investigate the Tuareg sense of person, and how it alternately receives expression and shapes perception.

1

Illnesses of the heart and soul: the case of Asalama

Spirits of solitude bring illnesses of the heart and soul. In song verses used in spirit possession rituals, one who is possessed is referred to obliquely through the metaphor of an orphan (*golama*), a term also used to refer to a childless camel, and a female camel who has lost her young. Asalama, the blacksmith woman whose ritual served as a prelude to my quest for understanding possession, told me that this condition or illness afflicts the liver, the area just beneath the ribcage. According to Asalama, the liver is the seat of all sentiments – especially love and anger – and is the place where possessing spirits settle after entering through the stomach, which is the symbol of the matriline, associated in local cosmology with secrets as well as spirits.

Spirits are said to return often, circulating among regular hosts. During a visit to the house of a prominent marabout, I learned that there exist two types of spirit: black or blue ones (cured by the drum of the *tānde n goumaten* ritual), and red ones (cured by marabouts). The former are like the “black monkeys on top of Mount Bagzan,” who never approach villages, but remain on the fringes of the wild. The marabout indicated that, although spirits are equally dangerous to men and women, “women’s spirits and men’s spirits are not the same: the former prefer noisy *tānde n goumaten* rites as medicine; the latter prefer the Koran.” Most local explanations of possession included references to the stomach, the matriline, and women’s spirits, suggesting that possession by *goumaten* or Kel Essuf spirits is distinctly feminine. The distinctive songs, head dance, and joking and flirting of the *tānde n goumaten* ritual are also considered feminine. Tuareg men and women of all ages and social strata stated emphatically that only women should perform the head dance. Although men may be possessed, men’s spirit illnesses are described as illnesses of