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0521470072 - Spirit Possession and Personhood among the Kel Ewey Tuareg

Susan J. Rasmussen

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Among the Tuareg people in the Air Mountain region of Niger, women are sometimes possessed by spirits called “the people of solitude.” The evening curing rituals of the possessed, featuring drumming and song, take place before an audience of young men and women, who joke and flirt as the ritual unfolds. In her analysis of this tolerated but unofficial cult, Susan Rasmussen analyses symbolism and aesthetic values, provides case studies of possessed women, and reviews what local people think about the meaning of possession.

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SUSAN J. RASMUSSEN

*University of Houston*



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## Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction	1
1 Illnesses of the heart and soul: the case of Asalama	11
<b>PART I Images of possession</b>	
2 Inversion and other tropes in spirit possession rituals	25
3 “Like a tree branch swaying in the wind”: the head dance	58
4 Illnesses of God: personhood, knowledge, and healing	78
<b>PART II Art, agency, and power in the ritual sessions</b>	
5 Sound, solitude, and music	109
6 The <i>tānde n goumaten</i> songs	131
Conclusions	145
<i>Notes</i>	158
<i>References</i>	165
<i>Index</i>	171

Cambridge University Press

0521470072 - Spirit Possession and Personhood among the Kel Ewey Tuareg

Susan J. Rasmussen

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Acknowledgments

It would be impossible to mention all the residents of Niger who helped me as informants and as friends, but I owe particular thanks to Mesdames Chabo Dila and Salma Enfa, to Messieurs Mohammed Amouha and Ibrahim Ihossey, and to their families, whose welcome and generous hospitality were indispensable. Azori Falaina, chief of the Kel Igurmaden descent group of the Kel Ewey Tuareg and of the primary village where I resided in 1983/84 and again in 1991, was unfailingly helpful. The director of the local primary nomadic school during my earlier visit, now deceased due to a tragic accident in 1984, graciously assisted me in grasping more precisely the meaning of certain concepts in the Tamacheq language by working with me on transcriptions of possession song texts, folk tales, riddles, popular songs, life crisis rite music, and life histories.

A number of fascinating conversations with many other people, in Agadez, Niamey, and in the Bagzan region of the Air Mountains, also helped deepen my knowledge. In addition, I gratefully acknowledge the influences of my teachers outside Niger, who include a number of Africanist scholars as well as social and cultural anthropologists, particularly Ivan Karp, Martha Kendall, Michael Herzfeld, John Johnson, and Charles Bird during my graduate and postgraduate studies. Roy Wagner's early influences, pointing me in the direction of symbolism and systems of thought, and the Africanist perspectives of Johannes Fabian and Robert LeVine are also evident in this study. I also owe a considerable intellectual debt to many other scholars who have contributed to the framework of this book, major portions of which I completed during residence at the Smithsonian Institution on a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (1989/90). I am grateful for the kind assistance of Mary Jo Arnoldi, Paula Girshick, Chris Mullen Kraemer, William Merrill, Paul Stoller, and Richard

Cambridge University Press

0521470072 - Spirit Possession and Personhood among the Kel Ewey Tuareg

Susan J. Rasmussen

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Acknowledgments*

Werbner. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the valuable editorial suggestions concerning writing, and other assistance on copy-editing matters, from anonymous readers, from Jessica Kuper at Cambridge University Press, and Katherine Hagedorn at Pomona College, and encouragement from my husband, Manuel Heredia.

My initial academic interest in the relation between religion and gender led me to examine social and ritual roles of women, their image in Tuareg cosmology, and the causation invoked to explain their illnesses (Rasmussen 1987, 1989, 1991a). I also examined how women adapted to contradictions and stresses in their socio-economic roles (Rasmussen 1985, 1991b). I first became interested in female spirit possession among the Tuareg while intermittently in this region during my initial five years of residence in Niger: near Mount Bagzan in north-east Aïr during the rainy seasons of 1977 and 1978, and in the town of Agadez for a year in 1976, when I observed a number of spirit possession rituals in Agadez and in the surrounding countryside.

From 1974 to 1979 I taught secondary school in Niger's capital, Niamey, and in Agadez I was first a Peace Corps volunteer and later under local contract for the Nigerien Ministry of Education. During that time, I was involved in preliminary field research, curriculum planning, and the study of local languages, Hausa and Tamacheq. I studied Tamacheq intensively for one-and-a-half years with Monsieur Alitinin Ag Arias at the Centre de la Tradition Orale in Niamey, and continued my studies informally during independent travels and residence in the north of the country. Later, I returned to conduct doctoral research near Mount Bagzan in 1983, through the generous assistance of the Fulbright Hays Doctoral Research grant and the Indiana University Grant-in-Aid, and again for three months during the summer of 1991, with assistance from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and a University of Houston Limited Grant-in-Aid. I also had the benefit of suggestions and support from: Monsieur le Directeur of the Centre de Recherches en Sciences Humaines; the Préfet, Sous-préfet, Sultan, and Anestafidet (traditional leaders); as well as friends in Agadez, through whom I was able to make contact with local leaders and other residents and to settle in caravanning villages and semi-nomadic camps, and eventually within the household of a Kel Ewey family. I resided primarily in one village, and frequently visited other caravanning and gardening centers nearby, as well as several other more distant oases and nomadic camps.

The Bagzan region of Aïr was in many respects a delightful place to conduct research. Its shady trees (numerous by local standards), dry air,



Cambridge University Press

0521470072 - Spirit Possession and Personhood among the Kel Ewey Tuareg

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments* xi

and nearby mountains protect it from seasonal temperature extremes, and although the days can be quite hot, the nights are usually cool. I made trips to Agadez for mail and supplies about once every six weeks by agricultural cooperative truck. Other travel was carried out on foot or by camel. The nature of my research topic required close and long-term residence. My decision to live in a tent helped to facilitate friendships among a people who, while not hostile, were initially shy, due to a combination of historical events (Tubu raids and French massacres) and my own novel status as the first American (or European) to settle there (most non-Tuareg typically passed through in a jeep with a tour guide). Furthermore, since women own tents and men own the increasingly common adobe house, and houses are also the usual choice of outside tourists, teachers, and government officials, my housing arrangement received widespread approval from local residents, in particular the women, thus underlining my role as essentially a guest and friendly student of Kel Ewey Tuareg culture. In the material that follows, all names have been changed to protect privacy.