

Gilles Tarabout. 2022.

Reflecting on the Vocabulary of “Possession” in a South Indian Context

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The aim of this chapter is to explore the semantics of “possession” in the particular context of contemporary Kerala, on the southwestern coast of India. In this region, as in other parts of the world, actions and discourses of some people in certain circumstances may be attributed as those of other beings, gods or spirits, who are thus temporarily embodied – a situation commonly characterized in the English language as one of “possession.” My main interest here is not to present and analyze its social context and dynamics: rather, it is to examine how people in Kerala express themselves about it. The corresponding vocabulary in Malayalam (the main language in Kerala)¹ is richly diversified and terms covering the English notion also apply to a larger scope than what is usually taken into account under it. In this context, relationships between human beings and gods or spirits appear often fluid and indeterminate and partake of more general conceptions of the body, of society, and of the divine world.

In this respect, we need to be cautious with the (Western) cultural construction linked to the standard understanding of “possession” – as an invasion and a seizure of a person – and with assumptions about consciousness and the self that it may entail. As David Scott puts it, speaking about *yaktovil*, a ceremony of exorcism in Sri Lanka, there is a need “to recognize that this Christian metaphor, ‘possession’ (which depends on the image of an anthropomorphic presence entering the body, occupying its interior, and gaining thereby control over the will or soul that already inhabits it), has conditioned the kinds of themes and problems produced **/p.54/** in analyses of *yaktovil*.”² My concern in this contribution is to try to enrich this discussion by studying what people in Kerala may mean when they speak about “possession.”

¹ Malayalam (*malayālam*) is the language of the Kerala State in India. All transliterations (in italics) will follow the spelling in this language, even for words of other origin (Sanskrit, Tamil) – except in quotations from other authors.

² Scott, “The Cultural Poetics,” 92; see also Tarabout, “Prologue,” 8sq.



Figure 2.1. One possible representation of a Bhut as it is imagined for Kummaatti, a ritual pageant specific to the Trichur area. Trichur (Kerala). 1997. Photo Gilles Tarabout.

In practice, I shall keep on using the English word “possession” as a mere convenience as it has become part of the anthropological jargon; it is used as well by English-speaking people in Kerala when they translate expressions /p.55/ in Malayalam. However, it is not to be taken in its literal, etymological, meaning, and for caution’s sake I will maintain the quotation marks.

Unless specified, “possession” will cover “divine possession” as well as “spirit possession”, as they are two poles of a single continuum, the local evaluation of which is a process depending on personal and social situations.³ Moreover, I will use for convenience “supernatural being” as a shortcut for gods and goddesses as well as for various potentially aggressive beings called *bhūts* (*bhūtam*), which include various types of spirits or of lower deities (the distinction is not always clear). This is also a misleading term which should not be taken here as meaning “above” or “out of” nature. As the ancient Laws of Manu make it explicit, ghosts or demons are as much “natural” as human beings: “Domestic animals and wild game; beasts of prey and

³ Also Nabokov, *Religion against the Self*; Berti, in this volume. I do not wish to enter here the terminological debate about “spirit possession,” “spirit mediumship,” “possession,” “shamanism,” etc. (cf. Tarabout, “Prologue.”; and “Corps possédés et signatures”; Berti, and Tarabout, “Possession.”).

the animals with incisors in both jaws; demons (*rakṣasas*), ghouls (*piśāchas*), and humans – [these are the creatures] born from an embryonic sac.”⁴

Evil sight

The modalities of action of such beings are diverse. For instance, in an astrological context (frequently relevant for the diagnosis of “possession” in Kerala), the main treatise used by local astrologers, the seventeenth-century Sanskrit “Path for Questions”⁵ identifies two main types of “possession.. One is the “obstruction or torment by possession” (*bādhā*) due to the ghost of a person whose obsequies have not been properly performed, a *prēta*, or of a wicked person, *piśācu*, a ghoulish.⁶ The second is the torment by possession (*bādhā*) or the attack (*upadravam*) caused by the sight (*dr̥ṣṭi*) of the 26 enumerated dangerous beings whom the scholarly PM⁷ calls “seizers” (*grahaṅṅal* – the word also designates planets⁸) or “deities,” *dēvata*,⁹ and who correspond to the current popular denomination of *bhūts*.

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Though it is frequently confused with the “evil eye” (*karimkaṅṅu*),¹⁰ an ill-defined malefic influence brought often unwillingly by some people, “evil sight,” *dr̥ṣṭi*, is different and is clearly understood as a form of “possession” bringing torment (by “possession”) (*bādhā*) and “desperate oppression” (*pīḍa*), a recurrent vocabulary in this field. A similar conception is expressed in the contemporary context of songs of Patayani (*paṭayani*), a series of masked dances of South Kerala with a strong dimension of exorcism.¹¹ One of the songs tells how the great Goddess herself became “possessed” by the sight of two kinds of *bhūts* called *pē* (Tamil: *pēy*, sometimes translated as “demon-god”) and *piśacu* (ghoul):

Seeing *pē*(y) and ghouls the Devi
Was *pēy*- afflicted (*pēppiṇi*)! Alas! Cruel time!
Like a tree falling on the ground
Fell and rolled the goddess of the world!
Running to see Lord Shiva,
The frightened ghouls told Him the news:
“O Lord, the Goddess saw us
A severe affliction took hold of Her!”¹²

The song proceeds by evoking how to dispel similar afflictions by offering sacrifices, dances and songs:

⁴ Quoted in Smith, “Classifying Animals,” 531.

⁵ *Praśnamārggam*, henceforth PM. Govindan, *Praśnamārggam* (with Malayalam commentary); for an English rendering, see Raman, *Prasna Marga*.

⁶ PM, XV–42.

⁷ PM, XV–51 sq.

⁸ On this point see Thite, *Medicine*, 11sq., 41.

⁹ PM, XV–67.

¹⁰ Raman, *Prasna Marga*, 525sq., makes this confusion.

¹¹ Tarabout, *Sacrifier et donner*, chap. 5.

¹² Vasudevan Pillai, *Paṭēni*, 214.

Hearing this song of praise,

Today they should vacate from [the surface of] (*mēl ninnu*) the body!¹³

What is expressed is neither a penetration nor an occupation of a human body, but rather a debilitating effect produced by a sight which installs in some ways the beings *on* the body of the Goddess. An exact parallel is found in descriptions concerning the affliction of divine images, in temples, by *bhūts*, whose impure presence sticks at the surface of the idol, causing a decrease in the power of the godly presence.¹⁴ It clearly parallels the evil effect resulting from the sight of some entities in Buddhist Sri Lanka, which /p.57/ Scott¹⁵ characterized as “a distinctive cultural poetics of eye-sight,” and finds as well other expressions elsewhere in India.¹⁶

Intrusion

However, in other contexts the “possessing” entity is explicitly an invasive one. A widespread expression for “possession” derived from Sanskrit and frequently found in the Sanskrit literature, *āvēśam*, literally means “penetration.”¹⁷ It is an invasion of the inside of the body, which can happen as a result of deliberate rituals by the person wishing to have a divine presence inside him/her, or as an unwanted result of defects: an impurity of the body,¹⁸ or a weakening state of fright, for instance. What protect the integrity of the person are rituals (purification) and a strong mind. People are endowed with various degrees of *manaśakti* (“mind-power”). Those lacking in mind-power (young girls are evoked as an example) are more prone to occult attacks, whereas people with strong mind-power are nearly immune from them. According to the astrologer K.N.B. Asan, there are circumstances which will facilitate occult aggressions:

Suppose a man is walking along a lonely path in the dead hours of night and suppose he is stricken with terror on hearing a strange sound at a particular place where previously a person had committed suicide. Whatever the man does thereafter may be an imitation of the dead. This is due to the mental shock he has suffered from. [...] It is to be understood that till the evil spirit is expelled from the body of the person, every act he performs will be in imitation of that of the spirit. Even the tone of his voice will be like that of the person when the spirit has entered his body.¹⁹

At first sight such a statement would seem to corroborate a model of “possession” in terms of invasion and displacement of the self. As we shall see, /p.58/ other expressions or statements point to more complex conceptions. For instance, another, more local expression, “to cross and become united” (*kaṭannu kūṭuka*), also points to the idea of a “crossing” of the body’s limits,

¹³ Vasudevan Pillai, *Paṭēni*, 214.

¹⁴ K.P.C. Anujan Bhattattirippad, personal communication.

¹⁵ Scott, “The Cultural Poetics.”

¹⁶ Compare Herrmann-Pfandt, “The so-called *Ḍākinī kalpa*,” 68–9.

¹⁷ For a detailed study of aspects of “possession” in Sanskrit literature, see Smith Frederick M., *The Self Possessed*.

¹⁸ There is a famous episode in the Indian epic Mahabharata, when a virtuous and strong-minded king, Nala, omits to purify a tiny spot on one of his heels, enabling the demon Kali to enter his body and to “possess” him. See also Smith Frederick M., *The Self Possessed*, 251sq.

¹⁹ K.N.B. Asan, interview March 10, 1991.

but places the emphasis on a process of fusion (sometimes thought of in the same terms as a sexual union) rather than on a replacement of the “possessed” person’s self. For instance, in the context of ritualized possession in the northern part of Kerala, called Teyyam,²⁰ one impersonator, speaking about his deliberate “possession” by a divine power (*śakti*), told anthropologist Rich Freeman:

This is because, as we say, “[I am] half myself and half the deity.” After I have gotten some divine *śakti*, then over and above that we can add to that our own *śakti*. [...] It is when the divine *śakti* and our own are combined that we reach the state of completeness.²¹

However, the balance between the power of the deity and the performer’s own *śakti* varies according to the phases of Teyyam institutional “possession.” Freeman suggests that “at the stage requiring the priest to discursively represent the speech of the deity, there must be a spontaneous anchorage in the persona of the god, with a total effacement of his normal ego and loss of conscious memory.”²² Says the performer:

What is spoken during the time of illuminated possession (*darśanam*) are not one’s own words at all. [...] If there is even a little bit of the ego (*ahaṃkāram*) left in the mind, then nothing will be done right.²³

We may note that the term given by Freeman as “illuminated possession” is literally “vision” (*darśanam*) – an expression usually applied to a temple’s worship contexts, where devotees obtain the sacred vision of the divine idol in a temple, and are blessed by being seen by it.²⁴ It is the positive equivalent of the evil *dr̥ṣṭi*, in a process in which getting the vision is directly linked to the bodily presence of a god or a spirit.²⁵

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Interestingly, the Teyyam impersonators refer to a combination of two “powers” (*śakti*): their own, and the divine one, which, when *fused* together, provide a “sense of completeness.” When there is such a perception, there shouldn’t be left the slightest trace of *ahaṃkāram*: this term, which Freeman translates as “ego,” is more usually translated as “sense of self”; it is one of the components of the subtle body that transmigrates from one existence to the other.²⁶ It is also distinguished from “consciousness” (*caitanya*), a term equally used by Teyyam impersonators and which Freeman characterizes as “what displaces the normal personality of living media, it is the god’s ‘mentality’, and consultants so described it to me.”²⁷ Thus, from what I understand of Freeman’s ethnography, the perception could be analyzed as one of displacement of the impersonator’s sense of self by the irruption of a divine power and its fusion with his own

²⁰ The reference work about this cult, which has attracted the attention of numerous scholars, is Freeman’s Ph.D. dissertation (Freeman, “Purity and Violence”).

²¹ Freeman, “Dynamics of the Person,” 157.

²² *Ibid.*, 157.

²³ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁴ Eck, *Darśan*.

²⁵ Compare Nabokov, “Who Are You?”; Carrin, “The Topography of the Female.” For a discussion on ritual visualizations of the gods, see Tarabout, “Visualizing the Gods.”

²⁶ Padoux, “Corps et cosmos,” 172.

²⁷ Freeman, “Dynamics of the Person,” 154.

power, providing an enhanced, divine consciousness. In any case, it points to a delicate articulation between “power” and “consciousness” in the representations of “possession.”

The importance of such a distinction is confirmed for instance by a recent ethnography in the adjacent region of Tulu Nad where the organization of divine “possession” is very similar to Teyyam. There, divine impersonators speak of a loss of their own consciousness for only a short time (“three seconds”), while they can feel the divine power much longer in their body.²⁸ As one interlocutor of Miho Ishii said, “The *daiva* enters my body only for a while. [...] However, the power of the deity remains for hours.”²⁹ Another declares: “The moment the *daiva* enters my body, I can’t see other people at all. It lasts for only a few seconds though. After that I recover my consciousness, but the power of the *daiva* still remains in me.”³⁰ Other ethnographies throughout India show that despite a regular claim of absence of consciousness about what happened during the episode of “possession,” such amnesia, in practice, is far from being systematic; and “possession” itself may be felt to have been intermittent.³¹

It is in this cultural frame that other Malayalam expressions evoking the *bhūt*’s action in terms of intrusion or aggression have to be understood: “travel of the *bhūt*” (*bhūtasāncāram*), “aggression by a *bhūt*” (*bhūtakrānti*), “being eaten by a *bhūt*” (*bhūtagrasta*). They point indeed to an invasion /p.60/ of the person, and to more general conceptions about the permeability of the person, a dimension elaborated for India by McKim Marriott³² and his colleagues.³³ Such a model is at the basis of both Freeman’s understanding of what happens during Teyyam, and of Smith’s interpretation of “possession” in his study³⁴ mainly based on Sanskrit texts. I would argue, however, that even in these cases the exact impact on the medium’s or the victim’s consciousness remains unclear: there need not be necessarily a displacement or a replacement of the self, or an effacement of the conscience. I will provide below a few illustrations that suggest a diversity of representations concerning the relationship between a person and a “possessing” spirit or God, and concerning the consciousness attributed to them.

Identities

The narratives below come from psychological therapists working within the interpretative frame of “multiple personality disorder”: they put their patients into hypnosis and make the “secondary personalities” “come out” and speak. There clearly exists a discrepancy between the consultant’s representations, in terms of “spirit possession,” and those of the therapist, in terms of “multiple personalities” – for whom the question is precisely one of personalities and not of cultural categories such as spirits.³⁵ Moreover these narratives were communicated to me or published in English. Nevertheless, despite these obvious limitations, I am convinced they may provide a glimpse into how some people in Kerala imagine what “possession” is about. My aim here is merely to look at the picture – culturally informed – that consultants may elaborate about their own perceptions; I will not be preoccupied by the events mentioned for

²⁸ Ishii, “Playing with perspectives,” 803sq.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 803.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 804.

³¹ Berti, in this volume.

³² For instance, Marriott, “Hindu Transactions.”

³³ Similar conceptions of permeability may be found in other parts of the world, as well as in the not-so-distant European past – for eighteenth century France, see Vigarello, *Le propre et le sale*. However, the transactional model as it has been applied to India fails to account for the observed stability of the person and of its social definition (Bouillier and Tarabout, “Introduction,” 19–22).

³⁴ Smith, *The Self Possessed*.

³⁵ Mulhern, “Embodied Alternative Identities.”

themselves, the more so because the question of memory in the psychiatrists' (contentious) category of "multiple personality disorders" has proved rather tricky.³⁶

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A first example was told to me by a Christian priest-exorcist-psychologist, Father George Kappalumakkal. Recounting a past case, of someone he called Matthew, he recalls what the patient's "secondary personality," Raman, replied to his question "Why do you possess this one?"

("Raman" speaking): "He [Matthew] is longing much for his wife. But all the women are like that. They are cheating people and the husbands. So one day this fellow came through where I committed suicide. When this fellow came I assumed the form of a snake and jumped in front. But he did not get frightened. Immediately I assumed the form of a bat and flew away. It was soon after the snake, and that fellow was frightened. Immediately I entered him. [...] I was given to drink. When I possessed him he also became very desirous of drinking. So I took him to the toddy shop, make him drink, then he had the idea that his wife is dishonest. So I asked him to kill his wife. After killing his wife I wanted to direct him to commit suicide."³⁷

Though it may partly be an artefact – the consequence of interpreting the situation as a case of multiple personalities – we may notice that whereas the "possessed" patient was observed by others (and depicted by the therapist) to act *as* somebody else, the inner representation he had himself of the process was a *dialogic* one. This recalls what Marine Carrin³⁸ mentioned about the Santals, a tribal population of India, where "possession" is an occasion to manifest a form of self-awareness, enabling a discourse about the "possessed ego" from the vantage point of the "possessing other" – the deity. She joins Nabokov³⁹ in her emphasis of questions of identity in rituals of "possession"; but while the latter considers that the Tamil rituals she studied tend to fragment the self so that the person eventually appears as "a compound of disparate identities that do not always blend well,"⁴⁰ Carrin proposes for the "possession" she analyses a less dramatic view and prefers to see a remodeling of the self. The Kerala materials could sustain both views. We find agonistic perceptions expressed, as in the above case of Matthew, supporting well a perception of a "split self," as in the story of Gracy, reported by a psychologist, Dr. Jagathambika, who used a grid of **/p.62/** interpretation similar to that of Father George and who also had recourse to hypnosis. I am summing up:

Gracy is a young Christian girl possessed by the spirit of an old Muslim woman. The "spirit" speaks: "When Gracy was frightened, I made note of her and possessed her. I am residing in Gracy's head and that is why she is having intense head-ache, always. [...] I am living in Gracy's left side. I am afraid of going to her right side because that side is occupied by Angels of God."⁴¹

³⁶ Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*.

³⁷ Fr. George Kappalumakkal, interview, August 22, 1992; for other cases see Tarabout, "Psycho-Religious Therapy."

³⁸ Carrin, "The Topography of the Female."

³⁹ Nabokov, *Religion against the Self*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴¹ Jagathambika, "A Case Study," 147sq.

However, by contrast, there are also instances of a nearly complete blending of “personalities,” exemplified by many institutionalized divine “possession” – not only in the case of the “completeness” reached by some Teyyam impersonators at the time of “possession,” but by many other mediums as well.

Whatever be the case, the point is that the representations of “possession” that people express – be they divinely “possessed” mediums or victims of ghosts – suggest an inner world more complex than a simple displacement or replacement of their consciousness by that of a supernatural, even when it is evoked as an invasive process.

“Hidden possession”

There are in fact indications that the question of consciousness is quite distinct from the question of the self and might just not pose itself in many cases of “possession.”

Kamala is a young Hindu woman “possessed” by two “spirits.” In the frame of the scenario of hypnosis, one “spirit” declares: “I am hiding and am calmly sitting [within Kamala].”⁴² The other one says: “I was always in her thoughts even after death. But luck and bad time only turned the thought about me into an evil spirit. I began to make /p.63/ appearance in Kamala only for the last year though I was in her from years ago. [...] My part in Kamala’s illness is the violent behaviour she shows in fainting. I have never spoken or revealed myself. I am disguised as the violent behaviour.”⁴³

We may first observe that Kamala was brought to the therapist because of her violent behavior and her fainting – corresponding to the popular observation that at these moments she was not “herself.” However, the representation that Kamala has of her own situation, as she makes it explicit under hypnosis, gives place to another silent, nonmanifested “spirit” presence which does not seem to affect her consciousness. Moreover, the representation she has of the other (violent) presence is one of late manifestation, though it was here discreetly for a much longer time – we may suppose, without outwardly affecting Kamala’s behavior. The notion of a “guise” is also one that makes more complex the understanding of behaviors attributed to “possessing” entities. Here, the “spirit” does not wish to reveal itself (*i.e.* it does not want to speak out its name). And the violent behavior shown by Kamala, which a common analytical point of view would see as the manifestation of “possession,” is defined by her as a disguise: the very form taken by the “spirit” wishing to remain hidden. This is a perception very different from Matthew’s in the preceding case, as Matthew explained he was acting under the control of the “possessing” entity.

The story of Anna, from the same source, underlines the hiatus existing between “possession” and the question of consciousness. Anna is a 35-year-old Christian woman who went to see the therapist with the complaint of being “possessed” by two lesser gods and three spirits of dead persons, all believed to have been sent by closely related persons in order to destroy the family. “These spirits were supposed to act in disguise as illness but later they appeared in their real

⁴² Ibid., 78. “Sitting” is a common expression also used for the installation of a divine power in a shrine. One expression pointing to “possession” has in other contexts the meaning “to coagulate, to be deposited on, to adhere” (*urayuka*), which has to be compared to the form *uraykkuka*, “to be installed,” used for the installation of a godly presence in an image: the person who is “possessed” also becomes a seat for the entity, like an image.

⁴³ Ibid., 85–6.

forms.”⁴⁴ When Anna was put into hypnosis and the “secondary personality” was invited to speak, “a loud scream came out of her. [...] along with the scream, she began to grind her teeth loudly and to shout and to beat her hands and legs on the couch violently. [...] She unbound her hair and pulled that with both her hands and shouted aloud ‘I am Chathan.’”⁴⁵ Eventually, Chathan (*cāttan*), one of the gods “possessing” her, says:

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“As soon as I came to Anna’s home, they began to have misfortunes. I was sent by the infant’s aunt [“infant” is how Chathan calls Anna] and her brother. We were asked to sit in disguise and so we cannot expose ourselves. We came to this family even before the birth of infant. I will not tell anything. Suppose I lied? I will try my best to trick all information. [...] We create all sorts of illness to the members of the family. We had shown them a sign indicating our arrival. We made a child ill and within 24 hours it died. We didn’t show any more signs. After the first indication, we were creating some illness like that. The people who sent us had a purpose. They wanted to destroy this family.”⁴⁶

Chathan adds:

“A priest tried to send us away once and he asked us to show a sign to make him convinced that we have gone, but we are clever. If we show any sign like that our presence will be proved and will be clear, so we just kept quiet. We came secretly and we would like to live secretly. We will not expose ourselves openly.”⁴⁷

The actions of Anna are interpreted as those of Chathan: it certainly corresponds to an interpretation by Anna’s people in terms of displacement/replacement of agency. However, Anna herself, using the vantage point of “Chathan,” depicts a more complex situation. Not only do Chathan and spirits “sit in disguise” (they were believed to have done so long before coming out as they did during the *séance*), but they send illnesses, interpreted as “signs,” to various members of the family, who are not said to be “possessed”: the “signs” are not necessarily to be read in the body of the “possessed” Anna. What is also noteworthy is the emphasis put on secrecy: the “possession” should remain unproven, unclear. Indeed, this is a domain of religious representations and practices which, by its very nature, is open to speculation and doubt in the mind of its very protagonists.

As a matter of fact, the terminology and these stories suggest that there might be no single, precise indigenous representation of how a supernatural being “possesses” a person. We have seen that it can come and sit inside the body, or it may stick at its surface. It may afflict by being sighted, or it may enter through impurity or by taking advantage of a fright or some **/p.65/** other excessive emotion. It may temporarily displace the person’s sense of self (*ahaṃkāram*), or provoke a blending of consciousnesses, or live in companionship within the person, or be hidden “in the guise” of diseases (without affecting consciousness), or afflict the consciousness while being outside of the body. Conversely, the vocabulary of “exorcism” is varied: it may

⁴⁴ Ibid., “A Case Study,” 117.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 117–8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 119–20.

correspond to a “massage” (*uḷicciḷ*) that rubs off an unwanted presence from the person afflicted, or to a “separation, cutting” (*vērppāṭu*), or to a “purge” (*olikkal*).

Such a variety of possible discourses about what looks, from the outside, as being very similar manifestations, might result from various causes. Among others, we may think that “possession” as a set of representations prospers precisely on ambiguity and lack of clarity (as “Chathan-in-Anna” says he would like to maintain!), and that, eventually, such differences in discourses do not matter for the people concerned.

The gestures of “possession”

Another dimension of the vocabulary of “possession” describes its bodily expression. These are mostly terms of movement, of agitation. The “possessed” person (*i.e.* under the agency of the “possessing” entity) will “stir” (*iḷakkuka*) or “shiver, shake” (*viṛaykkuka*). The association is so close that in some contexts provoking the shivering implies provoking “possession,” as in the following magician’s recipe:

Medicine for the shaking: [Taking] the under garment of a woman in menses, the excreta of a pig, the excreta of a dog, the excreta of a cat, hair, a bull’s horn, the skin of a black buck, the urine of a cow, human urine, onion and garlic, ghee [clarified butter], roll all these into a wick. For a deity who does not shiver, burn the wick, inhale the smoke through the nose. Then without exception the deity will come, shiver and speak.⁴⁸

Similar expressions also apply to people experiencing cold, fright, or anger – there is indeed a close semantic connection between “possession” and anger or rage. Two other widely used expressions are “jumping” (*tulluka*) /p.66/ or “dancing” (*āṭuka*). Vertical jumps correspond to a standardized bodily idiom of (mostly male) institutional mediums. “Dancing” (gods or spirits) is more diversified: it may consist of a rotation of the bust and the head of “possessed” women with untied hair (untying hair is a cultural requisite for women deemed to be “possessed” – remember that Anna untied her hair when “possessed” by Chathan); or it may be a more or less elaborate dance, as in the case of the dances in Teyyam (also called *tēyyāṭṭam*, “dance of the God”), which have to be learned by professional mediums.

Deities and spirits alike enjoy to play (*kaḷikkuka*) and dance (*āṭuka*), displaying their form through a human vehicle, as a song of Patayani dedicated to expelling Yakshis (*yakṣi*, an ogress, also the spirit of a woman who died before marriage) will illustrate:

Antara Yakshi [“inner *yakṣi*”], the Illusion of Shiva,
Oh beautiful enchantress!
To receive the worship at your holy feet,
Come to the canopy and rest, oh Devi! [...]
Oh one with divine feet you should put an end to the affliction
[*piṇi*, a word for affliction by “possession”] and vacate!
In the spathe of the areca tree, roasted and powdered items
Are spread, and fire brands are fixed all along.

⁴⁸ Manuscript of Kaniyan Narayanan, provided courtesy Wayne Ashley; translation by L. S. Rajagopalan.

I am cutting the cock⁴⁹ and giving the blood offering.
Cast off hesitation, become pleased, and appear bright!
[May] the affliction [*bādhā*] vacate; on the mask [used in Patayani]
Come in a lovely manner and stay!
Dance, and shake, and get exhausted, and play!
You must dance [*tullal*] beautifully and quit and go away!⁵⁰

Significantly, the very same words apply to the shaking of various ritual objects (such as the deity's sword) that convey a deity's power or represent it. Let me quote Freeman again:

The observationally manifest rituals that precipitate possession suggest it is not wrought in the interior of the performer's private psychology, but through the culturally scripted rites and media that give the theory of spiritual conduction behavioural expression in concrete forms. [...]

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Figure 2.2. The dance of the “beautiful” (*sundara*) Yakshis in Patayani. Kadamannitta (Kerala), 1982. Photo Gilles Tarabout.

The weapons of the deity which normally sit beside its image are similarly taken up by the shrine priests and *teyyam* dancers as conductors of the divine energy that brings on possession. [...] When shrine priests take up their deities' weapons, these items are made to shake in their hands as though they had an independent agency and this power is then seen to be transferred to their bodies, which begin to shake, tremble, and jump up and down in place. [...]

⁴⁹ An expression for sacrifice.

⁵⁰ Vasudevan Pillai, *Paṭēni*, 330.

Discursively, exactly the same verbs are used for the motions and “behaviours” of inanimate media as for the human spirit mediums; they all “stir” (*iḷakuka*), “tremble” (*viṛaykkuka*), become “indwelt” or “fixed” (*uṛayuka*), and “jump” or “dance” (*tuḷḷuka*, *āṭuka*). This discourse has remained constant since the medieval songs of possession which recount foundational events establishing a god’s presence in the shrines, down to contemporary reportage and description of ongoing practice. [...] Images and persons are simply relatively more or less enduring sites where divine powers are deposited and made to reside.⁵¹

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Figure 2.3. Goddess Kali as impersonated in a ritual theater (Mutiyettu, “bearing the headdress”). The power (shakti) of the goddess is said to be present in the headdress and to impose itself on the dancer. Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala), 1982. Photo Gilles Tarabout,

⁵¹ Freeman, “Dynamics of the Person,” 152–3.

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This is possible because “consciousness” (*caitanya*), according to Freeman, is thought of as a “kind of conscious stuff of the deity’s personality and will,” a “substance that flows into various media and that turns possessed media into the expression of the god’s personal being,”⁵² confounding “our distinctions between the living and inanimate.”⁵³

Affliction and “Possession”

When the “possessing” entity is a *bhūt*, it brings misfortune in various forms; as the story of Anna exemplifies, it is not only the “possessed” person who may be afflicted; incidents of various sorts may happen to other persons in the family, to their properties, their activity: it is the whole “domain” of the person which is concerned as an extension of his/her body.⁵⁴ “Possession” is known through such effects, which can be diversified and take the form of illnesses, untoward behavior, arson, theft, economic loss, and so on. All these misfortunes may be constructed as signs pointing to “possession” of someone in the family without being necessarily accompanied – in the representations of the initial stages of “possession” – by a change in the behavior of one of its members (remember that according to Anna’s story, Chathan was even already present before her birth). When such changes do occur, like losing consciousness, shaking, acting or speaking as a supernatural being, these are thought to be extreme, or more manifest, expressions of this being. It is a difference in degree but not in nature with the initial stages. Consequently, there is no clear-cut distinction between an affliction attributed to a *bhūt*, and a “possession” by a *bhūt* – the more so because a *bhūt* may disguise itself as an affliction. This is in line with ancient Indian mythology, where fever was seen as the presence and manifestation of a supernatural being, the “Fever-Demon,” *Jvarāśura*. Existing magical recipes for expelling fever, by chanting mantras, by blowing on the patient, or even by transferring the “possessing” entity-fever from the patient to the outskirts of the village, suggest that this is still a widely shared conception in India.⁵⁵

As a matter of fact, there is a range of common terms in Malayalam for affliction and malevolent “possession”: the most widely used word is /p.70/ perhaps “obstruction, torment” (*bādhā*), which we have already met and which is synonymous with “possession.”⁵⁶ Another common expression is “destruction by harassment” (*bādhōpadravam*). As a consequence the victim is “subjugated” (*pūnuka*), “tied by infestation” (*piṇi* – this was the word used for the Devi who lost consciousness after having seen *bhūts*, in the quote from the Patayani songs), or “desperately oppressed” (*pīḍha*) – all these expressions being synonyms for malevolent “possession.”

Interpreting illnesses and misfortunes as “possession” is a complex personal and social process which leads to the construction of a narrative in retrospection for making sense of a series of events, past and present.⁵⁷ The passage from illnesses as “signs” to a clearly perceived “possession” can be a slow process, sometimes unfinished, which brings further uncertainty about what exactly is happening. Two more stories from Dr. Jagathambika’s study will illustrate this last point:

⁵² Ibid., 154.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Favret-Saada, *Les mots, la mort*, 252sq.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, David M. Thompson’s documentary film *The Wages of Action*.

⁵⁶ According to Yasuchi Uchiyamada, who worked among stigmatized castes of low status, the word may also be used for deliberate, institutional “possession” (Uchiyamada, “Soil, Self, Resistance,” 290).

⁵⁷ Tarabout, “Corps possédés et signatures,” 331.

Annakkutty, a 16 year old girl, “was brought to the Research Department with complaints of severe head-ache, aggressive behaviour, talking like another person during the night and asking for water and drinking too much of it.”⁵⁸ The therapist asked Annakkutty, who said she “can see a black thing coming toward her. This causes the head-ache. Later she began to see the black shape closely and this shape began to take the form of a man. She called it Appukkuttan. She said that Appukkuttan comes near her and pricks her head and that is why she is having the head-ache. Here, in this case Appukkuttan has not formed as a separate personality. But as soon as Annakkutty is put to sleep, it is Appukkuttan who is speaking. Unlike Annakkutty, Appukkuttan is very mischievous and is very witty in his conversation.”⁵⁹

While Annakkutty’s family seems to have brought her with the idea she might be “possessed,” the therapist considers that the “secondary personality”, though named, is not fully formed, probably because it remains a mere /p.71/ black shape devoid of any personal history. The “possession-in-the-making” appears even less advanced in the case of Susy:

Susy, a 10-year-old girl, “feels head-ache and giddiness and then lies down. Then, keeping the head on the ground firmly, she moves her body as though to stand on her head. She will beat on her chest and cry aloud that she is dying and that she is being dragged away into a pit. She will remain in that state for about 4 hours.” However, no “personalization” is accomplished.⁶⁰

It is now well established that a regular feature of exorcisms consists of trying to put a name on a “possessing” spirit, suggesting that the most visible and spectacular characteristics of “possession,” linked to the outward manifestation of a supernatural being in a person’s body, are more often than not the very result of the process of exorcism itself.⁶¹

Final remarks

The Malayalam terminology points to conceptions in which a process of *vision*, be it evil or divine, is a major source for “possession” by a supernatural being. The latter’s presence may be sticking at the surface of the “possessed” person or be sitting inside the body after invading it. Even in the latter case, “possession” needs not have any implication of ownership by the supernatural entity. Nor does the popular affirmation, according to which it is the supernatural being who is speaking and acting, necessarily contradict other narratives, frequently expressed, which tell us that supernatural beings coexist, dialogue, or fuse with the consciousness of the “possessed” person. As a matter of fact, the inner world perceived and expressed by institutional mediums as well as by victims of “spirit possession” reveals itself to be a complex one, and the attribution of agency to a supernatural being leaves quite open the question of the “self” – fragmented, remodeled, or completed. Moreover, some institutional mediums express their perceptions by distinguishing and articulating together two dimensions /p.72/ of the divine

⁵⁸ Jagathambika, “A Case Study,” 196.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 197sq.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 209sq.

⁶¹ See, for instance, De Certeau, “Le langage altéré”; Talamonti, “La produzione rituale”; Nabokov, “Who Are You?,” 124; Sorrentino, *À l’épreuve de la possession*.

presence, the “power” of the deity and its “consciousness,” which have contrasted modalities of presence.

As a result, the question of displacement or replacement of the “possessed” person’s consciousness, and of the memory of what happened during “possession”, is subject to diverse and contrasted affirmations. Such a view is corroborated by the fact that “possession,” in the local representations, does not always imply “personification” in the psychological and behavioral sense: an illness may be interpreted as being the supernatural itself (disguised); the diagnosis of “possession” may be elaborated following various misfortunes befalling other people than the person who will be eventually identified as “possessed”; objects may be the support of a divine power and consciousness, a process described by using the vocabulary applying to movements caused by “possession.”

The Kerala material thus leaves an impression of diverse, if not heterogeneous views. This could be linked to the relative imprecision of representations of the person as well as to the very nature of supernatural beings. As Vernant put it with regard to Greek gods (and it certainly applies to Indian ones), they “are powers, not persons.”⁶² They can be here and there, one and plural, localized in or on a person’s body and simultaneously acting elsewhere. Their consciousness can circulate between human bodies and objects. They can overpower the consciousness of a person, or merge with it, or take the guise of an illness, or simply “sit inside,” unobserved. When, eventually, the god or the spirit speaks out its name, this is the outcome of a process which, in reality, is fraught with a systemic uncertainty about what exactly happened.

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⁶² Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, 2006.

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