

## SOME NOTES ON SPIRIT POSSESSION AND ISLAM

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The idea of human beings being 'entered' and 'possessed' by spirits is a notion existing in many parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa where this complex of beliefs is particularly vigorous. In the core of spirit possession beliefs stands the very concept of 'possession'. In the case of black African cults, the word must be understood in a quite literal sense, meaning that the medium is actually and wholly 'possessed' by the spirit, which therefore can act in the medium's body as it pleases, with the possessed person having lost all control over his or her body and become no more than a kind of temporary lodging for the spirit, a mere tool for it to manifest itself through. Being occupied by the spirit, the medium's own personality is totally withdrawn from his/her body and nobody can blame the medium for any acts done during the trance of possession as all responsibility falls then with the spirit. This loss of personality and responsibility is carried so far that it makes no difference even which sex the medium belongs to: women can be freely possessed by male spirits and vice versa (Tremearne 1968:288)<sup>1</sup>. A comparison of the different possession cults' séances will readily demonstrate to what a surprising extent widely dispersed cults resemble one another, even on a strictly descriptive level; indeed the similarities are sometimes truly striking. For the interested, a considerable amount of descriptions on the rituals is available<sup>2</sup>. Of course, belief in the existence of spirits does not necessarily imply belief in spirit possession; ethnographical literature distinguishes various kinds of spirits besides possessive ones – local, ancestral, and so forth.

As I have already remarked, there is an almost infinite variety of possession cults in Africa and elsewhere (Greenberg 1966:30; Lewis 1970:299). The cults with which I am concerned in this article are not to be found exclusively within the confines of sub-Saharan Africa: quite a few were active in the Arabic-speaking countries of North Africa, and indeed, in some cases, outside Africa altogether (notably in the Ḥiǧāz in what is now Saudi Arabia). But, as has always been obvious to virtually all observers<sup>3</sup>, even those cults which belong to the Arab world were actually imported

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<sup>1</sup> The spirits need only the body of the medium, for it is exclusively through a human bodily form that they are able to communicate with people; see Jolly 1994:6.

<sup>2</sup> Vidal n.d.:237-46; Greenberg 1966:51-3; Broustra-Monfouga 1973:200-4; Harries 1965: 58-9; Ingrams 1967:408-10; Skene 1917:423-34; Zenkovsky 1950:68-79; Westermarck 1920:102-4.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Seligman 1914.

from Black Africa and had for their members mainly people of black African descent (albeit not exclusively so). Spirits, possessive or otherwise, are plentiful in black African folklore and most ethnic groups make a clear distinction between the various types of the spirit world. Once in the Arabic countries, Black African slaves very soon had to conform with the local language, customs, and especially religion. And conform they did, although naturally they clinged on to much of their original folklore and traditions brought from their pagan homelands. The result was a peculiar 'folk' Islam, being a syncretic mixture of their new religion and the old beliefs, not least the belief in spirit possession. This syncretic religion and the (to the Arabs) strange practices very soon earned the black community a widespread reputation for magic powers, and it became a self-evident truth for most Arabs in North Africa and elsewhere that blacks possess an exceptionally great talent for all kinds of magical practices. This reputation developed quite soon, a fact illustrated by numerous remarks made by mediaeval Arab authors<sup>4</sup>. One can only wonder whether the reputation of blacks for magic rites could not be traced even further back in time, considering the frequent mention in early Arabic texts of the close association of blacks and musical séances and 'gaiety' (*tarab*)<sup>5</sup>. However, to gauge the exact antiquity of genuine possession cults in Arab lands is next to impossible due to the lack of unequivocal references to them: on the one hand, mediaeval Arabic literature tends to focus on 'high', literate culture rather to the exclusion of folklore (except ancient Bedouin folklore), and on the other, there are no early written sources on possession beliefs and cults within sub-Saharan Africa itself either. At any rate, the association of blacks with magical powers is, and seems to have long been, a recurrent phenomenon, especially in North African folk culture. Quite illustrative of this deeply implanted belief is a text that date from the last century, describing magic practices in the land of *Šinqīṭ* (present-day Mauritania): 'Sorcery has spread wide and assumed such great proportions among the slaves in the towns of *Šinqīṭ*

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., al-Qalqašandī, *Šubḥ* V, 291. I have not been able to find this text in the *Masālik al-abṣār* whence it is claimed to be quoted, but something quite similar is said there about the East African town of Malindi, today in Kenya; see al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik* I, 312, Book I; and cf. al-Idrīsī, *Nuzḥa* I, 59. The word *muqanqān* (more correctly, *muqanqā*), mentioned by al-Idrīsī and al-ʿUmarī alike, must have been a widespread term on the East African coast and is the same as the modern Swahili *mganga*, 'magician, medicine-man'. In fact, *mganga* is known to have sometimes been used in Swahili in reference to specialists of exorcising possessive spirits, in which sense it is synonymous with the more usual term *fundi*. (Interestingly, this usage has been reported precisely from Malindi district.) Cf. Skene 1917:421-2. See also al-Idrīsī, *Nuzḥa* I, 27 on the reputation of the womenfolk of the West African town of Kūga for magic (*sihr*).

<sup>5</sup> See for example an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* I, 282 (Book I). Also al-Ġāhiz, *Faḥr* 67. Of course it might just as well refer to any cheerful dance party without accompanying magic practices; whether it does will remain a matter for speculation. Ibn Buṭlān (*Šary* I, 374) also ascribes to the Bantu (*zimj*) women an inborn gift for rhythm and dances, commenting besides on what appears to have been a less than complete cultural and linguistic assimilation into Middle Eastern society ('*li-ʿuġūmati alfāzihinna*').

that any slave in Tiğikğa who has been beaten up by his master, or anyone else, does so that [the aggressor] should fall ill within a span of one day or two, and the latter will soon die... No doubt can arise about the fact that a black slave can get hold of any man's heart; and if he puts his hand on the chest of his victim with the aim of curing him, having been duly threatened to be put to death by the victim's family, the patient recovers and stands up instantly, as if being unbound of ropes. Likewise, if the sorcerer is killed before his victim dies, the latter recovers instantly, as if being unbound of ropes. The cause of sorcery being so excessively widespread among the slaves in the land of *Šinqīṭ* is that so many slaves are brought there from among the Bambara. These are a nation of blacks among whom the practice of magic is beyond comparison... (aš-Šinqīṭī, *Wasīṭ* 541). This extract clearly indicates a firm belief in the efficacy of the black slaves' magic among the local population in 19th-century Mauritania. Another Arabic source from the 19th century, when speaking of the Central Sudanese state of Dārūr, uses a term (*rūḥānī*) which is obviously a reference to possessive spirits (still being used in that sense in the Nilotic Sudan), and does not fail to emphasize the magical skills of the inhabitants, especially the Fulani (at-Tūnisī, *Tašḥīd* 281)<sup>6</sup>. Such stereotypes continued to be present in the Magrib for quite a long time. At the beginning of the 20th century, a private temple for spirit possession practices was built in Tunis by none else than a cousin of the Turkish Bey, while in Tripoli members of the governing *Karamanlī* family encouraged spirit possession rites! The common populace believed even more firmly in black African magic (Tremearne 1968:23)<sup>7</sup>. The fact that North African possession cults show considerable divergences from the principles of recruitment usual in sub-Saharan Africa, inasmuch as blacks here were often cult members merely by virtue of their colour – a black person being by definition a cult member –, might be seen as yet another indication of the stereotyped image of 'African magic'<sup>8</sup>.

Spirit possession cults active in the Arab lands originate in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and were imported mainly as a result of the Arabic slave trade, which, in an ever increasing manner since the high Middle Ages, meant principally trade in

<sup>6</sup> at-Tūnisī also mentions the belief among the Fūr and the Mesālīṭ in ancestral spirits and zombie-like creatures (*Tašḥīd* 328-9).

<sup>7</sup> For the common folks' belief in African magic, there is abundant evidence. Cf. Westermarck 1920: 22, 154, 29; Crapanzano 1973: 44; Tremearne 1968:187-190; Dubouloz-Laffin 1941:51-52; Zawadowski 1942:141.

<sup>8</sup> It is a rather confused matter, since the aspects of Sufi fraternity, ethnic association and possession cult were all but inseparable in the *Gnāwa* and *Štanbālī* groups. On the other hand, it is reported that entrance to the Moroccan *Gnāwa* cult has not always been the privilege of blacks. An exorcised 'patient', for instance, may enter the cult regardless of her racial origin or colour (Pâques 1975:12). The appellation *Gnāwa* in all probability derives from the word 'Guinea', of which an early mention can be found in al-'Umarī, *Masālik* III, 51 (Book IV): '*bilād Ġanāwa*'.

African slaves. The different Arabic regions, quite logically, had different sources for the supply of slaves. A slave-supplying source, quite logically again, was as a rule the black African region with a substantial pagan population nearest to the Arab country concerned (Aḥmadu Bābā, *Miṣrāğ* 141)<sup>9</sup>.

That beliefs about spirit possession among Muslims are to be seen as a typical example of religious syncretism has been quite obvious to all observers. Not a jot less evident is the fact that the various composing elements that have amalgamated into the phenomenon of possession cults are so fast intertwined as to make the task of clearly separating them as futile as it is meaningless. Therefore, in what follows, I merely want to discuss briefly some aspects of the interplay of Islamic and African cultural elements in the possession cults.

1. **The spirit pantheon.** The Arabic concept of *ğinn* (pl. *ğunūn*) may in fact refer to very different varieties of spirits, and whenever it has a strong possessive aspect, one is justified in suspecting African cultural influence behind the phenomenon<sup>10</sup>. Arabic *ğunūn* appear to have no real personalities or characters; although some have traditionally been named, they in no way come close to the intricate African spirit pantheons that we shall presently describe (Crapanzano 1973:139, 141-8; Dubouloz-Laffin 1941:59)<sup>11</sup>. African possessive spirits are a less than homogeneous and unified lot, there being many features that divide the spirit class, not unlike human society.

<sup>9</sup> Egypt, for instance, was supplied with slaves throughout the Middle Ages from the pagan countries south of the ancient Muslim kingdom of Kānem-Bornū in the Lake Chad region, with which she had very powerful cultural and commercial links anyway. See al-Qalqašandī, *Subḥ* V, 280. Western Algeria and Morocco imported their slaves from West Africa, especially the land of the Bambara. This was particularly true after the Moroccan conquest of the former Songay Empire in the late 16th century. Ibn Ḥaldūn in the 14th century already mentions the lands south of the Niger, the inhabitants of which were called *Lam-lam* by Arab authors, as the principal slave source for North Africa (*Muqaddima* I, 356). In later periods, the Bambara were the ethnic group regarded as the infidels *par excellence* (*kuḥfār Banbara*), hence the most important enslavable population around the Niger. For examples, cf. Taḍkira 12, 21, 45, 69, 76, etc. (and the excerpt quoted above from the *Wasīṭ*). In the list of enslavable tribes compiled by Aḥmadu Bābā (*Miṣrāğ* 158), the Bambara are not mentioned; we find instead the Mossi, the Gurmanche, the Bussa, the Dogon, the Bobo, and some other less-known ethnic groups.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Ibn al-Faqīh, in describing Wabār, the reputed abode of the *ğinn* located somewhere deep in the Arabian desert (*Buldān* 95), depicts what approximates the concept of local spirits, rather than possessive ones, who guard their land jealously against the intrusion of humans. On the other hand, the son of the Abbasid Caliph al-Manṣūr was known to have been afflicted by regular visits of a female spirit (*imra'atun min al-ğinn*) with whom he had fallen in love, losing his consciousness several times a day (al-Iṣfahānī, *Ağānī* XIII, 313-5); yet here again we face a 'spirit-lover', a *qarīna*-type spirit, and not a possessive one which would only use the body of its medium as a mere vessel to inhabit.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. the Arabic *ğinn* called *Umm aṣ-Ṣibyān* ('Mother of Infants') or (in North Africa) *Tābī'a* ('The Follower'; see Doutté 1909:116), who tries to rob mothers of their newborn babies through every possible means, displays truly striking resemblances to certain black African spirit characters (the Hausa *Uwal Yara*, or the Swahili *Subiani* and *Babuye Watoto*; see Tremearne 1968:246; Koritschner 1936:211; Kindy 1972:3).

The principal dividers of spirits, precisely like in our own circles, are religion, ethnic affiliation, tribal or clan membership, race and, alas, even social standing. This practically means that we can differentiate, within the spirit pantheon of every single cult, between spirits 'who' belong to various ethnic groups and 'who' are either Muslim or infidel, black or white, free or servile, etc. As for ethnic groups among the spirits, they corresponded exactly to the ethnic groups known to the people who believed in these spirits<sup>12</sup>. Besides having ethnic affiliations, spirits are further divided into 'clans' or 'families'. Obviously, these are not subdivisions of the spirits' ethnic groups, as quite often these 'clans' seem to cut across 'ethnic boundaries': spirit figures of one and the same clan may well belong to different ethnic groups<sup>13</sup>. Finally, religion and colour are no less serious dividers of spirits than they are of men. The concept of true-believer spirits and infidel ones is a typically Muslim idea, present in the folklore of many an Islamized society, not to speak of Arabs themselves. It comes then as no surprise that we find this idea among Muslim Africans as well. What may, however, make us wonder a bit is the fact that the division of the spirit pantheon into Muslims and pagans appears, nay even plays a major role, in the spirit cults of predominantly non-Muslim ethnic groups, like the *Giriama* of Kenya, who believe in the existence of a class of spirits titled 'Islamic/Arabic/Quranic' (*pepo wa Kiislamu/Kiarabu/Kikurani*) (Parkin 1970:224; Parkin 1991a:187-8). As far as thoroughly Islamized African peoples are concerned, the Muslim/pagan division within their spirit world is a natural part of their beliefs. Evidence for this comes abundant, but let it suffice here to mention only the Moroccan *Gnāwa*, the Hausa and the Songay (Westermarck 1920:7-8; Greenberg 1966:39, 60; Rouch 1945:17, 19).

The most fascinating element in spirit possession beliefs is the spirit characters themselves. These figures are by no means an undifferentiated lot of vaguely defined

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<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the Songhay-Zarma possession cults of Niger and Mali had Zarma, Fulani, Gurmanche, Hausa, Bariba, Mossi, Tuareg, and, with the advent of the colonial period, European characters among their spirits (Vidal n.d.:27, 42, 79; Gibbal 1984:74; Stoller 1984:176-7). Swahili spirits represent ethnic groups like the Abyssinians, the Malgache, the Somali, the Nubians, the Arabs, the Nyasa, the Ngindo, the Zaramo, the Manyema, the Luguru, the Masai, the Hadimu, etc. (Hurrayz 1988:69; Ingrams 1967:436; Koritschoner 1936:211-13; Gray 1969:174; Skene 1917:422; Zein 1974:249). Likewise, the Sudanese *zār* cult has spirits that belong to the Abyssinians, the Egyptians, the Copts, the *Fellāta* (West African settlers in the Nilotic Sudan), the Dinka, etc. Some spirit characters in the Omdurman *zār* cult have names which indicate their ethnic background: there is *Kalṭūm bint Nūba* (from the Nuba Hills), *Amūna al-ʿArabīyya* (a Bedouin), *Sīd al-Ḥarb Barnāwī* (from Bornu), and a group of spirits known as *Nās al-ḡabal* ('the Hill Folk') or *Zurug* ('Negroes'), considered to be descendants of captives from the Nuba Hills of Kordofān Province. And arguably the most bizarre character in the Sudanese Šāygiyya *zār* pantheon is the spirit of a British consul-general in Egypt, Lord Cromer. See Trimmingham 1949:175; Zenkovsky 1950:70; Al-Shahi 1986:114, 117.

<sup>13</sup> The Zarma (Songay), for example, know of seven spirit clans, which system, though subject to some minor changes, has been in existence for a considerable time, exceeding in any case half a century. Cf. Vidal n.d.:41, 56, 79; Gibbal 1984:69-70, 76; Rouch 1945:18-9.

clans and ethnics; quite on the contrary, each spirit normally has a fully-developed personality, precisely like humans, with his or her own likes and dislikes, idiosyncrasies, tastes and preferences in dress, music, dances, food and drink, habits, company, etc. This makes spirits resemble humans considerably, to the extent that we can say spirits form a society which is a true replica of our own, with certainly more than a touch of sarcasm in it. Actually the spirit pantheon is a field where black African fancy is at its best, creating a grotesque, enormously entertaining world of fantasy, yet never for a moment destroying the balance between fun and the serious, even quasi-religious side of the whole affair. In some spirit cults, sometimes in some particular spirit characters, the ironic aspect predominates, while other cults are of a less profane nature.

The words 'cure' and 'exorcism' are often used in relation to possession by spirits. This is due to the fact that such possession is naturally considered to be a condition somewhat abnormal and therefore only temporarily bearable; spirits must be got rid of if at all possible. The two most important phases of possession rites are, accordingly, identification of the possessing spirit, and satisfying its needs and whimsies by way of sacrifices, music, offerings. The identification of the spirit is an element of primary importance, perhaps the single most important act during all the rites. In this aspect, possession cults again display a striking uniformity throughout Islamic Africa: identification of the spirit generally entails a sort of interrogation directed towards the medium – who is at these moments none other than the spirit –, as a result of which the spirit is forced to disclose its name and identity<sup>14</sup>.

2. **Possession cults and gender.** Cult leaders in the overwhelming majority of cases are female. Leadership of the cults is generally afforded to an elderly woman, although male cult leaders are by no means an unknown species. Among some peoples (like the Hausa), it is observable that the more 'Islamized' a population, the more likely that possession cult members, along with their leaders, will be women, leaving orthodox religion to be the domain of men. With other peoples, however, this observation is far from valid; the Songay and the Swahili, both thoroughly Islamized, had their *zimas* and *fundis*, respectively, and these might be, and indeed often were, men (Trimingham 1964:114, 118; Gibbal 1984:65-6). Spirit cult leaders can only be female in North Africa (called *ʿārifa* in Tunisia, *moqaddma* in Morocco – although, occasionally, a male *mʿallem* may lead some *Gnārwa* groups), among the natives of Bagirmi (Chad), the Muslim Hausa, in the Nilotic Sudan (*šayha* or *kūdiya/gūdiya*), etc. (Pâques 1975:17; Tremearne 1968: 30, 150, 151; Vidal n.d.:129; Trimingham

<sup>14</sup> This interrogation is to be encountered in cults as widely dispersed as West Africa, the East African Coast, the Nilotic Sudan, and North Africa. Everywhere the interrogative technique forms the very basis, indeed the starting-point, of exorcism. Cf. Vidal n.d.:131, 141-5; Dubouloz-Laffin 1941: 58-9; Greenberg 1966:51-3; Harries 1965:59-60; Trimingham 1964:118; Allen 1981:101-13; Omari, Mvungi 1981:143 [on the spirit called *Kinyamkera*]; Trimingham 1949:175.

1949:175; Zenkovsky 1950:65, 68). The few isolated pagan communities of the Hausa (*Maguzawa*) display an interesting contrast to their Muslim fellows: whereas spirit cults among the Muslims are headed by women, and often prostitutes for that matter, pagan possession cult leaders are invariably male (Broustra-Monfouga 1973:207; Raulin 1962:270).

Possession cult membership may vary between exclusively female and mixed, purely male cults being next to nonexistent, at least in the Islamized regions of Africa. It is probable that this has not always been the case: the general tendency is towards a growing female dominance of these cults, together with a growing religious disapproval of them. A very indicative remark is reported from Maradi region, Niger, where men do not participate in possession rites at all: '*C'est une affaire de femme, cela ne nous concerne pas, les dieux [that is, les génies!] ne nous aiment pas*' (Broustra-Monfouga 1973:200)<sup>15</sup>. Among the just partly Islamized Giriama of Kenya, a lot of women get possessed, as opposed to a limited number of men, but, since all possessed men as a rule join the ranks of practising mediums while this holds true of only a minority of possessed women, the numbers of male and female mediums are for all practical purposes equal (Parkin 1970:224)<sup>16</sup>.

3. **The confinement of spirits during Ramaḍān.** There is a belief, of Islamic origin, ubiquitous in all possession cults covered by this study, which gained so wide acceptance in Africa that it has general currency even amongst pagan groups slightly influenced by Islam. I am referring to the belief that the month of *Ramaḍān* has particular implications within the spirit world, no less than among humans. The general tendency is to believe that spirits are 'imprisoned', 'chained', 'bound', 'fastened' during *Ramaḍān*, therefore their activity is seriously reduced in this period (Gray 1969:178)<sup>17</sup>. Evidence for this belief comes from all regions of Islamic Africa, and the whole phenomenon is not specifically African: a lot of people in many Islamized lands seem to reduce any activity considered un-Islamic or unorthodox during the fasting month<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, possession rites, considered somewhat 'un-Islamic', must

<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, the Šāygiyya of Northern Sudan label possession cults '*amāyil an-niswān*, 'a women's affair'. See Al-Shahi 1986:109. On the appeal of possession cults to marginalized groups within the society, cf. Wilson 1967.

<sup>16</sup> On the strictly Muslim Segeju of Tanganyika, cf. Gray 1969:178.

<sup>17</sup> Among the Hausa, even such small groups as remained pagan (around Birni N'Konni town, in Niger) will believe in the spirits' imprisonment during Ramaḍān and perform the release ceremonies in their due time. See Broustra-Monfouga 1973:200-204.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., al-Isfahānī (*Agānī* VII 235) tells us a story about the infamous libertine and poet al-Ḥusayn b. aḍ-Daḥḥāk who invites his beloved catamite called Yusr for a drinking party before Ramaḍān sets in (*qabla huḡūmihī*), for then they have to abandon that kind of behaviour for a whole month.

cease in the fasting month, only to be continued thereafter<sup>19</sup>. The idea of spirits being locked away during Ramaḍān can be traced back to mediaeval Islamic traditions attributed to the Prophet (*ḥadīṭ*), according to which malevolent spirits are handcuffed (*ḡullat 'utāt al-ḡinn*) for the duration of the fasting month (Kayyāl n.d.: 44)<sup>20</sup>. Syrian folk belief has continued to hold that during the whole of Ramaḍān all the *'afārīt* are confined to a copper holder kept on *Ġabal Qāt* [*Qāf?*] (Kayyāl n.d.: 52). In keeping with the above-mentioned mediaeval Arabic traditions, the Sudanese *zār* displays some modification in the widespread African notion of the spirits' imprisonment in *Ramaḍān*: according to the Northern Sudanese, it is only the evil, infidel spirits that are locked off in that month, while benevolent, Muslim ones roam free as ever (Zenkovsky 1950:73). At any event, even the evil spirits cannot be held in capture infinitely; there comes a day when spirits have to be restored to liberty and let go. This date is fixed either on the 27th of *Ramaḍān* (the famous *Laylat al-Qadr*) or at the end of the month. For example, the Hausa used to hold the latter view, the Swahili were divided in this question (Middleton 1992:166; Trimmingham 1964:120)<sup>21</sup>, while in North Africa the prevailing opinion seems to have been that only good spirits are released on *Laylat al-Qadr*, wicked ones having to wait until the end of *Ramaḍān* (Westermarck 1920:48). Perhaps the most interesting system is that of the black brotherhood of Tunis (*Ṣṭanbālī*): the 'temple' of the spirit cult (*Gidan Kuri*) would be locked up at the very beginning of the fasting month, with all the spirits inside, except for the extremely old and deeply religious Muslim spirit, *Mallam Tsofo*, who is harmless and lurks near the threshold anyway. On the 15th of *Ramaḍān*, the temple was opened and its inmates checked, then the building was locked again. On *Laylat al-Qadr*, all good spirits were released, with some accompanying ceremonies, and the process culminated in the freeing of all spirits at the end of the month (Tremearne 1968:274-5).

4. The rapport between 'orthodox' piety and possession cults. That possession cults are a manifestation of religious syncretism has been noted here. The overall character of possession cults, which incorporates pagan as well as Islamic elements, is summed up well by a comment of L. Vidal on Zarma spirit cults: it is perhaps totally meaningless to speak separately of pagan beliefs and Islam, as there is no marked opposition between the two (Vidal n.d.:41). The double – both Islamic and pagan Afri-

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Al-Shahi 1986:115.

<sup>20</sup> It was classified by al-Bayhaqī as a *ḥadīṭ ḥasan*. The *ḥadīṭ* goes on to say that the gates of Paradise are kept open throughout Ramaḍān, whilst those of Hell are kept closed.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Middleton attributes the very word *mfunguo*, which precedes every month's name in Swahili except that of Ramaḍān, to the belief that spirits are 'let loose' (the Swahili verb *kufungua* means 'to open', 'to release') for the greater part of the year. The final day of Śa'bān is called *mfungo*, 'shutting, imprisonment'. See Middleton 1992:165.

can – origins of possession-related beliefs and rites well attest to that, and have given rise to a great deal of speculations as to ‘how Islamic’ these cults actually are, whether cult adepts should be regarded as ‘real Muslims’ or just ‘nominal’ ones, and so forth. It is imperative that we notice the utter futility, if not the absurdity, of such inquiries.

As a matter of fact, it has been claimed, and rightly too, that possession cults as we know them, far from being suppressed by Islamization, emerged precisely as a result of a growing acceptance in Africa of Islam, with which traditional religious beliefs comfortably merged. Although it is a matter for anyone’s guess if it actually happened so, a strong argument in this theory’s favour is the fact that ancestor cult, a vigorous feature of a lot of black African cultures, has been continually losing ground in the cultures of most Muslim Africans, sometimes having all but disappeared, while possession cults have quite literally flourished in those very communities.

It is remarkable how widespread Islamic observances are in possession cult activities and beliefs; of this we have already seen an example, that of the spirits’ imprisonment during the month of *Ramadān*. The significant point here is that *Ramadān* is seen as a special period even by pagans, their spirits respect the holy month no less than those of the Muslims<sup>22</sup>. Other Islamic elements in possession rites, as there are too many, will now be only mentioned in passing. In Zarma lands, even the most staunchly infidel spirits (like *Dongo*, the thunder spirit) will ask of their mediums such services as reciting certain Islamic prayers, or giving alms (*sadaqa*) to the needy. The *Gimbala* cult’s devotees in Mopti offer their sacrifices to the famous Friday Mosque of that town, to seek God’s blessing. Almost all possession séances begin with an Islamic prayer, usually the *Fātiha*. Also, typically Islamic expressions like *bismillāh*, *inšallāh*, *al-ḥamdu li-llāh*, have now for a long time been frequently used by pagan no less than Muslim possession cult members (Vidal n.d.:95-6; Gibbal 1984: 124, 156). On Islamic holidays, it is not uncommon for possession cults to hold a big ceremony, as is the case with the North African Hausa on the Prophet’s birthday (*mawlid*) (Greenberg 1966:24; Tremearne 1968:280). In the Kenyan island of Lamu, the slave population held poetic recitals in honour of the Prophet on his birthday (*Maulidi ya Kiswabili*), and spirits were thought to have the habit of possessing some of the participants on these occasions (Zein 1974:112-3). Quranic *sūras* occupy a significant position in many a possession rite, for instance, the reputedly very powerful *sūrat Yā Sīn*, or the last two *sūras* of the Quran. These incantations did in fact sometimes go under the name of *dawa ya pepo*, ‘spirit medicine’, in East Africa (Trimingham 1964:118, 122). North African followers of possession cults show a par-

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<sup>22</sup> This strange phenomenon – of pagans taking over characteristically Islamic beliefs within the framework of possession cults – has further manifestations as well. Cf. Greenberg 1966: 27; Raulin: 1962: 270.

ticular attachment to the famous black muezzin of the Prophet, Bilāl al-Ḥabašī, who is respected as the spiritual founder of their brotherhoods and is called by them *Sīdnā Blāl*, or *Sīyidnā Būlel*, 'our master Bilāl' (Westermarck 1920:102; Pâques 1975:12).

In many places, notably in North Africa, a close connection between spirit possession cults and popular Sufism (Islamic mysticism) can be observed. As has been mentioned before, North African spirit cults are often considered as Sufi quasi-brotherhoods with a predominantly, if not exclusively, black membership. This has resulted in a considerable number of black Sufi saints acquiring fame in the Maḡrib. As popular religion in this region is characterised above all by the influence of Sufi brotherhoods and the veneration of saints, the merging of black African cults with this 'folk' Islam should surprise none<sup>23</sup>. The merging process must have begun at a quite early date, for a 17th-century Sudanese chronicler from Timbuctoo already speaks of the well-known 'spirit saints' Sīdī Šamharūš and Sīdī Maymūn in a perfectly matter-of-fact way (Kaṭī, *Fattāš* 12, 24-9)<sup>24</sup>. On the other hand, some *zār* cults in the Nilotic Sudan conveniently accommodate well-known Sufi saints like Šayḥ 'Abdalqādir al-Ġilānī or Šayḥ Aḥmad al-Badawī among their spirit characters (Al-Shahi 1986:115).

It is perhaps superfluous to say that the relationship between possession cult adepts and the representatives of a somewhat more 'orthodox' Islam has never been an unambiguous one. Quite naturally, some of the markedly un-Islamic extravaganzas of the cults attracted the frowning attention of pious Muslims, but the interesting thing is that the latter's reactions were not necessarily, indeed were not usually, hostile. The connections of possession cults with the Islamic élite seem to have been characterised largely by mutual tolerance on a 'live-and-let-live' basis (Middleton 1992:162). Some groups, it is true, have traditionally considered it beneath their dignity to take part in such dubious activities as possession rites (a relevant example for this attitude is the aristocratic, staunchly Muslim Fulani of the last centuries), but reproach of, or hostility to, the cults is a fairly recent development, fuelled by such influences as purist and reformist movements in the Islamic world. Nonetheless, possession rites have always been equated by the pious Muslim intelligentsia with black magic (*sihr*), which is condemned by Islam (Greenberg 1966:68; Parkin

<sup>23</sup> The most famous of black Sufi saints in North Africa are Sīdī Sa'īd (a.k.a. *Bū 'Akrūša*, a former slave from near Lake Chad, buried in Mornāg, Tunisia), Sīdī Maṣūr (in Sfax), Sīdī Masari, Sīdī Makari (both in Tripoli), Sīdī Bū Sa'īd (whose name is now famous for the Tunisian resort town which has grown up around his shrine), etc. The annual pilgrimages (*ziyāra*) to the shrines of these saints are full of possession cult ceremonies (Zawadowski 1942:147-8; Dubouloz-Laffin 1941:50, 56; Tremearne 1968:224-7). Moroccans have gone so far in their veneration of saints that many 'saints' are to be found within the Moroccan spirit pantheon, exactly as if they were humans. Some of these 'spirit marabouts': Sīdī Buḡnādel, Sīdī Ḥammū, Sīdī Maymūn; also female ones: Lālla Rqīya, Lālla Mīra, Lālla Ġmila, Lālla 'Aysā, etc. See Westermarck 1920:36-9.

<sup>24</sup> On these spirit characters in North African folklore, cf. Westermarck 1920:28, 29; Doutté 1909:160.

1991b:135)<sup>25</sup>. But, as we have observed, eyes used to be shut and tolerance was the order of the day, especially as nobody would ever have dared to question the efficiency of possession rites. The founder of the Muslim Fulani state of *Māsina* (in Mali), Šayḥ Ḥamadun (Seku Hamadu), is reported to have officially supported the *Gimbala* spirit cult and even to have had a protecting spirit of his own, *Jiné Samurussa* (Vidal n.d.:45, 162; Gibbal 1984:117-8). Hostility towards 'folksy' religion in general, and possession cults in particular, began in the Sudanic belt with the Fulani *ḡibāds*. The attitude of Muslim zealots is well exemplified by the words of 'Uṭmān dan Fōdiō, the most famous of the Fulani *ḡibād* leaders in Nigeria. He had this to say about what he saw as the antics of 'infidels', a term in which he included 'loose Muslims' as well: 'They are like animals (...) One of their well-known ways of behaviour is that they are reluctant to abandon the traditions, however condemnable, of their ancestors. [...] [they are] engaged in wrong acts, day and night, without any purpose approved of by the *šarī'a*, such as playing the castanets, the flutes and the drums...' (Dan Fōdiō, *Farq* 560, 562-3).

Recently, quite a few reformist and purist movements have emerged, particularly in the Sudanic belt, which facilitated the gradual withdrawal of possession cults from public life. The purist *Ḥamalliyya* movement, whose members are called in Songhay lands *Labilahi* (from the Islamic credo '*Lā ilāha illā 'llāh*'), has done much to force Zarma possession cults into retreat, as have the Fulani aristocracy of Northern Nigeria. The result of these purist efforts can be seen in a good many places over sub-Saharan Africa where, although belief in spirits is far from extinct, cult activities have all but ceased (Vidal n.d.:62-3, 78, 157, 165; Tremearne 1968: 23)<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> On the condemnation of *sihr* by many scholars of the *šarī'a*, cf. Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Muqaddima* III, 1149-50 ('*wa-li-bādā kāna s-sihru kufran*'), 1157 ('*aš-šarī'atu [...] ḡā'alathu kullahu bāban wāḥidan mahzūran*').

<sup>26</sup> While purist movements have until recently kept a rather low profile in East Africa, still, they have sometimes made their presence felt there, too. See Ingrams 1967: 433; and cf. Middleton 1992: 174.

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