

Self-Possessed or Self-Governed?
Spirit Possession and Transcendental Politics in Tibetan Buddhism –
And in Melanesian Shamanism

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In pre-1960s Tibet, as at present, the Dalai Lama, then a political as well as religious ruler, regularly consulted the protector deity of his nation. On regular occasions, the Nechung Oracle would become fully and spasmodically entranced, leap up with seemingly super human effort, dance wildly despite his weighty harnessed costume, and advise the country's ruler on important matters of state. In the 1950s, this Tibetan Oracle overrode key Dalai Lama advisors and convinced him, first to return to Tibet from India, and then to flee Lhasa for exile. The Dalai Lama himself has asserted that he has followed the Oracle's advice for the simple reason that it has always turned out to be correct.

In the southern New Guinea rainforest, Gebusi spirit mediums through 1985 became possessed, indicted sorcery suspects, and mandated divinations. Precolonially, a whopping one-third of all adult Gebusi deaths were executions – homicides -- related to sorcery accusations – and directly influenced if not determined by the pronouncements of possessed spirit mediums. With the later decline of spirit mediumship, Gebusi sorcery accusations – and killings – likewise greatly declined.

As these examples illustrate, spirit possession has been central in different ways to the actualization and internalization of sovereign power. But beyond these political results or *effects*, what about what we might call the internal combustion of spiritual possession, its relation to selfhood??

“Spirit possession” as a term brings up 66 entries in AnthroSource, of which two-thirds center on specific ethnographic cases. Of these latter, over half pertain to Africa, one-fifth to Latin America, and one-fifth to South or Southeast Asia. There is only a single case from all of China, one from Oceania -- and *none at all* from either Europe or North America. A few influential scholars – I. M. Lewis, Janice Boddy, Michael Lambek, Adeline Masquelier, Peter Fry, and the early work of Aiwaha Ong, among others – presage the large bulk of this current distribution. As such, “spirit possession” in our disciplinary parlance is in ethnographic fact a highly restricted, narrow concept.

Broadly, much of this literature seems in hindsight to be functionalist or quasi-functionalist by suggesting that possession is *not* in fact *pathological* but

ultimately either a protest of resistance against forms of dominating power, OR a way to domesticate and control disruptive spiritual agents. As such, in our received notions, possession typically *functions* in relation to, rather than compromises, an integral sense of self, or a field of power.

From the neoliberal standpoint of an ego-bounded self, “possession” is more regularly and *properly* the process by which the autonomous black box of the self itself appropriates an external world in the service of its own presumed prior existence. The “self” in a modern view should be the *subject* or “*predicator*” of possession rather than itself being the object of possession. Hence, for instance, the full materialized possession or ownership of a person – for instance as a slave – is considered a particularly egregious affront to the modern rights of self-hood. So, too, the spiritual possession of the self inverts its normal proper relation to the external world in a neoliberal view, and hence is easily considered pathological, something that needs to be either counteracted or functionally explained. In the crude sociology of knowledge above, it’s hence not surprising that no *Western* selves (and virtually none in China) are tallied ethnographically as “possessed” in AnthroSource key-worded articles on spirit possession.

These assumptions can be disrupted by considering what for lack of a better term we can call spiritually possessive processes in a different context that has been largely orthogonal to the attribution of “spirit possession,” namely, self-possession in tantric Tibetan Buddhism. (My information here comes from a mix of historical and philosophical reading, teachings by and practices with high Tibetan lamas, and a range of scholarly visits to rural and urban areas of northern India, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Mongolia during the last seven years, as well as Drepung Loseling Monastery and related teachings and discussions in Atlanta and elsewhere in the US.)

To essentialize for sake of time, the normal or everyday self in Tantric Buddhist practice is not at all a paragon of psychological order or stability but rather a delusion that ignorantly takes waking reality, *samsara*, at face value. In fact, it is stressed, this quotidian self is in fact *not* findable and *not* existent. Indeed, in Mahayana Buddhism generally, it is the reification and *attachment* to this presumed

self that is itself the root of suffering, dysfunction, and unhappiness. The danger is hence not that the self will be possessed, but that, for instance, the seduction of *material* possession will obscure the fact that the self exists only as a dependently-arisen phenomenon.

The goal in this cultural / religious world-view is hence not to assert or buttress the normal self but to deconstruct and dissolve it, and to ontologically recast its presumption. In Tibetan tantric practices, this is done proximately through meditation and visualization through which the normal self is in turn found to be non-existent, dissolved, and then reconstructed and reconstituted dependently in the form of a divine emanation or deity. This deified self – which is elaborately cultivated and configured through complex sequences of mantras, visualizations, meditations, and extended spiritual retreats – is ultimately not the deification of some externality that becomes a new reified self. Rather it is realized to be a self-conscious projection that merely approximates a truly transcendent plane of ego-less reality. Depending on the Tibetan Buddhist sect and the specific tradition of practice, this ultimate plane or dimension of existence may be variously termed *rigpa* (sometimes glossed as “pristine awareness”) or *mahamudra* or *dharmakaya* in a Nyigma Dzogchen or Gelupga context. In all cases, what replaces the self is an awareness that is, at least ideally, completely free from rather than predicated on reification of the ego and from the appropriation of the external world to its presumed inherent existence.

In this process, in a kind of way-station to Enlightenment, one is self-possessed by the energy and divine form of a tantric diety. Major Tibetan tantric dieties include *Yamantaka*, *Guhyasamaja*, *Hevajra*, *Chakrasamvara*, *Vajrayogini*, and *Kalachakra*. *Kalachakra* is sometimes taught on an elemental level to tens of thousands of persons at a time by the Dalai Lama. Iconically depicted, these dieties are portrayed as fantastic beings, often wrathful, with several if not scores of arms and legs, colored bodies, multiple heads, and awesome features and powers. In a sense, highest yoga tantra in Tibetan Buddhism promotes and cultivates self-possession by these diety forms as a way to dissolve and transcend the normal

notion of self and to enable dependent arising as a more highly realized consciousness of being.

Wrathful and also peaceful deity forms have a rich and elaborate history in Tibetan tantric Buddhism, and these have been elaborately depicted and written about. However, the actual practices associated with them are often considered esoteric and proprietary or secret, both in verbal transmission and in textual form. The Nechung Oracle, mentioned at the outset above, is a particularly public and corporealized instance of this deification process. The incorporation and domestication of powerful spiritual forces has been focal in Tibetan Buddhism at a number of levels, including not just in tantric meditational practices of self-deification but in the historic ‘taming’ of pre-Buddhist Bon shamanic spirits (see especially the work of Jacob Dalton) and social and political use of oracles and divinations as spiritual “skillful means,” from the Dalai Lama on down to local lamas and monks. Disputes concerning the veracity and authenticity of wrathful spirits associated with the protection (or denigration) of Tibetan Buddhism has continued to inform its sectarian divides, including in the divisive schism between the Dalai Lama and practitioners of Dorje Shugden.

In a sense, these examples illustrate what might be called the “political extraversion” of Tibetan Buddhist spiritual possession. Beyond these, however, is the highly refined *self*-possession of Tibetan Buddhist tantric adepts by meditational deities that are intended to produce long-lasting and in principle permanent alterations not just in the identity of the self but in the experienced ontology upon which any notion of self-hood or spirituality itself rests. This need not entail an escape from this world – not a religion of other-worldliness, ala Max Weber – but an experience of transcendent reality beyond-selfhood that is simultaneous and co-extensive *with* a ‘normal’ waking state, and not, by contrast, possession by an alternative spiritual agent or Other. Tantric adepts, including following spiritual retreats, often are perceived or attributed to engage in particularly active and effective this-worldly social and spiritual practices, sometimes accomplishing great or even seemingly super-human travels and teachings, building projects, and

staggeringly comprehensive scholarly writings and commentaries, largely from memory.

Across generations, the internalization of this perceived process is illustrated in the person and the institution of the Tibetan Buddhist *tulku* – the re-born reincarnation of an adept or eminent lama. The reincarnation of the *tulku* reflects the continuing mindstream of a person who is seen to have already escaped the afflictions of ego reification – and of samsara generally -- and who can hence re-possess a newborn body at will. (In some advanced forms of practice, as developed in the *Six Yogas of Naropa*, the adept is believed to be able to transfer consciousness directly, displacing the consciousness of another person who is already alive.) The XIV Dalai Lama has himself intimated that he may decide to “emanate” in new ways upon his own death rather than simply being reborn as a single new infant. In such cases, the transcendence of the normal self is not considered temporary or even limited to one-lifetime, but permanent insofar as one has in fact attained Enlightenment.

The use of skillful means to *combine* a refined and enduring functionality in this-worldly pursuits with a sense of being both *simultaneously* and ultimately *permanently* possessed by an alternative reality extends and begins to depart from the dynamics of shamanistic possession as described by Eliade and others. Spirit possession across many world areas has included the domestication and skillful incorporation of what are initially harmful as well as powerful self-possessing spirits. But the exploration of highly controlled and very long-lasting self-induced possession as an alternative level of reality that simultaneously co-exists with and informs everyday waking reality seems particularly developed in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. For some fifteen centuries – from Nargajuna through Je Tsongkhapa to Pabhongka to the present – Tibetan Buddhism has attempted to refine and apply practices associated with such self-possession. As such, the received priority that is commonly assumed between conventional selfhood and possession is in a significant sense here overturned or reversed.

The larger issue that may be pointed to in conclusion is hence not just the externalized sovereignty or governmentality of a spiritually possessed world in

regimes of power but, as Foucault (1986, 1988, 1990) himself explored in his later works, the power of ethical self-relationship as developed in alternative technologies of subjectification. As the potentials of alternative subjectification are considered more fully, as this session envisages, not just the content or nature of attributed selfhood but a Pandora's box of alternatively configured universes of intra- and inter-subjectivity are revealed for exploration.