

Ambiguity in the Hauka Possession Movement: Beyond Singular Notions of the Self

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Abstract

Spirit possession narratives and practices elude any singular, definitive framework. Nevertheless, possession movements have been understood as a form of resistance, involving mimetic discourses and practices that seem to parody power structures and norms. In this paper, I complicate readings of resistance through an analysis of a Hauka possession ceremony in Jean Rouch's documentary film *Les Maitres Fous*, showing how this interpretive paradigm relies on a particular, provincial conception of the self. Hauka possession movements, in contrast to narratives on individual efforts at resisting power norms, involve relationships of dependence and communal membership. Importantly, this reading of dependence does not exclude expressions of individual autonomy. The individual comes to understand, negotiate, and appropriate these relationships in changing, indeterminate ways. With this in mind, I argue that Hauka possession rituals put the individual in a between space of ambiguity, involving movement within established norms and standards of practice. As such, I advocate for an approach to the study of possession that reflects the indeterminacies and uncertainties of the practices themselves.

Introduction

Spirit possession is a broad term used to describe a range of narratives and practices. Possession is generally framed as involving relationships between humans and spirits or nonhuman entities. In different contexts, spirits are engaged with and understood in different ways. A common theme, however, seems to be the interdependence and inseparability of humanity and external forces or entities. Therefore, spirit possession

movements and practices resist containment by any one paradigm or conceptual framework. Despite this, studies of spirit possession have tended toward an emphasis on perceived efforts at resisting and subverting power norms and standards of behavior.

In particular, the Hauka possession movement has been understood as a form of resistance to colonial powers. In the context of French colonial rule in Niger, new spirits emerged in previously established possession movements. These Hauka spirits embodied human hosts and made their will known to those involved in the possession communities. In doing so, the Hauka took on specific identities, often those of past or present colonial authorities. The presence and role of Hauka spirits in the colonial context has invited readings of resistance. In this paper, I complicate understandings of Hauka possession movements as subversive to the established order. The paradigm of resistance relies on a conception of self that cannot be presumed, one of autonomy, rationality, and self-interest. To make this point, I analyze Jean Rouch's film, *Les Maitres Fous*, as an ethnographic text that depicts an annual Hauka possession ceremony in Accra, Ghana.

Complicating notions of an autonomous self, I identify expressions of more relational, communal ways of being in the Hauka movement. Importantly, a relational conception of self does not ignore or reject instances of individuality and subjective negotiation. With this in mind, I argue for a reading of *Les Maitres Fous* that privileges relationships of dependence and communal membership. This has the virtue of reflecting West African conceptions of the relational self. Moreover, this reading includes the potential for more individual, autonomous expressions. Individuals are not wholly defined by their relationships, but they remain inseparable from the contexts in which their beliefs and actions emerge. Accordingly, readings of communal dependence

encompass *both* individual subjectivities *and* established social norms. Experiences of Hauka possession put the individual in a between space of ambiguity and uncertainty, involving movement between different ways of being in and making sense of the world. In this paper, I encourage an approach that does the same, embracing indeterminacies and the limits of any one perspective or understanding.

The Hauka Movement

The Hauka movement began in 1925 in the Filingue district of what would become the Republic of Niger. The anthropologist Matthias Krings writes, “A group of foreign spirits hitherto unknown to the members of the local cults of spirit possession manifested themselves for the first time during a public dance of young adults.”¹ They introduced themselves as Hauka spirits from the Red Sea, coming as “guests of the spirit *Dongo* (the spirit of thunder worshipped in the *holey* cult of spirit possession of the *Songhay* speaking people).”² The Hauka arrived just three years after Niger became a French colony. Developing in the context of French colonial rule, the Hauka movement appeared to involve a direct, explicit imitation and mockery of colonial authorities.

Paul Stoller notes that the French “introduced a policy of ‘cultural renaissance’” aimed at the elimination of more “ancient ways” of being.³ The result, Stoller argues, was the emergence of what he calls “a revolutionary cultural phenomenon, the *Hauka*, a new ‘family’ of Songhay spirits.”⁴ Hauka spirits found a place within the already established

¹ Matthias Krings, "On History and Language of the 'European' *Bori* Spirits," in *Spirit Possession, Modernity and Power in Africa*, eds. Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 59.

² Ibid.

³ Paul Stoller, "Horrid Comedy: Cultural Resistance and the Hauka Movement in Niger." *Ethos* 12, no. 2 (1984): 169.

⁴ Ibid.

order of Songhay possession rituals. They simply had different identities and socially specific manifestations. In the district of Filingue, under the leadership of *Gomno Malia*, the Governor of the Red Sea, the Hauka introduced themselves as *Mayaki 'I* (the warrior), *Kapral gardi* (the Corporal Guard), and *Babule* (the blacksmith).⁵ The spirits took on specific identities and would display “military like behaviour, salutations and drills, similar to those of the French military.”⁶

French colonial authorities understood the movement as subversive and hostile to the new political and social order. Stoller identifies instances where the French administrators condemn the Hauka movement as challenging and imitating French colonial supremacy.⁷ He writes, “The French responded to the ‘Hauka agitation’ in the same manner they dealt with other acts of insubordination in Niger – with severe punishment.”⁸ French authorities also formally condemned the Hauka movement in an official report describing how, “while in trance, the leading *hauka* medium, a woman by the name of Zibo, ‘preached insubordination,’ encouraging people not to pay taxes and to refuse to work in the colonial forced labor gangs.”⁹ Members of the movement understood the role and meaning of Hauka spirits in different ways, but French authorities clearly saw possession practices as a means of resisting and challenging colonial rule.

The Hauka movement spread quickly throughout West Africa and, beyond the context of French colonial rule, it remained a “politically and culturally significant

⁵ Krings, “On History and Language of the ‘European’ *Bori* Spirits,” 59.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession among the Songhay of Niger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 119.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Paul Henley, “Spirit Possession, Power, and the Absent Presence of Islam: Re-Viewing ‘Les Maitres Fous’.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12, no. 4 (2006): 117.

phenomenon.”¹⁰ Stoller identifies migration from Niger to the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) as common before and during the emergence of Hauka spirits. He describes the Gold Coast as “the Mecca for literally hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking some escape from the economic and social privations of French colonial rule in Niger and Mali.”¹¹ Importantly, migrants did not leave behind past ways of being. They maintained certain religious and social practices, including, in this case, Hauka possession rituals.¹²

Jean Rouch’s *Les Maitres Fous*

In 1955, Jean Rouch released *Les Maitres Fous*, “The Mad Masters,” a short film on an annual Hauka possession ceremony in Accra, Ghana. Rouch was a French filmmaker whose first contact with the Hauka movement occurred when he was working as a civil engineer for the French colony in Niger. After observing a Hauka possession ritual, Rouch decided to become an ethnographer, studying “Songhay religion and the ‘migratory movements of the young Nigerians who sought work during the dry season in the cities of the Gold Coast.’”¹³ Rouch shot *Les Maitres Fous* in 1954 as “part of an extended study of urban migration.”¹⁴ The film was noticeably different than the eight previous films Rouch had produced, “engaging more directly with the subjects of the film cinematographically.”¹⁵ For Paul Henley, *Les Maitres Fous* was “shaped by a clear

¹⁰ Ibid., 124.

¹¹ Ibid., 125.

¹² On this point, Stoller describes the Hauka movement as “a pluri-ethnic, transnational phenomenon.” He continues, “The Hauka flew to Niger on the wings of the wind of the east, the Harmattan, which originated along the African shores of the Red Sea. Never a soft breeze, the wind carried the Hauka farther south and west to the Gold Coast, the Mecca of Hauka, *their* ultimate destination.” – Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*, 124.

¹³ Danielle Lewis, “Mockery and Respect in *Les maitres Fous*: A (Post) Colonial Exploration of Representation and Interpretation,” 3.

¹⁴ Henley, “Spirit Possession, Power, and the Absent Presence of Islam,” 732.

¹⁵ Ibid.

narrative structure with a classical ‘beginning, middle and end.’”¹⁶ As such, he writes, “it represented a new departure not only within Rouch’s own work but also within the genre of ethnographic documentary as a whole.”¹⁷

Les Maitres Fous shows a Sunday night Hauka ritual in the context of British colonial rule. In the film, the two closely related ethnic groups of the Songhay and Zerma are “referred to jointly as ‘Zabrama’ ... whose young men had been seasonal migrants to the economically dynamic cities on the coastal plains of West Africa.”¹⁸ Over time, the film has been understood and interpreted in a variety of ways. The anthropologist James Ferguson, however, identifies a common theme, arguing that, for many anthropologists, the central meaning of the film was that “it takes the scandal of mimicry (‘we want to be like you’) and reinterprets it as an ironic cultural practice that is both culturally defiant (and thus resistant and subversive) and authentically other (since it mimes Western forms only to appropriate them into a fundamentally non-Western order).”¹⁹ Upon its release, *Les Maitres Fous* was heavily criticized and condemned by colonial authorities for depicting Songhay and Zerma individuals in apparent mockery of colonial authorities.

Readings of Resistance

In resistance readings of *Les Maitres Fous*, members of the Hauka movement are understood as mocking and challenging British colonial authority in Ghana through rituals and practices of possession. Expressions of mimicry in *Les Maitres Fous* appear as

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ James Ferguson, “Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the ‘New World Society’.” *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (2002): 556.

clear attempts to subvert the colonial order. Furthermore, the commentary and framing of the Hauka ritual by Jean Rouch support this interpretation.

The identities and actions of possessed individuals imitate and appropriate British and French colonial figures. In Rouch's depiction of the Hauka ceremony, the first man to become possessed is seized by Capra Haidi, the corporal of the British guard. The man rises from the ground and salutes the others in the compound. He takes a torch and walks quickly back and forth, letting the flame burn his arms and body, proving that he is no longer human, now possessed by a Hauka spirit. Then, Captain Malia, the captain of the Red Sea, possesses another man. He begins marching back and forth, imitating the parade marches of the British army. The Hauka spirit seems to mock the overly structured and methodical ways in which the soldiers move. Meanwhile, a woman named Magasia lies on the ground with saliva running from her mouth. The spirit of Madame Salma, once the wife of a French officer, takes over. She puts on a dress and pith helmet, marching across the compound with exaggerated movement. Another Hauka spirit, the general, possesses a man. Suddenly, the governor confronts and insults him, causing the general to start tearing at the leaves and bushes on the edge of the compound. He exclaims, "Always the same thing. They never listen to me."

Throughout the ceremony, members march around with wooden guns, striking them together to imitate the sound of gunshots. One of the initiates, a man seeking admittance into the Hauka community, tries to put on a pith helmet worn by the British soldiers. He is pushed away from the group to await initiation, but returns with two wooden guns. He stomps around the compound, at times throwing himself to the ground. Later, the penitents confess their crimes and swear to never repeat their mistakes again.

After, they are led out of the compound to await possession. The other members begin to dance, moving throughout the compound. The sentries surround them, carrying whips and wooden guns. When one of the penitents tries to join the dancers, the sentries send him away. They remain on the outskirts of the compound, striking the wooden guns together and aiming them at the dancers. Some lay prone on the ground, facing the center of the compound.

These examples of a Hauka possession ceremony in Accra support readings of resistance. The mimetic practices of the Hauka movement can be read, Ferguson accepts, as “embodied themes of mockery, parody, laughter, and anticolonial resistance.”²⁰ In *Les Maitres Fous*, the possessed adopt and appropriate British colonial attire and actions. They seem to over-exaggerate the formalized marching styles and military practices of the British army. Paul Henley writes, “They assume a series of identities associated with the colonial world, mostly political or military: Governor, General, Major, Corporal of the Guard, and so on, putting on pith helmets and red sashes, blowing a whistle and parading up and down with wooden models of guns.”²¹ The practices and expressions of Hauka possession can be read as efforts to make sense of the presence of a colonial power and appropriate societal norms and foreign ways of being.

Jean Rouch’s portrayal and framing of the ceremony also seems to imply and promote understandings of Hauka possession movements as subversive to dominant powers. At the start of the film, for example, spectators are warned of the “violence and cruelty” they are about to encounter. The film’s goal, Henley reflects, is to “provide an uncompromised view of one of the ‘new religions’ developed by young African migrants

²⁰ Ferguson, “Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the ‘New World Society,’” 556.

²¹ Henley, “Spirit Possession, Power, and the Absent Presence of Islam,” 732.

as a reaction to their bruising encounter with ‘the mechanical civilization’ of the cities.”²² Rouch’s assumption of the oppressive nature of “mechanical civilization” emerges clearly in the opening sequence of the film. Rouch comments on the stress and strain of life in the city of Accra, “concluding with the suggestion – running over a dramatic night-time shot of an adept frothing at the mouth – that the migrants ‘from silent savannas’ are ‘forced’ to turn to the cult as refuge from all this ‘noise.’”²³ Rouch makes a similar claim at the end of the film, reaffirming his understanding of the Hauka ceremony as a means of dealing with colonial societal norms.

Perhaps the most referenced example of Rouch’s insistence on the ceremony as subversive to colonial rule occurs when one member is shown breaking an egg over the head of a wooden statue of the Governor. Rouch asks, “Why an egg?” and immediately answers that it is meant to “imitate the plume worn by British governors on their helmet.” The film then cuts to a shot of the actual British governor as he arrives at a military parade in Accra. Rouch comments, “Amid the crowd there are *hauka* dancers looking for their model. And if the order is different here from there, the protocol remains the same.” Rouch then shifts back to the possession ceremony.

The anthropologist Michael Taussig, in particular, highlights this part of *Les Maitres Fous*, focusing on the contrast between the two scenes of the possession ceremony and the British parade. He describes this aspect of the film as an “enormously clarifying moment,” causing those watching the film to audibly “gasp.”²⁴ Reflecting on Rouch’s framing of the Hauka ceremony, Taussig understands the film as subversive and argues that “the mimetic power of the film piggy-backs on the mimetic power of African

²² Ibid., 735.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, 1992), 242.

possession ritual.”²⁵ He continues, “The Hauka were jailed in 1935 for mimicking the white man who possessed their very bodies, and Rouch’s film was banned in the 1950s for mimicking that mimicking.”²⁶ Taussig focuses on the “mimesis” of the Hauka movement, understanding it as a clear means of subverting the colonial order.

Beyond Rouch’s *Les Maitres Fous*, studies of spirit possession have generally placed greater emphasis on theories of resistance. The anthropologist Michael Brown calls this the “theoretical hegemony of resistance.”²⁷ Brown even identifies this tendency in his own work, specifically in his reading of “gender-bending” practices of American channelers. He initially understands channeling practices as offering “a ‘site of resistance’ for the women who practice it.”²⁸ There is one problem, however; the practitioners themselves steadfastly reject this analysis and “see their exploration of male ‘energies’ as a way of expanding their selves.”²⁹ In general, the role of women in possession movements has invited interpretations of resistance. The reality is often far more complex. In her review of scholarship on possession, Janice Boddy makes this point, writing, “If we focus on what women do, rather than what they cannot, we find them working in the spiritual realm on behalf of themselves, their families, households, or communities, channeling spirits’ assistance or heading off their wrath, protecting future generations, even protesting injustice.”³⁰ Readings of resistance often give the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 243.

²⁷ Michael Brown, “On Resisting Resistance.” *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 4 (1996): 729.

²⁸ Ibid., 732.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Janice Boddy. “Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23, (1994): 416.

impression that individuals, women in particular, are either subverting or accepting power norms.³¹

The Autonomous Self

While resistance paradigms may be valid, they rely on a particular conception of an autonomous, rational self that may not be universally applicable. Boddy makes this point, identifying a rationalizing tendency in scholarship on possession wherein “attention was directed to instrumental, strategic uses of consensual beliefs by socially disadvantaged (so-called status-deprived) individuals who, in claiming to be seized by spirits, indirectly brought public attention to their plight and potentially achieved some redress.”³² These “status-deprived” individuals are framed in ways that emphasize perceived expressions of agency and autonomy. The self is then conceived, in Charles Piot’s words, as “autonomous, propertied, self-interested, accumulative, and having independent agency ... This individual’s interest is seen as opposed to both the interest of other individuals and that of the larger social whole.”³³ Readings of resistance assume and rely on this conception of an autonomous self.³⁴

³¹ Boddy sums this up nicely, writing, “a view now widely held is that possession is an embodied critique of colonial, national, or global hegemonies” (419). Boddy complicates this paradigm, noting how, “by replicating an experience in gesture and art, the experience becomes known and familiar, incorporated by the individual and her society. But it is also interpreted and thereby transformed” (425). Mimetic actors, she continues, “do not lack agency” (425).

³² *Ibid.*, 410.

³³ Charles Piot, “Introduction.” In *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 16.

³⁴ In general, the political theorist Timothy Mitchell argues, interpretations of resistance “bring oppressed or neglected groups to our intellectual and political attention.” To do so, Mitchell continues, scholars seek to reveal, “beneath their appearance as anonymous masses, their existence as genuine political subjects. This means they must be shown to be self-formed, internally autonomous actors resisting an external domination.” – Timothy Mitchell, “Everyday Metaphors of Power” *Theory and Society* 19, no. 5 (1990): 546.

Importantly, understanding others involves awareness of the limits of any one perspective or way of being.³⁵ Accepting this point requires that we confront ingrained assumptions and preconceptions. Saba Mahmood, in her study of a women’s mosque movement in Egypt, recognizes that to “analyze people’s actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is necessarily to reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination.”³⁶ Mahmood complicates common conceptions of agency as involving individual, rational, and strategic engagement with the world. She thinks of agency “not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action.”³⁷ Mahmood, therefore, comes to see how, in the context of the women’s mosque movement, “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment.”³⁸ A privileging of autonomy and individuality risks ignoring the indeterminate ways in which members of West African Hauka movements learn to engage with and make sense of their worlds.

The Relational Self

A more relational, communal conception of self contrasts with understandings of individual autonomy. This relational self is often identified with communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Piot argues, for example, that it “manifests itself in the ontologies,

³⁵ The anthropologist Michael Jackson, for instance, describes understanding as “the loss of the illusion that one’s own particular worldview holds true for everyone.” – Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 11.

³⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 174.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

cosmologies and psychologies of African peoples in myriad ways.”³⁹ Importantly, Piot is clear that he uses the term “African” provisionally, recognizing the limits of categories or frameworks like Western and African. Still, he identifies expressions and understandings of a more relational self in communities in Africa. Piot writes, “if the person is always an aspect of various relationships, we should see this person as composed of, or constituted by, relationships, rather than as situated in them. Persons here do not ‘have’ relations; they ‘are’ relations.”⁴⁰ This conception of a relational self remains difficult for me to grasp and understand. But this may not be surprising. My own ways of existing in and thinking about the world are partial and subjective. As Piot puts it, “this diffuse, fluid self – a self that is multiple and permeable, and infused with the presence of others, both human and nonhuman – is not captured by much Euroamerican social theory.”⁴¹ In other words, post-Enlightenment, Western, liberal assumptions often fail to encompass more relational, dependent ways of being.

The connection between human and nonhuman entities becomes especially important in communities where spirits are experienced as present and active. Laurenti Magesa, for example, emphasizes the significance of spirits in what he calls “African religion.”⁴² He writes, “Their presence and relationship to humanity means that they are part of humanity by the interconnection of vital powers and thus cannot be ignored.”⁴³ As such, the spirits “must be placated almost daily” and are not confined to a religious ritual

³⁹ Piot, “Introduction,” 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

⁴² Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Orbis Books, 2014), 56.

⁴³ Ibid.

or a specific sphere of human life.⁴⁴ Instead, they have the power to influence the everyday lives of individuals and communities.

Furthermore, philosophers Fred Hord and Jonathan Lee (of Colorado College) identify a “fundamentally relational conception of reality” in the history of black intellectual tradition.⁴⁵ They cite Dona Richards on this point, who writes, “All beings exist in reciprocal relationship to one another; we cannot take without giving ... Spirit is primary, yet manifested in material being.”⁴⁶ Specifically in communities with spirit possession movements, this more relational, interdependent way of being in and understanding the world figures prominently.

The notion of a more relational self complicates readings of individuals as either resisting or accepting power norms. On this point, Mahmood understands power as “a strategic relation of force that permeates life.”⁴⁷ Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Mahmood argues that the subject “does not precede power relations, in the form of an individuated consciousness, but is produced through these relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility.”⁴⁸ The individual is not a distinct, contained entity. This becomes especially clear in expressions of spirit possession. Boddy reflects, “Phenomena we bundle loosely as possession are part of daily experience, not just dramatic ritual. They have to do with one’s relationship to the world, with selfhood – personal, ethnic, political, and moral identity.”⁴⁹ The individual exists within systems and relations of power and cannot be considered in isolation from them. Importantly, this

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Lee and Fred Hord, *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Africana Philosophy* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Boddy, “Spirit Possession Revisited,” 414.

does not exclude the possibility for readings of agency and autonomy. Individuals come to engage and negotiate these relations in changing, indeterminate ways. I encourage a reading of *Les Maitres Fous* and the Hauka movement that appreciates how individuals seek out and find meaning within relations and experiences of submission and dependence.

Relationships of Dependence and Communal Membership

Conceptions of a relational, interdependent self can influence understandings of Hauka possession movements. In an effort to move beyond readings of resistance and complicate assumptions of an autonomous, individual self, I have come to privilege a reading of Hauka possession as establishing community and relationships of dependence. Specific examples from *Les Maitres Fous* demonstrate the validity of this interpretation, but are commonly misunderstood or ignored in readings of resistance.

Throughout the film, members of the Hauka movement come together in relationships of dependence. After a look at life in Accra, Rouch shows members of the movement meeting together at the salt market. They supposedly gather there every day after work, sitting together in small groups, playing cards, and napping. On a Sunday morning, the members find different means of transportation to get to the compound where the Hauka ceremony takes place. Muntyeba, a “High Priest” of the movement and a cocoa farmer from Niger, owns the compound.

When the initiates are sent away to await possession, select members of the movement gather around an altar for public confession. Rouch calls them the “guilty Hauka.” One man confesses that he has had intimate relations with a friend’s girlfriend.

Another says that he does not care about the Hauka spirits and sometimes thinks they do not exist. The penitents are then fined. One man sacrifices a chicken and pours its blood over the altar and a “termite hill” painted black and white to represent the Governor’s Palace. After, the penitents stand before the altar and take the “Great Oath,” asking the Hauka spirits to end their lives if they repeat their mistakes.

When Madame Lokotoro, “the doctor’s wife,” possesses a man, he puts on a dress and begins dancing in place. Meanwhile, the corporal of the guard salutes the others possessed by Hauka spirits. He repeatedly throws himself to the ground before quickly standing back up. The governor, meanwhile, lies on the ground, foaming at the mouth and “reaching the climax.” Seeing this, the lieutenant calls over the corporal of the guard to assist the governor. Speaking in French, the governor begins insulting the other members. The different Hauka spirits engage with one another, shaking hands vigorously and talking rapidly back and forth.

Later in the ceremony, the governor calls for a “roundtable conference” to determine if they will sacrifice and eat a dog. When all the Hauka spirits are present, they agree that the dog must be consumed. The possessed surround the altar and, as soon as the “White Priest” cuts the dog’s throat, they quickly move in, drinking the blood and licking it off the altar. With blood dripping from their mouths, the Hauka spirits must now decide if they should eat the dog raw or cooked. The captain determines that they will cook the meat so that they can bring the pieces to the other members who could not make it to the compound. They put the meat into a pot and wait until the water comes to a boil. As soon as it does, the possessed put their hands directly into the water and pull out pieces of meat. The head of the dog, understood as the best part, goes to the “wicked

commander.” Pieces of meat are wrapped in banana leaves and the broth is poured into empty perfume bottles to be given to absent members of the movement. Eventually, as night falls, the Hauka spirits leave their hosts one by one.

These aspects of the Hauka ceremony create and maintain community and are not necessarily attempts at resisting or subverting power norms. Paul Henley supports this reading, recognizing “that not all *hauka* possession rituals have an immediate instrumental purpose: some seem to be enacted merely to maintain the relationship with the spirits.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Henley notes that Hauka rituals are not necessarily “concerned with serious matters. Similarly, Rouch reports that some *hauka* events are little more than a form of entertainment, considered by the participants to be somewhat superior to going to the cinema.”⁵¹ Hauka rituals do not necessarily involve strategic, subversive actions. With this in mind, I understand Hauka possession as establishing and maintaining relationships of dependence. The possessed each have a place and role in the Hauka ceremony.

Above all, the members in the compound are subject to the will of Hauka spirits. Muntyeba, for example, runs the compound and seems to have a degree of power and influence over the other members of the movement. Nevertheless, he submits to the Hauka spirits. Furthermore, the initiates, seeking admission into the community, must first prove that they can become possessed. They submit to the spirits in hopes of joining the Hauka community. The penitents, as well, willingly confess their mistakes. The community holds them accountable for individual transgressions and requires that they

⁵⁰ Henley, “Spirit Possession, Power, and the Absent Presence of Islam,” 735.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 737.

pay back the Hauka spirits and other members. The individual, therefore, willingly engages in relationships of dependence and submission.

Additionally, the possessed sacrifice and eat a dog, an act Rouch describes as “highly taboo,” to prove to the other members in the compound that they are stronger and distinct from normal human beings.⁵² In Henley’s interpretation of *Les Maitres Fous*, the possessed “attempt to embody for the immediately present audience of Africans an other-worldly spirit being who, by very definition, will behave in abnormal, transgressive ways.”⁵³ The possessed demonstrate their acquired Hauka identities through actions that strike other members as distinctly other and non-human. They even burn themselves and reach into boiling water to prove that they do not feel or care about the pain. The possessed act in specific ways for a specific audience. The importance of context cannot be overstated. The possessed engage in relationships of dependence, demonstrating their non-human power to the other members in the compound and situating themselves within a broader community.

While many saw the Hauka ceremony in *Les Maitres Fous* as a clear sign of subversion and mimicry of colonial authorities, African students studying in France had an entirely different reaction. James Ferguson writes, “African students said the film represented them as savages, who only ‘aped’ European cultural forms for their own ‘tribal’ reasons.”⁵⁴ They also had a different interpretation of the imitative practices in the Hauka ceremony. These African students, Ferguson argues, saw “that within the cultural politics of the colonial order, imitation was less about sympathetic magic and accommodating white power within indigenous cultural orders than about claims to

⁵² Ibid., 755.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, “Of Mimicry and Membership,” 557.

membership within modern society and negotiations of the rights proper to such membership.”⁵⁵ I would argue that the reactions of African students reflect their understanding of a more relational, communal way of being. They framed the Hauka ceremony as a means of establishing and maintaining membership within communities.

Beyond the case of Hauka movements, Ferguson places particular emphasis on relations of dependence among the Ngoni people of Zambia. In an essay titled “Declarations of Dependence,” Ferguson challenges modern, liberal privileging of autonomy and individual freedom. He considers the history of the Ngoni state and its policy of incorporating conquered peoples, who could then find a place and purpose within the new order. To the “emancipatory liberal mind,” he writes, we have “the disturbing spectacle of people openly pursuing a subordinate and dependent status.”⁵⁶ Reflecting on this point, Ferguson works to disrupt the common Western, liberal assumption that progress lies “in the triumphant elimination or reduction of dependence.”⁵⁷ In doing so, he notes how “anthropologists of Africa (from Radcliffe-Brown onwards) have long insisted that relational persons do not precede relations of dependence; they are, instead, constituted by those relations.”⁵⁸ Ferguson even cites Mahmood and the “theoretical and political challenge of a form of agency that seeks its own submission.”⁵⁹ He comes to accept that, where the possibility exists for hierarchical affiliation, “dependents could enjoy considerable agency, and dependence itself could

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ James Ferguson, “Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 2 (2013): 224.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 225.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 226.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 237.

become ... ‘a mode of action.’”⁶⁰ “Hierarchical dependence,” he continues, can be “the principal mechanism for achieving social personhood.”⁶¹

Ferguson’s notion of hierarchical dependence applies to Rouch’s portrayal of an annual Hauka ceremony. Members of the movement and the Hauka spirits exist in relations of dependence and hierarchical affiliation. The spirits have considerable influence and control over the lives of Hauka members but they, nevertheless, depend on human hosts to make their will known and engage directly with the physical world. The spirits also take on a range of identities, each with a specific social status and purpose. In my effort to complicate and move beyond readings of resistance, I have come to see the importance of communal membership and relationships of dependence in the Hauka movement.

Movement, Ambiguity, and the Between

Nevertheless, there is a relevant counterargument to my insistence on communal membership and dependence in the Hauka movement. One may legitimately argue that this reading is itself limited, reflecting my own interest in disrupting readings of resistance and Western, modern assumptions of an autonomous, stable self. In response, I argue, the two modalities are not necessarily in conflict. More relational ways of being necessarily involve individuality and autonomy. For instance, based on fieldwork among the Dinka people of Sudan, Godfrey Lienhardt suggests “that one can lay too much one-

⁶⁰ Ibid., 226.

⁶¹ Ibid.

sided stress on the collectivist orientation of African ideas of the person.”⁶² Lienhardt critiques literature on African representations of the self and accepts that individual eccentricities influence more communal or relational ways of being. He identifies, for example, “the deliberate or accidental flouting of convention, slips of the tongue which reveal private reservations, clever calculations of personal advantage, and selfish obsessions ... all of which defy or subvert accepted standards of judgment and behaviour.”⁶³

Readings of dependence and relationality in Jean Rouch’s portrayal of an annual Hauka ceremony include awareness for the ways in which individuals engage with communal and societal norms. The individual navigates and appropriates established standards of practice and behavior.⁶⁴ Individual eccentricities, as Lienhardt puts it, influence and destabilize social norms and conventions. My understanding of communal, relational ways of being does not foreclose, but opens space for the indeterminate, ambiguous ways individual come to inhabit and negotiate standards of belief and practice.

The Hauka ceremony in *Les Maitres Fous* undoubtedly involves expressions of individuality. The penitents, for example, confess to personal transgressions and are held accountable by the community. They are not forced or coerced into confessing, deciding to submit to the standards and expectations of the Hauka community. Furthermore, even if the Hauka spirits are understood as imposing their will upon a submissive human host,

⁶² Godfrey Lienhardt, “Self: Public, Private. Some African Representations,” in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, 1985): 145.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁴ Mahmood references Judith Butler on this point, writing, “the iterable and repetitive character of the performatives makes the structure of norms vulnerable and unstable because the reiteration may fail, be resignified, or be reappropriated for purposes other than the consolidation of norms” – Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 162.

the possessed interpret and respond to their presence and influence in changing, indeterminate ways.

Therefore, the individual and communal remain inseparable. On this point, Michael Jackson and Albert Piette warn against a dualistic, either/or conception of societal norms, dismissing “reifications that would create the illusion of certain societies as fatalistic (the individual submerged in the group) and others as agentive (the individual standing out and acting autonomously).”⁶⁵ Readings of dependence and relationality risk giving the impression of a ‘fatalistic’ reality, in which individuals are completely determined by societal norms and standards. Nevertheless, examples of relational dependence in Hauka possession rituals are inseparable from expressions of individual interest and appropriation.

Ultimately, I argue against an either/or framework in readings of Hauka possession.⁶⁶ Hauka movements involve communal relations of dependence but potential remains for different readings and more nuanced understandings. This conception of individuality in communal adherence and practice complicates a unitary, stable reading of relational ways of being. Possession rituals situate the individual in a between space of uncertainty and ambiguity. In *Les Maitres Fous*, the possessed are both human and spirit. Boundaries between conceived entities are blurred, collapsed, and transgressed. As such, Hauka possession rituals demand an interpretive framework reflective of the indeterminacies and multiplicities of the practices themselves. Studies of and reactions to

⁶⁵ Michael Jackson and Albert Piette, “Introduction,” in *What Is Existential Anthropology?* (Berghahn Books, 2015): 17.

⁶⁶ Mahmood has a similar goal in her study of a women’s mosque movement in Egypt. She writes, “I want to move away from an agonistic and dualistic framework – one in which norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion – and instead think about the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated.” – Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 23.

Les Maitres Fous have insisted on either/or readings of individuality *or* relationality, autonomy *or* dependence. My understanding of communal dependence in Hauka possession movements allows for readings of individual negotiation and appropriation. In the study of possession experiences and practices, much can be gained by employing a both/and logic that embraces uncertainty and ambiguity.

Spirit Possession as a Model for Scholarship

The aim of this paper has been to encourage movement toward the ideal of reflecting the indeterminate, ambiguous ways in which the possessed experience and describe their involvement in possession rituals and practices. As such, spirit possession movements can provide a model for scholarship. Michael Lambek supports this point, writing on spirit possession in Mayotte, a collection of small islands between Madagascar and Mozambique once subject to French colonial rule. I will cite Lambek at length, not to draw comparisons between the Hauka movement and possession in Mayotte, but to support my insistence on embracing the indeterminacies of the between in spirit possession studies.

Lambek moves toward the ideal of reflecting observed complexities and ambiguities in his reading of possession rituals in Mayotte. He situates himself in the between, considering what he calls incommensurable statements. Lambek writes, “Incommensurable statements are neither obviously complementary (I am right about this and you are right about that) nor contradictory (this is my property; no, it’s mine).”⁶⁷ The point, he continues, “is that the distinctions between these statements, theories, practices,

⁶⁷ Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 396.

or arguments are not resolvable. Invocation of one does not logically entail any of the others, nor does it rule them out.”⁶⁸ Accordingly, Lambek advances a both/and approach in studying possession in Mayotte. As he puts it, “if one cannot choose between incommensurables, it is because each is insufficient by itself. Hence it becomes a matter of both/and rather than either/or.”⁶⁹ Importantly, Lambek acknowledges the “uncertainty of both/and,” claiming that it “logically encompasses the alternative of either/or.”⁷⁰ This is a key qualifying statement. The both/and model moves between incongruities and contradictions, embracing the potential for different readings and ways of understanding.⁷¹

With this in mind, Lambek identifies parallels between the indeterminacies of possession and his task as a scholar. He writes, “If the people of Mayotte have multiple interpretive vehicles for coming to terms with the world, so too do anthropologists.”⁷² In reflecting on his immersion within and movement between different concepts, Lambek considers his role in constructing a narrative. He reflects, “In fieldwork our narrativized self-construction intersects with the narratives of our subjects. I too have cast a story in which I endeavor to situate the events with reference to my repertoire and my interests.”⁷³ Lambek rejects the possibility for any objective or universal reading. In doing so, he

⁶⁸ Ibid., 397.

⁶⁹ Michael Lambek, “Both/And,” in *What Is Existential Anthropology*, eds. Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (Berghahn Books, 2015): 59.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Lambek expands on this point, writing, “both/and is not always a matter of having one’s cake and eating it too, because it encompasses both having one’s cake and not having it, eating it and not eating it. It is both the freedom to do otherwise and the obligation to do what one does. Both/and comprehends both either/or and both/and” – Ibid., 78.

⁷² Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 392.

⁷³ Ibid., 390.

embraces his own subjectivities and remains conscious of the ways in which individual dispositions influence and structure his readings.

Therefore, Lambek emphasizes the limits of his perspectives and conclusions. He writes, “I accept the consequences of my views. Culture and social life are not random, but they are disputable and open-ended. So is this book.”⁷⁴ Lambek makes it clear that his take on possession in Mayotte is partial and inconclusive. As such, he concludes, “just as I cannot say what life may be like in Mayotte tomorrow, so mine cannot be the last word on the subject of what it was like when I lived there. In conclusion, inconclusion.”⁷⁵ I argue that a scholarly approach promoting movement within complexities and indeterminacies embraces such inconclusive conclusions. Lambek does not seek out any one, universal understanding of intentionality or meaning, instead accepting the limits of his readings.

Constructing a Narrative

To admit the limits of any singular, stable conclusion entails an understanding of one’s role in constructing and maintaining a narrative. Regarding Hauka possession movements, readings of resistance and dependence are potentially reductive in their own ways. I have argued for a more inclusive approach in readings of communal membership and relationality, one that accepts and considers alternate understandings and ways of being. The ideal of both/and as inclusive of either/or is meant to encourage appreciation for alternate understandings and perspectives. Nevertheless, this interpretive paradigm embraces its limitations, deliberately constructing a narrative and creating meaning.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 405.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 406.

Paul Stoller does exactly that in his effort to reflect the complexities and ambiguities of Songhay Hauka movements, advancing a theatrical metaphor. In his words, “Possession troupes produce plays full of historical, sociological, and cultural themes. No matter what their form, these plays articulate unexpressable themes of Songhay cultural tradition, themes that must be provoked and evoked, themes that cannot be described by laws, in theories, or hypotheses lying dead on a printed page.”⁷⁶ Stoller focuses on the ways in which meaning is performed through possession plays, arguing that these observed expressions of Hauka possession elude containment by any one framework. Like Lambek, Stoller resists the temptation to provide a conclusive, definitive reading. Indeed, he maintains that his theater metaphor “provides only a framework – a stage – for the apprehension of possession in Songhay.”⁷⁷ Fully aware of its limits, Stoller employs this metaphor of the theater to provide a deliberately constructed narrative on Hauka possession rituals.

For Stoller, the constructed narrative resists conclusive assessments and can promote growth and creativity. He writes, for instance, “It is clear to me that the dynamics of the between propel us inexorably toward the story.”⁷⁸ Stories endure, providing an ideal against which to measure realities. Stoller emphasizes the role of stories in the lives of Songhay members of the Hauka movement. It is through their telling and retelling, their connection to past and present, that stories gain their power. The story, then, can act as a bridge “that connects two worlds, binding universes of meaning. It can be a path that entwines the distant lives of others to our more familiar

⁷⁶ Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession among the Songhay of Niger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 209.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Paul Stoller, *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey* (The University of Chicago Press, 2009): 173.

being – a place in the between that is a gift to the world.”⁷⁹ Recognizing the importance of stories and narratives in the lives of his subjects, Stoller seeks to allow his constructed narratives to “reflect the wonder” of his subject’s worlds.⁸⁰ He conveys the limits of his reading of Hauka possession through a story of his own, moving between different examples and perspectives. The strength of this approach, Stoller argues, lies in its capacity to “create bridges between writer and reader, bridges that transform the experience of the writer-storyteller into that of the reader.”⁸¹ The constructed narrative can then move toward the ideal of reflecting the indeterminacies and ambiguities of possession rituals, narratives, and experiences.

My own reading of communal membership and relationships of dependence in *Les Maitres Fous* accepts the possibility for other ways of understanding and making sense of the Hauka movement. I have advanced this reading of Hauka possession through the use of specific supporting sources and ethnographies. In support, Lambek and Stoller encourage an approach to scholarship that moves between different perspectives and ways of being. Each in their own way, they work toward the ideal of allowing their readings and narratives to express and reflect observed realities of ambiguity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy.

Conclusion

To conclude, this approach has value beyond studies of spirit possession. J.Z. Smith supports this point, advancing a playful approach to the study of religion. He also emphasizes the role of constructed narratives and reflects on parallels between the study

⁷⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 67.

⁸¹ Ibid., 172.

of religion and religious theories and practices. Smith defines 'religion' as "the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit positions of power through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation."⁸² While this definition can give the impression of a fixed, stable understanding of 'religion,' Smith recognizes the limits of any one reading or framework. He writes, "We need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men."⁸³ This entails an understanding that we necessarily create a narrative in studying other people and ways of being.

Furthermore, Smith's notion of "play" in the study of religion supports my insistence on movement and indeterminacy in readings of spirit possession. He encourages an approach that, for Sam Gill, "depends in the most basic way upon juxtaposition, upon the holding together of two things that cannot easily subsume one another."⁸⁴ Smith advances a playful method of study, one that moves and oscillates between incongruities. For example, on myth, Smith argues that "there is delight and there is play in both the fit and the incongruity of the fit between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world or of experience which is encountered."⁸⁵ Smith highlights the split between expectation and reality, attending to observations of oscillation and play in the between. He then argues that this reading of myth can apply to a more general conception of religion. As Gill puts it, "Smith's insight has been to shift the study of religion from a classification of map types ... to an examination of the dynamics of the relationships between maps (worldviews) and territories (human

⁸² Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993): 291.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

experiences). It is to see that religiousness occurs in the play between map and territory, worldview and experience.”⁸⁶ Gill then concludes, “As with religions, so with the study of religion.”⁸⁷

Still, reflecting movement and indeterminacy in readings of possession movements and practices remains an ideal. Michael Jackson, for example, seeks out “a way of according equal weight to all modalities of human experience, however they are named, and deconstructing the ideological trappings they take on when they are theorized.”⁸⁸ This ideal of “according equal weight” to incongruous and indeterminate readings and observations remains unattainable in practice, given the inevitable theorizing and framings on which we necessarily rely. Still, in Michael Brown’s words, “the ultimate impossibility of such complete intersubjective understanding does not make the goal any less vital.”⁸⁹

While I argue for an approach to the study of Hauka possession movements that moves toward “complete intersubjective understanding,” I have fallen short of this ideal. I relied on potentially limited conceptions of resistance and communal membership readings, privileging the latter in my understanding of Hauka movements. Still, I have framed this reading as a both/and paradigm inclusive of the potential for either/or interpretations. As such, readings of resistance, though limited in different ways, cannot be ignored or rejected in conceptions of communal dependence. Individual eccentricities, negotiations, and transgressions are also compatible with and even necessitated by more

⁸⁶ Sam Gill, “No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Luden*, the Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 2 (1998), 291.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁸⁸ Michael Jackson, “Introduction: Phenomenology, Radical Empiricism, and Anthropological Critique,” in *Things As They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*, ed. Michael Jackson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): 2.

⁸⁹ Brown, “On Resisting Resistance,” 733.

communal, relational ways of being. No matter how inclusive, open, or indeterminate an approach claims to be, there is always room for new insights and understandings. The task, then, is to move or play between indeterminacies and incongruities.

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