



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Anthropology

SPIRIT POSSESSION: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION ON THE PRACTICE OF DEO-UTHA AMONG THE DEORIS OF ASSAM AND ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Spirit possession can be considered as a complex phenomenon found to be still in practice in many societies around the world. Anthropologists have spent long years of time conducting ethnographic field studies on spirit possession and possession-trance in different societies around the world. Belief in spirit possession and possession-trance are ancient and very widespread as seen in the historical and ethnographic records. Spirit possession in man is connected with religion and considered as religious and folk tradition which is a temporary and reversible phenomenon. Spirit possession is a phenomenon that is culture-bound i.e. it is intimately related to the beliefs, customs and attitudes of the particular cultural group in which it is found and is a purely emic term which contains "a meaning which believers themselves attached to what they believe happen during a spirit possession ritual. The "religious possession of spirits" is considered a benevolent entity and considered as an integral part of the Deori social system.

AN INTRODUCTION TO SPIRIT POSSESSION

Anthropologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists describe spirit possession as a wide variety of conditions where a person has undergone marked change of behavior. It refers to any complete but temporary domination of an alien power of known or unknown origin over a person's body who loses his mental and physical control and act strangely during possession. It is characterized by change in personality and unusual behavior, which can be interpreted as evidence that a person is under the direct control of an exterior mystical power. Symptoms of religious spirit possession include restlessness or unfamiliar movements, yelping, groaning and uttering disconnected or strange speech followed by unconsciousness.

Archaeo-anthropological study confirms that the inhabitants of the Early Stone Age had a conception of demon-ridden outer space; fear of the unknown, the strange and the horrific. In ancient New Eastern Religions (Middle East) and in the Abrahamic religious, a demon is considered a harmful spiritual unit which may cause demonic possession, calling for an exorcism. In the Middle Ages, spirit possession was described as mental illness and was considered to be the result of sin. Shamans and local priests were the experts in the treatment and management of spirit possession in individuals. The task of separating a mad man from a possessed person fell into the hands of a medical theologian, lawyer, or physician. In early modern Europe, a spirit-possessed by an individual was considered as being bewitched and the possessed individual was considered as a victim, judged as innocent.

In social sciences possession refers to a state wherein an individual experience being taken over or occupied or controlled by an external force, which then controls or changes that individual's actions and identity. In anthropological literature, spirit possession is a wide category referring to a culturally patterned and accepted mode of being. Lewis opines that individual's will along with societal structure are the root causes of possession and it is impossible to recognize the behaviour of the possessed individual without understanding the socio-cultural context around. Both spirit possession and dissociative trance/possession disorder share a good number of phenomenological and behavioural characteristics, which helps us to differentiate deliberateness, suffering, impairment, help-seeking behaviour and idiom. The relation between possession states and dissociative trance is a matter of debate between clinicians and researchers. The universalist argues that, by virtue of the phenomenological cohesion, these two concepts bear similarities in connotations; while the relativists argue that possession and

dissociative trance possession must be understood in respect to their socio-cultural context, on their own terms.

Spirit possession is a phenomenon that is culture-bound i.e. it is intimately related to the beliefs, customs and attitudes of the particular cultural group in which it is found and is a purely emic term which contains "a meaning which believers themselves attached to what they believe happen during a spirit possession ritual. An anthropological definition refers to spirit possession to rituals "in which one, or a few, or even several, of the participants in a public ritual behave in ways which believers interpret as signifying that 'spirits' haven taken 'possession' of them." Both spirit possessions and dissociative trance are often interpreted explicitly as a deliberately induced phenomenon. Moreover, spirit possession does not always associate with illness. Hence, there is no single operational definition to describe both as they are dependent on local conceptions of 'normative' behavior.

Erika Bourguignon (1976) a leading anthropological scholar presented a cross-cultural analysis on spirit possession; possession beliefs and behaviours. in her book Possession. After surveying a world-wide sample of 488 societies across, she analysed the wide range of possession phenomena into two types - 'possession trance' and 'possession', and in both types a person's personality has changed. Possession trance is expressed in altered states of consciousness but in case of possession, such trance states are absent. Spirit possession is considered as positive when it heals mental and social disorders; and considered to be negative when it causes serious problems to mental health and social conditions of a person or a group of persons. It can also be indeterminate as it has both positive and negative involvements over time. Spirit possession can be defined as the inner seizing of occupation of a person by an external personality, a god, a spirit or another power, where this person's independence is to a large extent or totally deactivated (Daxelmuller, 1979).

In 1993, Leslie Sharp conducted a research project in a migrant town in north-west Madagascar and acknowledged the existence of "possession sickness" or "harmful spirit possession" in the sense that people also attribute the etiology of varied illnesses to spirit possession. The symptoms include chronic headaches, dizziness, loss of appetite, persistent stomach pains, sore neck, back, or limbs, etc. A form of possession known as njarininty was considered as a grave illness with symptoms that include shaking and chill, uncontrollable screaming and crying, loss of memory and mental confusion. Adeline Masquelier (2001) opines that the indications of possession are not free-floating signs; while the symptoms are embodied, they cannot be isolated and

extracted from the social reality through which they are experienced. (Igreja, V.2018).

Lewis (2003) in his book "Ecstatic Religion" expresses spirit possession as a subject for enquiry and links religious and contemporary theories to formulate an experimental and influential 'Social- structural model to make distinction between central and peripheral possession. He opined that spirit possession and trance states bring about benefits for the affected individuals as well as to maintain social structure within shared local meanings, which serves in maintaining the 'moral order'.

In different religious mythologies, 'spirit possession' is considered as a religious phenomenon and its core idea lies with the possible communication between divine beings and humans. The spirit possession can be roughly divided into 'positive', in which a spirit or deity enters into the body of an individual, resulting in sudden personality changes that are culturally evaluated to be positive, including oracular experience, and 'negative', in which a spirit, ghost or demon, etc. enters into the body of an individual, resulting disease, ailment, upset, sickness or illness.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the role of religion in the Deori social-cultural life.
- To understand the social implications and importance of spirit possession in Deori society.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study has been carried out by interviewing different informants from the field. The research is an analytical study based on both primary and secondary data which has been collected by undertaking field study and from other sources, documented in the reference section.

The People

The Deoris call themselves "Jimo-chayyan"; meaning the children of the Sun and Moon. The word Deori has three parts, Deo - meaning great or respectful, ow - meaning male and ri - meaning female. The Deoris are considered as one of the major scheduled tribes of Assam. They belong to the greater Bodo group of people. Racially they are Mongoloids and linguistically belong to Tibeto - Burman family. They are considered as one of the priestly class people since time immemorial.

Sir Edward Gaits refers to the Deoris as one of the priestly class people during the Chutiya reign, who worshipped Goddess Kundi-mama or Gira-Girachi. History reveals that since the Chutiya and the Ahom reign the Deoris were considered as one of the priestly class people, who performed religious rituals and works for the kings and commoners. It is a fact that during the early part of the Chutiya and the Ahom reign there were no caste Hindu priests as such and hence the Deoris were regarded as the priestly class people of that period with high admiration.

In the holy scripts of KalikaPuran and Yogini Tantra, it is mentioned that since the early 16th century, the Deoris have been worshipping the Burha-Burhi (Shiva-Parvati) temple, Tameswari or Kechaikhati temple, Baliababa(Shiva) temple and Patarshaal temple, presently in Sadiya, a sub-division under Tinsukia district of Assam. The Deoris have been further divided into four sub-divisions or Phoids or Khels; the Dibongiyas, the Tengaponiyas, the Borgoyas, and the Patorgoyas. The last Khel is reported to be extinct.

Presently the Deoris are found in the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Charaideo, Jorhat, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and Sonitpur in Assam. A good number of Deori villages are also found in the districts of Lohit and Changlang in Arunachal Pradesh. According to the 2001 census, the total population of

Deoris is 2, 45,000 with 133 revenue villages.

The presence of spirits and the threat of possession are facts of life of the Deoris of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The "religious possession of spirits" is considered a benevolent entity, which reorganises the social system. Religious spirit possession or deo-utha is a religious ritualistic observance and practices, which can bring peace and prosperity to the villagers and also diminishes the erroneous actions happening within.

Most psychiatrists, psychologists, and anthropologists have emphasized the similarities between cases of the possession type and diagnostic entities recognized in the West, such as multiple personality and hysteria. Accordingly, they tend to use phrases such as "possession syndrome" and "hysterical possession." They also, in varying degrees, offer motivational explanations of the condition that depict it as beneficial to the affected person in improving his status and perhaps resolving internal and external conflicts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Deo-Utha And Its Significance In Deori Society

Deo-utha is a unique religious practice, wherein the Deoris accept that by inviting the deo (unseen supernatural power), peace and harmony can be maintained in the society. It is a religious practice through which deo enters into the human body to perform religious activities. This unique religious belief and practice has been observed by the Deoris since time immemorial. This is generally performed in Magh and Bohagbihu. Sometimes, if any unfavourable incidents occur, the deo by himself decides to come down to earth and pass on the preventative thoughts as to how to save oneself from harm and evil strikes.

The Deo has a predominant position in the socio-religious life of the Deoris and is highly admired by them. They believe that the deo has both the power and ability to protect villagers from calamities and evil strikes and as well as can devastate villages. It also has the power through which it treats and cures many diseases. But the primary aim of inviting the deo is to reinstate peace in the earth and to listen to fore tales so that precautionary measures can be taken in advance. Formalities are observed and performed by the priests to invite the unseen deo. The villagers and priests first meet at the thanghar or deo-sal or goshani-sal (temple) and discuss the matter of inviting the deo. If they agree, the villagers offer a common oblation or sorai in the name of the deo at the thanghar and formally pray for the deo to visit the village. The sorai offered contains two pairs of betel nut and leaf, mahprasad, kecchapitha, flowers and a fowl. The priests then offer the sorai by sacrificing the fowl in the name of the deo by reciting some traditional mantras known as deo mantra. All the main four priests (Chari Deori) namely Bor Deori, Saru Deori, Bor Bharali and Saru Bharali of thanghar recite the mantras simultaneously to gratify the unseen deity. It is believed that these four Deoris have exceptional powers to converse with the deity.

After completion of the formal invitation, if the deo agrees to come down, it selects an individual to exist in to perform its duties, 4/5 days before bihu so that the villagers could make the necessary arrangement. Usually a normal individual (male or female) who is generally dirt free and abstains from bad activities is chosen by deo. As it enters into the body of an individual, he/she starts to exhibit some unorthodox and abnormal behaviours many a time during a day, like sometimes speaking loudly followed by keeping silent, loving to stay alone, visiting the thanghar at any time and entering without the permission of the priests, verifying the thanghar belongings, directing the priests to perform duties systematically, spending sleepless nights, etc. These symptoms signify the existence of deo within the individual.

As the family members confirm about the existence of the deo

within the family member, they immediately offer a sorai at the thanghar and request the deo not to be annoyed with themselves and their service. They start offering separate cooking items and offer new clothes to deo from that very day. According to their traditional custom, the family members without delay arrange a ritual called ghar-deo, because failing to observe this ritual within a day or so can lead to unnecessary situations like departing from the deo, partial psychological problem to the possessed person and even harm to the family etc. Ghar-deo is generally observed to gratify their household deity and forefather, and convey the message of possession of unseen power to their family members and seek blessing from them.

After the ceremonial ritual the deo exhibits normal behavior. Deo then visits the thanghar and informs the priests about his plan. During the possession of unseen power, the individual refrains from all household activities, sharing of bed room, common diet is forbidden.

On the eve of bihu, the deo with the help of thanghar priests notify the villagers to assemble at the thanghar premise on the Wednesday morning as Deori bihu generally starts from the first Wednesday of Bohag and Magh months of local Assamese calendar. In the morning the deo takes a trip of the village with a branch of a bamboo and informs the villagers to assemble at the thanghar premises and accordingly the villagers gather at the thanghar wearing clean white clothes like dhoti, shirt and gamucha by male folk while the womenfolk wear mekhella, chaddar, riha, and gamucha and performs bihu dance. As the deo reaches the thanghar, the villagers' kneel down in front of the thanghar, the priests' thanghar starts chanting deo-mantra or deo-dhwani. The deo first takes bath and wear new clothes such as dhoti, chaddar and gamucha by male and chaddar, gamucha and mekhela around the waist by female and then enters the thanghar, chants some deo-mat (code language used by the unseen deity) and blesses the noble gathering. As the blessing part gets over, the performance of bihu dance restarts. The villagers then make four separate groups consisting of boys, girls, elderly male and elderly female members who perform bihu dance. The deo along with the villagers participate in the bihu dance celebration and supervise the performance for 2/3 hours and after that deo becomes unconscious, commonly known as deo-pora, which means possession of unseen power ends for that day. The same sequence is repeated on the next day and on the third day after performing the bihu at the thanghar premise; the villagers with the help of the priests offer a sorai to the deo and request to reveal the fore tale. The deo then enters into the thanghar and chants some deo mantra and tries to communicate with the outer world to get the forecast. In this process the deo exhibits some strange physical expression like shaking of the body, head, hands and legs and sometimes faints for a few minutes and recovers. After finishing the religious action with the outer world, the deo comes back and sits in front of the villagers and reveals the fore tale and also advises them to take precautionary measures. Fore tale is generally made on floods, drought and other natural calamities to take place in the near future. The villagers sincerely listen to the sayings of the deo and seek clarification of queries if they have any. The deo also answers the queries of the villagers. As the conversation comes to an end, the deo blesses the august audience and gets unconscious, which means the deo has left the person's body. The villagers at the end of the function kneel down in front of the thanghar and pray to the deo to visit next year again.

CONCLUSION

For social scientists, the study of spirit possession presents a complex challenge. The concept of spirit possession reveals an unnecessary division that can be better understood when both categories of phenomena are seen as disruption of agency. This perspective allows us to develop a common understanding of these experiences that takes into account

their socio-cultural context. From the above study, it is clearly understood that the deo-utha practice has a great significance and importance in the socio-religious life of the Deoris. It also helps in uniting the members of the society because they highly admire the deo. Thus, religion as a social institution helps the Deoris to maintain their age-old customs and group solidarity. The belief in their deities and deo-utha practice makes the Deoris unique from the rest of the local caste and tribal communities of Assam.

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