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Spring 2017

# Innovative ethnography in the study of spirit possession in South Asia

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*University of Iowa*

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INNOVATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE STUDY OF SPIRIT POSSESSION IN SOUTH  
ASIA

by

Jack Price Goblirsch

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Arts  
degree in Religious Studies in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Frederick M. Smith

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Jack Price Goblirsch

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree  
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## ABSTRACT

The study of possession phenomena in South Asia presents a unique set of challenges for scholars. Because of its occurrence within diverse contexts, from healing temples and ritual performances to festival celebrations and devotional practices, attempts on the part of scholars to hone in on a concise vocabulary and conceptual framework with which to articulate the critical nature and function of possession has resulted in an extensive body of literature with wide-ranging methodological and theoretical dispositions. Each of these approaches, in its own way, contributes to an increasingly complicated web of intersecting disciplinary approaches.

As this body of literature continues to grow, and with it, the resources for generating a more productive academic discourse surrounding possession, so too grows a set of distinct challenges. How is one to sort through the maze of interpretive strategies and the conclusions they produce? Is it possible to assemble them in such a way as to develop a cooperative and mutually beneficial approach? Is there hope for arriving at a commonly shared vocabulary of possession capable of functioning across disciplinary boundaries? And if so, would such a vocabulary avoid forcing localized experiences and practices to conform to ill-fitting, non-native criteria of analysis?

Through critical evaluation of ethnographic contributions to the study of possession, this paper sets out to arrive at a set of conclusions about what works best for furthering the depth of appreciation and understanding for how diverse, complex, and pervasive possession practices are within a South Asian context. My criteria for this evaluation focuses on the degree to which specific approaches are established in, and guided by, an ethos of inclusivity, one that develops a healthy and vibrant dialectic between indigenous models of experience, practice, and interpretation, and those of the scholar. Along the way, I investigate key issues raised in the

study of possession, such as ritual efficacy, embodiment, agency, and the nature of human relations with various nonhuman beings.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The study of possession phenomena in South Asia presents a unique set of challenges for scholars. Because of its occurrence within diverse contexts, from healing temples and ritual performances to festival celebrations and devotional practices, attempts on the part of scholars to create a concise vocabulary and conceptual framework with which to articulate the critical nature and function of possession has resulted in an extensive body of literature with wide-ranging methodological and theoretical dispositions. As this body of literature continues to grow, and with it, the resources for generating a more productive discourse around possession, so too grows a set of distinct challenges. The following discussion critically evaluates ethnographic contributions to possession studies. My criteria for this evaluation focuses on the extent to which various approaches are grounded in an ethos of inclusivity which develops a dialogue between indigenous frameworks of experience, practice, and interpretation and those of the scholar. Along the way, I investigate key issues raised in the study of possession, such as ritual efficacy, embodiment, agency, and the nature of human relations with various nonhuman beings.

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## INTRODUCTION

The following discussion pursues a critical evaluation of the role of ethnography in shedding light on what I find to be some of the most critical, intriguing, and challenging aspects of the scholarly discourse surrounding spirit possession in South Asia. Given the extensive body of possession studies literature currently available, readers are often confronted with wide-ranging methodological and theoretical dispositions, each of which, in its own way, contributes to an increasingly complicated web of intersecting disciplinary approaches.<sup>1</sup> Religious studies, psychology, sociology, medical and cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, linguistics, gender studies, resistance studies, literary studies, and performance studies are but a few of the parties making substantial contributions to the discussion.<sup>2</sup> As this massive body of literature continues to grow, and with it, the resources for furthering the depth and productivity of these lively arenas of interest, so too grows a set of distinct challenges. How is one to begin sorting through the maze of competing disciplinary interpretive strategies and the conclusions they produce? Is it possible to assemble them in such a way as to develop a cooperative and fruitful multidisciplinary approach? Is there hope for arriving at a commonly shared vocabulary of possession capable of functioning across disciplinary boundaries? And if so, would such a vocabulary avoid the error of forcing localized experiences and practices to conform to ill-fitting, non-native criteria of analysis?

With an eye toward arriving at a set of conclusions about what seems to work best for furthering the depth of appreciation and understanding for how diverse, complex, and pervasive possession practices are within a South Asian context, one of the goals for this paper will be to tease out some of the tensions and complexities that exist between various authors'

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<sup>1</sup> Janice Boddy, in her 1994 article, "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality," references over 200 studies of possession, but which, as Smith notes, only includes resources available in English (Smith 2006:38; 79n.2). For a helpful bibliographic overview of resources available on possession in South Asia see Smith 2010b.

<sup>2</sup> For helpful summaries of possession studies as a multidisciplinary project see the review articles of Smith and Mayaram in *Religious Studies Review* 27(3), July 2001.



methodological and theoretical strategies. My criteria for this evaluation will focus on the degree to which these approaches are established in, and guided by, an ethos of inclusivity, one that develops a healthy and vibrant dialogue capable of navigating between the tensions that often exist (or one might add, ought to exist) between indigenous frameworks of experience, practice and interpretation, and those of the scholar. Along the way, I investigate key issues raised in the study of possession which pose distinct challenges to many long-held, largely (though not exclusively) Western theoretical and experiential constructs surrounding ritual efficacy, embodiment, agency, notions of self, personhood, and individual identity as well as the ontological status of gods, ghosts, spirits and various other nonhuman beings.

In the first section of the paper I provide a summary of various definitions, typologies and interpretive strategies of possession. The main body of the discussion is centered around the methodological and theoretical contributions of four different ethnographers, including William Sax's use of a performance studies lens and a reflexive style of reporting and analysis, Robert Desjarlais' development of a relational epistemology in pursuit of a phenomenological engagement with the felt qualities and sensibilities intimately associated with what he describes as a "local ecology of knowledge," Richard Jankowsky's pursuit of a dialogically-oriented middle ground between etic participant observation and emic experiential engagement and practical application, and finally, Bonnie-Glass Coffin's model of radical participation as it relates to transformative ethnography.

# CHAPTER 1

## DEFINITIONS, TYPOLOGICAL CATEGORIZATIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS OF POSSESSION<sup>3</sup>

Given that, as Kathleen Erndl argues, “the word *possession* can . . . provide only a rough and partial semantic equivalent for what is a fluid, multifaceted set of concepts,” the following overview of definitions, typologies, and interpretations of possession is intended to provide a sense of the diversity and range of methodological approaches and theoretical speculation raised in possession studies before a more sustained and critical evaluation is brought to bear on one or another of them throughout the remainder of this discussion.<sup>4</sup> As Geoffrey Samuels points out, just as with other terms which scholars struggle to define in any concise or consistent manner—e.g., shamanism, trance, and dissociation – one of the primary challenges in discussing possession phenomena stems from the difficulty of establishing a conceptual vocabulary capable of articulating the diversity of relations between human beings and “spirit entities” without creating further confusion and contradiction, especially given the tension that arises between idiosyncrasies of local context and perceived areas of overlap between phenomena loosely bundled under the umbrella category of possession.<sup>5</sup>

Further complicating efforts to arrive at a concise definition of possession is the fact that, as Frederick Smith points out, the bulk of scholarly discourse surrounding possession focuses on analyses of what possession “means,” while at the same time little, if any, consensus exists among scholars as to what possession is or how it works (Smith 2006:38). And as Smith indicates, the immense difficulty (or rather, impossibility) of approaching possession as if it were

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<sup>3</sup> The following introduction is by no means an attempt at an exhaustive survey of approaches to defining possession. For excellent overviews of interpretive and typological categorizations of possession see the works of Boddy 1994, Smith 2006 (esp. pp. 33-94, 110-172), and Levy, et. al. 1996 (esp. pp. 11-27).

<sup>4</sup> Erndl, quoted in Smith 2006:13.

<sup>5</sup> See Samuel 2008.

a singular cultural construct and category of human behavior, capable of being examined or explained through the lens of a single methodological or theoretical framework across variables of geocultural and linguistic context, becomes clear if one considers the incredible diversity of images and expressions used to articulate the experience of possession. This can be seen in the following examples Smith provides from various South Asian languages, in which possession is variously described as:

“riding” (Hindi, Nepali, Sinhala, Malayalam), as “dancing” (Tamil, Malayalam), as an “attack” (Hindi, Nepali), as a force “coming into the body” (e.g., Hindi, Marathi, Tulu, Irula), as “play” of the deity (Hindi, Marathi, Nepali), as a kind of “ecstasy” (Bengali, Marathi, Nepali), as a “weight” (Bengali), as a marker for intense emotional engagement (Sanskrit, Malayalam, Bengali, and many others), as an idiom of impersonation (Tamil), as an emblem of political oppression (Ladakhi), as a sign of debilitated life force (Ladakhi, Sanskrit), as part of a multicultural dialogic interaction (Ladakhi, Nepali), or as a symptom of a multilayered world visible “as if in a mirror” (Tibetan, Sanskrit) (Smith 2006:112).

In light of the diversity of images used to depict possession phenomena, Smith suggests scholars might “be better advised to abandon the category [of possession] entirely in favor of closely related indigenous categories of human experience marked by the permeability of human identity” (Smith 2006:590).

With this caveat in mind, a good place to begin a discussion of attempts at defining possession will be Janice Boddy’s oft-cited global review of possession studies, in which she states that spirit possession “commonly refers to the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she.” According to Boddy, such “forces” may include “ancestors or divinities, ghosts of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien.” She then defines possession as

a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable (Boddy 1994:407).

Such a definition highlights the shifting grounds of personal identity, selfhood, embodiment and agency found in many descriptive accounts of possession, in which Boddy claims, “three parties of variable inclusiveness are implicated...: a self, other humans, and external powers” (Boddy 1994:422).

Erika Bourguignon, by contrast, draws a sharp distinction between two general forms of possession based on the absence or presence of “trance behavior”:

We shall state that a belief in *possession* exists, when the people in question hold that a given person is changed in some way through the presence in or on him of a spirit entity or power, other than his own personality, soul, self, or the like. We shall say that *possession trance* exists in a given society when we find that there is such a belief in possession and that it is used to account for alterations or discontinuity in consciousness, awareness, personality, or other aspects of psychological functioning.<sup>6</sup>

While many have criticized Bourguignon for separating what appear to be inextricably linked phenomena, namely trance behavior and possession practices, it serves our purposes here simply to note two things: one, her emphasis on possession as an interpretive *idea* or *concept* founded in a belief, and two, the distinction drawn between the embodied, physiological character of “*possession*” (in other words, the perceived changes in physical functioning) and the alterations of consciousness in “*possession trance*” (in other words, the perceived shifts in attentional awareness and personality).<sup>7</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, in the following 2005 Encyclopedia of Religion entry, offers a definition similar to that of Bourguignon’s “*possession trance*”:

Spirit possession may be broadly defined 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 (Crapanzano 2005: 8687).

Based on his work with possession practices in Nepal, Rex Jones provides the following definition:

Spirit possession can be defined as an altered state of consciousness on the part of an individual as a result of what is perceived or believed to be the incorporation of an alien form with vital and spiritual attributes, e.g. the spirit of a superhuman form such as a witch, sorcerer, god, goddess, or other religious divinity.<sup>8</sup>

Again, the emphasis here is on the presence of observable alterations in conscious awareness, behavior, personality, and other aspects of an individual’s psychophysiological functioning.

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<sup>6</sup> Bourguignon, quoted in Smith 2006:39.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Lambek, for example, argues that trance and possession cannot be distinguished and regarded in isolation and that both are shaped by prevailing cultural influence: “Trance is not prior to spirit possession in either a logical or causal sense, and possession cannot be viewed as a ‘model of’ trance unless it is also well understood that it is equally a ‘model for’ trance...” (Lambek 1989: 40).

<sup>8</sup> Jones, quoted in Smith 2006: 35-36.

For a definition that offers a stripped-down alternative to those of previous authors mentioned, which focused on possession as an integration of spirit and matter, an altered state of consciousness or an interpretive concept and belief, Carl Becker defines possession as,

The phenomenon in which persons suddenly and inexplicably lose their normal set of memories, mental dispositions and skills, and exhibit entirely new and different sets of memories, dispositions, and skills.<sup>9</sup>

Becker's definition, by focusing on possession as a behavioral phenomenon, bears striking similarity to descriptive definitions of dissociative phenomena within the discourse of cultural neuroscience and medical anthropology. For example, Rebecca Seligman and Lawrence Kirmayer, referencing the work of Spiegel and Cardena, define dissociation as

a term used to describe both a set of behaviors and experiences involving functional alterations of memory, perception and identity as well as the psychophysiological processes presumed to underlie these phenomena...

Such behaviors and experiences, they go on to note,

...exist on a continuum, ranging from everyday experiences of absorption like "highway hypnosis" through more intense and prolonged forms of dissociative experience such as depersonalization and derealization, to more profound dissociative phenomena that include various forms of dissociative amnesia and alterations in identity (e.g., Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID, formerly Multiple Personality Disorder or MPD) (Seligman and Kirmayer 2008:32).

Through the lens of dissociation, possession is often viewed as a culturally recognized and sanctioned way of translating psychological distress into an idiom of spirit affliction. For example, Antti Pakaslahti, in his work on the model of treatment for disease-causing possession at the Balaji temple complex in Rajasthan, argues that spirit affliction and trance behavior provide a specific language for expressing and handling psychological distress in a manner that is "culturally congenial and minimally stigmatizing" (Pakaslahti 1998:139).<sup>10</sup>

Moving on from the above attempts at defining possession to broader typological categorizations of possession experience and practice, I begin with the work of Susan Wadley.

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<sup>9</sup> Becker, quoted in Smith 2006:36.

<sup>10</sup> For excellent discussions of possession and dissociation see Bourguignon 1976; Castillo 1994a, 1994b; Claus 1979, 1984; During, et. al. 2011; Sax and Weinhold 2010; Seligman and Kirmayer 2008; Spiegel et. al. 2011.

In focusing on possession as one among many forms of communication between human beings and “supernaturals,” particularly within the context of religious practice throughout rural India, Wadley’s discussion of *Dank* possession raises several key aspects of possession typologies. The first centers on a division between what is often referred to as positive, oracular possession, in which a ritual specialist or devotee is possessed by a spirit or deity for the purposes of divination, and negative, disease-producing possession, in which a person (in this case, conceived of as a victim) is possessed by a malevolent ghost or spirit that results in an unwanted psychophysiological condition requiring treatment by a ritual specialist (most likely, an exorcist). A further distinction may be drawn between the general cases just mentioned, notably that in the former the possession is conceived of as an invited, willed and desired condition, as opposed to the latter, in which possession is an uninvited, unwilled, and ultimately unwanted condition (Wadley 1976: 235-236). While these two general forms of possession may be seen to occasionally overlap, and sometimes even combine, as Smith notes, the key point to consider is that, in most cases, “Possession is sharply divided between positive oracular possession and negative disease-producing possession” (Smith 2006:31).

An additional example of a typology frequently raised in the study of possession can be seen in the work of Emma Cohen. Grounding her approach in what she describes as recent advances in cognitive psychology, Cohen distinguishes between two general, cross-culturally recurring varieties of “possession concepts”: “executive possession” and “pathogenic possession,” both of which she argues, “entail the direct actions of spirit entities in or on a person’s body” (Cohen 2008: 103). Executive possession concepts, she argues, “mobilize cognitive tools that deal with the world of intentional agents; the spirit entity is typically represented as taking over the host’s executive control, or replacing the host’s ‘mind’ (or intentional agency), thus assuming control of bodily behaviors.” Pathogenic possession concepts, by contrast, “result from the operation of cognitive tools that deal with the representation of contamination (both positive and negative); the presence of the spirit entity is typically (but not always) manifested in the form of an illness” (Cohen 2008: 103). Such

concepts, Cohen argues, evince similar defining characteristics across cultural and historical divides which, because of their common origin in, and constraint by, “evolved human cognition that guide perception, representation, thought, and action,” are thus amenable to definition along conceptual lines (Cohen 2008: 103). Cohen’s attempt at defining possession as a conceptual tool that arises out of a “regular cognitive architecture” raises questions as to what extent possession may be fairly described as primarily a cognitive tool. Given that many descriptive terms raised in emic discussions of possession experience and practice involve the physical body and the “direct actions of spirit entities in or on a person’s body,” how then is possession accurately described as primarily a cognitive tool?

In his widely-cited account of global possession practices, I.M. Lewis locates possession within the larger domain of ecstatic religion, describing it as a “culturally normative experience” with striking similarities to shamanism as the “religion *par excellence* of the spirit made flesh,” and “one of the main, widely distributed mystical interpretations of trance and of other associated conditions” (Lewis 2003:53, 183, 40). He formulates a psychosocially-oriented functionalist typology of possession states using the terms “central possession” and “peripheral possession.” Central possession, Lewis argues, constitutes a form of highly valued devotional practice in which individuals intentionally seek out possession by spirits which symbolize and embody a support for the religious, moral, and sociopolitical elite (Lewis 2003:29). Peripheral possession, by contrast, refers to a form of unwanted, disease-causing possession in which individuals, usually of low socioeconomic classes, are possessed by immoral, evil and dangerous spirits.

Primarily the domain of women, for Lewis peripheral possession practices often function as “thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex” and offer “an effective vehicle for manipulating husbands and male relatives” (Lewis 2003:26). In other words, women frequently instrumentalize possession to satisfy personal aims in a culturally sanctioned way. A further role played by peripheral possession constitutes what Lewis describes as “an oblique aggressive strategy” and a means by which those who are ill achieve a measure of

remittance by positing evil and untoward spirits as the cause of their illness, thus shifting the burden of guilt to a third party. Put more simply, peripheral possession is one way the politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised respond to, and cope with, difficult life situations in a way that is culturally acceptable (Lewis 2003:167). They do so, Lewis argues, by providing a ritual setting in which “free rein is given to the expression of problems and ambitions which refer directly to the participants’ normally frustrating social circumstances” (Lewis 2003: 174). Accordingly, for Lewis the experience of possession constitutes “a release, an escape from harsh reality into the world of symbolism which, precisely because it is not inappropriately detached from mundane life, is full of compensatory potentialities and has great emotive appeal” (Lewis 2003:175).

In addition to the above typologies offered by Wadley, Sax, and Lewis, various other sharply contrasted descriptive polar opposites abound in the ethnographic literature describing variations in the perceived functions and marked characteristics of possession experience, such as controlled and uncontrolled, intentional and spontaneous, voluntary and involuntary, integrative and disintegrative, wanted and unwanted, invited and uninvited, pathological and non-pathological, adaptive and non-adaptive, life potentiating and life de-potentiating, as well as divine and demonic. As with the definitions and typologies detailed above, interpretations of possession are equally wide-ranging. Janice Boddy, for example, notes that possession is frequently linked to contexts of sociopolitical and economic resistance for its help in providing ways of "understanding, trying out, coming to terms with, and contesting modernity, colonialism, capitalism, and religious and other hegemonies" (Boddy 1994: 421). Elsewhere, Boddy stresses the manner with which possession often "takes shape as a form of cultural knowledge and a means of knowing and healing, whose direction is both extensive and incorporative" (Boddy 1994: 414). Edward Harper, in his work on the role of spirit possession in helping Havik Brahmin women navigate a rigid patriarchal social system, argues that, “Women, who generally do not enter a rigid authority system before marriage, may only protest in one of two ways – first, consciously and directly, by fasting or attempting suicide; secondly, subconsciously and



indirectly, by becoming possessed” (Harper 1963: 176). Smith highlights the fact that, in many devotional contexts in South Asia, the dissolution of individual personality described in many possession accounts, contrary to a prevailing medical understanding of “loss of active control, loss of recognizable personality, and submersion of personal ego and identity” as symptoms of acute pathology are, in fact, “consistent, one might even say radically consistent, with dominant religious belief: complete submersion of the individual into the identity of a perceived higher (or even lower) power” (Smith 2001: 211). Miho Ishii, in a brilliant and nuanced article about the relationship between perspective exchange and spirit possession for participants in a *buuta* ritual in South India, describes spirit possession “as the basis for people’s everyday social relations and a sophisticated art performed to mould the behaviour of humans in relations to deities,” further describing the performance of possession rituals as a “mimetic, permeable, and transformative mode of one’s being as a part of the essential potentiality of humanity” (Ishii 2013: 795). Richard Castillo, debating the validity of direct applications of psychoanalytic theory to cases of pathological spirit possession in South Asia, argues for dissociation theory as an effective theoretical tool for properly contextualizing the “different subjective experiences, idioms of distress, indigenous diagnoses, treatments, and outcomes” associated with the treatment of mental illness attending afflictive possession (Castillo 1994b: 157). Erika Bourguignon, establishing a connection between forms of resistance and possession phenomena, argues that, similar to “masquerade and carnival, possession trance gives actors license for actions and expressions not available to them in their ‘ordinary state,’” and that, for women, possession frequently serves as a “psychodynamic response to, and expression of, their powerlessness” (Bourguignon 2004: 559). Possession has also been widely discussed as a therapeutic strategy implemented by ritual healers seeking to alleviate clients from various forms of supernatural affliction tied to disease-causing possession.<sup>11</sup> Many scholars, opting to interpret possession as a

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance Sax 2004, 2009; Sax and Weinhold 2010; Samuel 2008, 2010; Joshi 2004; Dalal 2007; Smith 2010; Nichter 1981; Pakaslahti 1998; Jankowsky 2007; Dwyer 1998.

result of underlying psychiatric disorders, have interpreted possession as a form of hysteria brought on by the possessed individual's inability to give healthy expression to acute personal distress or traumatic life experiences due to certain cultural restrictions placed on the open expression of intense emotional states.<sup>12</sup>

This cursory overview of definitions, typologies and interpretations of possession, if nothing else, illustrates the sheer diversity and fluidity of contexts in which possession phenomena are observed and, moreover, reinforces many scholars' claims that possession phenomena are perhaps best understood as existing on a continuum hallmarked by shifting grounds of practice and expediency, from their presence as pivotal components of devotional practices, healing rituals and textual traditions to their role in the efforts of marginalized individuals and groups seeking redress against oppressive political, economic, and sociocultural structures.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Freed and Freed 1964; Dalal 2007; Obeyesekere 1977; Sapkota et. al. 2014.

## CHAPTER 2

### ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD AND THEORY IN THE STUDY OF POSSESSION

In his discussion and analysis of a body of ritual healing practices associated with the cult of Bhairav<sup>13</sup> and the Harijan<sup>14</sup> community of Garhwal,<sup>15</sup> north India, William Sax employs a reflexive ethnographic methodology to clarify the nature of these practices as unique aspects of Garhwali religious life, particularly their role in dealing with various forms of illness and misfortune frequently endured by members of India's lower castes. Arguing for participant observation as the cornerstone of ethnographic inquiry and fieldwork, Sax highlights the necessity of moving beyond the limitations of "ethnographic realism" and its commitment to a "nothing but the facts, Ma'am" approach to writing. For as he notes, while proponents of this technique may praise it for its efforts "to give the impression of a balanced, objective, and rather clinical description of social reality," many postmodern critics argue it amounts to clever rhetorical and literary strategy which, in an effort to deliver linear, tidy, and logically coherent presentations of complex subjects of ethnographic interest, thereby conceals how it was the ethnographer arrived at the cultural insight and expertise necessary to produce the text in the first place and, in doing so, achieves "nothing more than a pseudo-objectivity" (Sax 2009:5). In other words, while readers may pick up a text written in the style of ethnographic realism and receive a reasonably accurate, contextually sensitive account of a particular cultural phenomenon, the

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<sup>13</sup> Bhairav (lit. "the terrible one") is the central *devta* of the healing cult. Sax defines *devtas* as "minor local godlings closely associated with the hills and ravines, the cliffs and streams of Chamoli District" (Sax 2009:27; 3). The term is important in distinguishing local depictions and understandings of Bhairav in Garhwal with the deity Bhairav associated with classical Sanskrit literature and popular Hindu tradition.

<sup>14</sup> The term "Harijan" (lit. "child of god") was coined by Gandhi to refer to people belonging to the lowest castes of India. Other terms frequently associated with Harijans include "untouchable," "Dalit" (lit. "oppressed person"), and "scheduled caste." For the sake of consistency, I will use the term Harijan when referring to low-caste persons affiliated with the cult of Bhairav given that, as Sax argues, "it is the most widely used and ideologically neutral term in the region" (Sax 2009:257-258n.7). See Polit for use of the term *Dalit* when referring to low-caste individuals and groups she consulted while conducting fieldwork in Chamoli (Polit 2005:228).

<sup>15</sup> Garhwal is located in the central Himalayas of North India, Chamoli District, Uttarakhand Province.

collaborative process leading to the production of the text is obscured and readers are left with the impression of singular authorship. The solution to this problem, according to Sax, is for authors to be transparent about the nature of textual production. Specifically, this calls for a writer to engage reflexively with his or her own experiences and observations recorded during fieldwork, clarify failures of method and theory to make sense of data gathered while still in the field, and perhaps most importantly, ensure the collaborative process between researcher and his or her cultural informant(s), which made possible the cross-cultural engagement necessary to conduct field research in the first place, remain visible (Sax 2009:5). The idea here, as Sax points out, is that reflexive ethnography “better informs the reader of the author’s prejudices and predispositions, and of the ways in which the data were gathered and the text constructed” and, as such, “is a refinement of the ethnographic method that is justified on empirical grounds, because it more accurately represents the research process” (Sax 2009:6).

Sax’s discussion of Garhwali possession and ritual healing pursues an insightful and sustained reflexive engagement between author and a broad range of source material, including interviews with healers and their patients, transcribed recitations of the cult’s history and central deity drawn from oral narrative, myth, and song, personal histories of patients, detailed conversations between healer and patient as well as directly quoted excerpts from the author’s journal written during fieldwork. This wealth of descriptive material contributes significantly to a reader’s ability to make an informed critique of the author’s argument and conclusions so that he or she can more fully develop his or her own analysis of the material presented.

As noted, a core component of Sax’s reflexive approach to writing hinges on the inclusion of initial impressions and observations he recorded during fieldwork. Within these passages, Sax frequently wrestles with the challenges encountered in discussing a tradition of thought, practice, and experience foreign to his own. In doing so he affords readers insight into the process of grappling with the deeply complex, personal, and context-sensitive nature of human behavior and experience. This can be seen in the following journal entry written during the early stages of Sax’s fieldwork and exposure to life in Garhwal:

For weeks I have been trekking from village to village, meeting with exorcists and magicians, transcribing old manuscripts with secret spells, and participating in these fearsome rituals. The people are so poor, their houses tiny and dirty; they haven't enough to eat; they are beset on all sides by poverty, violence, and disease; their only powerful friends are the fierce beings who inhabit these cold, threatening mountains ...

At midnight the villagers gather, they light a lamp, and the guru<sup>16</sup> calls the spirits down from the high Himalaya, up from the cremation ground. He sings and chants all night, summoning the gods, who possess the villagers one by one. They shout from enthusiasm, agony, or both, then "dance" on the earthen floor on all fours, some barking like dogs, others roaring like lions, the women's long hair unbound, whipping back and forth as they dance in wild abandon. Sometimes the ghosts of the unhappy dead come; they wail and moan, and seek to learn the reason for their unending torment. *What is my role here, what is my purpose, my responsibility? To record these people's poverty? To subject their suffering to a 'scientific' analysis? To display it to my students and readers? How can I ever help these unfortunate, suffering people?*<sup>17</sup>

Such questions point to many of the ongoing anxieties, responsibilities, and tensions deeply embedded within any ethnographic project. On the one hand, they are profoundly personal questions, tied to a specific ethnographer working in a particular part of the world, with a distinct group of people, within a specific time frame. But on the other hand, they echo experiences shared by many members of a broader academic community who endeavor to document and critically evaluate cultural traditions foreign to their own. Such questions serve as gentle reminders that on the other end of any ethnographic account stand people for whom little, if any, communicative outlet (institutional, personal, or otherwise) exists by which to critique, adjust, or consent to the depiction of them provided by the author. As such, they relate to ethical and moral issues central to the humanities, as in criticisms of ethnographers as what Clifford Geertz termed "merchants of the exotic," and the degree to which scholars, by focusing so intently on the more "extreme" and "exotic" aspects of cultures different from their own, thereby objectify the very people they seek to better understand (Sax 2009:19). And yet, as Sax indicates, there will always exist a tension that grows out of the similarities and differences of culture scholars must contend with as they become better acquainted with a way of life in foreign surroundings.

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<sup>16</sup> Sax's use of the term "guru" here to refer to the ritual specialists in charge of the healing rituals should be clarified, given that, as he explains, it "refers, not to a spiritual master, but rather to a 'master of the spirits' – someone who can summon, control, and exorcize ghosts, demons, and local deities" (Sax 2009:258n.9).

<sup>17</sup> Sax 2009:15. Italics are my own.

These differences, Sax argues, are what give rise to scholarly curiosity in the first place and drive innovative research:

...cultural difference is not only the starting point for ethnography, it is also a methodological necessity. There is and always will be at least one difference between the scholar and her object of study, and that is the difference between subject and object, the old dichotomy between thought and action, which cannot be avoided in academic life, no matter how much our political agenda or mystical inclinations might inspire us to try (Sax 2009:19-20).

And as Sax further notes, while ethnographers inevitably confront an abundance of ethical dilemmas in the field, the majority of such conflicts usually stem from “economic and political asymmetries,” rather than differences of cultural background (Sax 2009:20). Moreover, where concerns alight on the tendency of scholarship to focus on the more “extreme” and “exotic” aspects of foreign cultures (of which rituals involving possession are certainly an example) the response, as Sax puts it, would be to point out that as people grow in their exposure to, and familiarity with, cultural practices different from their own, a wonderful thing happens:

If the initial object of study – a religious or political movement, an unfamiliar kinship system – is exotic, if it seems strange and puzzling at first, then in the process of learning (and later teaching and writing) about it in its own context, it comes to seem less exotic and more familiar. Conversely, when we closely examine more familiar cultures, they begin to look rather exotic, less natural, more conventional (Sax 2009:19).

Such transformations in perspective and awareness lie at the ethical and moral center of the humanities. As Sax argues, participant observation, as the anchoring method of the kind of fieldwork argued for here is, as he puts it, “of moral value, because through fieldwork you recognize the humanity ... of the ‘Other,’ even as he or she recognizes yours” (Sax 2009:23).<sup>18</sup>

For an example of how studies of possession benefit from an author’s description of, and reflexive engagement with, his or her cross-cultural experiences during research, I turn once more to an excerpted journal entry written by Sax in the early stages of his fieldwork. Of particular note are his remarks on a distinct fear and anxiety which arose during initial

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<sup>18</sup> Sax’s following comments further exemplify this: “At the beginning of this research, such performances seemed so magical: exhilarating journeys to an exotic place where anything seemed possible, even the descent of the gods into human bodies. But as my familiarity with such events has grown, my enthrallment has waned, and I am more enchanted by the artistry of the musicians than by the frenzy of the dancers” (Sax 2009:21-22).

observations of ritual possession by Kachiya (a particularly ferocious form of the *devta* Bhairav).<sup>19</sup> After noting the advice he received from locals regarding the volatile and dangerous nature of Kachiya, as well as the warning from one local guru that he “causes even the healthy and powerful to fall!,” Sax writes:

During that first ritual of Makhan Lal’s,<sup>20</sup> I had the nagging suspicion, lurking somewhere on the edge of my consciousness, that I was under supernatural threat. And in the weeks that followed, as I had my first experiences of these rituals, the thought kept returning that I was in some kind of danger. I began to see bad omens everywhere, began to fear that I was headed toward some kind of supernatural disaster. Sitting in front of my computer screen writing up my research notes, and later converting those notes into a book, it is easy to dismiss these thoughts, and tempting to delete them from this chapter, but when I was actually in the field, surrounded by fierce demons and ghosts, my anxiety was often considerable (Sax 2009:16).<sup>21</sup>

In a footnote to the above statement, Sax draws a parallel between his own experiences and those of the English ethnographer Edward Evans-Pritchard in confronting similar challenges during fieldwork when he wrote that it “was sometimes difficult to check his own ‘lapse into unreason’” (Sax 2009: 258n.18). While this type of introspective, personal narrative often elicits unwarranted criticism for self-indulgent descriptive excess, for wandering off the strictly analytical path, or for co-opting the indigenous narrative, what it does is help the reader appreciate the intensity of engagement involved with this area of study, as Sax further indicates:

Had I allowed myself to take these gods seriously, I might have really been in some kind of psychological danger. To attend such seances night after night, to be surrounded by the music and the dancing and the possession, and at the same time to leave open the possibility that these dark and threatening forces were actually present, would have been spiritually risky (Sax 2009:17).

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<sup>19</sup> Kachiya (also known as Kachiya-Bhairav) is the form of Bhairav most frequently associated with the Garhwali Harijan’s healing cult (Sax 2009:28). The various depictions and forms of Bhairav will be discussed more fully below.

<sup>20</sup> The specific incident referred to here by Sax concerns a ritual healing conducted for Makhan Lal’s nine-year-old daughter who had been suffering from a case of afflictive possession. See Sax 2009 (pp. 6-15) for a fuller accounting of the ritual.

<sup>21</sup> The following journal excerpt from Sax’s field notes further clarifies the intensity of engagement during his research: “This fieldwork is turning out to be rather psychologically demanding. This is partly because the rituals are so exciting and dramatic: the drumming and singing, the ecstatic dancing of possessed people, the awesome appearance of the fearsome deities, the ghosts from the past, wailing and shrieking in a stuffy, crowded room. And all of this together with the poverty and suffering of the Harijans – it makes such a contrast to my own relative wealth and power” (Sax 2009:14-15).

Sax points out that even local *gurus* must take measures to protect themselves from the fear of falling subject to the workings of untoward spirits and “dark forces” (Sax 2009: 16). He even goes so far as to play off local views regarding the power and influence wielded by Kachiya and other *devtas* to gain greater access to stories and rituals which he then uses to enhance the depth of his narrative account. He does this by adopting a strategy of challenging local beliefs in various *devtas*:

In my previous research I had always behaved very respectfully toward the gods. Whenever anyone asked me if I “really believed” in the goddess Nanda Devi, I answered “yes,” and it was an honest answer, because I really did feel devotion toward this mountain goddess, whom symbolized for me the culture and region to which I had devoted so many years of my life. But now, surrounded by these dark and threatening forces, I adopted a different strategy. When people asked me if I believed in the gods, I said, “No. I think it’s all a bunch of superstition!” (Sax 2009:17).

While Sax acknowledges the unorthodox nature of this approach, given that it appears to cross the line of “neutrality” scholars are expected to uphold in terms of the respect they demonstrate for local people and their traditions, it nevertheless exemplifies a bold effort to procure information in a novel way which, as he discovers, does not offend local sensibilities and thus close off further avenues of research, but in fact, turns out to be quite an effective strategy:

Rarely did people seem insulted. After all, many of them were themselves rather skeptical about such matters, and this skepticism was increasing year by year. Usually, they would respond by saying something like, “Oh, so you don’t believe in our *devtas*? Well, then, I’ll show you! I’ll take you to a really powerful oracle, one who will show you her supernatural powers!” So even though my skepticism was more a matter of psychological defense than of actual conviction, it was nevertheless an effective strategy, and people responded by showing me more and more interesting rituals (Sax 2009:17).

Such innovation on an ethnographer’s part demonstrates the practical reality scholars face during cross-cultural engagement in the field and the need for maintaining an open-ended and fluid approach to what is often a chaotic and tangled set of local affairs and points of view. In addition to providing a more complete picture of how ethnographers navigate cultural, geographic, and linguistic barriers, Sax’s playful, if agonistic, challenging of local beliefs helps elicit a more thorough account of the emic point of view which, in turn, produces information and insight by which he can then further develop, support, and adjust his theoretical speculation. For example, one of the primary goals of Sax’s study is to better understand the nature and role



of the relationship between members of the Garhwali Harijan community and the *devta* Bhairav. Central to this relationship are rituals in which participants undergo possession by Bhairav. Though Sax's own confrontation with the healing cult's central *devta* and the subsequent fear of a "lapse into unreason" clearly gave him ample cause to pull back from such a sustained emotional, physical, and psychological engagement with the rituals, one can also see how this type of affective cross-cultural encounter, when reflexively engaged by the ethnographer, plays a significant role in steering the course of methodological and theoretical investigation.

It would have been easy for Sax to analyze Garhwali possession by Bhairav through a familiar psychological lens, viewing it as a coping strategy masked in a belief in a supernatural power used by the lower castes to deal with broader socioeconomic and political inequality. He might also have emphasized local beliefs in the power of Kachiya and the language of possession as poetic expressions of cultural metaphor and symbol tied to sociopolitical issues embedded in the mythology of Bhairav. And yet, as Sax discovers, such interpretations, while perhaps relevant to a broader discussion of possession, would nonetheless fly in the face of many Garhwalis' understanding of Bhairav and his possession of Harijan devotees. This is made plain and simple for Sax when his Garhwali friends, in response to his question as to whether they "really believed" in Bhairav, usually replied, "Of course I do! How could I not believe in him? He comes and dances, and you can see him right there in front of you!" (Sax 2009: 45).<sup>22</sup> This matter-of-fact response leads Sax to caution against the use of strictly linguistic and cognitively-oriented conceptual models for an interpretation of possession by Bhairav, given that such approaches would struggle to take into fuller consideration the performative, tactile, and embodied character of the experience. In other words, Sax's experiences, coupled with the insight provided by Harijan responses to his question, lead to a productive co-mingling of academic perspective and emic experiential engagement that can be seen in his discussion of

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<sup>22</sup> Such responses correspond with local descriptions used to indicate possession by Bhairav, in which, as Sax notes, "the god 'dances' (*nacna*) or is 'made to dance' (*nacana*) by the guru; he 'comes/sits on the head' of (*sir pe ana/baithana*) or 'comes over' (*upar ana*) the possessed person, referred to as the god's 'beast' (*pasva*) or 'little horsie' (*dungariya*)" (Sax 2009:47).

what he calls a “hermeneutics of the body” and his use of a performance studies approach to interpreting Garhwali possession by Bhairav (both of which will be discussed more fully below).

What I find worthy of note in the above approach is how it appears to have originated, at least in part, in Sax’s phenomenological engagement with rituals involving possession by the healing cult’s central *devta*. And while he does not claim to have been possessed by Bhairav or to have experienced the rituals as would a Garhwali Harijan, the reader can easily see how building off the insight generated by his own experiential “run-in” with Bhairav helps him appreciate the nature of Garhwali relations with the *devta* beyond a gesture of token recognition.<sup>23</sup> The importance of this last point takes on additional gravity if one considers how often emic accounts regarding the complex, substantial, and reciprocal relations between human beings and spirits, ghosts, demons, deities, and various other non-human entities take a back seat to scholarly interest in the secondary role – e.g., symbolic, therapeutic, communicative – such relations are held to play in broader sociocultural, political, or economic contexts. For example, Peter Claus, speaking to the challenges of improving the work of medical anthropologists producing ethnographies of spirit possession, notes that

I doubt that any serious anthropological study gives credence to the native claim that they are possessed by spirits, although we do sometimes acknowledge that we can proceed with the study “as if there were spirits.” On the other hand, we still feel strongly obliged to recognize that some “real” experience is represented in their belief and behavior. We make a stab at apprehending that experience on the basis of our own understanding of similar behavior and beliefs in the West (Claus 1984:61).

Claus goes on to discuss how the frequent identification of possession as a “medical problem,” and with it, the assumption of a psychobiological causation of possession, helps locate it within conceptual parameters amenable to a Western scientific cause-and-effect framework, and in doing so, ignores the many instances in which local terms used to describe the practice and

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<sup>23</sup> An example of the type of token gesture of recognition I have in mind here is exemplified in Erika Bourguignon’s following comments regarding what she calls “possession trance”: “The mechanism of dissociation is central to the experience and performance of possession trance. As such, it provides for the expression of personality aspects, strivings, and motivations, which, for the most part, remain unconscious in everyday life. Possession trance, as a psychophysiological state, involves alterations of consciousness, of personal identity, and some bodily changes, as well” (Bourguignon 2004:558). Note her passing mention of “some bodily changes as well.”

experience of possession treat it as primarily a religious phenomenon with a “spiritual origin” (Claus 1984:63). The tendency for medical anthropologists to limit discussion of possession to a medical condition, according to Claus, stems from the fact that many scholars continue to “take biological features to be more basic than cultural or ideational ones” (Claus 1984: 63).

Apposite to Claus’s above observations in a discussion of possession studies is the frequency with which relations between human beings and what Irving Hallowell describes as “other-than-human persons” are framed in a false metaphysical dichotomy.<sup>24</sup> As Stephan Beyer notes, the tendency in the academic literature surrounding discussions of these “other-than-human persons” is to operate with an implicit assumption that there is only one way for something to be real. For example, the possessing spirit is judged to be either tactile, and thus empirically verifiable, made of “real stuff,”<sup>25</sup> or the product of human imagination and cognition.<sup>26</sup> Such a dualistic framing, Beyer argues, results in the division of human relations with non-human entities into (1), a normative set of experiences (those that can be seen as coherent, predictable and consistent) and (2), a deviant set of experiences, which according to Beyer, are then treated in one of two ways: “they are dismissed as mistakes, illusions, or misattributions; or else they are *normalized*, reified, turned into *stuff*, into gaseous fauna” (Beyer 2009: 115-116).

Beyer’s point is that, whereas the ethnographer might see human relations with “other-than-human persons” as the remarkable eruption of the supernatural into reality, from the

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<sup>24</sup> Hallowell, quoted in Beyer 2009:112.

<sup>25</sup> For examples of this point of view, Beyer provides the following: “some anthropologists, sometimes based on their own anomalous experiences, contend that spirits are, instead, *real* – what Edit Turner calls *spirit stuff*. Felicitas Goodman, for example, maintains that spirits are real beings who seek communication with humans; Richard Schweder proposes the reality of malevolent ancestral spirits. Jenny Blain specifically protests against turning the spirits into ‘culturally defined aspects of one’s own personality, not external agents.’ Such reductionism is, she says, ‘part of the individualization and psychologizing of perception that pervades Western academic discourses of the rational, unitary self’” (Beyer 2009:115).

<sup>26</sup> Beyer provides the following example: “Classical animism says that there are no spirits; they are a *mistake*, a misattribution, the trope of *personification* – what anthropologist Michael Winkelman more politely calls a ‘metaphoric symbolic attribution’ of humanlike mental qualities to unknown and natural phenomena, including ‘gods, spirits, and nonhuman entities, particularly animals’” (Beyer 2009:115).

indigenous perspective might simply be viewed as a continuum of reality, accepted without metaphysical surprise or wonder. As such, the experience of an event in which relations with “other-than-human persons” are central would be dealt with in a very matter-of-fact manner, involving a pragmatism which, for someone schooled within an academic culture predicated on its own peculiar framework of rational and empirical inquiry, would fall into the category of “magic,” “superstition,” or “folk” religion, but which from the emic perspective would simply be another way of dealing with life’s breathtakingly broad range of experience and its endless host of characters and agents. And as Beyer further notes, the adoption of such an attitude and point of view would help weaken, if not subvert, the traditional ontological division between “real” and “unreal,” and would, moreover, encourage the de-literalization of how human experience is depicted and interpreted within academic discourse (Beyer 2009:116-118).

In keeping with Beyer's point, Smith makes a similar observation regarding the difficulty western academics confront in the pervasive South Asian notion of a permeable self:

by adhering to culturally and academically bounded assumptions of the singularity and inviolability of the individual, the phenomenon of possession has been analyzed (chiefly by anthropologists, as we have seen, who have claimed it as their bailiwick) as psychological illness, even schizophrenia, as sociological role-playing or status seeking, as expressions of cosmological beliefs, willful manifestation of good or evil, or as an aspect of cultural performance: as anything, in fact, except spirit or deity possession, phenomena that defy both the solid boundaries of the individual assumed by Westerners and the scientific rules of the academic trade (Smith 2006:589).<sup>27</sup>

As Smith observes, few studies manage to balance theoretical speculation regarding the role of possession in broader contextual circles with a concerted effort to recognize the emic view of possession as “ontological or veridical reality, which is to say as imposition or investiture on an individual personality of an independent and unseen external agent” (Smith 2006:66). He goes on to note that, while there is a growing sensitivity to, and inclusion of, this emic narrative in interpretive accounts of possession, the fact remains that “most scholars, who recognize, if

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<sup>27</sup> Smith comments further on the issue: “Acceptance of the ontological and substantive reality of spirits and deities has always been widespread in South Asia, as it has been in most societies in which the dominant scientific paradigm(s) differ from the one developed and accepted in the West since the Renaissance (hence, the Western scholarship toward the subject)” (Smith 2006:598).

begrudgingly, the possibility of possession, this recognition is tactical, as a contribution to other theoretical agendas” (Smith 2006:66). In other words, the tendency is to extend a partial acknowledgement of the emic view only where it serves to strengthen the author’s argument, rather than grant it its own position of authority and relevance. And as Smith discusses elsewhere, the pervasive strategy whereby scholars approach possession phenomena with an overblown emphasis on its theorized functional value – e.g., social, political, economic, therapeutic – betrays an underlying assumption regarding the empirical impossibility of possession as embodiment of an “Other,” and that “the investigator nearly always assumes that whatever is going on is not possession by an ‘other’ or, at the very least, that whether or not it really is possession is not a particularly germane question” (Smith 2001: 203). Again, the tendency is to focus on possession as an expressive behavior of secondary goings-on in the life of the person(s) possessed, and as such, overlooks the possibility of possession as the primary phenomenon taking place.

One of the central problems then, as far as studies of possession are concerned, is that emic claims regarding the experience of possession as fundamentally one of the human being pervaded by an external being are too often regarded as “intellectually indefensible,” attributed to a scientific naiveté not unlike that raised in other complex cultural and religious practices such as witchcraft, sorcery, and other forms of ritual historically grouped together under the umbrella heading of “natural religion.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, as Smith points out, by focusing so intently on the practical role of possession as a form of communication, therapy, or sociopolitical empowerment, what gets lost from view is that, in many cases, particularly in an oracular or

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<sup>28</sup> The following excerpts drawn from the work of Humphrey and Laidlaw on the pitfalls frequently associated with an overblown focus on the symbolic, which is to say secondary, import of all manner of ritual practices is telling with regard to the challenges any study of possession which seeks to seriously consider the emic point of view faces: “anthropologists engaged in symbolic analysis often singularly fail to provide realistic information about what people actually say about such symbols, no doubt because the actors so frequently reply something along the lines, ‘I know this means something, but I don’t know what it is.’ Anthropological interpretations have commonly covered up such unhelpful replies in order to produce a reading from their own deductions; (p.180). And ‘we would claim that an across-the-board analysis, with no attention to the cognition of real participants, produces an occluded and ontologically unclear level of analysis’ (p. 181)” (Humphrey and Laidlaw, quoted in Smith 2006: 80n. 21).

devotional setting, “the purpose of possession (at least positive possession) as reported by those possessed (rather than by anthropologists) is possession itself, the mere fact of manifesting and expressing the personality of the deity or spirit” (Smith 2001:211). This last point is a central component of Smith’s work on a panorama of possession practices across wide-ranging historical periods and mediums of expression, from Sanskrit literature and mythology to the work of modern ethnographers, in which it becomes clear that spirit possession, at least within a devotional or oracular context of India, is perhaps best considered as one of, if not, the “most valued form of spiritual expression in India” (Smith 2006: XXV).

This is not to say that scholars are inherently mistaken to highlight the role of possession as an “idiom of distress,”<sup>29</sup> a culturally conditioned tool of communication,<sup>30</sup> a form of mimetic performance for the purposes of storytelling,<sup>31</sup> a performative role playing and an “individual problem solving” tool,<sup>32</sup> or a means by which oppressive political or gender structures are resisted,<sup>33</sup> only that any such arguments must be considered partial and limited. Smith’s basic point is that when contextual considerations, upon which disciplinary-specific arguments regarding the broader role played by possession across a diverse body of sociocultural spheres are based receive the bulk of scholarly interest, the “existential reality” of possession is often reduced to the status of an epiphenomenon, or worse yet, dismissed altogether (Smith 2006:67). This is exactly what Janice Boddy cautions against when she notes that, “Possession intersects with numerous cultural domains including medicine and religion, but is itself reducible to none” (Boddy 1994: 413). The point is that when emic claims regarding the “ontological or veridical reality” of possession experience are dismissed, so too is a wealth of descriptive detail that might

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<sup>29</sup> See Pakaslahti 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Wadley 1976:233;249.

<sup>31</sup> Snodgrass 2002:37.

<sup>32</sup> Harper 1963:166.

<sup>33</sup> I.M. Lewis 2003; Bourguignon 2004.

otherwise aid in the refinement of a scholar's terminological and conceptual toolkit so as to take into fuller account the embodied, felt qualities of physical sensation and emotion intimately associated with possession. An example of what gets lost from view can be drawn from the ethnomusicologist Richard Jankowsky, when he writes that,

Because the spirits cannot be seen or quantitatively measured, they are dismissed as illusions or, worse, delusions. Yet when they are dismissed, along with them go their qualitative virtues: their capacity to inflict physical harm on humans, their ability to heal and maintain social relationships with their hosts, their embodiment of suppressed histories, in short, their social reality (Jankowsky 2007:203).

This is why Smith is able to persuasively argue that “both etic and emic categories of interpretation are limited if they are not used to complement, or at least, accompany each other” (Smith 2006: 51). A case in point for Smith is the concept of dissociation. While the cognitively-oriented insights of dissociative theory may help clarify the role of possession as an adaptive and creative psychological response to traumatic life events, such a theory would by no means be seen to “encompass the concept of possession” (Smith 2006:51). As Sax and Weinhold similarly argue, the notion of possession as an “altered state of consciousness,” though perhaps accurate to a degree, nevertheless falls far short of accounting for the dynamic interplay of mind-body relations at work in possession, particularly in a ritual healing context in which both the manner in which healing is effected and the means by which its efficacy are judged, are best characterized as working in and through the entire “mind-body complex” of a person (Sax & Weinhold 2010: 241-242).<sup>34</sup> And as Sax and Weinhold further indicate, ritual settings in which possession is a sought after, induced experience involving a variety of sensory stimulation – e.g., food, dance, music, smells – cannot be fairly evaluated using conceptual terms limited to “belief,” “cognition,” “symbolism,” “consciousness,” and “dissociation,” unless, as they argue,

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<sup>34</sup> For discussion of similar issues see Smith 2010:26, 31.

such terms are “broadened so as to take account of their embodied aspects” (Sax and Weinhold 2010: 242).<sup>35</sup> For as they go on to note

Not only do such rituals induce possession by working on the body, but the efficacy of the ritual is evaluated – at least by those who participate in it – primarily by means of bodily indicators. The signs of a successful ritual are somatic, e.g., the posture of the body and the quality of the voice change, thus indicating the presence of an external being in the body of the oracle or of the patient (Sax and Weinhold 2010:242).

Speaking to a similar set of issues regarding the limitations of adhering to a mind-body dualism which restricts the role of possession as a healing technique to a placebo effect, Geoffrey Samuel notes that scholars

need to take the language of spirits, of magic, sorcery and ritual healing more seriously; not in terms of occult forces, but as providing tokens and images for operating on the structure of human life at all levels, within a framework which does not dichotomize between mind and body (Samuel 2010: 16-17).<sup>36</sup>

I do not mean to argue that ethnographic description and analysis of possession remain strictly tethered to emic accounts, but simply note how careful consideration and inclusion of the emic view enables readers to take into fuller consideration the similarities and differences, the tensions and congruencies, which develop between scholarly claims regarding the role of possession in broader contextual environments and the matter-of-fact, existentially-oriented emic claims concerning the nature of their relations with the spirits, ghosts, demons, deities, and other non-human entities implicated in possession events. Moreover, where emic and etic claims regarding the nature and critical function of possession practice and experience are seen to diverge, new and innovative conceptual terms of analysis and the questions they beget begin to unfold. We can begin to ask why it is that for one party possession constitutes an essential component of devotional practice in which a devotee employs techniques aimed at intentionally embodying his

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<sup>35</sup> An ideal example of this can be seen in Diana Eck's efforts to expand descriptive definitions of *darshan* beyond the realm of strict visual metaphor so as to more accurately capture the felt qualities of exchange and touch which occur through eyesight during Hindu devotional practice (See Eck 1981 for more on this issue).

<sup>36</sup> Samuel's following statement serves to further clarify his stance on this issue: “Spirits, in other words, may be taken as representative of particular states of the system as a whole, associated with specific modes of action and feeling. This enables us to see the language of the spirits as a way to rebalance organismic functioning in relation to various kinds of physiological stress, a rebalancing which may be seen as contributing directly to organismic healing at a physiological (material) level, rather than operating in purely 'psychological' terms” (Samuel 2010:15).



or her chosen deity, while for others it represents an expression of repressed wishes and unfulfilled desires? Why is possession for some a core component of broader efforts on the part of ritual specialists to procure embodied, psychophysiological contact with ancestral ghosts, spirits and deities in order to procure information regarding sick or troubled clients, while for others it represents a predominantly cognitive, symbolic act of communication in a culturally-constituted idiom? Why is it that, so often, from the emic, practice-oriented perspective, possession is discussed with descriptive terms indicative of kinesthetic action and emotion while, from the etic, abstract theoretically-oriented perspective, possession is depicted with terms indicating shifts in attentional and cognitive awareness? The central point here seems to be an acknowledgement of how, just as emic accounts of possession flow organically from a confluence of personal story, experience, local context, and indigenous frameworks of historical and contemporary application, interpretation, and explanation, so too must an etic theoretical rendering of possession, at the very least, allow its relevance and fit to be tested against the information supplied by the emic account, and that any movement on the part of the scholar beyond the emic perspective will at least allow for a comparison between the two on the part of readers.

## CHAPTER 3

### HUMAN EXPERIENCE – MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS CONTEXTUAL PARTS?

Academic research, whether engaged through text, multimedia, or fieldwork, is largely guided by questions aimed at the production of information in accord with demands laid out in the methods and theories of a disciplinary tradition. Many of these questions are geared toward acquiring a familiarity with the broader environmental forces of influence –historical, social, political, economic, religious - that envelope a given person, place, event, situation or experience. Attention to contextual detail helps organize research in a way that makes it specific, manageable, and intelligible. This is what helps situate complex human phenomena at the nexus of the ever-evolving, swirling mass of influence and change that characterizes so much of human life. Without such details, the kind of “thick description” required to drive any ethnographic narrative would be impossible. In the case of studies that seek to describe, interpret, and explain possession practices, context supplies much of the raw material by which various theoretical constructs are used to identify socioeconomic, political, cultural, psychological and physiological factors thought to precipitate and influence the course and role of possession. For example, psychologists might look to discernible alterations of speech pattern and behavior in the possessed, viewing them as external manifestations of internal stress brought on by family discord, economic instability or gender inequality. Sociologists might devise questions about the relationship between possession and variants of gender, employment, educational background, and sociopolitical status in order to hone in on the role of possession as “an embodied critique of colonial, national, or global hegemonies,”<sup>37</sup> a means of acquiring higher social status,<sup>38</sup> a way people seek out explanations for problems and illnesses confronted

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<sup>37</sup> Boddy 1994:419.

<sup>38</sup> Snodgrass 2002:38.

in everyday life,<sup>39</sup> an attention-seeking behavior and a means by which internalized environmental stress is vented in a culturally sanctioned manner,<sup>40</sup> “political demonstrations of...social power,”<sup>41</sup> “a symbolic medium through which the individual (or group) re-adjusts himself to an appropriate moral order,”<sup>42</sup> or as “a commentary on life, morality, and social responsibility, and as an arena for enacting the inherent social tensions between benevolence and potential harm, altruism and selfishness, individual and society.”<sup>43</sup>

In the overwhelming majority of cases, the “burden of proof” for any given theoretical argument regarding the cause, nature, and critical function of possession ultimately rests on the purported strength and credibility of information supplied by context. Depending on the theoretical framework employed, varying degrees of emphasis will be placed on particular elements of context. And while I agree that any academic account which seeks to describe experiences, behaviors, and practices must do so by situating them within a fluid stream of daily life and context, I would also argue that any ethnographic narrative, regardless of how richly framed it is by details of historical, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural influence, is ultimately insufficient without direct input from those closest to the people, events, situations, and experiences up for consideration. Put more simply, no amount of adroitly wielded contextual data by the scholar can substitute for the insight generated by careful attention to the first-person, indigenous narrative and explanation. An example of this can be drawn from Smith’s discussion of psychoanalytical approaches to the study of possession. For the trained psychoanalyst, observable changes in the behavior and speech of the possessed are frequently held to stem from intrapersonal conflict. Whether the conflicts are born of internal or external stimuli (or a

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<sup>39</sup> Stanley 1988:33.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis 2003:23, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Mines 2005:19.

<sup>42</sup> Claus 1984:63.

<sup>43</sup> Csordas 1985:113.

combination of both), the focal point of analysis remains fixed on the internal origin of observable alterations in personality, behavior and so forth. Part of the problem, as Smith notes, is that the pervasive South Asian notion of a permeable embodiment, whereby a diverse range of substances and beings are held to traffic across corporeal boundaries, poses a distinct set of challenges to entrenched assumptions regarding the essentially unitary, bounded self that lies at the center of Western biomedical and philosophical thought. As a result, emic claims regarding the cause of possession as due to the person being pervaded by an external force or being lead to an epistemological dead end, whimsically captured by Smith when he states that possession frequently ends up becoming “an uninvited ontological or soteriological guest at an epistemological party” (Smith 2006:285).

What I am trying to get at is that sometimes the very person(s) for whom possession is a reality of experience get obscured from view, buried beneath an unbearable weight of contentious correlations between context and theoretical speculation. In attempting to peg down every element of contextual minutiae related to an incident of possession, whether it be the possessing entity’s identity, character, and history as defined in a written or oral text, the purported (and often presumed) personal traumas of the possessed hidden in plain sight of the analyst, peculiarities of the relevant historical antecedents of folk tradition, thought, and practice, or broader sociopolitical, economic and various other cultural factors thought to contribute to the form and function of the possession experience, the bottom line is that at the center of every possession account remains a person contending with a tremendously complex experience that commands an appreciation on its own terms. For there will always be idiosyncrasies unique to the individual person, family, or community that escape the purview of broader contextual considerations. Moreover, I would argue that first-hand emic narratives, contrary to a pervasive hermeneutic of suspicion which casts doubt on the reliability of personal experience as accessible information for supporting theoretical speculation, constitutes an essential element of a scholar’s basis for argument equal (or at times greater) in value to contextual information gleaned from details of age, class, gender, sexual orientation, medical history, income level,

political and religious affiliation, etc. Such details, as far as they may take the outside observer in drawing conclusions as to the internal or external factors involved in precipitating incidents of possession, can never hope to communicate what it *feels* like to be possessed by an external being, to have one's sense of identity, personality, agency and embodiment altered or even displaced altogether. An example of what I have in mind here is well-summarized by Thomas Csordas when, discussing Felicitas Goodman's work on the possession of Anneliese Michal and the legal battle that hinged on a confrontation between religious and scientific approaches to the treatment of her illness, praises the way her discussion of this incredibly complicated case resulted in an

account that remains true to the personal thoughts, feelings, and ultimate sense of tragedy of the principal actors, while simultaneously dealing with a complex set of social, religious, cultural, legal, and psychiatric issues raised by the case (Csordas 1985:106).

And as Smith argues, when studies of possession fail to consider the emic experiential point of view, what inevitably occurs "is that one explanatory model is replaced with another, which hardly solves the problem of communication between models" (Smith 2006: 45). An example, used by Smith, would be psychoanalytic models, for which emic explanations of an "anagogic" or "spiritual" nature are rarely regarded as reliable sources of causal, etiological explanation for possession. Frequently, the result of setting up such rigid standards for what scholars deem as admissible, which is to say intelligible (at least according to the scholar's operative analytic framework), evidence for supporting their theoretical investigation is that studies become overdetermined, and as such, fall victim to forcing "evidence to fit their theories" (Smith 2006:36, 44-45). In other words, devoid of the refinement in conceptual terms of analysis careful attention to emic accounts provides, scholarly discussions of possession fall into the trappings of a one-way discourse, with readers' exposure to the emic experience limited to a stereoscopic, "view master"-like screening of academic theory onto possession events.

With regard to the last point I offer Smith's observations on the debate surrounding the role of individual, "inner experience" in academic discussions of possession:

in virtually all the approaches I consider here—textual, anthropological, psychological,

and historical—assertions of the inner and individual nature of the experience of possession are stripped away and the ‘phenomenon’ in question is presented as discursively realizable only through reconstruction of context, whether performative or textual. It is with reference to this interpretive tradition that I feel compelled to contribute my own remarks to the discussion on the nature of the experience of possession. In spite of Sharf’s and Halbfass’s observations that personal inner experience is a notion imported to interpretations of Asian religious phenomena by Western and Western-informed scholars and practitioners, I contend that the removal of the role of individual inner experience, or subordinating it to a normative context, is another kind of ill-conceived construction of the object of study (Smith 2006: 17-18).<sup>44</sup>

In my view, Smith’s comments speak to the heart of a recurring theme in many discussions of possession within a South Asian context. If personal, “inner” experiences, whether those of an ethnographer or a cultural informant, are regarded as unreliable sources of information, considered inaccessible products of the subjectively-bounded phenomenological imagination, if empathy and sympathy for developing a more intimate understanding of other ways of engaging life are eliminated as sources of valuable insight and guidance for navigating linguistic, cultural, and experiential boundaries, then I might ask, what is the point of the humanities? Is it to collect and gather bits and pieces of concrete, quantifiable, and thus verifiable “objective” information pertaining to the relevant contextual elements thought to influence a given person, family, or community at a given point in time? Is this as far as scholars feel it safe to go in discussing and interpreting various aspects of another person’s life? Moreover, if personal, “inner” experience is stripped from the scholarly discourse, what are we left with? A collection of cold, hard, lifeless facts and figures? In my view, one of the most devastating consequences from the elision of personal, “inner” experience from scholarly discussions of possession phenomena would be the toll exacted on people’s willingness to engage scholarly material beyond the strictly contextual, “just the facts ma’am” approach.<sup>45</sup> This is something Sax hits on when he notes the following:

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<sup>44</sup> For an example of the line of Sharf’s thinking referred to here, considered the following remarks referenced by Smith: “I have suggested that it is ill conceived to construe the object of the study of religion to be the inner experience of religious practitioners. Scholars of religion are not presented with experiences that stand in need of interpretation but rather with texts, narratives, performances, and so forth. While these representations may at times assume the rhetorical stance of phenomenological description, we are not obliged to accept them as such” (Sharf, quoted in Smith 2006:16-17).

<sup>45</sup> For an example of the growing discontent with the elision of personal experience from ethnographic accounts see the special volume of *Anthropology and Humanism* 2010 35(2).

For most ethnographers, it is axiomatic that by living with a particular group of people, adopting their diet and dress, speaking their language, and participating in their way of life, one achieves a kind of understanding that cannot be replicated by conducting surveys, reading novels, watching movies, measuring land holdings or calorie intake or cranial size, studying history, analyzing language, conducting experiments, or any of the other methods employed by the human sciences (Sax 2009: 4).

What I'm arguing is that readers exposed to the scholarly discourse of possession studies, whether student or professional scholar, may begin to feel as though their own existential engagement with the subject material is being called into question, and as such, decline to be open and forthcoming about their personal engagement with the material out of fear of having their positions challenged as "unscientific," "unfounded," or the subjective fancies of the enchanted scholar "gone native." How will this impact students coming to humanities-based approaches to the study of religion and culture for the first time? Will it inspire or curtail their curiosity? Will it encourage them to engage the "Other" more deeply and openly, or rather, continue approaching the "Other" through oblique strategies of contextual re-creation of personal experience, devoid of the very thing that makes it personal in the first place? The bottom line, as Smith points out, is that "the hermeneutic of suspicion on which rests much of value in our fields must not become a hermeneutic of mandatory, routine rejection" (Smith 2006:17). In other words, while we need not uncritically accept phenomenological descriptions of experience as perfectly objective, unbiased accounts, we nevertheless want to avoid the outright rejection of such accounts as invaluable information and perspective on complex aspects of human life. Moreover, it seems that what is required, more than anything, is a willingness to embrace experimentations with how such difficult and complex subject matter is delivered, keeping in mind that they may fail in approaching greater levels of "facticity" or "objectivity" (whatever they might be), but nevertheless stand as welcome tides of playing around with how to better appreciate as complex and multifaceted a phenomenon as possession. In the following section I turn to various examples of how scholars have gone about experimenting with methods by which to more fully engage personal experience in their ethnographic narrative and analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### ROBERT DESJARLAIS AND THE ROLE OF A RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY IN ETHNOGRAPHY

“Everything around us, everything we look at without seeing, everything we brush past without noticing, everything we touch without feeling, everything we encounter without truly perceiving, has sudden, astonishing, and inexplicable effects upon us, upon our senses, and through them, upon our thoughts and our very hearts” (Guy de Maupassant, *The Horla*).<sup>46</sup>

As previously noted, the phenomenological engagement between ethnographers and their cultural counterparts frequently produces insights which can help steer the course of methodological and theoretical investigation in new and innovative ways. A similar matter is raised by Robert Desjarlais in his account of a tradition of ritual healing among the Yolmo wa of the Helambu region in north central Nepal. Observing what he describes as a “tendency in contemporary anthropology to privilege the linguistic, the discursive, and the cognized over the visceral and the tacit,” Desjarlais draws attention to the way many anthropological discussions of ritual practices focus so intently on an interpretation of the body as a tapestry of interlocking symbol and metaphor that they fail to account for the tactile, sensory dimensions of the physical body as it endures illness, suffering and stress (Desjarlais 1992:29). He goes on to note:

Largely neglected has been the realm of the senses, the sufferings of the flesh. We have lost an understanding of the body as an experiencing, soulful being, before and beyond its capacity to house icon and metaphor. A less cognate, more sensate treatment now seems needed (Desjarlais 1992:29).

As a corrective to this tendency, Desjarlais focuses on the role of descriptive accounts of ethnographer’s physical, emotional, and tacit sensory experiences during fieldwork as a complement to traditional avenues of inquiry rooted in textual, linguistic and historical consideration. He emphasizes the idea that, when trying to arrive at a more intimate and sophisticated appreciation and understanding of how people different from one’s self live – for

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<sup>46</sup> Maupassant 1995:285.



example, how they perceive the causes of, and implement treatments for, various forms of illness – it's simply not enough to work with a strictly language-based, predominantly intellectual and abstract theoretical approach. In other words, at some point all the information one has gleaned from reading books and articles, watching films or conducting surveys, all the while experimenting with various methods and theories designed to sort through, and make sense of, the raw data these traditional instruments of inquiry and understanding provide, must at some point be balanced by insights born of tactile engagement with the everyday lives and bodies of the people in question. Put another way, it is paramount not only to walk through what one has read, noting and cataloging differences and similarities between the contents of historical, philosophical, and ethnographic literature and living context, but to consider those visceral moments of making physical and emotion contact with unfamiliar surroundings, people, and their way of life. For this reason Desjarlais pursues an aesthetics of Yolmo wa experience based on what he calls “tacit cultural forms, values, and sensibilities – local ways of being – that lend specific styles, configurations, and felt qualities to those experiences,” which in turn, he argues, aid the ethnographer in arriving at a more grounded appreciation for how these locally developed aesthetic sensibilities “are rooted in bodily experience and played out in social interactions, shape indigenous notions of person, emotion, and experience” (Desjarlais 1992:65).

What I find particularly helpful in Desjarlais' approach is the light it casts on the complex process that takes place as a person begins to familiarize his or her self with an unfamiliar cultural environment. Referring to an observation of Gregory Bateson, Desjarlais elaborates on the notion that much of what a person comes to know of different people and places is as much directed by deliberate critical thought and reflection as it is by the accrual, over time, of intuitions and insights born of simply spending time with people, from the mundane activities of exchanging stories, waiting for a bus, or sharing a meal to the more intense and punctuated occasions of festival celebrations, ritual ceremonies and cultural performances. The following observations of Bateson help elucidate the nature of this process as it relates to an appreciation of the challenges involved with articulating an “epistemology of the self”:

The total self-corrective unit, which processes information, or, as I say, “thinks” and “acts” and “decides” is a *system* whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the “self” or “consciousness.”<sup>47</sup>

In other words, there exists a continual flow or trafficking of information between “subject” and “object”, during which people pick up on subtle clues and tacit information born of their interactions with people, places and the surrounding environment, often without being aware of it, and from this, begin to build a working familiarity with local knowledge bases. As Desjarlais notes elsewhere:

One learns of another way of being and feeling through contrast, noting the differences that make a difference. By participating in the everyday life of a society distinct from one’s own, an ethnographer confronts and slowly learns (often tacitly but always partially) patterns of behavior previously unfamiliar to his or her body. In my experience, it is through behavioral reworking that the differences characterizing two forms of life become most apparent; novel ways of moving, talking, and interacting contribute to visceral appreciation of the forces that occasion those actions (Desjarlais 1992: 19).<sup>48</sup>

In other words, what a person comes to know of another culture is perhaps as much embodied and tactile as it is conceptual and intellectual.

What I take from Desjarlais’ above comments is the need for attending to the embodied character of knowledge that feeds into ethnographic accounts on both sides of the emic-etic divide. And while the foreign participant observer might never come to know first-hand what it feels like to be possessed by a spirit, ghost, demon or deity, he or she can, at the very least, make a concerted effort to take into serious consideration the felt immediacies of experience contained in emic accounts of possession that emerge from a confluence of personal idiosyncrasy, cultural

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<sup>47</sup> Bateson, quoted in Desjarlais 1992:183-184.

<sup>48</sup> For additional insight into what Desjarlais is after here, consider the following: “we may feel how a culture ‘looks’ as we may see how a people feels. That is, our understanding of a people’s ethos is not necessarily limited to analytic insights. We can also begin to sense, through nonverbal, visceral means, something of a people’s sensibilities by attending to the patterns, orientations, and concerns that commonly impact on their lives” (Desjarlais 1992:247).

context, and locally developed ways of articulating the nature and significance of such events.<sup>49</sup> This takes on additional gravity if one considers that, in many cases, people at the local level are operating with epistemologies which, contrary to many western empirical sciences, often include experiential and emotional insight as a valid means by which to verify claims to knowledge and understanding, as Smith notes with regard to aesthetic traditions surrounding possession in South Asia, “Unlike in the West, however, in South Asian *sāstraic* thinking neither moods nor emotions bear the weight of irrationality, nor do they operate in opposition to religious truth or discourse” (Smith 2006:332).<sup>50</sup> The point, as Smith puts it, is that “the success of any methodological or interpretive framework in cross-cultural analysis depends on its addressing discourse modes and epistemological issues on both sides of the divide” (Smith 2006: 501).<sup>51</sup> In this way, a relational epistemology, one that is broadened and inclusive, might develop in which the ethnographer’s own reflexive phenomenological engagement, the emic experiential perspective as well as local frameworks of understanding might couple with foreign-based method and theory to generate a more complete picture of how things stand. For in a manner similar to Sax’s argument regarding reflexivity in ethnographic writing as more than a rhetorical or literary technique, such an

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<sup>49</sup> Such an approach seems well warranted given the fact that, as Janice Boddy notes, “because the body is both the existential ground of belief and the locus of engagement with the spirit world, it is not surprising that possession is often expressed in physical terms, as somatic change or illness” (Boddy 1994:411).

<sup>50</sup> Further complicating scholarly recognition of alternative epistemological frameworks at work in local understanding of possession phenomena is what Smith describes as a heightened level of intimacy between philosophical discourse and practical application in South Asia different from that seen in Western intellectual history. In other words, the gap between theoretical discourse and its application in ground level devotional practices is much narrower than it has been in the Western academy of arts and sciences. Examples cited by Smith include the frequency with which scientific and philosophical treatises in India are “often framed by creation myths, illustrate doctrinal principles with reference to obscure ritual minutiae, and resort to *śruti* or the testimony of the Veda as final proof (*pramāṇa*) of the validity of doctrinal assertions” (Smith 2006: 285), as well as the lack of contradiction between “extreme religious practice and mainstream philosophical discourse (Smith 2006:309). Moreover, as Smith indicates, “No Indian philosopher composed an *odium theologicum* against possession or any other specific practice, as did Christian theologians and missionaries” (Smith 2006:311).

<sup>51</sup> For an example of the need for addressing epistemological issues on both sides of the divide, see Smith’s discussion of how psychoanalytic interpretations of disease-producing possession in South Asia overlook the simple fact that the presence (or absence) of repressed trauma and developmental conflict are rarely, if ever, factored into traditional South Asian models of diagnosis. See Smith 2006:507 ff.

approach would be a refinement of method “justified on empirical grounds, because it more accurately represents the research process” (Sax 2009:6).

While I acknowledge the potential pitfalls of relying on the intuitive understanding of any given phenomena contained in felt sensibilities, emotions, and personal experience, whether they be on the emic or etic side of the “subject/object” divide, what I think is important to remember is that, one, ambiguity remains a constant in both ethnographic and indigenous understandings of complex human interaction, experience and practice (e.g., possession, exorcism, spirit loss, soul loss), and two, that the human sciences have always, and will always, continue to operate in and through, and rely upon, the human faculties of empathy, sympathy, and intuitive understanding rooted in the “felt recognitions” born of cross-cultural engagement which, because of their often elusive and complex dialectical inner workings, may be incredibly difficult to describe in words, nevertheless stand as an invaluable complement to the brand of empirical, reproducible evaluation and judgment required by the “hard sciences” (Desjarlais 1992:245).<sup>52</sup>

An illustration of the benefits of this approach are evident in Desjarlais’ discussion of what he describes as the “main work” of Yolmo wa ritual healing: “the exorcism of harms and ghosts from body and home, and the retrieval of lost life-forces” (Desjarlais 1992: 185). In order to engage an insightful, balanced, and context-sensitive discussion of how Yolmo wa rituals, such as exorcism, accomplish the work of healing, Desjarlais first offers a critique of what he views as a tendency within anthropology to focus more on what rituals “mean” as representations of participant “belief” and “thought,” as opposed to how participants “feel”. The result, as Desjarlais sees it, is that such approaches “fail to grasp what it might feel like to have ghosts and pains cut from the body” (Desjarlais 1992: 184). In other words, they fall short of a thorough consideration of the human body in a ritual context, and thus cannot further an understanding of whether, and to what degree, healing rites succeed in alleviating the suffering of patients. Moreover, if as Desjarlais argues, the various forms of suffering Yolmo wa seek to alleviate in

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<sup>52</sup> See Koss-Chioino (2010) for a discussion of Spiritism that touches on many of these issues.

healing rites are primarily rooted in the body, then how is it possible to provide an assessment of the efficacy of treatments without due consideration of how they operate in and through the body?<sup>53</sup>

The crucial point seems to be that an anthropologist can provide as lengthy and detailed a discussion of what healing rituals, such as those involving exorcism *mean* based on a consideration of their association with symbolic, psychological, intellectual, or cognitive theory, and still be left with questions of how the rites *work* or how they *feel* and that, as Desjarlais argues, “Only by attending to the sensory dimensions of the rites—how Yolmo bodies move, feel, and know—can we appreciate their experiential force and so gain an insight into the nature of Yolmo healings” (Desjarlais 1992: 186). For as he goes on to note:

Yolmo exorcisms entail much more than beliefs or ideas. They are more than symbolic actions. They are less dependent on “key,” “dominant,” or “transactional” symbols than on kinesthetic actions. There is little that is symbolic about the ghosts and harms that Meme<sup>54</sup> casts out. They do not stand for anything but themselves (though they may, at times, be associated with pain, misery, and anxiety). Ritual exorcisms do not work from a logic of symbolic identity, wherein a sign (ghost) comes to represent a referent (negative emotions, sexual angst). Rather, they engage a principle of kinetic action, wherein movements through space change how a body feels. “I felt my disease go out,” says one man. It is precisely this felt sense of healing, of pain leaving the body, that Meme seeks most to achieve (Desjarlais 1992: 195).

What I take of value from the above observations is the need for balancing the focus of academic interest in possession phenomena, particularly when it occurs within a ritual healing context. As Desjarlais indicates, what incidents of “soul loss” mean most to Yolmo wa is how they feel and the tolls the attendant psychophysiological symptoms exact on their quality of life. Most assuredly, culturally-embedded symbol and metaphor, signs and referents, play a role in the foreign observer’s appreciation for how soul loss is articulated in a local idiom, but the fact remains that careful attention to the ritual context in which a course of treatment is applied by healers illustrates the profoundly embodied and visceral character of the experiences associated

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<sup>53</sup> See Haliburton (2003), Waldram (2000) and the articles contained in a special issue of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* 24(2) for excellent discussion of the difficulties involved in evaluating ritual efficacy.

<sup>54</sup> Meme is the Yolmo wa healer with whom Desjarlais spent much of his time during fieldwork.

with the onset of symptoms, diagnosis, and course of treatment implemented to improve patients' situations on the part of local healers. As Graham Harvey, referring to the proclivity of scholars to over-interpret the symbolic nature of ritual behavior, puts it: "Salmon ceremonies and salmon respecting are about eating salmon, not communing with symbols of transcendence."<sup>55</sup>

And as Smith notes in a discussion of Frits Staal's work:

the meaning of the body is its very presence, the fact of its being and its movement. Its meaning does not reside in secondary analysis, in verbalizing, in communicating. The body possessed is not symbolic of something else, nor is it, in itself, a message to be communicated to a culturally conditioned public, a reinforcement of a set of beliefs (Smith 2006:583).

A parallel from an American context might involve an evaluation of the possibility of a therapeutic or healing aspect in the experiences of Catholic church-goers attending a Sunday mass based solely on their degree of awareness for the intellectual history of the symbolic and communicative importance of the transubstantiation of the body and blood of Christ in the sacraments of drinking wine and eating a wafer of unleavened bread. By focusing so squarely on the abstract, academically-minded import of symbols frequently held to lie at the center of religious thought and practice, what would be overlooked is that perhaps what the average Sunday church-goer sought out were more so the felt qualities associated with the experience of attending mass in the familiar communal environs of a warm and inviting atmosphere in the company of one's family, friends, and peers rather than any intellectual thrill born of participating in a symbolic gesture tied to the transubstantiation of the body and blood of Christ and theological debates within the Early Church over the nature of the holy trinity.

This last point leads me to briefly discuss Desjarlais' desire to write ethnography in a way that, as he puts it, "includes the reader's body as much as the author's" (Desjarlais 1992: 19). An example, frequently raised by scholars, would be the format of novels and short stories which, because of their narrative detail, freedom to play with perspective and explore subjective experience, alternative possibilities in narrative flow, and rich character development, are able to

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<sup>55</sup> Harvey, quoted in Beyer 2009:42.

position readers more intimately at the intersection of broader sociocultural events and the sea of actors, personal thoughts, actions, feelings, and emotions that interact with them. As Desjarlais points out with regard to his fieldwork among the Yolmo wa of north central Nepal, many of the interactions that take place between ethnographer and cultural informant(s) evade clear understanding and articulation. A spark of intuition or insight might be there, a feeling, an emotion, a fuzzy grasp of what's taking place. Ambiguity is a given in cross-cultural encounters. Arguably such limiting factors in academic understanding are what drive scholars to pursue with greater vigor enhanced understanding of human thought and behavior through various analytical devices.<sup>56</sup> This is not to assert that ethnographic accounts could use a good dose of imaginative, fictive storytelling for the purposes of attempting to creatively or imaginatively interpenetrate the minds and hearts of its living or deceased subjects (though experiments along such lines might prove a fascinating experiment), only that greater attention to the personal stories involved would help to supplement the incredibly specific interests of academic scholarship, providing a much needed dose of matter-of-fact, first-hand emic observation and experience which, often times, because of their paucity in methodological and theoretical baggage and argot, present healthy challenges to theoretical speculation.<sup>57</sup> More to the point, the better we are able to come to know people, both in everyday circumstances as well as in intense moments like those of possession, the more sensitive, thorough, and applicable will be the products of ethnographic study.

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<sup>56</sup> For more on this issue, see Desjarlais (1992): 31, 245-246, 257n.54.

<sup>57</sup> In addition to experimenting with the way scholars write about their experiences, perhaps greater attention to artistic depictions of possession on the part of scholars would provide a much needed reference point for getting better acquainted with many of the themes coursing throughout the study of possession, and that as Smith points out with regard to "its capacity to graphically represent the interests of complex, imaginative relationships, to portray internal psychological, mental, and even physical condition," for as Smith argues, "possession in south India... is invariably physical and representational, not just mental and psychological" (Smith 2006: 401;402). For an excellent example of what the medium of film might be capable of in terms of broadening scholastic approaches to the study of possession, see Jouko Aaltonen's remarkable documentary film *Kusum*.

## CHAPTER 5

### RICHARD JANKOWSKY, RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND A MOMENT OF APORIA

As an alternative way of considering the type of information produced by intense, prolonged engagement with emic experience and indigenous models of practical application, explication and understanding I now turn to Richard Jankowsky's insightful discussion of the relationship between music, trance, and spirit possession in *stambeli* ritual healing in Tunisia. Trained as an ethnomusicologist, Jankowsky describes the first time he made "musical contact with the spirit world" of his cultural informants during a period of apprenticeship with a master *stambeli* musician-healer (Jankowsky 2007:185). While practicing the *gumbri* (an instrument with deep cultural and historical ties to Muslim prayer) in the home of his teacher, a woman arrived seeking a diagnosis for what she perceived as afflictive spirit possession. As the healer carried on the diagnosis in one room of the household, Jankowsky resumed his practice in the adjoining room. Upon hearing Jankowsky's playing of the *gumbri*, the patient was suddenly frightened to the point where she ran away from the house (Jankowsky 2007:186). According to the healer, Jankowsky's playing had not frightened the woman so much as it had the spirit possessing her, which indicated that the possessing spirit was not of Muslim origin: "Since *stambeli* spirits appreciate Islamic prayers and are attracted to the sound of the *gumbri*, this was a clear indication that a non-believing, and thus non-*stambeli*, spirit possessed the patient" (Jankowsky 2007:186). With this information in hand, the healer was then able to direct the Jewish patient to a healer better-equipped to provide a course of treatment suited to her cultural background. Jankowsky's following reflections on this experience demonstrate the invaluable insight generated by reflexive engagement with field experience that many traditional methodological and theoretical instruments simply cannot provide:

The reaction of the patient – and of the Dar Barnum household – to my playing faced me with a dilemma. I became increasingly haunted by my own recurring thoughts demanding I make sense of the event. How was I to interpret the patient's reaction? Did my playing communicate with the spirit world? Did I believe it did and, finally, does it even matter? This moment of aporia (Derrida 1993) – a profound moment of doubt in



which knowledge enters crisis – made me question some very fundamental assumptions I held about music and the spirit world, and the implications of such assumptions for the ethnographic project (Jankowsky 2007:186-187).

As Jankowsky so lucidly articulates, the woman's reaction of fright and flight to his playing the *gumbri*, as well as the healer's matter-of-fact statement that this was instrumental in helping diagnose the afflicting spirit, while from the emic point of view most likely pose little cause for consternation, confusion, or second-guessing, let alone a moment of *aporia*, nevertheless give rise to a considerable amount of difficulty for Jankowsky as a trained academic. Quite simply, nothing in his methodological and theoretical toolkit was of help in unraveling his role in the identification of the spirit possessing the woman. In discussing the reasons for his interpretive dilemma, Jankowsky speaks with candor about his academically-oriented fascination with arriving at answers to highly technical questions regarding the role of music in triggering trance states which, in turn, theoretically might be seen to make possible the healing of patients. He discusses the way his reaction to the patient was "instinctively framed in terms of belief" and that his academic training had most likely led him to see "empirical data as the most valuable form of evidence," as well as what he calls a "subconscious tension" between his self-identification as a secular humanist and his adolescent relationship with the Roman Catholic Church and "its demonization of possession and its own unseen world of saints, angels and other divinities" (Jankowsky 2007:196).

According to Jankowsky, by focusing so intently on the technical aspects of the relationship between musical and lyrical content and the reaction of the patient, what he overlooked was the fact that the music played leading up to ritual possession had never been intended for a strictly human audience:

My concerns at the beginning revolved around the production of trance states and the resultant healing that occurred. My questions were "wrong" because they had allowed only for the possibility of musical communication between musician and patient. However, Baba insisted that neither he nor his music could heal an affliction; rather, it is the Saints and Spirits who are responsible (Jankowsky 2007:195).

And as the healer further indicated, Jankowsky's role (as well as his own) in the process that led to a moment of *aporia* was more aptly described as that of a facilitator and guide for calling upon

the spirits to help in the diagnosis and treatment of affliction. Jankowsky's following remarks help to further clarify his point and are telling with regard to the type of methodology he argues for:

Stambeli musicians mediate between the human and spirit worlds, and require deep knowledge of both in order to be efficacious. Their location at the interstices, at the in-between, is a privileged place, but also a place characterized by responsibility to others. The same could be said of ethnographers (Jankowsky 2007:201).

Further complicating Jankowsky's efforts to better appreciate the nature of stambeli relations with a broad spectrum of spirits, each with their own history and penchant for causing certain types of illness, was what he describes as the privileged place of visual representation in academic discourse and the degree to which unequal grounds of evaluation are established when embodied, sensory relations are judged according to standards that place a premium on visible, which is to say publically verifiable, evidence.

Building on this reflection, Jankowsky pursues a form of "radical empiricism" in his study of stambeli possession inspired by the likes of Johannes Fabian, Michael Jackson, Vincent Crapanzano, and Thomas Csordas. As he puts it, such an approach is

located somewhere between (the fantasy of) scientific objectivity and excessive self-reflexivity in that it neither denies the agency and situatedness of the ethnographer nor focuses disproportionately on the actions of the ethnographer. Rather, it emphasizes the hermeneutic value of acknowledging the interstitial space of inter-existence that arises during the ethnographic encounter (Jankowski 2007:193).

For Jankowsky, seeking out a middle ground becomes paramount when the cultural practices and experiences in question are rooted primarily in embodied techniques involving a range of what Csordas describes as "somatic modes of attention."<sup>58</sup> For example, much of the knowledge and technical expertise implemented by healers in a context of ritual healing is often transmitted through embodied practices conducted during a period of apprenticeship or training. Because of this, the ethnographer's task in obtaining information may be complicated by the fact that, for locals, such information and technique would most likely be self-evident. In other words,

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<sup>58</sup> Csordas defines "somatic modes of attention" as "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas 2002:244).

cultural counterparts might not think of it as important to share it with the ethnographer to better inform him or her of what is going on, since they understandably wouldn't consider it any way remarkable. Equally difficult would be trying to get someone to put into words something they've never been asked to articulate in spoken or written communication amenable to the logico-scientific argot preferred by many scholars. Jankowsky's following observations further illustrate Sax and Weinhold's point referenced earlier regarding the embodied nature of healing rituals involving possession:

Placating the afflicting spirit is also an embodied process. Through enticing the spirit to possess the host, the human-spirit relationship is transformed from one of an unwelcome, aggressive and even violent affliction of the body to one of an invited and expected accommodation of the spirit within the proper ritual space and time. The body is also the focus of the healing ritual: blood from the sacrificial animal(s) is wiped on the client's extremities; the body is draped in banners or covered in cloaks of proper type and colour; the appropriate type of incense is inhaled; certain victuals, usually made from the sacrificial animal, are ingested; and, most dramatic and obvious, the body is penetrated by a spirit and compelled to trance (Jankowsky 2007:200).

Taking into consideration Jankowsky's insistence upon a methodological framework that ensures careful consideration of the embodied epistemologies which anchor stambeli possession practices dovetails nicely with Michael Jackson's suggestion that, "When the world of those we study privileges embodied epistemologies, the common ground we should seek should involve opening ourselves up to the sensory and corporeal" (Jankowski 2007:200).

For Jankowsky, this raises the issue of what he sees as an implicit assumption in many academic accounts, namely that possession by deities, spirits, ancestors or ghosts poses "some sort of 'problem' to be solved," an attitude he traces to scholarly attempts to produce broadly configured typologies of possession and trance without reference to indigenous categories of interpretation (Jankowsky 2007: 187). Such approaches, he argues, demonstrate unfortunate cases where "the scholar's need for order and control is more important than the reality of experience for those involved" (Jankowsky 2007:188). In his case, it appears the application of traditional academic method and theory beholden to its own brand of rational, scientific frameworks of understanding simply cannot solve the "puzzle" or "riddle" of his own experience, let alone the possession of the woman whom he had frightened with his playing.

The point is that quite often what one confronts in cross-cultural experiences are traditions of thought and practice rooted in forms of knowledge which, as much as some scholars might struggle to admit, lie “beyond our capacity to comprehend on its own terms” (Jankowsky 2007:191). In other words, no matter how well-versed a foreigner might come to be in the language, customs, and intellectual traditions of a foreign culture, there will always come a time when help in understanding an experience, event, or situation is required. For example, when efforts are made to translate localized traditions of knowledge, experience, and practice into terms more amenable to the demands of a foreign epistemology, the very thing(s) that made such knowledge, experience or practice local in the first place fade from view, as Jankowsky, discussing Gary Tomlinson’s study of music in Renaissance magic, notes:

The danger in trying to render transparent the magical or supernatural concepts of Others...is that it either constitutes an invasion of the Other’s space in which we are unwelcome inquisitors or pulls the practices of the Other into our conceptual realm, which we dominate utterly. In other words, the danger is in losing the in-between space, the middle ground, of productive dialogic engagement (Jankowsky 2007:191).

Examples of this tendency to pull possession experience and practice into foreign intellectual and conceptual realms abound in the literature, as in psychoanalytic accounts where afflictive disease-producing possession is interpreted strictly through Freudian concepts of repression, hysteria, and neuroses without engaging the helpful, alternative perspective supplied by prevailing indigenous models of nuanced, complex, and well-documented indigenous psychophysiology.<sup>59</sup> In order to avoid such an imbalance in the conceptual grounds of investigation, Jankowsky places emphasis on the value of creating a dialogically-oriented middle ground between etic participation observation and emic practical engagement.

Jankowsky’s description of, and reflection on, a moment of *aporia* encountered during his immersive cross-cultural experience raises a central dilemma in the study of ritual healing and possession: how is one to move forward in the job of interpreting experience and practices

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<sup>59</sup> See Freed and Freed (1964), Obeyesekere (1977), as well as the excellent critiques of these works by Castillo (1994b) and Claus (1979).

when his or her intellectual toolkit fails to come up with the right tool for the job? In other words, when an experience during fieldwork refuses to be made sense of by one's traditional tools of inquiry and explanation, then what? By taking the traditional, emic explanation at face value? By sweeping it under the rug of aberration rooted in an erroneous and naïve understanding of how the world *really* works? Jankowsky's suggestion of adopting Herzfeld's "militant middle ground' between universalizing, traditionally empirical tendencies and self-reflexive, phenomenological approaches on the other" represents a productive starting point for generating a dialogic space in which a mutually informing, productive tension develops between emic and etic voices and perspectives (Jankowsky 2007: 191).

## CHAPTER 6

### BONNIE CLASS-COFFIN, TRANSFORMATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY, AND THE HAZARDS OF “GOING NATIVE”

For an alternative solution to the challenges of ethnographic engagement and reporting raised and responded to by Sax, Desjarlais and Jankowsky, I now turn to the ideas of “radical participation” and “experiential ethnography” discussed by Bonnie Glass-Coffin. In her article, “Anthropology, Shamanism, and Alternate Ways of Knowing – Being in the World: One Anthropologist’s Journey of Discovery and Transformation,” Glass-Coffin writes that

it seems that a willingness to really engage with cognitive and spiritual maps that fundamentally challenge how knowledge is produced, and even how reality is shaped, may be a prerequisite to the experience of really “being changed” by our encounters (Glass-Coffin 2010:205).

In other words, if scholars, particularly ethnographers in the field, want to better understand experiences of the “Other” that are generated, interpreted, and ultimately explained by recourse to modes of thought and reason different from one’s own, then there must be a willingness on the part of the scholar to have his or her critical assumptions about those experiences not merely exposed to moments of aporetic reflection, but perhaps changed altogether. To begin embracing such an attitude, Glass-Coffin suggests anthropologists begin by abandoning strict adherence to traditional models of the detached observer:

because ethnographers have begun embracing the value of stepping outside themselves and of being changed by the process, the tired assertions that anthropology cannot be good science unless the participant-observer remains “detached” from the cognitive and spiritual worldviews of their informants can no longer be accepted at face value (Glass-Coffin 2010: 206).

She extends this line of argument by referring to Johannes Fabian’s notion of “radical participation,” noting that, “stepping outside oneself . . . to truly enter the life world of the Other should be considered a ‘prerequisite for, rather than an impediment to, the production of ethnographic knowledge’” (Glass-Coffin 2010:206).

In my estimation, Glass-Coffin's approach, while undoubtedly a worthwhile endeavor, represents an extreme position which threatens to further polarize productive discussions about how scholars go about engaging the "unseen world(s)" of their cultural informants. Part of what makes ethnographic research a productive exploratory dialogical and experiential engagement stems from the differences of cultural and intellectual background between emic and etic perspectives. For example, Sax's reluctance to fully immerse or "radically participate" in Garhwali beliefs regarding the volatile power of the *devta* Bhairav may demonstrate an equally complex reckoning with what Glass-Coffin is after in her "radical participation." For by acknowledging his confrontation with Bhairav, by openly discussing the threat to his spiritual, psychological and physical well-being, is he not also demonstrating an openness to being "changed" or "transformed?" The fact that he feels compelled to draw back from such a deep immersion to ensure his own safety in no small measure demonstrates just how seriously he considers the "unseen worlds" tied to emic experience and perspective. Furthermore, what Glass-Coffin seems to overlook is that not all radical participation leads to the kind of unifying and pleasant types of integrative experiences she discusses. Quite often, and in many ways, there are very sensible reasons for an ethnographer to disengage from the vulnerability often associated with immersive cross-cultural experience. Sax's experiences undoubtedly demonstrate this.

And while there is little doubt that "radical participation" holds the potential to draw the ethnographer closer to a more intimate appreciation for, and experience of, the "unseen world(s)" in which indigenous practitioners operate, such an approach is perhaps best considered an additional component of the methodological and theoretical toolkit scholars wield in their efforts to unpack the complex experiential phenomena they seek to discuss, rather than a "prerequisite." Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that there are compelling arguments for the invaluable insight developed through the practices of distanced observation that cannot be achieved through the vehicle of radical participation. A case in point would be Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition, an idea that one may argue can only come to light through "distanced

observation.”<sup>60</sup> And as Jankowsky so cogently argues, there will always be the need for the constructive middle ground that develops when emic and etic, insider and outsider, actively engage one another, when differing “cognitive and spiritual maps” collide, are negotiated, and as a result, create the potential for cross-culturally informed mutual appreciation and understanding. Just as the methodological perspective for which Glass-Coffin argues is, as she puts it, “more ethically defensible and decolonizing than the detachment typical of participant observation,” given that, as she writes, it “emphasizes intersubjectivity, engagement, vulnerability, willingness to lose control,” and “builds on local ideas, revealing the ‘beautiful, powerful, and engaging features of local cultures’,” I would also argue that efforts to engage the “Other” through one’s own “spiritual and cognitive maps” offer an equally compelling means by which to deepen the ethical grounds of ethnography, given that they afford the opportunity for two parties – the ethnographer and his or her cultural informant(s) – to walk away from the engagement with a better appreciation for the “Other” (Glass-Coffin 2010: 106).<sup>61</sup> Radical participation by no means constitutes the only way for someone to establish a profound appreciation for other people’s relations with “unseen worlds,” for there is always the option to simply take people at their word when they provide first-hand experiential accounts of their “cognitive and spiritual worldviews,” and in so doing, open one’s self to new and imaginative techniques for exploring the diversity and range of human experience. In this way, the terms of understanding shift from learning *about* the “Other” to learning *from* the “Other,” and from talk of the experience of

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<sup>60</sup> See Sax’s discussion of misrecognition and its relevance to an understanding of personal agency in the healing cult of Bhairav: Sax 2009:196-199.

<sup>61</sup> As a Peace Corps volunteer, living and working in small village communities of Nepal and Thailand, I frequently found myself wondering how far I could go in adopting local mannerisms, behaviors, social customs and norms, while still managing to make my presence as a foreigner contribute to local understandings of Americans. What I came to cherish was the middle ground that grew between, on the one hand, my concerted efforts to adopt and inhabit another way of life – the cultural and aesthetic sensibilities, values, and norms of behavior and etiquette that guided my daily interactions with fellow colleagues, neighbors and friends – and, on the other hand, my efforts to cling to what I felt contributed to expanding local appreciation for my own cultural ways of seeing, knowing, and feeling.



reality to the reality of experience, all without the demand for a change in one's spiritual or ontological register.

Both models, “radical participation” and “participation observation,” have much to contribute to a broadened consideration of alternative approaches for unpacking the complex issues of human experience, religion, spirit, matter, embodiment, and notions of self that course throughout the diverse body of practices loosely grouped under the heading of possession. For as Glass-Coffin so rightly indicates, ethnographic research is more a “product of relationship” than an “observation of fact” (Glass-Coffin 2010: 205). And again, there exists no one-size fits all approach to obtaining a more intimate understanding of, and appreciation for, complex experiential phenomena. As Daniel Halperin argues with regard to an exclusively “emic friendly” approach, in which ethnographers attempt to fully inhabit local practical and experiential points of view, care must be taken not to move the focus of inquiry in the opposite direction where, as he puts it, “only accepting the ‘official’ indigenous stances” becomes as dogmatic as the demand for strictly concrete, empirically verifiable evidence on the other end of the extreme (Halperin 1996:32). What Halperin urges scholars to keep in mind is that ambivalence, ambiguity, and confusion surrounding complex and fluid issues like possession pervade across both sides of the emic-etic divide. For example, local participants in, and observers of, possession rituals might have their own doubts about the “reality of spirits” and whether a given person's possession is “feigned” or “genuine.” For this reason, Halperin, building on the idea of “a negotiated reality, or shared set of unspoken assumptions regarding ritual practices” suggests ethnographers ground their investigation in “the dynamic balance between three fundamental elements: careful field observations, adequate recording of subjects (emic) discourses, and integration of the researcher's (reflexive) thoughts and experiences” (Halperin 1996:35; 37n.3).<sup>62</sup> Halperin concludes his discussion of the perils involved with an

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<sup>62</sup> Further elaborating on the notion of a negotiated reality, Halperin references the following excerpt drawn from James Wafer's work on spirit possession forms in Brazil: “As I learned from my participation in Candomble, the boundary between different kinds of reality, whether social, epistemological, or ontological, is not a barrier to interaction...the fact that spirits could interact with people at any time and in even the most public locations – I once

“exclusively emic anthropology” by highlighting the value of ethnographers maintaining a flexible methodological approach in their work:

Given the veritable minefield of official discourses, underlying assumptions, deeply held feelings, and occasionally conflicting behaviors of participants, the ethnographer is perhaps best advised to do research equipped with a flexible analytical armamentarium. Preferably, this approach includes a more than superficial appreciation of other emic worldview(s), without being limited to such an orientation (Halperin 1996:36).

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played snooker with a Corquisa [a spirit] at a local bar – meant that most people were aware of the relative nature of the boundary between the world of practical affairs and the fames of the gods” (Wafer, quoted in Halperin 1996:34).

## CHAPTER 7

### WILLIAM SAX, PERFORMANCE STUDIES, AND GARHWALI POSSESSION BY BHAIRAV

Having gone over various methodological approaches to the study of possession, I return to Sax's work on Garhwali possession by Bhairav to see how some of the methodological and theoretical ideas discussed thus far play out.<sup>63</sup> Describing the cult of Bhairav as a "community of affliction and healing," Sax notes that participants in healing rituals suffer at "many levels: economic, physical, political, sexual, and spiritual" (Sax 2004: 297). Many of the stories framing the various situations leading clients to seek the aid of ritual healers speak to the negative impact exacted by the kinds of social, economic and political inequality frequently endured by members of marginalized and oppressed communities: poverty, lack of education, unemployment, limited or no access to healthcare services, unfair wage-labor practices, unequal distribution of land, physical abuse and sexual exploitation, missing children and failing businesses. Additional examples of common fears and anxieties leading individuals and families to seek the aid of ritual healers included bouts of afflictive spirit possession, physical complaints (e.g., fever, aches, and pains), personal traumas (e.g., miscarriages, still-births, the death of a child), failures to achieve success in educational or professional life, unfulfilled wishes (e.g., infertility, esp. lack of male heirs), interpersonal problems (e.g., domestic and intergenerational conflict), and tensions or threats resonating throughout larger social networks (e.g., disputes over land ownership and unfair business dealings).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Much of the material upon which I base the following descriptions of Harijan ritual healings and oppression are distilled from the works of Sax 2004, 2009 (esp. pp. 25-27) and Polit 2005, 2006.

<sup>64</sup> For a particularly apt example of many of these issues see Sax's transcribed interview of a young woman from Chamoli in which she recounts the role of ritual healing in helping her contend with the pain and suffering associated with an early arranged marriage, lack of education and legal recourse, poverty, domestic violence, and abusive in-laws (Sax 2005: 79-83). See also Antti Pakaslahti (1998) for a description of strikingly similar sets of troubles reported by clients at the healing temple of Balaji.

Further complicating the picture of Harijans' standing within a local sociopolitical and economic landscape are a set of gendered and caste-based practices related to prevailing cultural ideology in Chamoli. Of special note among these are patriarchal hierarchies that often place women in situations of subordination and limited avenues of redress, as well as marital practices that require young, newly married women to leave the security and comfort of their nuclear families and enter a new living environment in which they are situated at the weak end of power distributions within their husband's natal family:

Because of poverty, discrimination, and the related problems of alcoholism, unemployment, and wife abuse, Harijan marriages are less stable than high-caste ones, and low-caste women often flee an intolerable marital situation for the shelter of their *mait* [natal family] and its *devta* – another practice for which Harijans are looked down on by the higher castes, since it contravenes the idea that a properly married woman belongs in her *sauryas* [in-laws] (Sax 2009: 79).<sup>65</sup>

Additional examples revolve around a complicated dynamic interplay of social, economic, and political practices related to caste-based discrimination as, for example, in the exclusion of Harijans from high-caste homes and segregation in public spaces. Harijans are commonly addressed in the pejorative pronoun “*tu*,” the use of which is normally reserved for family and close friends, small children, and animals. When waiting in line to purchase a ticket or get on a bus they are often expected to defer to those of higher caste. Visible impacts of caste-based discrepancies can be seen in village geography and layout, where members of lower castes live separate from those of higher castes, with significant differences in the quality of land, building materials, and access to basic utilities such as water, electricity and sanitation. Because the land Harijans live on is often insufficient to sustain a living wage and provide sufficient food, Harijans frequently seek additional employment as day-laborers working for high-caste employers, and as such, workloads frequently reach extreme levels.

Although Sax points out that many among the younger generations of Harijans in Chamoli are increasingly influenced by efforts on the part of government and local development

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<sup>65</sup> Brackets are my own.

groups to raise awareness of, and provide solutions to, the impact of caste-based discrimination, and as such, the situation may be said to be improving, he also notes that, particularly for older members of the Harijan community,

forms of insult and stigmatization are so much a part of life that they have been internalized by the Harijans themselves, whose very way of inhabiting their bodies – what Bourdieu called their *hexis* – reflects this constant oppression and stigmatization (Sax 2009:26).

This “oppression and stigmatization,” Sax argues, is readily observed in the physicality of Garhwali Harijans, notably in their interactions with those of higher castes as, for example, in the way they bow their heads, fold their hands, use “obsequious language,” and avoid eye contact when interacting with members of higher castes. Karin Polit speaks to a similar set of issues when she references the work of John Webster to describe the oppression experienced by members of India’s lowest castes as a “situation not only of imputed uncleanness and inferiority but also a pattern of patron-client relationships within the caste hierarchy in which patrons control all the political, economic and ideological resources, while the Dalits are clients who are dependent upon their patrons for survival.” Polit further notes that, within such contexts of “hierarchy, prejudice, and power,” Harijans “learn that they are polluted and inferior” and that, according to members of higher castes, “their situation is not one of exploitation, but rather of patriarchal protection” (Polit 2005: 229).

While the above descriptions may appear to paint a portrait of absolute poverty and oppression for Harijans, Polit and Sax are careful to insist that the degree to which various forms of oppression and marginalization influence the daily life experiences of Harijans fluctuates from village to village. For as Polit indicates, discrepancies in socioeconomic and political status rooted in the local village context can, and often do, have a greater impact on the availability of recourse to institutions and structures of support (medical, educational, political, economic, or otherwise) than do those existing between local, regional and national contexts. Connecting this trend to the quality of health and well-being experienced by Harijans, Polit notes that for Garhwali Harijans “social pressure on people *within* their own villages plays a greater role with

regard to their well-being than the overall marginal status of Garhwal in India, or the marginal status of Dalits in Garhwal, when compared to high-caste Garhwali people,” and as such, marginality can exist to varying degrees for members of the same caste depending on the make-up of the surrounding community (their marginal status relative to caste distribution in the village) (Polit 2005: 226).

The historical and ongoing impact of Harijan experiences of oppression in Chamoli are often captured in descriptions of Bhairav’s identity, characteristics, and history contained in local memory and oral history, and which are passed on in the form of songs, myths, and legends performed during rituals (Sax 2009:27). In classical Sanskrit and popular Hindu mythology, Bhairav is perhaps best known as the god Virabhadra:

Shiva was married to Sati, the daughter of the sage Daksha, also called Prajapati, the “lord of creatures.” Daksha held a fire sacrifice and invited all the gods and sages except his son-in-law Shiva, whom he deliberately insulted by excluding him. Shiva was inclined to ignore the insult, but not Sati. She attended her father’s sacrifice and leaped into his sacrificial fire, thereby not only killing herself but also lending her name to the subsequent practice of self-immolation by widows. When Shiva heard what had happened, he was filled with grief and rage, and sent his followers, led by Virabhadra, to take revenge. They decapitated Sati’s father, Daksha, and killed many of the sages who had taken part in the sacrifice” (Sax 2009: 28).

Though different in many ways from local depictions of the deity, the story resonates with the core themes of violence, grief, anger, and revenge for perceived injustices associated with Bhairav in Chamoli. While numerous forms of Bhairav are worshipped in Garhwal, each with its own history of origin, community of followers and devotional practices, Sax focuses on his appearance in the form of Kachiya, a particularly fearsome, violent, and vengeful form of the deity given that he is the most commonly invoked *devta* in Garhwali Harijan ritual healing practices. Described as a “god of justice” who appears to “punish the wicked and bring justice to the oppressed,” local stories detailing his origin and history involve high-caste employers refusing to pay low-caste employees, daughters of low-caste workers sold into slavery and prostitution, failures of local judicial committees to issue fair and just rulings in cases involving exploitation of low-caste individuals and families, bribing of local officials on the part of wealthy aristocrats and landowners, as well as frequent physical abuse and false-imprisonment of

Harijans by colonial elites (Sax 2009: 32).<sup>66</sup> A local postman named Shanti Lal (a Harijan familiar with the history and practices of the cult in Garhwal), when interviewed by Sax, described the work of Bhairav on behalf of Harijans in the following way:

He adjudicates problems, helps people obtain powerful positions, gets them promotions, saves them from destructive quarrels...He does all this work for people from the entire area [*kshetra*]. People have faith in him. And the greatest thing is that he is the only power in the hands of the weaker sections of society, the Harijans (Sax 2009: 29).<sup>67</sup>

Often appearing as an Aghori *sadhu* whose devotional, ritual and meditative practices are frequently conducted in cremation grounds and are directed toward efforts to “cease distinguishing between pure and impure, beautiful and ugly, food and filth,” many Garhwali Harijan songs emphasize Kachiya’s most “impure” and “disgusting” actions which, according to Sax, play off an aesthetics of horror at work in descriptions of his physical appearance, thought, actions, and perceptions to “create an effect of supernatural horror and disgust, involving extreme impurity and the reversal of conventional norms of behavior” (Sax 2009: 40-41). Sax further suggests that a set of striking parallels exist between the social image of Harijans and Kachiya Bhairav, as for example, in their association with the polluting activities of disposing of dead animal carcasses and assisting with the process of childbirth (Sax 2004: 298). From the perspectives of many high-caste members of Garhwal, the central place of Kachiya Bhairav in Harijan devotional practices stems from their position as “weaker” and more “vulnerable” members of society. Consider, for example, the following comments of a Brahman priest interviewed by Sax:

Bhairav is a divine being, an incarnation of Shiva. And Kachiya is his angry form – he is filled with rage. For example, you are peaceful. But if a certain kind of experience happens to you, you will become very angry. That rage is itself the angry form of Kachiya...He is the god of the lower classes. He does the dirty work, that’s why his shrine is below ground...Kachiya is nothing but *tamas*, he is only the angry form...He goes everywhere. When a great injustice is done and there is no redress, he says, “Let’s

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<sup>66</sup> See Sax 2009: 25-50 for further details.

<sup>67</sup> In the same interview, Shanti Lal went on to compare the work of Bhairav to the practice of law: “He alone is our judge, and he is our surgeon. He is our everything. He is our deputy. He is our District Magistrate. I think that our ancestors who settled here, who were of a weaker section (of society) brought him as a helper. Even today, he is a powerful ally” (Sax 2009: 30).

go,” and goes to save them... [Such *devtas*] have power only over a weak man. But they don't have power over someone who knows the scriptures, someone who has knowledge. They belong to weak men. I know this, because I worship all these gods: Bhairav, Kachiya, Narsingh, and so forth. I worship them all. I am their priest. And in my view, based on my experience, these are the gods of weak people, people who have little spiritual power [*atmabal*]. It's like a light-bulb. Light-bulbs are of different strengths. Some are high-power and some are low-power. If too much power comes into a low-power bulb, it will explode (Sax 2009: 43).<sup>68</sup>

In many ways, the myths, legends, and songs associated with Bhairav passed on in local memory and oral history, and which consistently feed into the rituals conducted by ritual healers, provide not only a historical background for problematic situations Harijans confront in their lives, but also a blueprint for problem-solving strategies employed for the sake of resolving them. As Peter Claus notes, mythologies tied to local deities often evince striking parallels between the contents of myth and lived reality, most notably in the way possession episodes are framed:

There is a lot in common between the legends and the immediate lives of the possessed. Specific similarities can be found at all levels: structure, theme, mood, character, setting, action, etc. The extreme contexts of their legends, people can find possible definition and resolution of their own circumstances. The fact that the heroes are medial beings – apotheosized humans – who define their heroism in desperate situations homologous to the situations living people are apt to be disturbed by, facilitates identification and transposition of their character (Claus 1984: 68).

Antti Pakaslahti, in his work on the model of ritual healing employed at the Balaji temple complex in Rajasthan, makes a similar observation, noting that “The fight against the forces of chaos and destruction in the lives of the patients and families and the ways of solving their problems are modeled according to the structure and chronological sequences of the divine allegorical scripts” (Pakaslahti 1998: 138). In other words, when Garhwali Harijans participate in the healing rituals they are, in many ways, conjoined with a community of people, past and present, who share much in common with stories connected to the figure of Bhairav, particularly as it concerns their struggle to contend with strikingly similar circumstances related to caste-

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<sup>68</sup> Speaking directly to Sax, the priest goes on to comment: “You are strong... You have a healthy body and lots of money, and you are intelligent. You are a big person. But these Harijans are small people. They are poor and weak, and that is why they are vulnerable to all kinds of affliction from the gods and so on. They have no one” (Sax 2009: 43).



based discrimination and oppression, and in doing so, calling into action the work of local *devtas* to achieve this-worldly ends.<sup>69</sup>

Returning to Sax's comments on the degree to which Harijan oppression impacts on the embodied dispositions (bodily *hexis*) of Harijans we arrive at the pivotal role of spirit possession within the context of Garhwali ritual healing. Having traced a range of biographical, mythological, and iconographic depictions of Bhairav found in Chamoli, from his role in Shiva's revenge on Daksha in classical Sanskrit mythology to his identity as a Nath yogi aiding the poor and oppressed in the accounts of local gurus and villagers, Sax argues that, in order to more fully appreciate the enduring relationship between Garhwali Harijans and Kachiya Bhairav, attention must be directed away from considerations based heavily on language and iconography, and instead, toward the performative context of the healing rituals in which possession by Kachiya plays a central role. For as Sax argues,

words on a page are far removed from the way that Bhairav and Kachiya Bhairav are actually experienced in the lives of the people of Chamoli. Such stories are never read in a book; rather, they are *performed* as songs, and indeed the singing of these songs is one of the most powerful techniques for summoning the god and making him present. The songs are never sung in private, but always on a ritual occasion (Sax 2009: 43-44).

And as Sax goes on to indicate, focusing on the nature of Bhairav's various forms of appearance during possession is well warranted given the fact that, as he notes,

These forms of the god are fierce, they are frightening, and so is Kachiya's most basic form, when he possesses one of his devotees. It is this form—a person possessed by Kachiya—that Garhwalis most often see, and it is probably the one they think of when they picture the god (Sax 2009:41).

After observing (and participating in) numerous ritual healings involving possession by Bhairav, Sax draws attention to a common theme coursing throughout their performance, namely the appearance of the line, "I have no one." According to Sax, when a Harijan confronts a situation he or she can no longer manage on his or her, such a plea for help not only "expresses the truth of the situation in which the poor, low-caste man finds himself: alone and vulnerable," but also

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<sup>69</sup> See Smith (2010) for an insightful discussion on the role of mythic idiom in combining with local forms of knowledge and ritual technique to enhance the efficacy of ritual treatments targeted at resolving conflicts in patients' lives.

simultaneously “invites and anticipates a religious response: the assertion that one is not truly alone, and that Bhairav or Kachiya Bhairav will appear and provide justice, just like in the songs” (Sax 2009:45). The following description of possession by Bhairav illustrates this last point:

Many people, friends and relatives, gather at night, expecting to be visited by fierce and unpredictable deities. There is an atmosphere of excitement, a crush of warm bodies packed tightly together on the earthen floor. The music is strange and exciting... When the performance is effective, the atmosphere is charged, and many persons dance and/or become possessed. This is called *siddhi*, “supernatural power,” and it has an electrifying impact ... When the line “I have no one” is sung, it is a cue for possession to occur. Many listeners fall into trance; women loosen their hair so that it hangs loosely, then whip it back and forth in the air as they “dance” wildly, on their knees, to the beat of the drum; people roll about on the floor, grimacing and writhing in pain, their hands twisted into the shape of a bird-like claw, the characteristic sign of possession by Kachiya. This is the most persuasive and powerful appearance of the god, more compelling than any iconographic description and more immediate than any story. Kachiya possesses a person sitting next to you, and he is visibly transformed: the bared teeth, the bent waist, the dancing on his knees on the floor, the ramped and claw-like hands. This is the “appearance” of Kachiya in two important senses: it is *how* he manifests himself, and it is *what* he looks like. It is the physical embodiment of the *devta*, seen by devotees often enough to persuade them that he is quite real. Indeed, when I asked my friends if they “really believed” in Kachiya, their most common response was, “Of course I do! How could I not believe in him? He comes and dances, and you can see him right there in front of you!” (Sax 2009: 45).

Of particular note here is Sax’s question of whether the participant’s “really believe” in Kachiya Bhairav, with the response, “Of course I do! How could I not believe in him? He comes and dances and you can see him right there in front of you!” And as Sax points out, participant’s experience of possession by Bhairav is fundamentally one of embodiment, the evidence for which presents itself in the manner with which the ferocity and potency of the *devta* are on full display in participant’s bodies, when women unbind their hair, thrash it about, “dance wildly,” “grimacing with pain,” “hands twisted.” Accordingly, ritual possession by Kachiya can be seen less as a symbolic expression of oppression, and more as a literal performance of the embodied pain and suffering endured by Harijans.

Based on reference to the comments of villagers and his own observations, Sax moves forward with a performative approach to engaging a deeper discussion of Garhwali villagers’ possession by Kachiya. Referring to an observation of Clifford Geertz, he opines:

This is the pivotal moment of the rituals, when myth and iconography, context and social memory, power and morality, all come together. It is the moment when, as Geertz puts it, “the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world” (1973: 112). From the local people’s point of view, such ritual possession confirms the power and presence of the *devta*. If possession does not occur, then the ritual has failed. Possession defines the moment of maximum ritual efficacy, and this is always a performative moment (Sax 2009: 45-6).

Again, we see Sax moving forward in his analysis guided by clues he’s picked up from the local perspective. Because villagers themselves, as participants and observers, appear to evaluate the healer’s ritual in a similar fashion to scholar’s employing a performance studies approach, this allows him to continue his etic analysis while remaining in relative concert with that of the emic perspective. It appears that, for Sax, there is little need for the ethnographer in this case to create a novel theoretical framework by which to meaningfully discuss what he or she has witnessed. For as he points out, local standards of judgment already exist:

And the markers of success, the signs of competence, are also dramatic and performative: in particular the *siddhi* or power that is generated by the guru’s music. It is by such markers—especially in an exciting atmosphere, and the appearance of the god—that the audience judges the efficacy of a performance, and the authenticity of the god’s appearance (Sax 2009:46).

At this point, Sax is well positioned to begin begging the question as to whether, and to what degree, possession by Kachiya Bhairav can be interpreted as “performative.”

As a starting point for his argument, Sax interprets possession by Kachiya as “performative” in terms of the following definition articulated by Richard Bauman: “a mode of spoken verbal communication [that] consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence” (Sax 2009: 46). During the ritual, a guru plays music and sings songs in order to summon Bhairav. Audience members then judge the performance’s success based on whether the guru successfully initiates possession by Bhairav. As such, the guru bears a “responsibility to an audience” (the ritual participants), who then determine if “a display of communicative competence” has been achieved (possession by Kachiya). Moreover, both the means by which the possession is initiated (music, song, and dance), and the criteria by which the guru’s competence is evaluated (the possession of a client by Kachiya) are “performative” according to the definition laid out by Baumann (Sax 2009: 46).

In addition to Baumann's notion of performance, Sax attempts an interpretation of possession by Kachiya with reference to J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterance. Briefly put, one of Austin's most important contributions to the study of language centered on the idea of speech as constituting much more than simple descriptive or propositional statements, but also as performed actions in certain contexts. Consequently, while language employed for the sake of descriptive or propositional purposes will be evaluated based upon whether it accurately describes a given object or state of affairs, performative speech (what Austin referred to as "speech acts") must be evaluated based upon whether it succeeds in accomplishing a particular action. Whereas one can ask of a propositional or descriptive statement, "is it true?," the appropriate question for a performative utterance would be, "did it work?, or in Austin's terms, "was it felicitous?." Central to Austin's theory is the degree to which performative utterances rely on "antecedent social conditions" for their success. For example, many forms of performative utterance take place within highly specific cultural contexts and involve people with varying qualifications. Examples used by Sax include a priest who says, "I now pronounce you man and wife," or a judge who declares, "I now sentence you to five years in jail" (Sax 2009:47). The point is that for the words uttered (the "speech act") to be successful (felicitous), certain conditions must be met; the priest must be ordained and the judge must be endowed with legal authority. One of the major accomplishments of Austin, as Sax points out, was to temper the tendency of linguists to focus so intently on the more formal, objective analysis of language guided by denotative theory, and to consider the living context in which language often functions more as an action than a description (Sax 2009: 46-7).

The question for Sax, then, is whether possession by Bhairav serves to exemplify Austin's performative utterance. His response is that, yes, it can, but only to a limited degree. For example, one could consider key elements of Austin's theory to be at play in the guru's efforts to initiate ritual possession by Bhairav. He first performs an "illocutionary act" by summoning the deity with music and song. He then demonstrates a successful "perlocutionary act" when Bhairav appears in the body of the possessed. And finally, antecedent social

conditions have been met by the fact of the guru's training and positioning within a lineage which confer on him ritual authority. Furthermore, as Sax notes, not all attempts by the guru to summon Bhairav are immediately successful. Strenuous, repeated efforts are often made by guru and audience members alike to "plead, beg and entreat the deity to have mercy on them, to come and hear their prayers," which can also be construed as examples of "illocutionary acts," and therefore, "performative" as defined by Austin (Sax 2009: 47). But as helpful as Austin's theory may be in deepening an understanding for the breadth of practical purposes language may serve, particularly in a ritual context, for Sax it cannot adequately account for the physical quality of possession by Bhairav.<sup>70</sup> More specifically, it fails to clarify how it is that a guru, by singing songs and dancing to musical accompaniment, manages to initiate the embodiment of Bhairav in one of his devotees, as he states:

The appearance of the god is not the perlocutionary effect [appearance of the god] of an illocutionary act [the summoning of the god]. In fact, it is not a linguistic phenomenon at all. Rather, it is an embodied experience. The god "dances" (*nacna*) or is "made to dance" (*nacana*) by the guru; he "comes/sits on the head" of (*sir pe ana/baithana*) or "comes over" (*upar ana*) the possessed person, referred to as the god's "beast" (*pasva*) or "little horsie" (*dungariya*) (Sax 2009:47).

For Sax, linguistic analysis simply cannot account for the intensely physical, transformative, and emotional aspects of possession by Bhairav.

Quite simply, many of the key aspects of possession phenomena – e.g., the embodiment of an "Other," displaced personality, memory loss, distributed agency, experiences of a permeable self – require a movement beyond the confines of traditional models of interpretation (Sax 2009:47). Conceived as bodily practice, possession lacks the characteristics of texts which make them so suitable for a hermeneutic community. Scholars are trained primarily to think in and through the written word. Texts offer convenient, stable, and fixed material points of reference by which a scholar, or community of scholars, can play around with various theoretical

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<sup>70</sup> For a thorough application of Austin's theory to shamanic language and possession within a ritual context in Nepal see Maskarinec 1995, esp. pp. 191-193.

concepts and frameworks of interpretation. The key problem then, is that possession, conceived as bodily practice, is anything but fixed or solid.

Concurrent to the primacy of textual hermeneutics is a tendency within interpretive traditions to focus on language and cognition as the defining characteristics of the human animal. The result, increasingly discussed by scholars, is the tendency to interpret the physical body as if it were a manuscript begging to be read and deciphered not unlike a canvass upon which various latent internal goings-on are displayed.<sup>71</sup> In an argument which echoes those of Desjarlais, Michael Jackson argues that, in his words, “the ‘anthropology of the body’ has been vitiated by a tendency to interpret embodied experience in terms of cognitive and linguistic models of meaning” (Jackson 1983:328). The point is that when language and cognition function as not only the primary modes of investigation, but also the primary focus of attention in human experience and practice, vital aspects of those experiences and practices are left unexplored. According to Sax, this helps explain why so many interpretations of possession and ritual are bound up in metaphors of linguistic expression as opposed to embodied practices, as he notes with regard to his own work:

why language rather than the body is taken as a privileged metaphor – or even model of – society; why “performativity” is for Baumann primarily linguistic and not bodily; why even this chapter has threatened to become a discussion of texts and songs rather than the embodied performances that are the most basic form of the “appearance” of the *devta* (Sax 2009: 48).<sup>72</sup>

Smith’s comments on the challenges of gaining insight into possession phenomena in classical Sanskrit literature further illustrate the complexity of Sax’s efforts to employ an interpretive strategy capable of accounting for embodied dispositions and practices. Noting a dissonance between textuality and possession, Smith paraphrases an observation of Walter Ong:

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<sup>71</sup> Examples might include interpretations of possession as an “idiom of distress,” gendered resistance, and political reification at the site of the body.

<sup>72</sup> C.f. Jackson’s following comments: “To treat body praxis as necessarily being an effect of semiotic causes is to treat the body as a diminished version of itself” and that an “understanding of body movement does not necessarily depend on an elucidation of what the movement stands for” (Jackson 1983: 329).” Jackson further opines that, “Human movement does not symbolize reality, it *is* reality” (Jackson 1983: 341).

literacy – or, more simply, text – potentially releases the knower from the necessity of intense bodily engagement, from interaction with other human beings, human or nonhuman, real or imagined, and, at the same time, establishes self-sufficiency beyond the pale of relational intrusion, a realm in which possession naturally abides” (Smith 2006:12).

The difficulty for Sax (and every other scholar attempting an interpretation of the body possessed) is that in order to engage a discussion of embodiment he or she must do so within the medium of the written word, thus inscribing tactile, physical phenomena and practice within the domain of a text.<sup>73</sup> Having acknowledged the immense challenge of translating what are deeply complex, highly localized and embodied practices into what Elisabeth Schömbucher describes as “paper and types,”<sup>74</sup> Sax moves on to pursue a “hermeneutics of the body, the contorted body, the body in pain, which marks the appearance of Kachiya Bhairav,” noting that, “this body is so powerfully transformed, so disturbing and even frightening, and at the same time it is so central to the cult of Kachiya, that it calls out for interpretation” (Sax 2009: 48-49). By drawing attention to the manner and degree to which the bodies of those possessed by Kachiya are altered, evincing so much of the pain and suffering that the healing ceremony seeks to heal, and by correlating this with the depictions of suffering of Bhairav and his Harijan community in the songs and oral narrative of the cult, Sax argues that

the interpretation that suggests itself is the one that was made by many of my informants, and that is repeated over and over in Kachiya’s songs and stories: that his suffering is the suffering of the Harijan. This, I believe, is what Guru Darpal meant when he said that only those of “low birth” worship Kachiya; it is the reason why the Harijan political leader urged his followers to give up worshipping Kachiya; it is the reason why, according to Brahman priests, Kachiya attaches himself to “weak” and low-caste people; it even explains why Kachiya loves these people so much, and why he always comes to their rescue (Sax 2009:49).

Building on Judith Butler’s notion of performativity as “unconscious, unwilled mimesis,” Sax highlights the degree to which, over the course of a lifetime, people engage in a continual process of imitation and performance of discourses and behaviors modeled by others in their immediate environment to the extent that they begin to physically embody those discourses and

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<sup>73</sup> For a relevant discussion on the complexity of equating “possession as discourse” with “possession as event” see Smith 2006:593.

<sup>74</sup> See the insightful article of Schömbucher 1993 for more on this issue.

behaviors in what Bourdieu called their bodily *hexis* (Sax 2009:49).<sup>75</sup> A relevant example in the case of Garhwali Harijan experiences of possession by Bhairav would be the performative production of caste. As Sax puts it, “being a Harijan’ (or being a Brahman, for that matter) is something that one learns to do, not by studying a set of rules, but rather in everyday interactions like greeting, purchasing a cup of tea, or riding a bus” (Sax 2009:49). In other words, caste is something that gets ground into a person’s psychophysiological makeup over a lifetime of day-to-day interactions and experiences. It follows from this assertion that in order to heal the pain and affliction caused by such forces would require healing techniques aimed at rooting them out from the entire psychological, physiological, and sociocultural fabric of the individual, family, or even community. Understood in this way, ritual possession by Kachiya Bhairav can be seen as one, amongst a host of other techniques, which work to alleviate the debilitating embodied dispositions linked to Harijan experiences of injustice and oppression.

What Sax seems to be arguing is that ritual possession by Kachiya Bhairav is something Harijans learn over the course of a lifetime, through continual observation of, and participation in, healing rituals in which possession is a central component. And as Sax describes it, the bodies Harijans possessed by Bhairav are “contorted and in pain, because what is being collectively confirmed is not simply an historical event, but rather the whole experience of suffering and affliction that is the mutual bond of the Harijans” (Sax 2009:50). And as he argues further, performances of possession offer participants much more than a steam valve for the venting of repressed emotions, anger and resentment, but also a means by which “...identities and relationships are created, re-affirmed, reiterated, and sometimes reconfigured,” and as such, their transformative potential lies in their capacity to function as “self-defining actions,” which, as Sax points out, “are powerful precisely because they do not work simply at the level of language, but at the more fundamental level of the body” (Sax 2009: 49-50). The idea seems to

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<sup>75</sup> For an incredibly nuanced and insightful interpretation of possession performance through the lens of mimetic theory, see Ishii (2013), in which she discusses the possession experience of *buuta* impersonators in the coastal area of Karnataka as simultaneously one of being passively entered by the “Other,” while at the same time maintaining an active agency in allowing the “Other” to enter one’s self.



be that there exists a dialectic between the historical narrative – contained in various songs and stories related during rituals – of Harijans' experiences as a local community, united by a common cultural and religious history deeply imbued with suffering at the hands of high-caste oppressors, which when collectively affirmed in the performance of a ritual results in “a profound change of consciousness of the (largely or exclusively) Harijan audience, resulting in possession by the *devta*” (Sax 2009: 50).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Smith 2010 for a similar interpretation of ritual efficacy applied to three different instances of ritually inscribed mental health care within an Indian context.

## CONCLUSION

“I have taped a long conversation between an Indian patient and Indian psychiatrist. More precisely it was not really a dialogue but a composition of two intermittent monologues, quite surrealistic, at times like an Ionesco play. The patient talked about spirits, devotion, and rituals, the psychiatrist about hysteria, depression and therapy. Neither understood what the other was saying. The doctor considered the patient to be an uneducated believer in black magic and supernatural beings. The patient was wondering what on earth the psychiatrist was trying to say with all his complicated, strange words which made no sense to him.”<sup>77</sup>

Just as patient and therapist in this case appear to speak past one another, operating with two distinct and apparently irresolvable frameworks of experience and understanding, so too it seems that scholars often operate with an idiom and explanatory model disengaged from that of the first-hand, native viewpoint. When this type of speaking past one another occurs, a conversation never truly develops between potentially complementary alternative perspectives. As a result, the ground upon which furtive, insightful, and mutually-constituted dialogue might otherwise develop falls away. Information gathered in a local context gets filtered through highly specific, non-native theoretical and conceptual models without due reference to indigenous modes of interpretation and explanation. The emic voice is momentarily considered, passed over in the name of pursuing a theoretical argument rooted in a highly specific disciplinary framework. The etic voice of the scholar misses the opportunity to situate his or her observations side-by-side with those of the cultural insider's. And in the end, readers are left to ponder what went wrong, unable to more fully consider the competing claims at stake. People's relations with spirits get labeled as aberrant conditions of the psyche, the result of a pious folk imagination and superstitious belief in “black magic and supernatural beings,” devotional practices get construed as “therapy,” and in turn, the therapist, in the eyes of the practitioner,

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<sup>77</sup> Smith 2006:85n76. The excerpt is a footnoted personal correspondence between Antti Pakaslahti and Frederick Smith.

remains an enigma, posing questions and employing language that fail to catalyze mutual understanding and respect.<sup>78</sup>

Whether an ethnographer's methodology involves a brand of reflexive observation and reporting similar to that of Sax, a phenomenological engagement with the felt qualities and sensibilities intimately bound up in what Desjarlais describes as tacit encounters with a "local ecology of knowledge," Jankowsky's pursuit of a dialogically-oriented middle ground between etic participant observation and emic experiential engagement and practical application, or Glass-Coffin's radical immersion into the "cognitive and spiritual maps" of cultural counterparts, as I see it, much of what scholars risk throughout the course of employing any of these methodologies and the intense, prolonged periods of cross-cultural engagement each of them requires, is an alienation from the assurance engendered by conceptual and experiential frameworks passed on through the legacy of one's intellectual heritage. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of possession studies, in which conceptual cornerstones embedded within the human and natural sciences are continually challenged, from assumptions regarding the ontological status of human beings, spirits, gods, and ghosts and the restriction of personal agency to a uniquely human capacity to the limiting of disease and illness etiology to a strictly psychobiological causation and the role of rituals implemented to treat them as fulfilling a primarily expressive capacity as opposed to one capable of exacting changes on a physiological plane.

The intense emotional, physical, and intellectual engagement in an unfamiliar way of life required in the above approaches opens new horizons of human imagination, thought, and experience. This is what can make living in a foreign cultural setting so stimulating. But at the same time, such intense cross-cultural immersion can be highly disorienting and can uproot a person from the sense of security afforded by communicating in one's native language, residing

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<sup>78</sup> For an excellent example of this see Smith's comments on the reaction of a possession priest to Lauri Honko's psychologically-oriented questions regarding the possibility of a connection between domestic quarrels in the lives of audience members and elements of a performance of an epic. Smith 2006: 51-51, 85n.76; Honko 1998:137.

in familiar surroundings, and living with people who share similar cultural traditions and practices.<sup>79</sup> While each approach has its own distinct merits in terms of the kind of information and perspective it brings to the field of possession studies, what they share in common is a profound commitment to understanding the differences in scientific paradigm, worldview, and epistemology that impact on the way people variously experience and develop what are at once highly context-specific, but at the same time, idiosyncratic ways of what it means to participate in the breathtakingly diverse range of human activities in which one's experience of self, personhood, identity, embodiment, agency, devotion, what it means to be healthy and whole, what it takes to heal the scars of living in a topsy-turvy world fraught with conflict and inequality, in short, all the ingredients that add up to a distinct way of relating to one's self and to others. Moreover, they illustrate how failures to acknowledge the ongoing legitimacy of alternative scientific paradigms on both sides of the emic/etic divide inevitably lead to comparisons of culture, science, religion and daily practice as if there were an easy one-to-one correlation that proceeds naturally from the act of passive outside observation and the application of presumed universal methodological and theoretical frameworks. It's only natural that scholars work from the known when first approaching unfamiliar ideas and practices. However, that's all it is, a starting point.

And yet, the difficulty of developing scholarly approaches to the complex, fluid and diverse range of experiences and practical applications implicated within the umbrella of possession studies is that the legitimacy of the deep history of accumulated local knowledge and experience at work in the panorama of possession forms is, as I would argue, perhaps not something that can be intellectually developed. What I mean by this is that, at the very least, one of the best solutions for appreciating the profound differences in how people go about leading their lives is that it requires spending long amounts of time with them, preferably without the

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<sup>79</sup> An example of what I have in mind would be how Sax's intimate exposure to, and participation in, rituals involving possession by Bhairav produced a nagging fear of falling prey to the influence of a potentially vengeful and dangerous local deity, precipitated a fear of a "lapse into unreason."

goal of producing any pointed research in the pursuit of particular information guided by the narrow lines of inquiry rooted in specific disciplinary interests before a more sustained analysis is brought to bear on the specifics of one or another aspect of the lives of cultural counterparts. My point is that the differences in perspective that ensure the continued existence of a productive and healthy etic-emic boundary play out in the entire breadth of a person's life, not only in the punctuated moments of intensity during bouts of affliction and illness or devotional absorption in one's chosen deity, but also in the rhythms of daily life, from purchasing fresh produce at the local market to plowing the fields or preparing a meal. At the backend of such broad exposure is the breathtaking realization that people do indeed inhabit different worlds of thought, belief, and practice, and make profound as well as mundane decisions based on them daily. The field of possession studies, as I see it, would benefit greatly from its scholars stepping back from the narrow trenches dug for them by academic niches and disciplinary atomization to consider things in a much broader context of daily life, and then begin to ponder the "same, same, but different" wonder that lies at the heart of the human sciences. For as Michael Jackson notes, the focus of critical reflection and discussion catalyzed by such interactions tends to steer away from analysis of the experience of reality and instead turns toward an appreciation for the reality of experience. Distant and "objective" observation and the theoretical generalizations it frequently engenders give way to understanding and insight guided by a spirit of experience-based co-participation. Such a process, Jackson argues, requires

Exploring the ways in which our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart. In this process we put ourselves on the line; we run the risk of having our sense of ourselves as different and distant from the people we study dissolve, and with it all our pretensions to a supraempirical position . . . Accordingly, our task is to find some common ground with others and explore our differences from there.<sup>80</sup>

In this way, perhaps we can begin to see more clearly the multitude of illuminating perspectives capable of articulating in a meaningful and sensitive way the experiences, ideas, and practices of those leading lives in foreign cultures, all the while establishing points of similarity and overlap

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<sup>80</sup> Jackson, quoted in Jankowsky 2007:192-193.

on grounds of duly considered difference. This in no way discounts the valuable insights produced through scholarly application of methods and theories originally developed and applied in radically different geographical, historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts, only that each of their contributions to the field of possession studies will be highly limited until their arguments and conclusions are, at the very least, held up to indigenous frameworks of experience and practical application so that readers can better evaluate for themselves the merits on either side of the insider-outsider divide.

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