Power and Capacity in Rituals of Possession

Spirit possession must surely be one of the most written-about subjects in the subdiscipline known as "anthropology of religion." A single researcher would have difficulty in reviewing the literature on spirit possession in African societies alone.

This literature has been subjected to a number of interpretations and exhibits diverse perspectives. Lewis (1971) still has provided the most extensive summary. He considered possession to be a strategy used by the powerless to achieve goals when they lack access to legitimately available means and resources. Lewis' interpretation echoed Robert Merton's (1956) functionalist argument that actors pursue illegitimate means when they are otherwise blocked from achieving socially ascribed goals. The parallel is probably not intended but is instructive nonetheless.

Functionalist arguments animate the literature on spirit possession, even as scholars regularly attack functionalism as anthropological sin. I have no particular animus towards functionalist explanations as long as they account for the criteria by which agents produce their actions. Of course this is not easy in discussing phenomena such as spirit possession...
in Africa, in which the knowing subject is dispossessed by an other. Possession is by definition interpretatively opaque, but people do use culturally available ideas about possession, even when they cannot provide reports based on personal experience.

When explanations move immediately from cause to consequence without considering the intervening variables of culture, history, and society, problems arise. Even Wilson (1967), in his important critique of Lewis, accepted that one can explain the rate of possession without examining local concepts of person and action. Wilson replaced Lewis' idea that possession is the product of competition over household resources between husband and wife by positing competition between co-wives as the condition that explains possession. Neither scholar examined what possession means or how it fits with different historical conditions.

Those studies that do attempt to examine possession and meaning have their own flaws. They tend to reduce possession to individual needs, just as they deny that possession is one of the tactics of social life (Crapanzano and Garrison 1977). The difficulty is not that they lack a theory of meaning; they do see possession as a mechanism for responding to problems of meaning experienced by the actors. The meanings they unpack, however, are related to psychological and experiential dilemmas that are a result only of the social situation of the people involved. Thus, meaning is not as transparent and universal in these psychologically oriented studies as it is for those who interpret spirit possession as manifesting easily understood strategies. But meaning is still reduced to the relationships of individuals and situations. The meaning of possession is not related to world view or ontological concerns, such as how persons are defined and judged.

The most interesting set of studies remains Crapanzano and Garrison's edited volume, but their failure to examine possession in terms of the meaning it has for the agents has consequences. The first is that the authors do not seek to understand how the actors' definition of the structures of their natural and social world makes rituals of possession appear to them as the most effective course of action by which suffering can be alleviated. The question they do not ask is "How do local concepts of being lead to possession as a rational choice of action?" The problem here is also one of rationality. Possession can be shown to be a rational choice for action, but one must be careful to examine local rationalities. It is too easy to assume that the market-oriented criteria of western rationality are universal.

None of these studies acknowledges that possession phenomena have a history and may be responses to changing social and historical circumstances. Universal explanations of possession cannot possibly work across time and space. The studies of Fry (1976) and Lan (1986) are the results of a more historical perspective, in which possession phenomena are tied to changing political conditions. I have little doubt after reading Fry and Lan that possession can be related to resistance to the imposition of alien rule and a means of political assertion under conditions of domination.

I do not want to dismiss functionalism and its aftermath out of hand. All of these studies uncover an element that is critical for interpreting possession. They relate possession to considerations of power, whether this be domestic conflict or resistance to colonial and imperial domination. For me, the literature is a bit like an iceberg that only hints at the bulk beneath the sea. We know that possession is connected to ideas and relations of power, but we are unable to see sufficiently beneath the surface. How is possession, a form of action, related to local concepts of action and personhood, and what do these have to do with power? Lewis (1971) provided a hint. In those cults of possession that he classified as "peripheral," the act of becoming possessed can be directed against the powerful. What Fry and Lan showed in their Central African material was that the image of the powerful is not restricted just to such local agents as husbands and slave masters, but also to the suddenly visible representatives of imperialism and the world capitalist system.

Still, one need not assume that possession always takes on such a serious demeanor. Lambek's (1981) account of tromba spirits in the Comoros is a remarkable account of spirits as children and possession as play. Possession may still be a form of resistance, but the social organization is so thinly described in this study that it is difficult to discern precisely what is being resisted. I was left wondering why a society with such an egalitarian marriage system, with such small differences in social participation between men and women, has such a high rate of possession for women. Lambek's implicit explanation—that possession is fun—seems to run counter to his few descriptions of marital conflict, but it is attractive nonetheless.

This cursory summary indicates that I find most of the accounts of spirit possession in Africa that I have read plausible; some of them are even convincing for the specific formations that they describe. Possession can be resistance, a form of female assertion against males or competition with co-wives, play, or even relative deprivation. But these are all ac-
counts of how possession can serve the interests and needs of the actors at a specific time and place. They are not what most accounts of possession claim to be: universal explanations.1

An element shared by almost all of this extensive literature is that the explanations of spirit possession in Africa implicitly invoke power as part of their explanatory account. Few of these studies, however, seek to examine power as it is understood by the society in which possession occurs. An honorable exception is an early essay by Grace Harris (1957) about possession among the Taita of Kenya, where female possession is shown to be part of a continuing debate between men and women over the controls that can be exercised over women's bodies. Harris' fundamental insight is that the idiom in which women articulate their conflict with men is an embodied one, that spirit possession is not just any means of conflict, but a means that has a specific bodily form. It is not just that Taita men and women compete. They compete for the right to women's bodies and labor.

In my account of spirit possession among the Iteso of Kenya I want to follow up on Harris' perception and explore how Iteso notions of power are part and parcel of beliefs about the attitudes toward possession, and then to explore the consequences of this approach for understanding power relations in general.2

Possession phenomena are fascinating both to the distanced scholar and the engaged native actor. Exhibited in possession are situated and condensed forms of primordial aspects of the human condition, such as the opacity of other minds to direct observation, the embodiment of self and its relationship to others, and the struggle between self and possessing spirit for control over body and personality; this last item seems to me to be an essential feature of power relationships and a clue to the dramatic appeal of power struggles as a spectator sport.

I take the lead here from a book by the philosopher Bruce Wiltshire, _Role Playing and Identity_ (1984), in which the author argued that the manner in which social scientists incorporate aspects of life into their theories tends to impoverish our understanding of life. Wiltshire criticized Erving Goffman's dramaturgical orientation and emphasized the essential mimetic involvement with roles that reproduce our mimetic involvement with others offstage. Goffman (1956) seems not to have known that imitation is a serious business indeed, and he has made uninteresting what is most interesting to us as actors in society.

There have been a number of attempts to discover parallels between possession phenomena and drama (Firth 1967; Beattie 1969). These studies have been criticized on the grounds that possession is felt to be real by the people involved, whereas drama is feigned (Peel 1969). The most common view of drama is the common-sense one that the dramatic frame constitutes an event that is not "real" in some sense. Although this assumption is true enough for the modern Western definition of drama, it obscures the mimetic involvement of the participants that occurs both in drama and possession ritual and trance. There is a sense in which the experience of drama, possession, and even some categories of contemporary psychiatric nosology are experientially similar. Possession, drama, and multiple personalities, for example, are all experiences that raise epistemological dilemmas for actor and observer alike. In all three types of experience one body is host to competing personalities that exhibit different motivations and dispositions. In possession and multiple personalities, the knowing self is dispossessed by an other, and the self's reports of the experience are not possible (Karp 1986). Even some varieties of dramatic theory, such as method acting, blur the boundaries between the actors and the selves assumed by them.

The blurring of boundaries between self and others is not easy or automatic in possession, drama, or multiple personality disorders. One of the patients of the Boston psychiatrist Prince wrote to him that "You have induced a host of conflicting personalities in us and now have left us. What are we to do?" (Kenny 1986). All of these transformations tend to be accompanied by indices of struggle and described by those experiencing them as associated with violence and struggles for control.

All indigenous descriptions of possession with which I am familiar include references to its involuntary dispossession of the knowing self. Trance is accompanied by violent actions, erratic movements, and struggle over control of the host's body, at least in the initial stages of possession. Possession is initially defined in many societies as an illness, a source of discomfort. This is yet another indication of the element of conflict and struggle for control that is so much a part of the possession experience. Among the Iteso and in the other trance settings in which I have participated in East Africa, the afflicted "patients" are always surrounded by helpers who strive to keep them from hurting themselves or the people around them. The most flamboyant experience I had was in
the home of the Iteso who had joined Dini Ya Msambwa, a reformist movement with Christian and anticolonial overtones. (Buijtenhuijs 1985). The adept in the cult seemed quite pleased at the alarm her guests experienced. I knew her well enough to sense that here was an instance of putting an anthropological voyeur in his place.

Metaphors of possession (such as the West African example of the spirit “riding” the host as a rider handles a horse) are commonly found in, for example, Bori possession among the Hausa (Besmer 1975). These metaphors may indicate the presence of elements of abrasion as well as struggle in the possession experience. Similar metaphors tend to dominate Iteso descriptions of their experience. The spirit is most often described as “sitting” on the head of the host body. The result is that individuals lose control of their bodies and are unable to guide their movements. They struggle, usually violently, to cast off the spirit that has taken over the cognitive functions. The head is the seat of knowledge, perception, and skill (aoca)—cumulative qualities, which tend to grow over time and enable individuals to manage both their affairs and themselves. Older people are said to be more controlled by the cool qualities of the accumulated knowledge situated in the head than the “hot” passions located in the heart. Mental illness and drunkenness are afflictions of the heart and are described as entailing loss of control over cognitive capacities.3

The association of possession with the experience of struggle and control is not accidental. It is related both to the phenomenology of the possession experience and to the distribution of power in society. (At least, my Iteso data has led me to this conclusion.) I may seem here to be arguing the case for the very studies I criticized earlier; but in those studies, power was left unexamined and undefined. Customarily, power is defined in anthropology and the social sciences in Weberian terms of access to and control over people and resources. This is clearly useful for understanding cults of possession in two ways. First, as many studies have shown, becoming possessed is a means of exercising controls under conditions of inequality. Taken less seriously, however, is the second type of political statement: members of cults also assert that they struggle for control with their spirits and sometimes that the spirits struggle among themselves. This is often one of the defining features of trance.

Access and control are only the surface features of power relations. The powers people have and how they exercise them are not defined in the same terms in all cultural formations. I am led to wonder how accounts might change if observers were to listen more seriously to the assertions and meanings enacted by their informants. Perhaps they would begin to examine a second dimension of power that involves differences in the capacity to exercise and create power.

Capacity need not refer only to naturally occurring abilities, to natural differences between persons. Capacity is socially defined and created, sought and lost in social process, and often expressed in those local idioms we call cosmologies. Research on kingship in African societies, for example, has shown that kings are mediators—ritual operators who tap the powers of disordered nature in order to create the conditions for the orderly reproduction of society. The nature of kingship cannot be understood as an automatic product of the confusion of categories.4

One can play here upon the two senses in which I use the word “power.” In many African societies, world view is both cyclical and entropic (Kopytoff 1980), fundamentally concerned with physical and social reproduction. Reproduction is perceived as dependent upon human agency, including that form of practical activity translated as “ritual.”

Many ritual forms are purposive; they tap the energy (power) of nature to turn it into a finished cultural product—whether this be a human adult or first fruits. Thus the power potentially available in nature is tapped through the activities of certain individuals who possess the “powers” to mediate between the potential energy of disorder and its dissipation in the material world of creation.

The place of women in cults of spirit possession provides an instructive case study because of its similarities and contrasts to divine kingship. In most African societies women, like kings, are mediators; they mediate among particular social units such as households, lineages, ethnic groups, and so on. These forms divide societies into parts; hence they relate parts to one another within social wholes.5 They do not mediate, however, for a social whole, as do kings, prophets, and others who stand outside of particularity or social division.6

Another significant difference between women as mediators in possession and kings is that possession both involves involuntary affliction and is sought after, while kingship is (at least in ideology) a matter of entitlement. In possession, entrance to a cult is usually made through illness and suffering, but both in the ideology and practice of possession, an element of virtuosity exists that has been underestimated in the ethnographic literature. The Sotho speaking people of Natal, for example, associate possession with poetic inspiration, and the colors in which the possessed often describe possession would provide an interesting area for investigation, given their association with emotional states (Hilda Kuper,
I will turn now to a description of some aspects of rites of possession among the Iteso of Kenya. Possession was a recurrent feature of Iteso life—from the second night of my fieldwork until its conclusion two years later, I was surrounded by the noises of possession ceremonies in my neighborhood. Women predominate in cults of possession as the main actors, although as an entertainment form possession is open to all persons, and children learn about possession and its effects from an early age. At the time of my first fieldwork period, 1969–71, 50 percent of the married women in the neighborhood where I lived had been treated for possession illness and 90 percent claimed to be afflicted. Rites of possession are open-ended; new ritual forms are continually being added and old ones discarded. Each adept has her own cult and particular set of rituals, and competition among cult groups can be keen. Possession itself is a regional phenomenon and incorporates elements from neighboring peoples. As with much of Iteso medicine, exotic cures have more prestige than locally known ones, a trait the Iteso share with my family.

There have been three cults of possession among the Iteso since the turn of the century, and there are two levels of possession spirits. The first level is the local spirits of the dead (ipara), who are to be found loitering around homes and at the heads of streams, and who possess out of greed. In what I like to call “deep possession,” the possessing spirits are polyethnic in origin and always described as the ipara of strangers killed by Iteso in the past. They are the source of the exotic rites and songs that are a prominent part of the activity of the cults. These exotic spirits are named after rivers or spiritual entities found among the neighboring peoples. These include Malaba, a river that forms part of the border separating Kenya from Uganda, Sumba, a Kisoga spirit, Werc, the Luo word for high god, and Awori, a spirit of the Abaluyia peoples. These spirits are usually male, but Sumba and Awori are sometimes said to be husband and wife.

Ipara afflict people through illness and misfortune. Possession illness (emusebe) is only one type of affliction. Even though cults of possession were very little in evidence in the mid-1980s, ipara are still believed to afflict people, and recourse to akiogo ipara (medicines and rituals to “block” the ipara) is the virtual second level of resort when serious illness strikes. Very little in the way of serious illness or a continuing series of misfortunes is not attributed to ipara. They cause suffering not because of moral transgressions, but because of such base desires as greed for meat or revenge. Negative and childish emotional states are characteristic of spirits of the dead. As I mentioned above, Iteso distinguish two fundamental capacities in individuals, which stem from the regions of the heart and the head. The head is the seat of knowledge and the repository of experience. Evidence derived from the senses, but especially visual experience, is used to guide the individual in making decisions. The heart is the seat of the stronger emotions. While the capacities associated with the head change and can grow over the life course, the capacities of the heart remain static or even wane with age, as does physical strength, agong.
The ideal to be sought is a balance in the actions of heart and head, and actions should be motivated by a combination of vitality, wisdom, and physical strength.

Unbalanced emotional dispositions are attributed to the capacity of the heart to overcome the head, as are character flaws such as systematic "bitterness" and unreasonable and disproportionate actions. The stronger negative emotions of anger and hate, as well as uncontrollable desires, are always attributed to a strong heart overcoming a weaker head.

Ipara are figures of primary desire. They are the 'id to the ego represented by the head. Even when they cause illness because of someone's desire for revenge, they are also said to attack their victims because of their unrestrained appetite and greed for meat and beer. Hence they often cause illness because their victims have failed to perform rituals, such as mortuary ceremonies, at which the ipara are fed. They can not be appealed to; they do not respond to reason or to positive sentiments and memory of past ties. They can only be appeased. Revenge is a frequently invoked motive for a spirit attack. Madness, for example, is always taken as a sign that the mad person killed someone whose spirit was taking revenge by destroying the capacity for reason, a faculty of the head. Ipara were often described as "etau kijokis," ("all heart"). Emusebe, the affliction caused by possessing spirits, demonstrates the character of spirits. It is defined as a disease in which the spirit "sits" on the head of the patient. An entity that is "all heart" overcomes the capacities of the head.

Even the exotic spirits who brought emusebe to the Iteso are "all heart." They play an essential role in cults of possession. The local spirits act as guides and hosts to the spirits of external origins and lead them to Iteso homes, all speaking simultaneously, grumbling and quarreling as they proceed. The leaders in cults of possession form tutelary relationships with these exotic spirits and the apotheosis that Lewis describes is always with a non-Iteso figure. The spirits are always described as belonging to persons killed by the Iteso, but the main ones are tutelary spirits derived from the Bantu-speaking peoples surrounding the pararnilotic speaking Iteso. The Iteso have no such pantheon of spirits and acknowledge the Bantu spirits only in possession ceremonies. Recently, European spirits have joined the pantheon. I have the impression that among the neighboring Bantu speaking neighbors of the Iteso, the pantheons of cults of possession are not comprised exclusively of exotic spirits.

The Iteso used to believe in a group of generalized nature spirits called ajokin, which are sometimes associated with exotic spirits. Church-going Christian Iteso sometimes associated ajokin with the devil. Even the line between ipara and ajokin has become blurred, and many of the attributes of one are now attributed to the other. The exotic nature of tutelary spirits in cults of possession makes up a virtual history of Iteso foreign relations. It may be possible to reconstruct part of the history of interethnic relations by collecting the lists of exotic spirits and the events to which they are related; I have yet to do so.

Members became mediums through greater penetration into deep possession. The adept who leads the cult is "married" to her fellow cult members, who act as her "wives" in rites. Descriptions of the marriage are ambiguous, and it is difficult to tell whether the "wedding" is between the adept and her followers or between the spirit for whom the adept is medium and cult followers; elements of both exist. Customary polyandry is unknown in Africa. For the Iteso, however, an element of spiritual polyandry inverts the polygyny that is the statistically normal experience of women in marriage. While each household generally has at least two wives, women have second and third husbands in spiritual form in the possession experience.

Women move into and out of cults over a long period of time, and I know of one instance of rites of possession that were performed erratically over a thirty-year period. The impression I wish to give is of an open-ended and even labile quality to ritual in cults of possession, of a regional rather than society-specific system, one which incorporates change into its image. Even so, according to my informants, a core of ritual practice in cults has remained constant throughout the history of change and elaboration. This ritual core has three elements that are expository of the ideology and practice of power in possession, and they emerge in the central rite in which a local spirit is drawn into the cult by inducing trance in the afflicted patient. This curing ritual, found in all cult groups, is the central curing rite of possession cults and has remained constant over the years. The following three aspects of this rite are relevant to our account: (1) the paraphernalia associated with fertility and sexuality with which the patient is decorated during the rite; (2) the dramatic performance of productive labor, found also in domestic ritual and rites of twinship; and (3) the assumption of signs of male prerogative at the conclusion of the rite, the ritual inversion of gender identity.

Many of the objects used in the ritual that "block" or exorcise spirits occur in other rites. These paraphernalia are associated with sexuality and fertility and are central to domestic and life-cycle rituals, rituals of twinship, and possession rites. These include creepers such as star grass whose strength and tenacity is associated with successful fertility. Emaniman,
a vine that twines around small shrubs, is also associated with twins. *Emaniman* unites with its host plant so that one is unable to tell where one begins and the other leaves off. Twins are perceived as having united two separate lineages through an act of procreation.

Other objects and materials with which the patient is festooned are associated with spirits of the dead, *Ipara*. These may include white clay taken from ant hills, a favorite dwelling place of the dead. Fertility symbols all use the metaphor of sexual conjunction, with its associations of unity and division, mixing and separation. These ritual objects and their associations are found in rituals whose purpose is either to ensure regularity and orderly social and physical reproduction or (in the case of twinship) to celebrate it in the face of danger. Twins have a special association with rituals of spirit possession. The mother of twins and a woman cured of spirit possession can take shelter under a tree with each other during the rain. Ordinary persons must find shelter elsewhere.

The symbolic association here is not through a direct connection between twins and spirit possession, but between intimate association with *Ipara* on the part of both the parents of twins and women who have been possessed. Twins themselves are defined as spirit-like, and are regarded as having much the same erratic characters and dangerous potentials as spirits. The parents of twins are said to be exorted with the following statement: "Ikulepek awap nes bon ejas k'apedori naka aimakin ijo idure iyaare" ("The owners of the earth [spirits of the dead] are the only ones who have the capacity [power] to give you two children"). Embodied in this assertion is the idea that power (apedor) emanates from association with the spirits of the dead.

The spirits themselves are preeminently creatures of wilderness (Karp and Karp 1979). Underlying the rituals of possession is an attitude to and conception of the bush as containing disordered potentiality, which is ordinarily kept separate from the home because of the danger of disorder but which must be brought into contact with order to revive a failing world. Iteso women share a ritual status with such mediating figures as the Swazi king (Beidelman 1966a) and the Mugwe of the Meru (Needham 1960; Bernardi 1959). They act in and join ordinarily opposed domains because their everyday activities—their work—bring them into association with nature. Women produce order out of potentiality; the result of sexual contact is procreation; and so on. Ritual is also defined as work for women, and in ritual work, their activities in the division of labor are dramatized. I like to think of agricultural tasks as productive labor and ritual as reproductive labor in the Iteso scheme of things. A primary purpose of rites of possession is to produce the conditions for orderly reproduction, stated dramatically in the climax of the most important rite for curing possession, in which women ritually feed their children.

I do not want to give the impression that the Iteso are unabashed nature lovers. If nature is a necessary source of energy or potentiality, it is a dangerous source as well. Boundedness and avoidance of inversion, except in situations of male violence, are characteristic of Iteso thought and practice. The struggle to control nature is continuous, and experience provides the Iteso with sufficient evidence that they live with failure. There is an element of desperation in Iteso ritual. Ritual is purposive behavior, and display is not a primary motive for their work.

In the great majority of Iteso domestic ritual, work is a focus of symbolic attention. Ritual is designed to ensure that labor is productive. An additional element added to rites of possession is the assumption of male paraphernalia by women. The successful performance of a ritual for the cure of possession culminates in a public display of male symbols by a cured woman. After the cure, the patient goes to the market on the next market day and is entitled to a small gift from anyone she chooses to accost, often five Kenyan cents or, from women, a product that is especially associated with fertility, such as finger millet or sesame seeds. In addition to the other paraphernalia of possession, women display male insignia such as spears, clubs, and the like. The only other situation in Iteso social life in which women exhibit male insignia, to the best of my knowledge, is at the death of a male twin, when the widows of the twin sit on his stool and display a male insignia, the spear. One man who was cured by the possession ritual was told that male regalia was unnecessary for him.

I wish, for purposes of advancing the neo-Freudian interpretation that I find possible here, that there were some act of thrusting and a general element of identification associated with the display of the spear, as among the Nuer (Beidelman 1966b). Unfortunately, there is not. There is no question, however, that maleness is associated with active mastery of natural forces in Iteso thought. In the great ceremonies of the age system, men became aggressive animals of the bush—the bush buck, the ground squirrel, and flying ants that emerge at dusk. Men tend to operate in one of two spheres—either nature or culture—while women mediate between the two. In the division of labor, men always weed on the left part of a row of workers, or towards the uncleared bush. The left is asso-
associated with the bush. Men are stronger, Iteso say, and better suited for acts such as clearing; but it is women whose work brings to fruition what men have tamed.

In possession, the assumption of male regalia indicates an element of active mastery not usually associated with women. This interpretation is supported by the element of violence and struggle associated with both the entry of the spirit into the body and the violent treatment of the scapegoat that is made to stand for the spirit in the curing ritual. The animal is thrown violently to the ground until it urinates, a sign of agreement by the spirit to cooperate with the cult. In Iteso society, men do public violence to other men, while women do public violence to themselves, usually in mortuary ceremonies associated with emotional display. Although men do not participate in rites of possession, participants display maleness. The interdependence associated with the sexual act is an essential element of the curing and apotheosis of the possession experience. Women take roles of both active mastery and of the more quiet realization associated with women. The result of a cure is that women acquire a status to which they would not otherwise be entitled.

When engaged in cult activities, women are not subject to the ordinary controls that govern their behavior in their fertile period. They can go in cult groups unaccompanied by a male guardian; in cult situations they do not observe the relatively subordinate forms of etiquette required in other public situations—sexual joking and play not otherwise found in Iteso life are permissible here. Finally, women cured of possession have the same rights to marks of respect as those given to mothers of twins.

Iteso tell the parents of twins that only spirits have the "power" to give them two children. About women who have gone through rituals of possession they say, "Ijassu apedor" (lit. "there is power there"). The word apedor has a definable semantic range when the Iteso use it—it refers to the ability and capacity to carry out an act or to produce an effect. To ask a person if he or she is able to do something, one would use the verb apedor; for a request that requires compliance, the verb abeikin is used. I was often corrected for using apedor instead of abeikin. Force is translated as agogong, physical strength. I found no easy equivalent in the Teso language for the notion of authority. When the Iteso describe the transformation that women have undergone in rituals of possession, they use a form of the verb to be that denotes location. Literally, they describe the body of the woman as the locus for powers that were not in place before the rituals. I was unable to get anyone to respond to my suggestion that this was so because in some sense the body was occupied by two identities, the woman and the spirit. Whatever the relationship of the powers, the Iteso describe a person as changed and possessing enhanced powers to produce consequences in the world.

An element of this change in the definition of the person, her rights, duties, and the attitudes displayed towards her, after undergoing the possession and curing rituals, is that the relationship of women to power has been altered. Possessed women have gone to the source and returned unharmed. They are better able to deal with the dangers of power because they became androgyous characters. They know both male active mastery and female techniques of growth. In this sense women cured of possession have more power over their lives because they are more powerful, have different capacities; they control an important resource, themselves, to a greater degree.

In the preceding paragraph I have played fast and loose with the concept of power, moving back and forth from power as capacity and agency to power as energy and potentiality to power as the more conventional ability to control people and resources. The American College Dictionary lists more than twenty definitions of power. I realize that dictionaries are dangerous for anthropologists to use, but they do indicate the richness of what Wittgenstein called the crooked streets of natural language. The straight paths of causal analysis pare away the background meanings in terms of which specific contextualized definitions emerge. The Iteso follow a more crooked, and I think more interesting way than the strategizing approach in political anthropology, for example. They understand power in several senses and do not separate them precisely. Possession is tied to Iteso concepts of power, which is acquired through activities Westerners find difficult to grasp because our own concepts are situated in the generally mechanistic cosmology in terms of which too many social scientific concepts are articulated.

The Iteso evidence indicates not only that power can be created in ritual, but that the power in Iteso society has a center and a periphery, to use terms borrowed from world system theory. A major difference is that the center and periphery are not wholly stable. The relations among these epicenters constantly change. Spirit possession provides a context in which women acquire and exercise power as they exclude men. Both men and women are fully aware of this. Female power is at the center of possession, and male power is the periphery. I have not discussed the considerable costs of this system in this paper. They include social costs,
such as the legitimation of male symbols of power, and more economic and environmental ones, such as the relative cost of possession and the unhappy consequences when the healing of many illnesses is relegated to the possession context.

Notes

1. I exclude those explanations of possession that reduce it to somatic incapacity, such as nutritional imbalance or calcium deficiency. They are anthropological fantasies, totally lacking in evidence. Kehoe and Gilleti (1981), for example, have argued that "the preponderance of women in possession cults is linked with the likelihood of deficiencies in thiamine, tryptophan-niacin, calcium and vitamin D in women in old world traditional societies in which poverty and/or sumptuary rules restrict women's nutrient intakes" (p. 549). This extraordinary statement would have to be supported by evidence that the onset of possession is correlated with periods when the deficiencies most affect women. Such evidence is totally absent from the accounts cited by Kehoe and Gilleti. In addition, they constructed a category of "old world traditional societies" in which the status of women does not vary, not to mention that female nutritional intake appears to be the same regardless of such factors as social organization and mode of production.

2. In another publication (Karp and Karp 1979) we interpreted possession in situational terms as related to the life course of women afflicted and showed how the form of healing embodied in possession has affinities with ritual, healing, and gender symbolism among the Iteso. This is the sort of social psychological interpretation pursued in Crapanzano and Garrison's volume (1977). It can help to understand how rituals mediate specific situations and are related to suffering, but does not concern itself with seeking to know how the possessed see their ritual actions as effective.

3. The Iteso distinguish between mental illness and inebriated states such as drunkenness or getting high from bhang. Mental illness is often believed to be caused by the spirit of a homicide. However, they use one word to describe the experience of both, amefit. The difference is not in the experience, which they assert is not capable of discursive formulation, but in whether it is permanent (like mental illness) or temporary (like drunkenness). Amefit means to lose control of oneself.

4. This is the sort of claim that might be made by Mary Douglas (1975). What she tends to miss in her studies of cosmology is that confusion can be deliberate, that what is usually separate is often conjoined in order to be revived and separated again. Thus Beidelman has shown in his analysis of Swazi Royal Ritual (1966a) that the Swazi king takes filth and confusion on himself in order to revive a failing world (also Packard 1981). The twin problems of classification and confusion can only be properly understood if they are examined in conjunction with the concepts of agency that define persons and discriminate among those with the capacity to mediate and those who are excluded from that process (happily for them). This is often an overt purpose of cults in Africa: the action of the cult's members fights against the entropy they perceive as an essential aspect of their natural world (Kopytoff 1986).

5. If they can mediate between two parts of the whole, they can also stand as elements that divide a greater whole. This is the essence of the notorious "Nuer paradox" in kinship studies (Evans-Pritchard 1951). The children of different mothers are potential points of division within lineages, even as they provide the potential for relating their husband's lineage to their brothers' (This is obviously a patrilineal point of view.)

6. I do not mean to assert here that I am describing any pattern of belief that is distinctively African. Not all African societies are as obsessed with reproduction as the Iteso, and many societies in other parts of the world are as concerned with reproduction as those of the African continent. I think it is almost impossible to make any assertions about the relative "Africanness" of systems of thought. I use references to "Africa" to refer primarily to those societies about which I have read the most.

7. The Iteso are a paranilotic-speaking people living in Busia District, Kenya, and across the Kenya-Uganda border. I have described their social organization, belief system and ritual in Karp 1978, 1980, and 1987.

8. The first level is usually seeking a cure in one of the local dispensaries or a mission hospital or from physicians in the larger towns. One major reason for this is that Western medicine is usually less costly than major local cures.

9. The Iteso are not historically minded. They have little in the way of specialized roles related to oral traditions, and what historical sense they have tends to be related to the histories of lineages and subclans. Since their genealogies are shallow, historical events beyond two generations are not well remembered. The larger patterns of interethnic relations are presented in stereotypical form with little in the way of specific events represented. The primary forum for presenting the history of contact with other peoples may be the cult of possession. Possession is by definition an exotic phenomenon among the Iteso; almost all the songs and many of the rites are taken from neighboring peoples, and the more exotic the derivation, the greater the efficacy attributed to it as a cure. In possession ceremonies in which I have taken part, songs from the surrounding Nilotic- and Bantu-speaking peoples were freely mixed. Customs derived from the Baganda, acephalous Bantu peoples of Uganda and Western Kenya, and Luo and JoelPadhola Nilotes were all intertwined and acknowledged as being of exotic origins.

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