



Review Article

The Psychology of Trance and Possession: Altered States of Consciousness

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>This paper investigates the psychology of trance and possession states, with a focus on their relationship to dissociative disorders and altered states of consciousness (ASCs). Trance and possession events have been recorded in several cultures, and they frequently manifest as transitory changes in identity, awareness, and volition. According to contemporary trauma experts, dissociation is characterized by a lack of integration across multiple domains such as awareness, self-perception, emotional control, and sensory experiences. According to psychological and neuro-scientific viewpoints, these states may include dissociative processes, particularly in people who are predisposed to dissociation. Differentiating trance and possession from dissociative identity disorder (DID) and other dissociative illnesses, this review looks at historical, cultural, and clinical viewpoints on these concepts. The role of trauma, suggestibility, and neurobiological factors in eliciting and maintaining these states is examined. Furthermore, the therapeutic and pathological consequences of trance and possession experiences are discussed, with a particular emphasis on cross-cultural diagnostic problems. The review emphasizes the need for additional empirical study to better understand the mechanisms driving these changed states and their implications for mental health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 17-05-2025 ▪ Accepted: 27-05-2025 ▪ Published: 30-05-2025 ▪ IJCRM: 4(3); 2025:249-254 ▪ ©2025, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes
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KEYWORDS: Dissociation, Trance and Possession, Trauma, Emotional Release.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dissociation was first postulated by Pierre Janet, a French psychologist and philosopher, in the late nineteenth century. Janet used this term to describe a mental process in which specific memories, feelings, or thoughts become disconnected from an individual's conscious awareness. He observed this

occurrence in traumatized individuals, noting that sections of their memory or consciousness appeared to "split off."

A psychological phenomena known as dissociation occurs when an individual feels cut off from their memories, emotions, thoughts, or sense of self. It can show up as a number of symptoms, including a sense of unreality, memory lapses, or a

detachment from one's body. The spectrum of dissociation includes minor, commonplace phenomena like "zoning out" or daydreaming as well as more severe types like dissociative disorders.

Dissociation is frequently used to characterize the mental state in which people feel as though they have lost control over their ideas, behaviors, or consciousness—a state that can be "taken over" by an outside force or entity—in the context of trance and possession. This detachment might give people the impression that they are seeing their activities from afar or that they are not themselves, which is crucial to the possession experience in numerous cultural and spiritual contexts.

Trance and Possession: Dissociation is a psychological phenomenon in which an individual's sense of identity, memory, or awareness is disturbed or fragmented. Both trance and possession can be considered forms of dissociation. Dissociation enables people to disengage from overwhelming thoughts, memories, or emotions.

A trance is a condition of intense concentration or altered consciousness in which a person temporarily loses knowledge of their surroundings or sense of self. Meditation, hypnosis, religious rites, or psychological trauma can all be used to generate this altered state of consciousness.

Possession: Is a condition in which a person believes that an external force, spirit, or entity has taken over their body or mind. A loss of personal control is frequently the hallmark of this experience, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways based on one's cultural, religious, or psychological beliefs.

Trance and possession are dissociative states characterized by loss of control: Both trance and possession include a loss of control over one's body or mind, which is characteristic of dissociative disorders. Individuals may feel dominated by something or someone else, whether an alternate personality (as in DID) or an external spirit.

Disconnect from reality: In trance states, the individual may become disconnected from their surroundings and enter a highly absorbed or altered state of consciousness, which can result in memory loss or a lack of awareness of their surroundings. throughout possession, the subject may feel separated from their own sense of identity, with amnesia or bewilderment regarding their behaviors throughout the experience, comparable to a dissociative episode in which the person is oblivious of their activity.

Cultural versus psychological interpretations: Trance and possession are both considered extreme forms of dissociation, in which the individual disconnects from their ordinary identity or reality in response to trauma, stress, or emotional overload. Possession events are frequently interpreted as external forces gaining control of a person's body or mind from a cultural or spiritual standpoint. This perspective, while true in cultural

circumstances, can also be viewed as dissociative behavior in psychological terms.

In addition to depersonalization—the sense of being cut off from one's own body—and derealization—the sense that the world is not real—these sensations of being "possessed" or "in a trance" are also prominent signs of dissociative disorders. These conditions cause a mismatch between the individual's perspective of themselves and the environment around them.

Trance and possession are dissociative experiences that alter a person's sense of identity, memory, or consciousness. Dissociative disorders are frequently the result of trauma or intense stress, in which the individual disconnects from their sense of self in order to protect themselves from emotional suffering. While trance might imply a short detachment or intense attention, Possession frequently entails the perception that an external force is controlling the individual. Both experiences, however, represent the brain's attempt to cope with overpowering emotions or traumatic events by distancing itself from the normal flow of consciousness.

Emotional release: Is the act of expressing and letting go of repressed, pent-up, or suppressed emotions. This practice can be both cathartic and restorative, allowing people to relieve emotional stress and regain emotional equilibrium. Emotional release is frequently regarded as a critical stage in mental and emotional well-being, especially among individuals who have endured stress, trauma, or emotional blocks.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This research seeks:

1. To examine how the experiences of trance and possession are largely influenced by dissociation, emotional release, and altered states of consciousness,
2. To examine how social structures, religious customs, and cultural rituals influence and interpret experiences of trance and possession in many communities,
3. To recognize the effects these altered states have on motor control, emotional regulation, and cognitive abilities.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of possession and trance by B.K. Roy Burman offers a sophisticated interpretation of these phenomena as culturally rooted behaviors. In contrast to Western views that tend to pathologize these experiences, his work emphasizes the significance of viewing them through a lens that acknowledges their spiritual, psychological, and social responsibilities within South Asian communities. Burman's research broadened our understanding of trance and possession as significant rituals that are essential to religious expression, societal cohesiveness, and healing. I.M. Lewis I. M. Lewis's studies on possession and trance provide important new perspectives on how culture, religion, and psychological experience interact. He highlighted these states' significance in ritual, social relations, and emotional recovery by looking at them from a cross-cultural standpoint. His work has been a foundational contribution to the study of altered states of consciousness and the anthropology of religion because

of his rejection of the pathologizing approach of Western psychiatry and his emphasis on the social and cultural purposes of trance and possession. Erika Bourguignon (1924–2015) investigated altered states of consciousness in religious and cultural contexts, such as possession and trance. Her main contributions include:

Showing that dissociation states are frequently culturally acceptable and not fundamentally unhealthy. Emphasizing the importance of dissociation in coping with social stress and trauma, particularly in marginalized populations. Emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to understanding and treating dissociative disorders. Her work, particularly *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (1973), is still relevant in anthropology and mental health.

Michael Winkelman's research reveals that trance and possession are ubiquitous human experiences with deep evolutionary and neurological underpinnings. These states, which exist throughout cultures, emerged as adaptive strategies to improve group bonding, emotional regulation, and problem solving. They play an important part in traditional therapeutic methods, facilitating emotional release and psychosocial integration. By tying these feelings to synchronized brain activity involving the limbic system and cortex, Winkelman emphasizes their biological basis and significance for human well-being. His study emphasizes the importance of altered states of consciousness in cultural practices and community healing, connecting old traditions with modern scientific understanding. Stanislav Grof's study emphasizes the transformative power of altered states of consciousness, such as trance and possession, as tools for profound psychological healing and spiritual development. He stressed that these states, which are frequently encountered in therapeutic settings or spiritual practices, might assist individuals in processing trauma, accessing repressed memories, and exploring the collective unconscious. Grof saw such encounters as possibilities for self-discovery, providing profound insights into the psyche. By presenting trance and possession as non-pathological and culturally relevant, he connected psychology and spirituality, demonstrating their therapeutic significance for emotional unification and human transformation.

Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili linked distinct brain activity, especially in regions linked to self-awareness and perception, to altered states of consciousness, including trance and possession. They suggested that these states are caused by disturbances in the brain's "self-system," which can result in dissociative or outside-control sensations, which are essential to possession experiences. Their research, which contributed to the development of the area of neurotheology, combined neuroscience with spiritual and cultural elements, demonstrating that possession and trance are not merely neurological aberrations but rather occurrences with profound psychological, spiritual, and cultural meaning. They demonstrated how these states can be crucial for healing, social cohesiveness, and personal development by fusing knowledge of ritual and religious activities with brain science.

Through films like *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955), Jean Rouch explored trance and possession in ways that altered both cinema and anthropology. Ethnographic cinematography was revolutionized by his innovative use of the camera as an active participant in rituals, which captured spirit possession and trance states as normal cultural expressions rather than abnormalities. These behaviors, especially in colonial settings, were seen by Rouch as manifestations of societal resistance. By interacting closely with his subjects and adopting "shared anthropology," he made it difficult to distinguish between participant and filmmaker and promoted cooperative cross-cultural interaction. Even if his work generated ethical debates, it is nonetheless a significant contribution to the accurate portrayal of non-Western cultures.

A complex explanation that combines psychology, culture, and spirituality is provided by Sudhir Kakar's research on trance and possession. He underlined that these states are frequently culturally significant means of resolving internal conflicts and navigating spiritual realms, and they are far from being merely psychological diseases. Kakar questioned Western psychiatric theories by investigating the social and cultural aspects of possession and emphasized the significance of comprehending these occurrences within their own religious and cultural contexts. His writings continue to offer insightful perspectives on how societies create and understand spiritual, unconscious, and self-perceptions.

L.P. Vidyarthi's studies on possession and trance was to comprehend these phenomena in the context of Indian society's social and cultural structures. He maintained that possession and trance, which are frequently observed in religious and ceremonial settings, are valid spiritual experiences rather than mental illnesses. Vidyarthi emphasized how people in trance states may rise in social standing and be recognized in their cultures if they were thought of as healers or mediums. He stressed the significance of cultural context in comprehending such experiences and criticized the Western psychiatric inclination to pathologize them. He also proposed that trance can be a coping strategy for people who are under social or emotional stress.

M.N. Srinivas's research offers important social background for comprehending these phenomena in Indian civilization. In order to obtain social acceptance, underprivileged people may embrace higher-caste rites, such as possession and trance, as demonstrated by his research on Sanskritization. Srinivas underlined that these customs support authority and communal cohesiveness while fulfilling spiritual and social purposes. His research on religious syncretism shows how trance rituals can adapt to local situations and integrate into other religious traditions. All things considered, Srinivas's work emphasizes how trance and possession affect Indian cultural practices, religious legitimacy, and social structure.

Radhika Chopra investigates the ways in which these phenomena operate in South Asian social, cultural, and religious contexts. She focuses on the functions of possession and trance in social cohesiveness, gender relations, and religious identity. Her work emphasizes the practices' importance in settling disputes within

the community and navigating social realities, as well as their empowering qualities, especially for women. By arguing for a culturally aware understanding of trance and possession as valid and significant aspects of spiritual and social life, Chopra's research questions Western psychiatric interpretations.

Veena Das's research highlights the significance of examining psychological phenomena via a cultural and societal lens, providing a deep and culturally aware understanding of dissociative disorders. By showing how dissociative experiences can be legitimate reactions to trauma, social pressures, and religious practices, her work challenges the pathologizing tendencies of Western psychiatry. Das offers a more comprehensive knowledge of how dissociation works among South Asian communities and promotes a more contextually grounded, holistic approach to mental health by looking at the roles of gender, trauma, and cultural rituals.

Gananath Obeyesekere's argues for a viewpoint that acknowledges the spiritual and social relevance of trance and possession in South Asian traditions, challenging the pathologizing inclinations of Western psychology and colonial interpretations. Obeyesekere offers a more complex and culturally aware framework for viewing trance and possession as meaningful, socially rooted practices rather than disordered states by looking at the psychological, social, and religious functions of these experiences. Anthropological and psychological research on South Asian religious and cultural rituals is still influenced by his work.

M. Shah and I.P. Desai emphasizes how crucial it is to comprehend these phenomena as being intricately woven within Indian communities' social, cultural, and religious lives. They highlight the validity of possession and trance in regional customs, where they play significant roles in social interactions, religious rituals, and therapeutic treatments. By arguing for a more culturally aware approach that acknowledges the social, psychological, and spiritual roles of trance and possession in South Asian countries, their work challenges Western psychiatric paradigms that have a tendency to pathologize these experiences. Shah and Desai advance a more sophisticated view of trance and possession as intricate cultural practices rather than mental health conditions by examining the gendered, social, and psychological aspects of these phenomena.

B. D. Tripathi In-depth knowledge of trance and possession as culturally relevant practices that are integral to South Asian populations' social and spiritual lives can be gained from B.D. Tripathi studies. In order to demonstrate the significance of trance and possession in religious ceremonies, communal healing, and social integration, he highlights their therapeutic, social, and gendered aspects. Tripathi argues against the Western inclination to pathologize these experiences and in favor of a more culturally sensitive approach that views possession and trance as normal and significant behaviors rather than mental health conditions. The intricacy of these occurrences and their pivotal role in the social and religious dynamics of South Asian countries are highlighted by his work.

Aditya Malik's: A sophisticated view of trance and possession as essential components of South Asian religious and cultural life is

offered by Aditya Malik research. Malik highlights the significant social, spiritual, and transformative aspects of these practices by looking at their relationships to storytelling, ritual performance, community, and sacred locations. His art emphasizes how possession and trance serve as both individual and community experiences that unite the divine with the human, providing pathways to social cohesiveness, empowerment, and healing. Malik exposes the intricacy and importance of these phenomena in South Asian cultures by challenging simplistic interpretations with his culturally aware approach.

The profound cultural and social relevance of trance and possession in Indian society is highlighted by N. K. Bose research. He underlined that these occurrences are ingrained in religious and ritual settings, acting as channels for spiritual contact and instruments for resolving both personal and group issues. Bose examined their therapeutic role, specifically in promoting social bonding and offering psychological comfort and emotional expressiveness. He acknowledged the gendered aspects as well, pointing out that possession provided marginalized people—women in particular—with a means of visibility and agency. Bose criticized Western pathologization and promoted a culturally aware interpretation of possession and trance, seeing them as significant rituals that are essential to Indian cultures' social and spiritual lives.

Anant Kumar's studies, trance and possession are significant in Indian society on a social, psychological, and cultural level. He highlights how these occurrences, which act as links between the material and spiritual realms, have their roots in religious traditions. According to Kumar, they have therapeutic value because they offer psychological distress relief, emotional release, and culturally acceptable healing techniques—all of which are particularly useful in areas with a dearth of mental health resources. By providing them with short-term authority and visibility, he also examines their function in promoting social cohesiveness, settling disputes, and empowering underprivileged people—especially women. Kumar argues for a culturally aware interpretation that honors these states' social and spiritual legitimacy while criticizing the Western propensity to pathologize them. His work emphasizes the various ways that trance and possession can be used to assist indigenous healing traditions, improve communal ties, and address both individual and collective concerns.

Vasudha Narayanan highlights the importance of trance and possession in South Indian religious activities on a cultural, spiritual, and social level. She emphasizes how they serve as manifestations of cultural identity, modes of spiritual communication, and acts of devotion. Narayanan provides a thorough grasp of how these moods operate within rituals and holy spaces by analyzing their gendered, therapeutic, and performative aspects. Her research highlights how trance and possession can empower and change people, as well as the communities in which they are used.

R. S. Mann highlights the societal importance of possession and trance in Indian society. By examining their functions in rituals, social cohesiveness, healing, and empowerment, Mann emphasizes how essential these states are to both spiritual and

community life. His work emphasizes the symbolic, therapeutic, and performative aspects of trance and possession while placing them within their cultural and religious settings. Mann promotes a culturally nuanced understanding of these events by contesting simplistic interpretations and acknowledging their significance in upholding customs, resolving social issues, and empowering individuals.

Émile Durkheim's sociological ideas offer important insights into how these concepts function in religious and cultural contexts. The way these altered moods in group rituals produce shared emotional experiences, promoting social cohesiveness and community bonding, is explained by his concept of collective effervescence. Trance and possession are considered sacred encounters because they provide transformational experiences that link people to the divine and to one another, as explained by Durkheim's division between the sacred and the profane.

4. DISCUSSION

The difference between culturally rooted interpretations, which perceive these states as significant spiritual and social experiences, and Western psychiatric views, which frequently treat them as psychological diseases, is a major issue in the literature.

1. Cultural and Social Perspectives:

Several scholars, like B.K. Roy Burman, I.M. Lewis, and Sudhir Kakar, argue that trance and possession are not symptoms of mental illness, but rather significant cultural and religious traditions. These encounters are essential for healing, spiritual contact, and social bonding. In many cultures, they are revered traditions rather than debilitating illnesses.

Erika Bourguignon, Gananath Obeyesekere, and Radhika Chopra's work focuses on the social and gendered dimensions of possession. These experts demonstrate how trance states can empower underprivileged individuals, particularly women, by granting them temporary authority and respect. Similarly, L.P. Vidyarthi and M.N. Srinivas argue that possession is linked to social mobility and religious adaptation, in which individuals or groups use these states to obtain legitimacy within a religious or social system.

2. Neuroscientific and psychological perspectives:

Modern neuroscience has shed light on the molecular underpinnings of trance and possession. Andrew Newberg, Eugene d'Aquili, and Michael Winkelman discovered that these changed states require specialized brain activity, particularly in the limbic system, which regulates emotion and self-awareness. Their findings indicate that trance states are not only cultural phenomena, but also natural neural processes that aid in emotional control, group bonding, and stress alleviation.

Psychologists like Stanislav Grof believe that these experiences have therapeutic potential. They can assist people in processing trauma, releasing repressed emotions, and achieving emotional healing. Similarly, B.D. Tripathi and Anant Kumar investigate how trance and possession are used as alternative therapeutic procedures in communities with limited access to mental care.

These perspectives refute the notion that trance is irrational or hazardous, demonstrating that it can be a positive, transformational experience.

3. Sociological and Ritual Perspectives:

The concept of collective effervescence, developed by sociologist Émile Durkheim, serves to explain why trance and possession are so significant in religious ceremonies. His idea proposes that group rituals foster shared emotional experiences, establish communal relationships, and reinforce cultural identity. A.M. Shah, I.P. Desai, and R.S. Mann all support this theory, demonstrating how trance rituals play an important role in preserving traditions and settling societal dispute. Jean Rouch's ethnographic films, such as *Les Maîtres Fous*, provide an additional unique perspective. His work depicts possession and trance as lived realities, challenging Western prejudices and demonstrating how these states serve as modes of resistance, expression, and identity construction, particularly in colonial and postcolonial settings.

5. CONCLUSION

The research on trance and possession demonstrates that these states are complicated and profound experiences that cannot be disregarded as psychological diseases. Instead, they are firmly ingrained in religion, society, psychology, and social institutions. Trance and possession are regarded as sacred and empowering in many cultures, providing people with a means of connecting with the divine, resolving personal difficulties, and gaining social status.

Scientific and psychological value: Modern neuroscience and psychology demonstrate that these states have a biological basis and therapeutic benefits, assisting individuals in dealing with stress, trauma, and emotional issues.

Social and gender roles: Trance and possession frequently give underrepresented groups, particularly women, agency and a voice, as well as playing an important role in community healing and dispute resolution.

Ritual and Collective Experience: Sociological studies have shown that trance is necessary for communal cohesion, religious validity, and cultural identity, making it an important aspect of many civilizations.

Overall, trance and possession should not be viewed as unreasonable or disordered, but rather as very human experiences with important psychological, social, and spiritual implications. Future study should investigate these occurrences using multidisciplinary techniques that combine cultural sensitivity with scientific investigation in order to better comprehend their function in both historical and contemporary society.

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