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# Spirit Possession

VICTOR IGREJA

University of Southern Queensland, Australia

In many societies around the world, spirit possession is a multifaceted phenomenon. It causes ill-health and suffering, is a source of knowledge regarding ways of tackling social and health problems, and constitutes modes of collective remembering. In the expert literature, spirit possession is diversely referred to as altered states of consciousness, or dissociation or dissociative states. According to specific social circumstances, spirit possession is experienced as constructive in that it can provide healing resources; it is destructive in that it can cause serious health and social afflictions; and it can also be uncertain by encapsulating positive and negative experiences at once and over time. In the 1960s and 1970s sociological approaches reduced spirit possession to symbolic forms of power struggles. It was argued that disadvantaged groups, particularly women, attempted to redress their precarious condition by means of spirit possession (Lewis 1971). Anthropologists have spent lengthy periods of time conducting ethnographic studies of spirit possession in numerous societies and have suggested that the diversity of the phenomenon makes it difficult to capture in a single approach and definition.

Thus, anthropologists and other social scientists tend to use definitions that are consistent with the type of spirit possession that is prevalent in a particular society at a specific point in time, whereas others have applied multidisciplinary approaches in search of complex understandings. There are, however, points of departure that any student, expert, or media professional must consider when engaging with the topic. Spirit possession is an embodied phenomenon which nevertheless transcends the individual and becomes part of group dynamics (Stoller 1995). It flourishes in societies that cultivate the belief that an individual's body and action can be influenced and controlled by deities and spirits. Spirit possession manifests in ritual practice and in everyday life. In these contexts and for the people involved, spirits are real and are regarded as persons (Lambek 1981). Spirits are inseparable from particular social attitudes to death and particular historical circumstances of death (Kwon 2008). Research conducted in numerous societies consistently confirms that both men and women are afflicted by spirits; however, women are the principal focal point of possession trance. Because of gaps in reporting the identity of the spirits, the literature offers a less clear picture regarding the gender of the spirits. Recent case studies conducted in specific war-torn communities show, however, that afflicting spirits tend to be male (Igreja et al. 2010). In social theory, spirit possession has continuously animated debates and analysis regarding the potential and limits of human intentionality (also referred to as "human agency").

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## Spirit possession perspectives over time

Historically, spirit possession studies have been characterized by an emphasis on spirits as representations of psychological, social, political, aesthetic, or historical processes. Contemporary studies have developed symbolic perspectives focused on single factors such as instrumental expressions of social conflicts (Lewis 1971). Other authors have examined spirit possession through comparative perspectives (Bourguignon 1973); still others considered spirit possession as a holistic phenomenon (Boddy 1989).

Comparative studies have identified a greater variety of possession beliefs around the world in tandem with widespread institutionalized trance (e.g., spirit possession) and nonsacred trance (e.g., dissociative behavior). These results inspired the development of a distinction between trance (behavior) as rooted in physiology and possession beliefs as cultural phenomenon. This distinction is used mostly in the psychiatric literature which defines two types of dissociative phenomena: possession trance and dissociative trance (Bourguignon 1973). Possession trance involves the replacement of the customary sense of personal identity by a new identity, that of the spirit. Across cultures, the agents involved in these identity replacements can be spiritual (e.g., spirits of the dead, gods, and demons) or, as in the case of *ataque de nervios* (nervous attack), the dissociative states are linked to acute stressful experience, particularly relating to grief, fear, or serious family conflict. In societies where the origins of dissociative states are attributed to external entities such as spirits, these entities are regarded as persons and assigned agency that can meaningfully influence the lives of their hosts and kin. Often the spirits meddle in the host's life for a multiplicity of reasons. In a state of trance possession, the spirit's host becomes the vehicle of the spirit; in locations such as the center of Mozambique, a person in a state of possession trance is referred to as *txiquiro*, or a spirit's vessel. The spirit replaces the host's voice, words, perceptions, feelings, and behavior. Thus, a *txiquiro* cannot be held accountable for the actions of the spirit.

This distinction between trance and possession beliefs has not been readily accepted by some anthropologists. Michael Lambek (1989, 40) considers the distinction inappropriate on the grounds that "trance is not prior to spirit possession in either a logical or causal sense" and "where it is meaningful, trance is shaped by culture." However, attempts at determining the physiological mechanisms that explains trance have taken place, with some authors suggesting that cognitive approaches "potentially mediates between and connects neurological and particularistic accounts of forms, meaning, incidence, and spread of possession" (Cohen 2007, 86). While cognitive approaches contribute to enrich the scholarly knowledge of spirit possession, there is little doubt, as Roland Littlewood (1995, 163) remarked, that "whether we read the pattern as an idiom of distress, as physiological defense or as a creative fantasy, whether we grant it some existence as a distinct psychophysiological state, socially induced or requiring public acceptance to bring it into the open, its local context and meanings are significant." This approach highlighting the significance of local contexts and meanings is consistent with holistic approaches in the study of spirit possession.

Holistic approaches have focused on the cultural logic and practices of spirit possession, the factuality of spirits, and the links of spirit possession with religion, healing, justice, and politics in specific cultural milieus. This approach also considers spirit

possession to be linked with realities at local, regional, and global levels. Thus, holism considers spirits and spirit possession as complex symbolic platforms which provide ways of understanding, trying out, coming to terms with, and contesting modernity, colonialism, capitalism, and religious and other hegemonies (Boddy 1994).

Most ethnographic studies agree that, in order to appreciate the importance of local contexts and meanings of spirit possession and their implications at national and global levels, there is a need to define the type of spirit possession involved. Furthermore, the disciplinary focus that the analyst adopts frames the scholarly description of the phenomenon. Thus spirit possession can be defined as part of a continuum whereby suffering can give way to spirit possession as a source of healing. From a multidisciplinary perspective, possession as suffering parallels the psychiatric phenomenon of dissociative states, whereas possession as a source of healing involves therapeutic interventions beyond the individual sufferer. Cultures differ in their tolerance for actions attributed to extrinsic agencies and the radical shifts in perspective that accompany shifts in states of mind (Kirmayer 1994). The varying degrees of tolerance are also consistent with how expansive or restrictive societies allow the voices of the alternative identities or spirits to be heard and to command obedience and respect and, in the specific case of spirits, whether spirits randomly possess any person in society or manifest through the bodies of healers, or both. In Western psychiatry, dissociative states are regarded as symptoms of a fragmented self. This approach reduces dissociation to exclusive representations of psychiatric pathology. Following these diverse dissociative states or possession trance episodes often the host experiences postfact amnesia.

Following observations and self-reports of people suffering from ill-health attributed to harmful spirits, anthropologists have moved beyond social conflict and holistic approaches to seriously analyze the lived experiences of symptoms of illness, the disease patterns in such cases, and the people mostly affected. Anita Spring (1978) conducted a social epidemiological study among the Luvale in Zambia and reported that spirit possession was linked to women's childbearing difficulties, excessively long and heavy menstruation, miscarriages, stillbirths, and infant illness and mortality. Janice Boddy's (1989, 175) ethnographic study of the Zar cults in Sudan identified an association between spirit possession and loss of virginity among women, as well as a strong link between possessed women and fertility and marital problems, while this was not the case for the nonpossessed.

Following these ethnographic studies that examined the links between spirit possession and health problems, Leslie Sharp's (1993) research in a migrant town in northwest Madagascar acknowledged the existence of "possession sickness" or "harmful spirit possession" in the sense that people also attribute the etiology of varied illnesses to spirit possession. The onset of possession sickness was attributed to diverse debilitating illnesses such as chronic headaches, dizziness, loss of appetite, persistent stomach pains, or sore neck, back, or limbs. A form of possession known as *njarinintsy* was considered as a grave illness with symptoms that include shaking and chill, uncontrollable screaming and crying, loss of memory and mental confusion. Unlike Western psychiatric approaches to dissociative states, anthropological perspectives contribute to a phenomenological understanding and reporting of these afflictions by

highlighting, as Adeline Masquelier (2001, 14) argues, that symptoms of possession are not free-floating signs; while the symptoms are embodied, they cannot be isolated and extracted from the social reality through which they are experienced.

### **Current emphases in research and theory**

The ambiguity of invisible entities such as spirits contributes to its ability to continuously invoke transformations in response to major events and processes at personal and collective levels. The recent focus of various studies has been on societies emerging from violent conflict or grappling with issues of historical injustice. The current emphases on the topic have considered and analyzed the symbolic and creative aspects of spirit possession, as well as spirit possession as an instigator of major social unrest and ill-health. Methodologically, while the majority of recent studies have continued the ethnographic tradition, there is an emergent work leaning toward ethnographically informed epidemiological analysis of forms of spirits and spirit possession considered harmful locally.

An anthropological focus on communities emerging from deep collective crisis and trauma fostered by the Cold War-driven repressive dictatorships and civil wars and aggravated by state authorities' interference in survivors' attempts to rebuild their shattered social worlds on their own terms, reveals the ongoing interplay of suffering and creativity buttressed by spirits and spirit possession. Following deeply divisive experiences wracked by political repression, violence, and torture, serious questions arise regarding the possibilities and limits for former perpetrators and victims alike to live together and to jointly attempt to rebuild their shattered communities and social relations. Often, in some such contexts, state interventions are conceived to deceive, silence, and control the voices of survivors of state-sponsored political repression, violence, and trauma. In turn, spirits and spirit possession have played significant roles in shaping survivors' struggles to heal diverse afflictions and to recover a sense of morality and collective existence above and beyond states' interventions.

For example, the aftermath of the violence of hunger in the Great Leap famine in 1958–60 in China and of vengeful violence during the Cultural Revolution which claimed the lives of millions of people and of the continuing repression through state-imposed silence on survivors throughout the 1990s was experienced by many Chinese villagers in southwest China as the “age of the wild ghosts” (Mueggler 2001). In the earlier 1990s, local government representatives attempted to impose their interpretations of the past and visions of social reconstruction, while local villagers focused on dealing with the legacies of their grisly experiences in culturally meaningful ways. Mueggler interpreted the stories survivors told him of violence and their experiences of possession and revenge killings by wild ghosts as efforts to find ways to live together in a community rent by past violence, to trace the responsibility for violence, and to enunciate calls for justice.

In Vietnam, the variously termed “Vietnam War” or “American War,” which pitted the communist regime from the northern region against the US-backed southern government army, generated major population displacements and the deaths of millions of

people, both civilians and soldiers. The victorious communist north unified the country in 1975 and engaged in the reconstruction process. As in many socialist countries, the Vietnamese government imposed a secular monolithic model of remembering and official commemorations that conceived of the world as divided between war heroes and villains in a country where traditional religious and ritual customs such as belief in ghosts remain meaningful cultural practices (Kwon 2008). The government attempted to eradicate traditional religious beliefs while many Vietnamese kept experiencing bodily intrusions by grievous war ghosts that broke down the divide between heroes and villains, and state and family commemorative practices. As in China, anthropologists could only initiate ethnographic fieldwork almost two decades after the war ended in Vietnam. One of them was the anthropologist Heonik Kwon (2008), who interpreted the phenomenon of angry ghosts as testimonies of war-caused violent death and displacement of human lives. The other was Mai Lan Gustafsson (2009), who focused on describing the array of symptoms of illness and abnormal behavior that afflicted possessed people such as searing bodily pain, headaches, nightmares related to wartime deaths, palpitations, hearing voices, and self-mutilations. These health and behavioral problems negatively impacted upon the quality of life of the Vietnamese war survivors, who imputed the etiology of most of these symptoms to the war ghosts.

Studies examining the impact of civil wars in Africa have revealed that survivors often consider that war violence increases the prevalence of harmful spirit possession which in turn increase the severity of ill-health symptoms and the disruption of social and family relations. Ethnographic studies conducted in the center and center-north regions of Mozambique found that the main source of suffering among war survivors was *gamba* spirits. *Gamba* has a tripartite meaning, which a priori discards attempts to separate symbolic aspects from the lived experiences of ill-health and suffering (Igreja et al. 2010). *Gamba* refers to the spirits of young male soldiers who died in the Mozambican civil war (1976–92); these spirits return to the realm of the living to take revenge on the survivors who were allegedly involved in the perpetration of serious crimes in the war. In this regard, and in a similar way to the ethnographic observations made in China, Vietnam, and Uganda on the intrusions of *cen* spirits, at one level, in Mozambique *gamba* spirits constitute forms of collective remembering and evoke calls for justice. Additionally, *gamba* is also the name of diverse impairing symptoms of illness and, finally, *gamba* is the name of the healer or diviner specialized in dealing with *gamba* afflictions. In these regions in Mozambique it was known that ancestral spirits (named *madzoca*) proliferated and only possessed people who, on the basis of their lineage, worked as diviners and healers. Hence the emergence of *gamba* spirits constitutes, alongside the suffering it causes, a form of collective innovation.

Following on from these ethnographic studies in postwar Mozambique, medical anthropologists in multidisciplinary teams conducted ethnographically designed epidemiological studies focused on the local context and meaning of harmful spirit possession and community-level prevalence (Igreja et al. 2010). This work revealed that harmful possession by *gamba* spirits significantly contributed to reproductive illnesses, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, chronic headaches and nightmares. As the focal point of the intrusive harmful spirits were women with young babies, the

women's debilitated health spread the burden to the family which led to infant illnesses and mortality, as well as family instability, violence, and divorce. The prevalence rate of people suffering from at least one harmful spirit was 18.6 percent; among those individuals, 5.6 percent were suffering from possession by two or more harmful spirits. A comparison between possessed and nonpossessed individuals provided further evidence that harmful spirit possession was a major cause of health impairment and serious family conflicts.

Quantitative studies developed in Uganda measuring harmful spirit possession, traumatic war experiences, depression, and dissociation found comparable results to the epidemiological study of harmful spirit possession in Mozambique. In one study in northern Uganda, harmful spirit possession was prevalent and significantly correlated with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression (Neuner et al. 2012). In another study in southwestern Uganda, individuals suffering from spirit possession reported significantly more potentially traumatizing events than nonpossessed participants and, compared to controls, patients with spirit possession reported more psychoform and somatoform dissociative symptoms (Van Duijl et al. 2010). These emerging methodologies and studies are significant as they create baseline data and knowledge for future comparisons of prevalence rates of harmful spirit possession at local, national, and cross-national levels over time.

### **Future directions in research, theory, and methodology**

The field of spirit possession is complex. Any proper study should include both the theories and approaches of the social scientists (*etic*) and those of the people concerned (*emic*), who often are very knowledgeable about the various facets of the phenomenon. Research in communities emerging from violent political conflict or dealing with the legacy of historical trauma have offered interesting opportunities to grasp at once the symbolic, creative, and ill-health aspects and epidemiology of harmful spirit possession. Compared to the notion of dissociative states or dissociative disorders used in Western psychiatry, spirit possession in war-affected and politically volatile regions heightens collective perceptions of and concerns over the links to health, justice, and social memory in more compelling ways. Health, justice, and social memory are important for the development of social theories in the contemporary world. In the aftermath of political violence almost everywhere questions arise regarding which ill-health issues should be prioritized and who should be the primary institutions and agents involved in health care delivery; what kinds of violation merit justice and what kind of justice is possible and appropriate; whose memory deserves recognition and what forms of memorialization are meaningful for individuals and collectivities; and what the most appropriate concepts, theories, and methods are for studying the short- and long-term impacts of war violence and political repression. An emerging area of research has focused on examining in deeply divided societies the role played by spirits and spirit possession on matters of reconciliation and justice, also known as transitional justice in political and international studies. The phenomenon of spirits and spirit possession in facilitating,

or hampering or subverting, attempts to foster justice or impunity cannot be underestimated and requires further comparative analysis in countries dealing with complex legacies of war, trauma, and historical injustices.

The increasing global circulation of people and ways of living, ideas, and objects has highlighted the prolific facets of spirits and spirit possession, and it constitutes another important area for future research. The ability of spirits to travel or avert mobility and to maintain alternative transnational links between cultures and social contexts suggests the need to grasp the unpredictable relations of spirits and processes of globalization, particularly among migrant populations (Huwelmeier and Krause 2010), as demonstrated by Karen Brown (1991) on her ethnographic study of the popularity of Vodou devotees and the local attachments that they develop in Brooklyn (United States). In this regard, spirits and spirit possession are not something of the past that mirrors people's immemorial traditions. Instead, it is constitutive of modernity and postmodernity while also combining multiple temporalities (past, present, and future). The power of spirits and spirit possession to disrupt and empower people's lives has been amply theorized. Yet spirits are also unpredictable and sometimes, in specific contexts, appear too weak to generate broader structural changes (Ong 1987). Overall, both the power and weaknesses of spirits and spirit possession contribute to expand contemporary theories of agency and the condition under which spirits can inspire local processes of peace building and social transformation. For that, theoretical and methodological requirements will involve determining the identity of spirits as locally defined, listening to their voices and taking them seriously in the broader context of society and culture. The weakness or unresponsiveness of spirits is seemingly linked to the growing sense of unpredictability of the social world of many people around the globe and the inability of many contemporary policies and institutions to address people's needs.

Spirits and spirit possession have also been implicated in the lives of children, be they former child soldiers or children without military experiences. Around the world public accusations have been made against children for their putative involvement with spirits that have caused diverse illnesses and death in their families; often the accused children face life-and-death consequences. The phenomenon has been interpreted as manifestations of social crises and mass traumatic stress and as coping mechanisms deployed by children to address their precarious positions within families and communities under duress (Reis 2013). However, a further understanding of such phenomena also requires broader and critical examination of local moral worlds; of the absence of effective mediating institutions; and of how political authorities, healers, and clients do sometimes conspire to dismiss personal responsibility, to blame the victims, and to spread guilt beyond generational divides (Igreja 2004).

Methodologically, ethnographic approaches will remain important sources of in-depth knowledge to capture multiple facets of spirits and spirit possession. However, well-integrated multidisciplinary teams using a combination of ethnographic, cognitive, and quantitative approaches can also contribute in meaningful ways to improving public health understanding of the prevalence of harmful spirits and harmful spirit possession.

SEE ALSO: Addiction; Agency and Morality; Alterity; Ancestors; Consciousness, Altered States of; Ethnomedicine; Gender and Health; Global Mental Health; Idioms of Distress; Medical Anthropology; Mind–Body Reasoning; Personhood, Self, and Individual; Placebo; Religion and Embodiment; Religion, Health, and Wellbeing; Religious Experience and Phenomenology; Resistance; Shamanism and Possession; Shintoism; Techniques of the Body; Transitional Justice; Violence and Health; Violence and Warfare; Vodoo/*Vodou*; Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic

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