Taking the Role of Supernatural ‘Other’: Spirit Possession in a Japanese Healing Cult

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING SPIRIT POSSESSION

It is not uncommon to interpret the phenomenon of spirit possession not only in light of pathology but also in terms of sociological implications. Kiev (1961) noted that spirit possession among voodoo devotees in Haiti ‘provides legitimized public roles for private repressed impulses and needs.’ This view was seconded by Bourguignon (1965), who saw in this ‘temporary substitution of other ‘selves’ the opportunity for acting out certain positively evaluated social roles.’ Saka attacks, as observed by Harris in a Kenya tribe, allow women to demonstrate and execute their ‘rights’ vis-à-vis their husbands – ‘the rights of dependents’ (1957). The sociological implication of possession is evident from the use of such terms as ‘legitimized,’ ‘roles,’ and ‘rights.’

Insofar as possession is viewed in terms of the supernatural ‘role’ taken by the possessed, we must recognize that the possessed has some degree of self-awareness of ‘playing’ that role. Without such awareness one would be incapable of assuming a role. This suggests the theory of self developed by G.H. Mead (1967) that the individual is not a self unless he is an object to himself. Such a reflexive self develops through one’s taking the role of other individuals and responding to it. The role of other persons, thus vicariously assumed, becomes internalized and constitutes ‘me’ as distinct from ‘I,’ the subjective side of self. ‘I’ and ‘me’ together make up the whole self.

Mead’s concept of self fits the phenomenon of spirit possession remarkably well. Indeed, Yap used it for his interpretation of the possession syndrome. He attributed possession to ‘a disturbance in the balance of what Mead calls the ‘I’ and the ‘me;’ to ‘the unusual predominance, temporarily, of one phase of the Self at the expense of the other; of a certain portion of the ‘Me’ at the expense of the ‘I’ (1960).

I shall take Yap’s position as my point of departure. While Yap stressed the pathological imbalance of ‘I’ and ‘me’ in possession, I would like to delineate the sociological implication, as set forth in the first paragraph. Yap may be right in emphasizing the pathological aspect of possession, first because the
role taken in possession is not that of social others, as Mead would expect, but that of the supernatural, and secondly because the ‘me’ (the role of the supernatural other) is externally acted out instead of being internalized as should be in Mead’s self. However, we can look at the same phenomenon from the standpoint of the variety of roles that can be taken voluntarily by the possessed. We can further assume that taking the role of a supernatural other enables one to overcome, however temporarily, the role deprivation being suffered in the social world, which may trigger a change in the behavior system, including that of curing.

A role that is part of a social system can be taken and played only if other roles in the same system are complementarily played. The ‘central role’ to be played by Ego must be complemented by a ‘counter-role’ played by Alter. This requirement of ‘complementarity’ (Bateson, 1935, 1971; Watzlawick et al., 1967) is no less compelling in the assumption of a supernatural role, no matter how arbitrary that role may appear. The complementary role may be played by Ego himself or by other persons. The satisfactory performance of a supernatural role by the possessed requires Ego or other persons to accept the complementary role willingly. This means that the complementary role should be as desirable as the supernatural role. This is a major constraint on the repertoire of supernatural roles, and it precludes the randomness of possession behavior. In actuality, however, there seems to be no special problem since internalization of a role through socialization entails internalization of its complementary role; to learn how to play a dominant role, for instance, one must simultaneously learn how to play a submissive role.

I shall apply these assumptions to the possession behavior observed in a healing-oriented Japanese cult. The sociological interpretation of possession in the sense above, seems particularly relevant to the Japanese subject because Japanese culture sensitizes the individual to role gratification and role frustration as the primary source of his pleasure and pain. My objective in this paper is twofold: generally to validate the theoretical assumptions advanced above, and particularly to show how the selection of role types in ‘Japanese’ possession is culturally biased.

THE CULT, FIELD, AND DATA

The ‘Salvation Cult’ was established in 1929 and has continued to flourish since its founder’s death in 1948, under the postwar freedom of religion in Japan. The membership of the cult as of 1969 is claimed to have reached more than 168,000 (Bunkacho, 1970). Doctrinally, the Salvation Cult traces its ancestry to Shugendō, the mystic mountain sect, which was the earliest attempt to amalgamate the indigenous Shinto with imported Buddhism and Taoism. This syncretism is at the heart of the Salvation Cult, which reveres all deities and spirits without discrimination, although it recognizes some loose, partial rank orders among them. The Shinto pantheon consisting of kami (‘gods’) is worshipped side by side with Buddhas of Hindu origin, and supernatural status is conferred on the ancestors and the departed as well. While ‘qualified’ members study abstract doctrines that were developed by the