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Channellers, Cowries and Conversations with the Gods: explaining multiple divination methods in an Afro-Brazilian religious tradition.

Emma Cohen

Centre of Cognition and Culture
University of Oxford

Spirit possession is a particular form of communication with the divine world. The vast anthropological record on possession practices worldwide describes how human hosts give passage to spirit beings and deities, who, in return, bestow blessings, heal the sick, and offer advice on many situations. When possession occurs, the human's spirit/soul/agency/mind is said to be entirely displaced by the ancestor, deity or spirit being. Participants in possession ceremonies, spirit counselling sessions, and mediumistic séances and healing practices are afforded a direct line of contact with supernatural beings, enabling them to discern the causes of their problems and to obtain immediate guidance on their resolution. Yet, even with this readily available resource, possession cult participants also frequently employ what might be considered more prototypical divination methods, such as shell throwing and cartomancy. Why do people rely on the 'words' of shells and cards when they may converse freely with the gods in possession of a human host?

This chapter offers an explanation for the popularity of supernatural-agent guidance so often associated with spirit possession, and for its accepted and normal co-occurrence with these other divination forms. Combining ethnographic fieldwork on possession in an Afro-Brazilian religious tradition with recent hypotheses and findings in the cognitive science of religion, social psychology and neurology, it explores the ways in which people represent the behaviours and statements of possessed individuals, identifying constraints on people's ability mentally to represent the medium as the spirit or god, and suggesting an explanation for participants' reliance on the utterances of the divining shells. The central claim is that person-file memories and associated feelings, as well as interpersonal expectancies that the observer, or client, holds for a medium or channeller, are

automatically activated in any face-to-face encounter with the medium. Thus, while the observer explicitly represents the medium as possessed, and therefore as a spirit or god, this unconsciously activated information informs the observer's perceptions of the medium's behaviours, generating automatic and rapid inferences about the continued presence of the medium, not the supernatural agent. Prototypical divination methods potentially avoid this interference, providing a more confident line of access to the supernatural custodians of hidden knowledge.

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to consider a specific problem concerning the use of multiple divination techniques within a single religious tradition. The topic of divination has traditionally been a peripheral concern within holistic anthropological accounts of religious and magical practices. A number of studies, however, have considered the practice of divination in detail, and have raised important questions that remain pertinent for academic scholarship on cultural forms in general, and on the widespread practice of divination in particular (e.g. Bascom 1969; Evans-Pritchard 1976; Moore 1957; Peek 1991; Tedlock 1982).

Recently, there has been a resurgence of academic interest in divination as a topic in its own right.¹ As yet, however, there have been few up-to-date, scientifically-informed studies seeking to offer generalisable, testable hypotheses and theories for the persistence of divination practices across cultures, for the profusion of techniques even among a single cultural group, or for the patterns of distribution of modes of divination (see Winkelmann 2004). In this chapter I argue that, as we return to consider the burning questions that remain unresolved, emerging analyses of divination activities cross-culturally would benefit from an appreciation of recent developments in cognitive sciences. Indeed, generalisable accounts that fail to consider the role of the mechanisms and processes of the human mind in the formation and spread of culture, are deprived of a crucial level of causation, considerably narrowing their explanatory power. I offer a perspective from which to begin to reconsider long-standing problems in this field, and

¹ In the summer of 2005 alone there were two international academic conferences on the topic of divination, attracting established scholars in the field as well as doctoral and postdoctoral researchers with a primary interest in the divination studies. In addition to the conference upon which this volume is based (*Unveiling the Hidden* – University of Copenhagen, August), the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden and Leiden University hosted *Realities Re-viewed/Revealed: Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa* (July).

present some evidence that may shine a brighter light on this corner of the anthropological record.

The problem to be addressed concerns the transmission of culture in general, and the competition between cultural forms in particular. When we seek to explain the existence and constellation of cultural elements in a particular place (e.g. ideas, artefacts, and practices), we may offer hypotheses and theories that account for the success of these elements in that particular context. The economic and socio-political dynamics of the society, for example, are the pillars of traditional sociological accounts. Economic circumstances, such as class distinction and inequality, may be posited as causal factors influencing, for example, the success of new religious movements in a particular society. What is often missing from such claims, however, is an account of the underlying mechanisms that produce such outcomes.² In this chapter, I seek to approach a particular problem, employing an explanatory, selectionist framework to generate testable hypotheses on the basis of identifiable cognitive and neural mechanisms. Although the ethnographic focus will be a particular Afro-Brazilian religious tradition, the claims put forward are potentially generalisable to all contexts in which the causal factors identified coalesce.

The problem may be briefly summarised as follows; why do we find the use of divinatory techniques (e.g. sign-reading) as means of communicating with supernatural agents, such as spirits and gods, in traditions where these same supernatural agents apparently leave their celestial dwellings and usurp control of certain humans to speak through them, offering advice and imparting knowledge that is not normally available to humans (e.g. about others, the future, etc.)? Do these means of divining the spirits' desires, intentions and knowledge constitute cultural forms in competition or are they complementary, each driven by a (partially) different set of selective factors? On the face of it, it would appear that a direct line of access to the supernatural, via spirit mediums and channellers, would eliminate the need for specialist divinatory techniques. Divination often demands extensive training, as well as specialist ritual preparation of the instruments and the diviner. As a consequence, that majority of members of the religious community are excluded from utilizing these techniques personally, relying fully on the expert. In contrast, when the gods and spirits possess their human mediums, or 'hosts', individuals

² For a comprehensive critique of such "explanations", see Sperber 1996.

present may avail of a direct line of contact with these special beings, engaging in conversation of an everyday type. Anthropological accounts frequently describe the spirits' role as one of consultancy, healing and benevolence (e.g. Chesnut 1997; Modarressi 1968; Sharp 1999) – spirits are normally interested in the everyday affairs and concerns of the people who approach them.

Across the anthropological record, however, it is clearly not the case that this form of communication with the divine has led to the extinction of other forms of communicative divination involving the interpretation of signs. Mediumistic traditions frequently contain specialist diviner roles. This suggests that as means of communicating with the divine, these forms of divination – both prototypical techniques and spirit channelling – are not in direct competition for cultural inclusion. In this chapter, I explore why conversation with the gods incarnate is an imperfect substitute for divination practices. Data presented are drawn from my own ethnographic research in Brazil as well as from cutting-edge neuroimaging studies and recent research in social cognition.

The ethnographic context

The questions that I address in this chapter arise from ethnographic data collected during eighteen months with a group of spirit mediums in an Afro-Brazilian *terreiro*, or cult house. Before turning to the key theoretical issues of the chapter, a short introduction to the people, activities and context of the *terreiro* will be necessary to provide some background to the main problem. It will also provide the descriptive detail that is crucial for the identification of corresponding cultural contexts throughout the ethnographic record and cross-cultural comparison.

Since its beginnings in the early part of the twentieth century, scholarly work on Afro-Brazilian religion has traditionally neglected certain regions of Brazil. In fact, the majority of research has been conducted in the state of Bahia, with more recent work on many forms of these popular religious traditions expanding to include little-researched areas in the south of the country. The northern context of the research reported in this chapter has received very little scholarly attention, with only a sprinkling of published and unpublished works in existence, most of which are in Portuguese and are not widely

accessible. The reasons for this lack of representation in academic research are numerous. A major factor is that the traditional objectives of scholars seeking to understand the acculturation of the African in the New World, and to quantify the preservation of Africanisms, were drawn to those areas where African influence was strongest, where African slavery had been most highly concentrated, and where African religious practices had most successfully battled for their survival and had become an obvious part of the cultural fabric. Northern regions were largely sidelined by this approach, particularly those parts in which African slaves and their descendents had been so assimilated into European and indigenous culture as to leave little or no trace of their traditional religious practices. What did survive was viewed as a diluted and/or polluted form of what it once was, especially in the northwestern regions, such as Pará, where indigenous Amazonian, or *caboclo*, influence was strong. Despite the subsequent migration and spread of regional varieties of Afro-Brazilian religion throughout the country, research continues to focus on the conurbations of the south and east. The *culto afro*, as Afro-Brazilian religion has come to be termed by its practitioners, is flourishing, meanwhile, in the urban centres of the north and northeast.

Belém has a population of approximately 1.4 million. The number of cult houses, or *terreiros*, is unknown and the most recent census figures fail to capture the wide representation of Afro-derived religious practices throughout the population. In 2003, The Federation of Spiritist, Umbanda and Afro-religions for the State of Pará registered 1600 *terreiros* in the Greater Belém area. It was known, however, that many *terreiros* and other rooms used by mediums for spiritual healing and counselling had not registered with the Federation. Most frequenters declare themselves to be Catholics and see no contradiction in their simultaneous commitment to members of the Afro-Brazilian spiritual pantheon and ritualistic practices of their *terreiro*. Indeed, many *terreiros* afford the opportunity to continue worship and devotion to the Catholic saints, and included liturgical prayers and worship of the saints in their programmes of activities. Popular Catholicism is one of several “lines” of religion practised in many cult houses.

The leader (or *pai-de-santo*) of the house in which I focused my ethnographic research was also a specialist in a form of indigenous, Amazonian curing (*pajelança*), in traditional Candomblé Nagô, Candomblé-Jeje, and Mina-Nagô. Candomblé is the most African of all these lines, and every effort is made to ensure that ritual and ceremonial activities are

as true to the Nagô, or Yoruba, tradition as practised by the African forbears in their motherland and subsequently in the New World. As such, only African deities, called *orixás*, are invoked in prayer, ritual and ceremonial possession when this line is practised. An extensive mythology surrounds the *orixás*, some of whom are believed to have lived as legislators, warriors and kings on earth, and some of whom govern natural phenomena, such as the wind, thunder, health, the seas, and so on. Candomblé Jeje is similar to Candomblé Nagô; its geographical origins place it next door to those of Candomblé Nagô, in the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, and the members of its pantheon of *voduns* correspond almost one-to-one the *orixás*. The Mina element is an exclusively Brazilian development. Activities in the line of Mina focus on ancestor beings, many of whom spent at least the final part of their lives in Brazil and passed into an incorporeal existence in their spiritual home (the *encantaria*) without experiencing physical death. The precise term for such beings is *encantado*. The spirits of local, indigenous ancestors, or *caboclos*, form another major group of spirit entities within *culto afro* practice. *Caboclos* frequently visit the *terreiro* by possessing their devotees. The term *caboclo*, however, is often extended to include frequenting spirits of many different geographical origins, all of whom enjoy conversing, dancing, offering advice, and some of whom are particularly skilled in curing. The *cura* (line of curing), traditionally the domain of animal spirits, such as the *boto encantado* (a river dolphin spirit), is now largely performed by these “caboclos” and *encantados*.

	Afro	Brazilian	Origin	Line/Tradition
Spirit entity	Orixá		Yoruba	Candomblé Nagô
	Vodun		Dahomey	Candomblé Jeje
		Vodunsu, Encantado	Various – esp. Europe, Middle East	Mina
		Caboclo	Indigenous Amazonian (but term often applied more widely)	Mina; also curing and consultation
		Animal Spirits	Indigenous Amazonian	Curing

Table 1. Summary table displaying some of the various possessing spirits, their origins, and the religious ‘lines’, or traditions, with which they are associated.

A full schedule of ritual activities centres on the *orixás*, *voduns*, *encantados*, and *caboclos*. Candles are lit, requests presented, money exchanged, animals offered and bodies given over to the possessing spirits in homage to them and in anticipation of assistance and guidance in daily life. In addition, a number of procedures are followed – some daily – that are said to provide some level of protection from negative spirits and sorcery, and cleansing from negative energies. For example, bathing with a consecrated infusion of leaves and herbs specifically chosen for their cleansing properties is performed before any kind of involvement in religious or spirit-related activities, and before entering particular parts of the house, “to eliminate [lit. cleanse] the negative charge picked up on the street”. Thus, like many other cult houses around the city, this *terreiro* (hereafter called “Pai’s *terreiro*”, after its spiritual leader and “head of the house”) serves many functions. For many of those who attend, it is simultaneously a house of worship, a place of work, a social club, a health clinic, a spiritual retreat, and a home. As spiritual father to most of the members who had been initiated into the religion, as the principle vehicle for the curing spirits, and as the sole bread-winner of all the live-in members of the house, Pai is responsible for the emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of a sizeable community.

About twenty people formed the core of the religious community. This was slightly larger than average for the cult houses of the city. It was well-known that many houses had high numbers of frequenters, friends and hangers-on, all of whom might be present at the public possession ceremonies and parties (in which large quantities of free alcohol were normally served), but that the commitment of members was often transitory and perfunctory. Pai’s *terreiro* was known throughout the city as “serious”: alcohol was forbidden within the house unless it was for ceremonial use (e.g. in libations); there were frequent study sessions and open meetings and debates on issues such as ritual practice, divination methods, spirit families, the history of the religion, etc.; there was a fastidious commitment to correct ritual practice according to the tradition of Pai’s spiritual forbears and the desires of the *orixás* and other spirit entities, and so on. For these reasons, Pai’s *terreiro* attracted a ‘different crowd’ to its public ceremonies, and was generally spoken highly of throughout the city. (Although, for these same reasons, it was frequently the topic of much inter-*terreiro* gossip and jealousy.) A particularly grand public occasion, for example, is the coming out ceremony that follows the 3-week period of initiation (during which the initiate is isolated from the outside world, and led by the *terreiro* leader through a series of rites that begin a life of dedication and commitment to a particular *orixá*). Any

such ceremony, in which the *orixás* or *voduns* come to possess their “sons” (*filhos*) and “daughters” (*filhas*) attracts up to sixty participants and spectators.

Most of those who participate in such occasions – as members (*filhos*) of the *terreiro*, and as neighbours and friends – would have availed of the *terreiro*'s services at some point in their past, particularly Pai's expertise and the specialist advice that may be solicited from the spirits that possess him. In most if not all cases, initiated members initially come to the *terreiro* for guidance, most often on matters of finance, health and love. For some, the first visit may be the last. In many cases, however, the first consultation with Pai and his spirit entities marks the beginning of a series of treatments. A relationship subsequently develops between the client, the spirits and their intermediaries – the *terreiro*'s mediums and diviners.

Divination

When a client arrives at Pai's house, he/she is assessed by means of a variety of techniques. Even before any specific concern is discussed, simple numerological techniques are applied to the person's birth date, and personality and physical characteristics are readily and subjectively assessed, offering Pai a “psychological profile of the person”. During these sessions, Pai (or any of the medium-consultants of the *terreiro*) may be possessed by a spirit entity. Alternatively, clients may be asked to return on a certain day to speak with one of the entities. In this way, spirits may engage in conversation with the clients in a normal, everyday fashion – joking with them, questioning them, offering practical advice, and so on. Indeed, some of the spirits who regularly visit the house are barely distinguishable from the mediums they possess. It is sometimes necessary to ask people, “who are you?” to confirm whether or not they are possessed. In the *culto*, the continuity between the mediums' characteristic, normal behaviour and their possession behaviour is the mark of a well-developed, competent medium. Uncontrolled possession trance, in which the medium may have difficulty in interacting with people or singing and dancing in the possession ceremonies, is common among mediums early in their career, but is something that should be corrected through experience and practice.

The client may then discuss the issues and problems for which he/she needs spiritual guidance and resolution. The consultant will generally offer some advice, endeavouring

to ensure that all the relevant information has been disclosed and that the story is truthful and coherent. Many clients simply need to be reassured concerning some decision, or to hear a kind word, or some other advice for which recourse to divination techniques is unnecessary. For example, the general ethical and moral guidelines within which Pai and other Afro-Brazilian religious specialists operate dictate that should a client arrive with a grievance against someone she holds responsible for her misfortune (e.g. her husband's lover), and she is considering taking that person's life, she should be advised against this course of action. Some advice, however, can only be sought via the *búzios*, or cowry shells – what Pai has nicknamed his “internet to the *orixás*”.

The *jogo de búzios* (lit. “throw³ of the cowries”) is a divination technique that is derived from the Yoruban Ifá method. Other simpler indexical divination techniques are used in the *terreiro*, and although all are considered to be reliable, the *jogo* is considered the most informative and explicative instrument of communication with the *orixás*. Not only does it convey the *orixás*' answers to one's questioning; it reveals some of their reasoning by means of allegory and legend. It is a much simplified Ifá method, but still one that, according to Pai, requires intensive training. Such training was not to be sought in books and manuals. To be a legitimate diviner, one must learn the technique exclusively from one's initiating *pai-de-santo*. This follows general *culto* practice for the transmission of fundamental teachings and knowledge of the *orixás*, spirit entities and ritual procedures. *Boca à ouvido* (lit. “mouth to ear”) is how all members should learn the “deep things”, or *fundamentos*, of the religion. In the case of the cowry throwing, these comprise the 256 stories about the *orixás*.

Each consultation entails two casts; the first to reveal which *orixá* is speaking and the second to “bring the message” (*trazer o recado*). For each secondary cast, each of the sixteen possible configurations has sixteen possible meanings. The procedure was succinctly described to me as follows by Pai possessed with *caboclo* Zé Pelintra (hereafter written as Pai/Zé);

...there is a kind of table, a code, here. There are 16 cowries giving 16 falls, and 16 times 16 gives 256 if I'm not mistaken. There are 256 *itans*,

³ The term *jogo* in this context should not be confused with its alternative meaning, “game”, as in *game of football*.

which are the stories. Each way that they fall has a definition. For example, if it falls like this [*he throws the shells*], “Watch out! You need to request the protection of Oxum because your love life is looking bad”. If it falls like this, “Be careful – you need to solicit goodwill from Oxum because you are in financial difficulty”... So, this is the *jogo*.⁴

Many *pais-de-santo*, according to Pai, can give a single reading of each fall in this way and say something about its implications. Not many, however, have endeavoured to memorise the complete repertoire of stories, or *itans*. This, I was told, can lead to oversimplified and misguided interpretations and a failure to perceive how a particular existential concern maybe spoken to by the contextual details of the relevant *itan*. Therefore, there is a moral duty upon the *pai-de-santo* (or *mãe-de-santo* if female) to learn the technique well and to be honest with his clients. As Pai clearly stated, “In each throw, there are 16 paths or parables or destinations, and it is necessary to know the *itans* and to have the gift of interpretation in order to better orient the client”.⁵ He must also be ritualistically prepared, having attained senior status within the community through initiation and subsequent rites. In addition, the cowries must be consecrated for use; otherwise, as Pai put it once, “they are not obliged to tell the truth”. Of course, many stories circulated the *terreiro* concerning people who had failed to observe all these rules. Indeed, for a small sum of money, one could solicit the gods’ guidance via any number of self-made diviners at the Sunday afternoon market in the city centre.

The Problem

Given that, a) the teaching and training in the *jogo de búzios* is intensive, demanding and exclusionary, and b) the checking of each diviner’s credentials is impractical, and c) there is a very real possibility of being deceived by a fraudster, why persist with this method when the client may much more readily assess his/her situation in conversation with the *entidades* when they are possessing a medium? After all, as Pai/Zé once claimed, “Our

⁴ ...aqui existe uma especie de tabela, codigo, né. São 16 búzios que dão 16 quedas e 16 vezes 16 que dá 256, se não me engano. São 256 itans, que são as histórias. Cada moda que cai tem uma definição, por exemplo, se caiu assim, “Cuidado! Você precisa pedir a proteção a Oxum porque você vai mau no amor”. Se caiu diferente, “Cuidado, você precisa perder a Oxum benevolência porque voce está com problema financeiro... Então esses são, são o jogo.

⁵ “Em cada jogada há 16 caminhos ou parábolas ou destinos, e preciso conhecer os itans e ter o dom de interpretação para melhor orientar o consultante”.

divinities, they accompany us – our gods are much closer to us than other people’s. Our god manifests himself, and he speaks, and he delivers his message”⁶ With such a direct, spontaneous, two-way line to the gods, why persist with the costly method of cowry throwing when seeking the gods’ advice?

Culto principles and practice potentially provide a number of seemingly plausible, but in the end unsatisfactory, responses to this problem.

1. The spirit entities who normally offer consultations through mediums don’t know everything (e.g. *caboclos*, *encantados*, etc.) - the *orixás* know much more than they do. Therefore, consulting the *orixás* via the cowries potentially allows one to tap into a comparatively vast reservoir of knowledge.

“Let’s give an example”, says Pai/Zé, in response to my question, *Do the orixás know more than the caboclos?* “You look out of the window on the first floor of your apartment block and you see a lot of things, right? If you look out of the fourth storey, you see more things, and so on and so on. If you go to the top storey, you’ll see much more, perhaps the whole city – it’s more or less like that”. The analogy served to illustrate the hierarchical nature of the different spirit-categories’ access to hidden or veiled knowledge. Extending the analogy, one might suggest that humans occupy a space in the basement of this building, at least those humans who have not developed their mediumistic capacities.⁷

Furthermore, while it is often said that the spirit entities don’t know *everything*, and that the *orixás* enjoy more privileged epistemic access, *entidades* are still considered to have considerable powers of perception and special access to particular forms of knowledge. What we find is that in practice – outside the analytical contexts in which the above discourses arise – clients and initiated members (*filhos*) are not actually interested in whether or not a certain *entidade* is further up the ladder towards omniscience. What interests the client is whether or not these *entidades* know what she needs them to know

⁶ As nossas divindades, elas convivem conosco. Nós temos os deuses muito mais próximos do que as outras pessoas. O nosso deus se manifesta, e ele fala, e ele prega a mensagem dele.

⁷ It was widely accepted among cult members that mediumistic abilities (*vidência*) are inherent to all human beings. There are many ways in which they may be made manifest and developed. Some people, for example, may be destined to develop their abilities as mediums, channelling spirits and partaking in possession ceremonies, etc. Others may possess a simpler form of *vidência*, comparable to extra-sensory perception, or may be skilled in oneiromancy (the interpretation of dreams).

in order to plan her actions and to respond to specific situations in the most personally advantageous ways. The possessing spirits – of whatever category – are expected to know whether or not so-and-so has been betrayed by their partner, or whether they failed to secure that job offer because of corrupt selection procedures and/or sorcery. People fear that the *entidades* know things about them that they would rather keep secret, e.g. if money has been spent on a weekend's revelling instead of being offered to assist with *terreiro* expenses. In short, the consulting *entidades* are often assumed to know about exactly the kinds of personally significant things that clients and *filhos* (members; lit. sons/daughters) tend to ask about in consultation sessions. One regular client once told me,

...when the *entidade* is chatting to you, she perceives your life [lit. *has clairvoyance*]. She peels you like a banana, she sees what happened, she has a deep connection with what happened. It's as if everything were being shown on television.⁸

Furthermore, the *orixás* also manifest themselves through possession. There are, however, certain key differences in the manifestations of *orixás* and the other spirit entities. This raises a second consideration.

2. Possession by the *orixás* is mute – the *orixás* rarely speak and when they do, it is often in a different language.

In contrast to the *caboclo* spirits and the *encantados*, the *orixás* come less frequently to possess their *filhos*. When they come, they remain with their eyes closed, and rarely engage in conversation with those present. The *orixás* do communicate with those around them, however. Participants may approach them and speak privately to them and receive a response. Questions need to be phrased in such a way that the range of potential responses is narrow and statements short and succinct. This is a constraint that is imposed upon the diviner in a *jogo de búzios* session also. In addition to knowing how

⁸ Na hora em que a entidade está conversando com você, ela tá tendo uma vidência na tua vida. Ela faz, ela te descasca como se você fosse uma banana, ela tá vendo o que aconteceu, ela tá numa ligação profunda do que aconteceu. É como se fosse uma televisão passando do lado – ela vê tudo aquilo.

the cast of the cowries should be interpreted, the diviner must train in the accepted methods of formulating questions.

Possessing *orixás* will mimic, shake and nod their heads, and perform other gestures that indicate their approval or disapproval. For example, it was necessary for me to ask their permission to take photographs of them possessing their *filhos*. The *orixás* and *voduns* may therefore reveal much information when they are physically manifest in the *terreiro*. It would appear, then, that this may constitute a more economical means of consulting them – one that does not require the costly process of training in the *jogo de búzios* and learning the 256 stories to interpret the casts.

A third response may go as follows;

3. One can have more confidence in the *búzios* diviner. Many mediums are charlatans who pretend to be possessed and who consciously manipulate you and eagerly draw out your secrets.

This of course is true in many sectors of the *culto afro*. The distrust that results may be illustrated by the following incident. During my fieldwork period at Pai's *terreiro*, I had the opportunity of accompanying the ritual activities that marked the twenty-first anniversary of his initiation into Candomblé. In the *culto*, members commemorate their initiation each year, repeating some of the rites that were performed at initiation and often spending several days in peaceful solitude and devotion to their *orixás* or *voduns*. Certain anniversaries are especially significant. For example, at seven years a person acquires the right to initiate his/her own community and is given the title of *bablorixá*, or “father of the *orixá* (or if a woman – *iyalorixá*, meaning “mother of the *orixá*”). On the twenty-first anniversary, the *bablorixá* is said to become an *orixá vivo*, or an “alive *orixá*”, owing to his breadth of experience and depth of knowledge and intimacy with the *orixás* (rather than a mystical transformation or apotheosis). The lines of communication with the *orixás* are said to become much more open and varied. At twenty-one years the *bablorixá* may rely more on intuition and inspiration or revelation that he believes to be from the *orixás* and *entidades* without constant recourse to confirmation via the throw of the cowries.

In one of the rites marking Pai's twenty-first anniversary, a core group of initiated members of the *terreiro* met to perform an immolation for a particular entity with whom

Pai had had a special association since his initiation – his *Exú*. According to Pai, on this occasion the “supreme will of the orixás demanded that [the rite] was performed in a way that was contrary to every norm”. The norm is that Pai should not “cut”, or perform the immolation, for his own entity. Yet, when the individuals present asked the *orixás* via the cowries if they should perform the immolation, each of them was rejected. When Pai threw the cowries to ask if *he* should do it, they responded “yes” twice. According to Pai, to have asked a third time would have provoked the *orixás* and so Pai performed the immolation. He said to me, “These things happen often just to teach a lesson. It’s really good that something like this should happen so that the people – the *filhos* – see the possibilities that exist and understand that the highest authority isn’t the *babalorixá*; the highest authority is the *orixás*. And how do they communicate with man? With the cowries, because even if a person was possessed with their *orixá*, someone would say, ‘Ah! But you know, who knows if he was with his *orixá*?’. So, the best communication that exists is by throwing the cowries”.

Nevertheless, there are charlatan diviners also. Paraphrasing what Pai said on this issue, “If I throw the cowries for you, you don’t know my method. Even if you know *a* method, I can tell you that my method is different. This is an ethical problem”. So, there is potentially some ambiguity in the source of wisdom in both possession and cowry-throwing. How do clients deal with this?

Firstly, in the case of the *jogo de búzios*, most members of the in-group understand parts, if not all, of what is involved in throwing and interpreting the fall of the cowry shells according to the method of their *babalorixá*, and so would be capable of raising doubts about anything apparently underhand. Also, clients and *filhos* will generally carry out some research before paying the fee for the *jogo* to their *pai-de-santo* of choice. The diviner’s best advertisement is a satisfied client. Furthermore, the satisfied client is almost certain to return to solicit advice on any further problems. “The client who stays at your house”, Pai/Zé asserted, “is the one who sees that you have something, that you can orient him/her, that you have credibility, honesty in what you say”. Recounting the story of one very ill client who, after approaching many doctors over a long period of time, visited the *terreiro* and was healed, he concluded, “What was it that made her come? Credibility. Because there are lots of *terreiros* – on every corner there’s a *terreiro*, and she only came because we have credibility”. Secondly, in the case of possession, members and

frequenters of the *terreiro* also claim to be able to detect when someone is pretending to be possessed. Such ‘mediums’ are said to be “obsessed” (from the noun *obsessão*, or “obsession”) , not possessed, and are apparently relatively easily identified. In both contexts, then, participants should have ample opportunity to establish whether they are really consulting the gods, or if they are being misguided by a phoney.

Of course, not all clients have such experience of observing possession, or of the methods employed to interpret the fall of the *búzios*. This would explain, however, why most clients’ testimonies of their first encounters with the spirits – whether via mediums or cowries – reveal a certain degree of scepticism. Oftentimes, as in the case of the woman who was finally healed at the *terreiro*, their first visit is their last resort. It is because nothing else worked, and there is nothing to lose (other than the consultancy fee) that people often find themselves at the *terreiro* with little expectation that it will help their situation. Following the resolution of their problems, often over a sustained period of treatment, clients will gain experience of the correct practice as well as trust in the diviner and medium.

The list of ethno-explanations could be extended further. Nevertheless, I suggest that there is much more to perceiving a purportedly possessed medium’s behaviour than critically reflecting on whether or not he or she is genuinely possessed. Even when a person is satisfied that the medium is not faking possession, a degree of uncertainty lingers, even if only on the non-reflective or unconscious level. This is demonstrated by close observation of the ways in which people behave towards mediums when they are said to be possessed. One quickly observes that people’s reactions to possessed individuals are often at odds with how they define possession generally. Some of these data are presented briefly below, taking us to some final suggestions on solving the problem that concerns us here – in the *culto* and many other spirit possession traditions, why do we find prototypical divination techniques to unveil the hidden, when that hidden knowledge is readily accessible through conversation with possessed mediums?

How is possession defined?

Definitions of possession in the *culto* correspond with what appears to be the majority view as described by ethnographers of spirit possession worldwide. There are a number of descriptions available concerning what happens when someone becomes possessed.

Outside of theological debate, however, the consensus among *culto* members seems to lie with the following definition: when someone is possessed by a spirit, his mind – his agency, intentionality, control and therefore his accountability for his actions – is displaced. Another agency takes the place of the one that normally occupies and animates his body. A new person is formed in which the body is not the key identifying feature. Observers may now readily appreciate that the person in front of them, though he/she looks the same, is not the same person. As one *culto* participant put it, “it is the conjunction of the two parts that becomes, temporarily, a person” [i.e. body + mind]. This definition is guided by what may be dubbed “the principle of displacement” and an underlying commitment to radical dualism.⁹

Anthropological studies of spirit possession from across the world tend to present observers’ perceptions of possession as straightforward and unambiguous. For example, in his account of Haitian spirit possession, Ari Kiev affirms that “possession occurs when a loa selects to ‘mount’ or ‘enter the head’ of his *cheval* (person possessed), thereby replacing his soul... All thoughts and behaviour are then attributed to the loa” (1966: 143). In his ethnography of ‘*orisha* work’ in Trinidad, Kenneth Lum writes, “Since it was the spirit (the “actual you”) which animated the physical body, after an *orisha* had manifested on a person, it was that *orisha* who was now animating that person’s body... The displaced spirit only returned when the *orisha* had left” (2000: 156). Ioan Lewis also makes explicit the association between displacement of control and the apportioning of blame, claiming that in the Trinidadian Shango cult, as elsewhere, “whatever the possessed person does is done with impunity since he is considered to act as the unconscious and involuntary vehicle of the gods” (1971: 105).

Yet, I observed that this principle – while it informed people’s generic assessment of what is going on with bodies and minds during possession – was inconsistent with people’s behaviours towards possessed individuals in specific possession episodes. Mediums were gossiped about and reprimanded for things they had said and done when possessed. For instance, they were teased for dancing incorrectly or ungracefully, or for singing poorly; they were held responsible for inappropriate behaviour, e.g. talking dirty, or drinking excessively at a possession party, or involvement in crime. Further,

⁹ See Jesse Bering (in press) and Paul Bloom (2004).

observations of more subtle interactions attest to the importance of implicit mechanisms of social perception in possession episodes.

Take the fictitious (but plausible) example of Maria and Claudia. Let us say that Claudia is lazy in the *terreiro* kitchen and this generates some tension between them. Based on comparable, specific examples of such *intraterreiro* tensions, it is reasonable to anticipate that when Claudia is possessed, Maria's actions, expressions and demeanour around Claudia will show little indication that she has processed fully the implications of this change, i.e. that Claudia is now a new person and that this new person is no longer the lazy woman who shirks her kitchen duties. The dislike (as well as admiration) that characterised relationships between participants in normal daily social life carried over into the possession episodes. When participants were questioned about the apparent contradictions in what they say about possession in general and in how they interpret the behaviours of specific possessed individuals, they would either shrug their shoulders, or they would offer what might be called the "theologically correct" (Barrett 1999) description of possession. That is, the agency of the medium and the agency of the spirit entity are fused together to create a new person that is neither fully the entity nor the medium, but an amalgam of both, to which all behaviours are attributable. The 'principle of fusion', however, was an unwieldy one for real-time judgements – it was clear that in rapid, real-time attributions, behaviours were not attributed to this amalgam, but to either the spirit or the medium.

A number of other ethnographers have noted that ambiguity is inherent to possession. Niko Besnier, for example, writes, "mediumship is a competition between the voice of a spirit and the voice of a medium, since the two have only one mouth to speak through" (1996: 85). Similarly, Michael Lambek writes, "Possession contains the central paradox that an actor both is and is not who she claims to be" (1989: 53). Janice Boddy observes that possession by the *zar* spirits, "however social they may be, creates a paradox in and for those involved, as the possessed are simultaneously themselves and alien beings" (1989:9). Unlike most normal communication between two people, the intentional source of a possessed medium's words and actions is ambiguous. The consequences of this situation are not only assessed consciously by the observer (e.g. in terms of real/false possession-trance). Even when a person is taken to be possessed, there is some evidence that observers' perceptions of the medium's behaviours are incommensurate with the

‘principle of displacement’. The situations in which this is most apparent (to the ethnographer) involve inappropriate or inadequate behaviour (e.g. when mediums contravene moral rules and conventions, or fail to dance or sing competently). I argue that some of the ambiguities reported from possession scenarios around the world are due to implicit psychological biases that are informed by the mental mechanisms of social cognition. These mechanisms work rapidly and automatically to deliver many inferences per second as we observe and interpret the behaviour of others. The majority of these inferences are not consciously appraised and may therefore be generated and entertained without conscious checking and without appeal to counterintuitive features of the social situation. In addition to the ethnographic data from the *culto*, there is further evidence to suggest that these everyday mechanisms of normal social cognition inform and bias thinking about possessed mediums. Inferences delivered automatically and rapidly by the mechanisms that allow us to process information about people we know make it virtually impossible to process the migration of minds in real-time interaction. This evidence comes from recent studies in social cognition, specifically the growing research topic of significant-other representations and transference, and from neuroscientific accounts of person-identification.

Significant Others and Person Recognition

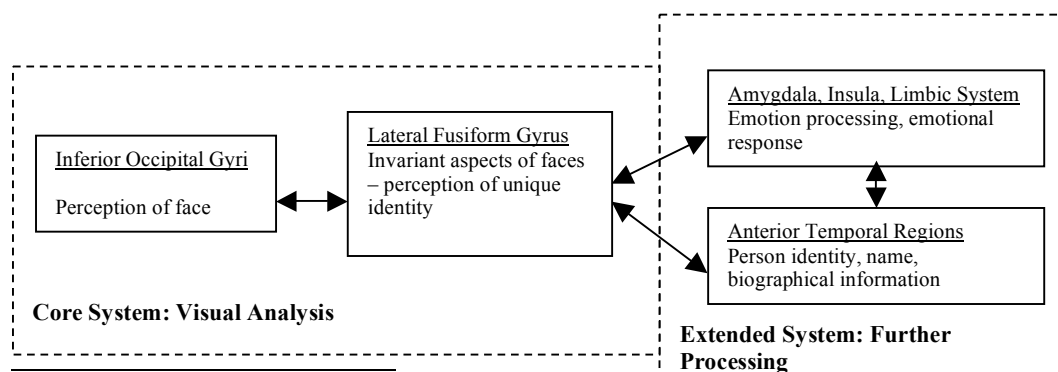
In a series of studies, Andersen and colleagues have investigated the mechanisms underlying the everyday transference of mental representations of Significant Others (SOs)¹⁰ to new persons (1990, 1995). They found that when we encounter people who resemble SOs, the information about the SO that is stored in our memory systems is automatically activated without our awareness. The activated representation of the SO is then used to predict and interpret the behaviour of the new person. In this context, *transference* is defined as “the phenomenon whereby something about a new person activates a perceiver’s representation of a significant other, leading him or her to interpret and respond to the person in ways derived from prior experiences with the significant other” (Chen 2001: 125). The activated memories of the SO include characteristics as well as feelings, motivations and interpersonal expectations. The proposed mechanism underlying transference is “chronic accessibility”. That is, the persistent readiness with which significant other representations are activated and brought to bear on social

¹⁰ Significant Others is a broadly defined category in Andersen et al’s empirical work. SO refers to “any people who have been important and influential in the individual’s life” (Andersen and Cole 1990: 385)

perception. Andersen et al.’s studies demonstrated chronic accessibility of SO representations compared to the control representations (1995).

These findings are relevant to our investigation of the mechanisms employed in the perception of possessed mediums. The possessing spirit entity is said to take control of the host’s agency, yet observers regularly represent the host as the agent responsible for actions and behaviours. Following Andersen’s findings, I suggest that this is because the behavioural features of the possessed host are often continuous with those features of the host normally. Despite the reflectively, or consciously, held belief that the host is no longer present, but that he/she has been replaced by another agent, observed continuities in personality, voice and use of language, and behavioural characteristics (e.g. mannerisms) in the possession episode¹¹ automatically trigger representations of the host’s personality characteristics and traits. This informs observers’ implicit interpretations of the host’s behaviours when possessed as well as their affective responses.

The neural correlates underpinning these processes have been the subject of at least two decades of rigorous neuroscientific enquiry (e.g. Bruce and Young 1986, Sergent et al 1992, Leveroni et al 2000, Shah et al 2001). Neurological accounts of the retrieval of information about others stored in memory draw from increasingly sophisticated fMRI techniques and data.¹² In some recent investigations, Leveroni et al and Shah et al, (see also Gobbini et al 2004, Paller et al 2003, Haxby et al 2002), have demonstrated that face perception and recognition involves several neural systems in concert.



¹¹ For mediums in the *culto afro*, a high degree of continuity between one’s everyday behaviour and one’s behaviour when possessed with *caboclos* is characteristic of highly developed mediumistic abilities. Inexperienced mediums endeavour to achieve such continuity and control in possession episodes and training sessions (“development sessions”) exist specifically for this purpose.

¹² Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging is a form of brain imaging that registers blood flow to functioning areas of the brain.

Figure 1. Model adapted from Haxby et al's (2002) model of the human neural system for face perception, showing brain regions activated in the representation of invariant aspects of faces.

Haxby et al. (2002) distinguish between the core system and the extended system in their model of a distributed neural system for face perception (see Figure 1). The brain areas that are identified as being active in the core system are responsible for the visual analysis of faces. The extended system is composed of those areas that process the meaning of information obtained from faces. Their model is supported by increasingly precise investigations into the specific brain areas activated by exposure to strangers, familiar faces, personally familiar faces and famous familiar faces (e.g. Leveroni et al 2001; Gobbini et al. 2004). For example, Gobbini et al. (2004) found that personally familiar faces (such as those of significant others) evoked a stronger response than did famous familiar faces in those areas associated with the representation of the personal attributes and mental states of others (or Theory of Mind) and with the retrieval of episodic autobiographical memory. Their results suggest that;

perceiving a familiar face activates a distributed network of brain structures related not only to visual familiarity but also to knowledge about a person's personality, attitudes, and intentions; to episodic memories associated with that person; and to the emotional response to that person. The 'knowledge' about the other person is retrieved *spontaneously* and appears to play an integral role in the recognition of familiar individuals (2004: 1634, italics mine).

This research provides evidence that there is a flow of information from specific systems in the brain that handle face perception, face recognition, and person-identification that is rapid and automatic. This means that perception of a familiar face will activate the retrieval of person-identity information without conscious effort. Although it is possible to have familiarity without identification – this happens when we know we know someone but we cannot quite place them – barring pathology, this is unlikely to occur for people we meet regularly. Recognizing a person involves automatic information flow

from neuroanatomical areas of the brain that deal with face perception to familiarity checking to associated areas connected with memory and emotion. This means that even if we tried to block this neural flow, it would be impossible.

Thus, the knowledge – both semantic and emotional – that we hold for a person is automatically accessed when we see him/her. Returning to the possession context, even though we may accept that he/she is possessed, and that this in turn entails a commitment to the belief that he/she is no longer here but has been replaced by a different agent, the identity files stored for that person will continue to inform our perceptions and interpretations of his/her behaviours, our emotional responses, and our interpersonal expectancies. It remains an empirical question, and one that is highly relevant to the real-world practice of spirit possession, as to how the use of masks, the alteration of voice, and the dramatic and striking transformations in behaviour during possession may interfere with these perception mechanisms. Given that these are frequent features of spirit possession traditions around the world, such questions could be investigated in real-world settings using experimental methodologies. The suggestion for our purposes here, however, is that these data are pertinent to the explanation of ambiguities in spirit possession traditions in general, and are particularly relevant to the question of the co-existence of mediumistic and prototypical divination techniques. Why do such techniques co-exist? Why throw the cowries to gain access to the gods' knowledge when one can ask the gods directly? I suggest that it is, in part, because the 'principle of displacement' that guides concepts of possession – while it is easily graspable in principle – conflicts with the intuitive expectations delivered by our mental apparatus for everyday social interaction. This produces an incongruence between reflective and non-reflective, or tacit, beliefs about possessed mediums, and, as a result, when seeking special knowledge, the randomized and mechanical communication with the supernatural agents via the cast of the cowries is a more appealing option. Insofar as charlatans can be avoided, and credible diviners accessed, divination by shells, while costly in terms of training, offers a more cognitively congruent method of accessing the messages of the gods.

Does it then follow that if the incongruence in possession contexts was removed (e.g. through the use of masks, radical alterations in voice and behaviour, etc.), divination techniques would become extinct in such possession traditions? Not necessarily. The

factors that potentially place these two methods of revealing the hidden in competition for cultural inclusion are numerous. Certain local characteristics of possession behaviour and possession definitions, as well as of divinatory techniques are significant. Are diviners easily accessible? What are the restrictions on becoming a diviner? How extensive is the training? Are the gods consulted through divination techniques the same as those who possess the mediums? If so, do they communicate when in possession? Such details must be considered, case by case, in addition to the generalisable principles described in this chapter in order to determine whether possession and divination are cultural competitors or complements.

Conclusion

This brief account of some of the processes underpinning everyday social perception takes us part of the way in explaining why the intentionality behind possession behaviour is intrinsically ambiguous. What emerges out of this compilation of evidence from field observations, psychological studies and neurological investigations is that the factors that come into play in the perception and interpretation of possession behaviour are numerous. These operate both implicitly and explicitly, and potentially the contents of both implicit and explicit perceptions and interpretations are divergent.

This may explain, in part, why a cult participant's dislike for another member is not forgotten about when that member is possessed, even though she tells herself that the woman is not here anymore; why she blames people for things they do when possessed, despite knowing that control is said to be displaced by the possessing agent; why she would have difficulty watching her possessed husband get too close to another woman, even though he is no longer the agent animating his body; and why it is the unequivocal voice of the cowries that she turns to for answers to her deepest questions and concerns, even though conversation with the possessing gods is a readily available option.

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