A VICTIM OF AN EPIDEMIC OF POSSESSION SYNDROME

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SUMMARY

A case of young man who got possessed by a god and two spirits alternatively is reported. He was one of the four victims of an epidemic of possession by two spirits (Mohini). The epidemic occurred following the prediction that the two women who committed suicide, would become Mohinis and haunt adult men. It appeared that the strong belief and expectation in the local culture made the index person who was otherwise well adjusted in life to get possessed. The implication of this finding is discussed.

Possession syndrome has been reported not only from Africa and Asia but also from other continents (Kiev, 1961; Mc All, 1971). It is an episodic disruption of behaviour during which it is presumed that the subject's personality has been replaced by that of a spirit of God whose characteristics are well known within the subject's culture (Wintrob, 1973; Wijesinghe, 1976). Possession syndrome can affect one individual (Mc All, 1917; Wijesinghe, 1976; Varma et al., 1970; Teja et al., 1970; Carstairs and Kapur, 1976) or many individuals in a group setting either of religious or nonreligious nature (Kiev, 1961; Claus, 1979; Wittkower, 1970; Salisbury, 1968). Sometimes it is reported to occur in an epidemic form other than group set up (Varma et al., 1970; Salisbury, 1968). Different explanations are given for this phenomenon. Some (Varma et al., 1970; Teja et al., 1970; Chandrashekar et al., 1980) believe that it is a manifestation of hysterical dissociation, others (Wittkower, 1970; Carstairs, 1958) equate it to hypnotic trance states seen in the west, and some (Mc All, 1971; Claus, 1979) argue that it cannot be a hysterical dissociation. A number of authors (Wijesinghe, 1976; Carstairs & Kapur, 1976) consider possession syndrome as a distress signal indicating that the person needs help, while Kiev (1961) Chandrashekar (1980) offer an explanation in that it is a culturally believed, socially expected phenomenon. It is argued that people who are brought up in such an environment may themselves fall prey to it. A case is presented in support of such a hypothesis.

Case report:

A 24 year old, illiterate, unmarried young man belonging to Harijan caste was brought to the out-patient department. He was said to be “getting possessed” by God and two female spirits (Mohini) for two weeks. He hailed from an extended family and was fourth among six siblings. Parents were alive. Family owned a tiny piece of land and they earned their livelihood by farming it. Patient was working for a land lord for fixed wages and was said to be happy with the employer. He was a religious, hard working and even tempered. He used to often remind the family members to repair or build a new temple for the family deity whose temple was in a bad shape.

The village consisted of 200 houses of which 60 belonged to the Harijan families. Harijans lived isolated in a corner of the village. In this village their main occupation was agriculture labour work. This village had primary school, electricity and a metal road connecting it to a district centre situated seven kms. away. People had to come to this district centre to obtain modern medical services.

A young woman committed suicide by jumping into a well situated by the side of the land owned by patient’s family. Three
months later, another lady who was patient’s relative fell into the same well and committed suicide. It is locally believed that people who die of unnatural circumstances would invariably become ghosts. A few days later, two fortune tellers announced in the village that the two dead women had become ‘Mohinis’ and would possess the young male adults. Fear gripped the village.

A few days later, a cousin of the patient, an 18 year old boy while relaxing suddenly screamed and became non-responsive. His body was shivering. People concluded that he was possessed by ‘Mohini’ and summoned the faith healer who applied ‘sacred ash’ to the body and performed rituals. The boy regained consciousness and told those around him that he felt somebody pressing his neck. He claimed amnesia for later events.

Patient at the time of courtesy visit to this boy experienced a chilling sensation and vague fear of being possessed by ‘Mohinis’. He was consoled by the mother. Next morning when he was ploughing the land, he felt nervous to look at the well. After a while he suddenly felt extreme weakness, his vision became blurred and saw a vague figure. He returned home feeling sick and was afraid that he might become a victim of the ‘Mohinis’. In the evening he heard that another relative of his, a 25 year old married man got possessed by the ‘Mohinis’. Further that the routine measures to exorcise these spirits failed indicating thereby that these spirits were very strong.

One hour later, patient got possessed by the family deity which declared that he had come to rescue the patient from the wicked ‘Mohinis’. Next day, God possessed him again. During this state of possession he beheaded a hen and a goat and drank their blood. He remained in an altered state of consciousness until late that evening and slept thereafter. Third day he was possessed again and ordered people to build a new temple for Him. On the fourth day he got possessed by the spirit of his relative who declared that she had come to rescue him from another Mohini. Seventh day, the other ‘Mohini’ possessed him and declared that she liked him and would take away his life. Later, patient for the first time told others that the two Mohinis were after him. Thereafter he was possessed by God and Mohinis alternatively. This was unusual. Villagers decided to bring him to the psychiatric hospital.

On examination he accepted that he was being possessed by both God and Mohinis and claimed total amnesia for the events which occurred during this state.

During abreaction, he reported that since he was handsome, the two Mohinis were after him. Later God possessed him and told His grievances that He had no temple and other Goddesses were preventing people from building a temple for Him etc. In a week, he recovered and was discharged.

DISCUSSION

In South Indian culture, it is believed that young women who die un-naturally become ‘Mohinis’ and are fond of young, robust and handsome men. They possess and, suck their vigor and vitality. The victims are left totally exhausted and impotent. In this village, once it was predicted that the dead women had become ‘Mohinis’, it appears that the young men got alarmed, so was our patient and other three victims.

Thus it appears that possession syndrome is culturally believed, socially sanctioned phenomenon and people who were otherwise normal exhibit it as an expected behaviour without having any underlying psychopathology.

CONCLUSION

- Possession syndrome need not always indicate illness or any pathology in the individual. Possession can occur in an individual who is otherwise well adjusted in life. In a culture where there is a strong
belief in possession, the individual is forced to exhibit this phenomenon as an expected behaviour. Once he is removed from this atmosphere or the expectation of the local people is decreased the person ceases to exhibit the phenomenon. Thus the psychiatrist should be aware of the cultural beliefs and expectations in managing such cases.

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