

**ALTERED STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS:
DANCE-INDUCED SPIRIT POSSESSION AND
TRANCE**

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Abstract

Spirit possession and trance are very dominant features of Altered State of Consciousness (ASC), especially within religious spheres. However, dance and movement, with the accompaniment of music/sound, create such an enabling environment, for individuals who are so predisposed, to easily and quickly transpose from the normal states of awareness to altered states of mystical interactions. Also critically discussed is the term ASC as both a religious and psychological phenomenon. This paper, therefore, explores ASC within the context of dance, using two different case studies in explaining the intricacies of trance, in particular, and spirit possession.

Preamble

This paper was prompted by a relatively personal experience during a dance workshop the author had organised some years back with the renowned Nigerian dancer and choreographer, Qudus Onikeku, as guest choreographer, who was around for the Yemoja Festival in Ibadan; a traditional religious festival attended for the purpose of having a first-hand experience of trance. The dance workshop lasted for two days and had so much to talk about than just the intended purpose of organising it.

The Workshop Sessions

The first day was a day for participants to learn and get acquainted with new dance styles, particularly the techniques of the choreographer, followed by discussions on the art of dancing beyond the walls of the classroom and the university at large. It was more of a practical workshop session.

The second day, however, was full of spectacles of different kinds. The dancers were taken through special routines with a launch into an experimental platform. This must have been prompted by the experience of the Yemoja Festival that was earlier mentioned. The flutist, who had been a part of the whole exercise, sustained his tune alongside the subtly played *Jembe* drum on the instruction of the choreographer, while the dancers moved in different directions, improvising their ways through the music and stage. The music was so enchanting that the whole room was filled with it and no one could take the mind off it.

This strongly tilts towards the choreographic principles of Mary Starks Whitehouse as observed by Joan Chodorow (1995), both dance therapists, who allow music to penetrate deep down into the mind of the dancer, subsequently resulting in total or partial purgation of the mind, to the extent allowed by the dancer. Each dancer is encouraged to listen to the music and let the music pass through, thereby allowing movements to come as dictated by the inner self. As pointed out earlier, citing Chodorow, Whitehouse submits that “I didn’t have to form the movements consciously. It had its own form. I learnt that I could listen to my own body” (1995: 25). Therefore, participants in this Workshop were given the chance to meander through the stage by way of the influence of the music and ultimately the aura of the space in use. This went on for several minutes when it was noticed that some individuals were moving far beyond the dictates of the music.

A particular participant went out of ‘order’ and was seen writhing on the floor seemingly dissociated from her regular self but with sustained movements in consonance with the workshop, like one who was in consistent conversation with invisible forces. It took several minutes of talking and movements before calmness could be achieved. The participant in this frame was in an altered state of consciousness, a form of trance, as later revealed through interrogation. Therefore, this paper will interrogate the subject matter further from both the experience of this participant and a later religious experience of the researcher during the popular Yemoja Festival which held in Ibadan in 2019.

Dance is widespread across human cultures and has emerged as an art that is largely hinged on daily and cultural activities. Throughout history, dance has played a key role in cultural and social practices and has also developed into a form of art and entertainment. It is an art of the great order of sophistication for the body, which can be trained to attain a state of bliss. It is ephemeral, as it vanishes entirely the moment it happens and in some cases, it remains as a temporary link to the supernatural within the religious sphere. Physically and mentally, dance

Akapo: Altered State of Consciousness: Dance-induced Spirit Possession and Trance

has its implication as it can be a source of good body rejuvenation and also as mental therapy. The dancer's body is the tool for expression. When a dancer moves, he/she communicates an emotion, thought, or idea. Kang opines from the religious point of view that

the dancer attains magical powers through his desire to dance and this, in turn, brings him victory, health, life and an indescribably great bonding with the tribe that he is associated with. The state of exhilaration achieved by the performer leads him into the world of the spirits, the gods and the demons. It thus carries him away from the world of the everyday, bridging the earthly world with that of the world of spirits and the supernatural. Thus, dance becomes a sacrificial rite, a charm, a prayer and a prophetic vision. Dance can, therefore be viewed as a remedy to aid the ailing, a lucky charm, a link between the dead and generations of their descendants, a means that spells victory in a battle, a creator in its own right and a preserver of the tribe or the community (2017:84).

For scientists and psychologists, dance provides a unique model to investigate how the brain integrates movement and sound as well as the development of motor expertise, combined with artistic creativity and performance.

Understanding Altered State of Consciousness

Altered State of Consciousness (ASC) can be described as a general change in the conscious behavioural pattern of an individual, in most cases, involuntarily. In some cases, the individual may be aware of such a change, but is subject to that which has overpowered his/her mind. This is very well seen as a psychological or religious phenomenon as this can be witnessed based on the state of mind or induced by spiritual/ritual activity as witnessed sometimes in shamanic practices. From a psychological standpoint, however, Revonsuo, et.al submit that

An altered state of consciousness is defined as a state in which the neurocognitive background mechanisms of consciousness have an increased tendency to produce misrepresentations such as hallucinations, delusions, and memory distortions. Paradigm examples of such generally misrepresentational, temporary, and reversible states are dreaming, psychotic episodes, psychedelic

drug experiences, some epileptic seizures, and hypnosis in highly hypnotizable subjects (2009:187).

ASC deals with a noticeable change from normal cognitive functioning, such as the instability in visual perception of the immediate environment, a feeling that time has either slowed down drastically or has speeded up beyond the expected. It could also relate to the inability to remember conversations from previous moments. There is, inevitably, a situational experience to have a grasp of oneself in totality. Easily noticeable in ASC are the creation, among other situations,

- i. Change in physical activity
 - ii. Change in physiological state
 - iii. Change in focus of attention
 - iv. Change in external stimulation.
- Block (2001), Farthing (1992), Revonsuo et al. (2009)

Individuals in an ASC tend to be either overtly reactive with hyper activities or exhibit a reduced level of activity.

Psychological aspects of Spirit Possession

Spirit possession/trance in dance is usually a religious experience that is usually borne out of the need to synchronise with the spirits and for the spirits to announce themselves among humans.

The dual nature, body and mind, of the human structure makes it somewhat complex and gives a very accurate feeling particularly when the dance is being analysed. Furthermore, the effect of such dances on the society, beyond its entertainment value as an art, complicates this analysis. Spirit possession and trance seem to fit predominantly into a conceptual framework built around a psychic mind–body relationship. Therefore, psychological and physical interpretative modes and perspectives remain the gateway into such analysis (Bourguignon, 1995). Understanding spirit possession and trance has been, in the first instance, based on the principles and findings of pioneers like James Frazer and Mircea Eliade, who have done significant work from an anthropological perspective. It is, therefore, from their submissions that other researchers have found a way to engage in further research on this phenomenon. Frazer, according to Huskinson and Schmidt (2010), believe that spirit possession and trance are temporary incarnation or inspiration, and these are basically a worldwide affair. Frazer's views regarding spirit possession were not particularly considered valid, based on the

Akapo: Altered State of Consciousness: Dance-induced Spirit Possession and Trance

conclusions that his research lacks empirical evidences to support his claims, as he was considered an ‘arm-chair’ anthropologist whose claims were merely based on scholarly proclamations. In spite of this, his claims have been very much relevant and corroborated by other anthropologists like Me´traux, who opines that

...people possessed start by giving an impression of having lost control of their motor system. Shaken by spasmodic convulsions, they pitch forward, as though projected by a spring, turn frantically round and round, stiffen and stay still with body bent forward, sway, stagger, save themselves, again lose balance, only to fall finally in a state of semi-consciousness. Sometimes such attacks are sudden, sometimes they are heralded by preliminary signs: a vacant or anguished expression, mild trembling, panting, breath or drops of sweat on the brow; the face becomes tense or suffering (1958:121).

Analytical psychology as described by Lucy Huskinson (2010) posits that trance/spirit possession is seen as psychological challenges that manifest like paranoia, auditory and visual hallucinations, thought insertion, delusions, obsessions, amnesia, convulsive seizures, paralysis, heightened affects, and so on, and have subsequently been diagnosed as a variety of psychological and neurological disorders. This is largely due to the fact that the western world tries to find an explanation to the behavioural patterns to fit within the given academic theories they hold in high esteem.

Altered States of Consciousness within Spirituality and Religion

Within the religious sphere, Firedson (1996), Arnaud & Naumescu (2012) Haley & Richeport-Haley (2015) have emphasised the relevance of trance in religious gatherings especially rituals and festival. They all share common standpoints that spirit possession plays an important role in validating the collective beliefs of a people particularly where supernatural visitations are concerned.

ASC is a means to an end as it channels the way through to the actualisation of spiritual unification of the body and soul of an individual or a group of people which is usually made manifest as spiritual and mental transposition, and serves as a genuine connection to the supernatural. In this case, there is sometimes a deliberate inducement of the mind towards this and, in some cases, it is a common practice in the

case of shamans. Shamanic States of Consciousness are a distinct sub-category of ASC, characterised by lucid but narrowed awareness of physical surroundings, expanded inner imagery, modified soma-sensory processing, altered sense of self, and an experience of spiritual travel to obtain information necessary for solving a particular individual or social problem.

Culturally, ASC is often understood within the spiritual and religious spheres as a term that describes the spiritual aspects of trance which include possession trance and non-possession trance, based on the thesis submitted by Erika Bourguignon in his early research. Possession and non-possession trance appear to be the defining aspects of trance. When describing trance, researchers and authors appear to be concerned with whether or not a spiritual entity has entered the body and soul. Whether or not a spirit has entered the body, it is imperative to understand these two aspects of trance in order to have a psychological understanding of this phenomenon.

It is difficult to distinguish between spirit possession and trance, and this is largely due to the similarities they both have in terms of how they are manifested on those possessed and those who go into trance.

Possession Trance

Encyclopedia of Religion (2005) states that spirit possession may be broadly defined as any altered or unusual state of consciousness and allied behaviour that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit, demon, or deity (2005: 8687). From an Anthropological perspective, Stephen and Suryani categorise possession trance as an involuntary state of mind in which a “spirit entity or force is believed to have entered or taken over the body of the human host” (2000: 9). Winkelman describes possession trance as a state in which one’s personality is taken over by the personality “of another entity” (1986: 194). In this state, the person may experience “visions, hearing voices, finding objects that possess special powers, divination, meditation, and dreams” (Stephen & Suryani, 2000: 9). Bourguignon, quoted by Cohen (2008), states that possession “is a term which refers to *belief* of a group of people under study, or, perhaps, to the belief held by a given author” and is “an idea, a concept” (1976: 6-7). This view is very well corroborated by Rajaram who states that

a trance would be understood to happen through certain behavioural practices, which signify the altered state of consciousness to the people observing it. The trance movements

Akapo: Altered State of Consciousness: Dance-induced Spirit Possession and Trance

were also community specific and could be understood by the way the performers start to move during the ritual in an erratic fashion, along with high energy,... which the community accepts and understands as trance (2015:2).

Foley (1985) states that these beliefs or possession dances allow the individual to journey into the lives of the supernatural which in turn helps the individuals to exhibit superhuman powers they would otherwise not be able to use. In the African religious belief, for instance, certain persons are predestined to be agents of certain spirits and are inevitably prone to falling into trance or possessed by the spirits that control them. Within the period that the possession lasts, they suppress their own being, involuntarily, in total submission to the higher power. The presence of the spirits is revealed by convulsive shivering and shakings of the whole body, wild gestures and excited looks, all of which are referred, not to the man himself, but to the spirit. In a different perspective, Mischel and Mischel opine that

The power, in the form of the possessed person, may alternately stalk about and dance to the drums when they are present, or “work” with implements, e.g., brandish a sword or pour oil, do divining, deliver messages, give advice, and prescribe medicines. The activities vary with the power of the individual under possession, and the circumstances during which possession (1958:15).

This type of altered behaviour has been likened to hypnosis, the dynamics of which are little understood. In particular, in the ritual situation, there is no interaction between a hypnotist and a subject. One might suggest that the individual hypnotises herself, as a result of previous experiences and expectations, or that the drums provide cues in a suggestive atmosphere. However, the specific behaviour depends both on social and individual factors.

Looking at possession trance in a religious context, there is usually a correspondence with a behavioural attitude which may have been learnt over a period of time or by a learnt model maintained by personal and/or group factors. This, in most cases, has a huge influence on the extent in which an individual is controlled by the ‘spirit’, but maybe not on the outcome. This is because some individuals try to avoid being brought into the enclave of the spirit they may have been associated with either from birth or through apprenticeship. In some societies and cases like

this,, there is a sponsor who organises a ceremony such that debts to the spirits are settled, including sacrifices, since she is reluctant to have anyone go into possession trance, that is, to have spirits appear. When individuals try to restrict spirit possession, it often ends in an unusually violent possession trance in which the tracer is taken over by the spirit.

Non-Possession Trance

Anthropological and psychotherapeutic literatures come together again to define non-possession trance. Stephen and Suryani (2000:9) define non-possession trance as a voluntary experience that results in a change in “the person’s usual mode of cognition, perception and behavior, but without a sense of being taken over by another entity.” Foley (1985) describes this as a state of trance in which the person is not taking on a persona or entity outside the self. And Winkelman (1986) finds that non-possession trance is often induced through auditory driving (rhythmic auditory stimulation), fasting and nutritional deficits, social isolation and sensory deprivation, meditation, sleep and dream states, sexual restrictions, extensive motor behaviour (like dancing), endogenous opiates, hallucinogens, and alcohol. Non-possession trance is often linked to non-spiritual means, but Bourguignon offers a different view. Bourguignon (1976) refers to non-possession trance as ‘soul flight’, in which the person’s spirit or soul travels to another place or world, where they have an encounter with a spirit. Bourguignon also submits that the person may have the spirits come visit them. The person is able to gain new insights and seeds of wisdom through this ‘soul flight’ or non-possession trance state.

There are some basic similarities between possession and non-possession trance and these include alterations of perception, sensation, memory, thought processes, loss of consciousness. They are often followed by euphoria and heightened levels of energy. One might be tempted to look at spirit possession from the perspective of shamanic practices, but they differ widely: for the former, the spirit controls the individual, for the latter, the individual shaman controls the spirit. The shaman, in healing practices, engages two or more worlds simultaneously and tries to bring about cohesion between the spirit of the one that is being inflicted and the spiritual realm. This is so because it is believed that when one falls sick for instance, there is a friction between the sufferer and the forces that control his existence. Therefore, the shaman “travels between the human and spirit worlds and his incarnation of spiritual presences—in a state of trance”(Cohen, 2008: 126) for the restoration of the spirit of the sick one into wholeness.

Akapo: Altered State of Consciousness: Dance-induced Spirit Possession and Trance

Dance and Trance/Spirit Possession

Dance as an art engages the whole of human consciousness. This, invariably, suggests that both the psychological and physical states are demanded in executing dance routines, either formally or leisurely. Hinging this explanation largely on the principles of Bourguignon (1995), he suggests that the basic ways to consider the place of trance in dance is from the religious perspective which is a very potent ground of trance/spirit possession. Bourguignon submits that “there are three points at which we may examine the relationship between trance and dance, when they occur in the context of religious ritual: 1) people dance to bring the spirits into their midst; 2) people dance their interactions with the spirits and, finally, 3.) people may dance the spirits’ departure” (1995:1). This inevitably underplays the psychological position but strongly upholds the spiritual/religious relevance where trance is concerned, but the argument within this claim is not to be dealt with in this research.

Dance is a pivotal plinth for trance practices. Dance, in this instance, is much more than the formalised movement of the body. Bourguignon opines that “trance and dance have much in common”: (1). When people dance in trance, they are led mainly by the dictates of music and the body inevitably resonates the sound of the drums and other musical accompaniment with movements in different forms and degrees. The sequences may come as uncoordinated as it may seem but in most cases, the dancer/trancer ceases to be herself as the spirit on which the whole exercise is hinged takes charge of all physical manoeuvring.

Within religious communities, both the possessed and the observer, who may also be worshippers, are fully involved. There is a clear dichotomy between the possessed and the onlookers, but they usually wait upon those who have been possessed to give messages through bodily movements and utterances, in order to receive guidance from the gods that they all worship and seek to hear from. In many cases, as it was with the participant mentioned earlier, there is an interaction with an image//spirit/creature which obviously is not physical. There is usually a constant struggle of ownership, a drive to possess beyond the present mental state. In the earlier illustration, it was a serious battle between the physical and the supernatural.

Although, the whole event was not a religious gathering, one cannot sever the spiritual from it totally. By this I mean that dance affords a dancer the room for expression and the ability to manipulate the body, initially by one’s ability, but upon a limit for both the body and the mind, it becomes inevitable that the dance controls the dancer instead of

the other way round. At this point, the dancer seldom retains total control of her body: movements are done beyond intended limits, lacking coordination without restrictions from the dancer. In this instance music serves as the driver. Rouget clarifies that

to dance is to inscribe music in space, and this inscription is realised by means of a constant modification of the relations between the various parts of the body. The dancer's awareness of his body is totally transformed by this process. Insofar as it is a spur to dancing, therefore, music does appear capable of profoundly modifying the relation of the self with itself, or, in other words, the structure of consciousness (1985:121).

When in a trance, the 'trancer' may be able to recollect the experience but certainly not the source of the energy being used.

The Yemoja Festival in Ibadan exemplifies the place of trance in religious festivals and gatherings. Yemoja worshipers, as it applies to several Yoruba traditional religious worships, seek to hear and appease Yemoja who is a highly revered goddess among the Yoruba people. Several activities precede the main ritual, the final major activity in the appeasement of the mother god for another year. Devotees pray, chant mantras, and sing devotional songs to prepare their bodies as worthy vessels to embody the spirit of the deity. Various purifying rituals are undertaken in the days leading up to the festival which is symbolised by the carrying of *Igba Yemoja* and *Igba Aje* (tray of bountiful sales).

The woman who bears the tray is usually a woman who has gone past the age of childbearing, a woman who has attained menopause while the one who bears the 'Igba Aje' is a maiden. They are referred to as the, *Arugba* (one who carries the tray). Both calabash are usually filled with edible things particularly yam porridge. She carries the calabash and heads to the stream where all the content of the calabash will be emptied into the Ogunpa River. The flow of the river usually signifies that the message, prayers and supplications of the worshipers and devotees will be transported to the river goddess, Yemoja.

A large entourage of worshipers and devotees follow the procession from the temple of Babalorisa who is the chief priest of Yemoja, the one through whom all rituals for the festival are performed. From the moment the first prayer is offered, a train of Bata drummers, who are present from the first day of the festival to the very last day, continue to beat the drum in praise of the goddess and this prepares the minds of the devotees towards the journey ahead.

Akapo: Altered State of Consciousness: Dance-induced Spirit Possession and Trance

The moment the calabashes are placed on the heads of the Arugba, they cease to be themselves. They transform into another figure in totality. This is because it is believed that the moment the calabashes mount their heads, the goddess herself possesses them and they cease to be on the same pedestal with those surrounding them. This is the altered state of consciousness, a trance, and a possession by Yemoja. For this reason, the Arugba Yemoja and Arugba Aje, while walking, are closely supported by two women on each side. They mutter words so inaudibly that no one around can easily grasp what is being said. As a result of this trance, their walking becomes clumsy, they move to the endless supply of music from the drummers and singers who raise one song after the other. The significance of the drumming and singing is to channel their paths into easy transition and union with the spirit of the goddess. Onlookers do not have any form of immunity against the prevalent spirit as it can possess anyone who is vulnerable to her callings. Vulnerability is subjective in this instance: for some, it is habitual and for others, the moment they allow the music and dancing catch them unprepared, they lose control of themselves and are therefore swept away.

It is strongly believed that it is sacrilegious for the calabash to fall, or for them to stumble, else untold tragedies await the people; hence, the need for them to be supported while walking. Their journey to Ogunpa is in total oblivion. They may be so accustomed to going through this path on a regular basis but they barely know how and when they get to the river. The Babalorisa and Iyalorisa refer to this as *Egun* (to be possessed). Possession trance during the Yemoja Festival is revered by the devotees as the Orisa manifesting herself to the people. In the words of the Iyalorisa, there is no particular method or means to put a person in trance, the Orisa chooses whoever they want to manifest themselves through as they please, regardless of age or gender. The Iyalorisa also mentioned that the moment the calabash is mounted on the head of the Arugba, she is immediately possessed by the Orisa and goes into a trance at once.

It is believed that when a person is possessed, the Orisa reveals the supernatural to them; some are even given messages to relay to the people in the physical realm. When inquired of the Iyalorisa if there is any adverse effects of being possessed, she responded that "...you know when a person is possessed, they get the strength of over ten young men and in the process could throw their bodies around and not feel anything at the time...when they return to their normal state, they may begin to feel these pains that they could not feel at the time of possession... aside this, it is considered a privilege and a blessing".

The Arugba Yemoja's duty does not end with the procession to and from the river; she is also the one who carries the Ogunleki Statue, which is the essence of Yemoja, to and from the palace of the Olubadan. At this instance, there is nothing ritualistic about the whole activity as it is seen as the celebration of a successful outing. The Iyalorisa, when asked if there is any consequence the Arugba has to face, be it negative or positive, she replied that it is treated as a great honour to be chosen as the Arugba and there is no negative effect, just blessings from the Orisa on the Arugba and her family.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that spirit possession and trance are not particularly limited to the religious circle, but there is a very high tendency for religion to be a medium by which this phenomenon can be observed. It is a whole lot tricky in the sense that an easily receptive mind can be caught within the frame of the above.

It is then inevitable to conclude that the dancer on the dance floor and the Arugba in the religious community both experience trance and possession in the same form. This, basically, is the influence of dance and music on those who ultimately give up being themselves, their original state of consciousness, to manifest what the mind could accommodate at that point in time. It is fundamentally psychological, even if one claims the potency of spiritual influences.

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Akapo: Altered State of Consciousness: Dance-induced Spirit Possession and Trance

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