

Chapter Six

Possession, Contact and the Image

Support

In West African masquerades it is common, during certain parts of the masquerade, for a spirit or divinity to sit atop the head of a masquerader, this person his or herself also being known in such a context as “a spirit.” This “spirit,” also referred to as “a mask,” is supported by the body and head of the masquerader in a way not too dissimilar to that in which the body and head of the group *supports and are supported by* the ancestors and/or the gods in everyday life. Note the possibility suggested here, namely, that two bodies bear one another, that they move together supporting one another.

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In the case of Gabriel, in the last pages of his *Journals*, the children of the small Congo village surround him, shouting, taunting him, as they do in masquerade to *so'o*, (the spirit of) the monkey, (the spirit of) death which he bears atop his head (or shoulders) and which bears him and the group as a whole.

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Among the New Caledonians, says Leenhardt, this support, *kamo*, is also known as “the technical notion of the body” and “the living one.” Likewise, to Stahl and Hoffman this support is the organism and the vital principle, i.e. a Platonized *pneuma* and *logos*.

The difference between the two can be explained by the affinity of the former to materialist Stoicism, and the latter to this Platonized form.

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Could it be, considering the Platonized form of Stoicism in terms of masquerade, just as the spirit which is borne atop the head (or shoulders, rather) is a mask, that the spirit of the organism and the vital principle, of the Platonized *pneuma* and *logos*, is also a mask? Among the New Caledonians, says Leenhardt, this support (which we under Pietist colonization rather refer to as spiritual) is “a living personage who is recognized less by the outline of a man than by the form, by what we call his air of humanity.” In other words, although we may see an organism and a vital principle in living bodies, in individuals, both of these things are little more than a mask which is supported by and supports the individual and group indistinguishably.

But if this is so, if the vital principle and organism are spirits, and spirits are masks, then what is *behind* the mask, *behind* the spirit? What is being covered-up for the spirit to be seen and dealt with? That which is being covered-up, I argue, is the very materiality of the spirit or mask itself. Among the New Caledonians we see this “masking” (and de-masking) of the materiality of the spirit or mask itself taking place, *via kamo*, in the form of a public secret, in the form of a secret which everyone knows and upholds, but which no one (supposedly) talks about.¹ When encountering a traveler who surprises or offends him or her, says Leenhardt, the New Caledonian sees a *kamo* (which is akin to a mask, or masked something), he or she sees “an *air* of humanity” but wonders what *exactly* it is that he or she is encountering. The first question, says Leenhardt, is what it is that he or she is encountering behind the mask, this spirit of a

¹ Thus the fact that Leenhardt de-emphasizes myth or any other telling, i.e. Platonic logocentric, activity as the basis of his ethnographic knowledge.

living personage, this “*air* of humanity.” Is it human? Is there a living personage whom he or she feels familiar with behind this air?

Note here what is perhaps most crucial in this masking and identification according to the New Caledonians. In asking if there is a “living personage” (*kamo*) behind the mask whom he or she is familiar with, he or she is asking not if there is an authentic, true, familiar personage there, but rather if there is a *kamo* (a mask, or masked person behind this mask) whom he or she is familiar with. Put another way, there seems to be no authentic person, or as the New Caledonians say, no *do kamo*, but only a series of masks and/or spirits to be gotten at in this de-masking.

Therefore, if what I said above is true, if all spirits are masks, covering-up the materiality of the spirit or mask itself, then the distinction between spirit and matter, so necessary to all Platonist enterprises, including Pietist colonialism, is actually a distinction between forms of materiality which cover each other up, which support one another both materially, as the blood cells support the body, and secretly as that which secretes this materiality, as that which says “This is material” by answering the question of the materiality of the spirit and/or mask with a form of “I can’t say.”

So what then of “the body,” i.e. that which is supported by, and supports us as, a group? Surely, “the body” is a social thing, a support of the group, a spirit or mask supported by someone in times like masquerade, or even in everyday life. But who supports it? We seem to feel that there are individuals, if not authentic, true personages behind the spirit or mask, supporting it and (following the utility which we also cherish)

supporting it so that it will support (and *as it supports*) the group. But as the New Caledonians and many in West Africa know (but cannot say), there are no authentic individuals behind the spirit or mask (or *kamo*); there are only more masks secreting their own materiality, secreting forms of materiality which cover each other up, which support one another materially. The secret of the material body *qua* its materiality is not something *to be* exposed in that it is *already* exposed in secretion. One does not do any group (or body) a service in saying what cannot be said, but is surely known (i.e. in pointing to this public secret). One does not illuminate anything in shouting out “I know that the body is material and we all need to join in saying it” any more than when one points out that “the body” is social. Doing so would be like he or she who, in a masquerade, shouts out that the spirit is “really” one’s uncle, or like he or she who, in everyday life, proclaims a shaman to be a con artist or a god to be a piece of wood. To think that others are not aware of any of the above can only stem from ignorance or naiveté, but to *say* that they are not (most often with violence) seems to be motivated by something else altogether more malicious. In coming to work within medicine and counseling with those with Alzheimer’s and those who care for them I came to see both the value and the dubiousness of such an “I can’t say,” and to see that the goal is not to expose either as secrets, but to rather work with the secretion which they already provide.

Identity, Image and Possession

Among the New Caledonians, according to Leenhardt, one is either a *kamo* or a *bao*. Both of these bodies (masks/spirits) are not, however, *different* beings but are rather identical. Their identity, or non-difference, is not logocentrically based upon myth,

language, or any system of “primitive classification” as we have come to know them in (symbolic or semiotic) ethno-theory, but rather is based upon yet another notion of support, detailed in chapter three, known as *karo*. In essence, when one speaks of a support, as I have above in terms of masks and/or spirits (supports) masking their own materiality, one speaks most basically of this or that *form* of *karo*. Combining this metaphysics with the very similar metaphysics of materialist Stoicism, this or that form of *karo*, i.e. this or that form of spirit, mask, or body, could equally be described (monistically) as this or that form of material *pneuma*, i.e. as this or that differing or changing state of *tonos* (tension, strain or tone).

An astute reader, though, may here take pause and note a certain inconsistency in the above description which begins by claiming its own lack of Platonic or mythological logocentricity. One may note that I first write of “forms” of *karo*¹ claiming their identity and denying their difference, thus making the idea of more than one form a bit confusing. The shortest response to this objection would be that when one is unable to see how two or more forms or things can be identical, yet more than one, one is not thinking monistically as one must here.

A more powerful and blatant point of objection would be in the next sentence where I mention “this or that *differing* or changing state of *tonos*.” How is it, one may ask, that things identical and non-Platonic-logocentric can be defined in terms of difference or change, the key markers of logocentrism. The answer to this question lies, one could say, in a particular way of encountering the world in which all things (or *karo*,

¹ I could equally have written “qualities” of *karo*.

be they *kamo* or *bao*) are seen as masks secreting their own identity, a material identity, but no true quality or form (spirit or mask) which they are said to possess or which is said to possess them.¹

Going back to the predicament of Gabriel we can see a failure to appreciate this notion of identity in its fullest sense. His story is an allegory of an encounter between an individual and history, an Alz history which is as much an allegory of natural history as it is of life history and the history of modern science and enlightenment. Gabriel sees himself as haunted by a possession, of knowledge which he possessed and which possessed him. This knowledge, if you will remember, came through the experience of mimetic glimpses, of small moments of possession in which he felt himself to be identical with this or that person at the center. Seeing their own gestures or expressions in his own, and from the following realization that he, like a *bao* among the New Caledonians, was being seen as a living personage, but one who may be dead, a stranger one has never met, who may be a mask, being continually unmasked to reveal another mask underneath. Most important, however, is that he saw this changing and differing identity as being in itself the secret to be preserved, and not, as he should have seen it, as a secretion of differing and changing material identities (of *karo*) within the ill person and himself to be explored, named and attacked. In Stoic terms, he mistook changes in *tonos*, in one form of body affecting another, for a form of spirit possession which, like any masquerader, virtuous Platonist, or repentant Christian, only he, in so becoming a subject, could finally deny or confirm.

¹ Many more details of this way of encountering the world will be discussed in chapter ten of this book.

It was out of this predicament that he turned to something akin to love magic; something involving images that went wrong; something which, in its quest to further (confirm) his own possession, i.e. that he possessed others and/or others possessed him, was akin to witchcraft; something for which he paid dearly. In engaging in love magic Gabriel did not seek a cure, but rather a way in which to deal with this disease, with a part of himself as he saw it. Put another way, he, like Kafka's ape¹, sought a way out. Through Bataille, Gabriel seems to have theorized and engaged in what he thought to be Bataille's "senile idealism" (or "materialism"). In doing this he engaged in a sorcery akin to that of Horkheimer and Adorno in their (mis-)use of Benjamin, championing symbolism over identity, and the use of possessive images over "universal interchangeability."²

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In Fritz Kramer's book *The Red Fez* we see images discussed in context of West African spirit possession. The main subjects of this book are, first, a certain not very well understood and in fact puzzling presence of stranger figures in the pantheons of different West African societies and, second, the role of these figures (i.e. spirits or masks) in local experiences of the sacred. The key to this puzzle, says Kramer, is found in the way in which possessive images function within these societies to help those within them deal with the different estrangements of modernity. At the core of the all-important way in which images relate to possession within these societies, says Kramer, are certain

¹ Kafka, Franz "A Report to the Academy"

² See chapter seven of this book for a further explication of these ideas.

“images of *passiones*” which he defines using Godfrey Lienhardt’s work on the Dinka entitled *Divinity and Experience*.

These possessive images, based upon Lienhardt’s ethnography, and whose nature will be further discussed later in this book, are of concern to the present discussion, and to Kramer himself, less as images *per se* than as states of possession. The key notion that seems to fuel nearly all discussions of possession is that of an all too Platonic mimesis in which an impression or image one has of this or that is spirit, mask, or what have you, is mimed in possession. Within this notion it is almost as if in one’s head, that allegorical home of Plato’s ideas and impressions, a series of impressions (not all to unlike a film) is playing and the possessed person, in one way or another, is miming them. In this allegorical theater it is forever images, records, and impressions which are mimed and never those material things or beings which these are images, records, and impressions of.

In considering this notion of possession, I suppose that we could say just as equally that records, photo and film images, and the inky impressions of printed words both possess those things and beings which they are impressions of *and* that they are possessed by those things and beings which they are impressions of. This second idea, however, would seem to only apply when these things or beings are seen as having a life of their own.

But what would it mean, as is so common in discussions of the relationship between animism and animation, to say that any group “sees” anything as having a life of its own? Are we not in such cases inevitably discussing mimesis in terms of Platonic *logos*, i.e. in terms of *an account of* this or that? More importantly, however, are we not also assuming that these impressions of things or beings in question here are not being *seen through* by the group which we say is seeing them as having a life of their own; being seen as masks or spirits which are secreting their own materiality; as masks or spirits covering other masks or spirits with no true thing or being which they are a copy of at their center?

If this is the case, as I hold it is, then regardless of the Platonic logocentricity behind what “people say” (for this is itself but a spirit and mask) images, impressions, and records neither possess people nor are these images, impressions and records possessed by them. If people move about in imitation of, i.e. if people are “moved by,” a photo, a film clip, or by a mental image (whatever the nature of this may be), they do not move about in imitation of an image, impression or record, but in imitation of (or simply in reaction to) the materiality or, in Stoic terms ‘the change in tone,’ of the image, impression, or record secreting its own materiality. Such is the case regardless of whether or not the image, impression or record is moving or still, the only difference being that moving images, involving other forms of materiality, entail more complex and varied forms of secretion.

Beyond Possession: Identity, Contact and Image

If it is possible, as I am suggesting here, to see spirit possession for what it is, i.e. a mask covering other masks (secreting their own form of materiality in their

unmasking), and not as a phenomenon in which a true self-identity exists at some core of a person's being, then it seems clear that the details of secretion of material forms would be indispensable to the understanding of a great many phenomena with which spirit possession has become associated.

It is in Michael Taussig's book *Mimesis and Alterity* that we see a first strong attempt to ethnographically imagine and understand these details of secretion of material forms found in possession and other forms of mimetic activity. At a certain point in this work Taussig confronts the notion of the copy, pondering its complexities (given to us by Plato, the *ur*-grandfather of mimetic theory). To do this he turns to the theory of magic. Sympathetic magic, as given to us by J.G.Frazer (a Plato scholar in his own right¹) exists in two forms: imitative magic, or the use of copies to affect that which is copied in ways which copy their copies, and contagious magic, or the use of an incident of contact between

two things (be they hair, nails, soil, a person's clothing, etc.) to further affect one of these things when separated and/or at a distance from the other. In confronting the "Law of Similarity," which he says governs imitative magic, with the "Law of Contact," which governs contagious magic, Frazer tells us that in the greatest number of cases we find both of these laws, i.e. imitative and contagious magic, *combined*. Citing an example from his own ethnographic experience Taussig describes a situation in which a group of workers try to influence the attitude of the foreman towards their desire for higher

¹ I refer here to Frazer's dissertation *The Growth of Plato's Ideal Theory* as well as his extensive work in classical scholarship and philosophy.

incomes. Going to a magician/sorcerer to aid them in influencing their foreman they are asked by the magician to bring him hoofprints of the foreman's horse which he needed to work his magic. Detailing the complexities in such a situation in which contact and Platonic, craftsman-like imitation work together Taussig writes:

The hoofprint is virtually part of the horse and at the same time it is an image of (part of) the horse and, to complicate matters further, the horse is a substitute for the rider. In whatever way we decide to conceptualize this, we must recognize that the two distinct principles, Imitation and Contact, cannot easily be separated in this instance in which, like fingerprinting by the modern state, the horse's imprint in the soil amounts to a copy, indeed a potentially fairly accurate copy, or (part of) its unique self. The print is in fact a stunning instance of imitation blending so intimately with contact that it becomes impossible to separate image from substance in the power of the final effect.¹

Let us reflect for minute on this example, noting the strangeness of the first sentence here. The personage of the foreman, including his mass, when added to and supported by the horse's body, as he and it often is, is supported by the horse's legs and the ground over, into, and through which it walks. The foreman supports the horse as well, providing for its feeding, water and so on, and the plantation owner supports the foreman, as well as directly or indirectly supporting the foreman's horse. With each step of the horse the body of the earth gives way to the body of the horse plus the body of the foreman leaving what we call a print or, better perhaps, an impression in its body (or hoofprint).

There seems to be something in all of the giving and merging of bodies here, and especially in making the hoofprint into a material part, which interests the

magician/sorcerer but which from this perspective of bodies in contact seems to elude us in imagining this magic as mimesis.

Could the very fact of this emphasis on materiality be that the hoofprint of the horse (a mask or spirit of the horse) secretes its materiality and then the body of the hole (the impression or print) secretes its materiality in the bodies of the workers (in seeing it) and in in turn, further secretes its own materiality in the body of the magician, and so on? Why is it that such an explanation has less appeal than talk of “the spirits of” the foreman and the horse or, more commonly, of the fact that the impression is a part of the horse like a memory, or an experience? I think here of Haitian Voudon and how the spirit mounts and rides the devotee like a horse, and I imagine a mass being added to a back, a change in tone of the horse’s body, and in the ground, and in those who look upon the spirit atop his or her steed, all bodies moving in contact. Why is it that such an explanation has less appeal than talk of perception of qualities and forms *à la* Plato’s cave, a mysterious den of sorcery if there ever was one? What is this “distance” through which contagious and imitative magic are said to work? What is the medium which they work through? The psyche, the social body, surely, but how understood? Are these bodies, centers of intellect, power, or what have you, all possessive of and possessed by spirits, ideas, forms, archetypes, myths, and so on? Are these spirits, ideas, forms, myths, symbols and so on that which constitute and are constituted by an authentic self, a complex cultural and historical identity, mediums through which we possess and are

¹ Taussig, Michael *Mimesis and Alterity*, p.53

possessed by images of others *à la* love magic, as Kramer depicts various forms of West African spirit possession in *The Red Fez* ?

This is how Gabriel understood affliction and tried to deal with it, and it is due to this that he failed. In his allegorical search for an authentic self, for and through a complex cultural and historical identity, he sought to manipulate some sort of image through which he possessed and was possessed by others, *via* love magic. Trouble was that unmasking got the best of him; a misguided notion that through de-masking spirits, ideas, forms, myths, or symbols that he could uncover that authentic self, that history or cultural identity of the Alz people, which so many thought to be lost or, at least, a lost cause. In doing so he sought to stem the tide of colonialism for at least his own lifetime, but was instead pulled out and under by its force.

Bio-Masking or Secretions of Materiality

In human interaction according to a non-relational metaphysics as I have been describing it physical action is forever moving in all directions at once, making the question of direction not as important as how far this physical action goes or, to be more precise, how far through which fibers different qualities of body are affected (i.e. change in tone).

When looking or listening physical action moves, propagates as bodies or fibers changing in tone—the latter being, according to Stoic physics, those areas of contact and change as one follows them like threads, being of great number, yet organized by way of often changing physical structure and mechanism. When one sees a series of drawings or any

such objects as given below (or hears, touches, tastes, smells and so on) physical action propagates in all directions whether from the filament of the light bulb inward toward and into its fibers and bodies of the hole, or outward in all directions to illuminate a room, toward and into the drawings, their ink, the paper, the material of the walls, the carpet, fibers of the lampshade and through the body of the hole into our eyes, their cones and rods, the optic nerve, its cells and further in. When one sees at a series of drawings or any objects (including the ten point type of the long footnotes below) physical action propagates in interaction with the light (also) from the material of the walls, from the drawings, their ink, the paper, the carpet, fibers in the lampshade, the body of the hole, our eyes, a squinting contraction of muscles which may have lost their tone as a child or as one aged, their cones and rods, the optic nerve, its cells and cells from further in, their filaments, organelles, and so on. Seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling and all action on things are materially and physically defined in this non-relational physics as changes in tone which take place in, on, through and around qualities of body, including the body of the hole.

The investigation of these changes in tone involves the following of fibers of influence, i.e. first understanding how particular qualities of body change in tone according to changes in other qualities of body. The different technologies we have for observing these changes show us and often create ever new levels of masking and de-masking through which we come to understand and work with the materiality being secreted by each of these levels. In the same way that a quality of body, a mask and at least part of the materiality which it secretes, is seen through the lenses, lighting, and

material changes involved in microscopy, this materiality of this mask is *only* seen through the secretion which the masks of the various technologies involved in microscopy (which I below call Bio-Masks). In the physical world which I am here depicting there is a mask for every mask, each secreting its own materiality. Be that mask a wooden mask, a face, the muscles of the face, the muscle fibers, the “space” between you and this page, the lens of the eye, the optic nerve, or other bodies involving various qualities of body changing in tone, all are secreting their own materiality. With this in mind, please follow the series of objects below (choosing not to follow those “letter objects” in the place of footnotes if you so wish):