

# Spirit Possession Rituals: Safety and Consent - Lessons Learned

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## Introduction

In the past five years, at William Blake Lodge, O.T.O, working with other local bodies including Azul Nox Oasis, and other local organizations such as Universal Temple of Spirits (UTOS), we have explored a number of different types of spirit possession rituals. This is an attempt to present a coherent summary of lessons learned.

## Background

It is useful to start with an explanation of the relevance of spirit possession to our practice. While not remotely an exhaustive overview of the history of spirit possession, we wanted to frame the relevance of our discussion by a quick overview of some of the high points of spirit possession, particularly in relation to Western Traditions.

Flor-Henry, et. al. suggest “Based on commonalities to shamanic practices of Australian aborigines, who became culturally isolated between 50,000 and 65,000 years ago, shamanism can be traced to the middle Paleolithic period at the onset of the Cognitive Revolution around 70,000 BP....they represent humanity’s most ancient spiritual tradition that lies at the core of religion and culture as we know them today.”

[1] Other sources suggest an origin as early as 100,000 years ago,[2]

Whether one believes in the objective existence of spirits or not, the existence of Shamanic States of Consciousness (SSC) as a form of altered human consciousness is undeniable and scientifically observable and detectable using Quantitative EEG mapping and LORETA (low resolution electromagnetic tomography) source imaging.[1]

While there is argument about whether observed Shamanic States of Consciousness (SSC) are identical to

possession states,[2] the presence of possession work in Aboriginal practice, characterized by the assumption of the spirits of Dream-time ancestors[3] suggests that the practice traces back to the dawn of Shamanic practice, and “there are many authors who stay closer to the ethnographic literature and recognize that controlled possession is one of the central features of shamanism”[2]

Specific study of spirit possession states is a nascent field and thus far limited to fMRI study on subjects of undesired, involuntary, possession[4] which may be entirely unrelated to the mental state engendered by voluntary possession.

Spirit possession plays a major part in many traditional religions, however it has generally been perceived as absent in Western European Tradition.

In fact this is not the case. Christianity embraces spirit possession through the relation of the Pentecost in Acts, where the Holy Spirit descended into the Apostles. Possession by the Holy Spirit was seen as acceptable at various times and even encouraged in some Christian practice. The changeling element of Fairy-Faith can also be seen as a form of spirit possession.

Possession is cited notably in many cases of witchcraft, though it is unclear if the possession really occurred or is part of a larger pattern of fabricated evidence against witches. The persistence of the phenomenon in trial records, of which the most easily recognizable to Americans will be those at Salem, but the cases of Nicole Obry and Marthe Brossier[5] in France are probably better examples of “typical” possessions. Brossier was regarded as an oracle, and public curiosity, essentially touring French towns with Possession as a sort of career.

While possession, like magic itself, was seen as adversarial, there is no doubt that even in the repressive atmosphere of Europe it was linked to ecstatic experience. For example in the French Louviers Trials, c. 1647, nuns of the Louviers Convent, specifically recounted being kidnapped, and possessed, while also forced to commit sexual acts with two Priests as well as demons. Because no form of possession other than that of the Holy Spirit was condoned by the church, and practice of spirit possession was, by definition, seen as diabolic.

It is difficult to understand the appeal and fascination of possession by the Devil and Witch Cults in Early Modern Europe. An entire genre of engravings, plays, pamphlets and books catered to a public avid for the

sensational details. The public did not support Witchcraft, but the craze for intimate detail about trials and magical operations could be compared to the current craze for serial killer stories. The printing press brought pamphlets and engraved stories into the hands of the middle and even laboring classes, and witch trials were a source of endless fascination.

In most cases pleas revolved around the idea of an involuntary possession, such as in the Louviers case, which led to orgiastic or blasphemous behavior. Despite a propensity to convict innocents, it is clear that in some cases the trials were finding individuals actually engaged in some sort of conspiracy. It is entirely likely that by the late period these group practices were in fact influenced by the enormously popular stories of witch cults. Whether this is true or not, it is likely that in some cases similar to Louviers, the “possessed” were, within the understandings of the day, more or less willing participants until their capture, or in some cases after, as can be discerned in the voluntary confessions of Isobel Gowdie, prosecuted for witchcraft at Auldearn.[8]

Despite the strong limitations imposed by Catholic theology, spirit possession endured as a Western practice, and there is reasonable evidence it may have been, in some cases, voluntary, if also counter-cultural and forbidden.

### **Conjuration without Possession**

The major thrust of most conjuring work from the 17th-19th centuries was a conjuration of a spirit entity at a remove, either in a scrying surface as we see with Dee and Kelley's Scrying Stone or in smoke such as depicted in Florence Farr's Taphthartharath ritual where a grey human figure emerged, or Mathers' games of Enochian Chess where the shadow of another player could be seen in an empty chair.

The unfortunate fruit of this has been the suggestion that the concept of spirit possession is entirely outside the Western tradition that gave rise to Thelema through Continental Freemasonry. Clearly this is not the case, and concepts changed radically around the turn of the century.

Historically the Theosophical Society experimented with mediumship, but not with the portrayal of spirit roles. The Golden Dawn involved the Chief Adepts in taking on the role of a spirit in their rituals. Crowley enlarged upon and strengthened this concept through his Rites of Eleusis which may have drawn from Mathers Rite of Isis. It would be wrong to see this as mere theatricality.

### **Relation to Thelema**

Spirit possession was, unquestionably, a significant element of Crowley's early practice, and thus finds a clear place in OTO and EGC literature and practice. A cursory look finds a few notable examples:

On December 6th, while in a desert valley near Bou Sâada Aleister Crowley and Victor Neuburg invoked Choronzon. Crowley sat in a triangle to scry, with Neuburg in the fortified circle. “his duties were to use his consecrated dagger to command and contain Choronzon in the Triangle of the Art, and to record the content of the vision in his notebook.” The description makes it clear that Crowley did not merely relay what Choronzon said, but spoke directly with the voice of Choronzon, as Neuburg did in some later rituals.[9]

Likewise in the Paris Working, it is clear that, on New Years Day 1914, Neuburg was serving not merely as a rapporteur, but engaged in a direct dialog with Crowley as Hermes.

In his publication of the Rites of Eleusis, J. F. Brown comments “Crowley hoped to apply the methods of Swinburne’s sleep-trance poetics to the traditional ritualistic oaths and formulaic speeches of ceremonial magic. ‘There is no more potent means than Art of calling forth true Gods to visible appearances’, he wrote in his instructional manual of Magic.”[6]

Ultimately this is incorporated into the core of the EGC through the Gnostic Mass, a ritual in which deity is emphatically and specifically invoked into an individual. The fact that the Mass is scripted makes it no less of a specific and intentional spirit possession ritual.

The concept of spirit possession has always been present in Western Esotericism. Spiritualism blurred the lines between mediumship and trance possession by the dead or other spirits. By the 1980s, the term “Channeling” had come into common use

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## More Recent Developments

Spiritualism introduced the idea of effective possession of the medium by the dead in the 19th century and the trope has certainly progressed alongside practice focused on other spirits.

When Margot Adler published *Drawing Down the Moon* in 1979[7] a work which was talismanic to the pagan movement of the early 1980s, she characterized the commonality of spirit possession. “The priest invokes into the priestess (or, depending on your point of view, she evokes from within herself) the Goddess....In some Craft rituals the priestess goes into a trance and speaks; in other traditions the ritual is a more formal dramatic dialogue.”

In practice this seems to have originated with Gerald Gardner, and the clear relationship between this, and the more scripted spirit possession of the Gnostic Mass is clear to anyone aware of Gardner’s background with Crowley. The chief difference is that we see, in some traditions, a more fluid and open practice of spirit possession, allowing for specific and individual communication.

The publication of *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist's Astonishing Journey into the Secret Societies of Haitian Voodoo, Zombies, and Magic* by Wade Davis in 1985 followed William Gibson's fictional work *Neuromancer* in 1984 in popularizing Vodou among practicing esotericists in the US and Europe. The concept of being “ridden” as a “horse” was a major element of Gibson's fiction, which certainly served to popularize the concept and induce many esotericists to experiment with trance possession in the 90's.

In the past two decades a wider understanding of African Tribal Religion including Voudou and Regla de Ocha, as well as exploration of other cultures with a strong tradition of spirit possession such as the Seiðr element of Norse tradition, has led to a broader understanding and adoption of techniques of spirit possession work, along with an awareness of issues of cultural appropriation. Many pagan and esoteric groups which did not traditionally include spirit possession work in their rituals have adopted the practice in some form.

## Characterization of our principal experiences

- Two iterations of the Invocation of the Holy Spirit, written by Crowley and revised by Rodney Orpheus, scripted.
- Aphrodite ritual, scripted except for divination

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- Two joint events with Universal Temple of Spirits (UTOS), a local group which works heavily with unconstrained trance possession.
- Joint event with Norse Seiðr group, in which the seeress works in full trance possession state.
- Dionysus ritual in which one of the participants habitually works in a state of full possession by Pan and various attendees are possessed by Maenads.
- Participation at Azul Nox Oasis in an Invocation of Babalon, unconstrained possession.
- Ritual for the Lodge's Goetic familiar, Tobias, which focused on intentional, circle constrained, possession
- Lilith ritual which focused on intentional, circle constrained, possession

## Lessons Learned and Takeaways

The characteristics of various types of possession are very different. In some cases experienced individual, who has repeatedly experience spirit possession by a given entity, may act very little different from their normal state, while other entities require constraint and close supervision.

It is not our intention to suggest “rules” but rather a set of practices which we have found to be useful. They should be adapted to the individual situation. There is no “one size fits all” approach.

### General Issues

**Plans** - “The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley.” - *Robert Burns, 1785* Have contingencies. Expect things to go sideways. When emotions run high it is easy for issues to arise. Having plans for anything that may go wrong, e.g. someone becoming upset or leaving the circle, allows for less stress which reduces the potential for mishap or mishandling.

**Spirits will act as Spirits** - a person play-acting the role of a deity, goetic, etc., is in a position to “pull punches” and to convey the essence of the spirit without actually being disruptive, revealing unpleasant truths, or generally causing chaos. Spirits will tend to behave in a manner true to their nature, and if this involves chaos, a person who is possessed may cause *actual*, not merely symbolic, chaos.

It is hard not to believe that our friends are essentially harmless and in control of themselves even when we see Spirit Possession - Lessons Learned: Safety and Consent

them in the possession of a spirit. This is more true if the spirit is one that is close to their own demeanor and nature. That is not necessarily the case.

**It is not a matter of “Good” versus “Evil” or “Chaos” versus “Order.”** - some spirits may be more benign and generally affable, however even a spirit that theoretically stands for both good and order can engender change, demand a reckoning, or do things which make attendees acutely uncomfortable.

**Aspects** - when calling on spirits that have many aspects, the tone and focus of the ritual may help determine which aspect is called, however in more random possession work it is entirely possible to get an aspect of a spirit which you did not count on. Plan accordingly.

**Types of Ritual** - we use the following terms to characterize certain important characteristics.

**Unconstrained** - the possessed individual interacts freely with the attendees

**Constrained** - the possessed individual is presumed to be bound into a specific space and cannot interact freely with the attendees

**Scripted** - a spirit is invoked into an individual but they are expected to repeat only specific lines which are part of the ritual, experiencing the possession, but not interacting in an unscripted fashion. Typically this is more limiting than a constrained ritual, but may not involve formal constraints.

### **Safety of The Attendees**

We generally address consent in advance of *any ritual* which might involve touching, e.g. any ritual which is more Dionysian than Apollonian in demeanor.

**Bullet point the pre-speech** – have a pre speech in which an organizer covers all issues, and draft it out beforehand rather than relying on memory or intuition. Take questions.

**Unscripted rituals require more supervision** – spirits who are able to mix freely with the attendees have more potential to cause issues.

**Constrained rituals don't need less supervision** – the fact that the person who is possessed cannot physically

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“get to” the attendees doesn't mean the attendees can't approach them, or feel verbally or physically compelled or harassed. Some of our most serious issues have arisen at constrained rituals.

**Required activities** - make it clear in advance *if any activities are required* and what should be done if an individual *does not wish to participate*. This can be done in much the same way that the Deacon commonly explains rules for exiting, and the requirement to communicate, prior to the Gnostic Mass.

**Informed consent** - In order to gain informed consent, it is important that individuals be given enough information to understand, in general, what they are consenting to, and that it is consistent with what is presented.

**Don't overlook the obvious** - It is easy to overlook issues such as touch, where a spirit may, for example, take hold of someone by the shoulder and whisper into their ear.

**Physical Safety** – if the spirit is unconstrained it may be physical. Most of us have seen videos of Loa striking people on the chest, kissing them, or slapping them. While a ritual should never provide carte blanche for any sort of harassment, it may be necessary to advise participants about the potential behavior of a spirit, and let them know that entering the spirit's presence may invite touch including rough or sensual contact.

A spirit is unlikely to conform to our norms of asking consent and the ability of the host to guide or control them depends on the particular qualities of the trance state, and medium.

Unless the spirit is constrained (and possibly even if it is, should the spirit ignore the containment, a possibility which must be considered), we cannot state that handlers or safe persons will always be able to stop a spirit before it acts aggressively.

If an individual does not consent to the *possibility* of physical interaction, *with the understanding that it will be curtailed if it is unwelcome*, it is probable that they *should not participate* in a ritual where unconstrained, or lowly constrained spirit possession may occur.

In order to maintain consent it is important that everyone feel empowered to seek the safe person and be excused

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from any unwelcome attention, and that the handler be vigilant, and be prepared to intervene, physically if necessary, if any attendee shows signs that attention is unwelcome or asks for assistance. Explaining these permissions before and potentially during, the ritual may be important.

**Emotional Safety** – if spirits are unable to physically rend us as in a Hollywood movie we may tend to make little of their ability to do harm. In practice a spirit who speaks cruelly or makes unreasonable demands can do *emotional* harm.

It is worth considering the possibility of emotional harm from every angle. While a generally adversarial spirit might say things that are bullying or belittling and cause emotional harm, even a very positive spirit might issue a challenge or pronouncement which is damaging to a given individual. For example a positive spirit might praise someone for their “beauty” only to provoke emotional pain because the person does not consider themselves beautiful, or deserving of such praise.

Obviously this makes scripting a safer option, however scripting has strong limits. In unscripted rituals we feel it is advisable to warn attendees and make it clear there are limits to how much we are able to safeguard their emotional safety. We can stop a possessed person from pushing, but we cannot “unsay” what has been said.

Because it is easy to see the ability to “take” whatever a spirit “dishes out,” can be an issue of pride, it is important that the potential for emotional harm be presented in a way which does not shame people into feeling they must attend. It should be made easy to demur, even at the last minute. Good blanket permissions might be along the lines of “if you don’t feel like dealing with that right now,” which does not suggest any judgment on the person’s overall emotional stability, and implies a choice.

**Personal Information** – some spirits may be able to access the memories or knowledge of the host. This may be used in ways that the host would never conceive, including to speak hurtfully depending on the nature of the speaker. People who are intimate with the host should be made aware that they may be emotionally challenged in this regard.

**Admit if you aren’t sure** - If the organizers *do not know what will occur*, this should be made clear.

**Things can go awry even if you think you are sure** - it is worth giving a warning that spirit possession rituals

may be erratic and that it is possible things will occur which the organizers did not plan on.

**Potential Roles** - in general we think in unscripted rituals there are two roles which are important:

a) **A handler** who supervises the possessed person, and may be able to either break their state or cause someone else to, or restrain them physically or verbally.

b) **A designated safe person or persons** who anyone in the ritual space may go to if they feel asked or pressured to do anything they do not wish to do.

**Identify the safe person(s)** - clearly, to everyone present, before the start of the ritual.

**Explain when and how it is possible to leave** - If it is possible to leave the space during the ritual, it should be explained where to go, and whether or not it is possible to return. Someone capable of handling issues and emotional or physical “aftercare” should either be tending the “safe” area where those who exit are told to go, or be prepared to leave the ritual if anyone else leaves.

Even if it is not formally possible to leave, someone may and that eventuality should be considered. In general it may be unwise to create rituals in which individuals “may not” leave. We recommend developing some mechanism of “censing out,” “opening the circle,” etc. to allow individuals to leave. Ultimately we cannot stop them, and feeling coerced to remain creates significant consent issues.

**Safe Place** – ideally a non-ritual space will exist where individuals may go if they need a break from the ritual, particularly if it is extended and very freeform. This space should be comfortable, well lit, and monitored.

### **Safety of The Medium**

**Communicate Clearly** - if the intention is that the medium will remain mostly in control during the possession, and will, for example, stick to a script, that needs to be communicated. It is important to understand this may lead to sacrificing quality of experience both for the medium and the attendees. If an individual medium cannot guarantee that they will “stay within the

swim lane” while possessed, they should not be coerced or shamed. If they are expected to steer around certain subjects, or be quiet at certain times, this is important to communicate in advance, with the understanding that the experience of the medium, and the intensity of the possession state may modify this despite intent.

**Protect the Medium** - understanding both the subjective and objective reality of the spirit possession state is key. We cannot ask someone to channel a spirit, then shame them for actions they undertook. If someone seems to be using spirit possession work as an “excuse” to “act out,” that is a matter to address, however when we commit to using a medium, we cannot subsequently hold them responsible for their actions in a vulnerable, receptive, state which we invoked in them.

**Restraint of the Medium** - it is vital that the medium for any spirit which may become physically aggressive agree to restraint by the handler. A pairing of handler/medium must be arranged to make this possible. It is unworkable outside the context of small personal rituals to have an aggressive spirit possessing someone who has not consented to be restrained in any way.

**Drinking** – alcohol is an integral part of many spirit traditions. It is difficult to imagine, for example, Baron Samedi without a bottle of rum. Alcohol may be iconic, and may also provide some of the presumptive energy which empowers the possession.

Spirits may not show appropriate restraint in drinking. Where the potential of a spirit to consume alcohol is unknown, a handler should have a conversation with the host about their tolerances, and work to enforce those tolerances by “cutting off” the possessing spirit. Often because a behavior is iconic, and has no consequence in an ephemeral context, a spirit may continue to engage in it without consideration for repercussions to the host.

**Exertion** - spirit possession can be a tremendously physically demanding act, even if there is relatively little actual motion. As many people who have experienced some traumatic loss know, emotions can be physically taxing. If dance or high activity is added the exertion can be greater. Consider the possibility your medium may emerge from their possessed state exhausted and in need of care.

**Water** – persons engaging in lengthy spirit possession may become dehydrated, particular if they are dancing or engaging in other sweaty, physical activity. The handler should provide water in some convenient way if there is exertion. It may be advisable to have Gatorade or the equivalent on hand to restore electrolyte balance, particularly as high physical activity, dance, and the less than optimally cooled spaces where many of us must do work may lead to excessive sweating.

**Food Dangers** - spirit possessed people may not be aware of food allergies or limitations. This is something that should be discussed carefully beforehand if food or offerings are to be present.

**Emesis** - vomiting after a possession is a very common occurrence, not always related to anything consumed during the ritual. In most cases it is probably caused by biochemical fluctuations as well as exertion. It can be seen in some cases as having a symbolic purpose, a “purging” of the influence on the body. Being prepared for this and having a safe place for the medium to vomit, if necessary, can be important to minimizing negative feelings afterwards.

**Aftercare** – Aftercare should be a plan, not an afterthought. A possessed person may be messy, sweaty, disheveled, dirty or unclothed. Some things that help with aftercare in addition to supportive individuals are:

- Designated gophers - have specific people prepared to deal with aftercare.
- Knowing where their belongings are
- Towels, washcloths, wipes - a way to clean up
- Water or sports beverage
- Protein
- Blankets. The individual may be in mild shock.
- Quiet. A peaceful place to withdraw with chosen friends

Aftercare looks different to different people. After one ritual, the person who had been possessed required flogging and pain (with which they had some experience) to allow them to reconnect with their body. Other people have reported requiring or desiring sex as aftercare, particularly when possessed by libidinous spirits.

Some persons who work regularly with spirit possession may not desire or need aftercare, but when in doubt it should be available.

## Spontaneous Possessions

While spontaneous possession of attendees who were not specifically intended to be possessed is rare with scripted and constrained rituals, it is not unheard of. It may be common with unscripted rituals, particularly if some of the people present are experienced spirit workers. Having a plan in regards to additional handlers, monitors, etc., and additional aftercare facilities, is advisable.

## Notes

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