EXPEL THE LOVER, RECOVER THE WIFE: SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS OF A SOUTH INDIAN EXORCISM

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This article questions prevailing anthropological explanations of the propensity of young Tamil wives to be possessed by demons. Symbolic analysis of the relationships between these demons and their victims in the context of exorcism suggests that the deeper issues addressed in episodes of spirit possession concern cultural interpretations of female alienation. Far from providing an opportunity to protest their powerlessness, participation in these trance-inducing rites forces women to confess to illicit romantic fantasies. Their 'therapy', such as it is, consists of exorcising those sentiments and re-establishing a sense of self congruent with their marital responsibilities and cultural expectations of the 'good wife'.

Introduction

The tendency for women to predominate in spirit possession cults has been a continuing locus of anthropological discussion ever since Lewis (1971) offered a cross-cultural explanation of female participation in what he called 'peripheral possession'. He argued that spirit possession, often indigenously considered a form of illness caused by amoral spirits, affords women and other marginal or subordinate individuals a safe outlet for protesting their 'status deprivation' (1966; 1971).

'This model and its assumptions', Boddy has recently pointed out, 'guided a generation of scholarship' and was applied in many parts of the world (1994: 410). Following Lewis, some anthropologists have interpreted the propensity for new brides in North India to be afflicted with 'ghost-possession' (Freed & Freed 1993) as a means of obtaining redress within the Hindu patriarchal order (Freed & Freed 1964; Harper 1963; but see Skultans 1997). They propose, for instance, that exorcisms are perfect opportunities for Indian wives to resist their powerless roles in their new families, because whatever rights the women demand during these curing rites can be attributed to their spirits. Fuller recently has endorsed this argument: 'women's possession episodes are also culturally tolerated opportunities to complain about female inferiority and subordination within Indian society' (1992: 233). And in her research on the Mukkuvars, a Catholic fishing people in the Tamil district of Kanyakumari, Ram argues that demonic possession enables women to reinterpret 'dominant' symbolic constructs of the female body and sexuality and 'challenge the daily discipline of living within the confines of respectable femininity' (1991: 93).

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Based upon exorcism rituals which I documented on twenty-four occasions in the South Arcot district of Tamilnadu in South India in 1990-91, this article casts doubt on this widespread explanation that a major function of Hindu 'ghosts'—known in Tamil as peys—is to express women’s dissatisfaction with husbands, in-laws or female roles. Nor does my research on Tamil exorcisms support the three alternative interpretations of female demonic possession which have stemmed from the ethnography of nearby Sri Lanka. The first, proposed by Kapferer, argues that 'women ... are subject to demonic attack as a function of their cultural typification, which places them in a special and significant relation to the demonic' (1991: 128). For example, Sinhalese women take part in polluting activities such as cooking, disposal of the dead, menstruation and childbirth which expose them to impure and potentially malevolent forces. They also attract demons because they are viewed, and view themselves, as sharing certain personality traits with such beings. Much like demons, women are more prone to 'emotional disturbance and excess, attachment to persons and relationships born of this world [and are seen] as being more engaged in the pursuit of worldly desires, and as being mentally weak' (1991: 140). And finally, women's mediating position between the Sinhalese Buddhist poles of nature and culture makes them structurally 'weak and vulnerable to disorder' (1991: 147).

At first blush much of Kapferer’s reasoning seems consonant with the explanations of my Tamil informants. Both women and men agreed that women are more susceptible to being 'caught' by demons because of an inherent weakness attributed to their impurity, as women are especially likely to be 'caught' by demons while menstruating (also see Bharathi 1993: 345; Caplan 1989: 55; Mosse 1986: 474). It was also said that women are mentally and emotionally deficient and more susceptible to the fear (payam) which, in South Asia, is thought to strip the self of protection against malevolent powers (Caplan 1989: 55; Kapferer 1991: 71; Scott 1991: 96; Trawick 1990: 190).

But the argument that cultural representations of women predispose them to possession fails to explain why, at least in Tamilnadu, it is not women as a whole but predominantly new brides who are most at risk. Of all my cases of demonic possession, twenty involved women who had married within the past six years (see also Mosse 1986: 473). Such statistics might be understood by invoking the Tamil belief that 'the odour of sexual activity ... [is] said to be particularly strong and attractive to demons in the period immediately after marriage' (Ram 1991: 90). But this would not explain why, of my sample of twenty young brides so afflicted, sixteen had run away from their husbands. It is true that here, too, the Tamils have a ready-made interpretation. From their perspective, the spirits known as peys cause the gravest psychic disorders, inducing victims to reject their spouses. But to formulate an explanation based solely on such beliefs runs the risk of making us blind to the social practices and ritual processes which actually enact this discourse. When we link such representations and actions to the lives of the women in question we discover a deeper layer of causes and motivations.

The nature of the relationship between culture and the individual is addressed by Obeyesekere, the second major researcher on demonic possession in Sri Lanka. His premiss is that demons in any society belong to a class of cultural
mented on twenty-four occasions in south India in 1990-91, this article explores the role of Hindu exorcises to women's dissatisfaction with their husbands. Based on my research on Tamil exorcisms and the ethnography of nearby Sri Lanka. The first, younger Sinhalese women are subject to demonic attack as a rite of passage which places them in a special and significant role. For example, Sinhalese women are ritually made impure and potentially malevolent beings. Much like demons, they are viewed, and view themselves, as being more weak and vulnerable to demonic influences because of an inherent weakness and are treated as being mentally weak' (1991: 345; Caplan 1989: 55; Stirrat 1992: 111; 1990: 190). However, field reports from Sri Lanka. For at the core of Tamil demonic possession is control over marital sexuality. Here is a discourse which charges women with being disenchanted with conjugal life, surrendering to fantasies of extra-marital intimacy and jeopardizing the reproduction of their husbands' families. I will argue that it is the function of exorcisms to force women publicly to repudiate this behaviour and to recommit themselves to the cultural expectations of a 'good wife' (cumankali).

On pëys and their environment

The term pëy derives from the Sanskrit preta, meaning 'departed'. It refers to spirits of human beings who, from the moment of death until they are ritually enabled to join their ancestors in the other world ten or sixteen days later, remain in a limbo, neither members of the society of the living nor that of the dead (Blackburn 1988: 217; Reiniche 1975: 182). But throughout Tamilnadu the word pëy usually characterizes the spirits of people who remain indefinitely in this liminal state because they met an 'untimely' (ahalamaranar) death, an inauspicious (turmaranam) fate which prevented their transit into the hereafter (see also Caplan 1989). The German Lutheran missionary Ziegenbalg was not mistaken when he wrote in 1713 that 'those men who die by their own hands' are particularly prone to become 'evil spirits, called Peggel' (1984: 152). Of the demons I tape-recorded during exorcist rituals, one had been murdered and six spoke of bus or train collisions. But fifteen, the majority, told of hanging or drowning themselves. Equally interesting was the fact that virtually all of the suicides had suffered from what my field assistant, in English, called 'love failure'. These pëys had taken their own lives due to an unrequited passion or because relatives had opposed their marriage plans.

symbols which are invested with subjective significance in order to articulate psychological conflicts (1981). From his perspective, demonic possession is a culturally-constituted idiom available to women for expressing and managing their personal problems (1970; 1977). His argument has the merit of presenting culture as created and recreated through individual agency (Stirrat 1992: 111). Yet, my research does not suggest that the production of Tamil culture is such a creative endeavour. As we will see, Tamil women are taught, even pressured, to frame their personal predicaments in the idiom of demonic possession.

My analysis is closer to that of Stirrat, the third major ethnographer of demonic possession in Sri Lanka. At Kudagama, a Sinhalese Catholic shrine which specializes in exorcism, he notes that demonic possession is 'primarily concerned with attempts to impose power over others, particularly young women' (1992: 112). His conclusion is based on the fact that individuals defined as possessed often exhibit not merely symptoms of physiological illness but a 'whole series of problems' which include 'odd behaviour' and 'irresponsible sexual attraction' (1992: 112-13; 1977: 138). To Stirrat, the diagnosis of demonic possession and subsequent exorcisms allow close relatives of the possessed person to reassert their authority within the domestic unit.

We will see how Tamil exorcist rituals force women to talk about their distress through metaphors and symbols which legitimize the power of those in authority. However, the field of power relations evoked by this ritual appears less broad than Stirrat reports from Sri Lanka. For at the core of Tamil demonic possession is control over marital sexuality. Here is a discourse which charges women with being disenchanted with conjugal life, surrendering to fantasies of extra-marital intimacy and jeopardizing the reproduction of their husbands' families. I will argue that it is the function of exorcisms to force women publicly to repudiate this behaviour and to recommit themselves to the cultural expectations of a 'good wife' (cumankali).
Stranded in this world, their limbo-like time on earth after death remains dominated by an unrelenting yearning to fulfi their frustrated desires for sexual intimacy. This appears to be their driving obsession, and this is why they stalk and ‘catch’ (piit) the living. Pey’s do not seem to be compelled to possess people, as the missionary Caldwell (1984) believed, because of a hatred of human beings, nor, as Caplan more recently put it, out of ‘anger’ (1989: 55). All my informants – specialists, lay people, and the spirits themselves – were unanimous that peys are motivated by ‘love’ (anpu) and ‘lust’ (acai).?

While twenty-two out of the twenty-four peys encountered were male, the reason for inactivity on the part of the female untimely dead seemed obvious to my informants. ‘They are too shy to catch people’. Furthermore, I was told, women have the power of self-control: after death they behave with the same modesty that guides their conduct when alive. Since peys are predominantly young males craving for intimacy, young women are their favoured prey.

Symbols of sexual passion are strongly suggested in my informants’ descriptions of the landscapes in which peys carry out their attacks. When I heard that peys continue to hover around the place of their death, I asked for topographical specifics and was told that these spirits had perished in inauspicious haunts, in a zone which people call taricu nilam, or the ‘wasteland’ (also katu, or ‘forest’). Rarely was this landscape given any more specific identification, for it was said that such ‘fallow’ and ‘dry’ land could be found anywhere beyond the periphery of the settled community (see also Caplan 1989: 55; Mosse 1986: 471). Caldwell noted in 1849 that the Nadars of the Tinnevelly District believed peys occupied ‘unhabited wastes’ and ‘shady retreats’ (1984: 163; see also Dumont 1986: 451). The association of these spirits with wilderness perhaps clarifies why the term pey, as Oppert discerned in 1893, can also be glossed as ‘wild or obnoxious plants’ (1893: 559; cited in Caplan 1989: 53).

Sometimes this forbidding territory is depicted with imagery symbolic of the demon’s untimely death: a pool of stagnant water where he originally drowned, or a tamarind tree from which he hanged himself. The hardy tamarind tree has natural and cultural properties which make it especially compatible with such an unseasonable landscape, for it thrives even during severe droughts, and is classified in Tamil folk taxonomy as ‘sour’ and ‘inauspicious’.

It was within this desolate landscape that virtually all my informants imagined peys to launch their attacks. They also concurred that the timing of the attacks is at high noon, when there is maximum heat and light. Their victims are usually travelling ‘alone’ outside their community: or as I heard more than once. ‘The girl gets caught on her way to the fields’ (also see Dumont 1986: 451).

These images appear to derive from Tamil aesthetic conventions of considerable antiquity. I refer to the last of the five categories of landscape described in Tamil love poetry (akam) compiled between the first and third centuries A.D (Hart 1979; Ramanujan 1967; Shanmugam Pillai & Ludden 1976). Named palai after an ironwood tree characteristic of this arid country, this fifth landscape was glossed as ‘wasteland’ (Ramanujan 1967: 105). To evoke its barrenness, the classical Tamil poets used phrases such as ‘dried springs’ and ‘stagnant water’ (Ramanujan 1967: 105). Even the key metaphor for this landscape, the palai, a leafy tree with the same characteristics as the tamarind, was aptly chosen, for, as
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'palai', the fifth landscape, this 'wasteland' landscape evoked their 'separation' and, according to Ramanujan, connoted 'the hardships of the lover away from his girl, but also the elopement of the couple, their hardships on the way and their separation from their parents' (1967: 106).

Transposed to the equivalent landscape of pey aggression described by my informants, similar meanings seem to prevail. When describing the typical scenario of a pey attack, exorcists and lay people alike embroider it with seductive connotations and emphasize how gorgeous the victim looks. The initial contact of demons with their prey is strongly visual and erotic: in broad daylight the pey can clearly see the girl's beautiful skin daubed with turmeric paste and vermilion powder, her hair dressed with flowers.  

Once seduced by her allure, in a lonely place, the demon 'touches' her. Startled, the woman grows 'fearful', an emotional state which, as noted above, leaves the self open to malevolent forces. And so the demon is able to 'catch' his girl and, according to my informants, he does so by 'sitting' on her head, the locus of sanity driving her half-crazy before 'entering' her body through a lock of hair.

Much like the lovers in akam poetry, the demon-pey then elopes with 'his girl', forcing her to separate mentally and physically from her community, especially from her husband. For it is well understood that pey 'not only sexually enjoy their victims' but also prevent normal conjugal sexual relations, inciting wives to 'kick' and 'bite' their husbands to keep them at bay. And since a woman's liaison with a pey is also said to make her barren, the husband is deprived not only of legitimate control over his wife's sexuality, but of her fertility as well. Thus if the couple is ever to resume a 'normal' life, it is necessary to conduct the ritual which 'makes the spirit run away' (pey ottutal).

How Shanti was 'caught'

Here I must stress that in actual day-to-day life the production of a cultural symbol such as pey is never as straightforward as the foregoing synthesis from dozens of ethnographic interviews might suggest. When we turn to the personal histories of Tamil women involved in demonic possession, we discover that the creation of such a symbol almost always depends upon the specifics of family and marital tensions and the women's biographies. To illustrate how crucial these social and psychological dynamics are to the making of a pey I will describe the case of Shanti.  

Shanti was a frail, high-caste (Mutaliyar) woman in her early twenties who grew up in a village near the town of Salem. When she was four years old her father left home to start a new family with his second wife. The sole offspring from his first marriage, she was raised by her mother and paternal grandmother.
At seventeen, while attending the wedding of a relative, her soft, attractive looks caught the attention of a widower fifteen years her elder. He proposed marriage and she accepted. As Shanti told me, 'He did not ask much in terms of a dowry. My mother was poor. As for my father, he was relieved to give me away, for he was saving for the marriage of his two younger daughters'.

After her wedding Shanti moved to Madras where her husband worked as a government clerk. She described the misery that followed: 'He would come home drunk, irritable, quarrelling over any small thing. I cried every night. Tears would flow and there was no stopping them'. Eight months later Shanti ran away. Back in her village she resumed her old job in a puffed-rice factory. But when her mother died six months later, Shanti's father sent her back to her husband, where life was little better than before. But she did make a few friends and began 'to go to the cinema'. It was around then that she first experienced her mood swings: 'One day I would be drowsy and could not bring myself to get up. Yet the next morning I would be giddy and restless'. She rejected her husband's sexual overtures and soon they were no longer speaking. She became increasingly withdrawn, lost her appetite and, most critically, 'lost interest in life'. Alarmtracted by her physical deterioration and sullen disposition, her mother's younger sister took Shanti to a suburb of the city for a consultation with a diviner. His trance-diagnosis attributed Shanti's trouble to a pêy.

The sequence of events which led to this diagnosis was typical of my cases and followed the pattern noted by Stirrat in Sri Lanka (1992; 1977). 'First', he writes, 'there is some sort of abnormal behaviour' (1992: 104). In Tamilnadu the women also behaved in a way that struck their kin as being odd or inappropriate: they were withdrawn, apathetic, anaemic, aggressive, incoherent and barren (see also Dumont 1986: 450) and, like Shanti, often refused to have sexual intercourse with their husbands and fled from their sight. Such behaviours, immediately indexed to pêys, precipitated what Stirrat calls 'suspicions of possession' by close relatives - usually parents but also siblings, spouses and in-laws (1992: 105).

At this point the women sometimes confirmed these suspicions, spontaneously entering trance, 'dancing' like demons and even speaking from the demons' perspective. But since few pêys were bold enough to entrance their victims, their influence was only expressed through the other symptoms I have mentioned (see also Stirrat 1992: 101). The next step was to seek out a diviner (either male or female) who generally verified that they were indeed under a demon's sway. Usually the women seemed to accept this explanation with passivity or resignation. Whether or not they fully understood the ramifications of this diagnosis, from that point on they were forced to think of their distress within the context of demonic possession.

Their relatives now began ceaselessly to conjecture how, when and where the possession occurred. They would not construct this scenario in a vacuum, but drew on well-established collective representations. For, as Mosse observed among Christian communities of the Ramnad district, the basic plot of these retrospective accounts typically included the identification of 'some pre-existing condition of vulnerability to demonic attack' and the 'frightening incident' which resulted (1986: 473). For instance, people told me how a possession must have happened on such-and-such a day when the woman was sent alone to
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relatives accompanying them anxiously consulted exorcists who
'ritual. In short, from the moment a woman was diagnosed with possession, she
'was 'caught' in an encompassing discourse. In this process her demon was
The ritual of 'making the demon run away'
The ritual to exorcize the untimely dead has received relatively little treatment
in the South Indian ethnographic literature. The only general reference seems
to be that of Caplan, who writes in 'Tamilnadu
with a variety of ritual techniques to
deal with possessory peey. Among the most common, is the 'god-dancer' (samadi), a shaman-
like figure who becomes a medium for the Goddess, who then drives out the
peey either by appeasing it with a sacrifice or threatening it with her superior power, or both (1989: 66,
citing Moffat 1979: 241-2).
Those specialists who regularly embody and 'dance' Hindu Goddesses - deities such as Kali and Ankalaparamécuvári, who are known throughout South
India to combat the forces of evil - are undoubtedly the prototypical exorcists
in Tamilnadu. But in this article I introduce another, neglected category of
healers, for in the South Arcot district at least troupes of male ritual musicians
known as pampaikkarar are also empowered to drive out demons,7
The structure of their exorcist operations clearly differs from that of the
mediums whom Caplan describes, for these musicians never 'dance' the God-
Instead, they sing and beat percussion instruments in order to induce the
possessed woman into a state of trance. Her 'dance' (attam) then dissolves the
normal boundaries between supernaturals and human beings, providing the
musicians with direct verbal communication with her possessing demon.
All the exorcisms of this type which I recorded were carried out on new
moon days on the funeral grounds immediately adjacent to the
Ankalaparamécuvári temple in the South Arcot town of Mél Malaiyánür.8 This
is the site at which the Goddess is said to have cured Lord Siva of his madness
at the same lunar juncture. Much like the Mahanubhav temple studied by
Skultans in the state of Maharashtra, this divine precedent for curing madness
has turned the Malaiyánür temple into a 'healing centre ... for spiritual afflictions, in particular, those which give rise to mental illness' (1987: 663).
Whenever they are contracted to expel peys, the Mél Malaiyánür musicians
hold a preliminary invocation at the entrance of the Ankalaparamécuvári
temple, to notify, or more exactly 'to warn' (ecein) the demon of what is coming. They alert the pêy 'to meet' them later in the day on the temple funeral ground. Usually, the pêy immediately responds to the drum beats by 'dancing' his willingness to co-operate; speaking through his victim's mouth, he promises to show up on condition that he be given a 'life' (that is, a sacrifice). At the conclusion of this 'warning' the woman usually drops to the ground in a faint. Then the musicians have her relatives purchase offerings that pêys are known to relish: puffed rice, cigars, arrack, toddy, bread, cooked rice, dry fish and the chicken to be sacrificed.

At the appointed place and time, the actual exorcism begins with a delimitation of ritual space. Drawing a circle on the ground, the musicians position the woman in the centre, facing east. The aim is to 'tie down' her possessing demon, for, as one of these specialists emphasized, 'once inside this circle the pêy cannot escape'. With the family and onlookers standing watchfully behind them, the musicians divide into two groups, framing the enclosure with the young woman inside.

After securing divine protection (kâppu) through a formulaic invocation to the great Hindu gods and key deities of the local pantheon, the lead singer throws all his vocal energy and talent into inducing the woman into a state of trance. First and foremost, he must establish the identity of the unwelcome personality now lodged within her body. He tries to cajole from the demon his or her name, gender, ancestral village, caste membership, age, marital status, number of children, and the ominous circumstances of 'bad death' which left him or her wandering in unfulfilment and yearning (also see Mosse 1986: 479): 'Whether you are king, minister, or governor (tuticâmi)', he may sing, addressing the pêy directly and using a mockingly exaggerated tone of deference, 'open your golden mouth and please speak up. Where did you catch her? Dance and tell me your name, we have removed the gag over your mouth. Please speak up!'

Often, the musicians must play for many tiring hours before achieving contact with the pêy. No matter how many compliments, sermons or threats are issued, spirits are in no hurry to speak or dance. Meanwhile, the afflicted woman usually stands awkwardly, hands clasped and eyes downcast. This behaviour is striking in light of the fact that she had probably 'danced' readily during the initial phase of the ritual. Perhaps that earlier moment had only formulaic value, for a spirit's demands for a sacrifice require little psychological effort; a sacrifice is what a pêy invariably wants. By contrast, the pêy is now expected to reveal its true and unique identity, a confession which entails a complex investment on the part of the possessed woman.

From this point onwards there is no going back. As Stirrat notes in Sri Lanka, 'once defined as possessed ... the subject has little alternative but to go through the rituals of the shrine' (1992: 106). A woman brought to Mêl Maliyañê to be exorcized is, similarly, 'exposed to extreme forms of pressure' (Stirrat 1992: 105; see also 1977: 140-1). Surrounding by the five musicians who closely monitor all her movements, she is incessantly and aggressively urged to dance and speak. To accelerate her entrancement, she is instructed to stare at a burning camphor flame. Lime juice is frequently squeezed around her face and upper body, for 'lime contains the essence of the goddess; it scares the pêy and makes it speak'. As Mosse observed at a Christian healing shrine in Ramnad, if
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As the woman eventually begins to sway and roll her head from side to side, the musicians immediately close in and quicken their cadence. Her gyrations accelerate, her braid loosens so that her hair swings wildly. Now that she is fully entranced, the singer may begin to interrogate her péy. Here I offer an excerpt from the exchange between Shanti’s demon and the Mél Malaiyanur musicians in mid-July 1991.

Halting the music, the singer addressed the spirit in everyday speech.

‘WHO ARE YOU?’

‘I don’t know’, answered the péy.

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‘But the singer was relentless.

‘WHO ARE YOU? Male or female?’

‘At ‘male’, the péy nodded timidly. But the musician insisted upon a verbal response.

‘Male or female?’, he repeated.

‘Male’.

‘What is your name?’

‘When the spirit gave no reply, the musician shifted to a more humorous register. At least you could say something – “Donkey”, for instance!’

Laughter came from the gathering cluster of onlookers. As if setting aside the crucial question of identity for the moment, the singer then ventured the second most common query which even a foreigner to Tamilnadu hears regarding identity.

‘What is your ancestral home?’

‘I am from Tiruppur’.

‘Where is that?’

‘Near Salem’.

‘And your caste?’

‘Why do you care?’

‘How old are you?’,

‘Twenty-two’.

Suddenly, the singer repeated the central question to the spirit, as if trying to catch it unawares.

‘WHAT IS YOUR NAME?’

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Again the musician confronted the spirit, but now trying a different line of questioning.

‘How did you die?’

‘I hanged myself.’

‘On what kind of tree?’

‘A tamarind.’

‘Why did you hang yourself?’

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‘So you died. But you must have had a name. What was it?’

‘Yes, they gave me a name. But I don’t know it.’

‘Come on, the people here will thrash you. Tell me your name and I’ll arrange a proper funeral marriage (karumai kalyānam).’

‘Will you arrange for my marriage?’

‘Yes, I promise.’

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these procedures are of no avail there is ‘an escalation of verbal abuse and physical violence directed at the péy’ (1986: 479). Finally, the woman may be subjected to other pressures as well. The drums often induce nearby devotees to ‘dance’ the Goddess. These dancers wend their way towards the exorcism scene and assert the divine authority of their embodied Goddess over the demon by grabbing the woman’s hair, pulling her to the ground and attempting to beat the péy out of her body.

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‘I hanged myself.’

‘On what kind of tree?’

‘A tamarind.’

‘Why did you hang yourself?’

‘Why did you hang yourself?’

‘So you died. But you must have had a name. What was it?’

‘Yes, they gave me a name. But I don’t know it.’

‘Come on, the people here will thrash you. Tell me your name and I’ll arrange a proper funeral marriage (karumai kalyānam).’

‘Will you arrange for my marriage?’

‘Yes, I promise.’

‘My name is Shankar.’
All pêys whose testimonies I recorded swore initially that they did not know who they were. But, as we have just seen, biographical details and personal names do eventually emerge. Yet after examining a number of my transcripts, it dawned on me that the pêys seemed actually to be constructing their identities by patching together vital statistics from their victims’ lives. In this case they shared similar ages (23/22), similar places of origin (two villages near the town of Salem) and similar names (Shanti/Shankar). Upon close analysis of two dozen pêy testimonies, I was also struck by how often the existential predicaments which led most pêys to commit suicide were strongly reminiscent of their victims’ own lives. In the case at hand, Shanti’s family, much like that of her spirit, had failed to arrange her marriage. As she told me, her father did not want to pay for her dowry and so she had been hastily wed to the first suitor who made no financial demands. Other women, much like their pêys, had been prevented from wedding sweethearts or mistreated by their spouses.

Since the pêys are encouraged to speak about their personal problems, the dialogue with their exorcists seems to enable women to talk indirectly about their own distress. But it would be erroneous to see in this process an unconscious expression of feminine protest or a therapy in any Western sense of freeing the self from past experiences. It is true that this ritual seems to conform to the Western therapeutic proposition that recounting traumatic memories to an attentive, well-meaning audience can help people recover aspects of their identity (Csordas 1996). It is precisely when the pêys recapture the most troubling stage of their lives (the cause of their suicide), and are offered a way out of their misery, that the women seem to complete their own identification with them. It is only then that the spirits usually name themselves, and women such as Shanti can be said to ‘find themselves’ in their demons. But women are not at liberty to exorcise their past through entirely free associations. Instead, the formulaic interrogation requires them to articulate a sense of self consistent with what is culturally known of the pêy. Since pêys are predominantly male malcontents with loose libidos, women are only able to speak of themselves through symbols of masculine, frustrated sexuality. We can understand why this process does not occur without a drawn-out trial: women are slow to ‘dance’ because they resist taking on the personality of a sex-driven man.

Once the musician-exorcist has elicited the pêy’s name, it becomes vital to find out where and when the demon caught his victim. At this point, the demons always contradicted the testimonies of my informants. They always recalled that their attacks had actually occurred not in any of the traditional wasteland landscapes I described, but in the heart of large urban centres. When I asked about this shift of pêys to modern sites, an exorcist replied that times had changed. ‘In the cities’, he explained, ‘there are more crimes, more suicides, and therefore more pêys’.

Nine such spirits whom I tape-recorded confirmed Caplan’s observation that in cities such as Madras the pêys concentrated ‘near trees and wells, cemeteries ... and railway tracks’ (1989: 55). But twelve others announced that they had ‘caught’ their victims on the way to cinemas, by bus stops, or even on buses. Yet these new landscapes for demonic attack still remain associated with anonymous, threatening zones, for they are away from the security of home and family and clear-cut gender domains, in places where male and female strangers
were initially that they did not know the biographical details and personal circumstances of a number of my informants. They seem to be constructing their identities from their pasts of origin (two villages near the town of Kangayam). Upon close analysis of two of their rituals, however, the existential predications of these women were strongly reminiscent of their male counterparts, much like that of her father. As she told me, her father did not belong to the family of the woman who was hastily wed to the first suitor she saw. She told me, her father did not belong to the family of the woman who was hastily wed to the first suitor she saw. Since they are predominantly male in the traditional accounts of their peys, they lack what Tamils call 'rajam kunam,' literally 'demonic nature'. Confronted with the existential predications of these women, but with the same marital problems that frustrate the demons, they too do not 'adjust' nor 'improve'; they succumb instead to disappointment and withdraw from social life, becoming escapist tendencies as their demonized doubles. Indeed, women who are 'caught' are commonly said in Tamilnadu to be afflicted with a 'weak or timid disposition' (pūtām kunam, literally 'demonic nature').

I suggest that the ritual I have just described enacts not merely the expulsion of the demon but also his decapitation, and that this beheading, symbolically enacted, is necessary if the woman is to resume a 'normal' life. But before exploring this final sequence, and what it may say about the expressive dynamics at the heart of the ritual, we must look more deeply into Tamil representations of demonic possession.

To explore this 'inner' realm, we must first re-examine the key symbol of this discourse, the pey himself. These spirits are construed as human beings prematurely robbed of their lives. Sometimes they met their fate by accident, but, more often, unwilling to accept emotional frustration, they took the ultimate step of self-destruction. Hence peys lack what Tamils call rajam kunam, a quality of fortitude considered indispensable to social life.

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Therapy for the ‘madness’ of gods and women

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We have seen how my informants imagine that women are attacked when walking alone and away from the normative landscape and its focal point, the family home. Their escapade leads them to a forbidden space which – whether filled with stagnant pools and tamarind trees or with bus stands and cinemas – is unincorporated, undomesticated and lacking the features essential for the establishment of social life.

Once estranged from their constitutive relationships, women appear seduced by this desolate reality. For although their absorption into this alien world is represented first and foremost as the consequence of the pêy's aggression, women are seen as setting themselves up for being 'caught'. We recall that they are always said on the day of the attack to be dressed in their best attire as if to lure the demon. Moreover, during exorcist dialogues the pêys often emphasize the visibility and sexual availability of their victims.

Such representations suggest that demonic possession is conceived as a domain of experience in which women free themselves from the ordinary controls on female sexual behaviour. Unaccompanied by a male guardian, they venture beyond the village settlement to engage in an unrestrained intimacy outside the legitimate sexuality ruled by their husbands. That this 'wild' behaviour is a source of danger and disorder is also shown by the fact that, in contrast with life-giving, marital sexuality, this union remains unproductive. It is in this sense that the possessed woman shares the fate of the mythic Tamil prostitute who, according to Shulman, is also a 'symbol of barren eroticism' (1980: 262).

In Tamil culture history such associations between a woman's demonic possession and her desire for forbidden sexuality seem to run very deep. According to Hart, almost two millennia ago the Caîkam poets commonly used spirit possession as an idiom for 'a girl's despondency at being in love with an unsuitable man' (1979: 23; see also Ramanujan 1967: 78). These meanings still prevail, for the pêy in today's social landscape is considered the 'unsuitable' suitor par excellence, a home-wrecker, a tortured malcontent and a social pariah of the first order.

But what truly makes the pêy an ineligible partner who must be expelled at all costs is the fact that, unlike the lover of the Caîkam heroine, the demon has no independent reality. Of course, this is an interpretation which my informants would probably reject, because for many of them demons are real. But I found hints that in Tamil culture these disembodied spirits are conceived to have a more subjective than objective existence. We may recall that a demon has no personal name nor any biography outside of his victim, and in this sense is what Obeyesekere calls a 'personal creation' (1981: 115), a being which only exists in the woman's mind.

The purpose of exorcist dialogues is to clarify and publicize the fact that the woman has crossed the line, that she is trapped in an alien world which, as its exterior symbolism suggests, is not just liminal and wild but dangerously severed from 'normality', a zone of deluding, erotic fantasies. Thus once the victim and her pêy have been fully re-situated into this maddening landscape, the exorcist asks the spirit what troubles he has brought his girl. Since pêys invariably answer that they have caused 'evil' (pâsam), their responses help to expose them for who they really are: lecherous outsiders who have visited life-threatening problems on their victims.
The rest of the treatment, then, consists of expelling the demon. As we have seen, the procedures which cause the pêy to run away work less through linguistic means than through sacrificial transactions charged with tremendous emotional intensity. This closing sequence of the ritual appears to be long-standing, for in 1709, in what may be the earliest Western source on this ritual, the French missionary Tessier seems to have witnessed an identical enactment in Pondicherry, less than 100 km away from the Mel Malaiyanur temple where I documented many exorcist rituals (see Dharampal 1982: 131-2).

To understand this climactic episode we should start with the notion of giving 'life' to the pêy in exchange for 'his' hair, since it is actually the central premiss of the exorcism. We should remember that at the preliminary invocation (the 'warning'), the pêy agrees to meet the musicians on the funeral grounds on condition that he be granted the 'life' missing from his disembodied existence.

In the Hindu culture of Sri Lanka, as Obeyesekere has demonstrated, hair is invested with unconscious potency and sexual significance (1981). To Sinhalese female ascetics, he argues, matted hair represents 'the god's lingam, the idealised penis, his sakti, the source of life and vitality' (1981: 34). It is tempting to infer that in exorcisms the lock of hair stands for the lustful genitalia of the demon. No such equation was explicitly made by my informants, but it was hinted at during the ritual dialogue. The pêy is said to 'enter' his victim through a hair lock. The lock is also treated as the metonymic identity of the spirit, for no sooner do pêys reveal their names than the exorcist demands to know, 'Is this your hair?', as if drawing an association between it and lustfulness. And when the musician ties the lock in a knot, the demon often protests with some anguish, 'It hurts! it hurts!'.

Yet in Hindu culture hair is also associated with opposed representations; specifically, with the public discipline of sexuality. Women's hairstyles change according to marital status. Hair is also a major symbol of self-abnegation, as devotees, male and female, offer their tonsures to tutelary deities. The capacity of this symbol to unify such widely different meanings as rampant lust, sexual control and ascetic devotion perhaps explains its capacity, in this ritual context, to 'convert the obligatory into the desirable', as Turner argued of 'dominant' symbols in general (1967: 30). In exorcisms the lock of hair seems to begin as the symbol of the pêy's wayward libido and point of erotic contact with his victim. By the ritual's end, however, the hair has become the token of the demon's voluntary sexual renunciation of his victim, and marks their point of separation.

Now let us consider the symbolic value of the 'life' or blood sacrifice given to the pêy in compensation for his submission. We should remember that no sooner is the demon offered the chicken sacrifice than he customarily calls for 'help!' (apâyam), the word which formulaically concludes the verbal operations of all exorcisms. The reason pêys cry out, I was told, is because they feel 'in danger and fear for their lives'. It was such an emotion of 'fear' which also left their victims open to the original attack in the first place. The demons, then, appear to be 'caught' by the same terror they induced in their victims, and their fright has the same consequences, for at that instant they are rendered voiceless and passive.
Losing his personal identity, the demon also turns into inert matter – into the heavy, round rock which the musicians place in the young woman's hands. Now this was not my comparison; a musician described this stone as 'the weight of the pey's desire'. But this 'weight' (param) has changed location. The pey is now in the victim's hands, in the rock, and under her control. While it made sense for the exorcism to climax with her dropping the rock, my questions regarding any deeper significance in this mystifying episode were met initially with vague answers.

But as I continued to question one musician about this obscure sequence, he volunteered the charter myth of the Ankalaparamécvari temple in Mél Malaiyānūr where I documented these rituals, a narrative which set the entire exorcism and my foregoing interpretation in a larger context. Since my narrator clearly drew some correspondence between myth and ritual, let me suggest how his story restates the plots enacted in the exorcism and illuminates their meaning.

His narrative was none other than a folk version of the well-known Sanskrit story of the god Siva's brahmanicide. This South Arcot variant opens with the uniqueness of Siva's personality, epitomized by his five heads. When Siva endowed the God Brahma with a fifth head, the identification between the two was so complete that Parvati, Siva's wife, could no longer distinguish which one was her husband. Taking advantage of this, Brahma quickly made a pass at her. So Siva resolved to cut off Brahma's fifth head, but whenever he chopped it off, it grew back. Then the God Visnu advised Siva to decapitate Brahma once more, but this time to hold the severed head in his hand. Siva did so, but now he had six heads, with his state of imbalance conveyed by the odd location of the extra one -- in his right hand. And Siva remained stuck to this head, effectively 'possessed' by an additional identity.

At this point the mythic representation of Siva's possession becomes identical to that of our demon's victim. For after this the god was condemned to dwell alone, on the fringes of society, in a wasteland where liminality became his permanent condition as he wandered around naked. And, like the demon's victim, he was stripped of reason and eventually went mad. Finally, just as Siva is possessed by a head stuck to his hand, the victim of demonic possession holds the 'weight' of the pey in hers. And this rock is smooth, round and about the size of a human head.

In the myth, the Goddess intervenes, throwing a lump of rice soaked in blood upon Brahma's head. Unable to tolerate contact with this polluted offering, it tumbles from Siva's hand; the Goddess, in effect, beheads Brahma. This is not the only time that a South Indian Goddess triumphs over those who, like the God Brahma, lust after her. In the South Arcot ritual I am describing here, the exorcism likewise opens with a blood offering: the chicken's crude decapitation. This offering is problematic for the pey, who immediately cries for help. He has good reason to fear, since, as I interpret it, the sacrifice foretells his own beheading. The victim runs frantically and drops the stone, the symbolic head of the pey, near the tamarind tree. With this act, she, like the Goddess, beheads her own impostor-husband. Now she is free of her demon at last.
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FIGURE 1. Vernacular painting of a Tamil exorcism, by an unknown artist.

Most Tamil myths which feature decapitation usually conclude with the head's reattachment, only rarely to the original body. In exorcisms, it seems that the demon's head is symbolically detached from his victim but reconnected by a nail to another body of the tamarind tree. Since in Tamil sacred symbolism the piercing of flesh by metal objects is often invested with sexual and particularly marital connotations, I suspect that at this point the demon is actually being remarried to the tree (Hiltebeitel 1991: 197-8). This interpretation is not as far-fetched as it might seem, for in South Indian rituals trees are commonly married to one another, to human beings or even to supernaturals (Beck 1981; Biardeau 1989). Moreover, the botanical and cultural properties of the tamarind would seem to qualify it as a 'natural' bride or sexual partner for a malevolent creature such as the pěy. As Gandhi has written, its bark is 'rough, almost black, covered with long cracks' (1989: 27) and the tamarind is classified as both 'hot' and 'female' (Beck 1969: 569).

In the end, then, once a 'divorce' from his victim has been secured, the pěy manages to obtain what was missing from his disembodied existence: he gets both a 'life' and a 'bride'. As for Shanti, the victim of the exorcism in July 1991, she was returned to the domesticated environment of collective life and acceptable identity, reunited with her husband and said by the musicians who talked to me later to be 'happy' at last.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the Tamil ritual known as 'making the pěy run away' is one response to a pervasive source of female distress. It is also likely that this ritual does give women some opportunity to voice feelings of loneliness, abandonment and marital disappointment. But other than providing a way of
expressing alienation and transcending isolation, it is hard to say what is fully or finally liberating for women about Tamil exorcisms. As we have seen, healers seem to operate from a much broader cultural premiss: namely, that the source of a woman’s alienation is locked in her head, precisely in her antisocial and life-threatening fantasies of extra-marital sexuality. This is why the musicians first seek to identify the woman with a prime symbol of male eroticism. For in Tamil culture, the pêy represents the kind of unbridled sexual energy almost always associated with men rather than with women.

This is also why their ritual transactions do not offer marriage therapy in a Western sense of resolving difficulties between the woman and her husband. Instead, the work of these practitioners, in league with the family, is closer to what de Heusch calls, in reference to the treatment of mental illness among the Tsonga of Africa, ‘a psychoanalysis of expulsion’ (1981: 177). Their goals are forcibly to remove the pêy from the woman’s head and to make her accept that her husband and not the demon is her rightful lover. The musician’s attempt to ‘make the pêy run away’, and his decapitation of the demon, symbolize these consequences. Better yet, he has the woman perform this last operation on herself.

We can now better appreciate how the theory that rituals of exorcism somehow empower women does little justice to the fuller female predicament in the Tamil world. Far from working towards their emancipation, the ritual I have described places women on a kind of trail. With demons on the stand and men on the bench, women are compelled to confess that they have succumbed to marital disappointments and erotic impulses which put them in peril of losing their sanity. The confessions of these ‘caught’ women require that the demons be expelled and wives returned to reason – that is, to the safety and structure of the patriarchal family fold and women’s proper role in it.

NOTES

Research was conducted in Tamilnadu from August 1990 until October 1991. It was supported by a Junior fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies, in Chicago, to which I express my gratitude. This article summarizes arguments presented in chapter 3 of my dissertation (1995). I wish to thank Margaret Trawick, who reviewed the thesis for the University of California Press, for her extended and perceptive comments on that chapter in particular. An earlier version of this article was presented in the spring semester of 1996 in the anthropology departments of Princeton University and of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Thanks to my colleagues at Princeton and my friends at U.W.-Madison for their valuable insights. My thanks also go to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, for I learned much from their recommendations, and to David Mosse, who kindly faxed me from New Delhi pages of his dissertation pertaining to my research. Finally, I am grateful for comments and editorial advice from David Shulman and Peter Nabokov.

1 The term pêy may also refer to a class of malignant beings who have an entirely different ontological personality from the demons discussed in this article. Rather than being the ghosts of ordinary human beings, these pêys have proper names, clear-cut identities and myths of origin which interconnect with the careers and narratives of the great Hindu pantheon. These demons too may possess people but they gain articulation through a different mode of appari- tion, etiology and moral ethos which this article does not analyse.

2 In the Madurai district, Dumont also noted that relationships between pêys and victims were ‘very clearly stated to be ... love relationships’ (1986: 450).

3 The predominance of male pêys in my sample appears to contradict the findings of Mosse, who notes that ‘63% of the ghosts exorcised at the shrine of St Anthony [in the Ramnad
on, it is hard to say what is fully or partially responsible for the particular context of exorcism. As we have seen, healers often invoke the same ritual premiss: namely, that the source of the problem is located in the head, precisely in her antisocial and pathological sexuality.

This is why the musicians who perform possession rituals through the demonization of unbound female hair represent the symbol of male eroticism. For in Hindu culture, female sexuality is equated with unbridled sexual energy almost exclusively, and in this context women are expected to dance fast and loosen their hair. Moreover, the request that these rites aim at curbing rather than freeing their sexuality.

With demons on the stand and men the absentees that they have succumbed to demands, which put them in peril of losing their hair, women require that the demons perform this last operation on that head. Their low or marginal status might explain why some peys (like Shankar) require that the demons demand a lock of their hair - which is then tied, cut and removed - as a symbolic transaction. For as we have seen in Hindu exorcism of unbound female hair in demonic possession, women's loose hair signifies 'disorder', 'extreme emotion' and 'sexual passion' and, in this context, women's loose hair signifies 'disorder', 'extreme emotion' and 'sexual passion' and, as Kaberer put it, being alone is 'a precondition of demonic attack' (1991:177). This is why the musicians who perform possession rituals through the demonization of unbound female hair represent the symbol of male eroticism. For in Hindu culture, female sexuality is equated with unbridled sexual energy almost exclusively, and in this context women are expected to dance fast and loosen their hair. Moreover, the request that these rites aim at curbing rather than freeing their sexuality.

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This motif is highlighted in the well-known story of the Goddess Renuka, also known as 'Māriamma' (see Assayag 1992; Beck 1981; Biardeau 1968; Trawick 1984).
Beck, for instance, documented how during a village festival in the Coimbatore district, the Goddess Mariamma was 'married to a tree trunk' (1981: 91). Beck's informants stated that this tree represented 'the goddess's husband' (1981: 122).

But the musicians acknowledged that sometimes this pray, or another one, may return, in which case they have to start all over again. My sense is that this ritual is most successful when the musicians identify the 'cured' woman with the Goddess, in the same process of turning patient into initiate which has been documented by ethnographers in other parts of the world (see Nabokov 1995: 237-43).

This must be understood in the light of broader Tamil symbolizations of the human body. According to Ram, 'The head occupies a key place in the merging of medical and religious discourses. The head stores the heat generated by desire (1991: 56; see also Beck 1979).

REFERENCES


Expulsez l'amant, recouvrez l'épouse: analyse symbolique d'un exorcisme en Inde du Sud

Résumé
Cet article met en question les explications anthropologiques courantes de la propension à la possession démonique des jeunes épouses Tamiles. Une analyse symbolique des relations entre les démons et leurs victimes dans le contexte de l'exorcisme suggère que les questions plus profondes qui sont abordées dans les épisodes de possession se rapportent aux interprétations culturelles de l'aliénation féminine. Loin de leur offrir l'opportunité de protester contre leur impuissance, la participation des femmes à ces rites qui les font entrer en transe les force à confesser des fantasmes romantiques illicites. Leur 'thérapie', comme telle, consiste à exerciser ces sentiments et à rétablir une identité personnelle congruente avec leurs responsabilités matrimoniales et avec les expectatives culturelles d'une 'bonne épouse'.

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