AFRICAN
THERAPEUTIC
SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT: Among the Iteso of Kenya virtually all married women claim to be possessed by spirits of the dead. Their husbands will hotly deny that this is the case. In many African societies women are subject to possession to a far greater degree than are men. Our research among the Iteso raised this issue in a very acute form when we visited a neighboring society who are culturally related to the Iteso. We found that women in this other society were not subject to the same kind of possession hysteria. We also found that women had a much greater freedom in what are primarily male spheres of activity in Iteso society. In this paper we look at the social correlates of the high rate of spirit possession among women in Iteso society. Essentially we shall examine four topics. In the first we examine the image of women in the Iteso world view and relate this image to Iteso beliefs about the causes of misfortune. In the second section we will look at how Iteso deal with misfortune, especially illnesses. We will show that women are both the cause of and the agents who are responsible for curing misfortune. In the third section we examine beliefs about the spirits of the dead and show that they can provide for women an alternative means of explaining illnesses which they are believed to cause. Finally we show how the ceremony for the cure of spirit possession dramatizes women's work, and that the central theme of Iteso traditional religion is a concern with ensuring the conditions in which women can reproduce the society under conditions of health.

Many anthropology textbooks, especially the newer ones, discuss the relationship between the sexes in terms of the different rights and duties that men and women have and in terms of the different ideas found in each society about men and women. What is missing in anthropological discussions is an understanding of the different problems and experiences that men and women face. That these differences can have consequences for the persons involved and the societies was brought home to us while we were living with and doing research among the Iteso of western Kenya. Two experiences illustrated to us some of the different ways that women in particular had to relate to their social environment.

Patty decided to spend a week in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, in order to have some medical tests performed that were unavailable out in the African "bush." We decided not to tell the persons in our homestead so as not to make a big deal out of routine medical examinations. In any case, it is a norm of American society that each household is a relatively independent unit and what goes on in one household is not the business of another. Ivan was going to spend the week collecting information on ritual and economic activities. Because it was the rainy season and the area we lived in was not served by public transportation, we asked a friend who had been visiting us to take Patty to the nearest large town so she could take the bus to Nairobi. Patty and our friend Peter drove off. Ivan found his week curiously unsatisfactory. Friends and informants avoided him, and the people of the homestead where we were living were particularly distant. This was puzzling as we had established very warm relationships with our neighbors. We had been fitted into the local kinship system on a fictitious basis, and the old man and woman who lived closest to us had become Ivan's father and mother and Patty's father- and mother-in-law. This is particularly important in Iteso culture because a man's mother exercises a close and supervisory relationship over her son's wife, especially at the beginning of a marriage. As we were a young couple, and obviously ignorant of how to behave, we were taken under their wing and given extra attention. During that week Ivan's mother and father, as well as the rest of our neighbors, avoided him.

After a week Ivan drove to the nearest town to pick up Patty and we returned to our home the next day. Within a half hour of our return we heard the sound of drums. Our neighbors came running carrying pots of beer. Within moments an impromptu party had broken out in our house. Clearly we were celebrating—but what? We slowly came to discover the cause of the celebration. Patty was given a severe scolding by her mother-in-law about her irresponsibility. How dare she leave home without telling the persons responsible for her behavior? What was she doing? What kind of wife was she? Days later, Ivan's closest Iteso friend asked one of those questions that often give anthropologists insights into the implicit assumptions in terms of which behavior is interpreted. Ivan was asked, "Do you Americans let your wives go off by themselves to places like Nairobi?" We did. Why? "Well, how can you prevent them from fooling around?" From the Iteso point of view, women are not sexually responsible beings. This is true not only from a male perspective. Iteso women were equally agreed that Patty had probably run off with our friend and this is why everyone had avoided Ivan. They were embarrassed by his loss. These and other instances gave us a clear indication that women were regarded as less than fully adult in Iteso society.

Our experience with the Iteso contrasted with a visit we paid to the Nandi people who lived nearby. Among the Nandi, women have a great deal more power over their lives. Women own shops, act as leaders in communities, and in a few circumstances, a very successful woman will assume the role of a man and marry a wife. When we told the Iteso about the Nandi, they refused to believe us. We began to investigate the way Iteso women dealt with their image and role and asked ourselves how their experience of subordination presented difficulties to them. This
I teso society, the almost universal claim of married women living with spirits of the dead / Karp

women are responsible for and associated with fertility and husband's lineage, all of the descendants in the male line, is image and role of women in I teso society.

Investigation helped us to explain another striking aspect of I teso women who are associated with the forces of evil. As in many other societies, both African and non-African, the I teso look at the world in terms of polar opposites. A person's right hand, for example, is called akan nak'akiliokit, the man's hand, while the left hand is called akan nak'aberu, the woman's hand. We discovered this quite by accident one day when an old woman showed us a sore on her right hand in hopes that we would have the medicine to cure it. She extended her hand explaining that it was most important that she be cured because it was akan nak'akiliokit. Because that was not a sufficient explanation for two non-I teso, she went on to explain that the right hand is called the man's hand because it, like men, is the strong and superior hand. Not only did she need her right hand in order to carry out her daily duties, but she must pass food, her beer straw, and shake hands only with her right hand. To do so with her left hand would be a gross insult to whomever she was in contact with. The left hand, the old woman explained, was weak and inferior, like women. Hence its name, the woman's hand.

This illustrates an important association, men with strength and superiority, and women with weakness and inferiority. As we discussed these associations with I teso, it became more and more clear that these ideas defined the way in which women were thought of and influenced the manner in which they were treated. I teso say the east is to the right and the west is to the left. With the east they associate the rising of the sun, and with that light, health and well-being. When someone is ill, the words “let there be light” are spoken as everyone faces the direction east. This signifies a collective desire for the return to health and well-being for the person being prayed for. The west, on the other hand, is associated with the moon, darkness, sickness, and death. The wind which blows from the west, and usually during the night, is said to bring many diseases to the people in their homes. These diseases include smallpox, consumption, and a disease called ecom. Ecom has several symptoms, most of which can also be the symptoms of other common tropical diseases. The word ecom actually means baboon and the disease usually attacks children. Baboons cause ecom through their bad smell which is carried into homes on the west wind. It is ritually cured by a ceremony called akilong ecom, or washing the baboon. Baboons are animals associated with the bush as opposed to the domestic animals found in the home.

We may now see that I teso associate women with the left, weakness, inferiority, the west, moon, darkness, and illness. The diseases that we mentioned above are all intrusions of the bush into the home. The bush is any area outside the gate of the thorn-bush fence surrounding a home. But women also are associated with the bush which is the origin of disease, death, and disruption. This exposes an essential paradox of I teso thought. Women, who are symbolically associated with the bush and with the forces that disrupt homes, actually live in homes. In the home women carry out their duties and responsibilities, including both routine and everyday activities and the ritual obligations that will safeguard their homes from harm.

This paradox serves to help us explain I teso attitudes toward women and the emotional behavior that is expected of them. Women are considered to be emotional creatures and their behavior at funerals shows this to be true. During a funeral, I teso women wail, cry, and throw themselves to the ground. We attended one funeral where a woman flung herself to the ground as the corpse was being lowered into the grave. She bruised herself badly, but accepted it as part of the normal suffering which occurs when a person attends a funeral. After that misfortune, however, other women were restrained by their friends, and sometimes by men, in order to keep them from hurting themselves. While no other injuries of that magnitude occurred there, we were told of numerous women who sustained cracked ribs and broken limbs while going through normal mourning procedures. This, by contrast with the quiet, solemn, almost indifferent behavior of men at funerals, is considered to be emotional and uncontrollable behavior on the part of women.

This highly charged emotional quality of women's behavior also has positive aspects. Women are the ones who express emotion for both men and women. They are entitled to do this as women, just as men are prohibited from showing emotion because they are men. This was made clear at a court case which we attended where three children were awarded to the father rather than to the mother. The children cried and screamed in protest. How sad, everyone said, because it is well known that children love their mothers more than their fathers, for I teso women are allowed to express an important emotion to the children, that of love, while men cannot be so demonstrative. Being a man also has its costs in I teso society.

The social role of women is also defined by a set of duties peculiar to that role. Among the I teso, a girl is called apese until she marries; then she is called aberu which means “wife,” but also “woman.” The social behavior that defines a person as a woman is the same as that which defines her as a wife and mother. The duties of a wife and mother are routine ones, but they also have symbolic significance.

Firstly, a woman must carry out all domestic duties including those necessary for the growing, preparing, and cooking of food at her hearth for her husband and children. The I teso are a polygynous society, and many men take more than one wife. In the neighborhood in which we lived over half of the married women shared their husband with another woman. Each wife has her own hut for herself and her children. While the husband has a sleeping hut of his own, he goes from wife to wife for sexual favors and is, at least in theory, obliged to spend equal amounts of time with each wife. Each wife and her children make up a separate segment of the household. Feeding herself, her husband, and her children, a wife must sow, weed, harvest, thresh, grind, gather firewood, draw and carry water, and cook. Husbands are ritually prohibited from engaging in most of these activities. I teso say that if a man does any of these things, he would be endangering the life of his wife. They also say that if a man were to perform any of these activities, he would actually be wishing his wife dead.

Secondly, a woman must allow her husband rights of sexual access except when ritually prohibited. Intercourse is usually prohibited only during menstruation. There is a different standard of sexual morality for men and women. It is not frowned upon when it becomes known that a man engages in extra-marital relationships. If a woman is found
doing this, on the other hand, she is either punished by her husband or taken to court. This different set of standards is commonly found in polygynous societies where men have more than one wife. In fact, a reason frequently given by women for their desire to have their husband marry another wife is that he will restrict his sexual activities to the home and not pick up and infect them with a venereal disease.

Thirdly, a wife must entertain and brew beer for her husband’s visitors. Drinking beer is one of the most common, but also one of the most important, of all Iteso social activities. Beer is brewed on practically every occasion. Beer must be served at all of the occasions.

Finally, a woman is responsible for the well-being and comfort of her children. She must see that they are well fed, clothed, kept healthy, and cared for when sick. A husband and father, while he loves his children and desires many, is not responsible for any of these duties which the wife and mother must carry out for them.

As we have said, the social role of women is defined by the set of duties which they perform. There is further recognition of this social definition which can be seen by looking at a group of domestic rituals called italia, after the word which means taboo. Several of these rituals are concerned with the status of the household when illness or misfortune strikes it. One of the major components of these ceremonies is the ritual performance by the woman of her everyday tasks.

These ritual performances of the everyday duties and activities of women dramatize both the image and the definition of women that is found in Iteso society. The rituals provide a symbolic recognition that the continuity and well-being of the society is bound up in women’s work. For Iteso, women’s work defines women and is also seen in ritual and religious terms as of crucial importance to the survival of the household and lineages which compose Iteso society. The Iteso would seem to recognize and give validity to one of our own folk sayings, that women’s work is never done. The Iteso recognize that they live in a highly uncertain environment where the consequences of illness and disease are likely to be death. By their work, women are responsible for averting these misfortunes.

Iteso see their society as made up of households and lineages. For them, women play an essential role in the reproduction and perpetuation of these groups. However, in Iteso conception the activities and work of women, which are so terribly important, are also terribly uncertain. This is the essence of what anthropologists often call “the problem of women.” For the Iteso the problem of women is that women are essential for the reproduction of their society. But the fact that they are essential does not make them either reliable or effective. We may relate this to the paradoxical position in which women find themselves. They are associated with and often responsible for the very misfortunes and diseases that it is their duty to ward off. Hence the attitude of Iteso men and women toward women is highly ambivalent. This explains why our neighbors were so pleased that Patty had not deserted her husband at the same time they were so ready to believe that she had run off.

From our perspective, Iteso women are in a position of considerable difficulty. The primary responsibility for the care and health of children and for the reproduction of the society rests on them. In addition they are associated with the very forces that are seen as the causes of illness and misfortune that attack households that they are required to protect. This contradictory and paradoxical situation is further complicated by environmental conditions in which they take place. The Iteso live in highly uncertain climatic and medical environments. One out of every five years there is too much rain. The Iteso adapt by planting a complex variety of crops that they hope will ensure some return no matter what the weather. They are familiar with hunger, however. Their medical environment is no more certain. Children are infested with a variety of tropical parasites and chronic malaria and dysentery are common. In the recent past they experienced smallpox epidemics and when we left Kenya in 1971 there was concern over an outbreak of cholera. Traditionally women could expect less than half of their children to live to become adults, and they are well aware of the probabilities. At the time of our research there were no medical doctors to serve the 400,000 people of Busing District, the area where the Iteso live.

The result is that whatever means Iteso women take to fulfill their role are bound to be ineffective. Iteso women are not women’s liberationists and they accept the definition of themselves that is available to them in Iteso society. How then do they cope with the evidence of and the blame for their failure to succeed in their role? One means that Iteso women have is to shift the responsibility for their failure to perform their work properly onto the spirits of the dead. Virtually all adult women, as we mentioned, claim to be possessed. Spirit possession is regarded by Iteso as a disease. The symptoms of this disease are weakness, inability to perform work, and generalized stomach and body pain. Many possessed women complain of joint pains. These are also the symptoms of any number of diseases in the Iteso framework of medicine and could also be the result of chronic tropical diseases. Spirit possession is diagnosed through a ceremony performed by persons (almost always women) who have been cured of the disease and joined a cult of possession. Drums and gourds are played in a variety of traditional rhythms after the patient has been ritually prepared. A chick is placed on her head and if she is possessed, she begins to tremble and the chick falls off. Then the patient begins to dance by herself. She often throws herself about wildly and has to be restrained by members of the cult in order to prevent her from hurting herself. The Iteso say that the possessing spirit “comes to rest on the head” of the patient and takes possession of her. The spirit speaks wildly and often in languages the patient does not know. The spirit may make unreasonable demands. At one session we attended the spirit demanded a motor car and a trip to America.

The pattern of demands may suggest that women feign possession in order to extract attention and goods from their families. It has been asserted by anthropologists that spirit possession is a form of sex warfare. Our information indicates otherwise. Our personal experience and the accounts of women we questioned lead us to believe that the trance state they go into in the seance is genuine. The atmosphere is very suggestive; the music, lighting, and audience are all conducive to a trance state. In addition there is experimental evidence to indicate that under similar conditions trance is easily produced. While enjoying this in several ceremonies, we felt ourselves begin to slip into a trance state and it took considerable effort to resist it. If we had believed that possession was real, resistance would probably have been impossible. Women to whom we talked seemed genuinely confused about what had happened during the seance. They described the experience as one of heightened bodily sensations, increased awareness of heart beating, breathing, and so on; and then they remembered
very little. It was clear to us that they had to process information during trance, but that the trance was genuine. This does not mean that there was no disagreement over whether to perform a spirit possession ceremony. The cost can be considerable and men have other uses for their income. Generally, we found that men believed in spirit possession but were reluctant to admit that their wives were possessed. Women thought that there was a greater incidence of possession than men.

After a successful diagnosis a series of cures are performed. These cures involve increasingly complicated and expensive rituals, many of which are borrowed from neighboring societies. The center of the curing ritual, however, always remains the same and is identical with parts of the domestic rituals that we discussed earlier. Women's work is dramatically reenacted, culminating in the possessed woman ritually feeding her own children. The ritual that is designed to cure Iteso women of spirit possession expresses the same desires as many other Iteso rituals. They are attempts to achieve a state where women can perform their work in such a way that the work will be successful. They are attempts by women to create an environment whereby they can reproduce the social order.

An important feature of spirit possession among the Iteso is that, while the focus of attention in the rituals designed to cure spirit possession is upon the restoration of productive and protective powers, the agent responsible for the disruption of a woman's productive powers is no longer the woman. Instead, it is the spirit of the dead person who is afflicting the woman. Thus, possession by spirits of the dead provide an alternate explanation for the failure of women, inevitable from our point of view, successfully to perform their role. This conclusion is confirmed by our observation that virtually all of the women in our neighborhood who had had actual cures for spirit possession performed for them had been afflicted with what we call an interruption of fertility before their cure. Either a child had died in birth or at a very young age or there had been a series of severe illnesses in the family or the woman had reached menopause.

As explanations for the causes of illness and misfortune, spirits of the dead share important features in common with Iteso women. Unlike many other African societies the Iteso do not believe that the spirits of dead persons are the guardians of morality. They do not punish someone because he has failed to perform his duties towards them. The Iteso believe that spirits of the dead are amoral and irresponsible. After a person dies his spirit is believed to make a slow progress into the deep bush, where he then resides. Rituals are performed by the dead person's family to help aid the orderly progress. Unfortunately spirits of the dead are very reluctant to live in the bush. They like to hang around homes and are greedy for offerings of beer and meat in sacrifices. Hence they possess people who wander near to them. If they would go to live in the bush, as they are supposed to, they would not possess anyone. The spirits of the dead are like women in that they are unpredictable and irresponsible. Also like women they mediate two opposed spheres of life. Women are creatures of the home who wander in and are associated with the bush. Spirits of the dead are creatures of the bush who wander in and disrupt homes. Affliction caused by spirits of the dead relieves women of the responsibility for those inevitable misfortunes that will disrupt their homes. Women who have been cured of spirit possession often have a new lease on life and return to their work with a renewed vigor and seemed to us better able to cope with a very demanding life. While we may not agree with the solutions that Iteso women have found to their problems, we may sympathize with their situations.