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Embodied Powers, Deconstructed Bodies

Spirit Possession, Sickness, and the Search for Wealth of Nigerian Immigrant Women

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Abstract. – Possession cults often proliferate during times of dramatic social and cultural changes (colonisation, evangelisation, war, etc.). The transitional and collective meaning of this phenomenon received many interpretations. On the other hand, not much attention was paid to the individual experience of change, to doubt, and to contradictory attitudes often accompanying choices such as religious conversion or immigration. This article addresses above all the following issues: 1) the relationship between possession and modernity; 2) the logic of possession and its unique ability to metaphorically catch complex and contradictory experiences; 3) the specific gender issues displayed by the nexus immigration/prostitution market through the female, possessed bodies; 4) the dialectics generated by possession among different idioms of daily life and embodied experience. *[Nigerian women, immigrant, Mammy Wata, possession, commoditisation of bodies, cultural identity, medical anthropology]*

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1 Possession in the Realm of Modernity, Immigration, and Transnational Scenarios

In recent years, numerous works have looked at possession in urban and migratory contexts: among those pertinent to the African context are, for example, that of Corin (1976) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gibbal (1982) in Mali, Sharp (1993) in Madagascar, Somer and Saadon (2000) amongst Tunisian immigrant women in Israel, and the most outstanding work of all, that of Rouch on the Hauka in Ghana ("Les maîtres fous," a film shot in Accra in 1954). Less numerous are studies concerning the relationships between possession and migration in Europe and, in particular, in Italy.[1] However, it seems relevant to us to throw light on these events and these connections, especially when one wants to investigate possession in its relationships to modernity (Behrend and Luig 1999), to the places and subjects of production (Ong 1987), to the challenges of "millennial capitalism" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b, 2000), or the worrying expressions of what have been defined as "occult economics" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a). The analysis of such an interweaving contributes to the dissolution of those models which made possession a unitary concept, a contrivance whose sense and

1 Among the former are: Adouane 2001–02; Capone et Teisenhoffer 2001–02; Halloy 2001–02; among the latter are: Speziale e Passalacqua 1998.

logic could be understood independently of other processes equally conceived as unitary modes. Our reflection starts from an opposite perspective. The analyses of possession trance, both in the contexts of origin and in migratory contexts, can be carried out satisfactorily only by renouncing to talk about possession "in the singular." As many authors have suggested, its expressions and meanings should be seen as strictly embedded in the social and economic dynamics of migration, globalisation, market economics, and war conflicts. Dissolving the conceptual unity of possession also means articulating its logic in relationship to other "cultural" phenomena, such as "witchcraft" or "traditional medical systems." In this way, possession becomes itself the object of incessant redefinitions and negotiations through symbolic codes, which are often contingent.

Our research began in 1997 at the Centro Frantz Fanon in Turin,[2] an ethnopsychiatric centre that offers support to foreign immigrants affected by psychological illness. The connection between migratory events and spirit possession became apparent when several women of Nigerian nationality were referred to our centre by other services because of "bizarre" illnesses. We mostly dealt with women of the Igbo and Edo ethnic groups (the latter coming from Benin City), who were involved in prostitution in Italy. Their "bizarre" illnesses do not lend themselves to being captured satisfactorily by clinical diagnoses and they have "resisted" preceding therapeutic treatment. Once these women were welcomed in an appropriate setting, they recounted (often in their mother tongue) their experiences and especially their previous participation in a possession cult well-known as Mammy Wata, which is widely practiced throughout the Gulf of Guinea and sub-Saharan Africa.[3] What aroused our interest were the constant references made by these women to symptoms, sensations, or experiences which could be traced back to their condition as possessed and to those *signs* which the priests of the cults of Mammy Wata or the Edo oracles recognise as characteristics of the intervention, of the presence or, more generically, of a *bond* with Mammy Wata. Were we in the presence of a particular "idiom of suffering" or were these testimonies revealing other problems?

2 Embodied Paradox

The expression "order in paradox" – coined by Holmberg (1989) to describe the role played in a Nepalese society by rituals and shamanism – offers us an evocative image to introduce our discussion on possession: an image of a phenomenon still placed within unresolved questions, that results in a remarkable proliferation of paradigms, and that is capable of generating paradoxes – in its ritual expressions and in the life of the possessed – which challenge the common interpretative models. The theoretical difficulty and the interpretative uncertainty in the debate on possession issue from at least two presuppositions. The first one consists in the resistance of many scholars to abandoning concepts and terms derived from psychology and psychiatry. Both disciplines often consider the possession cults as a *traditional* practice essentially localised in non-Western societies. Moreover, in the attempt to outline the anatomy of trance or of trance possession, psychiatry and psychology remain obsessed by the desire to construct a typology that includes all the variants, all its expressions, and by the constraint to produce diagnostic categories that in many cases (even when defined as culture-bound) violate the local sense of these experiences, and thus the knowledge on which they are founded. The presumed phenomenal contiguity or the structural identity that some authors have suggested between dissociation, multiple personality disorders, and possession,[4] refers in turn to a field of research where ambiguities have been the rule. This has been documented in frequent diagnostic errors made by clinicians both in Western and non-Western countries, which we ourselves have often witnessed. In commenting the book "The World of Ogbanje" by Chinwe Achebe (1986), Ilechukwu (1991: 147) remains "impressed," like "any psychiatrist," by the analogy traced by the author – "without be-

2 The Centro Interdisciplinare Frantz Fanon, founded in 1996, provides services of psychotherapy and counselling for foreigners (immigrants, refugees, victims of torture). The clinical work is carried out mainly with the participation of "ethnoclinical mediators." The languages used in the course of the interviews and concerning this work are Italian, English, Pidgin, Edo, and Igbo.

3 The women we have met have sometimes referred to Mammy Wata with the name of Olokun (Lord of the ocean), a divinity of the Yoruba pantheon. But, as reported by other authors, the use of terms such as voodoo, juju, Olokun, Mammy Wata, *ogbanje*, or *igbakwan*, etc. is extremely fluid, and the meanings attributed to each of these terms do not always coincide. See also Nevadomsky and Rosen (1988: 187–189). The description of the spirit *njuzu* in Zimbabwe reproduces more than a few traits of the iconography of Mammy Wata (Reynolds 1996: 158).

4 Ian Hacking's observations on trances and multiple personalities and the transformation of essential characteristic of other cultures into "pathologies" are very pertinent to this case too (1998: 230f.).

ing aware of it" – between some psychiatric illnesses (personality disorders, histrionic personality, mood disorder, borderline personality disorder, or schizotype personality) and the characteristics of *ogbanje*, a notion, which is closely connected to the cult of Mammy Wata (see below). These analogies between clinical categories and cultural categories raise, once again, a common methodological problem. If indeed it is possible and useful to make comparisons between culturally different manifestations, these need to be drawn from the use of transcultural methods, and not from the premises of psychology or psychiatry alone. On the other hand, the ambiguous frontiers of illness or cure, of evil or "misfortune" in African society (Pool 1994), make the comparison even more controversial. Here perhaps are the roots of the second presupposition of the origin of unresolved theoretical controversies on the status of possession. In the 1960s Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues wrote:

> The diviner, the hunter of witch doctors, the master of *ndöp* [the ceremony of possession celebrated among the Wolof and the Lebou of Senegal], know how to recognise from certain signs if an individual has been "attacked" by a witch, "worked" by a rival who uses methods of magic or "followed" by a rab. Under the effect of a syncretism which does not spare even the ethnologists, one can attempt to speak in this case of a traditional "diagnosis" of "illnesses" from the position of "healers" who use "healing rites." Rather than attempting to understand a religious vocabulary, we translate it into a *vocabulary of a medical type which is apparently more respectable*. This medicalisation of the vocabulary has however some inconveniences. It produces the *confusion of genres* ... and impedes our understanding of the *concatenations* connecting one circumstance to another (Ortigues et Ortigues 1984: 237f.; our italics).

In his analyses of the "stratagems of therapeutisation," Olivier de Sardan (1994) adopts a methodological perspective close to that of Ortigues. He underlines the importance of an accurate linguistic analysis in order to avoid interpretative ambiguities that, for example, attribute a predominantly therapeutic purpose to the possession rituals. Moreover, Olivier de Sardan refers to widely known ethnographic data according to which "the prototype of possession" and "the cast of madness" represent events that the adept never confuses. Almost fifty years ago, Métraux (1955) had already highlighted this capacity to distinguish between the two classes of phenomena. Similarly, de Martino had suggested the elegant metaphor of the stairs to indicate how, even when the psychopathological and the cultural phenomenon meet on the same rung, their meanings are very different and so are their destinations (1977: 63).

Nevertheless, these widely shared warnings do not solve the problem. What Ortigues called a "confusion of genres" is not generated because the medical vocabulary distorts what would be on the contrary a sequence of facts and experiences belonging to the religious order, but rather because there is an irreducible copresence of different semantic codes or, in other words, of idioms, logic, and systems. Such a copresence is made up of the *possession machine* and it seems particularly evident in the course of individual and social dynamics such as those characteristics of migration. Therefore, the errors of "therapeutic" or "political overinterpretation" pointed out by Olivier de Sardan (1993, 1994) may arise not from mere misunderstandings as much as from the *impossibility* of capturing within a single model, in one kind of language, the complexity of the rituals and the experiences of spirit possession, and the different semiotics that meet there. Moreover, the polysemous character of possession, which is common to all rites, extends well beyond the time of ritual and connotes the totality of the experience of the possessed and of their life. The "genres" (Ortigues et Ortigues 1984), more than being "confused," are exposed to the risk of being neglected or obscured to the advantage of just one genre (often the medico-psychological), to which almost everything ends up being subjected. If the psychological lens can lead to a real interpretative misunderstanding, an analogous risk applies also to those anthropological analyses, which situate possession solely within its religious dimensions, without adequately considering the role of changes, which historical events (colonialism, evangelisation, schooling) have produced in its current configurations and in the representations of the person at the background of such experiences. The great difficulty for the scholar of possession cults lies in building theories which appropriately consider the role of *all* the different points of view operating in the rituals and in the experiences of possession (political, religious, psychological, economic, therapeutic, aesthetics, and others). In this regard, the cult of Mammy Wata discussed in this article is exemplary because it crosses over fields of heterogeneous meaning which are rooted in specific cultural universes context- and time-bound. The observations reported by Alina Porrinis (personal communication) in her research among the Igbo conducted in Imo State raise further questions.

Among the Igbo of Oguta (Imo State) Mammy Wata and the *ogbanje* spirits are considered as *mmụọ mmiri:* spirits of the water that intervene in

the life of the people. When Mammy Wata falls in love with someone she starts to "disturb" (possess) the person. The possession can manifest itself in madness, sickness, infertility, misfortune, or the consecutive deaths of children. The cure consists, in the majority of cases, in a ritual aimed at placating the spirit.

Following some testimonies, Porrinis states that the first step towards becoming a member of the Mammy Wata cult can be the madness provoked by being possessed by Mammy Wata. The madness in this case is thought of as a sudden change of character and a temporary loss of reason. The person that becomes mad and temporarily loses control can return to health only after an adequate ritual, which often coincides with the initiation to the cult. The followers of Mammy Wata interpret the relationship between Mammy Wata and the disturbed person in terms of possession only during the first phase, i.e., during the sickness due to the possession. During the rituals when all the members of the cult get together, the experience of being in a trance (*nrọ*) is interpreted as evidence of the ability of a spiritually clean person to see and hear the spirits. Moreover, it seems that amnesia, i.e., the absence of the memory related to the experience of being possessed, reflects the discontinuity produced in the identity of the possessed person. It is a duty of those who have the "power" to share what they see or hear during the trance with all the other participants of the ritual. The members of the cult interpret the ritual performance of trance as the vision of the spirits and not only as possession by the water spirits. The entranced person doesn't stop being him/herself and is never identified with the spirit of Mammy Wata.

According to Porrinis some aspects call for attention. In fact, it would appear that the experience of possession is always related to a state of suffering generally associated with the initiation illness that strikes the people who are "disturbed" by Mammy Wata or by the possession of an evil spirit (*ogbanje*).

Although the symptoms of possession by *ogbanje* spirits can be similar to those produced by Mammy Wata, the possession by an *ogbanje* causes a condition of suffering that always requires an exorcism characterised by two moments: the expulsion of the spirit and a rite of propitiation that includes a last offering to Mammy Wata. The *dibia* (traditional doctor or diviner) can recognise different types of *ogbanje*: *ogbanje* of the water, *ogbanje* of the land, *ogbanje* that cause madness (*ara*) or loss of money, *ogbanje* that create problems in marriage, and *ogbanje* that cause the birth of the "children that return." Being *mmụọ ajo* the *ogbanje* are evil spirits – sometimes considered as children or messengers of Mammy Wata – that "take by force." The possessed ceases to be him/herself, appears as a different person, is "disturbed," and no more recognisable because of the superposition of the spirit onto him/herself. Such superposition produces the permanent identification of the spirit with the person possessed, since the person becomes an *ogbanje*. The *ogbanje* spirits are then responsible for a condition of suffering that manifests itself in the sign of a presence (that of the spirit) and at the same time constitutes a pathology of which one needs to be cured. The *ogbanje* spirits are responsible, hence, for a possession that does not transform itself into ritual possession but instead always requires a therapeutic intervention aimed at the expulsion of the spirit. Here we can find a clear expression of adorcism/exorcism dichotomy: *ogbanje* would admit only the second solution.

More in general, the questions discussed in the present work are similar to those raised by van Dijk on the abuse of the term "voodoo" (van Dijk 2001). They represent a premise for rethinking the experience of possession in a broader scenario than that considered by other well-known researchers. We propose to study possession in a scenario where the dynamics of migration in a European country, the conflicts between host society and immigrants, and the problems accompanying the experience of prostitution can be seen clearly. Such an experience is central to the biographies of the patients we have met, and it also represents an excellent metaphor of relations between the dominated and dominators, consumers and the consumed, desire and power. It expresses in an exemplary manner the contradictions connected to the obsessive search for wealth and well-being portrayed ever more frequently in the shared imaginary as something within everyone's reach and easy to achieve, almost magically.[5]

The economic profiles, and the contradictory existential trajectories witnessed by the women who are the focus of our research, are revealed after all as no less meaningful than the religious, psychological, or therapeutic profiles in understanding the experience of possession (as much the "manifest" as the "ordinary": Boddy 1989). Only by deferring constantly to such a context, we can perhaps suc-

5 "Making money from nothing" is the expression proposed by Andrews in relationship to the pyramid schemes developed in Eastern Europe and in some sub-Saharan African countries. The expression, taken up by Comaroff and Comaroff (1999b, 2000), seems more than ever appropriate in the context of our reflections.

ceed in interpreting correctly not only their experience of possession but also the often contradictory sense of their religious membership, of the suspicions of witchcraft frequently expressed in the confrontations with other conationals, and of the references to voodoo rites or to attacks from vampires. In fact, these accounts and the idioms in which they are expressed speak of real conflicts, of relation of force, of daily violence, and they become the object of negotiations and manipulations according to the circumstances, the places, and the interlocutors (the police stations, the hospitals, the voluntary workers of communities who take them in, the social workers whom they ask for financial help). In the scenario we are evoking, the actions and the discourses of these immigrant and possessed women no longer appear deprived of reason, nor can they be described as the expression of magic or irrational thought, or as a symptom of a "religious delusion."[6]

3 Bodies between Empowerment, Desire, and Commoditisation

Possession – defined as a means of creating communication between human beings and the divine, the living and the dead, men and women, one generation to the other (Lambek 1980, 1993) – is also a complex *machine-à-penser*.[7] In the context of clandestine migration, the condition of the possessed represents a condition from where it becomes possible to think of the question of crossing borders, of power and success, of illness, of alterity and the Other. This question emerges not only in the relationship between human beings and spirits but also between worlds and local economies, on the one hand, and signs and goods of foreign origin on the other. Similar to the reflections about the phenomenon of accusations of witchcraft,[8] this new set of questions allows us to think about the conflicts between moral constraints and individual choices, and the dialectical controversies regulating the processes of accumulation, inequality, consumption, and production.

The ambiguous relationships these young women (immigrants and prostitutes) have with their boyfriends and clients – where boundaries and meanings are endlessly negotiated, in Nigeria as well as in Italy (for the Philippines, see Ratliff 1999) –, with the *mamans*, with their families, and even with the Pentecostal churches or the priests of the possession cults (in the presence of whom they have given their oaths) allow another dimension to emerge: personal power and its exercise, a question which recalls some of the problems examined by van Dijk in the Dutch context. Van Dijk records the necessity of not undervaluing the "capacity to decide" of immigrant women involved in prostitution. The authorities are, on the other hand, embarrassed to admit this very "capacity": "The very idea of the possibility of voluntary action in this field … became deeply resented in a pervasive ideology of political correctness" (van Dijk 2001: 573). Although the experiences we gathered in the course of our research converge in many ways towards similar conclusions, they nevertheless call for a certain prudence in using the notion of "choice" or "voluntary action."[9] Immigrant women have to deal with the dangers and uncertainty of their condition, with the risks related to their health (in particular concerning HIV infection and reduced fertility), and with the anxiety generated by the scenarios of violence, suspicion, poverty, and death in their country of origin (D. J. Smith 2001a, 2001b). Only by considering the totality of these conflicts we can sense the special totality of practices, of power relationships, and of meanings which articulate the register of possession in the migratory context. And it is no less relevant to observe that the notions of reciprocity and of power to decide (agency), or the capacity to negotiate roles – evoked above all in reference to the daily context where these women have to

6 There are many examples of political abuse of psychiatric diagnoses in colonial contexts (Beneduce and Martelli 2005). Both for the most celebrated as for those everyday misunderstandings which these Nigerian women are subjected to, the observation of Mbembe could be valuable: "What African agents accept as *reasons for acting*, what their claim to *act in the light of reason* implies (as a general claim to be right, *avoir raison*), what makes their action intelligible to themselves: all this is of virtually no account in the eyes of analysts" (2001: 7). On health issues among immigrants see also Corin (1995).

7 The expression *machine-à-penser* has been borrowed from Adler and Zempléni (quoted in Beneduce 2002: 137). The arguments of Boddy on possession in the Sudan can also be taken up in the context of our research: "it comments upon and reorders quotidian meanings, unmasking their latent indeterminacies and broadening them in light of women's particular concerns" (1989: 9).

8 Ashforth 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1995, 2000; Fisiy et Geschiere 1993.

9 A specific programme (in its legislative form it is called "article 18") was launched in recent years to offer reception and integration programmes to these women, even when they stay without a permit in Italy (almost all the cases). Denouncing their exploiters has, however, often generated feelings of anxiety both for the possible reprisals in Italy and for the indirect vengeance of harming families back in Nigeria. On the fear of attacks by sorcery as a motive for migration see Fisiy and Goheen (1998: 399).

confront their partners or the institutional agents – seem to find their *structural equivalent* in the register of possession. Even while possessed by Mammy Wata, they seem to be able to control, to a certain extent, this relation, and to succeed in negotiating their objectives and in articulating this bond within other relationships. As it is in the logic of many traditional religions in general, so it is in the cult of Mammy Wata. In both cases we can say that "the gods need men," their existence depends on them materially enough (Augé 1988).

What J. H. Smith (2001: 431) observed in Kenya, regarding this "commoditized" relationship between women and *majini* spirits, is pertinent also in the case of the Mammy Wata cult. Within a scenario, which is articulated through seductions, callings, and negotiations, the question of power is stressed as much as that of its form and reproduction. In the cult of Mammy Wata the bond between the possessed and the spirit is accompanied not only by promises of well-being and of health, or of the gift of being able to heal but also by images of wealth, and by the dream of a luxurious life. These images are allegories of a foreign power, of the power of the colonies and of the Whites, whose presence dominates the African imaginary (Monga 2000; Gondola 1999). As other researchers have pointed out, through these events, a notion of power emerges closely connected to the capacity to incorporate and tame those "emblems of alterity" which are symbols and goods of the West (light skin, long, smooth hair, sunglasses, cellular phones). Not by chance, these symbols and goods are part as much of the contemporary icons of Mammy Wata as of the icons in flesh and blood that are her initiates. Here we are dealing with a representation of power rooted in the cultures of origin and in the historical events which have marked them (primarily the colonial period, evangelisation, urbanisation). In this context, power is conceived as the capacity to move across different worlds and territories, to cross visible and invisible frontiers, to capture an alterity in order to restrain, incorporate, and exhibit it.[10] Starting from these premises, it is not surprising that there is a special coincidence between "savage world" and "urban space."[11]

Mammy Wata is the goddess of the crossroads (the expression is Jell-Bahlsen's) and she is an excellent metaphor of this penetration into the "space of the Other," and of the compromises and negotiations which come with it. In fact, the crossroads are like the market places where one transits in a state of uncertainty, where paradoxes and ambiguities coexist and interact provisionally, and where different signs and meanings proliferate. In the cults of possession – and in particular in the cult of Mammy Wata – these aspects bring to light another dimension. When the experience of possession identifies itself so closely with the search for personal power, when the entry into a possession cult expresses the "peak of desire for power," a singular proximity emerges with that antisocial dimension which certain authors recognise as one of the essential characteristics of modernity: that which introduces new and only apparently paradoxical profiles in a phenomenon usually associated with a strategy of socialisation and of cure (Augé 1982).

The desires and the conflicts generated by the economical and symbolical postcolonial dynamics are added to the problems noted here. While well-being and prosperity were once believed to be realisable within the community, they have now become gradually accessible (at least in the terms of the imaginary) by individuals and, in this case, by women. It is not difficult to recognise that certain possession cults seem to be in certain aspects in perfect tune with the social processes that are characteristic of modernity. In particular, the case of Mammy Wata is coherent with a totally individual register of wealth and prosperity. On the cult of Mammy Wata, Frank (1995) observes how today the wealth and well-being of the European – which was once perceived as mysteriously associated with and accessible to men who lived in conditions of solitude (missionaries, traders, soldiers), and, therefore, in clear contradiction to the collective and solidaristic model of well-being – have become coherent images with the new forms of wealth and accumulation conveyed by the rhetoric of modern capitalism. These same images have ended up being superimposed "naturally" on to the icon of a

10 Argenti 2001; Fisiy and Goheen 1998; Quaranta 2002.

11 In Sierra Leone, the temporary village where initiation is carried out, is situated in the forest; it used to be called "little forest," and now it is called "Nairobi" (Bellman, quoted in Argenti 1998: 760). In the city of Kinshasa, too, in the imaginary of many adolescents and women, the search for new identities should ease up the "integration into the space of the Other, the West, appearing to them as the domain of ultimate power and pleasure" (Devisch, quoted in Argenti 1998: 759). This also reminds us of the theme of "rebel woman," widely diffused in the fiction of West Africa, where the woman who is led by the foreigner to the city and no longer to the forest, is described as a manipulator and, at the same time, victim of her destiny, rich but a prostitute (as in the novel of Cyprian Ekwensi, "Jagua Nana," quoted in Inyama 1992). Such versions can be defined as real social commentary on the new forms of power and on the strategies of domestication of this unknown and spasmodically desired territory which is the city, and in particular the European city.

divinity, who, not by chance, requires her disciples not to enter into family constraints.[12]

Therefore, the immigrant women we have encountered experience the singular symbolic overlapping of a possession cult with the ideal of individual well-being and with the financial means accumulated beyond the control of the family. Such an overlapping is strongly intertwined with their experiences on a social level (that of migration), on an economic level (as prostitutes, or "sex workers"), and on an emotional one (single women or women involved in fragile and ambivalent relationships).

4 A Story of Suffering, a Disorder without Name

Grace is a Nigerian woman who was born in Lagos in 1963. She grew up in Benin City (Edo State), in the family of her father (Urhobo group). She is the fourth of twelve children.[13] Her mother left her husband's house when he remarried. Grace was brought up by her paternal grandmother, together with her other brothers and sisters. Grace was her first husband's second wife; she had two children from him. The first child was born when she was 18 years old; the second was born with an unspecified malformation and died after a year ("he was as small as a baboon and breathed badly," she told us in one of the first meetings). Grace attributes the death of the child to the intervention of her mother-in-law who was suspected because during the pregnancy she had made her drink something of an unknown type. From her second marriage she had another daughter (who should be about twenty-four today).

In 1990, Grace's father died apparently from a stroke. In the same year, the economic problems of the family pushed her to leave the country going to Italy. In 1995, her mother died from illnesses which Grace maintains to be the same from which she herself has begun to suffer in Turin: swelling of the legs, nervousness, a thick and swollen tongue which makes it difficult even to speak. Grace's mother had converted to Christianity years before and in her final days prayed intensely that her daughters would not suffer the same health problems. It seems that almost all the members of her family trace the death of the mother to the fact that she remained Christian in spite of the fact that she had been told on numerous occasions to return to practices of the traditional religion. In the same year of her mother's death, Grace converted to Christianity and became a fervent member of a Pentecostal church.

In Italy she worked for a year as a prostitute. Currently she has a legal permit to stay in Italy and she has a job. For about a year she lived with an Italian man (probably a client who then became her boyfriend), with whom she still has a relationship, although they meet less frequently. Today she has a stable relationship with her second husband, a Nigerian who has recently arrived in Italy. She would like to have more children with him. However she has not yet been able to achieve this goal.

Clinical History

At the end of 1997, Grace was admitted to a Piedmont hospital following a collapse preceded by dizziness and the sensation of "enlargement" of the stomach. The diagnosis with which she was discharged states that she suffered of anaemia and metabolic illnesses. Grace arrived at the Centro Frantz Fanon in January 1998. She was sent by a health information service for immigrants that she consulted for gynaecological problems (a presumed pregnancy, pain in the uterus, inflammation of the vagina). The tests revealed a uterine fibroma and a vaginal infection, but because of the symptoms she presented (she was anxious and depressed) she was advised to have a psychiatric consultation.

Her complaints were about "something which moves through the body, as if there is something that wants to eat my head." She had burning sensations at the spine, swellings in the legs and feet, heavy eyes ("as if they have been shaken from somewhere"), sensations of water running uninterruptedly along her head and neck, feelings of heat, and vomiting. She was afraid that her muscles "may be dying." She feared having contracted the HIV virus during her past experience of prostitution and she was afraid that she was no longer fertile. The first symptoms seem to have appeared already by the end of 1991. She remembered being ill at the age of fifteen when she was in Nigeria (the symptoms in that case were especially nausea, loss of strength, loss of appetite, and swelling in the legs). According to Grace, the pain she suffered more recently was closely related to her arrival in Italy. The first episode dated from that period. When she climbed the stairs she felt a sensation of heat in her chest; she spit blood mixed with saliva. This problem lasted for about two weeks. She said that during this period she started having "heavy thoughts," and among her other worries

12 Although elaborated in another context, the considerations by J. H. Smith on the *majini* cult are also valid in the case of Mammy Wata: "… the *jini* is the epitome of the commodity fetish discussed by Marx …, a purchased thing which appears to produce wealth out of nothing … In short, *majini* invade those places that symbolize modernity" (2001: 432f.).

13 Grace is the fourth daughter, preceded by the firstborn son and two older sisters. On the number of Grace's children, as in the rest of her whole biography, we have received sometimes contradictory information; there seem to be three children currently alive.

were those of being deported by the police. From 1994 onwards she began to feel irritating itchiness along her body (from her feet to her head). Again at that time, during a sexual intercourse, she felt a strong pain in her abdomen and she had the impression that something was moving in her stomach. After that, even during her menstrual period, she continued to have this irritating sensation as if something was moving from her feet up to her head. Grace thought of it as a "worm." More recently (at the end of 1999), she asked us if the worm she felt slipping all along her body might be due to her past experiences as a prostitute. Other Nigerian women complained about the same problem. She described an episode of confusion which happened during the same period and which seems evocative of a crisis of trance. During a moment of collective prayer at her house, Grace began to shake and to experience muscular spasms, loss of saliva, and loss of consciousness. At the end of the crisis (her sister was present as well) she vomited a great deal and spat out very dark saliva. She said that God "wanted to take out the black (the dark) which I have inside" and which could have been caused by smoking cigarettes. Some weeks later, new elements appeared in her discourse. She maintained that the origin of her problems can be attributed to a Nigerian woman to whom she owed money. She described herself as a victim of this woman ("she is a witch," Grace says). The economic problems quickly took up the therapeutic scene. In this case the salient reference made by Grace was to the debts incurred in order to get to Italy and from which she was still not free.

In the course of a meeting, the therapist (one of the authors of this work) made reference to the sensations often ascribed to water which runs along her body, by asking her if in Nigeria she had ever heard of Mammy Wata. Grace smiled. After an initial moment of reticence and of disappointment ("The white doctors do not believe in these things"), she told of having practised the ritual of Olokun (Mammy Wata) twice. The first time, in 1989, lasted only three days and it was carried out because it would bring good fortune to the commercial activity she had just undertaken (selling rice). The second time, in 1990, the ritual lasted seven days (not ten, as foreseen, given its extremely high cost). Grace was in Lagos, where she had begun to suffer from loss of appetite and weight, insomnia, and swelling in the legs. Her paternal aunt (a priestess of the Olokun cult) had let her know through a message that she should return immediately to the village if she did not want it to be already too late (alluding to the danger of death that was hanging over her). Grace went to her aunt and told her about a dream she had had. After the divinatory response, the aunt and another priestess organised the ritual.

In the course of the ceremony, the divinity which chose Grace as her disciple was identified as Ete Okò, a term which indicates either a type of "algae which spreads rapidly on the river and swallows, covers, and destroys all that it finds," or a "boat." Grace said this divinity is very powerful and that very few women call on her in the course of the rite ("There would only be five in all Benin City"). She told of having made divinations in Italy in the early period, even in the church she used to go to. She remembered having indicated to other women, followers of Olokun, the necessity of making sacrifices at the shrine of the deity.

Grace said she never completed the whole ritual, neglecting to fulfil two essential steps of the final part of the ceremony aiming at revealing her new membership (one of these ritual acts consists of going around the market dressed in white and with a basket, piled up with gifts, on her head to make her recognisable as a daughter of Mammy Wata). Since the last ritual, Grace no longer honoured her altar and she did not know if during her absence her relatives had done so. A little while after her arrival in Italy, she had asked her family to burn the ritual objects, following the request made by the pastor of the Pentecostal church she was attending. However, the family refused to do so in her absence fearing the consequences of this act. Recently, Grace had asked her sister to send her some of the ritual objects from Nigeria so that she could wear them here in Italy (an anklet and a necklace). These objects never arrived. During one of the meetings, Grace said that she wanted to make peace again with her shrine; she intended to "leave the Church and to return to her *real* work."

In 1999, Grace told us of having practised a ritual in honour of Mammy Wata along a tributary of the Po River in Turin. A few nights later, she dreamt of her father and of some priestesses of Olokun. She greeted them in the ritual manner, "as one must do in these circumstances." After about two months, she dreamt of yam and a bunch of bananas. Grace said that a person who "knows how to read these things" has told her that the dream meant that she is pregnant. We suggest that the dream could also stand for some offers Grace made to Mammy Wata. At that point, she told us of a second dream she had in the course of the same night. In the dream she sung a song whose words are: "remember not to forget the conversation we have begun and the things we have done."

We met Grace again at the Centro Frantz Fanon in the spring of 2001. She had returned after a period of absence of several months, in the course of which she had been to Nigeria. There, she had been to an *azën* (a term which Grace translates as "witch doctor"), who had told her during a divination that she "is not a woman," but a being that is "half woman and half fish." According to the divination's response, Grace is the bride of a *spiritual husband* (*obaname*) who paid a dowry for her. Grace asked where this money had ended up, given that her father had never received any of it. The only answer the *azën* gave was that she should go to the river and give to the water a sum that he would establish; moreover, she should go to the river in order to take her baby *ogbanje* objects and to destroy them (see note 18). But Grace was afraid and did not do what she was told to do. When we asked her about the reasons for her rebellion, she showed on the one hand her rancour and claimed the right to be angry with Mammy Wata for all that she made her go through ("If she is angry with me, so am I angry with her"); on the other hand, she expressed great fear of falling into

the water, of being drawn down into its depth without being able to come up again ("What if I fall and I can no longer come up again? Since I was a child" – she tells us – "I have always been afraid of going close to the river").

Grace also told us of a dream that her daughter, who was then a medical student, had one night when they were sleeping together in Nigeria. In the dream the mother became Mammy Wata and was immersed in the depths of a river, surrounded by every kind of wealth; from the doorstep, Grace was calling her daughter asking her to come and meet her. Grace's daughter, waking with a jolt and frightened, had asked her mother to account for her nature once and for all ("But what is it that's happening to you? You aren't a woman," she said to her mother); she then refused to continue sleeping with her, and for the whole night Grace was unable to make her come back to bed. Grace asked us what happened that night ("I don't know what is happening to my body"). The therapist asked her again if her legs still feel heavy when she wakes up. Grace said that in the morning before she is able to walk she has to wait for some minutes, because it actually feels as if her legs would not be able to keep her upright, as if her legs are not ready to walk.

In the following pages we would like to examine some aspects of this experience. First of all, the analysis of her experience of possession will focus less on more familiar dimensions of possession (such as psychic dissociation, modifications of the state of consciousness, ritual amnesia, somatic illnesses, premonitions of being called) and more on the body and the territory it crosses. The latter are to be understood as places of uncertainty and danger where experiences, symptoms, and perceptions move between different strategies of objectivation, recognition, and control. These places are where the presence of Mammy Wata and the experience of being "acted on" become moments of crisis and menace (Cartry 1988; Izard 1985). Secondly, it seems important to analyse the nature of the bonds and constraints existing not only between spirit and possessed but also between their world and that of the nonpossessed. How do the possessed and the nonpossessed relate to each other in their daily life? How do the different logics addressed by their behaviour and experiences interact with one another? Finally, what remains is to question the notion of *human nature* as it emerges from these experiences and discourses.

5 Thinking Alterities, Playing with Agencies, and the Risk of Being "Other"

To become a divinity, to announce its coming through your own body, to be this very divinity and lend your own voice to it, to require that others recognise in that body alone the divinity or the spirits and no longer the particular man or woman who was present in that same place, in that same body until a moment before (Leiris 1989), this means to make another intentionality manifest, namely, to make other willing actors and desires emerging from this paradoxical identification. Perhaps not all has yet been said of this constraint to the interaction with alterity which the possessed incarnates through her life. To begin with, let us think of the many paradoxes that possession seems to promote.[14] It seems to be important to question our assumptions about the meaning of an experience which projects itself on to other dynamics and conflicts, and permeates the "life world" of disciples, the representation of selfhood, and their future projects well beyond the time of ritual. In fact, the ritual scenario of possession, the meanings and the values of belonging to a cult, assume new meanings when they are incorporated within other events such as migrating to Europe. In this context, possession rituals interweave with other experiences: the challenges of solitude involved in migrating; the worry of being the object of envy for any economic success which comes about; the constant concerns with illness, sterility, or death; the anxiety of a body which feels defeated.

By inverting the almost obvious assumed sequence (that imagines unconscious and inexpressible desires, or other conflicts, as the hidden "cause" of possession on the one hand, and the corresponding ritual as the "solution" for the individual and for the group to these conflicts and these desires, on the other hand), we attempt to interrogate the opposite trajectory of this experience. In other words, what changes in the history of the possessed when there is a perennial bond with a spirit? What is the sense of the many and irreversible transformations whose permanence is witnessed by the body as well as by other living signs, when these "signs" themselves migrate to other contexts? What possibility (and limits) arises from what is not

14 Among the many paradoxes of possession, here we mention two of them: a) the *extraordinary* (the "numinous") becomes repetitive and expected, called to participate in daily life; b) the body is not a temporary repository of the divinity or the spirit nor is it a simple shrine; it is the same body *structure* which is modified and this mutation is often lasting, because in many cases possession is "a permanent state, given once and for all" (Vincent 1971: 108). With regard to a possession cult in southern Italy, De Martino used the expression of "celestial husband" and "mystical weddings" to define the bond between the possessed woman and Saint Paul (1996: 74 f.).

always or only a contact with supernatural powers through prayer or sacrifice but rather an explicit "contract" (Frank 1995: 335) sealed in the body of the possessed?[15] How does the person redefine (reshape) her projects once she discovers to be "married" to the spirit of the waters? These questions need to be raised in order to unveil the (often violent) dynamics at work when there is competition between different models of the person, of the psyche, and of suffering (the medico-psychological, the religious and moral models of a Christian kind which invoke or allude to an exorcistic strategy, and the model of *reciprocal* possession and of alliances).

As the experience of Grace shows in an exemplary manner, the response to these questions must be found within the contexts in which possession takes place; in our case, within migratory dynamics. As already stated, such dynamics can profoundly influence the sense of that experience and its unfolding. As a matter of fact, the meaning of the symptoms and the degree of pertinence of gestures and ritual practices can change or vacillate. Such oscillation can be clearly witnessed in the phrases and discourses of our patients when they talk with much reticence about their illnesses and experiences, about the interpretations they have been given in Nigeria, the crises of possession, and the participation in the cult of Mammy Wata by always adding at the end of their telling phrases like these: "I do not believe it, I'm Christian, my family has been Christian for a long time." We are alluding to a field of particularly complex forces, where not only the content of a "belief" interacts with a person grappling with her doubts, but also where questions and choices between contradictory bonds and belongings intersect with each other. Moreover, these contradictions and intersections are enunciated in the presence of a Western interlocutor in the role of a therapist. In the course of migration and of the experience of prostitution, the sense of relation with a spirit – with Mammy Wata – and the presence of illnesses, which is no longer explicable through only one specific register, can become the terrain for a more dramatic doubt. Here we are alluding to the possibility of a radical doubt; or, better, to a real epistemological rupture that can break the ontological complicity operating until now between human beings and divinity, living beings and objects, bodies and spirits. Such rupture, such uncertainties, which are favoured by the cultural dynamics and by the migratory experience (as demonstrated by the history of Grace and of other women we have met) can be approximated to the notion of "crisis of presence" (De Martino 1977, 1995), to the terror of seeing the limits of their own body dissolved in a metamorphosis whose times and meaning are not controlled; in other words, more literally, to the anxiety of no longer being in this world.

Our hypothesis is that, far from the symbolic and limited to ritual contexts where the "initiation illness" is revealed and where the actual "spiritual companions" have been recognised and named, the experiences of possession – at least for some of the possessed – can be extremely persistent, in that their bodies become living and conflicting memorials of an inextinguishable debt. As Frank (1995) points out, though it is not in any way dangerous during a collective ceremony to experiment with possession, it can be dangerous when it is done individually, in secret.[16] In the latter case, sliding into the mould of insanity instead of that of possession, into the idiosyncratic register of alterity rather than of socialisation, seems to be more in relation to the absence of a social and symbolic fabric than to the impossibility or the possibility of recognising and naming the responsible spirit. When practiced individually, possession lacks a common moral discourse, which allows to govern and to objectify the meaning of these experiences and of the peculiar perceptions of a "double body" by situating them within a network of shared memories and roles. In this case the expression "the work of culture" is particularly appropriate (Obeyesekere 1985, 1990).

6 Placing Women, Children, and Spirits

While the ritual activity takes on complex meanings and merits consideration because it finds ways of reproducing itself in different forms – even in the contexts of migration – it seems to us just as important to analyse those aspects and events which might appear banal but nonetheless reveal a difficult attempt to reconcile contradictory belongings and worlds. Misty Bastian (1997), in her research among the Igbo (southeastern Nigeria) and in her accurate analysis of the cult of Mammy Wata, has referred to these expressions of possession as or-

15 On these issues see Szombati-Fabian and Fabian 1976; Salmons 1977; Drewal 1988; Gore and Nevadomsky 1997; Jell-Bahlsen 1997.

16 One day Grace made a sacrifice to Mammy Wata on the banks of a river near Turin. In a moment particularly fraught with tension she seemed to stumble and almost fell. Later, this fall was interpreted by Grace as a bad omen, and the experience considerably accentuated her uneasiness.

dinary. Moreover, she has extended the notion of "possession" even to those phenomena in which the entire ritual structure is not necessarily present.

In the introduction to her work, Bastian suggests to extend the study of the relationships between spirits and human beings beyond the experiences classically defined as "possession," "shamanism," or "mediumship." In particular, she is referring to those experiences in the course of which, although we cannot talk about being "possessed by spirits," meaningful bonds between the human world and the world of spirits are nonetheless interwoven. The logic underlining these bonds is essentially the same as that on which the constraints of alliance and of relationship amongst human groups are founded. She reports the examples of child spirits (*ogbanje*, "returning child"; *abiku*, "born to die") and of women-fish. The latter are "daughters" of Mammy Wata, women who were born under the sign of beauty and are lovers of well-being,[17] or women who refuse maternity, marriage, and other forms of social bonds.

Mammy Wata – who is the generally female spirit of the waters (although it is common to talk about "spiritual husbands" as well) – and *ogbanje* – who is the incarnate spirit – are closely related phenomena. On the one hand, the followers of Mammy Wata would be the most suitable to "cut *ogbanje*," that is, to break for good that bond and the inauspicious cycle of birth and death in which children, spirits, and family members are caught. On the other hand, the daughters of Mammy Wata are themselves "*onye ogbaanje mmili* (water *ogbaanje* person)" (Bastian 1997: 125), therefore, child-spirits who have fought against death during infancy by resisting to calls, temptations, and to the incessant molestation of companion-spirits of the waters. In this way, in the course of life they become persons with a double, ambivalent, and at the same time ambiguous nature. They are spirits of the waters entrapped in a body and obliged to live among human beings. They are bodies that can transform themselves into fish or into other animal forms. They are spirits and human beings at the same time, but they are neither the one nor the other. After all, they are like the representatives of a *third gender*, properly unclassifiable and in a certain sense "monstrous."

Previous research has shown how priests or priestesses of the Mammy Wata cult can be identified as *ogbanje* persons (or persons who have suffered from an "*ogbanje* illness"). Ilechukwu quotes a specialist and writes that "Ogbanje problems and mamiwater problems are the same. Ogbanje, [the specialist] thinks is the old form of presentation of a spiritual bond. There is now no need to search for *Iyiuwa* [or 'bond stone'] but to satisfy the demands of the spiritual ruler of this world – Satan. … Mammy Wata is an agent of Satan" (1990–91: 25 f.). In the same study (49), the author continues:

> Patients, their families and the healers, especially the Igbo ones, are unanimous in their view that *ogbanje* now manifest as Mammy Wata problems. The healers in particular see no difficulty in reconciling the two phenomena. Things have changed. *Western medicine has reduced infant and child mortality and now, they reason, the modus operandi has changed.*

In recent years these categories and the related ritual practices have been overlapping and were somehow confused, to the point that a patient can participate in an *ogbanje* ritual (to locate the "bond stone"),[18] or in a Mammy Wata ritual or, further still, in both rituals without the social agents involved perceiving either contradiction or confusion. Although in a more recent work Gore and Nevadomsky (1997: 68) have brought this relation to light, they stress the existence of local variants which cannot always be led back into a single schema:

> In Uga [Anambra State, Nigeria], Ogbanje are deceased children reborn to the same mother. They are wayward and difficult. Mrs. Umenze defines two kinds of Ogbanje: children from the rivers and children from the Niger River or the sea. Treating river children is easy, but Niger River or sea children must be initiated as priests/priestesses of Mammy Wata and then married to the sea. In Umuohiagu …, on the other hand, Ogbanje is also recognised as a problem, but there is not a connection between Ogbanje and Mammy Wata.

Constantly overlapping references to both phenomena have emerged even in the narratives of the women we have met. If we were to order their discourses on "illness" and its causes by a temporal scan, we would sketch out the following sequence: women like Grace, who have complained of illnesses and problems of different types (the presence of worms, tingling sensations, their precarious economic state, sterility, loss of work), after the indications of an oracle or of a priestess who has

17 "*-Li uwa*" is literally the one who wants "to eat the world," who wants only to enjoy herself.

18 It is a common procedure that the spirit-children place all the things which bind them to the world of their companions under the earth, near a water course: "There is an emphasis on the existence of a ritual bond object called *Iyiuwa* ('life contract')" (Ilechukwu 1990–91: 20).

interpreted these problems as signs of callings by the spirit of the waters, had participated in a ritual of Mammy Wata in Nigeria, thus becoming followers of the cult. Moreover, right from their early years, some members of the family (the mother, the grandmother, a paternal aunt) or a specialist (often a native doctor) had recognised them as *ogbanje* children.[19] Some of them, after having converted to a Christian church, had interrupted their participation in the cult even before leaving for Europe. In the course of this sequence other scenes and rituals (often described as "voodoo") accompany, under the threat of violence, the clandestine migration and the contraction of debt in relation to the subsequent activity of prostitution. Bastian's expression "embodied spiritual warfare" (1997: 123) can be applied here too because it effectively condenses these confrontational relations between spirits and bodies.

We will take up only two of the numerous interpretations of the cult of Mammy Wata: a) on the one hand, as it has been mentioned above, in recent years psychopathological interpretations have proliferated. This kind of interpretation tends to categorise the behaviour of the followers of Mammy Wata as a symptomatology of a hysterical kind, articulated through unresolved Oedipal conflicts and strong feelings of guilt (Wintrob 1970; Ogrizek 1981–82), or through the expression of a disturbed relationship between parents and children (Ilechukwu 1990–91). b) On the other hand, in a perspective very different from the medicalizing ones, Szombati-Fabian and Fabian (1976) attribute to the cult the possibility of marking in single individuals historical identities and events, "cultural memories," power relationships, and precise social dynamics. In this perspective, Mammy Wata incarnates repressed desires such as the "prohibited White Woman" and, more generally, the desire to possess the same well-being as the White Man.

We will try to integrate these reflections with the data we gathered in our research. The women we work with have been considered "ill" and diagnosed – in the hospitals where they have been admitted – as affected by serious "psychotic disorders." At the same time, they are immigrant women, caught in the identity flattery of being like the White (obsession in the use of whitening creams), caught up in the network of processes of social mimesis. Moreover, these women are followers of fraternities who have had experiences of possession and share this knowledge or, to say it better, the power of a knowledge. Taking on a historical perspective, we can add that the cult of Mammy Wata, her icon, her changed ceremonial expressions, and the bonds it forges in relationship with other cultural constructs (*ogbanje*, for example), constitute a particularly effective modality to classify, "select," and control the world of alterities, even of those represented by the social and cultural changes introduced by colonial medicine and missionary education, by migration and the market economy, and by the transformation of the constraints of family ties.

Drewal observes that the cult of Mammy Wata can be considered an exemplary case of what Wagner "calls the invention of culture, an ongoing process of creating one's reality, of constructing meaning out of experience. … Like anthropologists, Mammy Wata devotees 'study' others – overseas visitors – and generalise them from impressions, experiences, and other evidence as if they were produced by some external 'thing' " (Drewal 1988: 160).[20] In this sense, this spirit of the waters recalls in a single image the economic order ("she brings monetary riches and wealth"), the religious one ("she is a spirit of the watery underworld"), the therapeutic one ("she gives troubles to the chosen persons"), the social order ("she has no children, no family of any kind and her devotees are outside the kinship system") and the cultural one ("as a foreigner she provides alternatives to the established cultural avenues") (Drewal 1988: 161). Here we have an excellent example of what Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues would call a "confusion of genres." It is precisely through this superimposition of the evoked discourses that Mammy Wata continues to exercise her symbolic role contributing

19 A young Edo woman reported as a proof of her identity as an *ogbanje* child the fact that she heard voices calling her by name. These voices had on the other hand accompanied her for a long period of her life: Joy remembered that since her childhood in Nigeria, she heard them calling her name. Her mother, to avoid the worst, told her never to answer these calls. The patient, in the course of a stay in hospital for a syncope, underwent a psychiatric examination because of her serious anxiety disorders. Through vague disorders, events of illness, references to infancy, or to ritual practices one glimpses the long and tiring identity negotiation of someone who is "suspended" between multiple worlds.

20 Another Nigerian woman, from the area of Worri (on the delta of the river Niger) and admitted to a psychiatric ward of a Turin hospital, expressed her fear that "Dracula" could harm her. The evocation of characters from European literature reminds us of what Bastian writes (1993: 151) on the recurring references to vampires and witches in the Nigerian press. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the iconography of Mammy Wata (Mamba Muntu) is massively present in comics, in drawings on prisons' walls, or on Web sites, interweaving itself with the discourses of Christian churches, superimposing itself on negative figures ("revenants," evil spirits, Satan) or taking on the opposite traits which are decidedly positive.

to the construction of the reality of the people she "chooses" as followers, to the interweaving of different registers, and to the legitimisation of "novel modes of action" (Drewal 1988: 161).

We think that the most appropriate theoretical strategy to adopt does not separate these and other divergent interpretations, and, at the same time, it questions, e.g., why the mythic-ritual complex does not "reintegrate" these crises (or at least not with the same degree of efficacy) in the context of migration. Furthermore, we believe it to be crucial to analyse the sense of a belonging, which, although not in absolute terms, remains nevertheless mostly female.

7 Notes on "The Problem of Women"

The cult of Mammy Wata produces a real multiplication of the possible due to the ambiguity of the discourses and practices that seems at times to be followed intentionally by the participants of the cult. It is appropriate to take up some hypotheses that in recent years have been formulated around the problem of the "different nature" of woman and of her greater proximity to the "savage".

Edwin Ardener (1972) was one of the first to raise the question of the different nature of woman. He formulated the controversial equation "woman : nature; man : culture."[21] In analysing a Bakweri ritual (Western Cameroon), which is in many ways analogous to that of Mammy Wata with the image of the woman-siren (*liengu*)[22] and the reference to the spirits of the waters, Ardener suggests the following hypothesis: the "problem of woman" lies in the fact that she will insist on living in that space which for men is the space of the wild, at the margins of the untamed territories such as the forest, the woods, the sea.

Other authors have taken up this perspective. Sherry Ortner (1974) assumes the question which entitles her work as well, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?", in order to explore the condition of the subordination of women and the place of woman in the society. Although the author recognises a culturally constructed dialectic in the "proximity" of woman to nature ("the culture/nature distinction is itself a product of culture"), she nevertheless maintains that this equation is ubiquitous and that woman finds herself, for the most, occupying "an intermediate position between culture and nature" (1974: 84–86). This intermediate position could produce, among other things, a "symbolic ambiguity" characteristic of the female condition. From such ambiguity issues the fact that the woman could place herself (or be placed) within *and* outside culture, becoming at the same time the source of contradictory and ambivalent metaphors and meanings.

However, Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1973) expresses strong reservations about such hypotheses. The generalisation of the condition of female subordination to the male is, in the first place, inappropriate (and there is no lack of counter examples calling for a rearticulation of such a model in a more flexible manner: see Matory 1993). Moreover, according to Mathieu, assuming the equation "woman = nature" would mean theorising the biological "culturality" of man and the biological "naturality" of woman (as if placing them on an imaginary biological scale, a woman would be "more natural" than a man).[23] According to the author, the same ritual analysis of *liengu* authorises other readings: while it shows the "straying" of woman into the wilderness territories, it also offers the evidence of a will to socialise the savage world, bringing it under control and promoting negotiation with it.[24] According to Ardener, naturalising the identity between untamed or natural world, on the one hand, and female world, on the other, entails the risk of considering other connections as obvious and not worthy of further reflections, like the connection aimed at explaining the fact that possession is most often female.[25] A further reflection imposes itself. When the places and the meanings of "wild" change,[26] – remembering that this word today is associated less with the world of the forest and more often with that of the metropolis and urban contexts, the model of the woman as "physiologically" closer to the wildernesses of nature and to its rhythms changes. Finally, there are more than a few cases where the opposition between inhabited and domesticated world of the village, on the one hand,

21 The article by Ardener develops along two lines, one methodological, and the other analytical-theoretical. Here we take into consideration only the second.

22 Other references to this cult are reported by Eric de Rosny (1981, 1996).

23 Such an approach would lead us to neglect that the "'reproductive' force … does not only concern women … Fecundity, in numerous societies, is also the business of men" (Mathieu 1973: 108).

24 "This rite, like many others, 'treats with' the wild" (Mathieu 1973: 109).

25 On naturalisation of the reasons why possession is prevalently a female experience see Nathan (1986).

26 We record, moreover, that not only culture but also history contributes to the construction and delimitation of wilderness, and the colonial history of Africa has exercised a decisive role in this issue as well (see Neumann 2001).

and external world where meetings and exchanges take place with the other, present inverted roles between men and women (to the former belongs the relationship to the Foreigner, to the Other, and to the latter the control of the "domesticated" space of home and the village) (Boddy 1989).

Starting from these positions it seems to us that, if the discourse of possession remains problematic for the male-female couple, so does the relationship between "human" and "not human" and the status of the incarnate spirits we have discussed here. "*Figure-limite*" par excellence (Zempléni 1985), the daughters of Mammy Wata or the *ogbanje* children impose themselves, after all, as entities, as problematic existences because they oblige us to rethink the relation between women, men, and children who are totally human, and women, men, and children who are incomplete in the sense that they are not completely human. The latter are incomplete because the time of their socialisation has not come yet – as, in the case of the children, with the time for weaning – or because the socialisation has not definitely "cut" the bonds with the world of spirits – as it happens for other similar notions such as the *nit ku bon* in Senegal, or the "cord-children" in Cameroon.

Such representations put into question borders and categories, they make identity fluid and create new territories, *new bodies*, in which different logics and registers (the male and the female, the human and the nonhuman) come into confluence, not without conflict. In this regard, Mammy Wata is, once again, an exemplary figure: female spirit but at the same time "spiritual husband"; mother and husband together; spirit incarnated in attractive bodies that move around in market places, amongst people; woman-fish or siren who, by virtue of this *duplicity*, represents a sort of *third gender* never reducible only to the human nor to the nonhuman, neither male nor female, neither of the world of the living nor of that of the dead. The life of these beings, which we have learned to recognise under the skin of immigrant women and prostitutes, seems dominated by uncertainty and doubt, because it can suddenly break off and resist any attempt of a cure. Many of the women we have met often referred to the fear of not knowing any longer how to control this alterity. This fear expresses, again, the ambivalent nature of these relations, where the relationships of force can change signs at any moment, and the possibility to exist remains suspended between success, failure, or illness, between life and death. In a moment of serious crisis, including even the risk of suicide, a Nigerian woman confirmed it in her own words: "You cannot understand … I am *really different*. People *like me* don't eat … If I must die, it's better not to wait."

Referring to similar issues and, in particular, underlining the uncertainty which distinguishes the identity of such *cas-limite*, Zempléni (1985: 25) speaks of "degree zero" of identity (in the case of the children *nit ku bon*, possessed by ancestral spirits, *rab*, or themselves ancestral spirits, *enfants échangés*). The nature of these children would gesture always and only towards itself, as if these beings represented the *inverse* of a human person, and along with it, the Other, the foreigner by definition. An aspect no less meaningful and no less contradictory is that the *nit ku bon* children, like the daughters of Mammy Wata, are generally perceived and described as hard-headed protagonists of events and completely in control ("subjects") of their own existence.

8 Border's Bodies, Bodies as Borders

> A boundary is not the point at which something stops …
> A boundary is the point from where something begins to be present.
>
> (Igbo proverb)

Our discussion about the more ordinary dimensions of possession and its expressions within migratory phenomena started off by putting into question the claim of a conceptual unity of possession (Colleyn 1996). We then attempted to follow a trajectory similar to the one Geschiere (1995) and other researchers have traced in their reflections on the notion of witchcraft in Africa.[27] Such a notion is examined in its "everydayness" and in its intricate relationships to modernity. It incorporates in its images and practices the changing forms of power and violence, of accumulation and individualism, of conflict and solitude. The profiles we have illustrated (the antisocial dimensions of power sought by the followers of Mammy Wata, the search for an individual well-being indifferent to family constraints, the conception of personal power as the capacity to incorporate alterity) recall some of the profiles recognised in contemporary forms of witchcraft in Africa. We believe that, beyond the connections to processes of modernity brought to light both in possession and in sorcery (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993), the frequent references of the women to the logic and the phenomenology both of

27 "Our understanding will advance when 'witchcraft' is analytically dissolved into a larger frame of reference" (Crick, quoted in Pool 1994: 16).

sorcery and of possession need further explanation. In order to investigate this kind of experiences, we make use of the "embodiment paradigm" (Csordas 1990) and its recent developments.

The literature makes explicit references to the nexus between witchcraft and possession (J. H. Smith 2001: 433). More particularly, de Boeck makes explicit reference to this nexus with regard to children accused of witchcraft in Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo). In the history of Esther, a girl accused of being a witch, the connection between witchcraft and Mammy Wata became particularly evident (de Boeck 2000: 44). At the same time, witchcraft and possession – both figures of the frontier implicated in the strategies of distancing one's self from family bonds and of searching for a personal power on the part of women or adolescents[28] – overlap almost *naturally* in the experiences of the Nigerian women we have met in Turin. In the recall of events preceding migration, or in the interpretation of illnesses and daily problems, their words slide imperceptibly and continually from the register of possession to that of witchcraft and vice versa.

Although these experiential and conceptual territories are sometimes considered separate, they actually share a common logic: that of contract and of infinite debt, that of slavery and of dependence. Moreover, the power and the force hidden in the game are, in both cases, characterised by an irreducible ambivalence, which the discourses and the interpretations of sorcery on the part of the missionaries almost never managed to understand or tolerate. A further aspect justifies this parallel: it is the analogous theory of action which underlies these phenomena, a theory which is connected to specific conceptions of power and to no less precise representations of the individual (the possibility of doubling, of metamorphosis, etc.). Finally, through new "affiliations," both witchcraft and possession produce a dangerous breach in family and social bonds.

For an immigrant woman "to individualise oneself" can signify "to force herself to think" of the spirits which live within her, or of the trajectory of initiation started years before following an illness or a misfortune, in new terms and especially in reference to her own current projects of wealth and power. Far from the sound of drums, from the dances, from the hierarchy of the brotherhood, in the absence of a ritual time articulating the times of crisis and negotiating the forms and meanings of the suffering, other logics can break in (for example, those of competition, of suspicion, and of envy). When the ritual action is reproduced in solitude, in the uncertainty of its real power and, especially, in the terror accompanying the experience of "dubious signs" (Barthes quoted by Szombati-Fabian and Fabian 1976: 14), it risks becoming a reiteration of gestures whose symbolic values are mitigated or reproduced with difficulty. It becomes mere simulacra whose efficacy is more difficult to reaffirm once there is no possibility to socialise that incarnate alterity, to share that "daily theatre" which is possession, as it is for those algae and corals which lose the brilliance and harmony of their movements once they are left on the beach by the sea. Therefore, as the vicissitudes of many immigrant women have shown, it is not surprising that it is precisely when the dreams related to Mammy Wata become more frequent, when there are more signs revealing her presence *in their own bodies*, or when more decisive calls come from their own country and family as a reminder of the belonging to the cult, that the swarming of the "worms"[29] becomes more insistent and the illnesses become more troublesome or distressing. This situation makes the report of the illness and the search for a cure oscillating towards biomedicine, amongst the meanings, values, and images of their condition offered within the scenario of the host country.

Though possession represents an ordinary, widespread, and common experience (Sharp 1993), it nevertheless remains crucial because it constitutes for the women we have met a social practice that encourages certain kinds of actions, discourses, contrasts, and emotions. This very practice is particularly appropriate to articulate the problems posed for the individual by displacement, loneliness, and the challenges of modernity.[30] By recognizing the "ordinary" dimension of posses-

28 "In Kinshasa to become a witch is certainly a means to realise such independence" (de Boeck 2000: 50).

29 On this "illness entity" in West Africa, cf. Olivier de Sardan (1998); see also Bierlich (1995) and Wenzel Geissler (1998). "Worms" are a good example of embodied metaphor. Here again we find a particular expression of metaphors' functioning, and we can see how individuals try to create new meaning in social interaction by (cultural or individual) metaphors. Finally, we should remember what Kirmayer says on "politics of metaphors" and medical authority (1992: 340).

30 In order not to remain prisoner of a "meta-narrative" (Englund and Leach 2000), we stress that here we are using the term modernity especially as an equivalent of "contemporaneity," and that we make ours the definition put forward by Geschiere, who proposes the use of the term *modernity* "in the sense of an ideal or even of a *never fulfilled* myth of the autonomy of the individual, a scientific approach which renders the world ever more transparent, but also the access to the new technology and to consumer goods" (2000: 18).

sion as the most complex trait to interpret and, at the same time, as its original cipher, we can move successfully from an anthropology of possession to an anthropology of the possessed. By this we mean an anthropology which derives from the experiences, biographies, and accounts of the possessed the structure and meaning of possession.

A second consideration concerns the subjective experience of possession which we have been able to gather in the accounts of the women we have met at the Centro Frantz Fanon. Possession by spirits of the waters, or by divinities from the religious pantheon of the Igbo, Yoruba, Ibo, etc. is a familiar experience among the Nigerian immigrant women in Italy, but since it is no longer carried out in its original context, it is caught in other dilemmas, promises, or uncertainties, thus becoming at the same time *foreign* and "uncanny" in the psychoanalytic sense of the term. The relation with a spirit, which assumes in some cases the forms of a perennial alliance, conflictual and ambivalent as it might be (a marriage with a "husband" or, in other cases, with a "spiritual wife") situates possession among the exemplary forms of bonds to alterity, or better of realisations of possible alterities. The case of another patient gives an example of these difficult relationships.

Princess, a young Nigerian woman of royal origins temporally out of the prostitution scene, reported her dizziness, heart palpitations (which were "inexplicable" from the medical point of view), and strange and worrying sensations ("*someone* seems to arrive suddenly and unexpectedly and to push me, *making me fall*"). One day, she showed us a scar on her right arm to prove that she is the reincarnation of a maternal great-grandmother. She was offering a testimony as simple as it was peremptory of what we can define "cultural, incarnated memory." In fact, this small mark on her arm, that trivial scar, was speaking about her origins, her biography (which did not begin, however, on the day of her birth), the history of her lineage, and of her conflicts (that great-grandmother was repudiated by her husband because she could not give him a son). That little scar was a testimony: a theory of the person, and of his/her making. That sign became, finally, the occasion to speak of an invisible world and of a difficult membership to sustain. When she was a child, her playmates and neighbours perceived her as a "strange" child and called her *igbakwan*, which gave her more than a few problems. The paternal grandmother is a renowned priestess of Olokun (Mammy Wata), and every three years she celebrates a festival which brings hundreds of people even from quite distant villages in search of a cure. In this ceremony, her mother and sister participate as protagonists and Princess videotaped it. She later brought the tape to one of our meetings. Princess watches this ceremony with great uneasiness, because she "does not believe in it" and never wanted to be made a devotee of the cult. When she arrived in Turin, some Nigerian immigrant women "recognised" her as an *igbakwan/ogbanje*, which brought back the old uneasiness of her childhood (for the notions of Igbakwan, *ogbanje*, and Olokun, useful insights are in the novels of Sole Woyinka, Ben Okri and Chinua Achebe). Such an experience becomes tolerable for an individual only as long as precise obligations and strange relationships are accepted.

We have to consider the expression of a further paradox, that of a *reciprocal* incorporation (or if preferred of a reciprocal possession), which is sometimes described in the literature as "*ierogamia*," "family ritual," "fusion and consecration." Narrating this uncanny experience is at the same time a way by which people try to give meaning to this incorporation and to tame their "troubling" dimension.[31] Whatever this bond signifies, and to whatever extent it interweaves with other relations, other experiences (those of suffering and loneliness, or of exploitation and prostitution), it remains a venture with an uncertain outcome of which we have only begun to trace possible unfolding. We think that, within this scenario, the suffering of their bodies, their uneasiness assume a more comprehensible and more "perspicuous" (Wittgenstein 1953: 122) profile. In order to understand this profile the psychiatric categories have little pertinence.

As pointed out earlier, it is important to recognise the mimetic value entrusted to the body. The iconography of Mammy Wata has a complex geographical origin. It seems to have come from India and, then, to have been transmitted throughout Africa by the Europeans. If, on the one hand, her more recent stylistic evolutions (beside the serpent and the woman-siren sunglasses, cosmetic products, and other symbols of vanity and of power are gradually added) represent an excellent matrix of mimetic effects, on the other hand, it constitutes an exemplary witnessing of that game of mirrors and of complementarily characterizing the interplay of cultural dynamics.[32] But mimesis does not mean

31 Garro 2003. Generally on illness narratives see Good 1994; Kleinman 1988.

32 "Remarkably, this image symbolized the exotic Other for two vastly different cultural areas in the world: she was a mysterious, sensuous Oriental snake charmer for Europeans, but a European water spirit for Africans!" (Drewal 1988: 170).

mere reproduction nor simple imitation: by virtue of its own power, it somehow transforms the object of mimesis, making it different (grotesque, for example, or even more potent), adding "supplementary" meanings.[33] Finally, it seems to be important to associate to the notion of mimesis that of metamorphosis (metamorphosis of a body, a *real* ever-present event, as the history of Grace testifies well). We can assert with Fardon that in the case of these women at the centre of our reflections, "metamorphosis crucially informs … expectations of the possible. While endorsing the boundaries of categories, metamorphosis questions the stability of category membership" (1990: 42).

In the events we have encountered, and beginning from a body incessantly buzzing, possession seems thus to indicate an urgent need to reaffirm a conflictual identity which is both a bond and a memory that have become laborious to sustain (to represent, or better to "carry out," in the sense Victor Turner [1982] recognised in the etymology of the verb *to perform*). The methodological options we are alluding to allow, in their totality, to avoid the risk of essentialising the notion of "the African person," and to bring the attention back to the concrete "exercise of existence," to the "meaningful acts" these individuals carry out in their daily life (Kaphagawani 2000; Mbembe 2000, 2001). Once again, through this trajectory we take up the invitation of de Martino (1977, 1996) to apply in research the systematic and interweaving analyses of the relationships of force, sense, and concrete existence in which all these express themselves.

Furthermore can we avoid a consideration of the role of the common condition of the women we have met: the fact that this study deals with women who have shared, for a more or less extensive period, a specific experience, whose meaning cannot be disregarded in the comprehension of *their* possession, that of being women who have prostituted themselves, whose body has been a body *possessed*, or better *dispossessed*, taken in the dialectic of the sexual imaginary of the host society, submitted to blackmail and menaces or to the manipulation which has been superimposed on them, from time to time, in the moral and medical discourses. A body which has been captured by the logic of mimetic adherence, which strains to realise dreams of wealth and power of ambiguous expressions, which expresses desires, identity, and hegemonic motives, shared at least in part, by that complex economic, narrative, and social figure which in Western Africa goes under the name of "market mammies" or "Mammy Benz."

The subjugation of the bodies (and of female bodies, in particular), underlined by Kasfir (1998) as one of the main characteristics of the Mammy Wata cults, cannot operate among these women in the customary forms nor according to a regime which reasserts the exercise of a socially recognised power (the possessed as "respected agents of power"; Colleyn 1996). Their condition as clandestine immigrant women, besieged by envy of their compatriots and united by temporary bonds with their friends-clients, makes every strategy aimed at gathering and accumulating economic capital and "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1972) contradictory and at the same time uncertain. This subjugation can now move along the unexpected lines of a stubborn illness and resistance to therapy, in the silence of an interior monologue made up of dilemmas and anxiety (Beneduce 1999). Having said this, even the usually recognised mnemotechnical value of the ritual of possession raises another reflection about memory. In fact, when it can no longer be shared, speaking of "memory" becomes in the end less legitimate. The body can indeed be the place of an incarnate memory, which is obsessively revisited, endlessly interrogated, in solitude, being by now distant from that social sense which connotes the forms of possession described by Stoller (1994), Makris (1996), and Lambek (1993). In these cases it is made into "moral practices" of a cultural and collective memory. The body, the body-capital of our patients, is interrogated in its slightest murmurs, in its unusual symptoms, in the spasmodic search for a "value" (even in the economic sense of the term), for a response to its own obsessions with identity; a body which, even when revealing a possible "sense," makes itself again a *bond*-body because it is tied to the incarnated spirit, to the different forms of belonging, to those bonds of which one seeks in vain to take leave and towards which one has contracted a debt as singular as it is inextinguishable. According to Low (1994: 157), bodily experiences are metaphors able to mediate the relationships between Self and culture. In our patients we can easily recognise that body not only symbolically mediates these relationships: it expresses their crisis, their continuity, and their ruptures. With their symptoms and uneasiness, the bodies of these possessed women – who are at the same time uncertain of the meaning and value of this experience – are also the particular expression of a struggle for power whose definition is not exhausted in that of material possession but extends to the ability to

33 Argenti 1998; see Bayart (2000) on the concept of "extraversion," that well meets in many cases the biographies of immigrants we met in the Centro Frantz Fanon.

"nominate others as equal or unequal, animate or inanimate, memorable or abject, discussant or discussed" (David Parkin, quoted in Sharp 1993: 8).

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