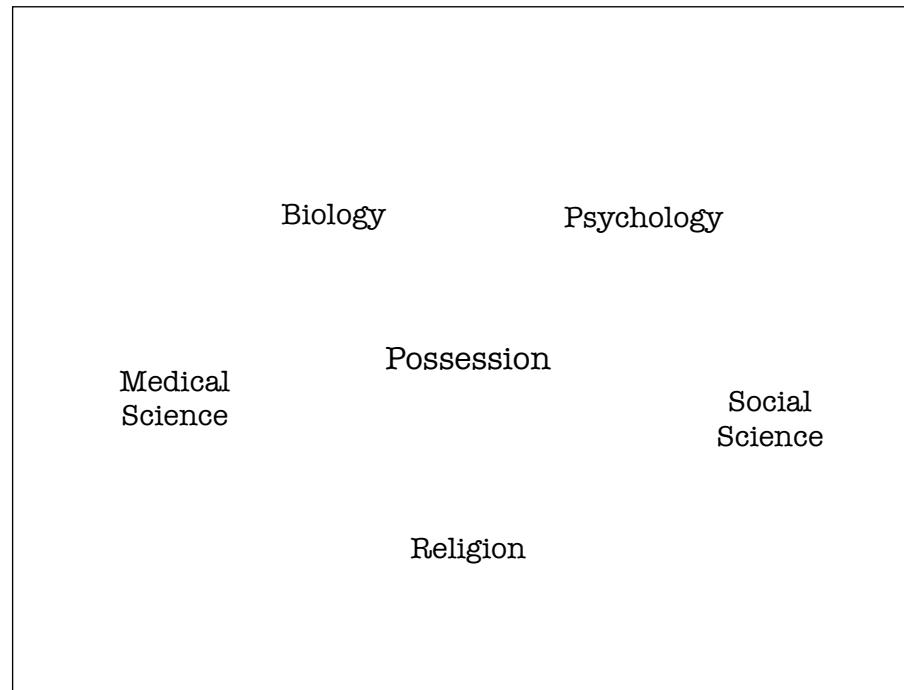


Spirit Possession and Purity

A case study of a Brahma Kumari ascetic

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This is a case study from my field in Orissa, 2008. My research participants were drawn from an ascetic meditation community called the Brahma Kumaris. One of the BK sisters was possessed by the spirit of a man she knew from her village. Here I explore local and faith-based understandings, management and treatment of the possession.



Every discipline has something to say about possession

Medical sciences classify it as a mental disorder (DSMIV American Psychiatric Association 1996),

Biological sciences say it's little more than a chemical imbalance,

Psychology explain it as a form of auto-hypnosis, dissociation or hysteria or non-conscious manipulation.

Social scientists refer to it as cultural expression of powerlessness or locally specific auto-hypnosis.

Religion may classify it as the work of a bodiless spirit, metaphysical payback for past wrongs. This is how the BKs tend to see it.

Possession inspires debates about reality. Is it a sign of mental health problems? Is it a way of dealing with chronic vulnerability? Or is it a fact that a spirit can enter the body of another?



Possession tends to be pathologized and mysticized. It's seen as something dangerous, exotic, unknown, demonic, strange, abnormal, and risky.

Fascinating: Bewitch entrance

For BKs the phenomenon of possession is normalised through their theology

Brahma Kumaris

- Global millenarian New Religious Movement (128 States, 900,000 BKs)
- Est. 1936 in Hyerabad, NorthWest India (now Pakistan)
- Predicated on the notion and ideal of purity
- Women as spiritual leaders

The Brahma Kumaris is a spiritual community founded in the mid-1930's in Karachi, now part of Pakistan. It was established on the basis of one mans mystical and visionary experiences. A short time later, many of his family and extended community had visions and mystical experiences. Mostly young women and children who would enter trance states of meditation for extended periods of time, sometimes days.

The founding principles that came from these visions are based on ideals of purity. Purity according to the standards described in the Vedic strictures and upheld by caste Brahmins of India.

Purity is the foundation of world peace and transformation for BKs, and they adhere to the principles of purity as the foundation of their lives. Transgressions of purity are considered severe. The problem with this case of spirit possession was that it was a messy transgression and an indistinct violation of her purity.

Brahma Kumaris Sisters



Typically, BK sisters and brothers wear traditional north Indian clothes. Sister in white sari's - also worn by widows and those who have renounced the world. Hair is tied back, no makeup is worn. Badge - role of teacher. Ring - public pledge of chastity.

Chastity, simplicity, obedience

Brahma Kumaris

PHILOSOPHY

- Souls
- Matter
- God (Supreme Soul)

DISCIPLINES

- Purity (celibacy)
- Meditation
- Diet (pure vegetarian)
- Daily class

PURPOSE

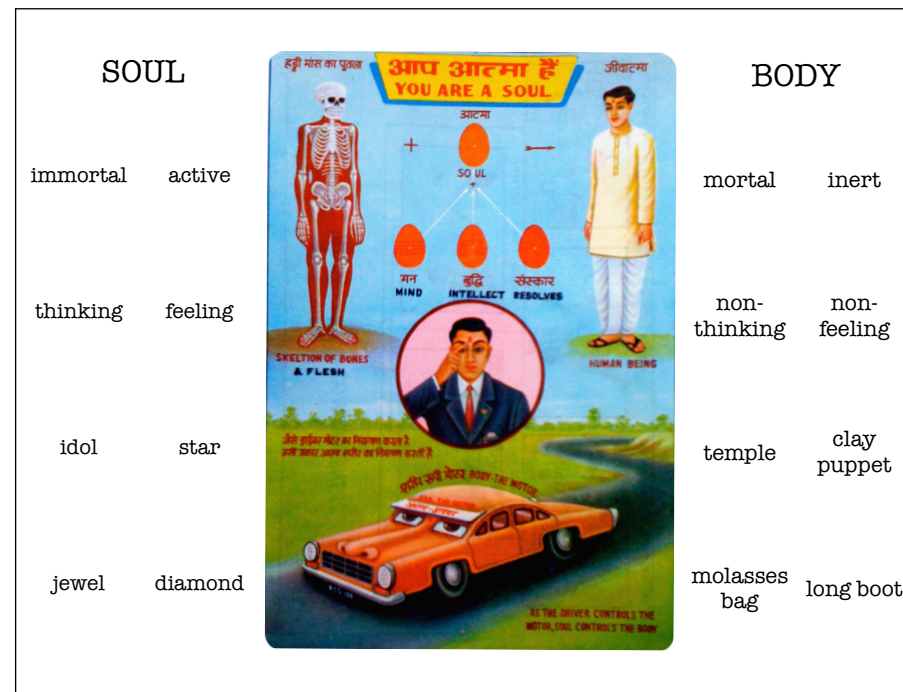
- Purification of souls and matter through meditation

BKs believe the world is an interplay between three forms of energy: Souls matter and God. Each bodily being is in fact a soul: a tiny point of conscious light energy that resides in the centre of the body. This is important for understanding how BKs made sense of the possession.

BKs explain that every soul start off pure and perfect and, through taking rebirth, loses its purity through the natural law of entropy. The spiritual loss of purity is reflected in material world. The only way that purity can be restored is through meditation with the Supreme Soul of God who is ever pure because he doesn't come into the cycle of birth and rebirth. By establishing and sustaining a meditative link with God the purity of souls and the physical world can be restored.

Their principles are all in support of this meditative link and their overriding purpose of purification. Celibacy, regular meditation including 4am, food cooked by fellow celibates, and daily spiritual class.

BKs main practice is open-eyed meditation with the Supreme Soul. BKs believe that meditation with the Supreme Soul is the key to purifying the self, and creating a pure world devoid of suffering, where and all souls are free. Done with the eyes open, BKs believe the energy transmitted through the eyes called **DRISHTI** has substantial power.



For BKs the soul and body are absolutely distinct. As shown, a body of flesh plus a soul equals a human being.

The soul has three faculties - the mind, intellect and sanskaras (personality). The soul, using these faculties to express itself through the body. The soul is the driver, the body is the car.

BKs say it is a Law of nature that: a soul enters a body, is born through the womb, lives, and dies. The soul leaves that body and takes another birth through the womb. However, a soul with a bad death or of particularly bad will, may enter the body of another at any time, without taking proper rebirth. Within the global BK community, there is little concern about spirit possession. However in India, particularly in Orissa where spirit possession and other methods of spiritual manipulation are common, bodiless souls are treated with a fearful respect and generally not discussed too much.

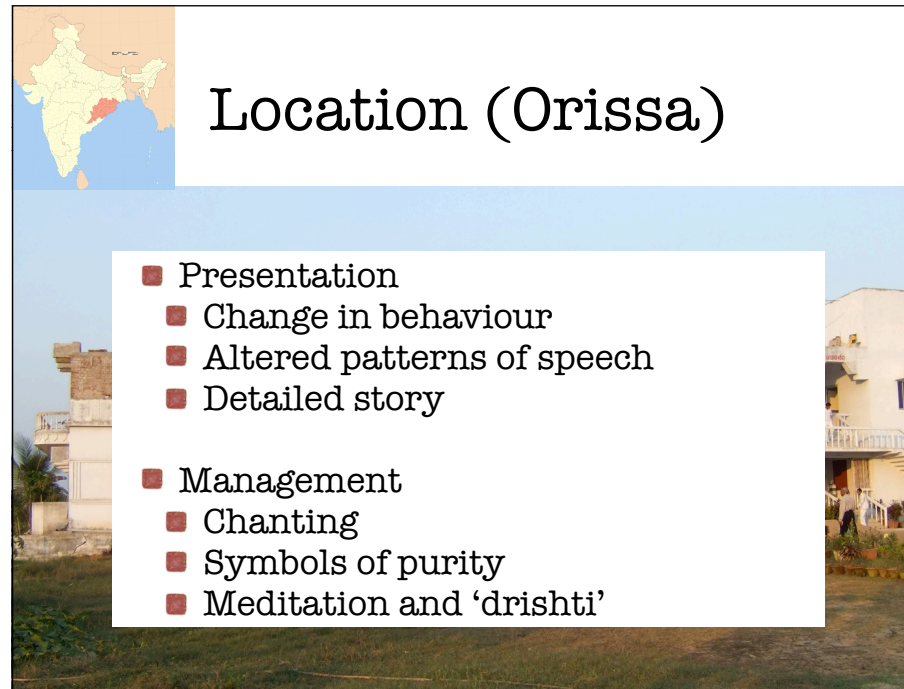
Rajni and Mohan

Mohan

This is the story of Rajni and Mohan as BKs tell it. Rajni was possessed by Mohan. And despite various attempts by Rajni and other BKs at restoring her rightful place, it took an exorcism to displace Mohan and return Rajni to her place of power within her own body.

Sister Rajni grew up in a village, was in her early thirties, and had been a BK since her teens. She lived with one other sister in a BK meditation centre in a village, typical for Orissa BK sisters. All the locals enjoyed going to the BK meditation centre, except for one particular man called Mohan. His lifestyle was the opposite of the BKs and he resented the influence the BKs were having in the village. Ultimately Mohan wanted Rajni gone.

Mohan was a Kali Sadhak (devotee of Kali) and performed Tantric Vidhya, is a form of spiritual manipulation based on understanding physical, spiritual and biological energies, that takes years to master. Tantra played a significant role in this case study because Mohan endeavoured to kill the sister through Tantric Vidhya before ultimately possessing her. "Tantra is an initiatory tradition based on symbolism and mythology and employs the use of thoughts, chanting, accurate rituals, meditation and careful use of organic products. Tantric Vidhya inspires fear, respect and awe as its methods are largely unknown.



When we arrived at the retreat centre Rajni didn't appear to be behaving as a BK sister would. Flailing her arms about, legs splayed out, poor Oriya and the most disrespectful forms of speech. Her plaited hair was disheveled and her white sari was dirty. Her eyes unfocussed and not making eye contact with anyone. Speaking, but not addressing anyone in particular. One of the brothers who had driven her here explained to me that this wasn't Rajni. The behaviour and speech was much more in keeping with the character of Mohan. **CLICK**

Mohan said, through Rajni. "I am a Kali Sadhak and have killed many people before. This time I tried to kill the sister-in-charge. I went to the temple and put Rajni's name in the skull of a virgin. First we take a skull and then think about someone with evil intent. Then whatever we do to the skull happens to the person. I burned the skull. I have done this before never failed. I went the next day to check she was dead, and she was conducting meditation class. I was angry she had not died according to my will. So, I went to the tribal area and found three mothers with small children sleeping in their arms. I took the infants, twisted their necks and then offered their bodies to Kālī. Then I drew the name of the sister on a piece of paper and wrote a mantra on it to kill her. I wrote it repeatedly all over the paper and did the practice required. The next day I went to see her dead at the centre and she was cooking. I couldn't understand her power. I had killed more than 300 people this way. That night I did special worship to Kali. I told my wife to bring a blade; I sliced my thigh, took the blood and offered it to Kali. Then later, after I had been out drinking, I was coming home on my bike. I didn't see the truck but then I was suddenly flying, flying, flying, through the air. I landed on my head. My back was broken at the waist, the left side of my head was damaged and my skull had a hole in it. Three people carried my body away in a truck. As I was flying through the air off my bike I knew my skull would break. I tried to kill her that same way. My death was like a curse on me because of my actions, and I know this is why I died.

Mohan kept repeating his story and eventually the BKs started to get bored. The BK brothers tried taunting Mohan, through ritualistic forms of purity. **CLICK Chanting 'om'** which is not normal BK practice, but was done in the early days and is still felt to hold special power. **Bringing out pictures** of the founder and founding members and making Mohan look at them. **Sitting in drishti meditation** with Mohan in the middle. All seemed to upset Mohan and cause him to yell out intricate Kali mantras in Sanskrit.

Kali



The next day we went to a local Tantric practitioner to exorcise Mohan who was also a kali sadhak. It was explained to me that Kālī's energy is fierce and it can be used for good or bad with equal strength, but each brings its own consequences. Unfortunately it is often used for bad. BKs accepted that because Mohan entered Rajni through Tantric means, so he must be removed with the same methods. Just like we're likely to return to the doctor who's diagnosed us with the flu, for our flu shot.

As we drove to the clinic and waited four hours for our turn, BKs were looking for ways to empower Rajni and disrupt Mohan. Mohan was not in Rajni continually. Every now and then he would leave and Rajni would collapse, exhausted. So the BKs experimented with ways to dispel Mohan: A sister removed her **RING** (symbols of purity) and placed it on Rajni's hand. Mohan complained that he was unable to do his internal Kali worship with the ring on. Two other sisters sitting in the car did the same. Seeing how it disturbed Mohan, the brothers promptly took their **BADGES** off and pinned them to Rajni's sari. In between, BKs would give Mohan **DRISHTI** to distress him. In the car with us as had a box of **TOLI**. Toli are sweets that have been cooked in Gods remembrance and then offered in a purity ritual. We fed Rajni some toli, as she hadn't eaten in three days. Mohan entered mid-bite and spat it out, ridiculing our attempts at giving Rajni pure food. There were clear attempt to maintain and protect Rajni's purity and efforts by Mohan to transgress her purity. As we were waiting Mohan, through Rajni's body, would secretly ask passerby's for goat meat and alcohol.

When we finally got into the clinic. The most elaborate part of the process was when the exorcist came in and asked us to lay Rajni down and to hold her arms and legs. He had a mix of ganges water, ash from Kali worship and black pepper in a spoon (standard mix for many such problems). However, this was not something to be swallowed. I held Rajni's legs down, a brother held her arms down. The Exorcist muttered a mantra while he was spooning the concoction into her nose. Another sister put her hand over Rajni's mouth so she would have to ultimately snort the mix up her nose. Evil souls enter through the nose, I was told, and so this is how they must also leave. This mix would repel the soul of Mohan. As soon as Rajni had sniffed the stuff up her nose, she jumped to her feet with every orifice in her face leaked. After that, there was a ritual with a flower that was supposed to draw the soul out from the nose. The ritual was interrupted and so the soul of Mohan became stuck in Rajni's nose. All of this happened to quickly and automatically, **with each person concurring the logic of the situation, that it was impossible to question its veracity.**

Diagnosis

- History (past relationship, cohesive story)
- Signs (behaviour, language, bodily position, not maintaining eye contact, constant talking)
- Symptoms (Rajni's distress, exhaustion)

Not one person in the clinic questioned the veracity of Rajni being possessed by another spirit. BKs accepted it, the Tantric practitioners accepted it, and the locals also accepted it. Later, even staff at my local university accepted it. No-one reasoned that Rajni was mentally unwell or that Rajni was complicit in any way. Neither was it considered to be a disease, but simply the invasion of an alien spirit. And the spirit had to be removed. Symptoms, diagnosis and treatment were all conducted with this reasoning, from a framework completely outside our western biomedical model.

History (past relationship, cohesive story)

Signs (behaviour differentials between Rajni and Mohan: bodily position, not maintaining eye contact, language, constant talking, knowledge of Mohan's personal life)

Symptoms (Rajni's distress and exhaustion)

Treatments and Cures

Local (Indigenous and faith-based)

- Organic products
- Ganges water
- Rituals
- Mantras
- Kali worship

Local (particular to Brahma Kumaris)

- Chanting
- Meditation
- Talismans
- Drishti
- Pure Food

Medical understanding and treatments



LOCAL: Herbs, Ganges water (pepper, ash), Tarbeej (herbs and talismanic), Mantras, Flower (objects of worship)

BK: Pictures of Dadi, Chanting, Meditation, Talismans (ring/ badge/ iron bolt), Pure food, Pure company (always flanked by BKs)

Symbols of spiritual power such as purity of place (being over the threshold of the ashram), purity of mind (Rajni's own ruminations, the collective chanting of "om" and establishing states of remembrance of Shiv Baba), talismanic symbols of purity (gold rings and badges), and pure food (which is seen as a way to maintain spiritual strength of the mind as well as the body), all served to safeguard Rajni against two threats: demise or death by Tantric Vidhya and impure acts performed through her body. Through thought, word, action, community, food and talismans, Rajni was protected against total subjugation from Mohan and his impure will.

Not once was Rajni's mental state questioned. Not once was she seen to be mentally unstable. This was seen as an external foe, by BKs, the staff and patients at the outpatient clinic, the local villagers, the staff at my local university, and even strangers of Orissa. Everyone was clear and so was I. In that context and embedded within that environment, the strangest phenomena take on a strong, cohesive logic that is reaffirmed by those around you.

Implications for Anthropology

- “Human spirituality transcends logic and rationality.” (Nelson, G.K. 1987. Cults, New Religions and Creativity. Cornwall, UK: T.J. Press Ltd., p. 11)
- “Strong objectivity is formed by working with insights from multiple standpoints.” (Harris, H.A. 2004. A theological approach. In Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings. London: Routledge, p. 77)
- To guard against using Western reductionist approaches as the yardstick by which peoples’ mystical experiences are measured.

When researching mystical experiences to remember that human rationalist transcends logic and rationality,

That strong objectivity is not only born from science, but is formed by working with insights from multiple standpoints.

And we have to continue to guard against using western reductionist approaches as the yardstick by which peoples’ mystical experiences are measured.

Thank you

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