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Multiple Personality, Possession Trance, and the Psychic Unity of Mankind

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# *Multiple Personality, Possession Trance, and the Psychic Unity of Mankind*

ERIKA BOURGUIGNON

... the psychic unity of mankind is a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory since, without this axiom, all psychoanalytic extrapolations from clinical data to cultural material remain idle speculation.

... in a given ethnic group, a particular idea can surface consciously and be culturally implemented, while in another it occurs only on the *unconscious* level and finds no direct cultural expression.

... the same impulse or fundamental fantasy can be stimulated by various cultural influences, and conversely, can use equally well a great variety of cultural outlets and fields of action ... something which is out in the open and even culturally implemented in one society is often repressed in other societies.

George Devereux, "Culture and the Unconscious" (1978[1955])

In his comparative study of abortion (1955), George Devereux compares the fantasies of individual psychoanalytic patients in one culture to institutionalized practices in another, and argues that such correspondences bespeak the psychic unity of "mankind." The impulses and fantasies, he claims, are universal; however, whether or not they are actualized and how they are given public expression will depend on the cultural context.<sup>1</sup>

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Devereux had little difficulty in finding examples to support his thesis, and others are readily available. For example, in the United States, in 1981, media attention was drawn to a phenomenon named, somewhat abusively, *bulemia*, or popularly, "binge-purge." This disorder, which affects primarily young women aged 17–23, consists of compulsive overeating followed by induced vomiting and purging. It was "discovered" by the therapeutic community after several years of attention to another eating disorder, an epidemic of *anorexia nervosa* in somewhat younger girls.

One curious feature of the *bulemia* phenomenon is that it appears that many of its victims had engaged in these pathological practices for several years, but were able to keep them secret from the people with whom they lived and interacted. When therapists and counselors of various sorts, as well as the news media, became aware of *bulemia*, it was found to be remarkably widespread: it is said to affect 10 percent of the women in the age group. (There is also a class factor involved: reference is frequently made to "college age women.")

What are the "various cultural influences" that stimulate the impulse and fundamental fantasy underlying "binge-purging" and its deviant or standardized outlets and fields of action? In the case of young American women, some of the cultural influences are obvious. The selective influences that determine why only a minority are affected relate to the individual's personal history and circumstances and are beyond these brief comments.

Although some individuals "invented" the practice themselves, others say they learned it from friends, or, more recently, from the very public outcry against the disorder. This observation is important because, at some point, we no longer deal with individual fantasies, distorted perceptions, and pathological practices, but with culturally styled pathologies. Laxatives and diuretics are not only easily available but vigorously advertised, as are high calorie foods. Slimness in women is a highly prized cultural ideal and, in La Barre's phrase, the nubile female is the "social cynosure." Moreover, knowledge of cultural practices in other times and places can also facilitate the development of analogous habits: news reports quote Jane Fonda as saying that she and her friends read about the Roman *vomitorium* in history class and thought it "real neat." Binge-purge may then be seen as an American culturally patterned pa-

thology of young women, and by contrast, as an established practice among responsible adult men in ancient Rome.

The history of this phenomenon suggests that, in a mass society such as that of the United States, various widespread disorders may exist "underground" as long as they do not catch the public eye, so that when they are "discovered" they constitute an epidemic, a national problem, a newsworthy event. This is related to the way in which news is produced, as well as to the manner in which pathological behaviors of individuals, given appropriate publicity, can serve as models for others.

A more complex and problematic group of phenomena with which we may test Devereux's thesis consists of the development of alternate personalities in certain individuals. Such persons exhibit dramatic changes in behavior, expression, even appearance, manifest startling and abrupt transitions between identities, and present little apparent continuity of memory and awareness. Two instances may serve to present the questions at issue.

The first example concerns Mrs. G., a black woman, who lives in New York City; she is in her mid-forties, attractive, well-groomed, and civic-minded. The second involves João, a shy and mild-mannered 33-year-old mulatto man, a resident of São Paulo, Brazil. About Mrs. G. we are told that, one day, she appeared "almost unrecognizable. She was dressed sloppily, was groomed badly, and had spots of food on her clothing. Her posture was entirely different . . . she spoke in a different voice and seemed to think in a different style . . . her face actually took on a different look. . . . Her attitude . . . was aggressive, and she spiced her narrative with curses and expletives" (Lasky 1978:369–370). The identity presenting itself in this manner was not Mrs. G., but someone calling herself Candy.

We learn of João that, one evening as he was riding in a taxi with a group of friends, he "took out some money to pay the fare. Suddenly, his facial expression changed, and he began to giggle in a high-pitched voice. [This was] Margarida . . . , and since women do not usually pay taxi fares 'she' began to fold up the money and put it back in João's pocket. Margarida stuck out her tongue at the driver, who by this time had turned around to look at the scene" (Pressel 1977:358–359).

At first glance, these two accounts appear quite similar. The pleasant and respectable Mrs. G. has an aggressive and slatternly alternate personality named Candy. The mild-mannered João has a provocative female alternative personality called Margarida. How are we to understand the existence of seemingly fully formed, named alternate personalities in these two cases? Are they examples of the "same impulse or fundamental fantasy," in Devereux's terms?

Our first step is to consider the sources from which these two examples are drawn. The account of Mrs. G./Candy comes from a clinical case report by an American psychotherapist. We learn of João/Margarida from the ethnographic study of the Brazilian Umbanda cult, conducted by an American anthropologist. The initial aims of the two writers in their interactions with the subjects of their reports differ: the psychotherapist was sought out by Mrs. G. to obtain relief from "continual anxiety and frequent bouts of depression" (Lasky 1978:359). The anthropologist met João among other cult participants, whose beliefs and behaviors she wished to record. The psychotherapist seeks to intervene; the anthropologist wishes to observe and to interfere as little as possible in the lives of the people she is studying.

Their reactions to the alternate personalities are correspondingly different. Lasky notes that, in spite of earlier hints of Candy's existence, he "had not lent credence" to Mrs. G.'s "second, separate personality." When Candy does appear, he is surprised and responds cautiously, telling her that he "would like to learn . . . which part of Mrs. G. she represented." This statement of disbelief in her existence infuriates Candy, who replies that "she did not *represent* anything, she was herself" (Lasky 1978:370, italics in original). Candy insists that she is a separate person, sharing a body with Mrs. G., who essentially agrees. She, the core personality, tells Lasky that Candy "usually seemed to be someone else who knew her very well and seemed almost 'to sit on my shoulder, like a little bird' " (Lasky 1978:364). This perception of Candy as separate and alien is confirmed when Mrs. G. says that though she may be embarrassed at Candy's actions, she does not feel any guilt for them. That is, she does not feel responsible for Candy's behavior. The therapist, however, does not entertain such a possibility. To him, Candy is a split-off part of Mrs. G. herself, "resulting from a developmental defect of the ego" (Lasky 1978:364).

For comparison we turn not to Pressel's views on Margarida but to those of João and his fellow Umbandistas. They do not consider Margarida as a split-off part of João's own principal personality, but as a separate being. She is one of several spirits that "possess" him at intervals. In local parlance, he is her *cavalho* or "horse" whom she "mounts." She does so by temporarily displacing his personality and taking over his body. What happens on these occasions is her responsibility, not his. Margarida is believed to be a "disincarnate" spirit, that is, the spirit of a deceased person. Although she is a unique individual she belongs to a class of female spirits called *pombagiras*, counterparts of male *exus*. These are said to be the spirits of persons who led especially wicked lives while on earth. However, she is not João's only spirit. Like other Umbandistas, he is the medium of four categories of spirits, including *prêtos velhos* (gentle and patient old black slaves), *caboclos* (stern Brazilian Indians), and *crianças* (playful children). João's friends thought Margarida caused his feminine behavior.

João had been an Umbandista intermittently for several years. He had first joined at the suggestion of friends, who viewed the cult as a solution for some unspecified difficulties which they thought were due to spiritual causes. In Umbanda, personal problems are often explained as the result of neglected mediumistic capacities which require development. That is, the applicant needs to identify the spirits soliciting him and to gain the skill to receive them on appropriate ritual occasions.

So far, we note both an important similarity and an important difference between the cases of Mrs. G. and João. First, both have stable alternate identities, and in each instance these alters (one of several in João's case) express feelings and attitudes divergent from those of the core personality, or host, for whom they cause difficulties. Both Candy and Margarida are aggressive, they counter cultural norms, and both are sexually provocative. Their hosts remember only dimly or incompletely, if at all, what transpires when the alters take over. They feel no responsibility for their alters' actions. On the other hand, the alters differ with regard to their sociocultural definition. Candy is Mrs. G.'s private, personal creation. Neither her community nor her therapist believes in her separate, autonomous existence. As a result, she feels embarrassed by Candy's behavior, which her community ascribes to her. Here João's story is

quite different. From the point of view of the Umbandistas—Joaõ and others alike—as well as many members of the larger Brazilian community, spirits of deceased humans seek temporary embodiment in living persons, who are their mediums. Margarida and his other spirits, in this sense, are socially accepted, culturally “real” entities, not personal split-off parts. Not only do Umbandistas not *deny* the reality of spirit alters, they teach their existence and foster their expression. Joaõ, like many others, turned to the spiritual-therapeutic institution of Umbanda specifically in order to learn how to give expression to these personalities.

In other words, the alters of Mrs. G. and of Joaõ—who live in different cultural settings, and who seek help from different types of healers—have different ontological status: for the American psychotherapist, it is possible, although unusual, for persons to suffer from defective ego development, to use dissociation, or “splitting” rather than repression as a principal ego defense mechanism, and as a result to develop “multiple personalities.”

For Umbandistas, the world is peopled by disincarnate as well as incarnate spirits. Having unfinished business in the world, they seek out persons with mediumistic capacities. These, however, must be developed through the spiritual guidance of leaders in the context of public and private rituals, at the peril of health and well-being. The aim of the cult, then, is to encourage the expression of these disincarnate spirit personalities. Not only is their reality not questioned, but their appearance and expression are facilitated. Pressel (1977; also Figge 1973) notes that Umbanda centers make an organized effort to teach novices how to enter trance states, and “how to be possessed by, and control the behavior of four spirit types” (p. 364). Such learning is not unique to Umbanda but inherent in possession trance ritual in general, in the many societies in which such beliefs and practices are to be found. Crapanzano (1977) deals with spirit possession as a language, or a medium of communication, and comments: “Technically, the spirit possessed must learn to be possessed—to enter trance, to carry out the expected behavior gracefully, and to meet the demands of the spirits. . . . Symbolically, the spirit possessed must learn . . . to structure and evaluate his experience in terms of the idiom at his disposal” (p. 15).

What is viewed as negative, pathological, apparently spontaneous, idiosyncratic, and deprived of positive cultural styling in the

case of Mrs. G. is fostered, stimulated rather than spontaneous, and culturally styled—to a degree even prescribed—in the case of João. His initial difficulties are explained as due to undeveloped mediumistic capacities, that is, the inability to express alternate personalities. In cultural terms, this means being solicited by disincarnate spirits who wish to appear through him, yet being unprepared to receive them. What is seen in purely personal terms in the one case, is seen in cosmic terms in the other.

Joining Umbanda, João had a great deal to learn: the belief system of the cult, the identities of his spirits, the behavior appropriate to each, as well as the technique of entering into trance on specified occasions. Possession trance is sought at regularly recurring rituals dedicated to specific spirit types, who are invited through their own songs, drum rhythms, and dance steps.

None of this applies to Mrs. G. Her alter is not culturally recognized, and is not invited. She has not been “taught” to act the part. To the contrary, the therapist sees his role as helping her to overcome what he perceives as pathological splits in her personality. He focuses on the patient’s life history in order to understand the sources of the splits and of the alternate personality. The Umbandistas may also speak of the past but are most likely to discover signs of spiritual solicitations, of the spirits’ past lives and even of past lives of the developing medium.

For Lasky, Mrs. G. suffers from “multiple personality” syndrome—a recognized albeit debated category of psychopathology. By contrast, João is a member of a religious group with a complex cosmology, in the context of which possession trance holds a central place. This contrast is a substantial one: the individual deviant without cultural support on the one hand, and the member of an organized group that teaches the behavioral and experiential manifestations he presents on the other. The American therapist seeks to convince his patient that the alternate personality does not exist, except as an aspect of herself; the cult teaches João that other spirit entities exist and wish to express themselves through him.

In spite of these dramatic contrasts, the two cases are not totally without points of contact beyond the lowest phenomenological level. Lasky knows of what he calls “the idea of possession” and refers to the popular book and film, *The Exorcist* (Blatty 1971). He asserts that this idea “is an offshoot of the concept of multiple personality”



(Lasky 1978:356). That is, he theorizes implicitly that pathological instances of ego dissociation form the model for the popular and ancient theory of spirit possession. Although the point is not further developed, it does require some comment. The historical origins of possession belief must, of course, remain moot. However, we know of its immense distribution in human societies, both possession belief in general and, more specifically, belief associated with the acting out of spirit personalities by means of an altered state of consciousness. Such ritual practices are enormously widespread and frequent. As reported elsewhere, we found them in more than half of the societies in a sample of 488 (Bourguignon 1973a). Moreover, behavior during altered states of consciousness is structured by a preexisting belief system. Where spirit possession belief does not exist, trance states will not be interpreted as due to possession, and the behavior will not be influenced by the explicit and implicit expectations involved (Bourguignon 1973a, 1973b; Lambek 1982). The expectations and their structuring impact are clearly seen at work in the case of Joaõ.

A very interesting point in Lasky's discussion of the case of Mrs. G. is to be found in his reaction to the appearance of Candy. He is surprised "at Candy's autonomous seeming existence" (1978:370) and he tells this to Mrs. G. Moreover, when he learns of various of Candy's actions, he becomes both angry and concerned "over the degree to which Mrs. G. could be harmed by Candy. At that point, in a burst of narcissistic grandiosity and messianic fervor," he adds, "I assured Mrs. G. that Candy was manageable, that Candy would be kept under control and that in a battle of strength Candy could only lose." Note that Lasky here reacts quite as an Umbandista healer might: the harmful foreign entity must be faced and kept from doing harm. However, he goes on, "fortunately . . . I became aware of the inappropriateness of my reassurances and of the invitation that I was presenting to Candy. If she had challenged me, I never could have won in reality" (Lasky 1978:371). Rephrasing the point, he invites Mrs. G. to work with him to get the "different parts of herself to comfortably work together in harmony" (1978:371).

Seeing an alternate personality at work was to this practiced therapist a dramatic and convincing experience, one that he understood as the source of possession belief. It required his substantial insight and self-criticism to allow his intellectual perspective to gain the

day, to deny the apparent evidence of his senses and to convince the patient of his view of reality, and thus to succeed in his therapeutic enterprise. In the end, the personalities were indeed integrated.

The possession beliefs Lasky refers to are those of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which manifestations of alien spirit entities are hostile, like Candy, and to which the traditional ritual response is exorcism. In that context, then, the ontological reality of the spirit is affirmed, not denied. The ritual healer does indeed challenge the spirit, who is to be driven away. That such cases are by no means limited to fiction or to the distant past is seen in a recent German case, as described in detail by Goodman (1981).

Umbanda beliefs concerning possession are distinctly different. The historic roots of this religion are to be found in syncretism of Catholicism, various West African religions, and the 19th-century syncretic spiritism<sup>2</sup> of Allan Kardec (Bastide 1960). One very important feature of the practice of this group is the controlled occurrence of possession trance. Yet, as we have seen in the case of João, there are instances when even practiced mediums experience spontaneous extra-ritual possession trance. Such eruptions of spirit alters into everyday life are more comparable to Mrs. G.'s case than the induced, approved, and regulated performances of possession trance in the cult setting. In addition to possession by Margarida, João experienced unsolicited and disordered possession by several other spirits within days after the events cited earlier. For one thing, his *prêto velho* spirit "would possess João, either to help him get out of the awkward situation" created by Margarida "or to castigate him for having failed to control the first spirit" (i.e., Margarida) (Pressel 1977:356). If Margarida was seen as causing João's feminine behavior, the *prêto velho* was thought to control it.

João's friends reacted to these spontaneous possessions by seeing them as evidence of difficulties in João's life, and of a need for spiritual assistance. Pressel tells us that João was, indeed, under stress, and that his problems involved not only conflict over his homosexual tendencies but also difficulties with finding and holding a good job. She sees the spontaneous possession trances both as symbolizing the points of stress and as helping João become more aware of his problems. When his job situation improved, his friends held a spirit ritual for him to "signal an auspicious beginning for João" (Pressel 1977:359). He was given support by his friends and their

spirits, and, Pressel suggests, by his own several spirit selves acting out balancing aspects of his total personality.

This is a specific instance of a more general observation Pressel makes: "After learning to play the role of each spirit, the novice may extend that personality trait into his own everyday behavior. . . . An extremely impatient woman I knew felt that she had learned to be calm from her *prêta velha* spirit" (Pressel 1977:346). The similarity between Mrs. G. and João, then, is that their alters appear in response to felt stress and give expression to it. A difference is that learning to express unconscious aspects of the personality—if we may so interpret the nature and meaning of the spirits for their hosts—allows their partial integration into the core personality. However, in contrast to the therapeutic procedure employed by Mrs. G.'s analyst, this result is obtained without reference to personal history, unconscious motivations, verbalization of conflicts, or "working through" of a transference relationship.

There are still further points of both similarity and contrast between Mrs. G. and João. As already mentioned, Umbanda spirit identities are cultivated in the ritual context. Disordered behavior may bring a client to the cult center, as one reason among many, but initial trances are induced by the medium-healer, who identifies the spirit and defines his or her identity. Lasky, in discussing the origins of Candy as an independent personality, sees her appearance as related to the analytic therapy and the relationship between the therapist and the patient. He argues that if the analyst allows himself to act on his protective impulses, provoked by the patient's self-presentation as helpless and dependent, this "can foster an inappropriate and overlong dependence on the analyst and may prompt the patient to produce more personalities" (Lasky 1978:372). On the one hand, dissociation may be a defense against the stress produced by the analytic process, and on the other hand, the multiplication of personalities may be stimulated by the analyst's countertransference. Viewed superficially, the analogy between Umbanda and analytic therapy for multiple personalities thus appears to have one more point in common: the personalities are produced in the therapeutic interaction. And yet, again, there are significant contrasts. The process by which the alternate personalities are produced differs. The Umbanda healer intentionally induces an altered state, suggests the existence of spirit personalities and provides models, if

not of the individual spirit, at least of the categories or types of spirits available. A program of learning to play spirit roles under controlled conditions, including induction and, significantly, termination of the possession trance, is established. Spiritual and social well-being is held out as a promise, as is the personal support provided by the group and its leader.

The psychotherapist, however, does not induce the manifestation of the alternate personality intentionally—at least not its initial appearance. On the contrary, he or she does not expect it and is unprepared to deal with it. On later occasions, however, once faced by the therapeutic problem such dissociation presents, the therapist may indeed wish to communicate with this alter directly and invite it to appear. In many reported cases, hypnosis is used for this purpose, but this was not the strategy employed in this instance (cf. Suttcliffe and Jones 1962; Schreiber 1973; Ludwig et al. 1972). In other words, in both the case of Mrs. G. and that of Joaõ, the initial appearance of a spirit alter is the outcome of therapeutic intervention. In the one instance it is iatrogenic and undesired; in the other case it is intentional. In both cases the spontaneous manifestation is a response to current stress whether that resulting from the therapy itself or from life situations. In the case of Joaõ, however, it fits into a world view that allows these eruptions to be perceived as helpful, to mobilize the strength of the ego, as well as the help of others.

A further difference between our two cases concerns the healer's perspective on his relationship with his client. Lasky, as we have seen, is concerned with "inappropriate and overlong dependence on the analyst." Analysis is a finite, professional relationship, the aim of which is to help the patient function independently. Joining Umbanda is a permanent commitment to a world view, to interactions with spirit personalities, human leaders, and fellow group members. One may drop out or switch centers, but spiritual development may permit one to become a leader. The spirits continue to remain available, and fear of dependency is not a factor in the overall picture. Indeed, one of the social functions of Umbanda is to provide a means to establish non-kin contacts and to build a personal network in an urban environment (Lerch 1980; Pressel 1977).

For purposes of comparison between multiple personality in present-day American society and possession trance, Umbanda offers a particularly instructive example. It is a major and rapidly growing

religion in a modern urban environment and therefore is more relevant for our purposes than traditional possession trance religions in small-scale societies where there is likely to be much less latitude for the development of idiosyncratic spirit personalities.<sup>3</sup> Among its sources is Kardecism, which grew out of 19th-century spiritism. Kardecism also contributed to Puerto Rican spiritism, now flourishing in New York. One might wonder what Mrs. G.'s story would have been like had she turned to a spiritist healer rather than a psychoanalyst.

Kenny (1981, 1986) has shown that 19th-century spiritism not only favored the development of mediums, who fascinated a number of the major figures of contemporary psychology, among them William James, but also stimulated the appearance of numerous cases of multiple personality in the same communities. Indeed, he considers multiple personality to have been "primarily an artifact of now lapsed theoretical perceptions, and hence an illusory, even though creative, co-production of physician and patient" (Kenny 1981:339). With the decline of the belief in spirit possession, cases of multiple personality no longer were reported. Others (e.g., Gruenewald 1977) have linked the frequent reports of such cases in the late 1800s to the then popular and widespread use of hypnosis, as well as to an active interest in hysteria.

In the last twenty-five or thirty years, however, the multiple personality syndrome has made a dramatic comeback in North America. It has been supported, some would say created, by the widespread dissemination of books and films offering vivid accounts of several cases: the case of Eve (Thigpen and Cleckley 1957) and the case of Sybil (Schreiber 1973) are probably the most widely known, since the film versions have been shown on U.S. and Canadian television. One case, that of Billy Milligan (Keyes 1981) shows that this subject is not merely a matter of academic interest or entertainment. It has attracted national as well as vigorous local interest because it involves criminal acts on the part of some of the subject's reputed 23 personalities, including acts of abduction and rape partly attributed to a lesbian alter. Diagnosis and appropriate treatment have been issues of repeated public debate in newspapers, legislative chambers, several hearings, and a trial. On videotape,<sup>4</sup> the "switching" from one personality to another is dramatic, as when the husky 26-year-old man suddenly acts out the personality of a delicate and

tearful woman. As in many other cases of multiple personalities, this individual has had a dramatic history of childhood abuse, and the sources of some of the personalities are easily recognized, while those of others remain obscure. Psychiatrists who accept the diagnosis of multiple personality have sought to produce a fusion. Those who reject it have used other, more punitive, strategies. Kenny has suggested that if "this ambiguous 'syndrome' were to be externally validated and ritualized in psychotherapeutic procedure, it would function as an existential equivalent of possession" (1981:355). It would be an equivalent to the degree that it provides recognition of the patient's subjective experience of alien intrusion and discontinuity of identity, as well as the therapist's experience of confronting a "different" person. On the other hand, in the contemporary approach of psychotherapists there is nothing equivalent to the two strategies used by healers who practice in possession trance cults: exorcism, that is, the recognition and rejection of the alter, on the one hand; and recognition and domestication of the alter, on the other. Thus, even in those instances where possession trance and multiple personality arise on the basis of similar case histories of child abuse and the use of dissociation as a defense mechanism, the cultural theory and the resulting therapeutic response remain radically different. For the two cases discussed here there is only analogy, not substantial identity of phenomena.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A German version of this paper appeared in Hans Peter Duerr's *Die Wilde Seele* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), a volume in honor of George Devereux.

<sup>2</sup>*Spiritualism* is the term most generally used in the United States today. In Latin America, *spiritism* (*espiritismo*) is the accepted form.

<sup>3</sup>Total stereotyping of required behavior in possession trance is illustrated by the Kalabari case presented by Horton (1969).

<sup>4</sup>I am indebted to Dr. George T. Harding, Jr., for his generosity in discussing this case with me, and permitting me to see videotaped interviews he recorded with Milligan. Dr. Harding acted as expert consultant for the court.

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