

## 4 | “Ill at Ease and Sick at Heart”: Symbolic Behaviour in a Sudanese Healing Cult.

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The quotation contained in the title of this paper is taken directly from a description given by a Sudanese woman as she related the sort of physical and emotional state she was in just prior to joining the spirit possession cult which ultimately gave her some relief from her symptoms.<sup>1</sup>

She went on: “I became frightened and anxious about everything, always feeling that death would happen to one of my family. My heart was beating hard and I had short breath . . . I was upset all the time. I was pregnant and afraid that I might lose my baby. I became anxious about my house and every small thing . . .”

This woman’s personal symptoms and sentiments, and the dreams that she had at that period, were to lead her to accept a culturally appropriate diagnosis that her troubles were caused by her being possessed by spirits called *zaar*. And acceptance of this diagnosis was, in turn, to lead her to participate in an ego-centred group ritual of spirit appeasement, rich in personal significance and in dramatic, historical and symbolic significance to all those taking part.

The concept of spirit possession, and curative ritual associated with it, touches directly on some of the main themes raised in this symposium. It is right at the interface between private and public symbols and sentiments, and forms a most pertinent starting point for any analysis of the nature of

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these and the relation between them. It is precisely this thesis which leads Mary Douglas, when discussing natural symbols, to use cases of spirit possession as "test cases" in formulating her concepts for describing "the way that social pressures reach an individual and structure his consciousness" (Douglas, 1973, p. 112). Her hypothesis is that societies, or sections within a society, which indulge in ecstatic and effervescent forms of ritual and symbolic behaviour, are expressing their "lack of strong social articulation" and that their practices amount to "... a fair representation of the social reality they experience" (Douglas, 1973, pp. 114 and 110).

Approaching the same sort of phenomena from a somewhat different viewpoint, Ioan Lewis argues rather that spirit possession may provide an outlet for those who are too rigidly circumscribed by their allotted status-roles; that it allows a form of contained protest to those who are the controlled, rather than controlling, members of structurally "tight" societies. Specifically, in his Malinowski lecture (Lewis, 1966) and in his later, more widely-ranging work on ecstatic religion (Lewis, 1971), Lewis has linked certain manifestations of spirit possession to feelings of absolute and relative deprivation experienced by those, especially women in "male-dominated" societies, who find themselves in a peripheral position *vis à vis* the sources of power and authority in their societies.

A close look, then, at one active curative cult which exists to treat individuals diagnosed as suffering from spirit possession, should help us towards a greater understanding of the phenomenon. It should help to demonstrate the sort of symbolic and emotional synthesis which allows an individual not only to express, in an atmosphere of group support, the social pressures impinging upon him, but also to experience a sense of relief from, and hopefully to come to terms with, these pressures.

It is my contention that the ritual of the *zaar* spirit possession cult of the northern Sudan provides individuals under a variety of forms of stress with a standardised and acceptable means of expressing the position in which they find themselves. At the same time, both the ritual act, and membership of the cult group, are instrumental in allowing subtle adjustment of their position.

Furthermore, since ego-centred curative ritual sensitive to, and indeed in part a product of, social change, allows for a two-way symbolic dialogue between the individual and his society, in examining such ritual we may also be able to gain some insight into the degree and extent to which the society is prepared to utilise the mystical experiences and dramatic and innovative abilities of its individual members.

In discussing a wide variety of inspired cults and religious movements, Victor Turner observes that however personal seeming the initial inspiration upon which they have been founded, "their mythology and symbolism

is borrowed from those of traditional rites de passage, either in the cultures in which they originate or in the cultures with which they are in dramatic contact" (Turner, 1974, p. 99).

This is certainly valid for the *zaar* spirit possession cult, now an established but once an innovative cult in the Sudan.<sup>2</sup> What is interesting is the manner in which such "traditional symbols" are re-deployed, and it is here that we broach the complex relationship between individual and group sentiments, private and public symbols.

Before going any further, it is necessary to set the cult in its ethnographic context. This I shall attempt to do in the briefest possible manner.

### The Social Background

The cult groups which I am going to discuss here are urban and suburban and involve mainly women of the sedentary riverain tribes of the Muslim northern Sudan.<sup>3</sup>

Marked sexual segregation is a dominant feature of northern Sudanese society. There is a clear sexual division of labour. Households are separated into men's and women's quarters, and in almost no instance do men and women who are not closely related mix at any public gatherings. Weddings, child-naming, circumcision ceremonies, and mourning, all take place with two separate, sexually segregated congregations.

One point at which this division breaks down to some extent is during personal and family crises of illness. A woman may, in complete privacy, consult an unrelated male Quranic healer or *feki*, either on her own behalf or on behalf of a member of her family, male or female. Similarly a man may resort for treatment to what is considered to be the essentially women's cult of *zaar*.<sup>4</sup> Some men are regular participants at cult rituals, and a few become cult group leaders. Of this male minority some are overt homosexuals, while others may initially have symptoms, such as bleeding from the anus or penis, which tend symbolically to classify them with women. The majority of both cult group leaders and followers are women.

2. For an attempt to trace the history of the cult in the Sudan, and to demonstrate its adaptive potential in situations of rapid social change and increasing urbanisation, see Constantinides (1972).

3. Another, in some ways similar, cult called *tumbura* exists in the poorer areas of the towns and appears to involve both men and women with no claim to Arab descent.

4. It is noteworthy that these excursions across the usual boundaries of sexual propriety are sometimes marked by deep sexual suspicion. Men are likely to joke, irreverently, that certain *fekis* much resorted to by women to cure infertility "do the job on the women" by more direct means than the latter's husbands suspect! Men who attend *zaar* rituals regularly are suspected by both men and women of being homosexual, or conversely, may be thought by men to be somewhat too heterosexual, dishonourably gaining access to women by feigning illness.

It is virtually impossible to estimate with any accuracy the proportion of women who are initiated members of the numerous cult groups, but most women, members or not, attend more than one ritual, in some capacity, at some stage of their lives. The number of mature women in the urban and suburban areas who have never attended such a ritual I would reckon to be small to negligible.

Taking the society as a whole, for men the main rituals are those of the life-cycle crises—male circumcision, marriage and death; and the formal religious rituals of Islam and the various religious brotherhoods. The main womens' rituals are similarly those of the life cycle—female circumcision, marriage, birth and death; and the rituals of the *saar* womens' cult. Women do not generally attend the formal group rituals of Islam, but carry out their prayer and worship individually. Their participation in the *saar* cult, however, in many ways parallels men's participation in the religious brotherhoods, and it could be said that the cult groups are in the religious and social life of the women what the brotherhoods are in the religious and social life of the men.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, certain aspects of usage and terminology are the same. Among many similarities of detail I shall mention here only the following: that *saar* cult groups, like the brotherhoods, celebrate the major annual festivals of Islam with sacrifice and the display of standards and flags, often bearing the names of popular saints; that both begin and end their proceedings with long incantations calling for the blessings of God, the Prophet Mohammed, and the saints; that the leader of a brotherhood is entitled *shaikh* and the leader of a *saar* cult group is called *shaikha*; that both are said by their followers to *arif al tariqa* or *arif al sikka*, literally to "know the way", to have access to the mysteries of the supernatural. The *shaikh* of a brotherhood usually passes on, in the male line, his office and the blessing and power, *baraka*, associated with it. While there are several instances of a *saar* leader passing on her office to a female relative, the position is most usually achieved by means of an initial experience of severe illness followed by a period of discipleship to another cult group leader.

In considering the whole ritual life of the northern Sudan it is evident that, in terms of duration, expense, and symbolic elaboration, spirit possession ritual is probably most closely comparable to the ritual surrounding marriage, from which also, as we shall see, some of its terminology is borrowed. In terms of pure drama, it is the most elaborate of all. As both ritual and drama, it draws upon a set of symbols which form a pattern throughout the total ritual of the culture.

5. In Morocco certain religious brotherhoods with ecstatic practices appear to be combined with spirit possession, as in the case of the Hamadsha described by Vincent Crapanzano (see Crapanzano, 1973).

Within the spirit possession cult groups a person suffering from an individual syndrome of physical, emotional or social malaise, becomes incorporated in an elaborate group ritual process, during the course of which she is encouraged to express her reaction to her symptoms in terms of a fairly standardised pattern of symbolic behaviour which has meaning to all the members of the group. I say "fairly standardised" because sometimes dreams, and nearly always trance, form parts of this process. Now these latter might be thought to be experiences whose meaning is highly specific to the individual concerned, but in fact how far is this so? How far can we go in predicting that both the symptoms she expresses, and her dream and trance experiences, will be culturally determined?

In order to come to grips with these and other problems, I shall now describe the typical process whereby a woman becomes a member of a spirit possession cult group.

### Diagnosis of Spirit Possession and the Role of Dreams

The primary basis for recruitment into the group is illness. Illness in this culture is a broad concept, and includes individual symptoms of all the local endemic diseases and a whole range of other organic ailments, as well as behavioural symptoms and a variety of social distresses such as anxiety about conflicts or problems in the home. To give just one example of the latter: a woman who has been worried because a husband or son is out of work, or drinking heavily, will describe herself as "sick". This is quite close to the notion one occasionally hears expressed in our own society: "I worried myself sick over him!" A cult leader will take on most complaints, excluding, however, severe behavioural disorders where the behaviour of the person concerned has become totally socially unacceptable. These are classified as possession by another class of spirits called *jinn*. The word for mad in Arabic is *majnuun*, literally, "*jinn*-possessed". Treatment is given by a male Islamic healer or *feki* and may involve the spirit being beaten, bullied, starved or tricked out of its unfortunate host. Milder behavioural symptoms, those which would probably be termed neurotic in Western cultures, tend more to be ascribed to possession by a *saar* spirit—also referred to by the synonyms *rih al-ahmar* or "red wind" and *dastuur*.<sup>6</sup>

6. The etymology of the terms *saar* and *dastuur* is obscure. Some writers assume the essentially non-Arabic form *saar* to be a corruption of an Arabic term meaning "he visited". Yet others believe the word to be a borrowing from either Amharic or Persian. As it exists in Sudanese Arabic it has no meaning outside its spirit possession context.

With regard to a possible "visit" or "visitation" meaning, it is interesting to note that the word *dastuur* was apparently used in Egypt as a warning cry to a household's womenfolk to conceal themselves when a male visitor approached the threshold.

*Dastuur* also bears the commonplace meaning of "door support" or "door jamb" in the

Whereas the aim is to exorcise *jinn*, *zaar* spirits are merely placated and remain bound to their hosts for life.

Many women consciously link their illness symptoms to remembered antecedent personal crises, and these are overwhelmingly to do with emotional distress at the death of a relative, or with problems of childbirth or fertility, and to a lesser extent with problems of marriage, or with adolescent and pre-adolescent problems such as circumcision and the onset of menstruation.

Indigenous healers tend to treat the total patient. I have been present at several diagnostic sessions, and in all of them the striking fact was that, even in cases of seemingly trivial organic complaints, all aspects of the patient's life were taken as relevant background. Thus for example, one person would volunteer the information that the patient had once had a baby which was still-born, another that she had been divorced twice before, another that she had conflicts with her present husband's mother, and so on.

So, the first criterion is illness, and when I refer to "the patient" I am adapting the Arabic term used, *al-ayana*, literally, "the sick one".

When a new patient consults a cult leader to ascertain whether or not she is spirit possessed, the diagnostic procedure may take one of two forms. Either the patient herself may act as a medium for the spirits which express through her their demands, or the cult leader, after what are said to be spirit-inspired dreams, or meditation, will convey to the patient what the spirit requires to cease troubling her. In the initial interview the attempt is always to encourage the patient herself to express the wishes of her invading spirits. What usually happens is that after some preliminary attendance at spirit possession rituals, after the urging and recommendation of her female kin and neighbours, and possibly after trying other available types of diagnosis and treatment, the patient, or her kin acting on her behalf, will arrange a formal consultation with a cult leader.

After taking the hand of the patient, calling down the blessings of God, and uttering soothing reassurances, the cult leader will then proceed to administer, one after another, the different blends of incense particular to each classificatory group of *zaar* spirits. This may or may not be accompanied by rhythmic drumming.

Any person may be possessed by a multitude of different spirits, but there are always a few who are considered to be the principal possessing agents, and it is to these that a patient will dedicate a ritual. These principal

Sudan, and this ties in with much of the liminal terminology used in the spirit possession songs, which include much reference to doorkeepers, thresholds, doorways and so on.

In the Sudan no conscious conceptual link with the similar Arabic term *dustuur*, meaning "constitution" (in a governmental sense) is made, but it is interesting to note that a similar cult in Somalia bears the name *mingis*, an Ethiopian term meaning government.

spirits are said to be those which reveal themselves first in the diagnostic session. Others may manifest themselves during the course of the patient's first ritual, or at later stages in her possession history. As the cult leader administers the different types of incense, the patient may go into or assume a state of trance and begin to tremble and to groan or weep. This indicates that the first spirit has, as they say, "descended". The cult leader begins to question it: "who are you?"; "tell us your name?"; "what do you require?"; "why are you troubling this woman?"; and so on. The patient answers in a "spirit voice", or by miming gestures interpreted by the cult leader, as the spirit indicates its requirements. These are usually stereotyped—a standardised spirit costume and the mounting of a ritual and sacrifice in its honour.

The cult leader begins to bargain with the spirit manifested in the patient: "take this illness from her and we will make a ritual for you and bring you all that you require". Relatives of the patient, usually visibly impressed by this point, add their assurances that they will provide everything possible.

The appearance of the first spirit marks the diagnostic breakthrough. After that several other spirits may reveal themselves one by one as their particular incense is administered. The first spirit, it is said, "stands locking up the door". After it reveals itself and receives promises that its demands will be met, then any other invasive spirits within the patient may also express their own particular characters and demands.

It is important to note that in general it is rare for a previously unknown spirit to reveal itself during these early sessions. The patient-medium is operating within a choice range of well-known spirit forms whose characteristics and demands are fairly uniformly conceptualised. As I said earlier, there are very few women who have never been to a spirit possession ritual. Most have some contact with, or knowledge of, cult groups. Many have been familiar with the spirits from their early childhood, having been taken along as infants and small children by their mothers to rituals, and later imitating the dances and costumes of the participants in their play. They may be directly under a cult leader's influence as her kinswoman or neighbour. Moreover it is not unusual for an ill patient to spend several days or weeks at a cult leader's house before undergoing formal diagnosis, thereby being fully exposed to a *zaar* atmosphere and to the ideas and suggestions of the cult leader and her colleagues.

The accuracy and success of this diagnosis by means of incense is measured by the degree of recovery of the patient, and to this extent the proceedings are highly pragmatic. Either immediately, or within a reasonable time afterwards, she should feel some relief from her symptoms. This is taken as a sign that the spirits are prepared to keep their side of the bargain and that she must start making preparations to keep hers. This is

why to call the actual ritual itself curative, is to some extent misleading. The "cure" may have taken place earlier, and a perfectly healthy and contented woman who sponsors a ritual is seen as merely fulfilling her vow to the spirits.

But sometimes the administering of the incense does not evoke a response from the patient, and she does not straight away become the medium for her intrusive spirits, even though general consensus insists that she is spirit possessed. When this happens the cult leader acts alone in a further diagnostic procedure.

The patient or her relatives bring to the cult leader a garment or cloth worn close to the patient which has her bodily smell upon it. The cult leader sprinkles perfume on it and holds it over an incense burner, before putting it beneath her head when she sleeps at night. She may wrap in it other objects, brought as gifts by the patient, such as palm leaves, perfumes and sweets, which are referred to as "keys of dreams". Before the cult leader sleeps she concentrates her thoughts upon the patient. If she has no dreams that night, she will tell the patient that there is no spirit possession involved. More often, not surprisingly, she says that she has dreamt of the spirits and their requests, and she instructs the patient accordingly.

Dreams, and their interpretations, play an important part in the *zaar* cult. Strange or unpleasant dreams, especially those involving unknown or foreign persons, will often be the factor that stimulates a woman who is unwell to seek a diagnosis in terms of spirit possession. They may also serve to confirm in the patient's mind the accuracy of a diagnosis already made.

These dreams, at least as they are remembered and told, are often remarkably clear in their reference, both to the dreamer and to anyone familiar with the culture. One example will have to suffice here:

This concerns a married woman now in her thirties. Like the majority of women of her age group and rural origin, she has had no formal education. She has been married for sixteen years to a father's brother's son (the preferred form of marriage) and the marriage has been affectionate and stable despite the fact that the couple are childless. Out of regard for his wife, and for their close links of kinship, the husband has resisted suggestions that he take another wife to bear him children.

At the time in question the woman had been married for five years. Her husband had gone abroad to study for a period of some years, returning only in the vacations, and had left her in the care of a group of kin living in a town far from her natal village. While there she started to suffer from continual headaches and dizziness. She began to have vivid dreams, and one particularly stimulated her to have recourse to a spirit possession cult

leader. She dreamt that she was ill, sitting on a chair, and unable to speak. An uncle of hers, a religious leader and a strict orthodox Muslim, opposed to spirit possession practices, appeared in the dream carrying a ram and saying it must be slain and she must be given its blood to drink, whereupon she says, she awoke feeling a heavy pressure in her chest and back and began to spit blood.

Now here we have a girl who has been feeling wretched and unwell. Her childlessness after five years of marriage makes her an object either of curiosity, not necessarily charitable, or of pity to her fellow women. Her husband is not there to boost her status by demonstrating loyalty to her as a wife, and she is away from the protection of her natal family. The move from a village, where she can claim some tie of kinship with most of the inhabitants, to a town largely composed of strangers, has undoubtedly restricted her social range and freedom, controlled as these are by the moral obligations of Islam. Furthermore, her husband's absence ensures that there is no immediately foreseeable chance of alleviating her central problem of childlessness.

In her dream she is sitting on a chair, speechless and therefore unable to express the nature of her illness. The "chair" refers directly to *zaar* spirits. The tray of offerings made to the spirits is called their "chair". During the course of spirit ritual the spirits are believed to come down and stay on their "chair". They are also said to "descend" onto the patient and "sit on her", so that she herself in a sense becomes a spirit "chair". A ram sacrificed in the course of a ritual as a specific patient-substitute, is first sat upon, and sometimes rode around the room, by the patient when she is in a state of trance and has the spirit within her. The ram patient as an offering is also then a "chair" for the patient spirit.

In this dream a strict uncle, who was in fact opposing her interest in the possession cult, now insists that this is the only way she can be cured. The sacrifice of a ram and annointment with its blood is the climax of a spirit possession ritual. In earlier times the blood was also drunk, and this has been one of the principal objections to the cult made by local Islamic leaders. So in this dream the uncle is not merely neutralised but transformed, and his religious authority is used to encourage his niece's participation in the cult.

Sometimes it is not the patients themselves who dream of the spirits, but their relatives. Kin who are already part of a spirit possession circle particularly, use the evidence of their dreams as a mechanism for recruiting their kinswomen to their cult group. Men sometimes dream of the spirits, and their dreams, or the interpretation of them by their womenfolk, have been known by their own testimony to force reluctant fathers, brothers and husbands to finance the ritual for which their women have been asking.

It is interpretation which counts in channelling an individual's dream processes along the culturally possible courses. For example, if a dream is by no means as clear as the one above, and the dreamer is already, shall we say, spirit-prone, she will go to a cult group leader who will draw, like the psychoanalyst, on a specialised store of esoteric knowledge to give an interpretation in terms of the dogma of the cult.

Dreams may be the means for the genesis of new spirits, or at least for the appearance of ones said to be previously unknown, since in theory all the spirits are supposed to have existed from ancient times. However, it is admitted that sometimes either a cult leader or a patient may dream of a new spirit form which they do not recognise—sometimes the wife or lover of an existing spirit. This spirit will teach them in the dream the song and drumming style it requires, and will convey its particular demands as far as costume is concerned.

It is not very easy to get a new spirit established. One has to persuade the cult leader and the others of the group of the validity of the dream apparition. One has to be able to describe in detail tangible characteristics and demands of the spirit, and to be able to provide a distinctive song and drumming rhythm. The song and costume may be tried out at a ritual sponsored by the innovator, but this is still a long way from its gaining general credence and acceptability, so that others begin to be possessed by the same spirit. What seems to happen much more frequently is that old spirits become slowly endowed with additional characteristics and demands, or with greater sophistications of costume. Thus Hakiim Baasha, a long established doctor spirit, now has two manifestations. One is a Turkish doctor wearing the costume of the Turko-Egyptian period of rule in the Sudan (1821-1880). Another has a modern medical uniform—long white coat, pocket pencil and stethoscope.

Working alongside the innovative and imaginative tendencies of individuals within the cult groups is the overall tendency to conservatism in belief of the group as a whole. Rituals should be performed in the "correct" manner if they are to have the desired beneficial effect. The trend therefore is for pre-ritual discussions between the patient, the cult leader, and other devotees, to attempt to reach a concensus on what is the correct and proper way to please a particular spirit or spirits. These decisions are drawn from a common pool of existing ritual knowledge. It is the well-known pattern whereby what was, in its early history, undoubtedly an innovative cult (see Constantinides, 1972, *ibid.*), gradually becomes more and more establishment, particularly when it models itself on existing religious institutions, as this cult has in many ways modelled itself upon the various mystical religious brotherhoods.

But a survey of the cult since the years of its introduction to the Sudan

shows that new spirits, and hence new segments of ritual action, have been introduced from time to time in the cult's history, and gained general credence. This appears to happen when an individual's notions strike a chord of recognition in the wider group of which she is a part, and where the expression of private sentiments coincides with a cultural readiness to accept symbolic expression of that sentiment.

### Spirits of Sickness

Let us now look more closely at the nature and characteristics of these *saar* spirits.

The dogma of the cult has it that there are seven groups of spirits and seven blends of incense, one for each group. However, this appears merely to be one of several devices for incorporating the cult within the overall belief system of popular Islam, the number seven having some prominence in Muslim theology and hence considerable mystical value. In fact, although the spirits are classified into groups, the classification is fairly flexible and varies slightly from one cult leader to another. There are usually more than seven groups, and the individual spirits whose classification is not clear-cut may be differently assigned according to the notions of individual leaders.

The main groups distinguishable are:

- The Holy Men—a collection of Muslim saints, teachers, founders of religious brotherhoods, and pilgrims.
- The Ethiopians—purportedly an ethnic group: it includes both anthropomorphic spirits such as "The Little Ruler of the Ethiopians", and the spirits of places and things associated with Ethiopia.
- The Pashas—spirits of early government administrators and doctors, several distinguishable as historical figures, others apparently cultural stereotypes.
- The Arabs—spirits of the nomadic desert tribes of the Sudan.
- The Europeans or Christians—this group includes the spirits of Jews, Copts, Greeks, Armenians, French and British. General Gordon of Khartoum is there, and so is Lord Cromer, as well as the spirit "Electricity". The Europeans are known particularly for their excessive fondness for alcoholic beverages.
- The Ladies or Daughters—an ethnically mixed group, including the daughters of all the above mentioned categories. The daughters of the Holy Men especially, typify a sort of ideal womanhood.
- The Blacks—this includes spirits of all the peoples and areas from which the northern Sudanese have in the past obtained slaves, as well as the peoples of the Western Sudanic regions.
- The Fellata—Muslim West Africans begging their way on pilgrimage to Mecca. Some of these may be alternatively classed as Holy Men, or as Blacks.

The Grandmothers—the spirits of old women, sometimes included with the Ladies, or some of them with the Blacks.

The Tumburawi—spirits from the previously mentioned Tumbura cult. This is a small group of spirits thought to be particularly savage in their effects, and may include spirits of animals, such as the crocodile, as well as the spirit of death and the graveyard.

There does not appear to be any marked status association in being possessed by one type of spirit rather than another, whatever the prestige of the ethnic category it represents, and the degree of significance of the possession lies rather in the severity of the illness inflicted. Certain individual spirits from a variety of groups are, however, more popular in terms of frequency of occurrence than others. Cult participants are normally possessed by more than one spirit, and it is not unusual for a person to have one or more from each of the groups.

Taken as a whole, the classification provides a fairly consistent view of all the cultural influences which have penetrated the Sudan from without, especially during the last one hundred years or more, and in this sense can very much be viewed as the spirits of social change.

When we come down, however, to the level of the individual spirits, we find remarkably little elaboration of character. Though each has a song and drumming sequence particular to its name, and a colour and costume association by which it can be recognised, these are usually little more than variations on a highly stereotyped theme. Cult members are much less interested in the nature and character of the spirits *per se* than they are in how any individual spirit is affecting them, or their close friends or kin. Spirit demands are worried over simply to “get it right” so that the ritual will be efficacious. In other words the spirits stand for, or symbolise, something else.

While in one sense, then, the spirits represent a panorama of the recent historical past, if we look closely at the ritual addressed to them, we find throughout the symbolic expression of timeless realities—fertility, life and death, and the individual's fears, failings and inadequacies in the face of these.

Now before I give a gloss on the ritual, I must make it clear that, as is so often the anthropologist's experience, the participants themselves are not interested in problems of meaning. They simply do not think about the ritual in these terms. Questions about meaning are meaningless questions, and tend merely to draw forth in answer re-descriptions of actions.

I remember vividly on one occasion being made to feel rather like a dim pupil hauled before the class for consistently failing to perceive the internal beauty and logic of some self-evident mathematical formula. I was attending the ritual of a cult leader whom I knew well, and had in the intervals

been persistently pressing her about the meaning of what I was seeing. Finally she threw up her hands in exasperation, turned, and announced to the whole assembly “time and time again we tell her, and still she doesn't understand!” However, she then proceeded to give me nothing more than a blow by blow re-description of all that had just taken place, finishing “and we do this because this is what the spirits want!” Cf. Wittgenstein: “don't ask for the meaning—look and see!”

So my answer was clear. The meaning lay within the action. The hypothesis then must be that the participants do not find it necessary, or perhaps even possible, to express the meaning explicitly, because it is self-evident at some level, conscious or unconscious, to members of the culture. This necessitates looking at the other, equally unexplained, rituals of the culture and drawing comparisons.

But firstly a brief outline of a typical *saar* ritual held for the benefit of an individual patient.<sup>7</sup>

### Possession Ritual

This will take place either in the patient's home, or at the house of the cult group leader. It lasts from one to seven days and involves considerable expenditure in relation to income. It is attended each day by, on average, thirty to one hundred women, according to the wealth and status of the main participants. Some of those attending are the patient's own female kin, affines, neighbours and friends; some of the others, followers of the cult leader and invited by her. The patient is referred to as “the sick one” or, alternatively as “the bride”. When not dancing or in a state of trance she should maintain the modest and downcast expression of a bride. She is also dressed as a bride with red *henna* dye applied to her hands and feet, a new dress and as much gold finery as she can muster, and a new white outer garment, the all-enveloping, sari-like *tobe*. The clothes should be new and clean because, as the cult leaders say, “as the ritual cleanses one of illness, so one should be clean and have clean things”. She must remain in these clothes, apart from costume changes, throughout the length of the ritual. She must sleep alone in a special room designated for the ritual, and which contains all the ritual objects and offerings, and she is secluded from contact with the men of the household, especially from any sexual contact with the husband. A woman who breaks the ban about male visitors, even for adolescent sons, will be admonished “do you want to lose your health for the sight of men!”

7. This very generalised description is based on the thirty-six rituals, given at different times by a total of eight different cult leaders, which in whole or in part I attended.

The patient will have spent a great amount of time and effort in preparing a series of costumes for the different spirits possessing her, a tray or "chair" of offerings, and a ram and goat to be sacrificed. The money for all this, as well as for the cult leaders fees, will normally be provided by a woman's husband, or by her close male kin—father, brothers or son. The head of a household should provide for the ritual needs of those former slaves who still work there as servants. Some women are able to finance themselves with the proceeds from inherited property, or from goods produced by them in the home, such as clothing and special foodstuffs, and sold to other women. If a woman is very poor a cult leader will often treat her and lend her the appropriate costumes, in return for general domestic services.

After the patient and gathering have been liberally applied with incense, especially at the bodily orifices, the points of entry and exit for the spirits, the drumming of a whole series of spirit songs will begin. This is called "pulling the threads". The spirits are referred to as threads and the drumming is said to pull them to "descend" into those who "have", that is, are possessed by, them. These latter are then also referred to as "descending" as they enter into a state of trance and become the spirit. Here is a cult leader's description of the process:

the odour of the incense is smelt by the spirits, and it draws their attention to the person who is applying it. And the song calls them as I would call you—"Hey! Come here!" Group by group they come, like people, into the room and into the people. And when the farewell is drummed they leave. The thread descends into people. Into some it goes quickly and others slowly. When the spirit descends into a person's body, they do things that they could never normally do.

Although the main focus of attention is on the patient, anyone fully initiated into the cult, who has given her own ritual, may rise to dance. Habituees arrive with hold-alls packed with their own spirit costumes, and will don them at the music appropriate to their own possessing spirits. During the course of the dancing several women may achieve, or assume, a state of dissociation, the drumming, incense, rhythmic bodily jerking, and over-breathing, all being employed as techniques. Trance allows for considerable bodily and emotional abandon. The same women whose culture normally demands of them sedate, restrained behaviour, may weep, tremble, rage, shriek, yelp, beat themselves violently against the ground, smoke and drink openly, or strut about arrogantly. However, this abandon occurs in remarkably controlled circumstances. Different states of bodily abandon are suitable to different groups of spirits. Even in trance, a woman possessed by the spirit of a Muslim saint would be expected to act in a dignified

manner appropriate to the saint. She would not, for example, display the violence and self-abuse suitable only to the spirits of the Blacks. If sometimes individuals behave inappropriately to the spirit in question, they are pulled up sharply by the cult leader and publicly chastised. So the apparent abandon is in fact carefully controlled and not necessarily spontaneous.

The drumming and dancing continues for several days and is punctuated by certain ritual highlights. Of these I will describe here only the most important, the sacrifice. This forms the dramatic and ritual climax of a whole sequence of symbolic actions. Any ritual of three days or more normally involves the sacrifice of two animals—a black male goat and a white or reddish-brown male sheep, depending on the colour association of the class of spirits predominating in the patient.

The word for slaughter may be used in referring to the sacrifice, but the most common word used is *karaama* or thanksgiving. This is a word used at life-cycle rituals, for sacrifices made at the principal Muslim festivals, and also for the occasion when a sheep is killed to provide food for guests who come to congratulate a person after they have recovered from some form of illness, or made good some misfortune. The word is often used to describe the *saar* ritual itself, indicating the focal nature of the sacrifice. Thus a woman, when asked how many spirit rituals she has given, will reply for example, "I have made *karaama* three times".

On the day before the sacrifice an assistant carefully washes down the animals and applies red *henna* dye in a line from the head to the tail along the spine, and then at right angles across the body, leaving a cross-shaped red stain.

At the time of the sacrifice the animals are led into the centre of the dancing area. They are covered with cloths, white for a white sheep, red for a reddish one, and fumigated with incense. If the goat is to be sacrificed at the same time it is covered with a black cloth and placed side by side with the sheep. The patient, dressed in the appropriate spirit costume, sits or rests briefly upon the sheep, and is then prepared to go in procession around the animals. An assistant leads the procession, bearing aloft the incense burner. Behind her comes the patient, and any others who have themselves already made a sacrifice to the spirits. They carry lighted candles as they go around. Dates, nuts and cereals may be tossed to the assembly during the course of the procession.

At first the patient wears white as the drumming and chanting invokes God, the Prophet Mohammed, and the Holy Men. She may then change into red. Soon the rhythm of the drumming increases and the patient and others in the procession may go into trance. The whole sequence may go on for up to half an hour as spirit after spirit is invoked. The attention of all the spirits must be drawn, lest any feel "jealous" at being left out and



inflict further illness on the patient. As one cult leader put it: "All the threads are to come. All of them are to be called from different directions, and all hear it. So that one spirit would not say it had not seen the sacrifice. All of them are invited, threads after threads, so that no one of them would say 'I have not seen the sacrifice'."

Finally, with the patient in a state of trance, the animals are led into the courtyard and all follow after. A large canopy is made from white cloth; beneath it stand the patient and the sacrificial sheep. The animal's throat is slit and some of the fresh blood that spurts out is quickly caught in a bowl by the assistant. Perfumes are added to the blood. The patient then steps or jumps over either the stream of blood or the body of the slaughtered animal seven times. The cult leader then proceeds to anoint the patient with the blood on her forehead, temples, hair parting, base of the neck, armpits, belly, hands and feet, paying particular attention to any part that aches or has been a seat of illness. New spirit costumes are marked with a spot of blood "so that the spirits will recognise them". A red handkerchief may be anointed with blood and tied about the patient's right wrist as a sign to the spirits that the patient has made a sacrifice. The patient is also given the blood-stained knife of the sacrifice to grasp in her right hand. Both knife and handkerchief will stay with her until the final riverside purification ritual.

Parts of the sheep are served as food to all the guests. Its head is kept aside and roasted or boiled in preparation for a further ritual sequence called the "Opening of the Head".

This takes place on the day following the sacrifice of the sheep. During a break in the dancing the cooked head of the sheep is placed, mouth pointing upwards, on a round tray, together with the four hooves, and brought before the cult leader. The whole assembly is ordered to observe silence. The cult leader administers incense to the patient and then she and three assistants ritually cleanse their hands in the incense smoke. Each takes a corner of the tray and they lift it seven times from the ground, and then lower it seven times onto the head of the seated patient. While the assistants continue to hold the tray in that position, the cult leader takes both jaws of the sheep firmly in her hands and forces them open. The tray is again lifted seven times from the patient's head, and she is then fed parts of the meat of the head, especially what are known as the sensitive parts, those where the essential being of a creature is thought to reside—the eyes, ears, brain and tongue. The cleaned skull of the sheep, together with its hooves, are kept aside to be thrown into the river.

The grand finale of this curative ritual is marked by a symbolic purification with water—where I worked, the waters of the river Nile.

Throughout the preceding days remnants from the various ritual

sequences have been stored in a large rush basket. These include the head and hoof bones of the sacrificial sheep, the head, hooves and intestines of the goat, dates, peanuts, sweets, a handful of the mixed cereal grains used in the course of the ritual, candle ends, perfumed oils, *henna* dye, and the blood-stained dishes. This rather malodorous collection stays in the room with the patient.

On the day following the last day of the ritual the cult leader and her assistants call at the patient's house for the final riverside sequence. The patient is still secluded in the spirit room in her blood-stained clothing, attended by her close female kin. The household will have hired a market bus, or taxis, to take the patient, the cult leader, and a small group of assistants and kin to the river bank, together with the basket of remains. On the way to the river the patient still clutches the blood-stained sacrificial knife in her right hand.

On arrival at the river bank, cult leader and patient stand in the water at the edge. The cult leader may throw handfuls of cereal grains towards the land and the water. Leader and patient then raise their hands in a salutation to the female spirits believed to reside in rivers. The contents of the basket are then hurled into the river, the assistants having taken the knife and bowls of caked blood which they proceed to wash in the river water.

Cult leader and patient wash their hands and faces in the river water. The leader then removes the red handkerchief from the patient's right wrist and washes it, after which she splashes handfuls of water into the faces of all those attending the ceremony. This marks the occasion for general rejoicing and merriment and the trip back from the river is rather a joyful affair.

Once back at the house, the patient is told that she may now go and wash and change into clean clothing, and perfume herself. The matting is rolled up from the floor and the patient may now sleep on a normal bed, though she is still secluded for a further number of days equal to the number of days of the ritual itself, and should continue not to see her husband during this time.

### Context and Meaning

I will now attempt to elucidate some of the symbolism used in these spirit possession rituals. In spite of the paucity of indigenous exegesis, it is obvious that the symbolism *is* meaningful to those taking part. In ritual action and preparation, in discussion, in the interpretation of dreams thought to be spirit-inspired, both cult and non-cult participants draw on a common pool of symbolic expression. Victor Turner (1968, p. 7) says: "Even

when symbols are not explained in linguistic terms, they tend to appear in contexts which, to a person reared in the appropriate culture, abundantly elucidate them". So let us now turn to the wider culture of our spirit possessed women for insight.

Both men and women of the Muslim northern Sudan regard the reproductive power of women as their most important attribute, and most of the rituals of the life-cycle are to do with control, socialisation and protection of this power. Before puberty, usually between the ages of five and nine, young girls undergo so-called Pharaonic circumcision, which involves cutting away the external genitalia and sealing together the scar tissue to leave one small orifice for the passage of menses and urine, and later of course, though it may have to be incised for this, for sexual intercourse.

Without this operation it is said that young girls would become wild and disorderly. It marks the beginning of the girl's social maturity, her transition from being a young animal free to roam and play with all her age mates regardless of sex, to being a responsible member of society, adhering to the mores and modesty required of members of her sex. The circumcised girl will now be increasingly restricted to association with female kin, she is expected to assist in and master all the jobs culturally appropriate to women, and will begin to cover her head and shoulders.

The circumcision is thought to ensure her good behaviour sexually, and to ensure that the sexual passions of women, often otherwise thought of as urgent and uncontrollable, are kept in order. It is supposed to guarantee her virginity on first marriage. Not to be a virgin when she first marries is totally unthinkable. So the girl's potential fertility, bounded and controlled by circumcision, is given over to the husband at marriage, so that through her he may perpetuate his lineage. The genital orifice has to be cut open to allow the birth of a child, and the circumcision is subsequently re-rendered and the woman re-presented as a "bride" to her spouse.

The overall ideal to which a northern Sudanese woman aspires, if I may be allowed to generalise very broadly here, is a marriage suitable to the status of her lineage, a household of her own which she is given free reign to manage, the exclusive affectionate and economic attentions of her spouse, and the demonstration of her fertility in the birth of many children, especially sons. Through all these she gains enhanced status, security in marriage, and ultimately a considerable degree of authority over her fellow women as the recognised "grandmother" of a lineage section. But many things may threaten the achievement of this ideal: her own physical illness or infertility; her personal and emotional inadequacy in the face of what is socially required of her; conflict with the other women among whom she must live and work; death of the close relatives who support or promote her interests; inadequacies in her spouse; the possibility of his taking another

wife, or divorcing her, and so on. All these find expression as symptoms of sickness, and seek relief, in spirit possession.

Against this background then, we may take as our starting point in the interpretation of spirit possession ritual, its pervasive marital symbolism.

The patient is called a "bride of the *saar*", though there is no accompanying notion of her actually marrying the spirit.<sup>8</sup> She is carefully groomed and perfumed as a bride; her hands and feet are stained with the red *henna* dye of a bride; she is dressed in fine new clothing and wears gold ornament and a new white *tobe*; she is bound with a red cloth; a sheep is sacrificed for her; and she is purified at the river.

Now there are other occasions in the course of a woman's life when she is called a "bride" and is similarly adorned and treated, with a sacrifice made for her and a very similar riverside purification held. This happens at circumcision (or did before this was made illegal and its practices became more secretive and restricted), first marriage, and after the birth of each child.

In fact nearly all the main symbolic themes present in spirit possession prove on examination to be recurring themes throughout the total ritual of the female life cycle.

A great many of them have to do with protection from the forces of evil believed to be ever present and menacing, but especially at these life-crisis danger points, when the principal actors are on display and are open to the malevolent envy of both man and spirit. Some are expressive of the condition of the person. Yet others are generalised symbols of life, fertility and regeneration.

Let us take for example the use of the colour red. The *saar* spirits themselves are, as a class, said to be "red winds". Red is thought of as a hot colour, and the spirits are also described as "hot" and as "heating" people. The blood association of the colour is obvious. The spirits are counted responsible for many ailments classified under the indigenous system as "diseases of the blood". As recipients of the sacrifice they are called "the owners of the blood". The Ethiopian spirits who are all associated with the colour red, are said to be especially "hot" and to "bring bleeding". The popular sub-group of Ethiopian female prostitute spirits are often held responsible for either excessive or non-existent menstrual bleeding and by association for all sorts of genito-urinary ailments and problems of fertility. Blood and fertility and therefore red and fertility are closely linked in the total social and ritual system. A woman bleeds at circumcision, the circumcised woman bleeds at first sexual intercourse and at childbirth. Regular

8. My frequent enquiries as to whether the patient was actually marrying the spirit were scorned as quite absurd. "How?" I was asked by one cult leader. "Can she marry *al-Tomsa* (a crocodile spirit) or *Waldi Youra* (a child spirit) or *Muna* (a female spirit)? Of course not! She is called a bride because she is like a bride."

monthly bleeding is overtly recognised as a sign of on-going fertility. As against this socially desirable, socially controlled situation, we have the threat posed by the irregular bleeding/uncontrolled sexuality/prostitution association of the female Ethiopian spirits.

Red is also a colour which indicates "importance" and status within the culture. In the Turko-Egyptian Sudan, the presentation of a red gown of honour and a red fez, such as are now required by the Ethiopian spirits, marked acknowledgement of the power and authority of the recipient. So we have the series of associations red/blood/fertility/importance/status.

For both men and women status is both ascribed and achieved. In part it is derived from the standing of the lineage into which one is born, and in part from the lineage which one creates through marriage and the birth of children. Although individually a man may achieve some degree of recognition for his religious piety, knowledge, military or political prowess, economic skills, or a combination of all these<sup>9</sup> to maintain the reputation thus gained he needs sons who will support him in his endeavours and carry on his line, and daughters with whose co-operation he can create alliances through marriage.

The achieved aspect of a woman's status, at least until recent years, is derived only through full exercise of her reproductive powers in socially appropriate circumstances, preferably in the context of a stable and on-going marriage with a man of equivalent ascribed lineage status. So, fundamental to a woman's aspirations, as indeed to a man's, are first of all her own health and fertility, and the health, fertility and potency of her spouse. Moreover, she needs to be able to exercise considerable social skills in securing and marshalling support for her goals, and in controlling and containing conflict which may threaten them. In part she will obtain this support from her husband and male kin, and indeed their willingness to bear the financial burdens of a *saar* ritual is public affirmation of her importance to them. But we must not forget that this is a sexually segregated society, and that the constant day-to-day contact of any woman is with her female peer-group. It is her fellow women among whom she competes for, and displays, status, with whom she is in potential conflict, and among whom she seeks her strongest supporters. And when a point of crisis is reached in a woman's life, its definition in terms of *saar* spirit possession demands that all the women with whom she is in contact—kin, affines, neighbours, servants and patrons, allies and enemies—join together in a series of ritual actions stating symbolically their unified desire for the restoration of her wellbeing.

The red/blood theme is of crucial importance at the sacrificial stage of

9. See Barclay (1964, p. 135) for factors influencing achieved status in a modern suburban Sudanese village.

the spirit possession ritual. The release of the blood of the sacrificial animal is considered as the first and most important step to health and well-being for the patient, and this is readily symbolised by her stepping or jumping seven times over either the body of the sheep or the blood. The sheep is alternatively viewed as an obstacle in the patient's path from illness to normality over which she can now step, or as a repository of the illness itself, a patient substitute, and in leaping over it she leaps away from the illness. The sheep is, as it were, a scape-goat! This is made quite explicit in such formulae as "the soul of this sheep is given up for your peace" or "you owners of the blood, this soul is sacrificed for you", which the cult leader utters as she anoints the patient with the fresh blood. A further sign to the spirits that a sacrifice has been made to them is the red handkerchief which is dipped in the blood of the sacrifice and then worn upon the right wrist until the final ritual and curative stage of the purification at the river. At the same time that this is washed in the river, the remains of the sacrificial animal are hurled into the water. This was specifically compared by one cult leader to the throwing into the river of the afterbirth which used to take place at the ritual following the delivery of a baby. "The river takes the afterbirth and leaves us the child." The implication is of course that the river takes the remains of the sheep and a cured patient is restored to her proper place in society.

The two other pervasive colour themes of the spirit possession ritual are black and white.<sup>10</sup> As we have seen, black is the colour associated with the group of spirits who induce violent and uncontrolled behaviour. Throughout the culture black is seen as an undesirable colour. It is associated with sorcery and the evil eye, with severe illness leading to death, and with madness. Spirits which bring madness and fatal disease are classified as black spirits. Black is contrasted to white in belief and popular expression. Devils are black. God is white. White indicates divine blessing and purity, a state of grace. The spirit holy men, as also their real-life counterparts, wear white and are expected to act with dignity and control. White is the colour of mourning because it signifies spiritual re-birth, as against earthly birth, the colour association of which is red.

So we have a whole series of contrasts: black is to white as the devil is to God, as evil is to blessedness, as violence is to calm and dignity, as disorder is to order.

I would suggest red as an intermediate colour between black and white, as indeed it seems to mediate between them in spirit ritual and sacrifice.

10. Possible significances of the almost universal ritual usage of the colour triad red/white/black have been postulated by Victor Turner (1967, p. 81 ff.). Many of the colour meanings prevalent in Sudanese ritual are directly comparable to their associations in Ndembu ritual (ibid., pp. 69-71).

God, the Prophet Mohammed and the saints, association white, bring a state of blessedness, wellbeing and order. Red spirits bring cureable illness and milder forms of behavioural disorder. Black spirits bring severe behavioural disorder and death. Red, I would suggest, can go either way. We have already seen that it can be associated either with irregular bleeding/uncontrolled sexuality/low status, or with regular bleeding/controlled sexuality/high status. A person who is ill because she is under attack from the red *zaar* spirits is in a ritually dangerous liminal position. If she ignores warnings and refuses to placate the spirits in ritual, it is believed that she will get progressively worse, possibly even mad or fatally ill. A correctly carried out *zaar* ritual however, is designed to restore her to a state of white/blessedness/and order.

The ambiguities of the red/blood/fertility association is recognised in women's discussion of their gynaecological ailments. Regular menstruation indicates on-going fertility, but also the absence of conception. Cessation of the menstrual flow may indicate pregnancy, or the *absence* of fertility.

### Conclusion

It will have become obvious to those acquainted with the literature on spirit possession that in emphasising same sex support, conflict and competition, and in de-emphasising cross-sexual hostility, I am approaching the sort of analysis advocated by Wilson (1967, pp. 366-78). He argues that "the social epidemiology of possession . . . suggests that by far the greatest proportion of persons involved have some sort of ambiguous status identity . . ." (ibid., p. 375) and that "spirit possession and similar states seem more closely correlated with social situations which regularly, though not necessarily, give rise to conflict, competition, tension, rivalry or jealousy between members of the *same* sex rather than between members of opposite sexes" (ibid., p. 366). However, it *is* only a matter of emphasis, and should not perhaps be taken too far.

In the sexually segregated society that exists in the Muslim northern Sudan, particularly in its urban and suburban areas, cross-sexual hostility does of course exist, and men may frequently be held responsible for thwarting the aspirations of women, and vice versa. The fact that the symbiotic relationship between the sexes is the recognised basis for society, does not stop each sex holding negative as well as positive stereotypes of the other, nor does it prevent each sex from attempting to manipulate the other to its own advantage.

My point is merely that, on the whole, women do not tend to evaluate themselves *vis à vis* men, but rather in relation to other women. They live in an enclosed and feminine world, with very much its own cosmology,

where men are indeed necessary, and frequently manipulated to serve the goals of women, but tend to be peripheral to their day to day concerns.

Women associate principally with, and are interested principally in, women. They see their main claims to status and security as resting in their re-productive power, fundamental to society, which, though it can only be given expression in properly sanctioned relationships with men, is unique to their sex. In this context it is highly significant that all the ritual designed to control, transfer and protect this power, is very largely in the hands of women. It is they who organise and supervise all the ritual trappings surrounding circumcision, marriage and birth, usually against a background of bitter complaints by the men about female extortion, as they pay out heavily to get their daughters and wives through each ritual stage. Similar male complaints are levelled against the restorative ritual of the spirit possession cult, also overwhelmingly organised and run by women. It is noteworthy that the only two full-time professions dominated by women in the traditional society are those of circumciser/midwife and *zaar* cult group leader.

So really I am suggesting that through spirit possession cults women who, for internal or external, physical or emotional reasons, are not adequately approximating to their culturally defined potential, express the nature of their problems through the symbolic behaviour of the cult's activities.<sup>11</sup> But it seems to me that the cult ritual achieves more than this, that it is, to use the established terms, both expressive and instrumental. It not only allows the individual to express, *vide* Douglas (1973, *ibid.*), the nature of his social reality and, *vide* Lewis (1966, *ibid.*), what is wrong with that reality, but also promises that things will get better, that problems will be overcome.

Cult ritual requires the individual members of a woman's social network to participate together in a standardised but dramatic enactment both of her own, and of each others, problems, inadequacies and anxieties. The atmosphere of mutual support and confession, the symbolic assurances of a better life to follow, the very nature and scope of the hospitality offered at the ritual, all allow for definition or re-definition of the status of the patient.

To summarise very briefly: the evidence of the cult groups which I have studied seems to me to support the far from novel hypothesis that individuals' attitudes, sentiments, needs and also stresses, are to a considerable extent shaped by the culture into which these individuals are born, and that therefore reaction to stress, although in one sense highly

11. Among the external factors impinging upon the women I would of course include social change and contact with other ethnic groups with different value systems, as symbolised in the very nature of the possessing spirits themselves.

individual, is bounded and given form by the sentiments of the culture which have been internalised in the individual since infancy. The particular material presented here attempts to demonstrate some of the mechanisms through which these individual attitudes, sentiments, needs and stress reactions, are capable of finding expression in culturally appropriate symbols through the group rituals of spirit possession. At the same time, it seeks to demonstrate that the fact that those rituals are largely ego-centred allows for a certain degree of adaptive exchange whereby the individual can subtly adjust his position in relation to the instruments of social pressure.

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## 5 | The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou

*Serge Larose*

To Haitians, Vodou denotes the whole range of beliefs and superstitions held by the peasantry in its dealings with the supernatural. However, among the peasants themselves, it has a much more precise meaning: it designates a specific ritual concerned with the so-called Vodou spirits. These spirits are worshipped within cult-groups which take much pain to point out the differences between them and other groups mainly pre-occupied with other sets of powers, all more or less related with the practices of sorcery, the "Petro" and the "Zandor" and the "Matok". I shall use the term "magic" to refer to the latter. Haitians do. The pre-eminence of Vodou societies over the magic ones is expressed in terms of fidelity to *l'Afrique Guinee*. Guinea stands for tradition, unswerving loyalty to the ancestors and through them to the old ways and rituals they brought from overseas. It forms what Turner would describe as a dominant symbol by reference to which spiritual power (1967, p. 28) is legitimated.

There have been very few attempts to relate these ritual distinctions to the functioning of social groups. Most studies of Vodou have tried to interpret it as a result of history, a mixture to be accounted for in terms of re-interpretations of Catholic beliefs by an African mentality (Herskovits, 1941). Whatever the usefulness of such an approach, it tells us little about the present function of such beliefs; it is clear that Vodou is not only the end-result of historical contact, but expresses itself a conception of history by which present behaviour is explained and evaluated. Lewis (1971) has shown how spirit possession can embody moral values held by the society where it occurs. I shall try in this essay to show how possession forms in Haiti an idiom in terms of which individuals and groups compete for power and morally evaluate one another. Such moral evaluations presuppose a set