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running over their bodies filling them with 'shuddering horror'. Such dangerous and terrifying encounters frequently figured as the prelude to the assumption of the shamanistic vocation (Rasmussen, 1929, p. 122).

Similar motifs, of course, abound in our own culture. The New Testament traditions emphasize the lowly origins of the Carpenter of Nazareth and His early spiritual travails, particularly His temptation by the Devil on the mountain; and such themes recur in the inspirational biographies of a host of later and lesser Christian figures. If it was only after her death at the stake that final authenticity was granted to the ambiguous 'voices' of Joan of Arc, some other more recent Christian mystics of similar background have sometimes been more fortunate.

One of the less well known, but not least interesting, of these was the Swedish tailor's daughter, Catharina Fagerberg, who was born in 1700. After a period of employment as a domestic, she learnt to weave linen and, while following this trade, rejected the advances of a leather-worker who wished to marry her. Then followed seven years of severe mental and physical torment in the course of which she was frequently visited by a 'good spirit', who explained that the cause of her anguish lay in her possession by devils which had been sent to trouble her by a black magician at the behest of her slighted suitor. Gradually however, inspired — as she believed — by God, Catharina acquired the power to contain her affliction and to diagnose and cure disease in others. Her reputation as a faith-healer soon spread and she inevitably came into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities. But, in a century in which witch-trials were outmoded, she was acquitted, leaving her spiritual manifestations to be dismissed by her sceptical opponents as morbid fantasies. However, in a world where many still believed in evil spirits and witchcraft, as well as in divine inspiration, Catharina enjoyed wide success as a local shamanistic healer. She was supposed to incarnate 'good' and 'evil' spirits, and, by sending out her own 'life-spirit', to divine distant events (Edsman, 1967).

These examples remind us how, frequently, those whom the gods call they first humble with affliction and despair. Moreover, as we saw amongst the Tungus, the powers involved are often, either directly or indirectly, both the causes of misfortune and the means of its cure. Those who become shamans thus commonly act, in effect, on the basis of the crude slogan: if you can't beat them, join them. It is, furthermore, precisely by demonstrating his own successful mastery of the

grounds of affliction that the shaman establishes the validity of his power to heal. This conception of the shaman as the 'wounded surgeon', to borrow T.S. Eliot's memorable phrase, will be examined more fully later. For the moment, all we need to note is that, while there is a real sense in which all religions are essentially cults of affliction, in the inspirational calling this association has a particular and poignant significance. In the language of theology, the shaman's initial crisis represents the healer's passion, or, as the Akawaio Indians themselves put it, 'a man must die before he becomes a shaman'.

II

The link between affliction and its cure as the royal road to the assumption of the shamanistic vocation is thus plain enough in those societies where shamans play the main or major role in religion and where possession is highly valued as a religious experience. Here what begins as an illness, or otherwise deeply disturbing experience, ends in ecstasy; and the pain and suffering of the initial crisis are obliterated in its subsequent re-evaluation as a uniquely efficacious sign of divine favour. In other societies, however, where shamans play only a minor role and are concerned with disease-bearing spirits which are not central to the religious life of the community this apotheosis, although it still occurs, is thrust into the background. Indeed, in these circumstances, the connection between suffering and possession is so overwhelming that at first sight it seems to constitute an end in itself, rather than an end and a beginning.

Here, ostensibly at least, possession connotes misfortunes and sickness, and cult activity is primarily concerned to alleviate distress rather than to attain ecstasy. The emphasis is on disease and its cure, and not, overtly at least, on affliction as a means to the achievement of mystical exaltation. It is this feature, as we saw in the last chapter, which has led some writers to characterize such healing cults as being concerned only with 'inauthentic', or 'negative' possession, and to contrast these with religions where 'authentic' possession is realized as a divine ecstasy. To elucidate this misleading, and ultimately false, antithesis we must look more closely at such apparently 'negative' cults.

This negative aspect is strongly reflected in the character of the spirits involved. For by those who believe in them, but actually worship other gods, these malign pathogenic spirits are regarded as being extremely captious and capricious. They strike without rhyme or

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reason; or at least without any substantial cause which can be referred to social conduct. They are not concerned with man's behaviour to man. They have no interest in defending the moral code of society, and those who succumb to their unwelcome attentions are morally blameless. At the same time they are always on the look-out for a convenient excuse to harass their victims, and they are inordinately sensitive to human encroachment. To step on one inadvertently, or otherwise unwittingly annoy it, is sufficient to so inflame the spirit's wrath that it attacks at once, possessing its trespasser, and making him ill or causing him misfortune. These unattractive characteristics are displayed by all these hostile spirits, whether they are conceived of as anthropomorphic powers, or as puckish nature sprites.

Since they are so pointedly indifferent to human conduct, it would be reasonable to suppose that these unpleasant spirits would be quite indiscriminate in their selection of human prey. This, however, is far from being the case. Contrary to what might be expected, they show a special predilection for the weak and oppressed. We should be wrong, however, to leap immediately to a pessimistic assessment of the workings of providence in these cases. For as we shall see, it is often precisely through succumbing to these seemingly wanton visitations that people in such adverse circumstances secure a measure of help and succour. Thus, in complete contrast to the sublime indifference to the human condition which they are supposed to display, such spirits are in fact acutely sensitive to the plight of the under-privileged and oppressed. These assertions, fortunately, can easily be confirmed. All we have to do is to look closely at a number of societies where illness is interpreted as malignant possession, paying particular attention to the categories of person most at risk and to the circumstances in which they most frequently succumb to possession. Since we are here primarily concerned with the incidence of disease, we shall in fact be following what in medical parlance would be called an epidemiological approach.

Let me begin with data on the Somali pastoralists of north-east Africa which I collected in the course of field-work in what is now the Somali Republic (Lewis, 1969). In this strongly patrilineal Muslim society, witchcraft and sorcery as these phenomena are known elsewhere do not figure prominently in the interpretation of illness and misfortune. Their main religious life is concerned with the cult of Allah whom Somalis approach through the mediation of the Prophet Muhammad and a host of more immediate lineage ancestors and

other figures of real or imputed piety who, as in Roman Catholicism, play a vital role as mediating saints. As in other Muslim countries, this public cult is almost exclusively dominated by men, who hold all the major positions of religious authority and prestige. Women are in fact excluded from the mosques in which men worship and their role in religion tends to be little more than that of passive spectators. More generally, in the Somali scheme of things, women are regarded as weak, submissive creatures. This is the case despite the exacting nature of their nomadic life, and the arduous character of their herding tasks in managing the flocks of sheep and goats, and the draught camels, which carry their tents and effects from camping-ground to camping-ground.

In this male-dominated and highly puritanical culture, spirit possession, which is regarded as one cause among others of a wide range of complaints (ranging from slight malaise to acute organic diseases such as tuberculosis), occurs in a few well-defined contexts. The first of these which I shall discuss here concerns cases of frustrated love and passion, and involves emotions which, especially on the part of men, are not traditionally recognized or overtly acknowledged. The stiff-lipped traditional view is that the open display of affection and love between men and women is unmanly and sentimental and must be suppressed. The expression of love towards God, in contrast, is a highly approved emotion which is widely encouraged and rapturously phrased in Somali mystical poetry. But the direct acknowledgement of similar feelings between men and women is totally out of place. Thus, if a girl who has been jilted by a boy she loved and who privately undertook to marry her exhibits symptoms of extreme lassitude, withdrawal, or even more distinct signs of physical illness, her condition is likely to be attributed to possession by the object of her affections. Here, as in all other cases of Somali possession, the victim is described as having been 'entered'. (Although in this case it is strictly the personality of her former lover which is supposed to have 'seized' her, rather than a free spirit entity, I make no apology for mentioning this type of possession here since it serves as a useful prologue to what follows.)

This interpretation of the disappointed girl's state is consistent with the traditional sex morality where the conception of romantic attachment was, as I have indicated, excluded. Only within the last twenty years or so has this rigid attitude begun to change — especially in the towns which, as elsewhere in Africa, are the foci of social change and

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modernity. There today, among the younger generation, the explicit recognition and acceptance of romantic love is a popular theme given wide currency in contemporary Somali verse and radio 'pop' songs which scandalize men of the older generation. With these enlightened views, young western-educated Somalis today describe such cases of young women's possession, in the Shakesperian idiom of 'love-sickness'. The traditional attitude, on the other hand, is much more in keeping with that exhibited by seventeenth-century French Catholic ecclesiastics in their handling of the celebrated case of the hysterical Sister Jeanne des Anges, prioress of the convent school at Loudon, and her frustrated infatuation for the notoriously amorous Canon Urbain Grandier. As readers of Aldous Huxley's lively evocation in *The Devils of Loudon* will recall, this poor nun's condition was attributed to possession by malevolent spirits and Grandier was held responsible. He was convicted of witchcraft and burned at the stake in 1634.

In the Somali Republic these matters are dealt with less drastically, and no legal action can be taken against the man involved. The interpretation which these facts suggest is virtually that given by young educated Somalis themselves. For a jilted girl no other institutionalized means are traditionally available to express her outraged feelings. For it is only where a formal engagement has been contracted, with the consent of the two parties of kin, that a suit can be filed for breach of promise. The disappointed girl's private emotions and feelings are of little moment in the jural world of men. Hence illness, and the care and solicitude which it brings, at least offer some solace for her wounded pride. Of the treatment administered to the possessed girl, all that need be said here is that, as with Sister Jeanne des Anges, the invading familiar may be exorcized by a cleric — in this case a Muslim man of religion.

The other context of Somali possession is similarly regarded as an illness and involves parallel symptoms ranging from mild hysteria or light depression to actual organic disorders. In this case, however, these disturbances are unequivocally attributed to the ingress of a hostile spirit or demon. As elsewhere in Islam, Somalis believe that anthropomorphic *jinns* lurk in every dark and empty corner, poised ready to strike capriciously and without warning at the unsuspecting passer-by. These malevolent sprites are thought to be consumed by envy and greed, and to hunger especially after dainty foods, luxurious clothing, jewellery, perfume, and other finery. In the context which I am about to describe, they are known generally as *sar*, a word which describes

both the spirits themselves and the illness attributed to them. The smitten victim is said to have been 'entered', 'seized' or 'possessed' by the *sar*.

The prime targets for the unwelcome attentions of these malign spirits are women, and particularly married women. The stock epidemiological situation is that of the hard-pressed wife, struggling to survive and feed her children in this harsh environment, and liable to some degree of neglect, real or imagined, on the part of her husband. Subject to frequent, sudden and often prolonged absences by her husband as he follows his manly pastoral pursuits, to the jealousies and tensions of polygyny which are not ventilated in accusations of sorcery and witchcraft, and always menaced by the precariousness of marriage in a society where divorce is frequent and easily obtained by men, the Somali woman's lot offers little stability or security. These, I hasten to add, are not ethnocentric judgements read into the data by a tender-minded western anthropologist, but, as I know from my own direct experience, evaluations which spring readily to the lips of Somali women and which I have frequently heard discussed. Somali tribeswomen are far from being as naïve as those anthropologists (see e.g. Wilson, 1967, pp. 67–78) who suppose that tribal life conditions its womenfolk to an unflinching acceptance of hardship and to an unquestioning endorsement of the position accorded them by men. My interpretation here is further corroborated from a modern woman's perspective by Raqiya Abdalla's (1982) study of female circumcision and infibulation and, more impressionistically perhaps, in Nuruddin Farah's early novel, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970).

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that many women's ailments, whether accompanied by definable physical symptoms or not, should so readily be interpreted by them as possession by *sar* spirits which demand luxurious clothes, perfume, and exotic dainties from their menfolk. These requests are voiced in no uncertain fashion by the spirits speaking through the lips of the afflicted women, and uttered with an authority which their passive receptacles can rarely achieve themselves. The spirits, of course, have their own language but this is readily interpreted (for a suitable fee) by female shamans who know how to handle them. It is only when such costly demands have been met, as well as all the expense involved in the mounting of a cathartic dance ('beating the *sar*') attended by other women and directed by the shaman, that the patient can be expected to recover. Even after such outlays, relief from the *sar* affliction may be only temporary.

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Significantly, in some cases the onset of this spirit illness coincides with a husband's opening moves to marry an additional spouse; and in every example which I encountered some grudge against her partner was borne by the woman involved. It scarcely requires any elaborate forensic technique to reach some understanding of what is involved here; certainly, Somali men draw their own conclusions. What the women call *sar* possession, their husbands call malingering, and they interpret this affliction as yet another device in the repertoire of deceitful tricks which they consider women regularly employ against men. This ungallant charge men support by alleging that the incidence of the disease is markedly higher amongst the wives of the wealthy than amongst those of the poor. Women in their turn counter this insinuation with the ingenious sophistry that there are some *sar* spirits which only attack the wealthy while others molest the poor. Not surprisingly, *sar* spirits are said to hate men.

Despite their essentially sociological view of the situation, men's attitudes are in fact ambivalent. They believe in the existence of these *sar* spirits (for which the Quran provides scriptural warrant, since they are assimilated to *jinn*), but with typical Somali pragmatism they are sceptical when their own womenfolk and pockets are directly affected. Depending upon the marital circumstances and the value placed upon the wife concerned, the normal reaction is for the husband to accept reluctantly a few bouts of this kind, especially if they are not too frequent. But if the affliction becomes chronic, as it is apt to, and the wife becomes a more or less regular member of a circle of *sar* devotees, then, save in exceptional circumstances, the husband's patience is liable to wear thin. If a good beating will not do the trick (and it often seems very effective), there is always the threat of divorce and, unless the wife actually wants this (as she may), or is genuinely physically ill (as she may very well be) or severely psychologically disturbed, this threat usually works. Leaving aside for the moment the wider implications of membership of a regular association of *sar* devotees, it is evident that this characteristically female affliction operates amongst the Somali as a limited deterrent against the abuses of neglect and injury in a conjugal relationship which is heavily biased in favour of men. Where they are given little domestic security and are otherwise ill-protected from the pressures and exactions of men, women may thus resort to spirit possession as a means both of airing their grievances obliquely, and of gaining some satisfaction.

Somali women have a strong and explicit sense of sexual solidarity

and feelings of grievance and antagonism towards men who, in their turn, regard the opposite sex as possessing a unique endowment of guile and treachery. Of course, both these sexual stereotypes are mutually reinforcing. It might even be argued, without stretching the facts too far, that here, as in other societies where sexual differentiation is equally strongly engrained, there are in effect two cultures — the officially dominant world of men, and the subordinate sphere of women. It is certainly in terms of such a wide-ranging dichotomy that Somali men see women's possession as a specialized strategy designed to forward feminine interests at their expense. This 'sex-war' view of the situation is very evident in the following folk-tale which, whether it records a true episode or not, has a very clear moral.

The wife of a well-to-do official was feeling out of sorts one morning and sitting morosely in her house, where there happened to be fifty pounds of ready cash belonging to her husband. An old woman (a *sar* specialist) came to visit the dejected wife and soon convinced her that she was possessed by a *sar* spirit and would need to pay a lot of money for the mounting of a cathartic dance ceremony, if she were to recover. The necessary *sar* expert was quickly engaged, food bought, and neighbouring women summoned to join in the party. When the husband returned from his work at midday for his lunch, he was surprised to find the door of his house tightly barred and to hear a great hubbub inside. The shaman ordered his wife not to let him in, on pain of serious illness, and after knocking angrily for some time the husband lost patience and went away to eat his lunch in a tea-shop. When, in the evening, the husband finally got back from work the party was over. The wife, who had recovered remarkably quickly, met him and explained that she had been suddenly taken ill. *Sar* possession had been diagnosed, and in consequence she had unfortunately to spend all her husband's ready cash to pay for the curing ceremony. The husband accepted this disturbing news with surprising restraint.

On the following day, which was a holiday, while his wife was out shopping in the market, the husband took all her gold and silver jewellery and her cherished sewing-machine to a money-lender from whom he received a susbtantial advance. With this money he assembled a party of holy men and sheikhs and feasted them royally in his house. When his wife returned later in the day, she found the door firmly closed and heard sounds of exuberant hymn-singing within. After trying unsuccessfully to get in, she in her turn went off puzzled to inquire from neighbours what was going on. When she finally

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returned home later, she found her husband sitting quietly by himself and asked what had happened. 'Oh', said the husband, 'I was suddenly taken ill, and to recover I had to summon a group of holy men to say prayers and sing hymns on my behalf. Now, mercifully, I am better; but, unfortunately, since there was no ready cash in the house I had to pawn all your jewels and even your sewing-machine in order to entertain my guests.' At these words, as can be imagined, the woman raised a loud lament. But after a short period of reflection her anger subsided, as she perceived the reasons for her husband's action. She promised fervently never again to 'beat the *sar*'. Her husband in his turn undertook never again to entertain holy men at his wife's expense and later redeemed her riches. And so, we presume, the couple lived on afterwards in amity.

The use by women of *sar* spirit possession, which this simple tale so well illustrates, is not confined only to the Muslim Somali. This pattern of possession exists also in Ethiopia (under the name *zar*), where it appears to have originated, and in the Muslim Sudan, Egypt, parts of North Africa, and the Arabian Gulf where it has even penetrated the sacred city of Mecca. In Christian Ethiopia, its psychological and dramatic aspects have been explored by the French surrealist poet and ethnographer, Michel Leiris (Leiris, 1958; see also Tubiana, 1983). Further light on its social significance there has been shed by subsequent anthropological research by Messing (1958), Young (1975), and Morton (1977). Messing records how wives use the cult in Somali fashion to extort economic sacrifices from their husbands by threatening a relapse when their demands are ignored — a process which the husbands seek to check by advocating Christian exorcism as the most appropriate treatment. Although more expensive initially, this latter procedure is theoretically efficacious as a single treatment. This avoids the unattractive prospect, following the initial initiatory illness, of the wife drifting into a *zar* coterie which would damage the husband's reputation as a respectable Ethiopian Christian. It is thus, perhaps, not inappropriate that the *zar* spirit and initiatory illness should also be known as 'creditor' (*kureyna*) — creating onerous debts which extend through the spirit-possessed victim to burden her male kin. Much the same appears to be the case with economically depressed women in Cairo, although *zar* possession seems to have an appeal for some rich women too, and *zar* ceremonies have become folkloric events and even made the basis for a distinctive 'Oriental' ballet dance style (*Arabesque*, 1978; 1983). To the extent that *zar* possession offers one

explanation of illness, improved medical facilities and other aspects of modernization seem to have a somewhat ambiguous impact on the phenomenon. In the Egyptian countryside where village women are less secluded than their bourgeois sisters — cherished by their husbands as symbols of Islamic respectability — they are reported to be less intensively involved in the cult than the latter (Saunders, 1977). In some villages such possession is known as the 'excuse' and the possessed victim referred to literally as 'excused' — as indeed she is from her routine tasks (Morsy, 1977; 1978). These themes are very explicitly displayed in the suburbs of Khartoum, capital of the Sudan republic. There researchers report that *zar* spirits possessing wives may not only demand gifts, including in one case several gold teeth, but also roundly upbraid the husbands in terms which would not be tolerated were they expressed directly by the women themselves (Constantinides, 1977, 1985; al-Shahi, 1984).

III

As an explanation of a wide range of *symptoms*, *zar* possession provides women patients (acting consciously or unconsciously) with an opportunity to pursue their interests and demands in a context of male dominance. Sometimes they are clearly competing with other women (e.g. co-wives) for a fuller share of their husband's attentions and regard. This may be related to difficulties or inabilities in fulfilling and sustaining men's ideal female roles as, for instance, with fertility problems. In other cases, they may be directly striving for more consideration and respect and sometimes actually competing with the head of the family for a larger slice of the domestic budget. These 'sex-war' aspects are by no means restricted to the *zar* complex. Without attempting any comprehensive survey of all similar cults elsewhere, let us look briefly at a few selected examples which are illuminating in various respects.

In African ethnography, one of the earliest and most vivid descriptions is given by Lindblom in his study of the Kamba of East Africa (Lindblom, 1920). In this society a sharp distinction is made between the local ancestral spirits which uphold morality and represent the ongoing interests of their descendants, and other, capricious spirits. These latter demons are typically spirit representations of neighbouring peoples — Masai, Galla and other tribes — including Europeans. These external or 'peripheral' spirits of foreign origin are not

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worshipped directly as the ancestors are, but regularly plague Kamba women. As elsewhere, the afflicted women 'speak with tongues' in a foreign dialect in accordance with the provenance of the invasive spirit. The spirits' demands, however, are quite clear. What they seek are gifts and attention from the menfolk, usually from the husbands, each spirit requesting things which reflect its tribal identity. Swahili spirits thus demand richly embroidered Arab-style hats, and European spirits articles which the Kamba take to symbolize European identity. Women's clothes are a popular request, so that the spirits help to enlarge the wardrobes of those they possess. That conscious deception is sometimes involved here is clearly indicated in a poignant little case history recorded by Lindblom. A woman with a craving for meat could only gain her husband's consent to the slaughter of an animal by resort to possession in which her hunger was voiced by the spirit. Unfortunately, however, once her desires were satisfied she made the serious mistake of boasting her successful deception so openly that it came to the ears of the husband who, outraged, sent her packing to her father.

Parallel cases are reported from Tanzania, where, some thirty years ago, Koritschoner described the high incidence in women of an affliction popularly called 'devil's disease' in Swahili. Again the possessing spirit, which manifests its presence by hysterical and other symptoms, demands gifts which reflect its origin. Treatment here is often a lengthy business; and involves not only the usual costly cathartic dances but also the presence for some time of the therapist within the family of the afflicted woman. In this enlightened therapy, the sick wife is made to feel the centre of attention and her husband may even be constrained to modify his behaviour towards his spouse (Koritschoner, 1936, pp. 209–217). Among the Swahili of southern Kenya, similar possession illnesses in wives, expressing conjugal strife, are treated by expensive exorcisms controlled by men. In the exorcism a sort of bargaining from a position of weakness ensues in which: 'demands made by women in marriage (for money, clothes and consumer goods) and refused, are made in the voice of a male spirit and granted. Husbands are publicly bound to provide the goods which will be used by the wife in the name of the spirit after "cure" has been effected.' (Gomm, 1975, p. 534: on patterns of Swahili possession more generally see Giles, 1987.)

Again, among the Luo of Kenya another account describes a similar cult of amoral, malevolent spirits of external origin, existing alongside

the ancestor cult which sustains local morality. The Luo ancestors cause sickness and misfortune amongst their descendants when people, neglecting customary rules, commit sins. But the foreign non-ancestral spirits, which particularly single out women for their attentions, are not concerned with administering the social code. They cause a wide range of afflictions ranging from organic illnesses to such minor troubles as constipation. Treatment, which as usual is expensive and involves dancing and feasting, is undertaken by a female shaman who summons the spirit possessing the patient and finds out what it wants. Often a victim has to be temporarily 'hospitalized' in the shaman's home, thus enjoying a pleasant respite from the work-a-day world of the hard-pressed Luo housewife. In the course of the therapy, the spirit agency involved is not so much permanently expelled as brought under control. And once pronounced fit, and restored to the bosom of her family, the wife must henceforth be treated with respect and consideration lest the dreaded affliction recur (Whisson, 1964).

Finally from East Africa, among the Taita, Grace Harris has described a similar woman's possession affliction caused by spirits other than those which sanction morality, and functioning in much the same way to exert pressure on men. Here an element which is present in many of these cathartic rituals and which is in this case particularly stressed is the assumption by possessed women of male postures and dress. Here too there is direct evidence, which is not always so well elucidated, that women actually envy men and resent the male domination which, according to some anthropologists, they should be conditioned to endure with equanimity and passive acceptance (Harris, 1957, pp. 1046–66).

The number of cults of this type in Africa is legion and we shall have space here for only one further example, from West Africa, which is particularly elaborate and well developed. Like its eastern analogue *zar*, the Hausa *bori* spirit cult of Nigeria and Niger has spread to North Africa and has a wide distribution (see e.g. Tremearne, 1914; Dermenghem, 1954; Monfouga-Nicolas, 1972; Echard, 1978; Besmer, 1983). The cult is based upon an imposing pantheon of some two hundred individually named divinities which are related amongst themselves in a manner reminiscent of the gods of ancient Greece. These spirits range in descending order of grandeur from the mighty 'King of the *jinns*' to a tiny cluster of sprites known familiarly as 'the little spots' which, despite their innocent-sounding name, are held responsible not only for a number of minor ailments but also for

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smallpox. As with many of its less expansive counterparts, this *bori* galaxy is thus not merely a census of spiritual forces, but equally a medical dictionary. Each spirit is associated with a particular group of symptoms, although there is inevitably some overlap.

Both amongst the Muslim Hausa in West Africa proper, and in its northern extension in North Africa this cult is again predominantly one of women. Women are the regular devotees in shamanistic exercises designed to cure and control the grounds of their ailments. Here, as elsewhere, in the polygynous family, women succumb to afflictions caused by these pathogenic spirits in situations of domestic conflict and strife. It is thus most significant that amongst the residual, pagan Hausa, when a man turns to embrace Islam, his wife is apt to join the *bori* cult (Last, 1979). When possessed, such wives are treated with a deference and respect which they are not otherwise accorded. Thus, as a Nigerian anthropologist has put it, wives

> manipulate *bori* episodes in such a way as to reduce their husbands to social and economic straits. Hence *bori* is not only a symbolic but also a real way of defying the male dominance which pervades Hausa society. In *bori* women find an escape from a world dominated by men; and through *bori* the world of women temporarily subdues and humiliates the world of men (Onwuejeogwu, 1969).

It is not my intention to prolong this recital of women's complaints indefinitely. A few brief examples outside Africa must, however, be given if only to indicate that what we are discussing is far from being a uniquely African syndrome. In the Polar regions, women are especially prone to contract 'Arctic hysteria' which may be diagnosed as possession by a spirit. The incidence of this affliction is highest in the harsh winter months when the struggle to survive is most acute. Gussow, who has interpreted this condition in Freudian terms, refers to the hysterical flights, to which those affected are prone, as unconscious seductive manoeuvres and invitations to male pursuit. It is, he argues, the refuge of those women who in circumstances of adversity and frustration seek loving reassurance. Stripped of its Freudian cadences, this interpretation closely parallels the line of analysis which we have been following (Gussow, 1960).

Similarly, in parts of South America, where traditional deities still uphold customary morality and are monopolized by men, we find

women prone to attack by peripheral spirits of the sort we have come to anticipate. This is the case, for instance, amongst the Mapuche of Chile, where such afflicted women may in the course of time graduate to become female shamans. The Black Carib women of British Honduras are likewise plagued by a variety of evil spirits which have no connection with the ancestors who, within a Christian framework, uphold morality. One such is a demon bush-sprite which lurks in shady places, and is particularly attracted to pregnant or menstruating women. It woos women in their dreams and inflicts sickness upon them. But the most feared of all such spirits in this culture is that described as the 'devourer', which is claimed to be known in English by the outlandish title of 'belzing-bug'. This terrifying creature can assume such various forms as a crab, snake, hen, armadillo, or iguana, and possesses girls, making them dance. The treatment of these afflictions is, as we have now learnt to expect, as rewarding to the women molested as it is economically damaging to their husbands and menfolk (Taylor, 1951).

This sex-linked possession syndrome we are tracing seems to be equally prevalent in India and in South East Asia generally. In Uttar Pradesh disaffiliated malevolent spirits, or ghosts, haunt the weak and vulnerable and those whose social circumstances are precarious. Thus the young bride 'beset by homesickness, fearful that she may not be able to present sons to her husband and his family may label her woes a form of ghost possession'. And, 'if she has been ignored and subordinated, the spirit possession may take an even more dramatic and strident form as a compensation for the obscurity under which she has laboured' (Opler, 1958, Dube, 1970). Amongst the Havik Brahmins of Mysore, where as many as twenty per cent of all women are likely to experience peripheral possession at some point in their lives, the pattern is similar. Here it is again mainly insecure young brides (or older, infertile women) who are most exposed to this form of possession. More generally, women as a class are considered weak and vulnerable and thus easily overcome by spirits which, flatteringly, are believed to be attracted by their beauty. In possession, the spirit conveys 'its' demands, causing the husband and his family to mount an expensive ceremony designed to placate it and to persuade it to leave the sick host. Until wives have gained more secure positions in their families of marriage and have given birth to heirs, the illness is liable to recur, thus granting the sick woman all the attention and influence which she is otherwise denied (Harper, 1963, pp. 165–177).

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Reports from Muslim Malaysia have, likewise, tended to focus attention on the dramatic diagnostic and healing seances of the inspired shaman (*bomoh*). More recently, however, as well as presenting a subtle analysis of the symbolism of the séance, Clive Kessler (1977) has carefully analysed the epidemiology of possession afflictions which principally affect women. There are three main categories of female victim: reluctant young brides in arranged marriages; older wives caught in the stresses of polygynous marriage with the threat of divorce; and widows and divorcees. The insidence of possession in all three cases, as Kessler (1977, p. 316) shows, 'derives from and also quite openly expresses the problematic relation between the sexes in Kelantanese peasant society'. The evidence thus confirms 'the connexion', we are tracing between 'stress, illness and possession', and 'the sexual politics involved here are, moreover, largely understood by *bomoh* and expressed . . . in the ritual therapy they employ'.

In rural Sri Lanka, the same possession pattern recurs; subordinate women are frequently beset by demons which cause sickness and voice the demands of the afflicted host very clearly. Here, as we have seen in some previous examples, there is also explicit evidence that women resent the position granted them by men: the partial alleviation which they achieve by possession does not exhaust their antagonism. Thus women frequently pray to be reborn as men and give other indications of their dissatisfaction with their lot as a sex (Obeyesekere, 1970, 1981; see also Kapferer, 1983). Again in Burma, as Spiro has shown, the cult of amoral *nat* spirits which is led by possessed women complements the official Buddhist religion dominated by men, and permits the former sex to protect and advance their interests (Spiro, 1967). Similarly, in one of the very rare sociological analyses of these phenomena in Indonesia, Freeman has reported the same patterns of married women's spirit ailments, among the Iban of western Borneo, which are attributed in this case to possession by lustful male incubi (Freeman, 1965).

In traditional Chinese culture also, women are, as ever, especially liable to possession by disaffiliated spirits and, as is well known, play an important part as mediums and shamans. Thus, in a psychiatric study in Hong Kong (to which I shall be referring again later), women in situations of domestic stress and conflict are shown to employ the same feminist strategy with similar results (Yap, 1960, pp. 114–37).

Finally, in the profusely syncretic Japanese religious tradition where a perennial shamanic current has flowed from the earliest times to the

present, possessed women have figured prominently. According to Hori (1968), the leading authority on Japanese folk religion, the generic term for shaman, or possessed medium — *miko* — implies that the role is primarily a feminine one. Historians of the ancient 'theocratic' period describe possessed female shamans acting as court oracles and, in some traditions, such inspired female shamans figure as dynastic founders. In the Heian period (784–1185), contemporary sources recount cases of aristocratic women possessed by gods and spirits in contexts of domestic strife of the kind with which we are now familiar. The eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* contains a number of striking episodes of jealous women possessed by aggressive spirits in contexts of polygynous and concubinal conflict, with the usual sex-war overtones (Bargen, 1986). This tradition of female spirit possession has persisted to the present (Blacker, 1975) and in contemporary Japan spirit possession is one of the commonest problems bringing women to seek refuge in the exorcistic Japanese 'New Religions' — whose founders are frequently possessed women (Davis, 1980). The linkage between women's spirit afflictions, and domestic conflict is, perhaps, today even more directly and pervasively evident in South Korea (see e.g. Harvey, 1979; and Kendall, 1985).

IV

It will now be clear, I think, that we are dealing with a widespread spiritual interpretation of female problems common to many cultures, whose diagnosis and treatment gives women the opportunity to gain ends (material and non-material) which they cannot readily secure more directly. Women are, in effect, making a special virtue of adversity and affliction, and, often quite literally, capitalizing on their distress. This cult of feminine frailty which, in its aetiolated form, is familiar enough to us from the swooning attacks experienced by Victorian women in similar circumstances, is admirably well adapted to the life situation of those who employ it. By being overcome involuntarily by an arbitrary affliction for which they cannot be held accountable, these possessed women gain attention and consideration and, within variously defined limits, successfully manoeuvre their husbands and menfolk.

Since the illnesses which they suffer are interpreted as malign possessions in which their personality and volition are effaced by those of the spirits, it is obviously not the women themselves who make these

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wearisome and costly demands on men. Although the spirits speaking
in various tongues, all monotonously voice the same (to male ears)
irksome requests, their enunciation in this oblique fashion makes it
possible for men to give into them without ostensibly deferring to their
wives or jeopardizing their position of dominance. And if, in the posses-
sion rituals, as they often do, women (no doubt often in mockery)
assume men's clothing and accoutrements and behave at least as
aggressively as their partners, is not imitation the sincerest form of
flattery?

Hence, within bounds which are not infinitely elastic, both men
and women are more or less satisfied: neither sex loses face and the
official ideology of male supremacy is preserved. From this perspec-
tive, the tolerance by men of periodic, but always temporary, assaults
on their authority by women appears as the price they have to pay
to maintain their enviable position. The concessions women extract
can be regarded, in turn, as 'rewards for colluding in their own oppres-
sion' (Gomm, 1975, p. 541).

In this connection the actual conceptual identity of the spirits
generally involved seems highly significant. In most cases these spirits
are either unwelcome aliens originating among hostile neighbouring
peoples, or mischievous nature sprites existing outside society and
culture. In other cases where this salient characteristic of externality
is more narrowly defined, they are either restive, disaffiliated ghosts,
or ancestors belonging to groups other than those where they cause
so much havoc. In a word, they are other peoples' spirits. They are
thus officially dissociated, as we have seen, from the overt social norms
of the communities in which they figure so frequently as sources of
affliction. This ostensibly amoral, rather than immoral quality makes
them particularly appropriate as the carriers of disease for which those
who succumb to them cannot possibly be blamed. Again, both women
and men can have a clear conscience on this score.[1]

At the same time, the special predilection which these peripheral
spirits display for women seems also peculiarly fitting. For whether
or not they be regarded as pawns in the marriage games which Lévi-
Strauss and other alliance theory enthusiasts insist men are always

[1] To appreciate the full significance of this evasive action we have to go back to
Job in the Old Testament. Like him, most tribal communities assume that a high
proportion of misfortunes and illnesses are to be interpreted as punishments for sins.
Possession by a peripheral spirit thus provides an explanation of sickness which does
not carry this implication of guilt.

playing, there is no doubt that in many, if not most societies women
are in fact treated as peripheral creatures. The peripherality of women
in this sense is, irrespective of the system of descent followed, a general
feature of all those societies in which men hold a secure monopoly of
the major power positions and deny their partners effective jural
equality. Here, of course, there is in one sense an obvious and vital
contradiction since, whatever their legal position, women are equally
essential to the perpetuation of life and of men. It is they who produce
and rear children, and play a major part in their early training and
education. Thus the treatment of women as marginal persons denies,
or at least ignores, their fundamental bio-social importance and in
social terms clashes with their deep commitment to a particular culture
and society.

Returning now to our previous argument, if, to a significant degree,
it is in terms of the marginalization of women from full participation
in social and political affairs and their final subjection to men that we
should seek to understand their marked prominence in peripheral
possession we must also remember that these cults which express sexual
and domestic tensions are yet permitted to exist by men. It seems
possible that this tolerance by men of these cults, as well as the ritual
licence and blessing also accorded to women more generally, may
reflect a shadowy recognition of the injustice of this contradiction
between the official status of women and their actual importance to
society. If, in short, women are sometimes, even in traditional societies,
explicitly envious of men, the dominant sex in turn also acts in ways
which suggest that it recognizes that women may have some ground
for complaint. This is not the only factor affecting men's interests and
behaviour however. As Roger Gomm (1975) shrewdly observes, the
redefinition of a problem of discipline (of the husband over the wife)
as a problem of possession enables men to maintain 'a stance of
competence in the face of conflicting evidence — although at a finan-
cial cost'. Moreover, the translation of a marital problem 'into one
of possession' enables all parties to co-operate in effecting a 'cure'.

These aspects are perhaps more evident when we consider the wider
elaborations of women's peripheral possession. Although I have
repeatedly used the term 'cult', so far I have concentrated on the use
made by women in their domestic situation of possession afflictions
as an oblique protest strategy against husbands and menfolk. Their
possession is diagnosed and treated as an illness. The primary emphasis
is sometimes initially on the casting out, or exorcism of the intrusive

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pathogenic spirit. But since such complaints tend to be habit-forming,
what is eventually achieved is often more in the nature of an
accommodation between the chronically possessed patient and her
familiar. The patient learns, in effect, to live with her spirit. The spirit
is thus finally 'tamed' and brought under control, but usually only
at the cost of recurrent ceremonies in its honour. This process is
normally realized by the woman concerned joining a club, or group
of other similarly placed women under the direction of a female
shaman. Such societies meet periodically to hold dances and feasts for
the spirits in which their members incarnate their familiars and perform
rituals in their honour.

As long as we maintain the external view — which men endorse
— that all these activities are designed to combat sickness and disease,
we can consider them as directly therapeutic in intention. They are
essentially cures, and in psychiatric terms, the cult meetings assume
much of the character of group therapy sessions. (This is an aspect
of their character which we shall discuss more fully later.) However,
from reports of the elaborate, if furtive, ritual procedures involved —
and from which men are rigorously excluded — it is abundantly clear
that such occasions are for the women themselves more in the nature
of religious services. Thus the healing cult is, for its participants, a
clandestine religion, and women are for once exercising a double
standard. What men reluctantly accept at face value as illness and cure,
the weaker sex enjoys as a religious drama. What is for both initially
an illness, thus becomes for women a traumatic induction into a cult
group. Consequently, we have here a feminist sub-culture, with an
ecstatic religion restricted to women and protected from male attack
through its representation as a therapy for illness. Just as with those
other possession cults involving men, which occupy a central position
in society and where the royal road to divine election lies through
affliction, so also here what begins in suffering ends in religious ecstasy.

These apparently contradictory, but in reality highly compatible,
elements are all present in tarantism as it survives today in southern
Italy and Sardinia. This, as we saw in the previous chapter, is officially
an illness caused by the bite of the dreaded tarantula spider. But since,
of the two tarantula spiders, the one whose bite is actually harmless
is that selected as the ostensible cause of this disease, there is clearly
more to tarantism than at first appears. Other considerations fully
confirm this suspicion. Those who have been 'bitten' once, re-
experience the effects of the 'bite' at regular, often annual, intervals.

The bite can also even run in families. Its first occurrence coincides
with the experience of stress and conflict by the victim. And women,
though they are actually less likely to be in contact with the real taran-
tula which could cause their symptoms, are much more prone to
contract this disease than men. That we are concerned here with
something much more exalted and arcane than the effects of a real
spider bite, is further indicated by the rich mythology and ritual which,
contrary to the apparently non-mystical aetiology of the affliction, lies
at the heart of tarantism.

In the first place, the spider involved is no ordinary insect but a
macabre cultural construct ambiguously connected with St Paul.
Following the celebrated incident with the serpents in Malta, it is this
saint who alone is credited with the gift of curing the bite; and what
he cures, he also causes. So the Apostle Paul is ambivalently assimilated
to the mystical spider, and in Apulia the rites of exorcism now take
place mainly at shrines dedicated to him. In the province of Salente,
where tarantism has been studied on the spot by the Italian scholar,
de Martino, the main ceremonies take place in St Paul's chapel in
the church at Galatina. Here the participants assemble annually on
the saint's feast-day in June and dance and sing to the accompani-
ment of rhythmic clapping. Those who seek a cure and those who come
to celebrate their recovery, summon the saint with the invocation: 'My
St Paul of the Tarantists who pricks the girls in their vaginas: My St
Paul of the Serpents who pricks the boys in their testicles.'

This strangely incongruous identification of the libertine spider with
the ascetic Apostle is not as wayward as it appears. For in earlier
centuries, the revelries of the tarantists certainly had a highly erotic
character, echoing the frenzied dancing of the maenads of Dionysus
from which there is some reason to suppose they may actually have
developed. And since tarantism today involves possession by the hybrid
spider-saint (for that is what the 'bite' really signifies), the expression
of this in the language of physical love is, as we have now so often
seen, far from unusual. The recognition of the saint's special power
to cure the affliction has thus enabled what was probably, in origin,
a pre-Christian and possibly once Dionysian popular cult to be
accommodated within the local practice of Christianity.

What is clearly involved here today is a loosely Christianized
peripheral cult practised mainly by peasant women. As in the other
examples we have considered, entry to the cult is achieved by
succumbing to an illness for which the mythical tarantula is held

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responsible. Treatment consists of the usual cathartic dance rituals conducted traditionally in the patient's own home to the tune of the tarantella, but held increasingly today in the saint's chapel. As elsewhere, all this is a costly business for, while the church profits (as well as the patient), heavy expenses fall upon the victim's husband and male kin. Once bitten, the subject is normally bound to the spider-saint for life. The symptoms reappear at regular intervals, being interpreted as further bites by the original spider, and abate only after the dance in its honour has been celebrated. The association of the spider with St Paul, and of the principal curing ceremonies with his feast day, incorporates the cult within the church calendar.

A typical example of the onset and subsequent treatment of the bite will show how everything that has been said previously of these cults applies equally here (de Martino, 1966, pp. 75 ff). A girl, whose father had died when she was thirteen, was brought up in poor circumstances by an aunt and uncle. At the age of eighteen Maria fell in love with a boy who, since his family disapproved of the match because of the girl's poverty, subsequently abandoned her. Maria suffered much from this. One Sunday while gazing listlessly out of her window, she was 'bitten' by the spider and felt constrained to dance. About the same time, a woman of the district began to think of Maria as a possible spouse for her son. When a suitable occasion presented itself, the mother asked Maria to accept her boy in marriage. To gain time, Maria, who was not attracted by the proposal, pleaded that she had not sufficient money to make a trousseau, because of her outlays to musicians for her tarantist dance treatment.

At this point, St Paul providentially appeared, ordering Maria not to marry, and summoning her in mystical union with himself. Shortly afterwards, however, the son and his mother succeeded in luring Maria out to a deserted farm and forced her to live there in shame. After a little time, a quarrel occurred when her mortal spouse brusquely ordered her to iron his clothes. And as she went out to return the iron she had borrowed from a neighbour, she met St Peter and St Paul who said to her: 'Leave the iron and come with us.' When Maria replied, 'And my husband, what of him?' she was told not to worry on that account. This incident occurred on a Sunday, exactly at the time of day when she had been bitten before. After hearing the saint's words, Maria was absent for three days, wandering through the fields. When she returned, she danced, as a result of the second bite, for nine days. With this curious love-bite the saint sought to remind Maria of

her holy tryst. Finally, Maria achieved a compromise between the rival interests of her human and spiritual spouses. She agreed to a formal marriage with her human seducer while continuing to celebrate her spiritual union by an annual recrudescence of her affliction in time to participate in the ceremonies on the saint's feast-day.

Thus, constrained by circumstances to marry a man she did not want, Maria continued to pay periodical tribute to the tarantula and to the saint, reviving on each occasion, in the symbolism of the rite, the original adventure of the bite of love and being cured at the same time through the grace of her celestial husband. What had begun as an affliction attributed to the demonic spider, had found its apotheosis in a peculiarly intimate communion with St Paul. And while Maria was thus able to control her illness through her annual participation in the Pauline rites at Galatina, this whole pattern of action was highly expressive of her plight. Through these recurrent outbreaks, followed by treatment at the shrine, Maria was able to sustain her condemnation of her forced marriage, making conjugal life difficult, imposing severe economic stress on the family which she did not love, and flagrantly calling public attention to her problems. If she could not radically remedy her situation, at least she could continue to protest at it in a religious idiom which men could condone as a divinely sanctioned therapy.

V

To understand fully the dynamics of this and other peripheral healing cults, we have to distinguish clearly between a 'primary' and 'secondary' phase in the onset and treatment of possession. In the primary phase, women become ill in contexts of domestic strife and their complaints are diagnosed as possession. The secondary phase is inaugurated when possession bouts become chronic, and the afflicted wife is inducted into what may become permanent membership of the possession cult group. In the course of time, she may then graduate to the position of female shaman, diagnosing the same condition in other women, and thus perpetuating what men tend to regard, uncharitably, as a vicious circle of female extortion. Thus what is considered to begin with as an uncontrolled, unsolicited, involuntary possession illness readily develops into an increasingly controlled, and voluntary religious exercise. The climax in this cycle occurs when the role of shaman is assumed by those women who, in full control of their