

## CONCEPTS OF THE SELF IN SOUTH INDIA AND THE UNITED STATES

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The language of “possession” — by which I mean, control or loss of one’s “self” to an outside agency — is extremely rich in English, even though we do not usually think of it that way. Americans speak of normal consciousness and control of the self by subject as the possession of self by subject. Lack of normal consciousness and lack of control of self by subject is the loss of self by subject. Projected consciousness and control is the possession by one person’s subject of another person’s self. Thus Americans often say: “I must have been possessed to say something like that;” “I was seized by an intense longing for her;” “She won my heart;” “It was the bottle talking,” and so on. A model of personhood, divisible and projectible, is thus inherent in the way we talk about ourselves in American English.

From an anthropologist’s perspective, it seems odd that with a language so rich in structures of this kind we take so little advantage of it. That is, people do not go around in the United States talking a lot about spirit possession and so forth. In fact, possession beliefs do not seem to be that common, unlike in India or in other parts of the world where it is taken for granted that the self can become the temporary repository of a consciousness not one’s own. What are we to make of this, especially in light of comparison to other languages and cultures? Or in more general (and, to a certain extent, Whorfian terms), what is the relationship between a linguistic utter-

ance and a cultural belief system?

Interestingly, there is a similar problem with Telugu, a language spoken in south-eastern India which Charles Nuckolls and I have been working on. In Telugu, the language of the divisible self is robust, but little used to talk about possession phenomena. Two words, *mati* and *manasu*, are the focus of a rich vocabulary supporting expressions of the divisible self. *Mati* refers to the capacity to think which speakers of Telugu usually locate in the brain. *Manasu* is sometimes translated as “heart,” but in Telugu it always refers to something without physical location that involves conscious intention or emotional desire. The most serviceable translation might be “thought or feeling directed to some end.” It is possible, thus, to have the mental capacity to do something, but not the desire, or the desire, but not the mental capacity to fulfill it. Both can be temporarily absent, just as with self and subject in English. Typical expressions using *mati* or *manasu* include:

*Nii manasu ekkaDa PeTTukunnavu?*

Where have you put your manasu?

(e.g., a professor might say this to a student who is failing to concentrate on a lesson)

*Nii manasu eTu poyindi?*

Where did your manasu go?

(e.g., same as above)

*Manasu peTTi pani ceeyaleedu*

He did not put his manasu and work.

(e.g., He did not apply himself to the work.)

*Manisi ikkada manasu (mati) ekkado.*

The person is here, the manasu wherever.

(e.g., He's here but his mind is elsewhere. This expression can be used either with *mati* or *manasu*)

*AaviDa atani mida manasu padindi*

She turned her manasu onto him.

(e.g., She likes him.)

*Atanu matilo leeDu*

He is not in his *mati*.

(e.g., He is detached and not paying attention)

*Mati vadileesi vaccaDu*

He left his *mati* and came.

(e.g., He came leaving his capacity to think somewhere else).

None of these expressions — in fact, no utterance with *mati* or *manasu* — is used in ordinary conversation about spirit possession, at least not in the Telugu speaking region I am familiar with. Discourse about possession makes use of altogether different expressions, most of them involving the words *pattu* ('to catch, grab'), *vaccu* ('to come'), or *digu* ('to get down'), as in the following: *deyyam aayani pattindi* ('the demon caught him'); *ammavaru naku vaccindi* ('the goddess came to me'); and *ammavaru na miida digindi* ('the goddess got down on me.') The person who has undergone possession typically refers to his whole body as the object of possession, to signify that the spirit has total control over him. The spirits pick him up, hold his arms and legs, make him move and speak, while the possessed individual — his

“consciousness,” we would say, or his “personality” — remains passive. The “self” has not gone anywhere, however, to be replaced by one projected from outside. It has relinquished control to an agency bigger and more powerful than it is.

In both English and Telugu it is possible to speak of the self as divisible and projectible, yet the constructions which lend themselves most easily to this purpose are not used in discourse about spirit possession. In English-speaking American culture, beliefs about spirit possession are not common and expressions which seem to refer to it are funny or ironic, as in, “it was the bottle talking.” In Telugu-speaking India, beliefs about spirit possession are common, but the vocabulary of the divisible self is not used to discuss them.

My basic point in this paper is that unconscious models are more than metaphoric structures available to be mapped onto conceptual systems. The latter view is associated with George Lakoff, and with others working the field now known as “cultural psychology” or “cultural models.” Unconscious models, in my view, also represent issues latent in the unconscious, some so deeply ambivalence-provoking they must be repressed and granted expression only in distorted form. One form might be the philosophical and religious models which Lakoff claims “reflect” unconscious models. They might do more. In arguing for the importance of the dynamic unconscious, however, I do not argue against the approach taken by Lakoff, but for a deeper and more conflict-based conception of the mind in which linguistic systems function.

Freud termed the “dream-work” all those mechanisms which distort the meaning of a dream in order to conceal its repressed content. One of these is reversal, the simple process of turning a thing into its opposite: “This is often the best way of expressing the ego’s reaction to a disagreeable fragment of memory” (Freud 1965: 362). Could dream-work mechanisms, such as reversal, also mediate the relationship between language forms and cultural conceptions, between metaphors and ideologies of selfhood?

The themes most relevant to the construction of the conceptual self in American culture are control and consistency. Control refers to the all-important capacity of the subject, the seat of judgment, to govern the workings of the self, the locus of memory and desire. Consistency refers to the level of congruence between the two. These themes become problematic in relation to the supreme value placed on differentiation and autonomy. The self not only is, but should be, distinct and separate, and to achieve this state it must be able to assert control over its processes and bring them into harmonious relation with each other. When autonomy does not develop, we call it "dependency" or "enmeshment." Psychotherapy is recommended to shore up weakened ego boundaries. If someone says he is possessed by spirits, and that they talk to him, we call it "thought insertion" and prescribe antipsychotic medication. If the boundaries between self and non-self are totally blurred and all ego autonomy lost, we say that the individual has "schizophrenia," and there (usually) the matter ends, in some kind of physical and/or pharmacological confinement.

What happens when the values of autonomy and independence are really challenged by the direct experience of the permeability of the self, as in spirit possession? Most Americans would deny it, and say of the Georgia snake-handlers, for example, that they are deluded. They might even use the language of the absent self to deny that possession has taken place — as in, "He's not in his right mind" or "He's just kidding himself." The possession models Lakoff speaks of do not imply the existence of culturally validated models of multiple selfhood. They mock it. "The devil made me do it" or "it's the bottle talking" are jokes and put-downs whose implicit meaning is that malign agencies external to the self do not exist, but that the self failed to exercise proper control over its internal processes. Not only do "possession models" in American English fail to support possession beliefs, they actually emphasize the contrary, to show that the only source of autonomy and control, properly speaking, is the unitary self. "It is much scarier," says Lakoff, "to think of your Self being controlled by someone else's Subject." But that may not be the point. It is not

so much scary as it is humorous, and the rhetorical force of this expression depends on the humor being recognized. The metaphors Lakoff describes support the ideology of individualism by seeming to subvert it.

It cannot be a simple as that, however. If the autonomous self were actually secure, and concepts of the divisible self merely used to reinforce it, then the expressions I referred to above would not be funny. The reversals of the American ideology in our joking about autonomy and control take place for a reason: To permit the expression of a thought that is otherwise repressed, because the feelings it arouses are too uncomfortable to acknowledge. Dreams are not the only phenomena that use reversal. So do jokes, as Freud pointed out in his book on humor (Freud 1960). The humor of expressions of possession in English might depend on the fear of loss of self, a fear so great that it has to be represented in humor in order to be acknowledged at all.

Alleged possession phenomena pose no small threat to a society that values individual autonomy beyond all else and constantly seeks assurances that its boundaries are intact. That may be why my snake handler friends must practice their faith in out-of-the-way places, in secret, and under threat of legal prosecution. For the most part, only when it is safely at a distance, on the movie screen, do Americans permit themselves to experience the fantasy of individual autonomy compromised through possession by outside agencies. It is an empirical question, of course, but the United States probably leads the world in movies about self-loss. Why else would we make, re-make, and serialize movies like "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "The Exorcist," "Poltergeist," "Nightmare on Elm Street," and "Dracula?" We tease ourselves with an experience most of us will never see but which, collectively, we harbor great anxiety about. Instead of locating this anxiety in real possession phenomena, however, where it might be too threatening, Americans project it onto fictional screen entities, in whose behavior the anxiety surrounding loss of self can be entertained in a comfortably detached form.

In India, the permeability of the self is not seen as a danger because the boundaries of the self are ultimately a hindrance to, and not the hoped for fulfillment of, successful human development. The rules governing human development (*varnasramadharmā*) prescribe actions which tend to break down, not build up personal autonomy. The ultimate end of this process, if it is successful, is *moksha*, a state wherein all boundaries vanish. In the absence of anxiety concerning personal autonomy, it is not surprising that the metaphors of the divisible self (*mati* and *manasu*) do not come up in the form of jokes, nor do they appear in discourse about spirit possession. That is not because possession fails to provoke anxiety; it does, but for a different reason.

Spirit possession in India is a daily occurrence and known to just about everyone, even in the big cities. There is no particular fascination with it, however, because the anxiety we associate with the loss of individual autonomy is absent. In over twenty years of watching Indian movies, I have yet to see one that emphasized or even featured an episode of spirit possession. It would be like making a movie of somebody breathing or of traffic moving normally. Why make a movie about something so commonplace?

To give another case in point: Once my husband, Charles, took the shaman of the village we were living in to see an American horror movie which had come to a nearby city. The shaman routinely treated cases of spirit possession and sometimes underwent possession himself. Charles had asked him a lot of questions about his spirits and he had asked me about mine, but when he described the spirits of the Judeo-Christian pantheon — the angels and devils and so forth — the shaman was extremely bored. So Charles took him to see “Poltergeist,” thinking (somewhat perniciously) that he would be startled out of his seat by the phantasmagoria of American-style ghosts and ghouls. He was not. In fact, he went to sleep. When Charles asked him later why he was not more impressed, he said, “You have your spirits and your shamans, and we have our spirits and our shamans. So what? Next time let’s go

see that Bruce Lee movie, 'Enter the Dragon'."

It has often seemed to both Charles and me, in listening to Telugu people describe possession experiences, that we were listening to a description of the actions of a parent toward a small child: the picking up, the handling, the directing are all highly reminiscent of the way parents treat their children. A Telugu parent, in fact, expects children to exercise little control or direction on their own part until an age Americans would consider very late. Even then, the demonstrations of independent initiative and personal responsibility that Americans parents love to praise are almost wholly absent. More important to the child is the development of what Kurtz calls "the ego of the whole," a sense of self that is best fulfilled in submission to the group (Kurtz 1993). Adding weight, perhaps, to the hypothesis that the metaphoric source domain for possession discourse is group-based and familial, and derives ultimately from the relationship between mother and child, it is significant that the word *ammavaru*, translated above as "goddess," also means "mother." That is in fact its most basic meaning. The word *deyyam*, "demon," also means "goddess," especially if one seeks to emphasize her more malign aspects.

Now, "displacement" is a primary mechanism of the dream-work and could function like reversal to distort a latent meaning. It is possible that the vocabulary of possession in South India represents, through displacement, values and attitudes originally associated with the relationship between mother and child. This would support the hypothesis that psychodynamic mechanisms mediate language forms and cultural constructions. It is necessary, however, to examine the maternal relationship in more detail before possession metaphors in Telugu (e.g., "to grab," "to hold," "to get down on") can be understood.

Recent work in clinical ethnography indicates that ambivalence is central to the relationship between mother and child and especially mother and son (Kakar 1978, 1982, 1989a, b, 1990; C. Nuckolls 1991, 1993; Obeyesekere 1981, 1984, 1990; Roland 1988; Trawick 1990, 1990). On the one hand, a boy is drawn by memories of his

mother's nurturing (far more long-lasting and intense in India than in the West) to idealize the feminine. On the other hand, fear that the mother may reject him or worse, exploit him for the fulfillment of her own sexual needs, compels him to constrain the feminine, to keep its power to envelop him under control. How to resolve the ambivalence that must result? Professional possession-mediumship offers one culturally sanctioned solution.

Ambivalence in the maternal relationship resolves itself among the men in possession by goddesses, a role which normatively allows certain men to immerse themselves in a nurturing feminine role identity and at the same time to control that identity through the practice of possession-mediumship. The position of the mother is similar. Wanting sons is natural in a culture where fulfillment of a woman's role is contingent on the production of male offspring. But in having sons, an Indian mother must eventually acknowledge their loss to a wife, who will supplant her, and (South Indian culture) to a set of affines who become competitors with her for her son's attention and support. Under some circumstances, ambivalence in the maternal role — between wanting mature sons and knowing that their maturity means some degree of disaffection from her — is intensified and then resolved in the experience of possession by her own dead sons. As a medium, the mother regains total control over her son, whom she incorporates as her permanent tutelary spirit. The son never grows up; he can never leave; and he can never be alienated.

Resolution of cultural ambivalence in the relationship of sons and mothers is thus possible in different ways. The first way is through symbolic transformation of the son to make him less problematic for the mother. The second way is through symbolic transformation of the mother to make her less problematic for the son. Both patterns of resolution appear to be present in the cases I have studied. Male possession-mediums resolve the ambivalence in favor of the son. The "son," as it were, recovers the mother through his own symbolic transformation and then complete immersion in a female persona which becomes (for him) a controlled object of

devotion. Female possession-mediums resolve the ambivalence in favor of the mother, who then recovers the son through a process of re-absorption into herself. In both cases, the significant other in the mother-son relationship is returned and simultaneously relieved of its ambivalence-generating nature through symbolic transformation into an inalienable possession as well as into a source of divinatory power.

To be “caught,” “come to,” or “got down upon” by a possessing spirit called “mother” is to refer to a relationship that has its origins in childhood. This is no simple thing, however, because all goddesses — like all mothers — have two aspects: one benign and the other malign. This is the source of ambivalence. If the possessing goddess is in her benign form, and the experience pleasant and useful, then the “mother” is nurturant. Her purpose in possessing is to do good. If the goddess is in her malign form, and the experience of possession painful, then the “mother” is angry. Her purpose is to punish and inflict pain. Through regular worship and occasional (male) animal sacrifice, people attempt to control the goddesses and insure that the form they most often reveal is the benign one.

But they always forget to do these things, with the result that the goddesses become angry and attack. Why do people forget? There are probably many reasons, but chief among these, I believe, is the ambivalence spoken of earlier. Villagers need the goddess, but they fear she will envelop them, and the fear makes them want to shun her. Doing so directly, however, is too dangerous — and in any case, one should only express devotion to the goddess. “Forgetting,” therefore, while not exactly direct or deliberate, is one of the few means at their disposal to express hostility to a supreme being.

The relationship between goddesses and devotees is no less problematic and generative of ambivalence than the mother-son relationship, but the transactive language of worship at least affords some measure of action. One can curse the goddess for her failure to provide sustenance; think of her as either nurturant or punishing, encouraging one and limiting the other; and even imagine sex with her in the appropri-

ate idiom of worship. Of course the goddess never ages or dies, so the relationship can be prolonged forever. When South Indians speak of possession by the goddess, using the vocabulary of mother-child interaction, they have displaced the latter and transformed it into the former, where it can be managed in a religious idiom while at the same time retaining its ambivalence-generating power.

The purpose of this discussion has been to suggest that metaphors are not alone among the contents of the unconscious which give shape to conscious beliefs and attitudes. Psychodynamic processes, such as reversal and displacement, mediate the relationship, and Lakoff is surely correct in comparing these to the process of conceptual mapping (Lakoff 1993). This is especially true when the object of metaphoric construction is conditioned by strong but deeply conflicted feelings. This is the case with American and Telugu concepts of self. In both cases issues of control and autonomy are important, and because these issues are for the most part repressed — although for different reasons — the metaphors which give expression to them do not do so directly, but indirectly, through mechanisms the mind uses all the time, in dreams, jokes, and slips-of-the-tongue.

## **Conclusion**

In more recent work, Lakoff (1993) uses the idea of conceptual mapping to show that the mechanisms Freud called symbolization, displacement, condensation, and reversal are the same mechanisms that cognitive scientists refer to as conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, conceptual blending, and irony. This represents an important extension of linguistic theory and an exciting opportunity for creating a rapprochement between cognitive science and psychoanalysis. To push the extension even further, Charles Nuckolls and I have advocated that the next step should be to develop a richer account of motivation, based on the hypothesis that metaphorical systems are powered by unresolvable conflict between deeply held emotional orientations which come to life in childhood.

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## 南インドと合衆国における自己の諸概念

## 〈要 旨〉

ジャーニス ナクルス

アメリカ人は自己規制を重要視する。従って、正気とは主体が自己をコントロールしていることで、「憑依」とは主体が自己のコントロールを喪ったことになる。こういう考えは「人」が二分割され得るし、投出され得るとするもので、英語には憑依について豊富な語彙が有る。しかしアメリカ人はこの事実に気づいていない。言葉の使い方と、文化的な信仰システムに関わる問題なのだ。

南インドのテルグ語も同じだ。マティ (Mati) は脳の中にある考える能力、またマナス(Manasu)は形を持たず、はっきり自覚できる意志とか、情緒的な欲求を表し、「ある目的に向けられた思考ないし感覚」という意味だ。英語の自己と主体と同じく、マティとマナスも一時的に主体から離れる (absent) ことが可能だ。

なにかの霊の憑依について話すとき、マティとマナスは使われない。霊に取りつかれたときの会話には別な語彙pattu (捕らえる、つかむ) vacuu (来る)、などを使う。霊の憑依では、自己はより強大なものにコントロールを奪われるが、投出されるわけではない。

Lakoffの理論を継承し、深めるのが自分の立場だ。

アメリカ人にとって自己と深く関わるのはコントロールと調和だ。コントロールとは主体に備わる判断力、自己の働きを統御すること、記憶と欲求の在り場所だ。調和とは主体と自己の一致度だ。自己は(他の人間の自己から)はっきり別のものであり、分離していなければならないと(アメリカ文化では)される。差異化と自律性を保つ必要がある。

霊の憑依のように、自己の独自性と自律性が侵された場合には、アメリ

カ人は困惑する。自己の外のある悪意に満ちた存在の働きかけが原因でとは考えず、主体が自己の働きをコントロールするのに失敗したと、アメリカ人は考える。自分の「自己」が他の人間の「主体」にコントロールされていると思うなどとても恐ろしいのだ。個人個人の自律性を何よりも重んじる社会では憑依は大きな脅威を及ぼす。

アメリカとは異なり、インドでは個人個人の自律性を厳格に守るのは人間的成長の妨げになると考える。アメリカのように自律性が侵されないかと常に気づかう必要もなく、冗談の形で心配をまぎらわせたり、霊の憑依と重ねて話すこともない。

インドでは霊の憑依は日常起こることだ。テルグ語を話す人たちは、霊に憑かれた経験をあたかも親が幼児を扱う動作、つまり抱き上げたり、思うままに操ったり、するように話す。実際にインドでは子どもがかなり成長するまで、アメリカ人にとっては遅すぎると思える年齢まで、子どもに自制を求めず、強要を加えないのだ。

憑依という語彙が南インドでは母親と子どもの関係に関わる価値と態度を、置き換えによってではあるが、表す。母子は愛憎の両面価値 (ambivalence) で結ばれている。この両面価値は、男性が女神にとりつかれることで解決する。女神に憑かれた男は、育児する母親の役割を演じる一方、巫として男性の特徴も保持できる。母親は成人した息子を嫁に奪われるが、息子の死後、その霊が母親に憑くなら、彼女は息子を取り戻せるわけだ。両面価値は、男性が憑依すると息子側に有利に、また女性が憑依すると母親に有利に働く。