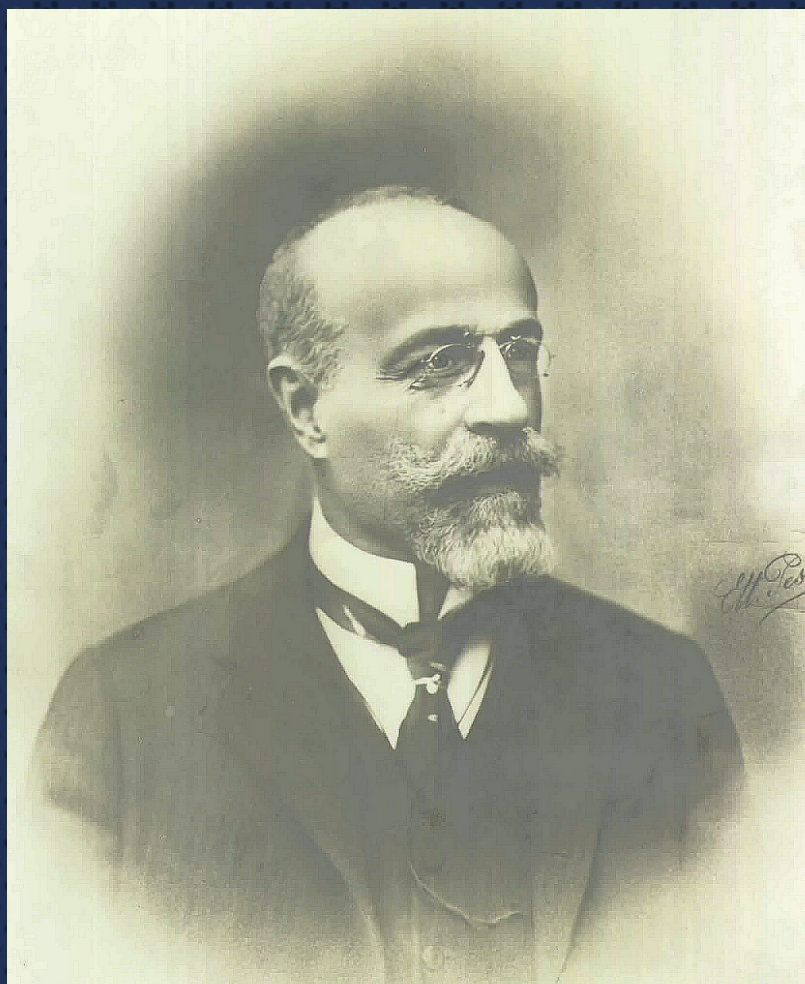


AM



53 / giugno 2022

RIVISTA DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI ANTROPOLOGIA MEDICA
FONDATA DA TULLIO SEPPILLI



In copertina una fotografia del medico napoletano Enrico De Renzi (1839-1921). Il file immagine è tratto da Wikipedia *online* al seguente link: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Enrico_de_renzi.jpg.



Il logo della Società italiana di antropologia medica, qui riprodotto, costituisce la elaborazione grafica di un ideogramma cinese molto antico che ha via via assunto il significato di “longevità”, risultato di una vita consapevolmente condotta lungo una ininterrotta via di armonia e di equilibrio.



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Editoriale

AM 53: un nuovo numero “miscellaneo”

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AM 53 è un nuovo numero a carattere “miscellaneo”: anche se alcuni articoli hanno un tono storiografico e parlano di uno stesso secolo, l'Ottocento, ciò non è stato concertato e non si configura dunque come sezione monografica.

Il numero si apre con due saggi.

Denso di spunti interessanti è lo scritto di Elisabetta Moro su Enrico De Renzi che giunge a toccare la questione dell'unificazione del nostro Paese: l'Italia. In maniera molto concreta e suggerendo numerose piste che meritano di essere in futuro ulteriormente esplorate, il testo tocca una questione centrale: l'attenzione alle popolazioni povere, che tanto influenzerà le antropologie mediche contemporanee, nasce nell'Ottocento. Questo scritto di Moro ha ispirato anche la copertina dove campeggia un'immagine fotografica del medico ottocentesco napoletano.

Un secondo saggio molto importante è quello di Roberto Campos-Navarro e Antonella Faggetti, esponenti dell'antropologia medica in Messico ed esperti del rapporto tra antropologia e storiografia. Lo scritto documenta la continuità nel tempo, dalla fine del XIX secolo a oggi, ovvero le permanenze formali, della nozione di “perdita dello spirito”, ben radicata in antropologia medica.

Seguono le ricerche italianiste di Ariele de Mario, di Leonardo Garizzo e di Andrea Scartabellati, uno scritto etnografico su uno dei più avanzati temi dell'antropocene in antropologia medica (l'inquinamento atmosferico nella città di Bologna), un lavoro sulla violenza negli ospedali durante la pandemia, un nuovo studio antropologico su una figura della storia medico-psichiatrica italiana di fine Ottocento.

Con questo numero offriamo la possibilità di esplorare da vicino e da lontano un secolo “lungo”, così importante per l’antropologia e la storia della medicina in Italia e in Europa. L’Ottocento sembra erodere il Novecento, il secolo ormai trascorso (quello che in uno studio di Eric Hobsbawm, storico britannico vicino all’antropologia, fu chiamato “il secolo breve”).

Beninteso, la storia fatta dalle antropologhe e dagli antropologi ha un che di diverso da quella prodotta dalle/i professioniste/i della storiografia: nel nostro caso, infatti, essa è condotta soprattutto come etnografia storico-sociale, storico-culturale e storico-politica.

Prima delle recensioni poi, in questo numero 53, pubblichiamo nella rubrica *Note, Interventi, Rassegne* un articolo di Giorgio Brocco sull’antropologia medica post- e decoloniale che di fatto anticipa i temi che toccheremo nella sezione monografica del volume successivo a questo, che non sarà miscellaneo, ma avrà una sezione monografica curata da Roberto Beneduce e da me.

Tuttavia, non voglio anticipare altre notizie su ciò che faremo.

Chiudo dunque subito questo brevissimo editoriale del n. 53 con i miei vivi ringraziamenti e saluti a tutte/i.

Ode to Ecstatic Experience

Marcela Perdomo
University of Pittsburgh

Paolo PECERE, *Il Dio che Danza. Viaggi, Trance e Trasformazioni*, Notte-tempo, Milano 2021, 340 pp.

Some traditions never die, they simply transform. That is the axiom we often hear. Deities, ritual, and religion all travel, change and adapt to spaces, new scenarios, or resist also leaving them. Spirit-possession and trance have been perpetually demonized by Western thought and monotheistic hegemony. Yet, it is now known that they are universal phenomena and honorable customs that facilitate community. This, simply put, is the main theme behind this impeccably written book by Paolo Pecere. *The Dancing God* is an ambitious, rich, and captivating book about travel, trance, and transformation intertwined with a keen nostalgia for a vibrant spiritual past that has diluted in a present reality where tourism and the Westernization of the world has become the norm. From his motherland Italy to unusual spots in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and back to cosmopolitan areas like São Paulo and New York city, we follow Pecere's steps in search for singular experiences ready to unveil one of humanity's most enigmatic and sacred realms: ecstatic experience.

The book documents how still misunderstood, and even less respected cultural-religious practices such as spirit-possession and shamanism, are nonetheless found through the most diverse and unsuspected manifestations around the world. I share this approach as no marginal detail because it links to a broader project in showing the ways legitimacy and respect for these ancestral practices guide the Author's writing and analysis. From the vanished Dionysus cult in the Mediterranean to the now touristic attraction of dancing bodies in the *Theyyam* possession ritual in Kerala, to the flamboyant *Orixas* in the Bay area of Salvador and back to the extravaganza of LGBTQ carnavalesque personages parading in the streets of Manhattan, there is a dancing God. The reader is captivated by the seducing narrative recounted through a powerful, yet intimate, but also delicate, and exquisite prose.

This multidimensional text conveys the rich scholarship in anthropological ethnography, combined with history, philosophy, literature, and an overall thread of transnational ecstatic experiences.

Paolo Pecere's *Dancing God* is a great contribution to the understudied phenomena of trance and spirit-possession. The Author builds an impressive itinerary inviting the reader to travel through time and space. With Pecere, we revisit emblematic places where pioneer scholars like Ernesto de Martino, Georges Lapassade, Jean Rouch, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, and Alfred Métraux have left their unique footprints.

Paolo Pecere's experience as a traveler, passionate writer and a scholar is a transforming energy in the text as well. Moving across outsider/insider social locations, destabilizing some of his interlocutors and the status quo is a thread in the book. Trance is depicted as a powerful fuel indispensable for collective and individual vitality. Yet, throughout the pages we can also perceive a distant melancholic tone as Pecere confronts the present of memorable sites that once hosted famous possession cults. Some of these cults have been now reduced to secular shows at best or hidden and even illegal practices at worst. He denotes a critical lens to this metamorphosis since the introductory chapter, and the ensuing chapters show his insertions, implications, exclusions, and even negotiations of his own personal interest for these esoteric practices. The book continues to build on these themes throughout the rest of its pages. For me, as an initiate of shamanism and spirit-possession who has studied trance and possession phenomena, this book was a testament on how to move across so many imposed boundaries (political and religious) and the many obstacles that have an impact in our understanding of these highly complex embodied experiences.

The Dancing God is built in seven sections, each presenting the different facets of a single God. It follows the stages in the Author's journey, using each stage to consider the different transformations that possession traditions have gone through around the globe. The first section 'Going Down' opens Pecere's journey in Puglia, Southern Italy. This is a momentous opening since not only are we dealing with a powerful historically and culturally charged geographical area, but it is also here where once existed one of the most intriguing and perplexing cults in the contemporary Mediterranean: Tarantism. Following de Martino's footsteps, it goes on to describe the story of Maria Nardò from Taranto. Orphaned by father, Maria's story is emblematic and representative of this bizarre phenomenon. In this biographical account a prohibited love story constitutes the initial event of unfortunate

that leads Maria to be bitten by a spider that will also make her dance. After receiving another marriage proposal, Saint Paul appeared to her to tell her not to marry him and to join him in a mystic marriage. At the end, the young woman had given up on marriage, however every year she would be tormented by the spider bite. It seemed clear that the bite would be recurrent in different critical moments of life existence (puberty crisis, the death of a dear one, a frustrated love, misery, hunger, or any organic illness). The therapy consisted in alleviating this crisis through a ritualistic compound containing a symbolic complex of personages, myth, dramaturgy, percussion, dance, and trance.

With this introductory chapter, Pecere has already retraced one the most classic scenarios of trance-possession phenomena that could be summarized as follows: misfortune (in this case a forbidden love) is followed by a spiritual call (the spider bite and the apparition of Saint-Paul) that could imply initiation through a given therapy (usually possession dance). Like for the immense majority of possession cults, the therapy (in this case *la Pizzica-Taranta*) will not exorcise the possessing entity out of the affected individual, rather it will merely organize the possession with more possession within the legitimacy of a ritualistic frame. The opening story of Maria Nardò also takes us back in time, to a Mediterranean basin where Bacchic ceremonies were celebrated once upon a time in the name of an acclaimed Dionysus, and also one of the key characters of Pecere's odyssey. The Author constantly introduces comparisons and analogies between Tarantism and the ancient Greek tradition, both containing the mosaic equation of misfortune, contagious epidemic, erotism, inebriation, dance, histrionics, exaggeration, trance, and transformation. This will thus prepare us to read the following sections which will progressively add, each in its own unique way, new elements to this equation.

Section 2 'The Red God' focuses on the *Theyyam* possession ritual in Kerala. Here, Paolo Pecere meets Mahesh, a local inhabitant that will guide him throughout this exciting new journey. We can feel the Author's ramping enthusiasm as he is about to witness his first possession ritual. It is in chapter Two where many themes concerning the ontology of spirit possession from a more anthropological point of view will come to light. For instance, the Author reflects on concepts such as personhood cross culturally. He realizes that contrary to the Western concept of personhood, the Indian notion has nothing to do with an autonomous substance. The individual is permeable, multidimensional, almost unreal, illusionary (l' *annatta* in Buddhism).

On the other hand, the *brahman*, which is the result of thought, may also be anticipated on a “soul journey” during oneiric activity. There is thus an “astral body” that is able to exit the physical body and wander in other realms. Following this logic, the Author then concludes that the experience of possession doesn’t appear as a staggering aberration as it is depicted in the monotheistic traditions or by Western psychology and psychiatry. Like in many possession cults, in India, spirit possession is indeed a manifestation of the divine or the demonic and its ritualization is effectuated for spiritual knowledge and devotional purposes.

Moreover, the *Theyyam* ritual presents another enigmatic characteristic that has drawn the attention of many specialists in trance phenomena, namely marginality. Along with conflict and resistance, read from a Western perspective, the *Theyyam*, practiced by a lower caste in India may be perceived as containing a salient social class struggle. Parallel to the Dionysus cult that defied the civil and political order, *Theyyam* inverts the roles and puts the “world upside down” as stated by dancer Hari Das. This phenomenon will become even more evident in the following chapters where Sufism and the possession rituals in the Afro-Atlantic religions exhibit also themes linked to marginality, social conflict, collective trauma, and resistance against hegemonic cultural order.

‘The impure God’ takes us to the “country of the pure”, a plausible etymological significance for Pakistan. Following the steps of Alexander the Great, Pecere stops at the city of Lahore, where the Greek civilization had flourished over centuries. In this way, chapter Three invites the reader to travel to two distinct periods simultaneously, the pre-Islamic period and the current Islamic one. In these two different contexts, we begin to search for one God, maybe Shiva. Studies suggest that Shiva is the God who creates, that destructs and dances. He would be the “impure God” since he appears to be “mad”, a “destroyer of social barriers” and the one that guides the men from lower ranks (p. 109). Sufism is at stake, and here, trance (*wajd*) is far from being an unknown concept in the Islamic thought. In fact, in Sufism, the state of trance along with prayer and ecstatic dance makes integral part of the religious experience, to the point where it is considered to be an element of high fidelity to the prophet Mohamed’s doctrine (p. 112). However, as the Author assists a Sufi ritual, he seems to capture several tensions that exist between this ancient Indian-Islamic tradition and the Muslim regime. Not only does he show delusion for some of the liturgical adaptations to the dominant rule, but he also acknowledges as he speaks

with some of his interlocutors, the disdain and the stigma that weighs upon the mystic tradition.

From Pakistan Pecere leads us now to West Africa. Chapter Four 'The Hidden God', masterfully revives the pioneering ethnographic adventures of Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris and Jean Rouch. Indeed, this chapter is perhaps my favorite one because the reader can come closer to intriguing characteristics and specificities of possession cults, such as the identity of possessing entities. For instance, Pecere brings us back to the fascinating universe of the *Zâr* from Ethiopia. These spirits were "mythical men", descendants of Eve who remained out of the Biblical story and who were condemned to live out in the woods, where they possessed mostly women. In this part of the book, Pecere also begins to question the benefice of spirit possession while also reflecting on the theatrical dimension that heavily intrigued Leiris. Through this classic ethnographic account, chapter Four is a brilliant reflection of the multidimensionality of possession which tends to harmonize the most heterogeneous dimensions such as therapeutic, self-inquiry, breaking the rules, the expression of the comical and tragic and the exhibition of erotic suppressed desires.

It is also the chapter where the influence of European colonization begins to show in its most palpable sense, through possession and visual imagery. In the history of ethnographic documentary, *Les maîtres fous* by Jean Rouch is regarded as initiating a whole new phase in the development of the genre. It concerns the *hauka* spirit possession cult of Songhay-Zerma migrants from the middle Niger river who had come to work in Accra, the ex-capital of the British colony of the Gold Coast. In this section, Pecere contributes to the rehabilitation of this unique masterpiece, usually interpreted as a remarkable counter-hegemonic representation of European colonialism in Africa. The political influence and the relations of power and inequality in the possession cult are still subject to debate among scholars. However, one of the most compelling elements concerning the encounter between colonial forces and practitioners of possession-based religions is the incredible resurgence of this relation in the pantheons, myths, and ritual practices of these non-Western traditions. Finally, the chapter concludes with the Author's own travel accounts. Pecere takes us this time to Mali and Togo, where he will get slowly closer to the religious roots that once traveled to the other side of the ocean.

'The God From the Sea' pursues the African adventure in Brazil, one of the most African nations of the Americas. At this point, Pecere questions:

«In sum, is possession a liberating process or an alienating one?» (p. 212). To the Author, this question couldn't be more of a current issue in a country like Brazil. The journey begins in the cosmopolitan city of São Paulo during a political transition that would install a far-right president in the government to the indignation of many. Pecere navigates in the immensity of a city inhabited by 25 million descendants of Italians, which would make São Paulo the "biggest Italian city" out of Italy (p. 213). Nevertheless, the Author stresses here that these "Italians" have all lost their language and customs in one of the most complex nations of the world, where descendants of Portuguese, Germans, Japanese, Amerindians, and Africans cohabit sometimes in the body of one single person: the *Mestizo*. One of the most fascinating things about this multi-identity is that one does not need to be Black to join mainstream Afro-Atlantic religion Candomblé. In fact, as the Author observes it, while in Africa Vodou was not optional and was rather imposed by inheritance, in Brazil anyone could "naturally" discover its own *Orixá*.

After being in the "biggest Italian city" out of Italy, how could Pecere not go to the "most African city" in the American continent? (p. 213) Salvador de Bahia is our next stop. Looking for living and thriving *Terreiros*, the Author finally meets a group of Candomblé adepts, like Marcelo, a *Pai de Santo* and the son of *Eshu* that will soon orchestrate a small and very intimate ceremony along with the human embodiments of *Shango* and the beautiful *Oshun*. The sensorial experience lived here will give us a sense of the ontological status of possession cults as "do-religions" versus "believe-religions", where ritual action and performance conquer the worship centerpiece.

The Two final chapters of this book brings the reader to two contrasting scenarios: to the secretive Amazon forest and to the unstoppable city of New York. After a passionate anthropological and epistemological inquiry for the meaning of shamanism, Pecere arrives to Gamboa. 'The God of the Forest' transports us to one of the most epic places of classic ethnography and a Mecca of Shamanism. Yet, despite this glorious past in the history of ethnography so brilliantly revisited in this book, we are confronted once again with the extreme vulnerability of the land, its peoples, and traditions in a hyper globalized and neoliberal world, which can leave any nostalgic and sensible reader with a bitter taste. The chapter also leaves an open-ended question about what it means to be a shaman in the 21st century. Who is a Shaman, where is he and what does he do?

In the final destination of the journey, we see the reemergence of the main question that has been the guiding thread throughout this epic experience: what remains of these types of practices? Clearly, these practices old as the world, have not just vanished, and Paolo Pecere does a fantastic job demonstrating how the former have not only survived but have also adapted to contingencies, social turmoil, and perhaps simply inevitable planetary changes. 'The God in a Mask' brings us now to the streets of New York taken by the LGTB members who behind extravagant costumes and frenetic celebration may "unconsciously" honor that immortal God that has never left us throughout this whole adventure: Dionysus.

Pecere's intention was to write about travel, trance, and transformation, but his ambitions were broader. I wholeheartedly believe that anyone in academia and even other circles can find something for themselves in this book. This multilayered account of trance and spirit possession shows how these ancient phenomena transform and travel through time and space. Paolo Pecere's book is a journey committed to telling the story of possession cults and their transformation around the globe. This approach makes this book superb for use in courses on religious studies, anthropology, history, critical ethnic studies, and multiethnic studies. It also contributes to philosophical arguments on embodiment. Perhaps the book ought to be read various times to deeply capture the nuanced ways in which autoethnography/story/history are fused into one and are never just that. As I read the book, I savored all of these layers, these retellings of stories and histories. There is more work to be done in terms of connecting the embodied experiences with legitimate religious practices. Although this book has an enduring quality that promises to stand the test of time.