

Spirit Possession in Shamanism

A Cohabiting Embodiment of Distinct Imaginal Entities

‘The soul is what makes you beautiful...It is that alone that makes you act and be busy. It is what directs your whole life...’ (Jakobsen, 1999, pp.80-81)

The phenomena of spirit possession can be viewed and reviewed through the lens of differing fields of study including and most notably religious studies, psychology and anthropology. When reading in this area of research one would expect to encounter discourse giving examples from within the realms of the main world religions such as exorcism, or the more recent practices of the séance within the spiritualist churches. Here we will engage mainly with this phenomenon as presented through shamanic practices and within this conduct a study of the related context including physical space and ritual. Although there will not be a discussion around the use of the term shamanism, engaging in this particular account of spirit possession will undoubtedly highlight some of its core traits. This essay will argue that the consequential altered state of the shamanic practitioner when possessed can be understood as a *cohabiting embodiment of specific imaginal entities*. An argument will be made for apprehending spirit possession as a shift into an imaginal mode leading to a relationship with distinct and autonomous entities. This will be supported by the work of Merete Demant Jakobsen’s study of shamanism, Robert Bosnak’s work on embodied imagination and James Hillman (particularly with regards to his notion of soul-making).

The importance of place and use of shamanic paraphernalia will be addressed in relation to invocation and containment. Attention will also be given to ritual processes and their essential role in amplifying the presence of spirits. In addition, this essay will attempt to show that the shamanic experience of spirit possession can be understood as a participatory state that confounds the dualities so often entering discourse from *a priori* epistemologies. This later discussion will be aimed at shamanic possession’s impact on the apparent juxtapositions of body/mind; sick/healthy; male/female and good/evil.

The various observations and arguments detailed above will be discussed within three sections: 1. ‘The Nature of Spirit Possession’ – that is, how this essay will approach and define the phenomenon; 2. ‘The Resonating Context’ – where and how this occurs and; 3. ‘Relational Participation’ – observations on the consequence of possession. A brief conclusion ‘Creative Extensions’ will open questions on the impact of this particular view of possession on personal practice.

SECTION I

The Nature of Spirit Possession – A Leading Definition

Invocation

The intention in this first section is to elucidate on a particular view of spirit possession and to set some parameters in order to offer a narrowed, though not exclusive, understanding of this experience. This definition is anchored in the shamanic tradition and in correlation with this provides a set of rules: a) that the possession is by invitation (or invocation) b) that there is a shift in experiential mode (into the imaginal) and c) that this manifests as a physical expression of the spirit (embodiment).

In an early paper written in 1946 by Kenneth M. Stewart, we see an appraisal of spirit possession as it arises in various Native American peoples. Within this a distinction is made between ‘demoniacal’ and ‘inspirational’ possession (p.324-325). Here, Stewart indicates the different nature(s) of possession according to whether the spirit has invaded an individual or whether there has been an invocation. Understood as both unhealthy and demonic (Stewart, 1946, p.325) the appearance of an *uninvited* spirit denotes an experience that afflicts the uninitiated but not the shaman who is intrinsically developed in this experience (Jakobsen, 1999, p.7). It is inspirational possession that this essay is concerned with and the healing consequence of such a form of spirit embodiment. In elaboration of this point, it is possible to find studies which give more sophisticated distinctions and indeed enlarge upon the process from possession as sick-demonic-invasive to healthy-benevolent-invited (Lewis, 1997, p.127). These studies not only define the

shamanic form of possession but also illuminate an essential definitive characteristic of the shaman's capacity and being. That is to say, the shaman 'processes' these spirit experiences into healing (Lewis, 1997, p.127-8). We are not, therefore, exploring the darker and more troublesome form of spirit possession here, rather we aim to gain insight into possession as a richly benevolent and invoked shamanic act.

Imaginal

The second mark of spirit possession to bring attention to is, I would argue, a central factor in this willing invocation, that is the shift into an imaginal mode. This change in state and quality of knowing can be understood as a shift from, or surrender of the rational and literal disposition often through trance (Plancke, p.383, 2011; Jakobsen, 1999, p.9-10) in order to 'encounter the realm of the soul' (Avens, 1980, p.198). This fundamental change in state is an essential characteristic necessary for achieving a visceral relationship with the spirit or soul-entity in question. In order to give support to this observation I will give significant attention to two aspects of the method for such a shift in the following section. For now, let us take note of the experiential quality inherent in this altered state.

In *The Soul of Shamanism*, Daniel C. Noel admonishes the modern western antagonism toward the imaginal, stating that it is this altered state of non-literal animated imagination that is essential for shamanic practice (1999, p.60). Further to this, recounting a conversation with Michael Harner prior to entering a shamanic journey, Noel goes on to report the distinguishing terms of: a) ordinary state of consciousness (OSC) and b) shamanic state of consciousness (SSC) (1999, p.60). Although useful terminology for the notable difference in experience or state, I would argue that this is insufficient if we are to get to the heart of shamanic spirit possession. It is the image that is central to the experience. Indeed, Noel reports Harner's admission of this fact, equating spirit with image explicitly: "some people might call it [a spirit encountered in shamanic practice] an image, but those *images have power*." (emphasis mine) (Noel, 1999, p.100). This last statement will form a vital part of my argument going forward; the image in the imaginal that I draw attention to is an *autonomous* quality of being, independent and *volitional*. These images, evoking qualities well beyond a simple visual experience are, I suggest, alive and well in the imaginal experience. Spirit

possession can therefore be understood as a transition from a state of literal being to the state of the imaginal.

It is vital at this point to make a clear distinction between the notion of the imaginal first used by Henri Corbin and the function of the term in this term in this essay. As I have stated previously in a study of the active imagination (Fitzgerald, 2020), one's mental gaze can be drawn upwards and elsewhere (as with Corbin), or inwardly and down (as with Jung). I am drawing on the approach taken by James Hillman, which focusses on the image arising here and now - in and *of* this world (Fitzgerald, 2020, p.5,9). The shift into the imaginal state from this perspective, leads to a deeply embodied and '*this-worldly*' participation. This leads to the third and final criterion selected in this section as essential for shamanic spirit possession.

Embodiment

In this final vignette of the first section, there is again a need for careful elucidation on this term identified as a defining factor in possession. This does not indicate a physical expression of as yet unknown unconscious events, nor is this a projection, psychological or otherwise. This embodiment speaks to the notion that the living image experiences itself in the practitioner, born into manifestation as a result of invocation through the transit of the imaginal. As Bosnak states, relating an embodied imagination experience from a dream-work group participant invoking the primal bull: '...a shaman in ecstasy has been trained to lose all vestiges of habitual self, and so the bull can become an *epiphany of himself*, instead of a habitual-self becoming the bull.' (emphasis mine) (Bosnak, 2007, p.6-7). The image of the bull can be understood as a living quality of being, awaiting embodied participation with the shamanic practitioner who acts as both custodian and celebrant of the arising spirit. Paradoxically, the individual both is, and is not the bull.

Later in the same work, Bosnak shares another participant's experience in a dream-work group. In this case, the individual, Moto-san, relates a dream that has striking significance with regards to his vocational predicament (2007, pp.27-33). Much of the dream, when brought back for reflection in the group, is found to resonate with different parts of his physical body. Through the invocation of this dream image and the consequential (and multiple) *physical* manifestations, Moto-san finds himself in what he describes as a 'rental body' (2007, p.31). Encouraged to keep this new body

experience, Moto-san is reported to have moved into a decisive career move, coupled with a new physique, tangibly manifesting this change of being (2007, p.30).

This report demonstrates perfectly the complete shamanic process from engaging in the imaginal, through direct emotional and physical experience, to the full sense of embodiment where the actions of the participant are fundamentally guided and transformed by this spirit-image. Moto-san acts in service to the emerging quality of being, ‘crafting’ it in reality. One can relate this to James Hillman’s notion of ‘Soul-making’ (1990, p.86); soul, manifesting in tangible works, which will be remarked upon in the concluding section. As we move to the next section, it is useful to reflect that the process described by Bosnak was supported by a particular natural space and weather elements (rain) (2007, p.30). This indicates the importance of ritual space in an invocation of spirit possession, which will now be discussed in more detail.

SECTION II

The Resonating Context - Containers, Amplifiers and Animators

This second section will expand on the surrounding context that can be said to form a basis and background for shamanic spirit possession. The two constituents (*environment* and *ritual*) presented herein can be understood as containing/delimiting and amplifying/resonating.

Environment

The space within which spirit possession occurs and the objects and paraphernalia in this locus must be understood as central in supporting the act of shamanic spirit possession. The careful preparation of space by the Angakoq people of Greenland exemplifies the role of the prepared environment. In the following example Merete Demant Jakobsen calls upon the reports of Gustav Holm and his 1888 expedition. In this tradition the Angakoq people wait carefully in darkness, the shaman is bound, animal skins hung at the doorway and windows. The floor is cleaned with

meticulous care; a large flat stone placed in a specific position, a ceremonial drum set (after wetting) on this stone and a long seal-thong then made soft through rubbing and stretching (1999, p.81). As Jakobsen goes on to state, all of this is in order to evoke a particular atmosphere, *inducing a shift in state* whilst at the same time showing that the spirit (*tartuk*) is the agent in this process.

I suggest that the objects in this space, placed carefully as they are, set a tangible boundary (at the windows and doors) but also delimit the imaginal arena, the soul-temple as it were. This provides a container within which the ritual process can be acted out. Without this symbolic perimeter, it might be suggested that the chaotic forces about to ensue are liable to cause a psychic havoc. The aforementioned invocation (or invitation) can thus be carried out with what we may playfully understand as health and safety procedures duly attended to. Just as the shaman can be understood as a receptacle, or ‘tabernacle’ (Lewis, 1997, p.122) for the spirit, the ritual space performs the function of allowing possession in a ‘controlled context’ (Lewis, 1997, p.122).

If the space can be understood as a container, how might we view the objects and their role in the context of spirit possession? Common among possession rites is the use of musical instruments (Wittkower, Douyon & Bijou, 1964, p.75; Lewis, 1997, p.126; Stewart, 1946, p.372). A visceral demonstration of the literal and symbolic coming together in the creation of music and rhythm, we find here also an amplification not only of sound but also of spirit. Jakobsen, this time referring to Knut Rasmussen in a study of the paraphernalia relating to the séance, gives the example of drumming and invocational utility:

‘It was thought that the drum in the hand of the shaman possessed mystic and supernatural power, which helped to summon the spirits. *It would become alive* in the course of the séance and floated freely about the house without being touched by the shaman’s hand.’ (emphasis mine) (Jakobsen, 1997. P.73)

This astonishing report provides a clear example of the ritual object becoming animated by temporarily sharing in or resonating with the quality of the spirit; this spirit is therefore not only embodied (brought to physicality) in the shaman, but also in the related ritual objects. Suffice to say, this resonance or harmony provides a rationale for why certain objects (statues for example) correspond with specific spirits: because they resonate (share in) the quality of being and amplify this allowing direct relational participation.

Ritual

In *Shamanism and the Psychology of C.G.Jung: The Great Circle*, Robert R. Ryan elucidates on Jung's understanding of shamanic ritual, stating that dance along with ritual and theatre, is highly potent because 'symbolic enactment with the body is more efficient than ordinary active imagination.' (2002, p.129). He goes on to state that the definitive factor in ritual is indeed action and movement. It is this physical, body-based manifestation which must be seen as a marker of the shamanic, imaginal and embodied image; an argument is supported in Ryan's further acknowledgement of the centrality of ritual. Ritual according to Ryan and Jung 're-opens the gates' between god and man, allowing a trance state, implying the necessary shift required to participate with a multiplicity of autonomous entities (2002, p.130). Through ritual then, the physical patterned movements of the practitioner '[give] form to the imaginal world' (Ryan, 2002, p.129). This highlights the transition from an ordinary state to a mode of being that allows the practitioner an immediate appreciation of imaginal powers that lie in the externally and internally manifest psyche.

These movements, clearly, are not the ordinary movements of a person, but an animated and embodied pattern moving from invocation, through to an imaginal state and finally to the embodiment of a spirit. The body creates the right shaped container for the spirit to enter: '...movement is subsumed in pattern and the continued repetition of the pattern evokes the experience of an identity with the eternal patterns of the cosmic life which informs it.' (Ryan, 2002, p.130).

SECTION III

Relational Participation - Cohabitation and the Distinct

Cohabitation

This section will focus on the manifest consequence of engaging with the praxis described in the first two sections, namely the non-binary and *specific* nature of spirit possession. According to

Kenneth M. Stewart's aforementioned early paper, 'Possession in Native America', the key defining factor in determining spirit possession is that the individual is '...invaded by a supernatural being and is temporarily beyond self-control, his ego being subordinated to that of the intruder.' (1946, p.325). The distinction between invitation and irruption has already been discussed, here I will attend to the second part of this statement: the amalgamation of possession with an experience of powerlessness. An alternative approach is instead to include a description of possession with the wider and more co-operative term: 'spirit-inspired' (Lewis, 1997, p.120). Given as an exemplary description of possession in African shamanism, Ioan Lewis states that the spirit, understood as external (and therefore not psychological) '...mounts' the shaman as a rider does a horse'. Lewis goes on to emphasize the importance of the shaman's mastery over this spirit (1997, p.120). This begs the question: Where does the power lie in this relationship? Between rider and horse, who possesses whom? This provides us with an excellent metaphor for a more developed and arguably more expansive interpretation of spirit possession. We can now consider the notion that the spirit, as with the rider, is responsible for the direction and urgency of the shamanic journey (I shall expand on this notion of journeying shortly). The shamanic practitioner at the same time, as with the horse, retains a level of control through a skillful dance between intention and surrender. This being one of many binary-collapsing, or perhaps more accurately, reconciliations of opposites, that support the argument for shamanic spirit possession as embodied *cohabitation*. This view of possession is one of a self-organized, unruled, 'in-between' state (Bosnak, 2007, p.15).

Homayun Sidky in an attempt to separate spirit possession from shamanic practice, argues that it is the act of journeying and the control exercised that separates shamanic experience from possession (2011, p.92). I would argue that Sidky's rejection of spirit possession as a shamanic practice, falls foul to the very problem of binary thinking that shamanic possession (it will be shown) tends to collapse. Sidky fails to offer a third option for possession, that is, neither complete mastery over the spirit, nor complete loss of control; instead, I suggest, a shared possession. To elaborate, this offers a conception wherein the spirit (temporarily) has *in its possession*, the body and partial will of the shaman. Concurrently, the shaman has *in his possession* the particular character and partial will of the spirit invoked.

Sidky also asserts the idea that a total possession can be evidenced through the apparent inability of individuals to remember these altered states (2011, p.92). Again, I would argue that this is a failure to recognize the epistemological shift that occurs during imaginal cohabitation or shamanic trance. The inability to remember does not preclude an individual's present participation in an event. If this were the case, how could we explain the common experience of forgetting dreams as we wake, or indeed a night of Dionysian intoxication? Ironically, Sidky's point only highlights the fundamentally disparate quality of knowledge and experience that is present in the possessed state.

The term cohabitation not only denotes a shared space between person and spirit, but also tends to the binary-collapsing nature of spirit possession; it's tendency to complexify ordinarily accepted juxtapositions. It is possible to highlight a selection of dualisms, normally unchallenged as either/or positions, revealed as new possibilities within the experience and the surrounding context of spirit possession. To being with, we might consider the binary sick/healthy, especially with regard to the wounded healer, initiation and mental health (Jakobsen, 1999, p.11), or indeed the highly charged debate around good and evil. According to Ioan Lewis the Tungus people, from where the term *šaman* originates (Laufer, 1917, p.362), understand that a spirit can be '...malevolent, benevolent or neutral...' conveying the ambiguous and amoral temperament of soul entities (1997, p.126).

The Cartesian split of body and mind is probably the most notorious of dualistic perspectives on the human condition. Nevertheless, whether one agrees or not with this position, it must be said that it does highlight a difficulty that is also true for humans: relationship. As we have seen in examples given above, shamanic spirit possession offers an experience in which the practitioner participates in the relationship between presupposed opposites. The actions of the dance in ritual for example, allow an experience not of body *and* mind, but of 'body-mind'. The particular spirit that arises in shamanic practice can be understood as homologous with the hyphen in this term; the bridging autonomous, imaginal space. In shamanic possession this space is where relationship occurs allowing the body and the mind to *know each other* in the moment.

Particular attention will now be given to the impact of possession states on gender, I have selected this example due to the current heightened preoccupation with gender identity. There are of course ever-increasing current challenges to the notion of the gender identity binary in socio-political

terms. Here we will observe an example of the cohabitation described above and demonstrate an inversion of power with regards to this male/female opposition.

Carine Plancke's study of the Punu of Congo-Brazzaville discusses the shifting of power between male and female in accordance with spirit possession practices. According to Plancke, women of the Punu who are normally subordinate, are instead given agency (through spirit possession) as a result of their '...natural receptivity...' creating an inversion of power to a female with '...the most powerful of vocations...' (2011, p.367). In a social context where power is synonymous with 'male', this inversion not only shifts the base of power but along with it the confuses and complexifies the gender role.

The meaning of each gender is therefore challenged from the perspective of power as a result of the expression or emergence of the imaginal entity. The possessed woman is, in terms of gender (rather than sex) both male and female concurrently. Not only does this inversion of power merge gender, it also permits the mode of the imaginal to take precedence over the literal mind and its methods. If we are to recognize the attributes of imaginal and literal as belonging to feminine and masculine accordingly, it is possible to see the power inversion occur with regards to the mode of knowledge as well as gender. It is important to recognize, that in this process *neither maleness nor femaleness are annihilated*, instead, they cohabit. Having brought to light the alternative possibility of spirit possession as embodied cohabitation, we can now attend to the question as to who or what the shamanic practitioner cohabits with.

The Distinct

To recap we have, in this section, looked at one of two elements that I suggest stand out as core characteristics of shamanic spirit possession: cohabitation. We now turn to the 'the distinct'. When considering the correct title for this subsection, both of the terms 'specific' and 'particular' were also offering their services, but it is the subtle emphasis on clarity, recognizability and difference (CED, 2000, p.452) that summarizes the intention of this passage.

In reference to Haitian spirit possession Wittkower, Douyon and Bijou outline essential criteria for spirit possession, one of which states that '...the behaviour of the possessed person corresponds to the characteristics of the god summoned' (1964, p.75). The implication here is that the individual

mimics the god, pretending to be what he is not. In sharp contrast to this interpretation of the experience, James Hillman argues for an emphasis on the full participation of the tangible and natural world with distinct gods.

‘When Pan is alive, then nature is too and it is filled with Gods, so that the owl’s hoot is Athene and the mollusc on the shore is Aphrodite. These bits of nature are not merely attributes or belongings. *They are [physical] gods.* And where better to find gods than in the things places and animals that they *inhabit*’ (emphasis mine) (Hillman, 1972/2007, p.26)

According to Hillman, soul is in the process of crafting itself through this cornucopia of multiple forms (1990, p.86-87). The forms are and remain *autonomous* and *volitional*. The invitation of the spirits in shamanic possession can then be understood as an invocation of a highly distinct and irreducible soul entity.

According to Robert Bosnak, even Jung falls foul of this tendency to strip the spirit or entity of its own independent personality. This is done through an initial reduction of the phenomena to an expression of an archetype (the image reduced to a pattern or complex) and secondly to the notion of the ‘Self’ (2007, p.14). In the same passage, regarding this as the ‘psychological face of monotheism’ Bosnak reflects on Hillman’s polytheistic approach, which critiques the attempt to ‘centre’ the constellation of images, manifesting in such forms as Jung’s use of the mandala (2007, p.14). Along with Bosnak, I would argue that this reduction fails to respect the tradition’s own polytheistic understanding, which potentially equates to the colonization of polytheistic spirit possession by a monotheistic psychology. As rich as these areas of psychological and theological fields are, I must now summarize and conclude this brief study of spirit possession.

CONCLUSION

Creative Extensions - Stretching into the Quality of Being

This essay has offered a definition, an invitation into the ritual space and a reflection on the attributes of the spirit possession. I have not intended to argue for the reality, validity or authenticity of the phenomenon here, somewhat pusillanimous perhaps, but I have instead chosen

to express an understanding of the essence of this phenomenon from a specifically shamanic perspective. There are of course many and varied examples of spirit possession, which may share in these qualities, this is a comparative study for further discussion.

If we are to accept the argument that spirit possession in shamanic form does indeed necessitate *embodied cohabitation of distinct entities*, how might this impact the practice life? I would suggest that this theory of possession could inform engagement with art and craft. If it is possible to accept a rationale that understands all matter as potentially animated, then soul-making occurs when the practitioner stretches form to allow participation with a distinct spirit. Like Rodin's dancers (Art & Architecture, 2020) we can adopt a posture with our bodies, poems, music, arts, cooking or sex, all of which have the capacity to invoke the gods. Spirit possession therefore becomes available beyond the strictly shamanic context.

In the end, perhaps the term 'possession' leads the minds-eye to stray too far from the benevolent potential of a dance with the deities. After all, it is as viable to speak of cohabitation as a shared offering as it is a mutual possession. The personal practice of embodied imagination need not be limited to tradition shamanic forms, but conversely shamanic tradition can inform the practice life and invoke in us a custodian, midwife, mentor, protector, wingman, curator, craftsman, artist, scribe, celebrant and of course *animator*. We are invited to receive these cognomens and inhabit these vocations in direct relationship with soul.

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