



SPIRIT POSSESSION AND ITS IMPACTS ON MARGINALISED
SOCIAL GROUPS

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree, or qualification thereof, or for any other university or institute of learning.

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are cited and included.

I also hereby acknowledge that my thesis will be made publicly available pursuant to Section 47b of Act No. 552/2005 Coll. and AAU's internal regulations.

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Abstract

This thesis discusses spirit possession and its impacts on marginalised social groups, to which women often belong. The paper focuses primarily on spirit possession cults in non-industrial societies in Africa, Malaysia and Indonesia. This thesis compares and contrasts numerous possession cult societies in order to identify their general common features and to determine the emic and etic explanations for the phenomenon of spirit possession. This paper describes the general mechanisms of possession and possession trance rituals, the negative aspects of spirit possession, and the benefits for the possessed host, her kin, and her community. This thesis argues that while possession cults relieve the tension between the dominant and marginalised social groups by offering a means of self-expression and self-determination to oppressed individuals, the status quo of the unequal power structure is maintained. This study contributes a new argument to existing research, that women combat their subordinate status by essentially becoming men. This work concludes that spirit possession and possession cults are a response to female subordination and although spirit possession and possession cults compensate for the negative effects of subordination, they never challenge the existing social order.

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Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction.....	6
2.0 What is Spirit Possession?.....	9
2.1 How is Spirit Possession Diagnosed?.....	11
2.2 How do the Hosts and Spirits Communicate?	12
2.3 How does a Spirit Communicate with the Host's Kin?.....	14
2.4 What are Possession Trance Rituals?.....	15
2.5 Does Spirit Possession Evolve?	18
3.0 How is Spirit Possession Explained Emically?.....	19
4.0 How is Spirit Possession Explained Etically?.....	21
4.1 Biological Etic Explanation: Possession is a Symptom of Nutrient Deficiency.....	23
4.2 Cultural Etic Explanation: Spirits Maintain the Continuity of Culture	23
4.3 Social Etic Explanation: Possession is a Response to Restrictive Gender Roles.....	24
4.4 Social Etic Explanation: Possession Cults Empower Women as a Group	30
4.5 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession Improves the Well-Being of the Host	31
4.6 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession Provides Economic Rewards.....	33
4.7 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession is a Consequence of Intersexual Tension	36
4.8 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession is a Response to Intrasexual Tension	38
4.9 Functional Etic Explanation: Spirits Preserve Social Order and Promote Community Welfare	38
4.9.1 Psychological Etic Explanation: Spirits Reaffirm Familial Succession	41
4.9.2 Psychological Etic Explanation: Possession Develops the Host's Personal Identity	42
5.0 Common Patterns: Possession is a Response to Female Social Subordination	44
6.0 Conclusion.....	47
7.0 Bibliography	53

1.0 Introduction

Contemporary Western society operates on the premise that the body can be controlled solely by one internal agent, the mind. In possession cult societies, this belief is replaced by the conviction that external supernatural agents, or spirits, can seize all control at their leisure. Spirit possession is a worldwide phenomenon, which occurs predominantly but not exclusively in non-industrial societies. It is a dynamic phenomenon that responds to modern development and functions by interlacing tradition with new cultural experience. Spirit possession societies create complex social structures where human beings and spirits interact and form personal relationships. Although the precise nature of possession cults varies across the world, patterns and similarities emerge. This thesis compares and contrasts numerous possession cult societies in order to identify their general common features and to determine the emic and etic explanations for the phenomenon of spirit possession. The primary focus of this work is to examine the relationship between spirit possession cults and oppressed and marginalised social groups, which women are often associated with. This thesis argues that while possession cults relieve the tension between the dominant and marginalised social groups by offering a means of self-expression and self-determination to oppressed individuals, the status quo of the unequal power structure is maintained.

This paper analyses secondary sources and adheres to Natvig's definition of a cult, which refers to a typology of religious organisation manifested as a loosely organised religious group as opposed to a form of devotion, a sect, or a church (1987, p. 670). The majority of possession cults discussed in this paper are related to Islamic religion or they practice a form of folk Islam. Next, this thesis will introduce the communities that are central to the analysis. The next chapter will describe what spirit possession is and what it typically involves, as well as the common features of possession rituals. Following that, this paper will discuss the diagnosis of spirit possession and the general mechanisms of possession. Next,

this paper will describe the processes of spirit and host communication as well as communication between the spirit and the community. The next chapter will provide emic explanations for the phenomenon from the perspective of the natives. The following chapter will be dedicated to the etic explanations for why spirit possession occurs from an outside perspective. This section is divided into biological, cultural, social, functional and psychological etic explanations. The last chapter will reveal the similarities between the possession cult societies and offer an interpretation that spirit possession and possession cults are a response to female subordination. In that chapter, this thesis presents my contribution to existing research that women combat female subordination by temporarily becoming men. Finally, the paper will conclude what purpose spirit possession serves for individuals and their community.

This thesis focuses primarily on the following possession cult communities. The Hofriyati in Sudan become possessed by *zar* spirits. These are predominantly anthropomorphic spirits that are considered foreigners to Hofriyati culture. In Hofriyati culture, men and women observe highly restrictive gender roles as well as gender segregation. The local women are circumcised, expected to marry and give birth to male children. The strict gender roles that govern their physical and psychological being are intended to ensure that they are successful.

Similarly to Hofriyati women, Malay women must traditionally observe strict gender roles regarding their behaviour and bodily functions, and the rapidly changing socio-economic situation in Malaysia caused a discrepancy between traditional culture and modern development. Consequently, spirit possession began occurring in modern urban environments and among a different demographic of women.

The Shaygiyya of northern Sudan may also become possessed with *zar* spirits, and possession occurs among women and former slaves. Locally, the *zar* spirits are considered friendly and helpful, as long as their demands are met. The spirits are thought to be fond of bold bright colours, fine clothing and pleasing scents, and these are frequently used by the hosts and their kin to appease them.

The Mayotte of Comoro Islands, Africa, believe that *trumba* spirits are inherited from a member of the senior generation, and their culture focuses on why the host became possessed by a particular spirit as opposed to why the host became possessed. Consequently, the Mayotte form very personal relationships with their spirits and the spirits are an inextricable component of the local social structure.

The community of the Bemazava Sakalava kingdom of northwest Madagascar is marked by rapid social change. The society diverted from revering their royalty and traditional lifestyles, and transitioned into rapid urbanization while suffering an influx of migrant labour. These factors affected the local spirits, which as a consequence also became modern and urban over several generations. The local spirits, known as *tromba*, procreate and their offspring live in the world of their human contemporaries, which renders them more understanding of their problems.

The Ndau communities in south-eastern Zimbabwe are born with their spirits. This possession at birth affects their sense of personal identity, their skills and ambitions. The existence of the spirits and the hosts' experience are never doubted.

The Amhara of Ethiopia are the only Christian possession cult group discussed in this paper. The Amhara are Monophysite Christians. Here too the majority of possession victims are female. The Amhara believe that the host must attend the possession trance ritual because the spirit desires it. Among the Amhara, a host attracts additional spirits throughout the course

of her life, and she develops a close, continuous relationship with them depending on how often the spirits choose to visit.

The Bonerate are found on a coral island in Indonesia, where the total population is 5000 inhabitants. The Bonerate are the most egalitarian society in terms of gender equality discussed in this paper. The women serve a preeminent role in the possession trance rituals as they have developed throughout history to be the authority and the protectors of the community on land while the men were pirates at sea. Local women protected the island from foreign raiders and as a result they are more emancipated than other women discussed in this thesis.

2.0 What is Spirit Possession?

Spirits are commonly defined as supernatural, disembodied entities which enter their human hosts during states of possession. Ordinarily, the spirits are anthropomorphic, for instance tribal ancestors, significant historical figures, or living foreign persons. Although animal spirits exist, this thesis discusses exclusively anthropomorphic spirits. Messing, 1958, states that every human being has the potential to succumb to spirit possession, but individuals who are experiencing social or psychological stress are more vulnerable, as are individuals from families where possession is hereditary (p. 1121). Spirits are predominantly male, as spirit possession trances frequently involve a gender reversal, and universally the majority of possession victims are female (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 564). Numerous sources concur that possession occurs predominantly among women. Women with a threatened social status are particularly vulnerable.

Every spirit is considered an autonomous entity with agency. Every spirit has a name, a personal history and a kin group, and is capable of forming complex relationships with the host and their kin. The host and the spirit are never present in the host's body at the same time

(Lambek, 1980, p. 319). The host and the spirit have different characteristics and preferences in terms of a taste in food and fashion (Lambek, 1980, p. 319). The spirits will often consume substances that human beings find inedible or revolting, such as blood or cologne (Lambek, 1980, p. 319). This further marks them as distinct and supernatural. When a spirit is present in a host's body, the host's behaviour is noticeably different to her usual demeanour, but her behaviour is not necessarily extravagant or tempestuous as it can be during possession trance rituals. The spirit may simply converse with another member of the community about practical matters, offer advice, or engage in light-hearted friendly chitchat (Lambek, 1980, p. 320).

The mechanisms of spirit possession vary. In some societies, spirit possession occurs at birth, but possession later in life is universally more frequent. Possession is never voluntary as it is often perceived as severely taxing for the possessed individual, and as an incurable affliction. Some possessed individuals choose to avoid addressing their spirit through possession trance rituals at first, especially if it involves initiation into the cult, as it entails significant expenses and long-term obligations (Giles, 1995, p. 93). Giles states that eventually even individuals with strong religious objections towards cults join them, as they believe that it is the sole remaining option for them to find relief from the spirit attacks (1995, p. 93). Sharp, 1995, notes that the host is expected to concede and accept her fate as possessed, as "to resist is both futile and dangerous; because the spirit will only intensify the host's illness or may even kill her" (Sharp, p. 79). Typically, the initial stages of possession are the most harmful, because the possession is out of the host's control, but subsequent possession trance rituals rebalance this power dynamic to an extent and allow the host to accommodate the spirit with a greater degree of control and develop a meaningful relationship with it (Natvig, 1987, pp. 670,671). The host, together with her kin group, negotiate with the spirit to appease it and decrease the severity of its attacks on the host, which are believed to be

the source of a myriad of problems including the host's infertility or miscarriage. Eventually, the spirit is appeased with gifts and the host gradually returns to her regular life. It is common in the majority of possession cult societies to appease their spirits with gifts, and frequently the spirits are fond of material goods such as "clothing, golden and silver ornaments, drinks, and cigarettes" and the host must wear or use these items even outside of possession trances (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 31). If the host is a married female it is traditionally the husband who purchases these items, otherwise male or other kin cooperate to aid the host. Other means of placating the spirit may include ensuring that the host is "well-groomed in terms of perfume and clothing" (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 31). When the spirit's demands are satisfied, the negative symptoms of possession are temporarily alleviated.

2.1 How is Spirit Possession Diagnosed?

Locally, spirit possession is a recognised and legitimate affliction in societies with possession cults. Almost never is the victim perceived as insane, healthy, or pretending. The diagnostic methods for spirit possession vary between cults, but similar patterns and trends occur throughout many of them. Frequently, the presence of a spirit is indicated by physical or psychological symptoms of illness and general misfortunes (such as death of family members). Messing, 1958, describes symptoms such as extreme apathy, proneness to accidents, sterility and convulsive seizures (p. 1120). Al-Shahi, 1984, compiles a wide range of minor to major physical symptoms, including headaches, increased heartrate, burning sensation while passing water, susceptibility to bone fractures and bleeding, among others (p. 31). Psychological symptoms include irritability, nervousness, feelings of dejection, insomnia, and hallucinations (al-Shahi, 1984, pp. 31,32). Despite this, the possessed individual maintains her mental faculties, and remains a sociable and responsible member of her community, although her appearance may become dishevelled (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 30). Where available, the physical symptoms are examined by doctors using Western medicine prior to

being diagnosed as spirit possession. Only when Western medicine fails to provide an explanation do the victims turn to mediums, shamans and healers. During the first possession trance ritual, the spirit is asked to reveal its identity, which frequently takes a considerable amount of effort and skilful negotiation from the supervising medium (Messing, 1958, p. 1120). Subsequent possession trances develop the relationship between the host and the spirit and allow the spirit to state its demands. Contrary to Christian and Jewish traditions, spirit possession cults never attempt to punish the spirit for possessing the host and spirits are rarely exorcised. Instead, communication and a reciprocal relationship are developed between the host and the spirit. The spirit is accommodated and treated with respect and deference. Once the host is possessed, spirit possession becomes a part of the daily experience and is not limited to the dramatic culminations of trance rituals, and as stated above spirit possession is a lifetime affliction that affects the host as well as her kin (Boddy, 1994, p. 414).

2.2 How do the Hosts and Spirits Communicate?

The host learns her spirit's demands by communicating with it. The host also learns about the name, personality, and other characteristics of her spirit. Once the host is possessed, the spirits actively communicate with both the host and the community, both directly and indirectly. The spirit communicates with members of the community "face-to-face" through the host (Lambek, 1988, p. 713). Communication occurs during rituals as well as in daily life. The spirits convey a message, and it is the task of the recipient to interpret the message and respond accordingly. Frequently, the spirits communicate directly with the host through visions and dreams (Lambek, 1980, p. 713). The host has the power to interpret these visions and dreams, and others are unable to dispute them, which gives the host power and control over others through requests and commands on behalf of the spirit.

Aside from visions and dreams, the primary means of communicating with a spirit is when the host enters a state of trance. Bourguignon, 2004, defines possession trances as psychological states involving alternations of the host's consciousness, personal identity, and physicality (pp. 558,559). Trances may occur spontaneously during the day or night when the spirit descends upon the host with a desire to communicate, or may be induced during possession trance rituals. The central mechanism of spirit possession trance is dissociation, in other words behaviour without conscious intent. During the trance, the host's body absorbs the spirit and its traits, and the host becomes unaware of her own actions and embodies the spirit. The spirit is fully in control, and consequently major transformations in the host's behaviour can occur. Typically, possession trances are followed by amnesia, which further contributes to the dissociation between the host and her possession induced behaviour during a trance (Beneduce & Taliani, 2006, p. 432). Possession trance occurs predominantly during possession trance rituals, which are culturally specific ceremonies during which the hosts are brought into a trance state either unassisted or with the help of a medium, and channel the spirit. Trances are a form of indirect communication between the host and the spirit, as a medium is present as an intermediary between the host and the spirit. The host is oblivious to her own actions or the spirit's demands, and later the medium recounts the events of the possession trance to the host.

Another means of indirect communication between the spirit and the host is through a third party participant outside of possession trance rituals. This is referred to as "auto-communication" but the spirit and the host remain distinct (Lambek, 1980, p. 321). This form of communication requires a three figure dynamic, with a sender, an intermediary and a recipient, who are all separate individuals (Lambek, 1980, pp. 321,322). The intermediary is not necessarily a ritual medium, but any member of the host's kin or community. This form of communication is more private than the public displays during possession trance rituals, and

its primary purpose is to convey specific information from the spirit to the host about personal matters or dilemmas. An example of this form of communication is found among the Mayotte, where the spirit would convey a message onto an intermediary through a possessed host, and the intermediary would later give the message to the recipient, the possessed host, once she is out of the trance. Lambek provides a story of a host who was concerned about the health of her baby, and the spirit advised her via her sister to give the baby Western deworming medicine (Lambek, 1980, p. 320). The degree of separation between the spirit and the host must be maintained to protect their distinctiveness. It also allows for a greater freedom of self-expression, and gives women the authority to speak about topics that are normally considered inappropriate for them.

2.3 How does a Spirit Communicate with the Host's Kin?

As mentioned, the spirits are able to communicate with the host's kin group, which creates complex social structures within the community. Becoming possessed is the equivalent of introducing a new member into the family, and the relationships develop as they would with a human member. Spirits can establish close amical relationships with the host's kin group. The spirit can become a mediator between spouses, in which case the spirit and the host's husband are considered siblings (Lambek, 1980, p. 327). The spirit and the husband form a peer-to-peer relationship as men, and may become quite close (Lambek, 1980, pp. 322,327). The husband and the spirit may have a conversation while the host is in a state of trance, even outside of possession trance rituals.

Similarly to human relationships, the relationship between the spirit and the host's husband may initially be difficult to negotiate. The relationship consists of the spirit offering the husband advice and companionship, but the spirit expects that the husband will abide by its orders (Lambek, 1980, p. 328). Eventually, the spirit and the husband reach a mutual

understanding and engage in open, honest discussions (Lambek, 1980, p. 328). However, the process of developing a relationship between the spirit and the husband may be complicated when the wife has several possessing spirits. According to Lambek, the occasional interaction between the spirit and the husband is a “new dimension in the relationship that is in effect all the time” (1980, p. 329). This implies that the arrangements and promises made to the spirit are binding, and that possession has the potential to improve communication in a marriage as spirits are respected and considered unbiased mediators.

2.4 What are Possession Trance Rituals?

Possession trance rituals are rituals held for the purpose of inducing the trance and allowing the spirits to express themselves. The spirits must communicate their demands so the possessed women can negotiate with them in order to regain their health and fertility in exchange for material gifts, and so help the possessed women to continue to live according to the prescribed gender roles (Natvig, 1988, p. 63). The rituals have a definite entertainment aspect and they are frequently the centres of community culture. According to Giles, possession cults are “central to socio-cultural structure and are one of its most illuminating expressions”, which implies that they are one of the primary avenues for the formation of social relationships in a community (Giles, 1987, p. 234). Giles adds that the cults are an arena for “conspicuous consumption and entertainment” as the rituals are accompanied by feasting, dancing, music, and displays of extraordinary behaviour (1987, p. 247). Rituals are partly spectacles and may also include the use of smoke or animal sacrifices.

They are also opportunities for the comedic satire of local conventions, morality and history (Boddy, 1994, p. 417). The comedy is provided by the outlandish and grotesque behaviour of the spirits. Kenyon, 1955, observed a *zar* possession cult in Sennar, Sudan, and found that local women prefer being possessed by some spirits over others during rituals and

find the experience enjoyable (Kenyon, 1995, pp. 112,113). Kenyon found that local women prefer to be possessed by “Bashir”, an Ethiopian spirit, primarily because of his charismatic, entertaining nature, as he is “unpredictable and fun” for both the host and the audience (1995, pp. 112,113). The ritual trances are physically demanding, and the possessed hosts often dance and perform other ritual acts until the point of exhaustion, but the experience can be enriching and exciting for them as well as for the audience (Broch, 1985, p. 268). Rituals are a space where the participants, the host and the audience, can reimagine themselves (Engler, 2009, p. 483).

Frequently, rituals are a spectacle of super-human feats, such as walking on hot coal without feeling pain, which serve as proof of possession (Broch, 1985, p. 275). During the trance, the spirit interacts with the audience, which consists of other hosts, mediums, cult members or kin. The audience is fully immersed in the performance and exclaims and laughs as the suspense builds on the ritual stage (Broch, 1985, p. 276). Throughout the ritual the host may become possessed by several spirits in succession, but the spirits remain distinct. In many possession cults, every spirit has its own induction music or other routine act that summons it. For the duration of the possession trance the host is granted the right to move and act without inhibitions. Among the Bonerate, the ritual behaviour of the spirit hosts in the trance is vulgar as well as supernatural, and the audience, particularly the young males, respond to the vulgar acts, such as vulgar devouring of eggs, with culturally appropriate expressions of male virility and sexual prowess (Broch, 1985, p. 276). By demonstrating what is excessive, rituals define the boundaries of normal acceptable behaviour in the community (Engler, 2009, p. 471). Engler summarizes the mechanics of possession rituals and states that they rely on the deference of the audience. In other words, the audience “guarantees the value of what is said and done” and legitimises and interprets the actions of

the host (2009, p. 473). The audience also suspends their reactive attitudes towards the host and displaces them onto the spirit (Engler, 2009, p. 483).

This displacement of the audience's reactive attitude onto the spirit means that possession and possession trances allow women to break boundaries and express individuality without shame. Possession provides them with the opportunity to indirectly express their personal problems and allows them to make decisions for themselves (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 37). During a trance women are allowed to behave like men and mock them by drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or wearing men's clothing, which is strictly forbidden in daily life (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 38). Al-Shahi notes that trances are the brief periods of freedom and an escape from the hardship of daily life (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 39). Women also transcend the boundaries of daily relationships, as cults provide opportunities to meet new people and in some cases also opportunities for liaisons, which is particularly important in an otherwise gender segregated community (Messing, 1958, p. 1121). Universally, possession trances and rituals allow women to defy all the constraining aspects of gender roles.

Although spirit possession may be perceived as acting from an etic¹ perspective, emically² it is not the case. Despite the theatrical element of ritual possession, staging a play on the same topic is insufficient, as it lacks the necessary mystical transformation of the host from a human being to a vessel for supernatural entities. Acting would be superficial and controversial as it would indicate that the actors harbour unacceptable beliefs about their community due to the lack of dissociation between the body and the performance. While actors performing a play act with conscious intent, a possessed host acts unconsciously, as she is dissociated from her physical body and her behaviour. From a local perspective, the

¹ Etic refers to an outsider's perspective.

² Emic refers to the perspective of the natives.

primary function of spirit possession rituals is not entertainment but communication with the spirit world in order to fulfil the spirits' wishes and cure the hosts' ailments.

2.5 Does Spirit Possession Evolve?

Although spirit possession is an ancient phenomenon, it is not static. Spirit possession interlaces history and tradition with new cultural experience and responds to modern development, such as migration or capitalism. This impacts the host demographic, as well as the locations where the possessions occur and the spirits themselves. In some cultures, such as the Bemazava Sakalava in Madagascar, it is possible for spirits to procreate, and younger generations of spirits embody more relevant characteristics that pertain to contemporary society. The variety of spirits that are present in a society is affected by socio-economic development in a region as well as migration, and may radically differ from the ancestral spirits of previous generations. For instance, in the pre-colonial era among the Bemazava Sakalava, the *tromba* spirits were predominantly *royal tromba*, or the deceased royal ancestors, and only a select group of mediums were allowed to become possessed by these spirits and interact with them (Sharp, 1995, p. 77). With the increase of migration to urban settlements and the immigration of foreign cultures, the ethnic identity of the Bemazava Sakalava was under duress, and the cultural maxims shifted. Royalty ceased to have a significant impact on society. Consequently, a new generation of spirits emerged that consists of playboys, prostitutes, and cowboys (Sharp, 1995, p. 77). These spirits were born in modern day and "lived" in the world along with their human counterparts, so they are better situated to understand newly arising issues such as interracial marriage and the exploitative nature of capitalist wage labour (Sharp, 1995, p. 84). The spirits reflect the problems local young women face, such as extra-marital pregnancy, and the spirits and the women mould one another and change the paradigms of spirit possession (Sharp, 1995, p. 81). Through the *tromba* spirits, the Bemazava Sakalava managed to preserve the integrity of their cultural

heritage, while responding to the demands of modern day society and rapid social change. This affected the hosts as well as the spirits, as the primary demographic of female hosts shifted from exclusive groups of professional mediums that hosted the royal spirits, to young women in their twenties hosting the contemporary “popular spirits” (Sharp, 1995, p. 78).

A similar development may be observed among the Malay of Malaysia, where the socio-economic development transformed the possession demographic from married women affected by strained marriages, divorce, or widowhood, to young, unmarried, employed women (Ong, 1988, p. 29). As the country developed, rural women began to seek education and employment, and the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour transformed. Women who were previously bound to domestic roles entered what was traditionally considered the male sphere (Ong, 1988, p. 32). However, the tensions between this new dynamic and tradition prevailed, and women found themselves “cast into an intermediary status” and consequently began being possessed en masse at school or at the workplace (Ong, 1988, p. 32). Society was slow to adapt to the changing social dynamic and failed to provide the women with appropriate coping mechanisms or models of behaviour, and the subsequent status uncertainty induced mass possession.

3.0 How is Spirit Possession Explained Emically?

Following the above description of the phenomenon, this chapter will elucidate the emic explanations for possession. Emic explanations refer to explanations from the perspective of the natives. Though the emic explanations for the phenomenon of possession and its prevalence among particular social groups, such as women or other marginalise groups vary, a universal unifying element exists. The emic explanations for the prevalence of possession among women include the notion that spirits are attracted to women, and Young states that it is “common knowledge” among the Amhara of Ethiopia that the *zar* spirits prefer

women and the poor (Young, 1975, p. 574; Boddy, 1988, p. 8). Among the Hofriyati, it is female moral frailty and their physical size and strength compared to men that makes them susceptible to spirit possession (Boddy, 1988, p. 10). A similar opinion of female frailty increasing their susceptibility towards spirit attacks is held among the Malay, where the echoes of the dominant Islamic religion dictate that men are endowed with reason and women are controlled by human lust (Ong, 1988, p. 31). This perceived frailty of their character renders them spiritually weak, and combined with their “polluting bodies and erotic nature”, it renders them “permeable” to spirits (Ong, 1988, p. 31). Among the Malay, spirit possession is traditionally associated with the female life cycle, and women are most susceptible to possession during and immediately after childbirth, as it is considered a dangerous rite of passage, and special rituals must be performed in order to protect the women from spirit attacks (Ong, 1988, p. 31). Throughout life, Malay women must observe strict rules regarding their bodily fluids, as disposing of them haphazardly is a defiance of local gender roles and renders them susceptible to spirit possession (Ong, 1988, p. 31). Similar strict rules apply to the disposal of cut fingernails and cut or fallen hair, as well as menstrual rags, as they can offend the spirits (Ong, 1988, p. 31). Later in life, women are susceptible in middle age, when they are under the greatest amount of pressure to be good wives and fulfil other gender expectations, and women who “resist their assigned roles as wives or mothers” are the most vulnerable (Ong, 1988, p. 31). The nature of spirit possession among the Malay has changed in response to modern development within local society, and women may now succumb to sudden mass possession in schools or factories (Ong, 1988, p. 29). As stated above, this occurs in response to the conflicted and ambiguous status the women gain when they become students or factory workers, as the traditional gender role expectations still apply even though women now perform tasks that were previously reserved for men (Ong, 1988, p. 28).

Furthermore, men are also subjected to gender role expectations and Wilson notes that in Somalia, possessed men are thought to be homosexual, and that their possession is a result of their failure to fulfil the ideal male gender role (Wilson, 1967, p. 370). Young echoes this notion and states that men frequently find membership in possession cults degrading, as it implies that they are submissive and unassertive (1975, p. 577). Other possession cult societies believe that the spirits are present to discipline them. Snodgrass, 2002, reports that in India, a community believed that a woman became possessed with a spirit that arrived to punish her husband for his greed and to teach him how to behave himself (p. 614).

The universal emic function of possession cults is to restore the host's health and relieve the symptoms of possession. Young states that a woman's conscious motive for joining a possession cult is always medical (1975, p. 581). The host joins the cult because a spirit chose to possess her, and the initial signals of this possession are physical symptoms (Young, 1975, p. 571). Once possessed, a host is vulnerable to further episodes of malady in the future, and the cult helps her cope and appease the spirits. The cult also offers the possessed host support and guidance through her possession experience. The cults are the sole means of alleviating the problems that prevent the host from fulfilling the established gender role expectations and living a satisfied life. The cult's mediums instruct and teach the host the correct trance ritual procedures so that her spirit can communicate its wishes and the host can work towards granting them. The hosts deny ever pretending to be possessed, and they are genuinely concerned for their own health that the spirits threaten. The volatile nature of the spirits explains all periods of malady and good health (Young, 1975, p. 573).

4.0 How is Spirit Possession Explained Etically?

Since spirit possession is absent in contemporary Western society, it may consequently be difficult to fathom. This paper provides several etic explanations for spirit possession and

possession cults, which interpret the phenomenon from an outside perspective. Numerous interpretations of the phenomenon of spirit possession can be found in research, notably biological and psychological interpretations, functional interpretations, and social and cultural interpretations. First, this paper will briefly mention the biological explanation for the phenomenon, to offer an alternative perspective to that of social anthropology. Following the biological interpretations are cultural explanations for the phenomenon, wherein possession and possession cults are instrumental in ensuring cultural continuity. Following that, the study will describe the social explanations, which encompass gender roles and female empowerment. Following the social explanations, this thesis will discuss several functional explanations, which portray possession and possession cults as serving a particular function in society, such as negotiating interpersonal relationships, especially intersexual and intrasexual relationships within the kin groups. After discussing the relationships within kin groups, this work will discuss public relationships within the community and the impacts of spirit possession on social order and community welfare. Lambek, 1980, summarised the functional explanations of possession as a “means to prevent, avoid, neutralize, gratify, or cure either personal neurosis or the strivings for social prestige and political power of the oppressed in an inegalitarian society” (p. 318). Next, this thesis will discuss the psychological explanations for spirit possession, which include superstitious beliefs, mental illness, or “individual hysteria” (Lambek, 1980, p. 318; Ong, 1988, p. 30). A frequent etic explanation of why a woman becomes possessed is that it is a psychosomatic response to her failures as a woman to fulfil gender role expectations, although emically possession is seen as the source of the problems, especially in the case of female infertility issues. Following that, this work examines the psychological interpretation that possession cults facilitate the development of a personal identity and familial succession. Finally, this study discusses the common features of the spirit

possession communities and deduces that spirit possession is a response to the social subordination of women.

4.1 Biological Etic Explanation: Possession is a Symptom of Nutrient Deficiency

The biological interpretations of the phenomenon associate spirit possession and the accompanying health deterioration to nutrient deficiency due to inadequate diets. The nutritional hypothesis argues that there is a connection between nutrient deficiency and trance states, which primarily affects women due to their frequently restricted access to food (Bourguignon, Bellisari, & McCabe, 1983, p. 413). However, this interpretation is excessively reductionist, as it omits the cultural understanding of possession and fails to explain why individuals without nutrient deficiency symptoms join the cults, and the evidence on the correlation between nutrient deficiency and trance states was inconclusive (Bourguignon, Bellisari, & McCabe, 1983, pp. 414,415). It also fails to provide an explanation for the argument that nutrient supplementation would cause a significant decrease in the prevalence of trance states in supplemented studied groups (Bourguignon, Bellisari, & McCabe, 1983, pp. 414,415).

4.2 Cultural Etic Explanation: Spirits Maintain the Continuity of Culture

Possession and possession cults may also be interpreted as a means for a preserving local cultural heritage. Spirits maintain social and cultural continuity, and possession rituals trigger cultural memory. Stroller, 1992, approaches possession cults from the perspective of cultural heritage and claims that possession is a “phenomenological arena in which cultural memory is fashioned and refashioned (p. 54). The culture is transmitted through the embodiment of the spirits during ritual, with the aid of music, dance, and scents, which trigger the senses and evoke intimate aspects of cultural heritage that are crucial in societies where written accounts of history are scarce and cultural memory is body felt (Stroller, 1992, p. 57).

In addition, the possession rituals reflect the social aspects of culture, either by adhering to or by mocking the established status and gender hierarchies, or by depicting customary behaviour (Stroller, 1992, p. 59). This occurs among the Bonerate, where the host's behaviour during a possession trance ritual serves as an example of poor moral and social conduct (Broch, 1985, p. 277). This ensures that the non-possessed ritual participants and the audience are aware of this behaviour and its implications and learn the cultural values. Young Bonerate girls that assist with the rituals represent "potential continuity" and their presence during the ritual "makes them familiar with elaborate ritual knowledge", which ensures that the correct practices will be observed in the future (Broch, 1985, p. 272).

Spirit possession cults may also perpetuate local history. While the possession trance rituals ensure the continuity of the local social life, the spirits hold the memories and lessons of history such as "perennial violence, hunger, or slavery", as is the case with spirit possession cults in Haiti (Boddy, 1994, pp. 417,418). Through their knowledge of the past and present, as well as their kindness and benevolence, the local spirits heal "the wounds of social change" (Boddy, 1994, p. 417). Embodying the spirits helps the community cope with and honour the hardships of the past.

4.3 Social Etic Explanation: Possession is a Response to Restrictive Gender Roles

The following section will explain the social aspects of spirit possession, focusing specifically on restrictive gender roles. Ascribed gender roles and expectations vary across societies, but several trends can be observed among possession cult societies. Gender roles define acceptable behaviour, activities, decisions, and stages of life for either gender with varying degrees of flexibility or rigidity. In order to illustrate how possession and possession cults are a response to restrictive gender roles this paper uses the example of Hofriyati

society. Following the Hofriyati example, this paper will provide other examples supporting this argument.

Among the Hofriyati, women are expected to be submissive and to obey men's commands, as well as to maintain their social circle of kin and acquaintances by visiting them regularly (Boddy, 1993, p. 32). Hofriyati women are held to intensely restrictive standards of behaviour, which encompass all aspects of their life, including their physicality and mentality. Local gender roles also specify the ideal female demeanour, which restricts them from expressing emotion, and they demand integrity and dignity (Boddy, 1988, p. 9). A primary gender role expectation for women is marriage. Marriage is associated with the social pressure of observing gender roles and the subsequent stress when difficulties emerge, for instance infertility or strained marriage, is attributed to spirit possession and is alleviated by negotiating with the spirits (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 563; Wilson, 1967, p. 368). Marital status is a "significant factor" in spirit possession, and statistics from the Hofriyati village reveal that 47% of married women became possessed (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 557; Boddy, 1988, p. 4).

Hofriyati women are raised to be the vessels of local morals, culture and tradition and are hindered from becoming self-reliant, critically thinking individuals with the potential to contemplate other forms of social and moral order (Boddy, 1988, p. 16). According to Boddy, spirit possession is a response to an "overdetermined self-hood", which is a consequence of extremely rigid social norms that embed specific physical, cognitive and emotional dispositions in young girls that they cannot deviate from (1988, p. 16). For instance, displaying emotions is considered improper and vulgar (Boddy, 1988, p. 9).

In Hofriyati culture, women are required to perform exclusively feminine tasks while obeying a strict framework of rules governing these tasks with the purpose of becoming pure, marriageable, and fertile (Boddy, 1988, pp. 6,7). Their life is centred on their fertility and

women lack aspirations other than marriage and bearing children, ideally male descendants and doing so are the only means through which women can gain respect in the society (Boddy, 1988, p. 9). These factors induce absolute conformity, and as a result Hofriyati women are unable to fathom any other form of moral or social order. From an etic perspective these gender roles appear constraining and limiting to female potential, but they are the epitome of local traditions and women strive to honour them in order to have a fulfilled life.

Typically, men and women have distinct gender roles, and men are traditionally responsible for public affairs, while women are responsible for maintaining the internal both in a practical and symbolic sense. A strong delineation between the internal and external is observed in Hofriyati society, and women are the maintainers of the internal realm. This separation encapsulates both the women's physical mobility and their social networking. Boddy states that "females are associated with enclosure", and Hofriyati women are expected to stay within the village compounds, surrounded by brick walls, whereas men possess a significantly higher degree of physical freedom (1988, pp. 5,9). The purpose of a Hofriyati woman's life is to cultivate social relations and life within the village. The culture possesses a strong, defensive "inward focus", dedicated to limiting potential social and physical openings through endogamous marriage and pharaonic circumcision (Boddy, 1988, p. 5). Hofriyati women are required to be cleanly and "impervious", which is exhibited in their seclusion from men and the outside world, as well as their circumcision (Boddy, 1988, p. 8). Female circumcision is a physical expression of cultural values of purity, integrity and morals. Their lives are micromanaged and their bodies are modified in order to protect and perpetuate the ideal feminine form. A circumcision serves as a rite of passage into "womanhood" and prepares girls for marriage and childbirth by purifying them and ensuring their fertility (Boddy, 1988, p. 6). Furthermore, the circumcision ensures that the women will lose less blood during menstruation, as blood is regarded as a symbol and insurance of female fertility

(Boddy, 1988, p. 6). Consequently, the women physically embody this ideology of containment and their contact with the outside world is exceptionally restricted, as is any possibility of a non-Hofriyati experience or encounter with the non-Hofriyati world.

This emphasis on containment governs the entire life of a Hofriyati woman, and their emotions become inseparable from her physical body. This indivisibility is a crucial factor in the process of possession and possession trance, as it functions as its antithesis. Since Hofriyati women are constrained to local, internal affairs, Bernal, 1990, summarises that the contrasting foreignness of *zar* spirits counters the “expected everyday identities of Hofriyati women which (...) expands the possibilities of what women can do or be” (p. 733). By having their bodies controlled by a non-Hofriyati entity, women may express and experience entirely novel patterns of thought, behaviour and motion that deviate from the prescribed norms without losing face or suffering repercussions. However, Boddy emphasises that the possessed women distinguish themselves “unselfconsciously”, which implies that they are not fully aware of the full scope of their actions and that the results of possession are incidental as opposed to deliberately produced (1993, p. 32). Throughout their lives, healthy Hofriyati women that are not yet possessed or never become possessed perform all female duties in accordance with this ideology out of belief that it is necessary in order to progress properly through the vital stages of life, and refuse to deviate from it as they do not recognise other traditions, or they view them as non-Hofriyati. This constrained, internal orientation is contrasted by the foreign nature of the *zar* spirits that may possess women and their interaction during possession trance results in a life altering personal experience that transcends the ontological and epistemological boundaries of Hofriyati existence.

Generally, even outside Hofriyati society, women are under significant pressure to fulfil their role, for instance to bear male successors, and when women struggle to perform they are regarded as “less than normal”, which causes them distress. This psychological

distress is often somatised into physical pain and this physical discomfort is frequently attributed to spirit possession (Natvig, 1988, p. 63; Boddy, 1988, p. 13). Al-Shahi confirms that *zar* possession is common among women due to the high levels of stress and emotional strain they experience in a male dominated culture (1984, p. 38). Consequently, the rigidity or flexibility of the social order and gender roles, together with gender stratification, are crucial indicators in the statistical prediction of possession trance (Shaara & Strathern, 1992, pp. 157,158).

As with the Hofriyati women, the somatisation of psychological distress is also found among the Hausa in West and North Africa. For Hausa women, excessive displays of emotion or romantic feelings are also undesirable, due to the rigidity of the prescribed gender roles (Lewis, 1966, pp. 310,312). This contrasts contemporary Western society where the male gender stereotypes dictate that displaying emotion is a sign of weakness. Lewis finds that married Hausa women in rural areas who feel secluded and excluded from society are at greater risk of becoming possessed (1966, p. 320). A possible etic explanation for the high incidence of possession among married women are the extreme expectations placed on women to be good wives and bear male offspring, combined with the strictly defined gender roles and restricted emotional expression. As mentioned, as a consequence of this pressure exerted by social norms in cultures where open discussion is prohibited, women are inclined to somatise psychological distress, which causes the physical symptoms that are attributed to harmful spirits.

In his research among the Bonerate, Broch establishes that spirit possession and the related rituals promote gender complementarity by endowing women an “impossibly high status” during ritual, while men are present to protect and serve the women (1985, pp. 273,278). Further, by portraying socially accepted sexual roles and behaviour, and presenting the consequences of marital infidelity for both genders, rituals place Bonerate men and

women on an equal plane (Broch, 1985, p. 279). Among the Bonerate, possession rituals may also be interpreted as rituals of gender complementarity as opposed to sexual conflict (Broch, 1985, p. 262). Though Bonerate women are expected to be shy and modest, the Bonerate cannot be directly compared to other possession trance communities, such as the Hofriyati, as their women are socially, economically, and politically equal, may participate in decision making, and polygyny is absent (Broch, 1985, p. 278). Therefore, their possession rituals represent the consequences of women surpassing the gender equilibrium, which is based on “moderation” between the male and female roles, and they emphasise solidarity between the genders as the moral of the ritual narrative (Broch, 1985, pp. 277,278).

The question remains whether women in possession cult societies even aspire to be like men, or whether they focus on fulfilling their own gender roles to the best of their ability. Wilson explores this reluctance to compare and compete and concludes that “primitive” women do not see themselves as an underprivileged class (...) [or] seek to gain social equality” (1967, p. 368). Though this statement is a broad generalisation with dated terminology, it indicates that in the majority of cases, the stimulus behind spirit possession as a broad attack on gender inequality is unintentional or indirect. However, an overwhelming amount of evidence draws a positive correlation between the rigidity of gender roles, marginality and subordination, and spirit possession (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 558; Plancke, 2011, p. 367; Wilson, 1967, p. 366). This suggests that one of the aspects of spirit possession is an unconscious cultural response to oppressive social dynamics. Bourguignon frames spirit possession as a “psychodynamic response to, and an expression of powerlessness” for women (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 557). This is echoed in the research conducted by Wilson, where he states that women internalise their peripherality, and possession is a protest response to disturbances in the gender equilibrium (Wilson, 1967, p. 372). This implies that although women are consciously, overtly content with their social roles and aspire to fulfil the

expectations bestowed on females, if they encounter difficulties in the areas of marriage, fertility, or emotional well-being, the prescribed social conventions fail to offer them alternative means of expressing potential distress, which results in negative psychological states they cannot articulate or process.

4.4 Social Etic Explanation: Possession Cults Empower Women as a Group

Membership in a possession cult may empower women through shared knowledge and experience as well as through the demands posed by the spirits. Spirit possession may improve the political situation of women as a whole, for instance in Guinea-Bissau, where the spirits demanded that the community must abolish arranged marriage and eliminated expensive rituals which local women opposed (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 567). The male spirits who the women were possessed by reduced the influence of the male elders in favour of female empowerment (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 567).

Among the Hofriyati, possession cults empower women as they serve as spaces where women can interact with other women, offer support, share knowledge and experience, and exchange advice on life and mundane domestic tasks (Boddy, 1994, p. 416). Among the Luvale in Zambia, possession cults provide a valuable source of education on healthcare, fertility issues, and advice on motherhood (Boddy, 1994, p. 416). Possession cults function as a support group for distressed women especially in urban settings, where they recreate the tight cohesion of rural kin groups that urban women lack (Boddy, 1994, p. 416). Research conducted by Kenyon confirms that cults offer women who are removed from their families a solid support network, and give them confidence to interact and bond with people outside their kin group, as they can recreate this sense of affiliation through the kinship of their spirits (1995, p. 116). The presence of a possession cult in the community means that there is

a space available for women to freely interact and find understanding through shared experience.

4.5 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession Improves the Well-Being of the Host

Besides female empowerment, spirit possession offers several other benefits. The hosts' well-being is improved through greater social influence and prestige in the community as well as by resolving their psychological and physiological issues. The benefits of possession may extend onto the hosts' kin, which is an added benefit to for them. The social benefits of spirit possession for the host include "recognition, awe and respect paid by ritual participants, and control over the behaviour of other group members" (Ward, 1984, p. 316). Shaara and Strathern, 1992, state that the urge to use trance possession as a tool to gain prestige and power is predominantly found among low status and impoverished individuals (pp. 146,147). The research conducted by Bourguignon states that possessed women interpret the spirit's wish to be in line with their own, which benefits them (2004, p. 562). They are fulfilling their own wishes based on the spirits' prompt, which renders them independent from their husbands and kin for the first time.

Becoming a host enables women to hold a position of power and authority in their community, as it grants them influence over community and kin group relationships (Lambek, 1988, p. 725). Giles generalises from the evidence collected in numerous possession cults that high-ranking possession cult members, such as healers, have status and authority that extend beyond the boundaries of the cult into local society, and that they are both respected and feared by non-members (1987, p. 247). Hosts may also gain authority by embodying a powerful ancestral spirit, which helps them reinforce moral claims that would ordinarily be dismissed because of their status as a woman (Lambek, 1988, p. 725). This is confirmed by Cohen and Barrett, 2008, who find that the "low status women of a community may assume

the persona and the power of a deity or an ancestor, thereby adding the authority of these beings to their statements, which often take the form of demands on husbands” (p. 252). Possessed women gain the ability to express concerns normally reserved for men, such as concerns about land and inheritance (Lambek, 1988, p. 725).

Spirit possession cults treat the hosts’ psychological and physiological issues. A common theme in the discussion of trance possession rituals is catharsis. Numerous sources state that the vivid displays of emotion that occur during rituals have a cathartic effect, as they relieve pent up tension that the women cannot release otherwise, as society fails to provide them with other coping mechanisms, since displaying emotions is viewed as vulgar, as stated above. The emotional catharsis the women experience during trance rituals provides a “sense of renewal and improved capacity for dealing with reality” (Young, 1975, p. 567). The rituals have a therapeutic effect on the spirit hosts. In possession cults, the “psychological and physical well-being” of the members is the focal point of all activity, as they joined due to the adversities and negative symptoms the spirits induced (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 41). Young confirms that women are motivated to join possession cults exclusively by the need to relieve the adverse symptoms of possession, it is a choice based on medical necessity (1975, p. 581). *Zar* possession cults are centred on female fertility and helping women regain their fertility after becoming possessed.

The possession cults are also concerned with the health of newborn children, as possession is often hereditary. In the *zar* cults in North Sudan, post-partum rites are performed to protect the babies’ health and preserve the mothers’ future fertility by bargaining with the spirits to diminish the ferocity of their attack on the host (Natvig, 1988, p. 65). Natvig states that the universal purpose of possession cults is to “cure the illness and misfortunes” caused by the *zar* spirits (1987, p. 669). While Natvig’s argument coincides with the emic perspective on the purpose of possession cults, Ward argues that ritual possession

represents “a sanctioned psychological reaction to individual or subcultural stress and frustration and that it compensates for these hardships by permitting attainment of power and prestige” (Ward, 1984, p. 316) .

As mentioned, the generosity and benevolence of the spirits may extend to the hosts’ kin, and so indirectly positively affect the host’s well-being as well. A member of a Sudanese zar cult reported that after she accepted the terms and conditions demanded by the spirit, her children grew to have successful professional careers despite her own lack of education (Kenyon, 1995, p. 112). Kenyon concludes that *zar* possession is “not regarded as a pathological condition and that *zar* is not necessarily problematic or debilitating” once the spirit is appeased (1995, p. 112). The spirits themselves may be benevolent and helpful, and spontaneously enter the host and assume her place when she is in a disempowering situation (Boddy, 1994, p. 417). Consequently, *zar* spirits are rarely exorcised, and it is desirable to pacify them by obliging to their demands.

4.6 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession Provides Economic Rewards

Numerous sources argue that the primary function of spirit possession is the self-enrichment of the host. Wilson, 1967, stresses that possession brings economic rewards to both hosts and professional mediums, particularly in the form of luxurious gifts or payment for healing services (1967, p. 375). Wilson generalises that possession is an access route to financial self-enrichment in “most societies where it occurs”, regardless of whether or not it is a profession (1967, p. 375).

The argument that women may become possessed as an attempt to enrich themselves is supported by Kenyon’s findings in Sennar, where women may gain a small financial income for their spirit possession. This financial income is exclusively monetary and is additional to the material gifts received by the hosts to appease the spirits. In the Sennar *zar*

cults, it is customary for the women possessed by particular spirits to receive a small amount of money for the messages their spirit receives and delivers to other spirits (Kenyon, 1995, p. 113). The women are allowed to keep these donations, which is another example of the positive exchange between society, the host, and the spirit world where everyone profits. However, receiving donations for communicating messages to spirits is rare and only occurs with select spirits. Also, the amount of money received by the women for this task is insubstantial, so it is improbable that communicating messages will result in significant enrichment.

However, possession may become an independent source of income for women if they become professional healers. Boddy states that in Brazil, becoming a healer is perceived as a natural “extension” of being a housewife and is economically profitable for women (1994, p. 416). Similar trends appear among the Pokomo, where skilled *waganga* healers can earn substantial wealth through their practice (Giles, 1987, p. 247). Frequently, a medium is the “most powerful vocation” women, especially childless, powerless women, can attain (Plancke, 2011, p. 367). This contributes to greater gender equality and female emancipation in societies where women are entirely dependent on men for financial support. Independent sources of income are a significant asset when women are prevented from being formally employed.

Another common explanation for the existence of spirit possession is that the hosts extort their husbands and kin group for gifts (Young, 1975, p. 578). The gifts the women receive are considered a luxury within the community. The history of gift giving as an aspect of spirit possession is explored by Lewis, 1966, who discusses the development of luxury gift giving as a component of spirit possession in Ethiopia, and attributes it to the harsh nomadic environment in which women struggle to survive and feed their children (p. 313). Giving women gifts such as luxurious and delicate food and clothing when they are coping with

difficult environmental conditions and the adverse symptoms of spirit possession probably developed as a cure for ailments and an act of compassion. The gifts may have historically contributed to the physical survival of the struggling women and their children, and in some cases they may still be crucial for survival. However, most contemporary gifts are non-essential items such as perfume or soap, and consequently may be etically perceived as a result of the hosts' indulgence or greed as opposed to survival necessity.

Women are said to resort to extortion when they are dissatisfied with their marriage or jealous of their co-wives (Lewis, 1966, pp. 313,314). The research conducted by Al-Shahi describes the symbiotic relationship between the wishes of the spirit and the host, as the demands made by zar spirits always benefit the possessed, despite being made primarily to satisfy the desires of the spirits (1984, p. 31). This may be interpreted as an attempt at self-enrichment through extortion. However, al-Shahi adds that the zar spirits are considerate with their demands and become distressed when the spirits sense that their demands are excessive and overexert the host and her financial means, so extortion is unfeasible (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 31). The rationalisation of spirit possession as a tool for extortion also omits the risks commonly associated with spirit possession, such as the symptoms of illness, the notion that spirit possession is a lifelong, permanent affliction, and that women often feel pressured to obtain the gifts required by the spirits for fear of further health deterioration. Essentially, the possessed women wish to alleviate the symptoms that prevent them from being the perfect women capable of accomplishing the idealised female tasks, which includes being proper wives to their husbands.

From an etic perspective, cross-culturally, the delineation between gender roles places women on the submissive, peripheral end of the spectrum. Boddy argues that women in spirit possession societies are subordinate to their husbands because they are morally and financially governed by their husbands or other male relatives if they are unmarried (Boddy,

1988, p. 9). However, this study argues that financial subordination is subjective and since women in possession cult societies generally fail to receive financial education and are raised in a society where it is customary and desirable for men to control finances, the impacts of financial subordination on their psyche are minimal. The issue of female marginality is based on an etic perspective that economic and political subordination fully determines a woman's position in other spheres of life. In contemporary Western society, female emancipation incites women to compete with men for the same rewards and equal social status, and this concept fails to be universally applicable.

4.7 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession is a Consequence of Intersexual Tension

Another functional explanation for spirit possession and possession cults is that they are a response to the intersexual tension within a community. Lewis claims that spirit possession is a “war of the sexes”, as it propagates intersexual tension by giving subordinate women an opportunity to seek revenge and manipulate men (1966, p. 318). According to Lewis, spirit possession allows women to “air out grievances” caused by subordination or neglect, and to “gain satisfaction” by applying “mystical pressure” onto their husbands or male kin (Lewis, 1966, pp. 312,313). This view is supported by Young, 1975, who argues that the periods of physical illness which accompany spirit possession are an “arena” in which the socially subordinate hosts, specifically women, “compete with those who control the assets they desire” (p. 569). Young insinuates that rural Amhara women resort to spirit possession deliberately as a means of extortion due to their inability to access the coveted resources, and indicates that the “extortive strategy” of possession is insignificant in urban settings because urban women enjoy social and financial autonomy (1975, p. 578). Instead, urban Amhara women seek possession cults primarily in order to reestablish support networks that substitute their tight knit rural kin groups.

Similar patterns emerge among the Tsaayi in Congo-Brazzaville, where women are etically seen to use possession to rebel against male domination and to express their desire for the “male world” by demanding to eat abundantly, be allowed to consume meat, reduce physical labour, and other luxuries that are typically taboo for women (Plancke, 2011, p. 367). From a Western perspective these luxuries are comparatively modest, and may include adequate nutrition, clothing, soap or perfume. Consequently, from this perspective, possession appears to be an active response to dissatisfaction and an intentional attack on the social structure that defines gender.

Other researchers argue that while spirit possession acknowledges intersexual tension, and mediates between the genders, local women do not use possession to actively rebel against men. This is explored by Giles, who argues that frequently the exclusion of possession cults from the dominant religion and its customs, together with the prevalence of high ranking female cult members, means that rituals are the sole sphere of life where men and women interact on equal terms (1987, p. 243). Therefore, though cult rituals may offer a condensed image of intersexual tension, they provide relief for it, and the equal interaction of men and women promotes social cohesion beyond the extent of the cult. Plancke cites Boddy who argues that women lack reasons to actively oppose male domination because emically their social roles are perceived as complementary, and instead they accept the dominant masculine ideology, and possession trances are a tool to redefine the dynamics of personal relationships as opposed to gender inequality (Plancke, 2011, p. 368). Research conducted by Giles, 1987, confirms that the function of possession cults is to reassert female value as opposed to a challenge to male domination (p. 236). Women in possession cult societies cannot compete with men for the same social rewards in terms of political status and financial acquisition, and are consequently less inclined to deliberately do so (Wilson, 1967, p. 376).

4.8 Functional Etic Explanation: Possession is a Response to Intrasexual Tension

Alternatively, spirit possession cults are interpreted as a response to intrasexual competition between women. Wilson, 1967, suggests that women in possession cult societies compete to surpass other women at traditional female tasks, both within polygynous marriage and the wider community (p. 373). Specifically, spirit possession fosters confrontation between individuals of equal status. Spirit possession is frequently reported in relation to wives' apprehension towards their husbands marrying a co-wife, a woman about to gain equal status to them (Wilson, 1967, pp. 369,370). Many factors determine a woman's social status, including seniority in residence or marriage, age, and fertility. Wilson suggests that spirit possession is a response to a threatened status, typically caused by decreased fertility, the introduction of a new wife into a polygynous marriage, or diminishing physical strength, which results in feelings of inadequacy (1967, p. 373). This coincides with the incidence of spirit possession reported among married women. Possessed women receive gifts, care, and attention to appease the spirits and alleviate their symptoms, which indirectly re-establishes their importance and social status. Wilson reports "violent manifestations of jealousy" between co-wives that occur as a result of the newlyweds ostentatiously displaying the gifts they received from the husbands, which exacerbate the feeling of insecurity and degradation among primary wives. Therefore, the gifts wives receive during possession help alleviate this inequality and promote cohesion.

4.9 Functional Etic Explanation: Spirits Preserve Social Order and Promote Community Welfare

In addition to negotiating private relationships between kin, the spirits may negotiate public relationships. Etically, the spirits serve as a means of preserving social order within the community by redressing relationships. Ward, 1984, argues that "on a macro plane, the possession ritual is perceived as augmenting social cohesion within a distinct subcultural

group” (Ward, 1984, p. 315). In the majority of possession cult societies, the spirits “confront and confound established power relations” and so reshape lives and communities (Boddy, 1994, p. 420). Boddy adds that the “mocking and lampooning” during possession trance rituals “reasserts cultural order and leads the (host) and the audience back to (...) shared understanding”, which counteracts any social tension that may have arisen (Boddy, 1994, p. 414). In rural Sudan among the Hofriyati, possession is a diplomatic platform that allows kinswomen to renegotiate the convoluted, overlapping social relationships produced by endogamous marriage (Boddy, 1994, p. 423). The Hofriyati women are unable to directly talk about their problematic relationships with their kin due to the restrictive and prohibitive gender roles, so possession by the same or different spirits as their kinswomen is a platform for them to realign their relationships with their kin without direct confrontation (Boddy, 1994, pp. 422,423).

This possibility to unobtrusively reestablish relationships is echoed by Engler, 2009, who describes possession trance rituals as autonomous spaces that are independent of society, where interpersonal relationships are reflected on and reconstituted without constraint or judgement (p. 469). Further, possession cults remedy individual and social conflicts by reasserting the “traditional values of social cohesion” (Giles, 1987, p. 238). According to Giles, 1987, the social conflicts are frequently the result of inequality between the dominant and marginal groups, and cults serve as outlets for this frustration with therapeutic effects (p. 234). Plancke, 2011, confirms this notion and adds a gender aspect that the purpose of possession trances is to redefine women’s relationships within the cultural order, as opposed to posing a challenge the legitimacy of male domination (p. 368). Plancke elaborates that in several possession cults, including the Mongo from the Democratic Republic of Congo, spirit possession temporarily redefines the women’s relationship with men, but the male dominated system of social rules and values remains intact (2011, p. 368).

Giles, 1995, argues that by addressing and alleviating social tension and problems, spirit ceremonies promote the “general welfare of the community” (p. 94). The resolution of social disagreements is conducted through communication with the spirits that dictate the behaviour of the cult members. On the Swahili coast, rituals among several local groups also “rid the community of polluting and harmful influences and spirits” and ensure that good cult spirits are present to be guardians of the entire community (Giles, 1987, p. 247). Possession cults also help communities cope with new situations, as they incorporate “modern” and “foreign” traits into a previously established belief system through the presence of foreign spirits, which facilitates social development and progress without disrupting local tradition (Kenyon, 1995, p. 116). This is in accordance with the findings of Beneduce and Taliani, 2006, who suggest that possession cults “proliferate during periods of dramatic social and cultural change, such as migration, war, and colonisation” (p. 429). Communal benefits are also observed by Perman in among the Ndaou of Zimbabwe, where possession rituals “ensure productive interaction and communal flourishing” by creating occasions for the community to gather and share experience (2011, p. 66). Among the Ndaou, the spirits directly contribute to the community as they have their own agency and communicate with their surroundings through their host, and offer a new, independent perspective on local issues (Perman, 2011, p. 86).

The spirits always have a purpose and never possess a host without posing demands on her, and while the spirits possess the host they may perform other beneficial functions. Cohen and Barrett, 2008, conceptualise spirit possession as the “transformation of a (...) mortal into a supernatural for some locally relevant purpose, for example, the offering of advice, healing, (and) the delivery of a message” (p. 252). In some cultures, the spirits have access to secret knowledge mortals cannot gain (Cohen & Barrett, 2008, p. 253). Consequently, the community negotiates with the spirits to gain access to this knowledge and use it for the

benefit of the community. All of these factors indicate that in societies where possession cults are present they serve as a means of dissipating social tension and promoting cohesion.

4.9.1 Psychological Etic Explanation: Spirits Reaffirm Familial Succession

A further etic functional explanation for the existence of possession cults is that they help negotiate relationships within the host's kin group. Specifically, spirits may mediate intergenerational relationships. Among the Mayotte, the spirits are inherited by family members and form a bridge between the generations by reaffirming familial succession. Lambek, 1988, observed that among the Mayotte, the same spirit may possess several people, and it will maintain identical relationships with the community regardless of which host they are currently possessing (p. 714). This means that the social network is preserved even after the death of a host. Although these Mayotte *trumba* spirits may possess several hosts, they may only present themselves in one host at a time (Lambek, 1988, p. 714). For instance, a parent may share a spirit with their child, and alternately fall into possession trances. Sharing a spirit implies a level of "psychological intimacy", respect, and mutual interest between the hosts (Lambek, 1988, pp. 715,716). Rituals provide an arena to play out intergenerational conflicts and so resolve them (Sharp, 1995, p. 83). Lambek defines the paradigms of intergenerational spirit possession as the "dialectical process of submission to, identification with, and subjective incorporation of significant and powerful aspects of the senior generation" (1988, p. 718). This demonstrates the intensity of the cultural requirement to honour the elders and create lasting communal and familial bonds.

Succession ensures that the family is reproduced as a "social unit" (Lambek, 1988, p. 718). It also allows the younger generation to gradually become independent of the senior, by initially sharing the possessing spirit and eventually hosting it alone, and so achieving maturity and autonomy while honouring the elder generation (Lambek, 1988, p. 718). Hosting

the same spirit as the parents signifies that the descendants are subordinate to their parents and willing to succeed them and to maintain the relationships in which the parents' spirit has participated, which maintains the general social order while facilitating progress (Lambek, 1988, p. 716). Possessing spirits that have been in the family for generations establishes a strong familial identity and reasserts the family's relevance in the community (Lambek, 1988, p. 725). The spirits also help the host navigate her individual autonomy within the grand scheme of familial succession and social continuity (Lambek, 1988, p. 725).

4.9.2 Psychological Etic Explanation: Possession Develops the Host's Personal Identity

Spirits also have a profound effect on the host as an individual. The research on the ontology of spirit possession conducted by Perman among the Ndau of Zimbabwe proposes that the hosts' relationship with the spirit contributes to her sense of personal identity. Among the Ndau, individuals are frequently possessed at birth by one or more spirits from several hierarchically organised spirit groups (Perman, 2011, pp. 65-68). It is the spirit's decision whether a girl will become a ceremonial medium for the spirit as she matures (Perman, 2011, p. 70). Further, the spirit will affect the individual regardless of whether it decides to possess them during ceremonial rituals (Perman, 2011, p. 68). In Ndau cosmology, *Madhlozi* spirits, also known as *Mashave*, are considered "foreign spirits" that are unrelated to the Ndau, they are the spirits of outsiders that influenced local history, and they contribute to the hosts' sense of self more than spirits from other groups (Perman, 2011, pp. 65,67). Every *Madhlozi* spirit is known and believed to have unique attributes, such as various special skills and talents in areas of healing, hunting, or musicianship among others (Perman, 2011, pp. 68,81). Consequently, the possessed display these attributes in their daily lives, as the spirit's personality interacts and influences their own personality, granting them the special talents and skills, which distinguishes them from other Ndau. The Ndau believe that the majority of their individuality is a direct consequence of possession, as the spirits manifest themselves in

the hosts' habitus³ (Perman, 2011, p. 75). Perman stresses that "the very characteristics that make people unique and distinct from one another [...] emerge from the spirits" (Perman, 2011, p. 68). The Ndau foster close relationships with their spirits, especially considering the majority of Ndau are possessed at birth, and as a consequence they alter their own behaviour to accommodate the spirits. For instance, the host must avoid certain food or colours, or wear particular clothing (Perman, 2011, p. 78). Despite the profound effects of possession on the medium's habitus, the spirit and the medium remain distinct. In addition, the spirits are responsible for the hosts' skills and their future. The skills *Madhlozi* spirits transfer onto the Ndau increase the probabilities of them following particular career paths, which further enhances the formation of their identity (Perman, 2011, p. 80).

Spirits also aid the formation of a personal identity among the Hofriyati. Hofriyati culture prevents women from forming an individual identity as their interdependent self-construal patterns allow them to think of themselves solely in relation to their kin (Boddy, 1988, p. 16). This means that personal identity is a challenging concept for many Hofriyati women because gender roles determine that sisters, aunts and nieces are considered "social and jural equivalents", which means they can take one another's place in marriage when a female kin member dies (Boddy, 1993, p. 32). This renders them equal and replaceable, and offers little opportunity for self-discovery and learning their individual worth. With a limited range of role models and minimal social mobility, Hofriyati women lack the agents to define themselves against in order to form a distinct identity. Possession serves as an avenue for Hofriyati women to differentiate themselves from their family members through their new associations with the spirit world and subsequently the external world outside their immediate kin group or Hofriyati culture (Boddy, 1993, p. 32). Possession by foreign *zar* spirits provides

³ Habitus as defined by Bourdieu refers to the ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that people living in a culture acquire through social experience that constitute the physical embodiment of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990)

women with another perspective on their own lives by allowing them to experience the life and emotions of an outsider both by learning about the spirit and by embodying it. Consequently, the women may gain greater understanding of their own identity when contrasted with another, and may gain greater self-awareness and self-confidence by embodying the spirits' bold actions or associating themselves with high status *zar*. The formation of a woman's personal identity relies on both direct and indirect communication with the spirits. Firstly, the spirit communicates directly with the victim through dreams and visions (Boddy, 1988, p. 22). The unique and intimate nature of dreams and visions may contribute to a greater sense of individuality by providing women with private emotional experiences in a society where a significant portion of a woman's life is predetermined. Moreover, the spirit and the host also communicate indirectly through witness reports of her actions during a trance (Boddy, 1988, p. 22). These channels are the sources of new perspectives that enable Hofriyati women to externalise, objectify and define themselves in terms other than their traditional female roles.

5.0 Common Patterns: Possession is a Response to Female Social Subordination

This work compares several possession cults, and based on the similarities that emerged this thesis contributes to the existing etic explanations by asserting possession cults are a response to female social subordination. This thesis then presents a new argument that subordinate women in possession cult societies combat their subordinate status by essentially becoming men.

As mentioned earlier, in societies where possession cults exist spirit possession is prevalent among women, and etically spirit possession may be interpreted as female resistance to the unequal power structures. Alpers, 1984, conducted research among the Swahili in East Africa and found that local spirits and possession rituals reflect the historic

devaluation of women, the increase of female domesticity and subordination, as well as the declining social recognition of women, and concludes that possession is a form of female rebellion against male domination (p. 699). Similar conclusions may be drawn about possession cult societies in other cultures as they display analogous traits.

Lambek's research among the Mayotte concludes that five times more women than men become possessed throughout the course of their life (1988, p. 711). This is attributed to the "powerlessness and domination of women" (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 559). Plancke echoes this sentiment in his research and states that "women's worldwide predominance in possession-trance cults is inversely relational to their inferior position in society" (2011, p. 366). This is complementary to the common notion that spirit possession primarily affects marginal social groups that women often belong to. The statistical data gathered by Shaara and Strathern, 1992, establishes a positive correlation between the rate of possession trances in a society and the reduced opportunities for marginalised members of society to improve their political, social, and economic status (p. 146). They summarise that possession trance occurs most frequently among "low status and restricted women", and in areas where marginalised individuals may legitimately use possession trance to gain prestige and financial reward, or to diminish the influence of the dominant group (Shaara & Strathern, 1992, pp. 146-8). Ward echoes this opinion, as she argues that the probability of possession among marginals is greater as a result of "profound frustrations, deficiencies of an educational or economic nature, and inability to achieve social mobility" (1984, p. 316).

Similar trends exist among the Hausa, where the prevalence of female participation in possession cults is attributed to their inability to participate in the public and religious life of Islam, and possession cults are a form of compensation for these constraints (Lewis, 1966, p. 310). The effects of Islam and the Sharia law on female membership in possession cults were noted by Kenyon in Central Sudan, where the introduction of the Sharia law in 1983 led to an

increase in female cult membership, presumably in response to the new social and legal pressure placed on women (1995, p. 110).

It is evident that women are deemed the inferior gender in multiple societies. For instance, among the Shaygiyya, women lack rights, are forbidden from owning property, leaving the village, and participating in public affairs (al-Shahi, 1984, p. 38). This parallels the conditions among the aforementioned Hausa, where women are excluded from ceremonial and public affairs due to the gender segregation in Islamic religion, and they lack authority in most spheres of life (Lewis, 1966, p. 310). The local *Bori* possession cults are believed to provide an opportunity for authority as well as a religious outlet that is accessible to women who are excluded from Islam (Lewis, 1966, p. 310). This suggests that the existence of cults is inextricable from the socio-political oppression of women and that they were formed in response to the inequality in order to empower women in male dominated world. Giles, 1987, notes that male tolerance towards the existence of possession cults suggests that men unconsciously acknowledge the discrepancy between the women's official social status and their value to society (p. 235). In essence, possession cults strive to resolve the tensions that arise from the power inequality between genders in the local community, while maintaining the status quo of male dominance.

As mentioned above, my contribution to existing research is the argument that subordinate women in possession cult societies combat their subordinate status by essentially becoming men through the gender-reversed nature of spirit possession. The comparative analysis of multiple possession cults showed that this is a cross-culturally common feature. In all possession cult societies, the majority of spirits are high status males. By becoming possessed by these male spirits and embodying their physical traits, attitudes, and other characteristics, women temporarily become men of high social recognition and gain their status, power, and ability to voice their opinions on matters typically reserved for men, as well

as other benefits that are ordinarily reserved for men, such as adequate food, displays of strength and emotion, and appearing in public. Women even dress and behave like men during possession trance rituals by smoking or drinking alcohol to emphasize their embodiment of male spirits.

Gender roles divide male and female spheres of agency, and only male gender roles offer codes of conduct that allow men to gain status, earn money, make decisions, and have an individual personal identity. Since the majority of spirit possession cults are based on Islamic religion, the aforementioned notion that men are endowed with reason and women are governed by lust limits the scope of female authority. In societies where female gender roles are extremely restrictive, the roles never developed the behavioural scripts and coping mechanisms that would grant women the same liberties as men, and the sole way for women to gain the advantages men have is to embody a male spirit and channel its authority.

6.0 Conclusion

Spirit possession and possession cults are complex phenomena that serve a myriad of functions within possession cult societies, and every function renders a number of possible explanations, depending on the analytical framework of the research. A single, all-encompassing explanation for the existence and purpose of spirit possession and possession cults does not exist. This work provides explanations regarding the impacts of spirit possession and possession cults on members of marginalised social groups, particularly women.

This thesis concludes that possession affects predominantly women as they are emically believed to be the weaker and consequently more vulnerable gender. Possession serves as an explanation for misfortune, and diminishes the psychological stress of personal failure to fulfil gender role expectations. Etically, women become possessed because their

society denies them channels for self-expression and coping mechanisms for psychological distress. Possession offers women these coping mechanisms as well as channels for self-exploration and self-determination they cannot access otherwise. Resilient women who remain unpossessed do not need these channels, as their needs are met when they fulfil the gender role expectations. Women resort to possession cults only when they experience difficulties with achieving the feminine ideals. Despite their occasional benevolence, spirits are still considered potentially lethally dangerous and women never become possessed recreationally.

Spirit possession is an ancient phenomenon and spirit possession cults maintain the continuity of local culture in societies where cultural memories are body felt as opposed to written. Possession cults are the epicentres of local cultural heritage, as the spirits facilitate the continuity culture by perpetuating local social and moral values by presenting them to the next generation during possession trance rituals. Culture is transmitted through the embodiment of the spirits and possession rituals evoke the intimate aspects of cultural heritage through sensory and aesthetic experiences. Since spirits are often believed to be hereditary and capable of possessing knowledge, this knowledge is passed down through generations of spirits and human hosts, which contributes to the continuity of tradition and preserves the heritage and cultural memory. Spirit possession and possession cults also help the community cope with a historically difficult past. In addition, the spirits progress and develop alongside the community and are responsive to the socio-economic development of the community, and so help the community transition and adapt while preserving local tradition.

Possession cults also empower women as a group as they are a space where women can interact and share their experience, as well as receive advice on practical matters they would not otherwise have access to. Since women in possession cult societies are often

isolated and have limited means of social interaction, possession cults offer women support and help them return to their regular life after experiencing periods of adversity. In addition, male spirits hosted by women have the authority to make executive decisions that benefit all women in the community.

Further, spirit possession cults have therapeutic psychological effects on the hosts by providing them the opportunity for catharsis and a release for accumulated anxiety. By dissociating themselves from their body, possessed women are allowed to publicly express emotions and other taboo behaviour, and are liberated from the constraints of daily life. Embodying a spirit lets them experience a new physicality and mindset. Spirit possession gives women greater autonomy, authority and scope in activities they have already taken interest in, such as maintaining the internal life of the community. If a host has a positive relationship with her spirit, the spirit's benevolence may extend onto her family and bring them good fortune.

Possession also brings the host social recognition and awe, and allows the host to have greater control over their social group. Women gain respect, social recognition and influence when they are possessed by an important male spirit. It temporarily improves their social status by placing them at the centre of public attention, relieving their misfortune with gifts, and giving their statements credibility through the authority of the male spirit. It allows women with a threatened social status to reassert themselves and leave the state of status ambiguity.

Spirit possession also serves hosts by being an avenue for the possible self-enrichment of the host through material gifts and occasionally also a small income. Luxurious gifts are universally the most common means of appeasing a spirit. Etically, the gifts serve as compensation for the misfortunes endured by the host, or they are the products of the host's

extortion of kin group members. The host can enrich herself especially if she becomes a spirit medium. Becoming a spirit medium is frequently the one of the few acceptable vocations for women in possession cult societies.

Within the kin group, spirit possession and possession cults resolve intersexual tension and reasserts female value without challenging male domination. Possessed women can apply mystical pressure onto their husbands and male kin in order to resolve grievances and dissatisfaction. Further, spirit possession may ameliorate a host's marriage and her relationship with her husband as well as her co-wives. Possession is a diplomatic platform that allows kinswomen to renegotiate the convoluted social relationships produced by endogamous marriage.

Further, possession cults serve complex functions within the entire community. They offer a socially acceptable means of restructuring unequal power relationships between community members and kin where confrontation is unacceptable. In addition, the spirits help the community resolve issues by providing a new, independent perspective on local affairs. Spirit possession cults maintain the local social order by reaffirming public relationships.

The positive effects of spirit possession and possession cults on social cohesion may also be observed within familial succession. Spirits mediate intergenerational relationships and facilitate familial succession by forming a bridge between the generations. Sharing a spirit with a member of the senior generation implies a level of psychological intimacy. Spirit possession and possession cults also provide an arena for the resolution of intergenerational conflicts. In addition, the relationships between the generations of hosts and their kin and the generations of spirits form lasting communal bonds and familial identity.

Possession also contributes to the development of a personal identity through the foreign nature of the spirits, which allows the hosts to experience a different culture, which

they would otherwise never be able to do. This gives them a new perspective on their own lives and lets them experience new patterns of thought, which helps them achieve self-determination. Spirit possession offers a socially acceptable means of self-assertion where no other means for self-determination exist. This self-determination includes the development of a personal identity by allowing the host to distinguish herself from other women in her kin group and community through the spirit. The unique characteristics of the spirits may determine the skill set and the future of the host, which further contributes to the development of her personal identity. The host's unique relationship with her spirit gives her a greater sense of individuality.

The evidence suggests that spirit possession and possession cults developed as a response to female subordination, as they are the sole socially acceptable avenue through which women can re-assert themselves as functioning members of society and develop a sense of self that is otherwise precluded by society. Through gender reversed possession, marginalised women can temporarily access the less restrictive male gender role scripts and other liberties and benefits reserved for men. This function of possession and possession cults is intrinsic to the phenomenon, so the women are never consciously aware that it is a response to their subordination. Though they may observe the benefits possession brings other women in terms of gifts and attention, their ingrained fear of spirits prevents them from abusing possession for their personal advantage. The local women's personal aims are to fulfil the gender role expectations and become ideal women, and spirit possession impedes their efforts, so possessed women are always perceived as unfortunate victims.

Whether examined emically or etically, possession cults are successful at resolving the host's predicament. In societies where women have reached greater emancipation, the progress is catalysed by local political and economic development, as opposed to being the result of possession cult activity. At the same time, although spirit possession and possession

cults relieve the tension between the dominant and marginalised social groups and compensate for the constraints of female subordination, they never challenge the social order or eliminate the unequal power structures.

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