

ALFRED METRAUX ARTICLE ON VOODOO

Alfred Metraux

DRAMATIC ELEMENTS IN

RITUAL POSSESSION

The phenomenon of "possession" continues to elude satisfactory explanation because of the ambiguity of its nature. It belongs to one of those marginal zones where beliefs and rites are allied in the closest possible way to still obscure psychological mechanisms. We know that the phenomenon dates from antiquity, and that in numerous so-called primitive societies it is one of the means by which the faithful communicate with the supernatural. Our object is to offer a contribution to the clarification of this ambiguity by an analysis of the forms and functions of the trance in *voodoo*. This term, originating in Dahomey (in Fon, a voodoo is a god or spirit), denotes the ensemble of religious beliefs and practices observed on the fringes of Catholicism by the common people of Haiti. It is a syncretic religion in which elements from West Africa predominate, although other African cults have left their mark; however, this religious amalgam was impregnated from the beginning with Catholic beliefs and rites. The practice of voodoo is not limited to Haiti. Under such names as *macumba*, *concomble*, *Santeria*, it is found in Brazil and in Cuba, where the Negroes, closer to the period of slavery, have conserved African traditions more completely than in Haiti. Observations made in Brazil can help to explain certain aspects of possession which, in Haiti, took an aberrant form.

The links which unite voodoo to the religions of Dahomey and Nigeria are demonstrated both historically and by their use of a common sacred vocabulary; its close analogies with the Sudanese *bori* and with the cult of the *zars* in Ethiopia and modern Egypt are more difficult to explain. We apparently, confront, in voodoo, a very ancient religious tradition, perhaps dating from the proto-Mediterranean era. Some authors, Frobenius and Jeanmaire among them, are tempted to trace the distant origins of these cults to the Mediterranean world. However that may be, these old religions which yielded to Christianity or Mohammedanism in Africa gained new footholds in America. As black or mulatto settlers, leaving the Brazilian coast, established themselves along the tributaries of the Amazon, sanctuaries of Belem or of Manaos are today adorned by Cretan and Anatolian *kabrys*. The attraction of voodoo and related cults for the European imagination can be largely attributed to the feeling of familiarity they engender. Their whole world of gods and spirits, readily accessible through the mechanism of possession, awakens old memories in us. Industrialized as we have become and reduced to a proletariat, the divinities of the outskirts of Port-au-Prince and Bahia nevertheless belong to our universe.

Since voodoo is still a little known religion, it is necessary to define briefly several terms which will be used throughout this article. The divinities of voodoo, whatever their rank, are called *loa* (mysteries, or saints). The priests of this cult are called *houngan*; the priestesses, *mambo*; servants of both sexes, *hounsi*. The name of *houmfo* is given to the sanctuaries. The peristyle is a sort of open shed in which ceremonies and dances take

Translated by James H. Labadie

place. The midpost raised in the center of the peristyle is of sacred character and the object of a cult.

Members of the voodoo sect have the simplest possible explanation for the mystic trance: a spirit or *loa* lodges in the head of an individual after chasing out the “good big angel,” one of the two souls dwelling within each person. The sudden departure of the soul causes the trembling and jerking which mark the beginning of the period of trance. Once the “good angel” has left, the possessed experiences the sensation of being in a total vacuum, as if he had lost consciousness. He then becomes not only the receptacle but also the instrument of the god. It is no longer his own personality but that of the god which expresses itself in his behavior and his words. Facial expressions, gestures, and even the tone of his voice reflect the character and the temperament of the divinity descended upon him. The relation between the god and the man of whom he has taken possession is comparable to that of a horseman to his mount. Thus it is said that the god “mounts” or “saddles” his *choual* (*cheval*). Possession being closely associated with the dance, the image of a “spirit which dances in the head of its horse” is used. The invader is a supernatural being who takes possession of the body; hence the current expression: “the *loa* seizes his horse.”

In its initial phase the trance manifests itself by symptoms of clearly psychopathological character, reproducing the clinical progress of an attack of hysteria. Those possessed give first of all the impression of having lost control of their motor system. Shaken by spasmodic convulsions, they leap as if thrown by a spring, whirl in frenzy, stand rigid with the body leaning forward; they stagger, tremble, regain self-control only to lose equilibrium again, and fall finally in a state of semi-consciousness. Sometimes these attacks occur suddenly, sometimes they are announced by such preliminary signs as a distraught or anguished expression, slight trembling, panting, drops of perspiration on the forehead. The face takes on a shriveled or pained look. In certain cases, the trance is preceded by a feeling of drowsiness. Unable to keep his eyes open, the subject feels invaded by a vague lassitude. This torpor does not last long, disappearing before a sudden awakening accompanied by convulsive agitation.

The preliminary period can be short duration. Habitués of possession rapidly run the gamut of nervous symptoms. Trembling, a bit of staggering, a few mechanical movements: and then, complete trance! When the accelerated rhythm of the ceremony will permit no delay in the appearance of the gods, many omit even this preamble.

It is said that the nature of the crisis depends on the character of the spirit who seeks incarnation. The great and awful *loas* invade their “bodies” with all the violence of a hurricane. Those of gentler humor spare their “mounts.” The nature of the nervous attack depends on the ritual condition of the possessed; the greater his lack of experience, the longer his struggle against it. So long as his head has not been “washed,” that is, so long as his *loa* has not entered his head in a special ceremony, he behaves like a savage. His leaps and wild gestures are like those of an untamed horse who feels the weight of the horseman on his spine. Is not initiation a breaking which prepares the faithful for divine rides? The horse which at first bucked becomes accustomed to his master. He no longer jumps when the latter “climbs” into the saddle and guides him with his invisible hand.

Such metaphors are not out of place in a system of representations making such wide use of the equestrian vocabulary.

The possessed are protected against their own frenzy by the surrounding crowd. They are prevented from writhing too furiously and, if they fall, there are arms ready to catch them. Even their modesty is protected: the woman rolling convulsed on the ground is followed by other women who repair the disorder of her dress. This sympathetic participation of the crowd doubtless gives the possessed a feeling of physical and mental security which permits total abandon.

After the trance, the possessed pretends to remember absolutely nothing of what he may have said or done. Although some pretense is clearly apparent, his denials in this respect are categorical. One is not supposed to know that he has been the receptacle of a spirit until others so inform him. Many affect disbelief concerning their actions. A woman whose dress was torn during possession came to ask me about the cause of the damage; her pained surprise appeared genuine.

This amnesia, or rather, reticence, does not extend to the preliminaries of the trance. Some informants say that before darkness clouds their minds they feel pins and needles in their legs, or a strange heaviness which roots their feet to the ground. The violent entry of the spirit is apparently perceived by some as a sudden blow at the nape of the neck. These sensations are immediately followed by the loss of all sense of time.

The period of possession is more or less long, often only a few seconds, when the subject is "drunk," that is, struck by a slight dizziness, the effect of a contact with a source of sacred energy. Those whom the possessed ones whirl about in courtesy, as well as the one who brings the necklaces to the *hounsi*, generally succumb to this slight drunkenness: they have been brushed by the *loas* whom they approached.

These are individuals who remain in a state of possession for hours or even for days. It is apparently difficult for them to maintain a state of trance. They show signs of forgetfulness or negligence which contradict their divine personalities. An unwarned visitor runs the risk of deception, addressing the possessed as if he were his real self. The slighted god takes offense at this and rebukes the careless one. To avoid these mistakes, the gods are generally polite enough to disavow their identity if their attendants neglect to name them. The mistake is more excusable when the god deserts his "horse" in the middle of a conversation. When this happens, the divinity who has been listening to you suddenly and disconcertingly becomes just a man or a woman with a vacant, surprised stare.

Such confusion is rare. As a general rule the end of the trance manifests itself by signs of lassitude in the possessed. He becomes less lively and either sprawls into a corner or falls half-fainting on the knees of the spectators. After remaining motionless for several moments, with a stupefied expression, he opens his eyes and looks about him with the astonished air of a sleeper who awakes in unfamiliar surroundings. Often, through respect for the god who is preparing to leave, the face of the "horse" is covered with a scarf.

Once the acute phase of the crisis is past, the shoes of the possessed are removed along with all necklaces, rings, and objects that might be broken or lost during the trance. If the subject has difficulty in controlling the attack which shakes him, a priest or a priestess approaches, rattle in hand, and quiets him by gently shaking the instrument. The agitation of the possessed gradually ceases. Suddenly a new person shows himself:

it is the god. His emblems are immediately brought forward - hat, saber, cane, bottle, cigars; if he is supposed to wear a costume, he is led to a room of the sanctuary which serves as vestry.

The spirits, regardless of their sex, enter the bodies of either men or women. The subjects must, by their clothing or their behavior, indicate the change has taken place in them. The disguise is often summary – a simple hat, a pair of glasses, a cane, suffice to characterize a spirit. For certain divinities, it must be more complete. Baron Saturday, master of cemeteries and of the dead, appears in a black suit, starched cuffs, top hat, and white gloves, dressed in short as an undertaker or an official personage at a high-class funeral. The peasant god Zaka is known by his straw hat, his pouch, his pipe and his speech, which, like his dress, is that of the inhabitants of the morros. Those possessed of the marine god Agoue carry an oar, make rowing motions and hollow sounds imitating the noise of waves. Ogou, god of blacksmiths and warriors, wears a red scarf, assumes a martial air and affects a curt voice of authority. He does not hide his taste for fun, demanding a bottle, from which he drinks deeply without showing any effects: hence the song which greets his arrival:

Maft'Ogou boue. Li boue, jam saoul, Ogou-ferraille
Boue, li boue, jam saoul ...¹

The one visited by the serpent-god Damballah sticks out his tongue, slithers along the ground or hangs head down from the roof-beams. When a man or woman enters in a silk robe, covered with jewels, powdered and perfumed from head to foot, the public knows that Mistress Erzulie, loveliest of the voodoo gods, has come for a visit. She advances with the affected air of a coquette who, delighted with the men, has nothing but contempt for the other women. She barely consents to greet them with both little fingers extended.

The appearance of the great *loa* is signaled by a battery of special “field” drums; singers of both sexes increase their ardor. The subject is fanned, the sweat is wiped from his brow. If the *loa* is one of the protecting spirits of the sanctuary, he is escorted behind a parade of banners. So much honor does not, however, excuse him from the observation of strict voodoo etiquette. Granted that the faithful bow to the ground before him, he in his turn must prostrate himself before the priest or priestess in charge, before the drumbeaters and the midpost. Etiquette requires him to distribute small favors to all present: he brusquely gives a double handshake to some, dampens with his sweat the faces of others or shakes their garments to bring them luck; he lifts in his arms those he chooses for special honor or creeps between their spread legs. Cures are expected of him, he must touch the sick and improvise other treatment. This can be rather disconcerting; thus, *mambo* Desina once had a leg painfully bitten by one possessed of Agoue who was trying to cure her rheumatism.

The possessed ones – more properly, the gods – prophesy, threaten sinners and willingly give advice, even to themselves; the *loa* often asks the audience to tell his “horse” to mend his ways or follow other bits of advice. Once the person in question is again capable of listening to such advice, the message is scrupulously given to him.

The description of one of the numerous possessions which we have observed will, better than any general considerations, give a precise image of this essential aspect of

¹Great Ogou, Old Ironsides, drinks and drinks, never drunk...

voodoo. The following passage is taken from on-the-spot notes: “The *hounsi*, red scarves on their heads and wearing colored robes, dance in honor of Ogou. From the moment of the first dance, *mambo* Desina is possessed of this god. Despite her age, her weight and her infirmities, she dances lightly before the drummers, hands on hips, rhythmically shaking her shoulder. Then she finds a saber whose handle she places against her belly, bends the blade. She repeats this dangerous exercise against the base of the column. A *houngan* spits a mouthful of rum at her belly, and rubs her legs with rum. Desina, furious, fences with the master of ceremonies, also armed with a saber. The ceremonial duel degenerates into a real battle, spectators intervene to prevent an accident. Desina is seized anew by a quarrelsome fury. She slashes at the midpost with saber-blows and chases the *hounsi* who flee in terror. Just as she is about to catch them, she is stopped by the staffs of the sacred banners which two women cross in front of her. This calms her immediately. Whenever Desina-Ogou succumbs to a fit of rage, a priest speaks to her, remaining carefully protected behind the banners. Desina finally catches the *hounsi* whom she strikes violently with the flat of her saber; this excess has a calming effect on her. Suddenly become friendliness itself, she greets those present and showers them with polite remarks. She calls for a big cigar and smokes nonchalantly. Then she orders spread before her the food contained in a hamper attached to the midpost. She eats heartily and distributes what is left to the *hounsi*. She then summons a trembling little girl who has already received a vigorous spanking with the flat of her saber; she gives her a long lecture about the behavior expected of little girls, predicting, the most horrible fate for those who fail to heed the advice. Having forced the girl to lie prostrate before her, Desina – still with the voice of Ogou – turns to the *hounsi*, to who she gives copious advice about their dress. Then she speaks of herself in the third person, praising her economies in the construction of the sanctuary. The *hounsi* listen respectfully. Shortly after, the god leaves Desina, who becomes herself again.”

Every case of possession has its theatrical side, as shown in the matter of disguises. The rooms of the sanctuary are not unlike the wings of a theatre where the possessed find the necessary accessories. Unlike the hysteric, who reveals his anguish and his desires through symptoms – a personal means of expression – the ritual of possession must conform to the classic image of a mythical personage. While the hysterics who used to believe that they were the prey of the demon also drew elements of their diabolical personality from the folklore of their milieu, they did undergo a form of suggestion not entirely comparable to that of the possessed ones of Haiti.

The adepts of voodoo make a very clear distinction between possession by *loas*, which is sought after and desirable, and possession by evil spirits, which is morbidly feared. Dialogues such as those between the two personalities of the demoniac never take place in voodoo. In ritual possession, consciousness is apparently entirely obliterated and the individual obeys the *loa* “sicut Cadaver.” As soon as he has chosen the personality suggested by folklore – or, in voodoo terms, as soon as the *loa* has, voluntarily or in response to a call, descended upon him – the subject makes up his role out of the knowledge and memories accumulated in a life spent visiting congregations of the cult. Only in his relations with others is anything left to the fantasy of the possessed. He can, if he wishes, be benevolent or angry toward certain persons; but he may not modify the character nor the appearance of the divine personage incarnated in him. In the

eyes of the audience some succeed better than others in representing certain gods. This why one can hear in voodoo circles such comments as: “You should see her as Erzulie.”

These similarities between possession and the theatre must not make us forget that in the eyes of the public no possessed person is truly an actor. He does not *play* a person, he *is* that personage throughout the trance. But how can we avoid calling “theatre” the impromptu performances organized spontaneously by the possessed when several divinities manifest themselves simultaneously in different persons? These improvisations, of varying tone, are much enjoyed by the audience, which roars with laughter, contributes to the dialogue and noisily shows its pleasure or discontent.

An individual possessed of Zaka appears in the peristyle dressed as a peasant. With defiant gestures, he mimes the anxiety of a farmer come to town who is afraid of being robbed. At this point, another possessed one arrives – one might almost say: “Enter second spirit.” It’s Guede-nibo, of the family of gods who keep watch over the dead. Zaka is obviously terrified by the presence of his ghostly colleague and tries to propitiate him by an invitation to food and rum. Guede, dressed in city-clothes, exchanges polite conversation with Zaka in an effort to make a fool of him. He asks: “What have you got in your satchel?” He is examining its contents when Zaka, alarmed, cries: “stop, stop!” The satchel is returned to him for the moment, but snatched again while Zaka examines a sick man. Desperate, Zaka asks for cards and shells in order to find the lost satchel by divination. The audience chants: “Tricked, Zaka, tricked.” The objects he asks for are finally brought to him. Several persons are suddenly possessed by Zaka and provoke what the Haitians aptly call *youri escandale* (a scandal). One of them accuses a woman of having stolen objects entrusted to her. Protestations of the lady, angry cries and mutual insults fill the air. Finally Zaka is accused of the theft. His conscience bothers him and he is visibly disturbed every time someone approaches his precious satchel.

The following anecdote also shows the theatrical side of possession. During voodoo ceremonies each divinity is honored in turn by three dances accompanied by chants which evoke him; no modification is permitted in the strict form of these dances. During one of them, dedicated to Ogou, a priest was suddenly taken by a *loa*. At first it was believed that the expected god had shown himself, so the surprise was general when it was realized that Guede had made a premature appearance. A priest, addressing the possessed one, asked the god kindly to leave and come back in his turn. Guede refused and demanded his tribute. The priests and other dignitaries repeated their request, threats following pleas. Guede laughed at them. For the sake of peace and quiet, someone brought his vestments. He danced joyously, pulled a few tricks, then threw himself into a chair. The possession was over. Regaining consciousness, the possessed was angry because the songs and rhythms of the drummers did not follow the usual sequence. He criticized the *hounsi* for this breach of discipline. He didn’t want to hear of the unexpected appearance of Guede, the guilty one. Like all the possessed, he maintained that he had no idea of what had happened.

Sometimes the possessed are capable of great variety in their actions. This talent is particularly revealed when successive possessions make them change roles instantaneously. They may, like the *hougan* whom I observed one evening, be first Ogou-balindjo, a screeching god who sprinkles his head with water, then become Guede-fatras and perform an acrobatic dance terminating in the appearance of Petit-Pierre, a

querulous glutton who, to the great amusement of those in the gallery, picks quarrels with members of the audience. Another time a woman prey to the goddess Belekete, contorted herself, screwing up her arms and legs, twisting her neck, sticking out her tongue. She had succeeded in dislocating every part of her body in the most frightful way and when suddenly the hideous Velekete left and she was transformed into a wantonly playful beauty.

Ritual trances pose a fundamental problem. Are they really divisions of personality, comparable to those suffered by certain hysterics, or simulated states forming part of a traditional cult and obeying ritual rules? In other words, when someone received a god, does he lose all sense of reality, or is he simply an actor playing a role. The answer to this question is possible only after the careful establishment and statement of all data. First of all, it is important to know the functions of possession within the social and religious system which has given it such a significant place.

Most cases of trance take place during religious ceremonies, public or private. The spirits must participate in the homage rendered to them, accepting their sacrifices in person, at the prescribed moment. When the feast is celebrated in a household sanctuary, the spirits descend only upon members of the family. It would be considered bad taste for a stranger to go into a trance, and anyone guilty of such an unbecoming act would be invited to leave. As a general rule, the same persons are visited each year by the same spirits. The possessions are just as regulated as other details of family life.

When a sanctuary organizes a public dance or a grand ceremony, the possessions are not limited to officials of the cult, *mambo*, *houngans*, and *hounsi*. A great number of spectators, come as visitors, are suddenly seized by a god and participate for a few minutes in the dances and the rites.

The confusion introduced by "chain-possession" into the order of the ceremony is only an apparent one. These "epiphanies" rarely disarrange the order of the cult. The chief ritual acts are necessarily accompanied by possessions, since it is desirable and even necessary for the *loas*, as chief interested parties, to participate. They generally enter the officiating dignitary, and, in addition, the man or the woman who is paying for the ceremony, thereby showing their good will and guaranteeing the efficacy of the sacrifice. The absence of gods would be a proof of their indifference or, even worse, of their hostility. When a gift is brought for a *loa*, the priest who will really enjoy its benefits is very careful not to thank the giver. The latter will receive directly the marks of divine gratitude when, during a feast, the god is incarnate in the priest or in any other person present.

Collective possession inevitably occurs whenever, in the course of a ceremony, the participants are stimulated by certain spectacular effects – the spurts of flame when alcohol is burned in honor of Ogoa, or when the sacred oil-pots called *zains* suddenly catch fire, the explosion of small powder charges signaling the arrival of another god. There is also a relation between the number of possessions and certain drum rhythms; by beating more energetically, the musicians are apparently capable of inducing states of trance. At such times they themselves appear to be delirious, though they are rarely really "mounted." The *houngans* also know how to break down the resistance offered by certain individuals to the gods. Dancing in front of them with a fixed stare, the *houngans* make certain gestures whose suggestive power resembles magnetism. On the other hand, individuals subject to states of possession, but who for one reason or another are reluctant

to yield to it, use different magic procedures to outwit the gods. Sometimes they wear a certain headdress, at other times they dip the corners of their scarves into a substance which works against the power of the *loa*.

The phenomenon of possession also occurs in daily life. As a matter of fact, in psychological role shows most clearly in profane circumstances. The trance sometimes functions as a flight from suffering, or simply from fatigue. Dr. Louis Mars witnessed a *loa* appearance in a patient at the most painful moment of an operation. In the same line, he tells of seeing two persons possessed just after they had been in a bus accident.

Those who must make an exceptional effort can ask a spirit to help them – in other words, they hope that the state of trance will facilitate their task. There is the case of shipwrecked persons who were able to get ashore thanks to Agoue, who became incarnate in them. During a pilgrimage to Balan grotto, near Port-au-Prince, mambo Desina, who, because of her rheumatism, was having difficulty climbing the rocky path, was suddenly possessed of Legba: instead of limping painfully, stopping ever minute or so as she had been, she made her way with resolute step and without visible fatigue. Except for this extra energy, possession produced no other change in her personality at the time.

The trance enables those who take refuge in it to escape from a disagreeable situation. The trials of the initiation rite require neophytes to beg alms in public places. Some are ashamed of this. They ask the *houngans* to send a *loa* to them. Once possessed, they no longer need to feel uncomfortable since not they, but the gods, hold out begging hands.

The individual in a state of trance is in no way responsible for his words or actions. As a person he has ceased to exist. The possessed can therefore, with complete impunity, express ideas which he would hesitate to voice in his normal state. It is frequently noted that the possessed make statements or commit aggressive acts which can be explained only by hidden resentments. Their shocking indiscretion sometimes affects the entire audience, which shows in disapproval and begs the god to be still. Possession thus plays a role analogous to that of intoxication in America, where alcohol often provides a convenient alibi for an outburst of frankness.

The state of possession adds weight to the recommendations which a priest or anyone else makes to the audience. I have often seen mambo Desina, as some great *loa*, scold her *hounsi* or urge them to obedience and gratitude toward the good Desina.

Possessions sometimes occur in the open market at Port-au-Prince. A buyer should not be surprised when a salesgirl addresses impertinent remarks to him in a nasal voice. It's Guede, who, to the great amusement of the crowd, has mounted her and become very outspoken.

Certain possessions satisfy obscure tendencies closely allied to masochism. It sometimes happens that the possessed one throws himself violently to the ground as if hurled by some superior force, or brutally beats his head against a wall. In other cases, highly exceptional it must be admitted, women tear and burn costly garments. These acts are interpreted as punishments inflicted by the *loa* on his "horse" for some ritual breach. The vengeance of the *loa* also takes other forms, scarcely less cruel. He may descend upon his "mount" in church, at the moment of elevation, provoking a painful scandal.

Finally, among the functions of possession, a high place must be given to the pleasure it offers to poor devils who, crushed by life, can become the center of attention

and play the part of a supernatural being, feared and respected. The part of histrionics and exhibitionism in the phenomenon of possession is certainly very great, as has been noted in the case of true hysterics.

Adepts of voodoo say that spirits prefer to visit individuals who resemble them. In other words, there would seem to be a correlation between the character of the divinity and the temperament of the one who represents him. Persons of gentle humor should be visited by lovable and tranquil *loas*, while the violent should receive impetuous or brutal spirits. It is true that in Haiti, contrary to the case of Dahomey and Brazil, one person may be “mounted” by different divinities. The analogy between the *loa* and his “horse” should thus be limited to that of one’s “chief *loa*,” that is, the spirit who possessed him first and who has become his official protector. The faithful are often possessed, however, by *loas* whose natures are completely opposed to theirs. The trance then exercises a compensatory function. One anecdote, told me by a person, who can be believed, is perhaps explained by the unconscious desire of the heroine to transpose reality by means of a mystic trance. A poor woman, fruit-seller in the Port-au-Prince market, used to celebrate an annual ceremony in honor of a personal “good.” Captain Deba, who in real life, has been a high-ranking American naval officer. She saved her money to buy him whiskey and other things dear to the Americans. When the spirit of the captain came upon her, she would put up on a sailor’s cap, pretend to row a boat, and hum American songs. The transformation of a voodoo divinity into a visiting foreigner would seem strange were it not for the fact that the woman in question had once been the mistress of an American naval gunner. The god had taken the form of her lover, not, however, without an increase in rank! By means of annual possessions, she recaptured a transfigured past.

It is these apparent functions of the trance which suggested Bastide’s Freudian interpretation: possession permits the repressed personality to return in symbolic form, “in an atmosphere of festive joy, without the sinister character Freud speaks of.” It is called “a sort of confession, not spoken but acted, an active cure in the muscular exaltation of the dance rather than a passive one on the half-hidden couch of a darkened clinic.” The comparison is a bit forced and gives too large a place to individual impulsions, since trance is so often a ritual imperative. One may also rightly ask what repressed impulsions are revealed by the possessed during the trance. Except for cases like those cited above, his behavior is rigorously dictated by tradition and, far from seeking to express himself, the possessed speaks to personify a mythological being whose nature is after all foreign to him. Most possessed persons can draw from the state only the satisfaction of an actor who lives his role and is applauded. Even the approval of the audience is shown only in the attention it pays to his movements and actions.

It is too often imagined that the possessions of voodoo take place in the middle of a crowd excited by mystic enthusiasm. Actually, those who attend the ceremony as spectators cast only an occasional glance at the events. They gossip around the peristyle, smoking cigarettes or nibbling pralines. At no moment is the public the prey of collective delirium or even of an exaltation likely to approach ecstasy. The traditional dances of voodoo – *yanvalou*, *doba*, *dahomey*, *petro* – executed gravely, with a very fine sense of rhythm and admirable suppleness, have nothing dionysiac about them. It is only in certain ritual rounds that animation reaches a fever pitch.

Ritual possessions are frequently attributed to nervous disorders of hysteric nature. Twenty years ago⁹, Herskovits refuted this interpretation by showing the rigidly controlled and stylized aspect of the phenomenon and its frequent occurrence as a normal means of establishing relations with supernatural powers. The number of persons subject to possession is too great for it to be called hysteria, unless one considers the entire population of Haiti to be suffering from mental illness. If the trance corresponded to an innate disposition among the Haitians, one would be right in wondering what mutation had caused that faculty to disappear in regions of the same ethnic composition, where the African religious tradition has been less faithfully preserved or has disappeared.

Possession cannot be explained solely in terms of psychopathology. It is probable that possession has this character only in a very limited number of cases where the individuals are, without any doubt, true neurotics subject to split personality.. Must we attach the label "hysteric anesthesia" to the impressive spectacle of men or women, inhabited by gods, who are able to handle glowing bars of iron without apparent discomfort? In the ceremonies I have attended, the possessed ones did brandish red hot iron rods, but they arranged to take them by the cool end. The *hounsi* who danced in the fire prudently jumped about on logs which the flames has spared. But I no reason to doubt the testimony of those who have seen the possessed grasp incandescent bars with both hands. I have seen photographs of a woman lifting with her feet a white-hot iron rod. I find it difficult to pass judgment on such feats, whose equivalent is found in other religious manifestations and among sects who cultivate extreme forms of asceticism. As for the Haitian possessed who grind up glass in their mouths, their performance is on the same level as that of our carnival artists.

There is in most cases of possession, except at the start, which is likely to be disordered, an element of comedy which inevitably suggests a certain degree of pretense or at least an element of voluntary delusion. One rightly doubts the authenticity of possessions which occur on demand, so to speak, when the ritual requires them. The loss of consciousness, without which classic possession cannot take place, is, if not entirely absent, at least only partial in a large number of cases. Such-and-such a woman, possessed of Damballah and wearing a new dress, will avoid throwing herself on the ground for fear of soiling her robe, although the serpent-god ordinarily obliges his "horse" to slither along the floor. Another may speak of events or subjects which he could not possibly know without being fully conscious. Still another too visibly uses his divine immunity to give free rein to spite or cupidity. Many times I have obtained as a favor from a subject his possession by the god whose acquaintance I hoped to make! Space does not permit me to list the many instances of distraction or other lapses for which the possessed may be held to account. There is a striking contrast between these possessions, not too serious after all, and those whose intensity and gravity evoke respect, as is always the case when we compare the rank amateur with the great artist.

The behavior of the possessed, so obviously stylized, does not permit us to determine whether the origin of possession is voluntary or compulsive. Only in very rare cases does one witness a real struggle by the subject against the trance which occurs in spite of himself. I remember having noticed, among the public admiring the dances of one possessed of the god Simbi, a well-dressed woman who no doubt belonged to the petty bourgeoisie of Port-au-Prince. She appeared uncomfortable as she watched the possessed ones. Suddenly she closed her eyes and her face contracted painfully. She

began to perspire profusely, her shoulders and arms stiffened. Soon she was shaken by violent, convulsive trembling. The *houngan* approached her as she rocked back and forth, faster and faster, in her chair. With closed fist, he pushed his thumb against her forehead as if trying to force a peg into it. Her face still convulsed, she closed her eyes as tightly as she could, but in less than a minute her trembling stopped. She looked around her and stopped perspiring. She appeared relaxed, calm and remained seated as if nothing had happened.

The chant, even more often the roll of the drums, exercises an undeniable influence on certain subjects. *Hougan* Tullius, listening in Paris to the recording of a band made during a ceremony he himself had directed, was seized with dizziness at the very point where he had been possessed when the recording was being made. Dancing on a Parisian stage, he was again “mounted” by the *loa* Damballah, to the great discomfort of his comrades.

The fact that possessions take place during a ceremony from which they are formally excluded constitutes still another proof of the suggestive power of the phenomenon. One evening during the period of solitary confinement for those being initiated _ rites from which the divinities are rightly banished – three persons showed symptoms of possession. Two succeeded in calming themselves, but to bring the third to his senses the *mambo* had to grip his head tightly.

During the first stage a contagious force is unleashed which acts on nervous, unstable temperaments. This is why the spectacle of a possession generally serves to start others, not only among the *houngans* who are ready to be “mounted,” but also among the spectators come as visitors or out of curiosity. In poor quarters where voodoo is practiced, there is nothing shameful or even disturbing about a nervous attack. It contains no mysterious or abnormal element; quite the opposite, since it is a mark of divine favor. It would seem that those who have yielded to suggestion become gradually more and more likely to fall into a trance. Beginning as a form of disorder, their crisis finally becomes the sort of stylized behavior which I have tried to describe.

Among possessions which appear spontaneous, it is useless to try to distinguish between those which are the effect of psychic contagion and those which respond to the inner will of the subject. Do not many voodoo adepts – I would almost say most of them _ find in the convulsive spasmodic phase a sort of *physical technique* serving to provoke the *delusion* of divine possession? This, of course is pure hypothesis, but one may legitimately wonder whether the simulation of a nervous attack might not encourage the retreat of the true personality before a borrowed one. Do not the exaltation and dizziness resulting from this frenetic agitation create a mental climate well suited to a certain sort of auto-suggestion? In this case, the notion of a state of possession would seem to take over the consciousness of the subject after the preliminary symptoms have announced it.

In observing certain cases of possession, one is tempted to compare them to a child who imagines he is an Indian, for example, or an animal, and who strengthens the illusion by means of a piece of clothing or some other object. Adults contribute to this waking dream as accomplices of the fiction by providing the disguises which favor it. Possession evolves in an atmosphere even more favorable: the spectators do not pretend to believe in the reality of their game, they believe in it sincerely. Among the lower classes, and even in certain sections of the Haitian bourgeoisies, the existence of *loas* and their incarnations are articles of faith. The possessed shares this conviction. Finding

himself in a state of tension after having undergone or affected a nervous attack, he finds it difficult to distinguish his own being from the personage he represents. He becomes an actor on the spur of the moment. The ease with which he plays the part is proof to him, if one be needed, that he has become the personage itself. He plays his role in good faith, attributing it to the will of a spirit who, in some mysterious way, has entered into him. In short, it would seem that the simple fact of believing himself to be possessed is sufficient to provoke in the subject the behavior of the possessed, without any real intention of trickery past. Filliozat compares possession to a “suggestion of a state: and explains it by “momentary forgetfulness either of intentions linked with habitual activity, or of the real sensation of the state in which one finds oneself,” from which it results that “one acts against his normal will or believes himself to be in a state other than the true one.”

The “forgetfulness” of the possessed is not always a gross mystification. To admit that one remembers what he has said or done as a god is to recognize that he has not been really possessed, given that it is impossible to have been at the same time himself and a *loa*. It is better to convince oneself that one has forgotten everything than to admit having tricked both the audience and the god. Whoever puts himself into a trance is obliged to play the game to the end. To simulate a possession does not necessarily imply a skeptical attitude toward the phenomenon itself. The *houngan* Tulus, whose possessions were often “done” as a favor, was haunted by the fear of the *loas* and took very seriously – even tragically – the treats and warnings he received from the mouths of other possessed persons.

The state of possession is then a function of the intensely religious climate in which voodoo is practiced. The omnipresence of *loas* and their incarnations is the object of beliefs so profound and so unquestioned that possessions evoke less emotion than the visit of a friend. If a woman rolls on the ground, shrieks or beats herself, the spectators simply say that she “*has a loa*.” This faith is contagious: it is shared by some of the French clergy in Haiti, who naturally see in this phenomenon the hand of the devil. Some cultivated white people, accepting possession as a manifestation of the supernatural, are not far from a real faith in voodoo. Visits to the sanctuaries impose on the detached but polite observer the use of expressions which, in fact, are the equivalent on his part of acceptance of the authenticity of possession. It is not possible, after all, to mention the conduct of a possessed person without attributing it to the god who has taken possession of him. It would be unjust to consider the “horse” responsible for the actions or words of his invisible rider.

An anecdote will illustrate the force of conviction seen in the possessed themselves. A young woman, “mounted” by the goddess Erzulie, had danced during the ceremony with a young man whom she subsequently honored with her favors. Again in a state of trance, she gave the young man a hundred dollars, all her savings. In this she was merely conforming to the generous nature of the goddess. The next day, regretting her gesture, she claimed on the pretext that she remember nothing of what she had done. She had the young man brought before the judge. When the latter learned the circumstances, he ordered the young man to give back the money; the girl became suddenly frightened and refused to take it back. She rightly feared to cross the divinity who had directed her while she was possessed.

Long lists of similar cases in scattered parts of the world show that possession is a very widespread phenomenon and there are few variations in its manifestation. Facts

relating to possession, but which are detached from their cultural and social surroundings, bring little, however, to the solution of the fundamental problems posed by this form of mysticism.

The conclusions I have reached based on observations in Haiti differ only slightly from the results of a study made in Sudan on the same subject by the English psychologist and ethnographer Dr. Nadel. To the question "Are all trances authentic?" this scholar answers a definite "No." He admits, however, that certain simulated possessions can end in genuine schizophrenia. None of the *chamans* (sorcerers) he visited was in everyday life abnormal, neurotic or demented. Their hysteria was entirely professional. But he adds that possession among the *chamans* "exploits and channels predispositions to neurosis in such a way that the subjects remain stable and their neuroses are confined to this single aspect of life." Trance can thus be a psychological mechanism useful to the mental health of the group in avoiding the variety and multiplicity of neuroses and psychoses in our own society.

The interpretation of trance proposed here will remain in the hypothetical state until the time when one Haitian subject breaks the inhibiting bonds of traditional beliefs which are at the root of "forgetting." If, while awaiting this event, I have ventured as an amateur upon the terrain of the psychiatrists, it is due to my belief in the primarily social aspect of trance, at least insofar as it occurs in so-called primitive societies. Moreover, didn't the same thing hold true in the phenomena of possession illustrated by the Salpetriere? "Did not Charcot and his disciples transform their cells into *hounfos* (voodoo sanctuaries)?" a one of my ethnographer friends asked, with more than a little truth.

Possession cults show signs of decadence in Haiti. This is seen in the decreasingly formal nature of the crises in comparison to those which occur in Dahomey or even in Brazil, where they take place in a hieratic atmosphere. Subjects to be possessed are there named in advance. They receive throughout their lives only one spirit and avoid excess in their hysterical mimicry. The adepts of voodoo, on the other hand, can incarnate all the *loas* they please. In this choice left to the individual and in the relative disorder of his conduct the decline of voodoo may be seen. Tourists will do the rest.

Ritual possession states, in very clear terms, the entire problem of sincerity among agents of the supernatural in a considerable number of societies. Of the *chamans*, magicians and priests who, by diverse procedures, enter into communication with the world of spirits or work miraculous cures, how many are sincere, how many are impostors? Durkheim has already put us on our guard against an interpretation of religious matters which would give too large a place to fraud. When the *chaman* of the Chaco draws out of his patient the vertebrae and the fangs of the serpent who has bit him, does he mock his public in exhibiting them with a triumphant air? How can the *chaman* who has hidden in his mouth the poisonous objects which he pretends to have drawn from the body of the patient believe in his mystification? However, if he falls sick in his turn, he will have recourse to a colleague who uses identical methods, demonstrating his belief in the efficacy of his technique. Is it not guaranteed by the success, tradition, and confidence accorded him by the entire group? If he ever heeds his own doubts, they finally yield before the conviction of others and the proofs of his own success. The very behavior of the *chamans* shows us that the accusation of imposture cannot be supported:

they undertake their cures seriously and persistently; they go into trances which leave them physically and mentally exhausted. Finally, do they not show themselves to be disinterested?

An important fact emerges from the study of these different methods of communication with the divine: whether basically possessions or *chamans'* trances, they all try to reproduce psycho-pathological states. Hysterical crises and hallucinations are considered to be privileged situations which permit the comprehension and domination of nature. The artificial reproduction of these disorders is the basis of the techniques of ecstasy and possession. Among the agents of the supernatural are true neurotics as well as normal individuals. Thus are constituted those unprecise zones in which theological speculations mix with pathological experiences. From this collaboration spring the beliefs that open the way to delusions and unconscious falsehood. The force of conviction in an archaic society is illustrated by the following anecdote: a young Zuni Indian, having seen *katchina* personages disguised as spirits) without their masks, returned home to announce that he had seen Katchinas *wearing the masks of men*. It is in this state of mind that possession can be accepted at the same time by him who undergoes it and by him who sees in it the authentic manifestation of the divine presence.