

porary (both modern and modernizing) societies. Possessed women appear in various New Age religions in the United States.

The most common remedy for harmful possession is exorcism. In parts of Africa, however, the diagnosis of possession is often considered a step toward accommodation with the possessing spirit. This usually requires membership in a cult group that provides for the periodic "feasting" of the spirits.

Societies vary in the amount of importance given to possession beliefs. Bali, for example, has many different types of such beliefs associated with different social roles. Healers and diviners are usually women. Kris dancers may be both men and women. Masked actors in possession trance dramas are men, although they may impersonate female characters. Hobby horse possession trancers are men. Entranced little girls who, possessed by a village deity, dance on the shoulders of men, are a particularly striking example of Balinese possession trancers.

Why women predominate among possession trancers has been a subject of debate. Suggested reasons include female psychophysiology (hysteria, calcium deficiency), women's conservatism, and their response to an inferior social status. No single explanation accounts for all examples.

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See also Possession Cults.

ERIKA BOURGUIGNON

Possession Cults

The term *possession cults* may be said to refer to communities of women and men creating ceremonial opportunities to manifest a spiritual personality through the body of one or several of the participants. *Possession* refers to the interpretation of an altered state of consciousness experienced by a usually trained participant as being the manifestation of the personality of a spirit. *Cult* refers to the communal action usually deemed necessary to manifest and interact with the spiritual person in or through the body of the human participant.

Though the terms *possession* and *cult* have a robust history of usage in social scientific literature, both present barriers to understanding the phenomena they seek to describe. The former has been sensationalized in novels and films to suggest an anomic, pathological, or demonic invasion of the personality, where the latter suggests inauthentic and authoritarian religiosity. Though the phenomena described in scholarly literature as possession cults may not be free of pathology or inauthenticity these religious traditions are characterized by communal, sanctioned action that brings about important, even uplifting, contact with the presence and power of a spiritual person.

To avoid the pejorative associations of both terms we may prefer to privilege the participants' interpretation of the phenomena and speak of spirit "manifestation," "incorporation," or "mediumship." And inasmuch as traditions of spirit manifestation are considered contacts with a sacred world, they may be better termed "religions."

Following the pioneering work of Erika Bourguignon, researchers have organized their interest in these religions in two directions: understanding the state of mind of those experiencing spirit manifestation; and examining the interpretations of their behavior developed by the religious communities concerned with them.

The experience itself has been characterized as trance, dissociation, fugue states, hysteria, hallucinations, cataplexy, epilepsy, hypnosis, and somnambulism. Though attempts have been made to distinguish various types of behavior, researchers have found the distinctions too rigid and the phenomena too fluid for categories to be useful. Bourguignon herself subsumes all related experiences as "altered states of consciousness," while Felicitas Goodman prefers "trance" as a general term.

Certain generalizations can be made about the neurophysiology of spirit manifestation. According to Goodman, those undergoing manifestation are likely to breathe more deeply, perspire more readily, blush,

tremble, twitch, and tense their muscles. Their heart rates increase and blood pressures drop. These phenomena are likely occasioned by—though not necessarily caused by—external stimuli such as fasting, exhaustion, or sensory deprivation or overload. In some contexts chemical catalysts may be employed, such as tobacco, cannabis, alcohol, or other psychotropic substances.

It is important to bear in mind that the altered states themselves are conditioned by cultural expectation and that the experiences of those in these states are patterned after the community's interpretation of them. Nowhere is this more important than in the question of the individuals' relative awareness of their own behavior when manifesting spirits. Janice Boddy asked Asia, a medium in the *zar* tradition of Sudan, about her experience while manifesting a spirit and was told: "You forget who you are, your village, your family, you know nothing from your life. You see with the eyes of the spirit until the drumming stops" (Boddy, 1989, p. 350). Karen Brown's Haitian teacher Alourdes told her, "When the spirit in your body, in your head, you don't know nothing. They [the other participants] have to tell you what the spirit say, what message he leave for you" (Brown, 1991, p. 353). Maya Deren refers to her own experience during a Haitian vodou ceremony as "white darkness" (Deren, 1953, p. 247). Each of these examples suggests slightly different kinds of awareness that may serve different purposes for the communities involved. Goodman maintains that the memory of the trance experience is dependent on the expectation of the community rather than the desire of the individual.

Researchers have focused on reports of awareness and amnesia in their interpretations of the function of spirit manifestation and the special prominence of women as mediums and leaders of traditions where it plays a central role. The most influential theory concerning the role of women in religions of spirit manifestation is that of the British social anthropologist I. M. Lewis. Lewis seeks to explain the prevalence of what he terms "ecstatic religion" among marginalized and subordinated groups within a given society, notably women in male-dominated societies. He draws a functional, or in his words "operational," connection between the social and economic deprivation suffered by women throughout the world and their resort to spirit manifestation as compensation for their sufferings. Stemming from his extensive fieldwork among *zar* communities in Somalia, and drawing examples from other traditions worldwide, Lewis argues that spirit manifestation offers women attention, status, catharsis, and redress denied them by male authority and unavailable to them by any other culturally acceptable



A woman falls into a possession trance during a vodou ceremony, Haiti (Philip Gould/Corbis).

means. When manifesting spirits women receive the elaborate courtesies and respect accorded to sacred beings. Not the least of these perquisites in poor societies is the access to rich and fancy foods appropriate to the spirits. Behaviors usually deemed unacceptable for women, including demands for political, economic, or social power, can be expressed and to a certain extent realized through spirit manifestation.

Basing his generalizations on the *zar* traditions, Lewis concludes that religions of spirit manifestation negotiate power between the genders in male-dominated societies. Spirit manifestation is looked upon by men as a kind of illness requiring the therapy of ceremonial indulgence of the manifested spirit. For women, however, spirit manifestation is seen as a "clandestine ecstasy." It is "an oblique aggressive strategy" carried out by women to compensate for exclusion from male privilege and to redress the imbalance of power.

It is the attribution of "clandestine" and "oblique" functions to religions of spirit manifestation that reveals the limitations of Lewis's approach. It is one thing to demonstrate that the results of the practice of spirit manifestation are compensatory and another to speculate that the participants are acting so as to achieve compensation. Here the awareness of the medium becomes particularly relevant. If the medium's account of her own experience is that she is not self-aware during spirit manifestation, then one must attribute to her unconscious motivations and assume she is gaining unconscious rewards. Finally, Lewis's theories of "oblique" compensation presuppose that women are seeking the kind of power withheld from them by men. Given that

spirit manifestation is a global phenomenon in 437 of 488 cultures surveyed by Bourguignon, it ought to be argued that it is a normal dimension of religious experience. From this viewpoint it is the lack of spirit manifestation that is more likely to be compensatory rather than its presence. Susan Starr Sered asks if it may be that male socialization prevents such a common cultural experience among men. Goodman is yet more forthright, seeing the ability to manifest spirits as a "genetic endowment" of all human beings.

Compensatory or not, spirit manifestation is a central feature in women's spirituality throughout the world. Sered finds it the key religious experience in nine of the twelve traditions that she documents as "religions dominated by women." She argues that religions of spirit manifestation stress interpersonal and familial relationships, which are of particular relevance and concern to women. The sharing of the medium's body by her own personality as well as that of the spirit parallels the experience of pregnancy and child rearing. Primary relationships are most frequently understood in terms of mothers and daughters, while initiation is seen as giving birth to the spirit as well as the new life of human initiates. The very act of spirit manifestation is a kind of giving birth with its attendant throes, altered states of consciousness, creativity, and nurture.

While spirit manifestation may provide a refuge and protest against restrictive views of gender, it also parallels the ego formation of women in most societies, stressing relatedness and connection over objectivity and separation. Sered argues that this view brings together theories of spirit manifestation among women with participants' explanation of their own experience. In the words of Maria-José, a Brazilian priestess of *macumba*: "From the beginning women are more open to trances—they have fewer obstacles in their minds than men. . . . Women have a much deeper relationship with themselves than men do. A more direct tie—how should I say—to who they really are (Bramly, 1977, p. 117).

Religions of spirit manifestation are traditions throughout the world that have fostered women's creativity and leadership. They have provided access to spiritual power independent of the hierarchical institutions of the world religions and have supported an embodied spirituality that has uniquely reflected women's concerns and hopes.

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See also Cults; Self; Shamans.

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Postmodernism

Because of the highly contested nature of the term, it is impossible to define *postmodernism*. Its central preoccupations do not constitute a radical break with modernity, but rather a restructuring of many of its elements to bring them to intellectual prominence. Relations between power and knowledge, subjectivity, difference, heterogeneity, fragmentation, and otherness, or "alterity," are key concepts in postmodernist discourse. But these concepts have always been present in discourses of modernity as "counterdiscourses," sometimes subordinate or subterranean to the prevailing discourses where knowledge exercises coercion and conformity to hegemonic norms. Although postmodernism tries to expose the ways in which difference and otherness have been marginalized or rendered deviant in modernist discourses, it is often difficult to distinguish between what Hal Foster (1983) calls a "postmodernism of resistance" and a more reactionary "repudiation of modernism." The distinction is crucial for feminist theory, which remains heavily influenced by postmodernism. Critical theories affirming difference, nonidentity, specificity, and plurality have been used effectively by feminist theorists challenging the androcentric hegemony of academic disciplines that have disregarded or ignored women's contribution to various fields of knowledge. There are conceptual traps for feminist theory within postmodernism, such as the repudiation of notions of the autonomous subject, which, if taken too far, threaten to extinguish the efforts of feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether to effect the recognition of the "full humanity of women." The goals of women's liberation are unrealizable in the absence of a