Spirit Possession

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Introduction

The term ‘spirit possession’ is used with ambivalent, even opposing, meanings, but it is contagious in its use, particularly outside academia. Popular culture is full of references to ‘spirit possession,’ usually reflecting a negative, stereotypical understanding of spirit possession as ‘demonic’ and evil. However, these descriptions and interpretations are based on a misunderstanding of rituals that are at the core of many religions. Although these rituals include uncontrolled bodily movements and alterations of consciousness, lack of memory and other sensory experiences that observers might regard as altered states of consciousness, they are interpreted by people experiencing them as means of communication with the immaterial world, as manifestations of the divine, or as a fulfilment of a religious obligation. The experience is usually felt to be positive and devotees embrace it willingly. There is therefore a sharp distinction between the wider (popular) understanding of spirit possession and the meaning practitioners attach to the experience. As a result, the term ‘spirit possession’ is widely rejected by Brazilian practitioners; in order to distinguish their practice from the negative views of outsiders, devotees of the many relevant Brazilian religions use different terms to describe what they are doing. Nonetheless, the term ‘spirit possession’ is still used, not only within popular culture but also within academia. Scholars use the controversial term, despite its rejection by practitioners, as an analytical term because it allows comparison across traditions and even cultures and is useful for the functional interpretation of the practice.

This chapter begins therefore with a definition of spirit possession, in order to explain how the term may be used as an analytical label, then continues with an overview of studies of spirit possession in Brazil, and finally turns to the perspectives of practitioners. It presents a variety of spirit possession rituals practiced in Brazil and highlights the interpretation within each religious tradition, from Afro-Brazilian religions and Spiritism to certain new Christianities. Our aim is to demonstrate the range of interpretations from both analytical and ethnographic perspectives.
Academic Definitions of Spirit Possession

An influential definition of spirit possession is that of Crapanzano, as any altered or unusual state of consciousness and allied behaviour that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit, demon, or deity. [...] he possessed act as though another personality—a spirit or soul—has entered their body and taken control. Dramatic changes in their physiognomy, voice, and manner usually occur. Their behaviour often is grotesque and blasphemous.

Crapanzano (2005: 8687)

Platvoet connects spirit possession firmly to communal rituals “in which one, or a few, or even several, of the participants in a public ritual behave in ways which believers interpret as signifying that ‘spirits’ have taken ‘possession’ of them” (Platvoet 2000: 80). From an anthropological perspective it does not matter whether the possessing agencies can be objectively acknowledged: what is important is the meaning “which believers themselves attached to what they believe happen during a spirit possession ritual” (Platvoet 2000: 81). This approach is also the foundation of Boddy’s definition of spirit possession as a “hold exerted over a human being by external force or entities more powerful than she” (Boddy 1994: 407) Critiques have argued that the definition contains the presumption that external forces more powerful than humans exist and might even be regarded as theological. Challenging definitions based on such a presumption, Keller advocates Ann Grodzins Gold’s definition of spirit possession as ‘any complete but temporary domination of a person’s body, and the blotting of that person’s consciousness, by a distinct alien power of known or unknown origin’ (Keller 2002: 3–4, with reference to Gold 1988: 35). Keller highlights in her own work the need to take the agency of the possessing entity into consideration when studying spirit possession. She vehemently criticizes that studies on spirit possession focus on the medium, the possessed entity, and overlook the possessing agency. Her approach can be therefore also criticized, as ‘theological’ in its core. Crucial for all studies of spirit possession rituals is the deictic character of the term (Schmidt, 2016). In the same way as the meaning of the deictic term ‘here’ depends on the context of its use—‘here’ can be my office while writing the chapter, or the university where I work, or the uk—the meaning of spirit possession also depends firmly on the context: religious, social, cultural, and historical. By linking the term to its context, the discussion about spirit possession shifts from ‘belief’ to ‘practice,’ and by defining spirit possession as a deictic term that is open and