

POSSESSION

by Phil Hine

"My skull is a drum; each great beat drives that leg, like the point of a stake, into the ground. The singing is at my very ear, inside my head. This sound will drown me! ... I cannot wrench the leg free. I am caught in this cylinder, this well of sound. There is nothing anywhere except this. The white darkness moves up the veins of my leg like a swift tide rising, rising; it is a great force which I cannot sustain or contain, which will surely burst my skin. "Mercy!" I scream within me. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly: "Erzulie!" The bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded at once. That is all."

Maya Deren

The phenomenon known as possession has been, until fairly recently, a comparatively rare phenomena in Western Magical practice. This is possibility due to its association, in the nineteenth century, with some of the grosser elements of mediumship, and a general misunderstanding of non-western magical approaches such as Voudoun and Santeria, which have, until the recent popularisation of anything possibly "ethnic/shamanistic", been denigrated as "primitive" religions - particularly by descendants of the Theosophists who, as Michael Bertiaux put it in a recent interview, *are obsessed with their childhood experiences of voudon, based on 1930's and 1940's zombie movies.*

It is also the case that experience of possession is difficult for many people, particularly those conditioned by a European upbringing, since possession requires disinhibition and the ability to surrender oneself to passion - something which, on the whole, is neither socially sanctioned nor consistent with the self-image of "being in control".

Over the last few years however, there has been a marked rise in the practice of possession-oriented ritual, where the aim of the working is for the appearance of an entity into a human vessel, for purposes of enchantment, illumination, or oracular utterances. The use of possession-based work is particularly strong within Wicca, the Northern Tradition, and the freestyle approach generally termed as Chaos Magick. Having had many opportunities to participate in such workings (both as a vessel and a celebrant), I hereby offer an analysis of

the possession experience for discussion.

Possession is a wide-ranging phenomena which is probably the most popular form of union with the divine in human history. Possession-oriented rituals are apparent in ancient Egypt and it has been shown that the earliest forms of Cabbalistic practice were oriented towards this type of experience. Possession was a recognised phenomena in ancient Greece, two examples being the Delphic oracle, and the practices of the Theurgists, defined by Proclus as "... in a word, all the operations of divine possession." Possession is a central feature of Voudoun, Santeria, and Macumba, religions which are gaining increasing popularity, and is apparent in most tribal cultures, from America to Australasia.

Possession also appears in early Christianity - particularly with the manifestation of "speaking in tongues" which remains popular in modern-day forms of evangelical Christianity. St. Paul's dramatic experience on the road to Damascus bears all the hallmarks of a sudden divine possession, yet he was worried by the phenomenon, and found it necessary to lecture the Corinthian Christians on the need to carefully manage speaking in tongues: *"If, therefore, the whole church assembles, and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? ...do not forbid speaking in tongues, but all things should be done decently and in order"* (I Corinthians, 14).

In general, there are two routes into the ecstasy of possession. The first is solitary, and the second is group-oriented. Solitary possession is often the result of an extended retirement of meditation, prayer, or ritual, whereby the celebrant attains union with the chosen entity. The basics of this procedure were eloquently described by Steve Wilson in his article *Results Mysticism* in C.I 15. This was the path of solitary mystics such as St. John of the Cross. Within the context of monotheism, this practice is not without its dangers. The Sufi mystic al-Hallaj announced that he was "God", and later was crucified. The Christian mystics of the Middle Ages were often one step away from being viewed as heretics. In India, this form of solitary possession is known as Bhakti Yoga.

The key elements of this experience are easy to identify. Firstly, there is a degree of isolation from other people. Isolation, in varying degrees, contrib-

utes greatly to the loss of a sense of ego-boundaries. Isolation places great stresses upon the human psyche. Secondly, there are varying degrees of deprivation - fasting, sleeplessness, removal of sexual relief, self-inflicted pain, etc - the monastic favourites which would be recognised and approved of by shamans and tantrics alike. Thirdly, there is the constant turning of attention to the subject of the retirement. The mystic continually directs his awareness to the union with the divine which he seeks, through prayer, meditation and ritual. Crowley's *Liber Astarte* is a fine example of this kind of work, as is the Abra-Melin system - if you are inclined towards grovelling before Jehovah. The published Abra-Melin diary of William Bloom is a fascinating account of the 'self-abasement before god' gambit in action. Crowley, of course, was much more inclined to lie back and let the 'god' enter him through the back door, as it were, and readers are referred to my own reflections on 'passive' sodomy in C.I 11 for more on this particular form of possession.

It is the group-oriented form of possession which I wish to pay particular attention to, since contemporary possession-workings are most often in this form. In religious cults, possession plays an extremely effective role in validating belief in the system. This is precisely what worried St. Paul about the "tongues" phenomenon so widespread in early Christianity. As an adherent of reason, he was worried by the fact that participation in this form of ecstatic experience produced a fervent yet uncritical belief.

DISINHIBITION

The ability to 'lose control' appears to be a key factor in the possession experience. I have seen people who, upon attempting to take on a manifestation for the first time, clearly 'lose' the trance when their inhibitions over what is acceptable behaviour conflicts with the persona of the entity they have taken on. Expectations over how to behave, even within the free space of a magical ritual are, once they have been built up, difficult to shed. The ability to release one's inhibitions and 'go with' the possession takes time to build up for many people, though it can equally be the case that individuals who seem otherwise to lack charisma and confidence can sometimes very quickly 'let go' and enter possession trance. One explanation is that the possession experience gives participants "permission" to act out of character. As a voodoo celebrant said to S.E. Simpson (Religious Cults of Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica & Haiti, 1970)... "*What a person is afraid to do, he does when possessed.*" Permission to act in a manner appropriate to the God is

effectively sanctioned by officiating officers, celebrants and audience. However, in modern rituals, the limits of permission are not always clearly defined. Anthropological accounts of possessed persons seemingly going 'out of control' agree that any relating violence is approved of and expected - part of the 'play' of the ceremony. In teaching others the 'trick' of becoming possessed, it is essential to convey the message that the individual is not 'responsible' for the behaviour of the spirit. Once one understands that all present are able to divorce the behaviour of the individual from the presence of the God, the need to hold fast to one's personality diminishes.

GROUP EFFECTS

It should be understood that possession is not merely a matter of entity and vessel, but an experience that arises from the total interaction of those present. In some senses, possession is a form of theatrical performance. Certainly I have heard actors describing an experience akin to possession - that, when on stage, they are able to do things which are associated with their characters far more eloquently than when out of role. Accounts of possession ceremonial by Deren, Seabrook, Belo et al show that the interaction between performers (those possessed by spirits), audience, ritual officers and the Master(s) of Ceremonies co-creates the possession experience. Of particular interest is the role taken on by the Master of Ceremonies or officiating Priest.

Keith Johnstone (Impro, 1981) notes that in Voodoo ceremonial, the officiating priests have high status, yet are "indulgent" to the possessed participants, who often exhibit child-like or playful behaviour. Another useful analogy is the idea of the M.C as "ringmaster", coaxing the possessors towards the ecstasy of gnosis and whipping the audience on. A good MC ensures not only that the spirit behaves (or misbehaves) appropriately, but also that the audience participates in the performance. All too often, I have seen the 'audience' in a possession working standing uneasily round the possessee, and occasionally being berated by the spirit for their lack of participation. Invocatory rites are similar to evocatory rites in that they are context-derived. In my experience, the successful appearance of an evoked goetic spirit depends very much on the ritual space - the use of appropriate props and paraphernalia. In the same fashion, good possession working requires a clear context that is known and understood by all participants. Conflicting expectations often give rise to results which are at variance with the participants' intentions. A good

example from my own experience is of a working which was clearly designed by the officiating priest to be the opening act for an orgiastic celebration. The entity he chose was IUSTINA, a persona derived from a character in the works of the Marquis de Sade (*Justine: The Misfortunes of Virtue*). The entity was based on the character Justine who, whilst undergoing every kind of debauchery imaginable, retains an aura of virtue. During the working, the possessee displayed behaviour which was quite in keeping with the Justine of the book, although that was not quite what the officiating priest had in mind!

This is not of course, an issue in ceremonies where the entire assembly knows what to expect of the entity manifesting. William Sargant gives an account of a Voudoun ceremony he witnessed in Haiti,



where two girls became simultaneously possessed by Ghede, a loa who is known to be particularly sexually active: "They half stripped each other and one girl symbolically raped the other with a masculine type of pelvic approximation. It ended with the total emotional collapse of both participants." Sargant goes on to say that the group was somewhat amused by this episode, and that the girls, who were normally restrained and quiet, had no memory of what they had done. He notes that the only people who were 'upset' by the incident were the boyfriends of the girls, but that they could say nothing, as it was the manifestation of Ghede. This in itself is an important point. In many possession-oriented cults, there is a tacit understanding that whatever a possessed person does, it is the action of the indwelling entity and, as such, they cannot be faulted. Furthermore, after people come out of possession, they are not told about how they behaved.

It has often struck me that the size of the group participating in a possession working can also contribute to the depth of trance on the part of the possessee. Work in small, close-knit groups allows a strong atmosphere of trust, confidence and relaxation to build up, which is conducive to possession taking place. However, large groups, particularly in frenzied workings involving strobe lights, massed dancing & screaming, allow a celebrant to achieve a deep possession relatively quickly. Again, the effect of being in a crowd enables the dominant personality to be shed quickly. Also, the fact that the vehicle for possession is the focus of attention for the entire group brings on an excitatory state of arousal, kicking in the fight-flight autonomic reflex, washing away the borders of self-image in a flood of adrenalin.

TRANSMARGINAL INHIBITION

William Sargant, in his book *The Mind Possessed*, makes a thorough examination of possession-type experience. He believes that the key to this phenomenon lies in an 'abnormal' response to extreme stress which was identified by Pavlov as Transmarginal Inhibition. Sargant describes this reaction as having three stages, the Equivalent, Paradoxical, and Ultraparadoxical. The Equivalent stage is characterised by a response whereby the individual's reaction to both weak and strong stimuli is the same. In other words, a person suffering from depression may react to both significant and trivial experiences in the same way. The Paradoxical phase occurs when weak stimuli produce stronger positive responses than strong stimuli. An example of this phase is the depressed person who does not react

when verbally threatened, but can be motivated by a gentle command. The third phase, the Ultraparadoxical, is characterised by the appearance of responses that are diametrically opposed to those which have been previously conditioned or habituated, and new beliefs and behaviours may be implanted. Sargant also notes other phenomena associated with this state. These are: increased suggestibility to beliefs and stimuli which would not normally be paid much attention; the isolation and inhibition of certain thoughts and behaviour from memory, and the "inhibitory collapse" which wipes recent behaviour from memory.

Sargant sees the possession experience very much in terms of the above process. He points out that possession is very much an abreactive, cathartic experience, and notes that in some societies, possession, when brought on through dancing, drumming and chanting, serves to release accumulated tension in the celebrants. He cites his own work with patients suffering from shell-shock; the inability to release a traumatic experience from consciousness. Sargant and his colleagues deliberately subjected clients to an extremely stressful reliving of the initial trauma, to the point where they collapsed. Afterwards, it was found that the trauma had released its hold upon them.

How does this mesh with the possession experience? From my own experience, I can confirm that possession is certainly both abreactive and cathartic. Intense physiological activity - muscular strain, hyperventilation, etc - followed by release, is often more relaxing than quiescent relaxation techniques. Another interesting point concerns that of memory loss following the state of possession. This is widely documented, from accounts of hypnosis to instances of possession in cults such as Voudoun, as noted above. There is some suggestion though, that the degree of memory loss is related to group expectations. In some cults, it is an article of belief that when the god enters, the human 'soul' is displaced. In *Prime Chaos*, I have discussed the possession experience in terms of a continuum - at one end, there is "full" possession, which may result in partial or total memory loss, and at the other, the phenomenon of "Overshadowing," where the celebrant retains a degree of self-awareness during the possession experience.

Sargant also recognises the importance of the group atmosphere in creating a space where possession may occur. He notes that the overall effect of possession ceremonial is to place the celebrants in a state of increased suggestibility. Rhythmic drumming, dancing and chanting are three of the most popular means of creating a possession experience,

to which modern magicians have added the use of strobe lights and audio effects.

MASKS AND POSSESSION

The use of Masks, and other ritual props, is an important feature in possession. In some cults, when a celebrant begins to display the symptoms of possession, the character of the incarnating entity is discerned by the officiating priests, and that individual is given the appropriate props for the particular god or goddess. In Western approaches to possession, it is more likely that the vehicle visualises himself, or is already dressed in the appropriate garb. In contemporary magick, the vehicle for possession by a particular god tends to be chosen before the ritual proceeds, rather than, as in Voudoun, spontaneously ridden by the loa. Masks are particularly useful in conferring a degree of anonymity to the wearer. Masks which are particular to a certain spirit tend to exhibit consistent behaviour, no matter who is wearing them. As has been noted, spirits tend to a certain conservatism. The invading spirit may be defined as a mask - an arising character which has its own behaviour and personality, as defined by belief and context. This may not however, be the case for "unfinished" gods - that is, entities who are not reinforced by an informing tradition, belief system or even a general expectation of character formed from the pool of the celebrant's experience. This appears to be the case for entities such as Baphomet.

PROBLEMS ARISING FROM POSSESSION

While in a religious context the direct experience of the indwelling entity serves to validate belief in that religious system, possession can occasionally be problematic from a magical perspective, where certain, unshakeable belief is not quite viewed in the same light. While within the ritual space it is important to invest total belief in the possession experience, the continuance of uncritical belief outside it can become dysfunctional. This, however, calls into question the function of possession-experience, particularly within the context of Chaos Magic. I have often heard an incarnating entity utter oracular or prophetic statements during possession workings. In a context of generalised belief, one assumes that the results of possession workings would be integrated into the successive experience of the participant. I often wonder how far this is the case in Chaos Magic, where consensual belief in the reality of the experience may be shed as soon as one leaves the temple space. Perhaps someone would care to address this point in a future issue?

A second problem which relates to possession is

that of knowledge of the entity. It may occur that an entity manifests within a vessel that is unprepared. By this, I refer to an individual who has no prior knowledge of the entity, in terms of its character, mythological associations, or relevant behaviour. This is particularly relevant when we consider entities that have knowledge of specific areas. In possession-oriented cultures, it is usual that entities who can offer diagnostic advice manifest through healers or witch-doctors. It would be difficult for someone with no knowledge of such specialisation to give a coherent delivery, even if they were possessed by the relevant spirit. A related problem is that individuals who are new to the possession experience may not have the skills to accurately deliver a message - again, the ability to disinhibit, as discussed above, is relevant.

Thirdly, there is the problem of fixation. Some magicians appear to become fixated on manifesting a particular persona, often to the point that regardless of the character of the entity, the same behaviour and persona is apparent. Arguably, this is not true possession but an expression of ego-reinforcement in front of an audience. This can result in obsessional mania, as the self being continually reinforced dominates the magician's behavioural repertoire, to the point where it is difficult for any other selves to manifest, and the individual's beliefs and behaviour are limited to that of the dominant self. There is often a deep-rooted insecurity behind such fixations.

A fourth problem relating to possession is related to the idea of banishing or earthing. It is not unusual for individuals to remain possessed even after a rite has been concluded. There are instances of participants in such workings becoming possessed for hours or even days after the event, spontaneously. In the religious context, this tends to lead to conversion. Sargant's model of possession relates the experience to the release of accumulated tension, and if the experience does not culminate in exhaustion (its own banishing) or collapse, then the effects of it may linger. Those who wish to make use of possession-oriented work would do well to bear this in mind.

TRAINING FOR POSSESSION

Like many other types of magical experience, possession is a learned response. When an individual first experiences possession, it may have far-reaching consequences as a life-changing agent. It may occur suddenly or gradually, and in some accounts of possession it can be agonisingly painful. The degree of resistance to the experience is interesting in this light. Sargant notes that, often, the

more one resists the onset of possession, the more intense the experience actually becomes. I have noticed that, in my own experience of being possessed, whenever I have consciously tried to limit the depth of possession, it has in fact proved to be much more intense than I expected. With practice, one may achieve a state of possession relatively quickly.

Whatever the setting or the context, the key elements of possession remain similar. Warm-up rituals, such as banishing, prepare for the main event by helping the celebrant to focus attention on the entity to be manifested. The use of excitatory gnosis such as drumming and dancing place the body under stress, allowing awareness to be inflamed with the image of the incoming entity. Individuals may become spontaneously possessed, or the possession may be directed into one individual chosen specifically to be the vehicle. Whilst it is possible for someone *other* than the chosen vehicle to be possessed by the entity, it appears rare that entities *other* than those being invoked manifest. As Sargant says, Christian revivalists do not become possessed by the Goddess Kali. The behaviour of a possessed person is often very much in terms of Sargant's model of transmarginal inhibition. Since the "gods" have a certain amount of regality, they often react badly to being commanded, yet can be steered by weaker commands. Hence the 'indulgence' on the part of officiating priests as noted by Keith Johnstone. It is often the case that the God is reluctant to leave the vehicle. In modern magick, this tends to be dealt with by placing the celebrant under further stress - capturing them (if necessary) and calling them out of trance until the invading persona has departed. In extreme cases, a lustration of cold water is provided.

CONCLUSION

Possession remains a powerful form of magical work. It can be used to derive oracular information (as used by the Greeks and Tibetans), to charge magical weapons, to share in the power of the God (as in ritual masses) or 'live' a particular mythic transformation. In constructing possession-workings, it can be useful to examine magical and religious paradigms where possession is a recognised and culturally-defined technique. The experience itself can be related to wider phenomena such as religious conversion, hypnosis, and abreactive therapy. As with all types of magical technique, its use requires careful analysis and evaluation if it is not to devolve into a habituated limitation. In general, magical possession is both useful and enjoyable, if a little hair-raising at times.