

Coming Full Circle

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Perhaps we are approaching a new naturalistic theory of spirit possession applicable not only to mental health but to anthropology and the historical interpretations of European witchcraft as well.

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Many of the helping professionals, particularly those who were trained in the social or behavioral sciences, will recall studying the history of the mental health movement. In reviewing this historical phenomenon we sometimes wonder how people coped with psychological problems before there were mental health professions. If they were fortunate, those who were psychologically troubled may have found a compassionate person, perhaps a village clergyman or an understanding relative in whom they could confide.

Or they may have chosen to tell no one about their feelings of fear, sleeplessness, or despair. If they were unlucky, they were identified as a witch or warlock and tortured until they confessed to this "crime" (Kramer & Sprenger 1484/1948). This story is repeated many times, although more eloquently in the various texts and chapters on the history of mental health professions (e.g., Alexander & Selesnick, 1966; Mora, 1985).

Additionally, these authors observe that one of the oldest theories about the etiology of mental disorders identifies spirit possession as its causal agent. This notion of spirit possession as an etiologic theory was virtually abandoned within the field of mental health, as we struggled to escape the confines of Medieval explanations for behavior.

It is ironic that this religious theory spawned a reprehensible series of crimes against humanity, the witch persecutions of Europe and America. Curiously, a recent book by sociologist, Hans Sebald (1995) attempts to equate the earlier witch persecutions with modern accounts

of ritual abuse in an apparent effort to discredit the contemporary allegations of ritual abuse. The author tells the story of the witch-boy of Bamberg, who apparently went in and out of dissociated states while interviewed by the Inquisitors and who also described incidents of sexual abuse in his past. I agree with Sebald's conclusion that the narrations of the witch-boy are much like those of modern survivors of ritual abuse.

However, we part company when Sebald interprets both phenomena as the result of fantasy. Why would the medieval and current accounts necessarily involve both the elements of sexual abuse and dissociation of identity? Is it not more parsimonious to view dissociation as a consequence of trauma? Certainly this hypothesis is consistent with the great majority of contemporary patient reports. Oesterreich's (1921/1966) exhaustive study of possession also mentions cases of what was then called "dual personality" but is now identified as Dissociative Identity Disorder. Evidently, Oesterreich saw a connection between the two.

The obvious similarity between what has been known historically and anthropologically as "possession states" and dissociation of identity is becomingly increasingly clear. According to a contemporary scholar, Begelman, both "possession and MPD are based on the same database" (1993, p. 201).

People are sometimes surprised to learn of the extent of Freud's interest in possession, witchcraft and the occult. On the other hand, Freud is probably better known for his creation and then abandonment of a theory that postulates that neuroses are caused by childhood sexual "seduction." According to Masson, Freud abandoned his seduction theory as a result of his treatment of Emma Eckstein, a patient who described mental scenes while in therapy with Freud comparable to modern disclosures of ritual abuse. In one such scene the devil "sticks pins into her finger and puts a piece of candy on each drop of blood" (Masson, 1992, p.103).

When similar mental images are described by contemporary patients it soon becomes evident that the "devil" is really a person costumed in that manner. In a letter to Freud's friend and colleague, Wilhelm Fliess, dated January 24, 1897, Freud notes the following: "Imagine, I obtained a scene about the circumcision of a girl. The cutting of a piece of the labia minora (which is still shorter today), sucking up the blood, following

which the child was given a piece of the skin to eat" (Masson, 1992, p. 105). Masson says that Freud is still referring to the same patient, Emma Eckstein. Therapists who work with ritual abuse patients often hear of such accounts of genital mutilation along with ingestion of blood and bits of flesh. Freud also wrote, "we may have before us a residue of a primaevial sexual cult which, in the Semitic East (Moloch, Astarte), was once, perhaps still is, a religion" (Freud, 1966, p. 243)

Possession states are still with us and now in 1995, possession and possession trance are listed under the diagnosis Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified in the DSM-IV. Rather than adopting the traditional Western religious theory of possession we are now utilizing current anthropological views of this subject. Have we come full circle?

The field of anthropology may also have an opportunity to learn more about possession phenomena from developments within the mental health professions.

The increasing numbers of psychiatric patients who report histories of childhood trauma and present with symptoms of dissociative disorders may give us a clue to the etiology of possession disorders which are quite widespread among many preindustrial cultures (e.g., Bourguignon, 1973). In researching our current book, *Cult and Ritual Abuse: Its History, Anthropology, and Recent Discovery in Contemporary America* (Noblitt & Perskin, 1995), Pamela Perskin and I found evidence that trauma is used in a variety of the initiation ceremonies which are conducted in preindustrial cultures and which may be associated with the development of possession states. Our theory is that ritual trauma is a primary cause of the dissociation of identity which one finds in shamanistic, and sorcery-oriented preindustrial cultures as well as the "occult underground" in modern Euro-America. Perhaps we are approaching a new naturalistic theory of spirit possession applicable not only to mental health but to anthropology and the historical interpretations of European witchcraft as well.

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