Chapter Twenty Four

Numinous Conversations:

Performance and the Manifestation of Spirits in Spirit Possession Practices

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Spirit possession is an extremely complex phenomenon, with social, cultural, psychological and, potentially, parapsychological components. All of these different aspects interact and coalesce to produce something that is very difficult to reduce into a simple explanatory scheme.[1] In this chapter, however, I am going to focus only on the behavioural aspects of this unusual phenomenon, in particular those aspects that might be referred to as 'performance,' and the way that performance is utilised in the manifestation of spirits. This is not because I consider this perspective to be the best for interpreting and understanding spirit possession, but rather because it illuminates interesting issues, which in turn highlight other components of the phenomenon.

This chapter will examine spirit possession practices from a cross-cultural perspective, drawing on the anthropological and ethnographic literature on spirit possession, as well as on my own field research with trance mediums in Bristol. My research takes the form of participant observation at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, a group devoted to the development of trance and physical mediumship. The Lodge was established in 2005 by Christine, the circle leader, after she was 'made aware' of the reality of spirit mediumship during a seance she attended with a friend.[2] I have been conducting field research with the group since 2009.[3]

I. Recognising Persons, Selves & Personalities

The concepts of 'self,' 'person' and 'personality' are not, by any means, concrete in either psychology[4] or anthropology.[5] Indeed, theories of personhood are socially and culturally relative,[6] with different cultures possessing different categories of person and criteria for personhood. Despite the difficulties in coming to consensus definitions, however, such notions are of central importance in any analysis of spirit mediumship.

Spirit mediumship, by its very nature, appears to exceed the popularly assumed Western conception of the self as an 'individual' and 'constant' centre of embodied consciousness,[7] because in the practice of mediumship the body ostensibly becomes host to many different selves.[8] In her study of Afro-Cuban Spiritism, for example, Diana Espirito Santo argues that mediumship is a 'type of partnership between a person and a series of spirits' and that the 'person' of the medium is a 'meeting-ground for the unique abilities of each of the spirits belonging to her spiritual cordon.'[9] Spirit mediumship can be thought of, therefore, as a process whereby the medium's person is expanded through the incorporation of other spiritual persons, thus creating what could be considered a composite, or multiple, personhood, perhaps constituting what the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has termed a 'dividual' notion of personhood.[10]

The medium's body serves as the means for physical expression, or 'enactment,'[11] of numerous, seemingly distinct, personalities (I use the term personality, rather than more neutral terms, such as 'agencies,' to refer to the spirits incorporated at the Bristol Spirit Lodge because this is how they are referred to and perceived by its members.) The body is the primary tool for the expression of personality and internal psychological states through the use of gestures,

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[1] Kelly & Locke 2009:30-31; Halloy 2010:168

[2] Di Nucci 2009:23

[3] Hunter 2009; Hunter 2012

[4] O'Connor & Hallam 2000:238-239; Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007

[5] Mauss 1985:1; Sökefeld 1999; Sax 2002:6-9; Smith 2012:52

[6] La Fontaine 1985:138

[7] Spanos 1994:144; Sökefeld 1999:417; Sax 2002:9

[8] Spanos 1994:144; Sökefeld 1999:417; Sax 2002:9

[9] Espirito Santo 2011:102

[10] Murray 1993:5

[11] Spanos *et al.* 1991; Spanos 1994

movements and specific bodily postures.[12] It is our interface with the physical world and our everyday means of communicating with each other, both verbally and non-verbally.[13] The way in which we use our bodies, therefore, is of key importance to the way we are perceived as personalities. In mediumship the body is used to express more than one personality, and so it must be used in specific ways in order for these different personalities to be perceived as distinct from that of the medium.

The term 'blending' is often used by western mediums and channellers, including members of the Lodge, to describe the interconnectedness of the medium's consciousness with that of the discarnate entity utilising his/her body as a vessel, and the anthropologist Dureen Hughes has highlighted the positive connotations and sense of 'harmony...between channel and entity'[14] implied by the term. When an entity is incorporated within the body of a medium it makes itself apparent to the outside world through manipulations of the medium's vocal tonality and physical demeanour, just as we normally express our own personality. Afro-Brazilian Umbandaists, for example, believe that spirits and saints, known as *Orixas*, inhabit the bodies of spirit mediums during trance dance performances.[15] Each *Orixa* has a favourite rhythm and a particular stylised dance which are performed by musicians and mediums respectively, and which enables differentiation between the embodied spirits. During the trance session the medium's movements are the movements of the *Orixa* inhabiting the body; at that moment the *Orixa* and the medium are blended. The medium is the spirit and the spirit is the medium. The dance performance is the physical expression of the *Orixa's* presence. Similarly, according to the Yanomamo Indians of the Orinoco Valley in Venezuela the *shapori* (being the Yanomamo equivalent of the shaman) initiation process involves the metamorphosis of the initiate into a *hekura* spirit:

> The shaman is correspondingly perceived by non-initiated Yanomami as something other than a human being; he is a living spirit in the flesh...[The] Yanomami term for shamanic initiation, *hekura prai*, can be translated as 'the metamorphosis of a human being into a *hekura* spirit,' or human body into a cosmic body.[16]

While the *shapori* is inhabited by the spirits he carries out specific healing and divinatory tasks under their direct control and influence. To the outside observer this may appear to be an elaborate act, but to the Yanomami it is a blending of the human and spirit worlds: a performance that expresses the presence of nonphysical entities in a culturally recognised manner.

II.   Recognising the Bodily Expression of Spirits

As with the *Orixas* of Umbanda and the *Hekura* of the Yanomamo, the spirits at the Bristol Spirit Lodge also express themselves through physical bodies. When a spirit first makes itself known through an entranced medium at the Lodge the communication is often weak and it may take many development sittings for an individual spirit personality to fully express itself. Occasionally a personality will show the early signs of emerging (such as slight twitches of the medium's body, or gurgling sounds indicative of an attempt to speak, for example), but might never reach its full expression as a regular communicator. Indeed, my own experience of falling into what the circle leader described as a 'light trance state,' during which my left arm moved of it's own accord, was taken as a sign that a spirit entity was attempting to communicate through my own body.[17] It is the role of the circle leader to recognise these early signs and then to develop them through engaging them in dialogue. The role of the circle leader at the Lodge is comparable, to a surprising degree, with that of the master of ceremonies in Kelantan Malay spirit mediumship practices, as described by Raymond Firth in the 1960s:

> The master of ceremonies plays a leading part in questioning the medium, interpreting what he says, and by his control of the musical accompaniment stimulates and guides the medium's actions. For the most part he adopts a quiet, rather neutral position in the verbal exchanges, agreeing with the putative spirit or commenting rather drily in a kind of "so, indeed" fashion...Throughout he is recognised as the person having prime authority in the proceedings; at the symbolic level he is the "master of spirits," a shaman in the strict sense of the word.[18]

At the Bristol Spirit Lodge, the circle leader is also responsible for ensuring the smooth running of the séance, to ensure that the medium is comfortable and to maintain control over what takes place inside the Lodge:

> ...management has to come into it. You set the intent, you set some sort of guidelines, and you expect them to work with you. It is a blending thing, you need to get some séance etiquette, or something, you know. You need to get a rapport, you need to get it organised. You sort of make deals between, you know, what is OK and what's

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[12] Argyle 1987; Bowie 2003:54

[13] Goffman 1990; DePaulo 1992

[14] Hughes 1991:166

[15] St. Clair 1971; Turner 1985:129-130

[16] Jokic 2008a:38-39

[17] Hunter 2009; 2011

[18] Firth 1967:199

not OK, and what behaviour is acceptable around us and what isn't. We've got to be a bit flexible to them too, what they want and what they don't want...so you kind of negotiate your way around.[19]

The strongest, most fully developed, communicators generally form a group called a 'spirit team.' A medium will regularly channel the members of his/her spirit team, and these communicators will become recognised by sitters as distinct individual personalities. The structure of the spirit team can, in many ways, be seen as an analog of the group structure of the personalities expressed through multiple personality, or dissociative identity, disorder. The average size of a spirit team at the Bristol Spirit Lodge is ten distinct spirit personalities. Of the members of the spirit team there is usually one who takes the role of 'main spirit guide,' 'control,' or 'gatekeeper,'[20] a feature that has also been noted in other spirit mediumship traditions.[21] This spirit is often the most developed personality of the spirit team and, more often than not, was the first personality to present through the entranced medium in the earliest stages of his/her development. Raymond Firth interpreted the role of the control, or 'familiar' as he termed it, as that of a 'built-in mechanism which allows the medium to emerge from his dissociated state' at the end of the performance.[22] Stephen Braude defines the spirit controls as 'recurrent and self-consistent characters who act as intermediaries between sitters and communicators.'[23]

Because each personality must express itself through a single physical body, the spirits utilise exaggerated body movements and unusual vocal tones to differentiate themselves from one another. Occasionally the presence of a spirit is inferred simply by the physical posturing of the medium's body, and this posturing is recognised as signifying the presence of a distinct personality, as this quote from an interview with a Bristol medium called Sandy illustrates:

Sometimes, in the earliest days, they used to come through, and they'd come through presenting differently, and some of my movements'd change. And depending on which spirit comes through depends on what I do with my hands, or, the one where I was dragging my leg, I just couldn't not drag my leg as I walked in.[24]

The exaggerated postures and vocalizations can often give the impression that the individual spirit personalities are caricatures. I would suggest that this is a necessary aspect of the mediumship process, assisting in the development and expression in the social moment of distinctive personalities: the exaggeration of postures and movements serves to signify the presence of a particular spirit-person. For example, a member of Sandy's spirit team called 'Elf' is characterised by movements of the arms and legs, as though swimming in the air and has a high-pitched child-like voice. Graham the undertaker, another member of Sandy's spirit team, by contrast, presents as particularly large and broad-shouldered and has a deep, throaty voice. In some mediums (Sandy in particular), more than one spirit has, on occasion, presented simultaneously through the body of the medium. The psychical researcher Frederic Myers noted a similar capacity with the medium Eleonore Piper: 'In some cases (Mrs Piper) two or more spirits may simultaneously control different portions of the same organism.'[25] In such instances individual presences are inferred from the distinctive independent movements of certain body parts: for instance the legs may move in a manner distinctive to one particular personality, while the arms may behave in a completely different manner associated with the personality of another spirit. Anthropologist Nurit Bird-David describes a similar process of gestural expression of spirits in her analysis of the *devaru* performances of the South Indian Nayaka. She writes:

The *devara* evoked often improvise on the same repetitive phrases. The saying, the voicing, the gesturing are important. These principle aspects of their behaviour are, in Bateson's term (1979), meta-communication, namely, communicating that *devaru* are communicating, because the *devaru* are present as they move, talk, make gestures, etc. They are present as they communicate and socially interact with Nayaka.[26]

Exaggerated behaviours, then, can be thought of as a form of meta-communication, signifying the presence of distinct personalities and serving as a means to allow them to be communicated with as individuals distinct from the medium's personality by the sitters and the circle-leader.

III.   Dialogue and the Reinforcement of Spirit Personalities

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[19] Interview with Christine 23/03/2011

[20] Johnson 1955:129; Klimo 1987:180; Gauld 1982:109-118

[21] Firth 1967:199

[22] Firth 1967:199

[23] Braude 2003:33

[24] Interview with Sandy 23/03/2011

[25] Myers 1903 [1992]:248

[26] Bird-David 1999:76

Over time the spirit-teams of the mediums will become regular fixtures at the Lodge's weekly séances and are treated in many ways as anyone else who attends regularly. Their personalities are continually checked against past recordings of communications as a means to ensuring the genuineness of the phenomenon, as Christine has stated: 'I will be looking to see if previous spirit communicators return and present themselves as previously. Any inconsistencies in voice tone or personality or information offered between the 'previous' and 'present' communications will be noticed (I compare audio recordings.)'[27] Through this regular interaction the spirit communicators become much more than abstractions; interaction allows them to manifest in a socially real and very tangible way. Similarly, Bird-David understands the *devaru* as relational persons, brought into social existence through interactions, i.e. conversation. She writes that: '[k] eeping the conversation going is important because it keeps the Nayaka *devaru* interaction and in a sense the *devara* themselves "alive."' Moreover, the form this interaction takes is described as 'highly personal, informal, and friendly' and consists of 'joking, teasing, [and] bargaining.' The conversations are said to include 'numerous repetitions or minor variations on a theme' in which the Nayaka and the *devaru* 'nag and tease, praise and flatter, blame and cajole each other, expressing and demanding care and concern.'[28] The interactions between spirits and sitters at the Lodge could equally be described in this way. Take the following séance transcript for example:

Christine [Circle leader]: Are you there yet Charlie?

Charlie [Spirit]: Of course.

Christine: Is it okay to open the cabinet?

Charlie: If you wish.

Christine: I'll do it slowly... How are you?

Charlie: Very well, how are you?

Christine: Fine. We've been sitting in the dark. How was it for you?

Charlie: Wonderful, how was it for you?

Christine: Not too bad actually. I wouldn't say it was the best ever, but not too bad!

Charlie: Some people are never satisfied.[29]

The tone of the interaction is very informal. This sort of quick interchange between the circle leader and the spirit will usually precede the more advanced, philosophical, discussions which form the bulk of the communication. These could be interpreted as a means to build up the personality of the communicator through recognising and reinforcing the fact that another personality is present by engaging it in dialogue. The idea that spirits require this sort of engagement in order to manifest is also common in other mediumship traditions. In her analysis of the Venezuelan tradition of Maria Lionza, for example, Placido describes how conversation provides the means for spirits to express themselves in the social moment:

To exist...the spirits need to be able to speak. By allowing them to express themselves through the mediums and by listening to what they say, humans are somehow resuscitating them...It is through words and communication that the spirits are brought to life, in that it is during episodes of spirit possession that they are created, that they become social persons.[30]

This emphasis on interaction with the spirits can be considered an analog of the socio-cognitive theory of dissociative identity disorder and past-life regression personalities, in which the various personalities are conceived of as 'rule governed, contextually supported social constructions.'[31] Psychologist Nicholas Spanos argues that 'secondary personality enactments' represent 'joint constructions that are created, shaped, and maintained by the beliefs and expectations of significant others who constitute an interfacing audience, as well as by the actor who displays the secondary identity enactments.'[32] Despite the similarities in understanding the way in which these personalities are manifested in the Maria Lionza world-view and the socio-cognitive model, there are, however, significant differences in terms of the ontological suppositions associated with these theories. For the members of the Maria Lionza cult, amongst

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[27] Personal communication with Christine 2011

[28] Bird-David 1999:76

[29] Di Nucci & Hunter 2009:158-159

[30] Placido 2001:214

[31] Spanos *et al.* 1991:308

[32] Spanos *et al.* 1991:308

other mediumistic traditions,[33] including the Bristol Spirit Lodge, the spirits are very real and play an important role in the group because 'what they say matters,'[34] while for the socio-cognitivists the finding that alternate personality enactments are sustained through social interaction implies that they possess no form of independent ontological reality.

I would not go so far as to conclude that the spirits communicated with at the Bristol Spirit Lodge are simple 'social constructions,' but rather would suggest an interpretation based upon the notion that ontologically distinct spirits *could* exist and that the *process* through which they make themselves known would be an interactive and social one, just as we our own personalities are expressed and sustained.

IV.   Preliminary Conclusions

The model implied by all of this emphasises the combined influence of altered states of consciousness, performance and social interaction, in the development of new socially active personalities. In the context of spirit mediumship demonstrations, the concept of performance should not be taken as indicating fraudulence or trickery, instead it should be regarded as a culturally specified technique for the expression of nonphysical persons. Alterations of consciousness allow for a dissociation, to whatever degree, of the medium's everyday sense of self. Through performance the medium is able to either bring forward previously unconscious, or previously filtered out, selves. These selves, or persons, to become stabilised, require the interaction of other social agents. For the duration that the interaction is maintained, the newly emerged self is also a social agent, after the séance it is either subsumed back into the medium's subconscious, or filtered out of their normal waking consciousness. Because different cultures recognise the presence of persons in different ways, different forms of personhood-expressive performance have come into existence. To a certain extent this model accords well with Frederic Myers' model of consciousness, in which consciousness consists of at least two streams: the subliminal and supraliminal. Myers argued in favour of interpreting spirit possession as a 'shifting of the psychical center of the personality of the [medium] himself' to allow emergences from the subliminal into the supraliminal:

> I propose to extend the meaning of the term [subliminal]...to make it cover *all* that takes place beneath the ordinary threshold, or say, if preferred, outside the ordinary margin of consciousness; not only those faint stimulations whose very faintness keeps them submerged, but much else which psychology as yet scarcely recognises; sensations, thoughts, emotions, which may be strong definite, and independent, but which, by the original constitution of our being, seldom emerge into that *supraliminal* current of consciousness which we habitually identify with *ourselves*.[35]

Myers did not deny the possibility that external, nonphysical, influences might be at play in mediumistic states and argued that his theory of the subliminal mind, which differs from the Freudian notion of the unconscious in its inclusion of aspects external to the individual, provided a framework for understanding such phenomena 'without reducing them to epiphenomena of psychopathology...or ruling out influences beyond the self.'[36] From this perspective the spirit personalities expressed through spirit mediumship performances might be interpreted, in Carl Jung's terms, as 'psychoid manifestations.' Jung identified the 'psychoid' as a transcendent entity that manifests at the juncture of unconscious (non-physical) and external (physical) influences.[37] Like Myers' notion of the subliminal mind, Jung's conception of the unconscious also included aspects external to the individual's psyche, he wrote: 'a psychological truth is...just as good and respectable a thing as a physical truth [because] no one knows what "psyche" is, and one knows just as little how far into nature "psyche" extends.'[38]

These conclusions may seem tangential from a social anthropological perspective, nevertheless I feel that they get right to the heart of what it is we are dealing with in this phenomenon. Through attempting to understand the mechanisms through which spirit possession operates we can move towards a greater appreciation of the function it performs, and the experiences that result from that function, in the social sphere. Through attempting to understand how spirit possession could be possible the anthropologist is moving towards a more comprehensive understanding of the particular culture in which the possession is taking place. Such an interpretation is, I feel, a useful conceptual starting point for any analysis of spirit mediumship and is particularly suited to anthropological explorations as it does not rule out 'native' interpretations. Instead, it provides an inclusive framework that is amenable to scientific theorising and investigation while also being cross-culturally applicable and non-reductive.

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[33] Stoller 1994; Lambek 1998; Bubandt 2009; Hunter 2009

[34] Placido 2001:221

[35] Myers 1903 [1992]:13-14

[36] Taves 1999:258; see also Alvarado 2002:23

[37] Addison 2009

[38] Jung 2007:157

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