Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-024-09879-z

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Amina: Shaking Boundaries of a Woman Inhabited by the Spirits (Senegal)

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Accepted: 2 September 2024

Abstract

In this article, I present the individual ethnography of Amina, a Senegalese woman possessed by the spirits of her lineage. Amina's story shows the lacerations of a person who simultaneously inhabits two worlds: the traditional Lebou culture and the Western one. When her spirits manifest themselves, she is forced to choose between two different interpretations of her suffering: the traditional persecutory and the Western psychopathological. She chooses the former but refuses the healers imposed by the tradition and turns to a priest of her choice, who proves to be sensitive to her need to personally own the healing journey. Amina strategically manipulates the plasticity of the traditional belief system without abandoning it; she bends it to shake the boundaries of herself, and her group and lineage. She uses the disruptive potential of possession and the irruption of the invisible world in the visible to renegotiate her role and acquire a new status in her group. She uses the performative dispositive of possession to renegotiate and expand her spaces of agency and affirm her tenacious subjectivity of a permanently liminal person, one who inhabits, shakes and redraws the boundaries between different worlds of meaning.

Keywords Spirit possession · Senegal · *Ndöp* · Liminality · Boundaries

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Published online: 20 September 2024

Introduction

In this article[1], I present the results of ethnographic research conducted in Senegal between 2014 and 2017 in a Lebou village on the outskirts of Dakar. During my research, I met Amina[2], a Lebou woman possessed by ancestral spirits of her lineage, who agreed to share her story with me. The research developed during 3 years of observation of Amina's life with her spirits[3]. Our meetings originated this portrait of a possessed woman, which documents how she creatively manipulates the plasticity of this belief system to affirm her subjectivity and the permanent liminality of a woman contemporarily belonging to two worlds: the traditional Lebou culture and Western modernity.

The Context: The Lebou and the *Ndöp* Possession Cults

The Lebou are a sub-ethnic group of the Wolof, an ethnic group that emigrated from the interior of northern Africa and settled on the Senegalese coast in the 16th century (Ndoye, 2010; Sylla, 1991). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Lebou massively converted to Islam, without, however, abandoning the cult of the ancestral spirits called *rab*. After the Islamization, the *rab* cult among the Lebou transformed itself without disappearing: the spirits began to differentiate into *Ceddo* (animists) and *Sëriñ* (Muslims assimilated to the Koranic *djinn*). This syncretism between the two belief systems allowed the *rab* cult to survive Islamization (Zempléni, 1966, p. 76). The first Western scholars to document the *rab* cult were Mercier and Baladier (1952), while the systematic study of these cults began at the end of the 1950s with the *École de Dakar*, one of the pioneering experiences of transcultural psychiatry, coordinated by the French psychiatrist Henri Collomb. From the late 1950s to the late 1970s, the *École de Dakar* experienced a fruitful clinical collaboration with the traditional Lebou healer Douda Seck at the Fann psychiatric hospital. This collaboration produced a vast literature on *Ndöp* possession cults and, more generally, on clinical psychopathology in an African context (Ortigues & Ortigues, 1966; Zempléni, 1966, 1968 and 1974). The publications of these 20 years of research are summarized in Collignon (1978).

During my stay in the Lebou villages on the outskirts of Dakar, I came into contact with the *Ndöp* possession cults, still very active, and I documented, through the

[1] This article is the English translation of a piece originally published in Italian: Miramonti (2021)

[2] Amina expressed her consent to the publication of her story for research purposes. Her name and the names of other people mentioned in her life history are changed to protect their privacy. Only the name of Mohammed Ndiaye, renowned Senegalese healer and priest, was maintained, with his consent. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

[3] The methods used for data collection included participant observation and discursive interviews. The data analysed for this article included 61 discursive interviews with Amina and the field notes of participatory observations in twenty-two *Ndöp* public ceremonies, and four private ceremonies of alliance with the spirits. To outline the historical and social context in which Amina's story develops, I also interviewed three possessed women from the village of Yoff, four priests, and a *batteur* (drummer in possession ceremonies).

in-depth analysis of a particular biography, their expressions in a social context that differs in many aspects from the one investigated by the *École de Dakar*.

The Story of Amina

Amina was born in 1955 in Yoff, a Lebou village on the outskirts of Dakar. Her father is a fisherman, imam and Koranic teacher, and her mother is a fruit and vegetable merchant. Neither of Amina's parents manifests the presence of ancestral spirits in their lives, although a divination session, conducted when Amina was already an adult, revealed that two spirits had tacitly "followed" her parents since their birth: Nylan, a female animist *rab* had been following her father, and Samba Diop, a male Muslim spirit, had been following her mother.

During her childhood, Amina attended primary and secondary school in Dakar. Following adolescence, she began to manifest her impatience with the village rules, which she perceived as too restrictive, and a desire to escape, to the point that even today, in her village, Amina is called the "toubab" (the white) for her tenacious spirit of independence. During an interview, Amina recounted: "In the village of Yoff, I felt I was taken hostage by the culture [...], as a reaction, I wore my hair short throughout my adolescence and refused to braid it. All my life I have been the exception that proves the rule."

During high school, Amina met Moussa, a student a few years older than her and with whom she began a relationship. At the end of high school, she enrolled in the Law School at Dakar University; Moussa had enrolled a few years earlier to study for a bachelor's degree in foreign languages. They talked about getting married when Amina finished university. After graduating, Moussa received a job offer in the UK and Amina wanted to follow him, but conflicts arose between the two and Moussa decided to leave on his own. Amina could not bear to remain in the village. She abandoned university and moved to Cotonou, in Benin, where she found a job as a secretary and remained there for 5 years, during which time she maintained a correspondence with Moussa. Four years after her departure, Moussa returned to Dakar and asked Amina to return and marry him. Amina flatly refused. Moussa then decided to turn to a Muslim healer (marabout) and he asked him to prepare a *maraboutage* (witchcraft) to induce Amina to return and marry him. A few months later, the *maraboutage* took effect and Amina felt an urgent need to return to Dakar. A few days after her arrival, she agreed to marry Moussa. She later recalled:

> It was unexpected: after five years in Benin, I felt [...] I had to go back to Dakar. I arrived at the end of January and on February 12, I got married to Moussa, without knowing why. It wasn't planned; it took everyone by surprise, even me.

Recalling this phase of her life, Amina commented: "On my return from Cotonou, I could no longer adapt to the hardships of the village, after having tasted freedom for 5 years." A few months after her return, Amina found a job as an executive secretary in a Dakar bank. A year after their wedding, her first child was born and, a few months later, her husband received another job offer from abroad, this time in

Canada. Amina was ready to follow him, but Moussa's mother wanted her son to remain in Dakar and feared that Amina would induce her husband to live abroad forever. The mother-in-law then attacked Amina with a *maraboutage*, to induce her to separate from her husband and prevent him from staying abroad for long. Amina recalled: "Two months before Moussa's departure, we had some serious quarrels and we started talking about separating. I didn't want to stay in Yoff, I wanted to go with him to Canada". Two months later, Moussa left for Canada, with the agreement that Amina would join him within a few months, but the conflict between the two escalated. A few months later, Amina separated from her husband, who had decided to remain in Canada, against the wishes of her mother.

After the separation, Amina remained in Yoff and continued to work as a secretary in a bank. A year later, she remarried a colleague. At this point, the ex-mother-in-law realized that Moussa was hoping to restart a relationship with Amina and would not return to Senegal until Amina was married to someone else. Moussa's mother attacked Amina again with witchcraft, this time to get her to separate from her second husband. A few months later, the witchcraft had its effects: Amina separated from her second husband and Moussa announced his return from Canada. Faced with the possibility that Amina would go back to Moussa and the two would permanently go to live abroad, the mother-in-law again attacked Amina with witchcraft, this time to distance her from Moussa. Upon Moussa's arrival, the ex-mother-in-law convinced her son to marry another woman, one who wished to live permanently in Dakar. When Moussa married this woman, the spirits who tacitly had been following Amina, manifested their presence:

> When Moussa remarried, my symptoms exploded. When he married another woman, I felt myself falling… If you are not careful you think that the maraboutage against me was prepared by his new wife. It is not so. It was Moussa's mother who did it.

In 2003, a few days after Moussa's wedding, during a ceremony in honour of the *rab* Samba Diop, Amina fell into a trance and an unknown *rab* possessed her. The spirit requested that Amina sacrifice a cow and build a home altar in his honour. Amina's family agreed to organize the ceremony and they put Amina's aunt, a healer and priestess of the village, in charge of the ritual. On the day of the ceremony, the priestess did not follow the usual ritual procedures: she did not induce a trance in Amina and did not interrogate her spirit to reveal her name before the sacrifice. Only after the altar had been built, did the aunt announce that it had been erected in honour of Nylan/Djogoy, an androgynous animist spirit often represented as a lion, who tacitly followed the paternal lineage of Amina's family. After this revelation, Amina felt that, due to her aunt's failure to observe the rituals, Nylan had rejected the covenant and had not taken up residence on the altar. So, she refused to offer libations on the newly built altar. Reflecting on the behaviour of the aunt, Amina said:

> I don't think my aunt wanted to sabotage my covenant with the spirits. I think the spirits called her to exercise clairvoyance, but not priesthood, and that she was simply unable to conduct all the stages of the covenant ritual.

In the following years, Amina's symptoms worsened: she had frequent, uncontrolled trance episodes, severe migraines, and moments of exhaustion and isolation during which she did not leave the house for days. In 2009, 6 years after she had failed the alliance with Nylan, Amina fell into a deep trance that lasted for five hours. During the trance, the spirit Samba Diop revealed his name and claimed to have defended Amina from numerous *maraboutage* set by her family. In exchange for her protection, the spirit requested a week-long *Ndöp* ceremony, the sacrifice of a goat and the building of an altar in her courtyard in his honour. Amina's family decided to put Adja in charge of the ceremony, a powerful priestess of the village related to Amina's aunt and considered more powerful than her. The ceremony would take place in conjunction with the sacrifice and the construction of the altars of three other women of the village. During the divination that preceded the sacrifice, Adja realized that the spirits had chosen Amina to become a clairvoyant and healer, and feared that once the sacrifice was made, Amina might increase her powers and become a dangerous rival. This is why Adja decided to sabotage Amina's alliance with her spirit. On the day of the ceremony, Adja sacrificed a goat for each of the four women but buried the head of the goat sacrificed for Amina's spirit under one of the other three women's altars and only buried the goat's legs and liver under Amina's altar, leaving it without the animal's head, an indispensable element of its foundations. Recalling the episode, Amina said:

> Normally the head of the animal is buried under the altar so that the sick person can think, the eyes of the animal so that the sick person can see, the ears so that she can hear, the tongue so that she can speak and the legs so that she can walk […]. In my altar, the foundations were completely missing...

Following the sabotage by Adja, Samba Diop, deeply offended, refused to take up residence at Amina's altar and the alliance with the spirit failed. Amina's symptoms worsened: she had frequent psychosomatic disturbances and uncontrolled trances. I randomly met Amina for the first time during this painful phase of her existence, during a ceremony in 2014, and I began to accompany her life concerning the spirits from that moment. After 6 years of prostration following the sabotage of the ritual, in 2015 Amina approached a young priest named Mohammed Ndiaye who was a student of Douda Seck and whose therapeutic reputation was rapidly rising. She had decided to approach him because she felt that he was sensitive to the sick person's needs and he allowed the sick person to actively participate in the treatment:

> Mohammed often stopped by my house to ask me questions. We stayed up talking until very late. He probably felt that the spirits were with me, but they were unhappy. Looking back now, I feel it was the *rab* who were putting him in touch with me.

After more than a decade of suffering and two failed attempts to build an alliance, Amina chose to break away from the family prescriptions that bound her to

her aunt and Adja and decided to turn to Mohammad and try again to ally with the spirits that had defended her from her family's *maraboutage*. Mohammed accepted Amina for treatment and asked her to begin with a divination ceremony in which he would induce a trance in Amina and invite all the spirits following her to possess her and reveal their name and their conditions for the alliance with Amina. A few days before the ceremony, Amina asked me to be with her during the divination and to record what she would say during the trance. I asked her why she wanted me to record the dialogue of her *rab* with the priest and she replied: "To be able to listen to it when I'm not in trance and know what I said since no one around me ever remembers what I say when I fall into a trance and, of course, neither do I." So, I asked her: "What will your family say when they enter your family courtyard and find your new altar, which was not built by a healer of your family?" She replied: "They will have to accept the *fait accompli*: that I have built myself a real altar for my *rab*, in my courtyard, with a priest of my choice. At that point, they will not be able to do anything."

To avoid interference from the family, Amina organized the ritual with the utmost secrecy: it would not be a *Ndöp*, which included a public part with the whole neighbourhood, drumming, and public sessions of possession dancing. It would be a *Samp*[4], a discreet private ceremony, at her home, without any music and no dancing. Mohammed would celebrate the sacrifice and build the altar, protected by the high walls of the family courtyard. I asked her: "But, for the *rab* you will nominate, will your alliance be valid even without the drumming and the public dances?" She answered:

> You too, in Europe, can have a wedding in a public ceremony, with hundreds of guests, or in private form, only with few witnesses and behind closed doors. It is always a valid marriage. Not all *rab* ask for drums and dances. I will build the altar to my *rab* without making a *Ndöp*; it will be a *Samp* celebrated in secret, in my family courtyard.

Amina decided that only three people would attend the covenant ceremony: Mohammed, one of his helpers and me. On the prearranged evening, Mohammed showed up at Amina's house with his assistant and with the divination tools. Amina closed the doors and windows and the ceremony began. Mohammed spread a carpet on the floor of Amina's living room and invited her to sit on it. He then induced a trance in Amina and invited all the spirits that followed her to manifest themselves. Amina remained in a trance for about forty minutes, during which the priest interrogated her and she named three *rab*: Nylan, Samba Diop and Waly (a Muslim *rab*). Samba Diop demanded that Amina immediately pay her debt to him by sacrificing three chickens and building an altar in his honour the following day. The next day, Mohammed performed the sacrifice and built an altar in Amina's courtyard. Satisfied with the fulfilment of his request and with the observance of the ritual procedure, Samba Diop accepted the alliance and took up residence on Amina's altar.

[4] For a detailed description of the differences between *Ndöp* and *Samp*, I refer to Zempléni (1966, p. 307).

Amina's symptoms subsided considerably. She was more serene, even though the construction of the altar had shown her rebellion against her aunt and Adja. After realizing what had happened, Amina's aunt and Adja never openly mentioned the new altar, but they excluded Amina from the celebration of family ceremonies. Despite her improved health, Amina felt that she still had to pay off her debt to the other spirit who had protected her from witchcraft: Nylan. A year later, in 2017, she asked Mohammed to build an altar in Nylan's honour. The ceremony once again took place behind closed doors, with no drumming and no public dancing. Mohammed built an altar in honour of Nylan in Amina's courtyard, next to that of Samba Diop. This time, Nylan accepted the alliance and became Amina's protector and adviser. The symptoms that had afflicted Amina were further reduced.

In the following months, Mohammed revealed to Amina that the spirits had chosen her to become a seer and healer, but she hesitated because she felt that taking that path would lead her to irreversibly cross the border that separates the world of the *rab* from the Western one and to surrender irreversibly to one of the two worlds she had been inhabiting: the traditional one, giving up her tenacious desire of autonomy, which bound her to the Western world. The phase of Amina's story I have documented ends here, with an omen and a procrastination, both cyphers of a personality tenaciously and fruitfully suspended between two worlds, which she inhabits simultaneously.

Reflections

What does Amina's portrait tell us about spirit possession among the Lebou of Senegal? What reflections can we formulate starting from this particular story? To answer these questions, I propose seven remarks and a conclusion.

The Life History: Self-reflexivity Self-reflection and Generalization

An initial reflection arises from the choice of documenting a life history in depth rather than analysing a larger sample of "possessed women" within a comparative scheme. As Crapanzano notes, "The life history is an immediate response to a demand posed by an Other and carries within it the expectations of that Other" (Crapanzano, 1980, p. 8). For Crapanzano, the ethnographer's question is a "foreign construct", which enters the subject and forces them into an alienating awareness of their own experiences. The life history is the product of a desire of the questioned subject to be recognized by the Other who has asked the question. The subject does not limit themselves to giving information but evokes the "desire to be exceptional" in front of the interlocutor, to present oneself as an "individual in the community" (Crapanzano, 1980, p. 10). Commenting on the life story of Tuhami, a possessed Moroccan man, Crapanzano notes how Tuhami "models" his interlocutor by narrating himself and is, in turn, shaped by the ethnographer's question. The two are shaped by the common goal of mutual self-recognition (Crapanzano, 1980, p. 10). For Crapanzano, Tuhami's story expresses his desire to be accepted for his

uniqueness as an individual, and the, sometimes contradictory, versions he provides of his biography represent an attempt to establish, mirroring himself in his interlocutor, his identity and the value of his experience. Zempléni too, presenting his ethnography of Khady Fall, a Senegalese priestess, notes the uniqueness of the story of his interlocutor and warns against the '"abuse of generalization" of many ethnographies, where a particular case becomes an "expression of an entire culture" (Zempléni, 1974, p. 32).

As we have seen, Amina also attempts to affirm the uniqueness of her experience and the value of her story by mirroring herself in the expectation of the ethnographer and defining herself as "the exception that proves the rule". After more than 3 years of exchanges, I believe that my choice to accompany her life with the spirits for a fairly extended period has allowed me to grasp both unique and non-generalizable aspects of her biography, and more intimate aspects of possession among the Lebou, which would probably not have emerged by conducting a few interviews with a larger sample of possessed women. Above all, it is this depth of gaze that makes Amina's history capable of illuminating both the uniqueness of her existence and many contemporary aspects of possession in her ethnic group. As Karl Jaspers noted: "Often, a deep penetration into the single case phenomenologically shows what is common to many others" (Jaspers, 1997, p. 4).

The "Ordinary Dimension" of Possession

Amina's biography has highlighted the centrality of the daily dimension of possession as opposed to the moments of ritual possession. Analysing two cases of possessed Moroccan men, Crapanzano interprets possession as an idiom, a social discourse that influences self-orientation, the determination of individuality, and the relationships established between the possessed and their group even outside the ritual moments (Crapanzano, 1977). In this regard, Schirripa, analysing the possession cults among the Nzema of Ghana, notes that "for the Nzema, what is important is to recognize that an individual has a relationship with one or more gods, and this is not perceived only in the moment of possession, but as a continuous, lasting process" (Schirripa, 2001, p. 83).

The encounter between the ritual dispositive and the daily life of the possessed, therefore, places the accent on possession as a fabric of representations that structures the entire existence of the possessed. In this regard, Lambek, analysing the relationship between human beings and spirits in Comoros, proposed a distinction between "manifest" and "latent" possession. The first indicates the moments in which the spirit shows its presence in the body of the possessed by altering her words, gestures and states of consciousness, while the second refers to the entire biography of the possessed regarding their spirits (Lambek, 1993, p. 313).

Adopting the concept of continuity between daily life and ritual experience, this "portrait of Amina" attempted to look at the actions and relations that mark Amina's everyday life, focusing on the less striking aspects of ritual possession. The case of Amina confirms that possession intertwines biography and ritual performance and

emphasizes the co-existence of the person with the spirit. In this ethnography, Amina's 'living with the *rab*' emerged (the "latent" possession) in continuity with her 'being possessed by the *rab*' (the "manifest" possession). The case of Amina thus confirms the thesis that "possession is not only a momentary *contact* with the spirits but also a permanent *contract* with them**"** (Frank, 1995a, p. 335).

***Theater vécu*: Performativity and Possession**

The interweaving of daily life and ritual raises the question of the performative aspects of 'manifest' possession and their efficacy in producing permanent changes in the biography of the possessed. "Every possession has a 'theatrical' side" observes Métraux: the possessed "reproduce" the forms of a nervous attack rather than undergo it. This "simulation" is obtained by conforming to precise ritual rules, and it resembles the work of an actor playing a character (1955 p. 29). For Métraux, the behaviour of the possessed is regulated by pre-established models, but the "fiction" of the crisis does not involve an intentional deception on the part of the possessed: "These similarities between possession and theatre must not make us forget that, in the eyes of the public, no possessed is an actor. He does not *play* a character, he *is* that character throughout the trance" (Métraux, 1955, p. 32). Leiris (1958) takes up Métraux's theses and affirms that the effectiveness of the ritual representation culminating in the crisis produces an atmosphere of extreme suggestion, to which all those present adhere, which is capable of causing effects in the reality beyond the performative moment. For Leiris, possession is, therefore, *théâtre vécu*, and not just *théâtre joué* (Leiris, 1958, p. 89); possession is a communicative device that multiplies the roles, leading the possessed to model their bodies on the character of the spirit they are embodying. In this regard, Pennacini notes that "the fundamental hermeneutic alternative" between sincerity and fiction dissolves in the ritual, which shapes and transforms the very perceptions of those who participate in it, producing "a sort of cognitive restructuring" (Pennacini, 2001, p. 11). Even Pussetti, referring to the ritual possession in the Bijagó islands of Guinea Bissau, writes: "Performances must [...] be understood as modes of action, social practices with real effects, active components of the system that contribute to shaping, not limiting themselves to representing it. Transformed and protected by moving symbols, the deepest and most implicit meanings are deconstructed, criticized, elaborated, modified" (Pussetti, 2001, p. 114).

We have seen how the performative aspects of Amina's ceremonies were inspired by apparent sobriety: Amina refused public ceremonies and decided to focus on her relationship with the priest. She did not want to be seen in a trance by her family members, she only wanted a few people, and exclusively of her election: the priest, the assistant and a *toubab* of her choosing. The spirit asked her to erect an altar in his honour in her courtyard and not, as often happens, in the courtyard of the priest, next to those of other possessed people. The choice of the place and the audience for her ceremony underlines the interiorization and individualization of Amina's *théâtre vécu*. When I asked her about the effectiveness of the ceremony in the absence of drumming and public dancing, she replied using the metaphor of a private wedding,

the effectiveness of which in transforming the identities of the participants did not depend on the number of guests, the place or the dances. It was no coincidence that Amina decided to summon as witnesses and guarantors of her "marriage" with the spirits the representatives of the two worlds to which she felt she belonged: the ancestral one of the *rab* and the modern one of the *toubab*. These two witnesses would hear the voice of the spirits as she manifested by using her body squirming on her living room floor. Each of the witnesses would participate with the tools of the world they represented: the priest and his assistant with the traditional divinatory objects and the *toubab* with a symbol of the magic of the whites, technology, which held the power to fix the words Amina pronounced when she was invaded by the spirits. The recorder would deliver to Amina and her "public" the exact transcript of her dialogue with the spirits. Amina's request to listen to the recording of her voice in trance could be interpreted not only as a need for introspection but also as the search for an "audience" outside of her culture. Mirroring herself in her unknown foreign interlocutors, she would be able to assert her identity and the value of its existence. Concerning the relationship with her family, whom Amina holds responsible for the failed attempts to build a covenant with the spirits, Amina chose the form of a "surprise marriage", presenting them with a *fait accompli* and accepting the consequences of her break from family ties.

Amina's story confirms that possession is a performative event that invades and creates a space of interaction for the possessed and her community. But in Amina's case, what changes are the audience (restricted and elected by the possessed) and the stage (the living room instead of the village square). Instead, the drama's characters and script were left to the spirits, which Amina reproduced in her body following partially pre-established conduct. During the trance, Amina fidgeted, moaned, trembled, stammered, and accused her family, following movements that she had probably seen since childhood in other possessed women and that she had, consciously or subconsciously, embodied. Protected by three "characters" who took turns to possess her, Amina expressed her frustration and anger, criticized her extended family and staged her identity conflict. Her trance, behind the mask of reserve and sobriety, was profoundly performative, it was lived theatre, where her "acting a role" had profound "reality effects" on her self-perception and healing.

Un truc de femme: Possession and Gender Identity

In one of my first meetings with Amina, I asked her why most Lebou men did not participate in the public ceremonies of *Ndöp*, as women and children of both sexes do in large numbers. She replied: "Because men think *Ndöp* is women's business (*un truc de femme*)." The clear prevalence of women among the participants in possession cults among the Lebou raises questions about the gender dimension of possession and its effectiveness in shaping and redefining gender identities and relationships. Analysing possession in Lambek (1980, 1988) emphasizes the power of possession to reconfigure gender identities, focusing, in particular, on the influence of spirits in the marital relations of the possessed. For this author, possession is a

communicative system through which the spirits can tighten interpersonal ties and enrich the communicative texture of relationships.

The role of possession in redrawing the boundaries of gender identities is also analysed in De Martino's study on Apulian women affected by a psychosomatic condition locally associated with the bite of the Tarantula spider, called *tarantate* (De Martino, 2005). The author documents how the biographies of the *tarantate* are profoundly marked by a culture that imposes strict rules on women and limits their decision-making, inflicting trauma and prolonged frustration. In this context, De Martino interprets tarantism as a ritual to vent conflicts and repressed aggression, one which makes use of colours, music and "rhythmic discipline":

> Tarantism as a rite is constantly identified by the gradual resolution, through dance and music, of a state of crisis dominated by the collapse of the individual presence [...]. Everything happens as if a certain rhythmic order of sounds unlocked that very elementary sign of living which is moving, and as if, at the same time, the discipline of rhythm prevented the movement from liquidating itself in the mere unrelated psychomotor discharge. (De Martino, 2005, p. 135)

De Martino interprets the cyclical recurrence of spider bite symptoms as a sign of a repressed conflict that returns to consciousness. The bite is a painful past that "bites again" (in Italian: *rimorso*, means both "bite again" and "remorse"). The woman and the ritual are responsible for bringing her back to the roles that the social order attributes to the female gender. Even in the case of the Apulian *Taranta*, the effectiveness of possession in shaping the gender identities of the women who inhabit "the land of remorse" is manifest.

We have seen how Amina's biography, like that of many *tarantate*, is pervaded by the frustrations generated by the imposition of rigid social norms on women and by the constant desire to travel to other physical and relational "places". We have also highlighted how Amina's biography is crossed by moments of profound crisis of her presence, of her perception of being an individual endowed with meaning in a world endowed with meaning. During these crises, possession intervenes "to arrest the insurgent chaos, to redeem it in an order" (De Martino, 2005, p. 123). The attempt to bring Amina back into the rules of the group takes place through witchcraft, with the specific aim of shaping her conjugal relations: inducing her to interrupt her life as a single woman living abroad, to return home and marry a man from her ethnic group, in her village, to separate her from the first and then second husband, and then induce the first husband to marry another woman. We have noticed how Amina's "crisis of presence" is revealed in all its violence precisely when the ex-husband marries another woman: "When my husband married another woman, I felt myself falling". In Amina's life, the revelation of spirits and the long journey of allying with them constitutes, on the one hand, a re-incorporation into the norms of the group and, on the other, a moment of renegotiation of such rules, where the "chaos" evoked by De Martino is redeemed in a new relational order. Through the dispositive of spirit possession, Amina partially returns within the normative boundaries of her group, but also redraws a new interactive space for herself as a woman in Lebou society. The sober performativity of Amina (who rejects the "rhythmic discipline" of drums) allows her to make explicit, through the impunity that the status

of "possessed in a trance" grants her, the latent conflicts with her family that try to force her into roles and behaviours that she refuses. Protected by the mask of "incarnated spirit", she can openly criticize these attempts at subjection and resist them using the language of spirits.

The Therapeutic Dimension of Possession: Subjectivity and Liminality

The efficacy of possession in shaping the physical and relational life of the possessed beyond the moments of ritual possession leads to reflection on its therapeutic dimension. In the article mentioned above on Khady Fall, Zempléni compares ethnographic and psychoanalytic methods and argues that psychoanalysis in an African context formulates statements about individuals which implicitly admit that they will never have access to the status of a "subject"[5] who speaks in an analytic setting (Zempléni, 1974, p. 32). During their psychoanalytic clinical experience in West Africa,[6] some Western psychoanalysts met some of these individuals. Still, the dialogue in a psychoanalytic setting could only develop with those who could formulate a personal question, i.e., for those who, according to Zempléni, "could deny themselves [...] to the persecutory interpretations of the evil of their culture" (1974, p. 31). Zempléni notes that the ethnographic method he adopted in the case of Khady Fall clearly distinguished his meetings from those that a psychoanalyst could have conducted in the Fann Hospital with a Senegalese patient because the choice to consult a psychotherapist constituted a "fault line" for the sick person's traditional interpretation of suffering, where the patient asks the Western healer to be the arbiter of their ambiguous position between a persecutory "mode of organization" of suffering which they already deny and an internalized one which they cannot yet assume (Zempléni, 1974, p. 35). Even Ortigues notes how the liminality of the individuals she met in Fann was decisive in giving these individuals access to psychoanalysis and giving Western psychoanalysts access to psychoanalytic practice in Africa (Ortigues, 1966, p. 20). The other "subjects" encountered in Senegal remained "inaccessible to the clinic" (Zempléni, 1974, p. 31) and could only be known through the distorting mirror of the few liminal individuals who accessed the hospital.

The concepts of liminality and ambiguity I evoked recall the analysis of the rites of passage by Van Gennep (1909), where liminality is the phase in which the initiates are separated from society and are no longer what they used to be, but not yet what they will be. Liminality is the moment in which the status of "initiate" is crystallized, the ritual has the power to "promote" to a superior condition or to "reverse"

[5] The debate on the relationship between subjectivity, psychoanalysis and possession is very broad. Some contributions relevant for this research are: Crapanzano (1980) and Pandolfo (1997) in Morocco, Corin (1976, 1982, 1985) in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rasmussen (1994) among the Tuareg Kel Ewey.

[6] The clinical work of Ortigues in Dakar is not the first experience of psychoanalytic therapy outside Western culture. Before Ortigues, psychoanalysis had been applied to patients of non-Western culture by René Laforgue in Morocco, Wulf Sachs in South Africa, Octave Mannoni in Madagascar, Gustav Jung in Kenya, Fritz Morgenthaler, Paul Parin and Goldy Parin-Matthey in Mali and Ghana, and Girindrasekhar Bose in India.

to an opposite status before re-incorporating the initiate into society. A few decades later, Turner took up the notion of liminality in his reflection on performance as a bodily practice capable of producing a "critical redefinition of reality". For Turner, performance is a place of margin and passage that is placed between defined cultural structures and new aggregations. The performance produces change through "social drama": the breaking of a norm that makes visible the latent antagonisms of a society which can only be resolved with a "critical review" of the hitherto legitimated cultural structures (Turner, 1988, p. 33).

Applying the notion of liminality to Amina's story, we can note first of all that it is not a transitory dimension that precedes reintegration but a stable existential condition, a social and interior "place" the protagonist inhabits, summarizing her constitutive ambiguity in her body and her relationships. This permanent liminality becomes the cypher of Amina's being in the world, of her presence. Amina's "social drama" occurs when she breaks the norm that binds her to the healers of her family to choose a priest who combines traditional initiation with sensitivity towards the restless subjectivities emerging in urban contexts exposed to a rapid process of Westernization. The "critical review" of the rules adopted by Amina implies a rupture with family instances, but not the separation from the *rab*'s universe. In Amina's self-narration, I found her desire to face the crisis of her presence and to affirm her indocile subjectivity as a *toubab* woman, without deculturating from the categories of her group and without undertaking a progressive inculturation in the categories of Western therapists. In her healing journey, Amina remains the protagonist of her "personal novel", re-woven into the "tragedy of the group" to which she feels she belongs, intertwined in a way of saying and narrating herself that combines the persecutory and interiorized register, the epic and the novel. At the end of 3 years of observations, Amina appeared to me as a woman who inhabits the boundaries of the belief systems with which she is in contact. Her biography is crossed by the essential instances of Western modernity and by the indocile ancestral memories, which demand to be seen and recognized, to be symbolically pitched in her courtyard, where the altars that her parents never built have finally been erected. Remaining immersed in the representations of the *rab* cult, Amina appeared to me as tenaciously a *subject*, a "thing of herself" and at the same time inextricably intertwined with the "things of her group ", not decultured by the representations to which she adheres, but not even flattened by them. That is, she seemed to me capable of "formulating a personal question" (Zempléni, 1974, p. 30) using the language of the *rab*. Finally, she seemed to me capable of following the tortuous path of healing, designing a social and emotional space for rewriting alliances (Turner's critical review of norms) within her group, accentuating her process of individuation[7] and remaining, at the same time, fiercely "inaccessible to the [Western] clinic".

[7] This aspect of the life of the protagonist confirms Corin's thesis (Corin 1976, p. 360) which identifies possession by spirits in an urban context as a strategy of individualization for the possessed.

Pushing Boundaries: Possession as a Dispositive to Create Alterity

I began these reflections by pointing out that Amina is not "representative" of her group. Like Tuhami, Amina is marked by her distance and difference from the average and the group. In her village, Amina is the *toubab*, a white person with black skin, the rebel who throughout her adolescence refused to wear braids, who emigrated to another country and lived alone before marriage. The theme of the border, of the *limes*, has repeatedly returned in her story; both a painfully inhabited border between symbolic worlds and a crossing of geographical and cultural borders always desired and once achieved through migration. I would like to conclude with a reflection that goes beyond the interpretation of liminality as "inhabiting a border". On this subject, Pennacini underlines "the capacity of possession to provoke an alteration of consciousness, an “identity leap” that seems to break the boundaries not only of the possessed individual but also, in some way, of their culture" (Pennacini, 2001, p. 13). Also in Amina’s case, possession appeared as a device to push the boundaries that demarcate her identities and belongings, to cross them in both directions, to violate forbidden places and to expand her spaces of agency. In Amina’s case, possession appears both as a mechanism for re-incorporation into the group, which bestows her a new status, and as a mechanism for a "critical revisiting" and for renegotiating identities and power. In her biography, her "standing on the boundary" does not appear only as having been pushed to the margins by those who inhabit hegemonic positions in a world of meaning but also a position of ambiguous privilege, from where one can lean towards other worlds without abandoning one’s own, and from where Amina can connect with them and redraw the boundaries that separate them.

Inhabiting the *Limes*: Liminality as a Permanent Condition

This portrait of Amina has given us back a "life sideways", a unique and non-generalizable existence which not only permanently inhabits *limes* and crosses it in both directions but also redesigns it. In her life, being on the boundary is not a stage in a rite of passage but a permanently habitable place, albeit inhabiting it comes metaphorically at the price of a twist in her identity. Amina’s possession allows her not only to inhabit the boundaries between cultures and categories but also to break, connect, blur and redraw them. Reflecting on the persistence and expansion of possession cults in the context of rapid Westernization, we can, therefore, confirm that possession is more a *transitional* than a *traditional* practice (Beneduce & Taliani, 2001) and that it does not take the form of an outcropping wreck of civilisation but as an enigmatic figure of a restless modernity on its way.

Amina embodies liminality as a key category in social spatiality. Liminal people like her are physically and emotionally on the edge, inhabiting the boundary between multiple worlds of meaning and lingering on the threshold between being healed and a healer, receiving and giving treatment, between an independent *toubab* woman and an African *ndöpkat*, an initiate in a congregation of the possessed. In this hesitation and posing on the threshold is an anthropological category of those

who inhabit the *remission society* (Frank, 1995b) of spirit possession, neither cured nor sick, neither in the safe zone of non-initiated nor reincorporated in the group of their initiated, permanently belonging to the liminal society, individuals who dangerously balance between opposites, who connect the opposites without permanently belonging to either of them. These individuals are liminal connectors, tightrope walkers, dangerously stepping on the tightrope of not taking just one side and permanently and, sometimes contradictorily, claiming multiple belongings. These liminal connectors, who shake boundaries between worlds and dangerously walk on those lines without falling into one or the other category, are the representatives of a historically emerging way of being in the world. They lead lives in between, and their betweenness is the special name of this often-neglected form of humanity of which Amina has been, so far, a representative.

Conclusion: The Price of Healing

The comparison of this portrait of Amina with the aforementioned portrait of Tuhami is eloquent. Tuhami fails to receive help from his symbolic culture, and the spirits that appear in his life are stiffened symbols of a "now irrelevant cultural code" (Crapanzano, 1980, p.142), to the point that Tuhami appears resigned to not being able to change his situation (Crapanzano, 1980, p.133). Amina, on the other hand, finds the spaces to access healing in the plasticity of her belief system. While Tuhami appears as a "figure of marginality" *vis-à-vis* his system of beliefs, an "outcast" (Crapanzano, 1980, p. 5), Amina can be assimilated to a "figure of liminality" in Turner's performative sense, not only, therefore, a "life sideways", but also a "redemption figure" who strategically manipulates her symbolic system to recreate it and access a form of individual healing (Backe et al., 2021; Lovell & Diagne, 2019). However, Amina's healing comes at a cost; it implies contracting a new debt with the spirits. The spirits call her to a new becoming, to a future of seer and healer. In the face of this revelation, Amina hesitates to cross forever that *border* which the spirits transform for her into a *threshold* between worlds, according to the double etymology of the Latin word *limes*, which means both *boundary* and *threshold*. Standing in front of that threshold from which the spirits call her, Amina hesitates to throw herself irreversibly off balance, to break her precarious equilibrium which is the hallmark of her being in the world, of her "life sideways" and, at least for now, the spirits seem to have accepted her suspended ambivalence.

Amina's life remains open to new developments. Her unique way of living with the spirits and her tenacious subjectivity are demonstrated in her daily life through the painful fertility of her constant inhabiting and redrawing of the elusive boundaries that separate and connect different worlds of meaning.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Amina for her generosity in sharing her story and for allowing me to be part of intimate moments of her healing journey and Mohammed Ndiaye for his warm welcome and unconditional support during the fieldwork.

Declarations

Conflict of interest No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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