Abstract  This article presents the case of a Sri Lankan woman who tells of an early life fraught with suffering and problematic dissociation. After a 30-year career as a priestess during which she became renowned for deep possession trances, firewalking, and blood sacrifices, she no longer participates in these activities. The analysis of this case argues that problematic dissociation outside a ritual context can be used in and transformed by involvement in culturally available possession rituals to promote healing. This counters Melford Spiro and others who have viewed possession experiences as necessarily abnormal, psychotic, and symptomatic of mental disorder. It supports Gananath Obeyesekere’s assertion that engagement with these symbolic systems can lead to “progressive transformations.” Parallels between this priestess’ lifestory and Western psychotherapy extend Obeyesekere’s conception of “the work of culture” beyond the domain of meaning and symbol to include roles for embodied practice and interpersonal relationships. [spirit possession, Sri Lanka, dissociation, healing, mental health]

There has long been debate about the relationship between mental illness and religious experience. Afflictions and distress that Western-style psychiatry views as psychobiological occurrences may be understood and experienced in many places in spiritual terms. This debate has sometimes been framed by simplistic oppositions, leading to such romantic ideas as the proposition that schizophrenics in the contemporary West would be shamans had they been born elsewhere, or conversely, invoking what Janice Boddy calls “an unfortunate lay observation that [possession] adepts are chronic hysterics” (1989:255).

However, this debate is not restricted to those unfamiliar with mental illness or unsophisticated about culture. The scientific community, as Csordas points out, has tended to generate similar questions about “whether religious experience itself is pathological or therapeutic and whether religious healing can be understood as analogous to psychotherapy” (2002:12), questions that he argues stem from a separation of issues of healing into either the medical or religious domains, domains that in actuality converge in their concern with suffering and salvation.

An important part of this discussion has focused on spirit possession trance practices, a topic that has been a point of departure for psychoanalytic anthropologists. In what follows,
I briefly sketch out the debate and then offer a case study, one not fully accounted for by either position but that sheds light on some terms of the debate.

Classically, psychoanalytically trained anthropologists like Devereux (1980) and Spiro (1997) have viewed possession experiences and the beliefs and visions involved in them as necessarily abnormal, psychotic, and symptomatic of mental disorder. In this view, various cultural traditions involving spirit possession rituals may provide socially recognized and even valued roles for those with the symptoms; however, the possession experiences themselves cannot be curative. Even if there is symptom elimination, Devereux warns against calling this a cure, since, although there may be a “corrective emotional experience” (1980:17), no real insight is achieved.

Conversely, Obeyesekere (1981, 1990), also psychoanalytically trained, points to the transformative potential of engagement with culturally and personally salient symbols drawn from a society’s possession idiom. In The Work of Culture (1990), which builds on his research with possessed priestesses in Sri Lanka, Obeyesekere claims that symbols, chosen for deeply personal and largely unconscious reasons from the array offered by the culture, can be progressively transformative, shedding infantile meanings initially articulated and taking on new, more mature significance. He argues that the motives that initially led women he interviewed to select and manipulate particular symbol sets are largely satisfied over time. As these women continue to interact with and within the net of personal symbols in what Shweder calls “expressive performances” (1991:341), meanings carried by those symbols shift progressively. In contrast to symptoms, which Obeyesekere characterizes as regressive, fixated, and idiosyncratic, meanings and motivations behind personal symbols transform and are transformed by use in culturally meaningful ways. Through selection of and engagement with personal symbols drawn from a cultural repertoire, individuals transform and develop into healthy cultural selves.

Spiro (1997) directly rejects Obeyesekere’s assessment, saying that, although he agrees that these women’s involvement with spirit possession practices is motivated by attempts to manage psychological distress generated by troubled childhoods, the possession trances are not only not curative but they are themselves manifestations of psychopathology. He says:

I agree with Obeyesekere that the possessions and visions that characterize the spiritual experiences of the priestesses constitute attempts to cope with unbearable conflicts by means of religious symbols—that is, by means of a culturally constituted defense mechanism—but I believe these possessions and visions are episodic psychotic symptoms, not because religious symbols are regressive or because they reflect the archaic motivations of childhood but because (as Obeyesekere convincingly demonstrates) the priestesses have undergone severe traumas, whose pathological consequences are beyond repair, except perhaps by means of prolonged psychiatric intervention. [Spiro 1997:124–125]
In Spiro’s assessment, spirit possession experiences are, by definition, hallucinations and beliefs in the reality of these experiences, delusions. Although these hallucinations and delusions are made up of symbols drawn from a shared cultural repertoire, the priestess, unlike the nonpsychotic, is unable to distinguish between imaginings and beliefs about religious beings, on the one hand (imaginings and beliefs that might be shared by many others in the society), and actual, veridical experience of interacting with these spirits and their world, on the other hand. For Spiro, it is this inability to distinguish mental representation from actual objects and events, the mistaking of symbol for signified, that reflects psychopathology.

Spiro argues that many people are able to draw on religious symbol systems to form culturally constituted defense mechanisms that allow them to avoid psychopathology and symptom development; however, the psychotic cannot. Her use of the symbol system is a symptom itself and the episodic repetition of its expression represents a failure of reality testing and a manifestation of serious psychopathology, not the path toward a cure.

Although religious symbols are not regressive, the ways in which the priestesses use these symbols to cope with their pathology is. Their use of these symbols does not resolve their pathological conflict; rather, it is a symptom of their conflict. [Spiro 1997:125]

Participation in religious practices that endorse and encourage dissociative symptom expression will not cure pathology. In Spiro’s assessment, as above, this pathology is “beyond repair” and the only possible hope for cure would be “prolonged psychiatric intervention” (1997:124–125).

That the priestesses experience moments of pleasure during their possessions is, Spiro claims, neither evidence of cure nor inconsistent with pathology. Spiro argues that it is predictable that “intermittent psychotic episodes” (1997:132) would provide temporary relief from distress because “hallucination and delusions, insofar as they fulfill thwarted wishes, are always pleasurable, which is why a priestess would certainly prefer these religious experiences to her frustrating mundane existence” (1997:133). If, however, these pleasant feelings existed in her everyday life, this would be a sign that the engagement with possession practices had been curative and “progressively transformative” as Obeyesekere claims is possible. According to Spiro,

If a priestess’s archaic motivations were overcome and her unconscious conflicts resolved by the performance of her religious role, then her life would be pleasurable not only some of the time—during her trance and possession experiences and for some limited time thereafter—but most of the time. [1997:134]

It is here that I wish to enter this debate, accompanied by the story of a woman I call Josephine, a Sri Lankan priestess who indeed seems to find her life pleasurable most of the time
these days and who, after a long and typical career as a possession adept, says she no longer engages in the deep trance states Spiro identifies as psychotic. She is a priestess who appears to meet the criteria for cure that Spiro says can only be achieved through psychiatric intervention.

I met Josephine in the summer of 2001 while doing fieldwork in Sri Lanka. At that time, she was a respected priestess serving a number of deities and assisting clients who wished to communicate with them. The story she told me about her life closely matches those Obeyesekere (1981) recorded 20 years earlier. After a troubled childhood, involving significant experiences of loss and suffering, she began spontaneously entering trancelike states in early adolescence in response to stressful situations, typically outside of any ritual setting. These bouts of what she now understands to have been spirit attacks and possessions continued throughout the first decade of her miserable, forced marriage and the births of her children. During a visit to a temple soon after the birth of her last child, she had her first recognized possession, by the demon form of Kali. After a period of time in which she suffered greatly, she gave up her family life and took on the full role of priestess.

However, there is an additional turn in Josephine’s story: after years of involvement with possession, she is becoming a different kind of priestess, one who no longer engages with dissociation and its usual religious symbols in expected ways. After a 30-year career of ritual possession, she no longer feels inclined to perform the more flamboyant displays of her profession. She is no longer interested in firewalking or performing blood rites, nor does she enter the kinds of deep trance states in which she has no memory or conscious control. On the one hand, Josephine is unlike those in Obeyesekere’s sample whom he deems psychotic because of their severely impaired capacity for reality testing and withdrawal into private, idiosyncratic worlds. On the other hand, she is also unlike those priestesses who operate strictly within a shared “cultural frame” (1990:69) of understandings about spirit possession within which her behaviors are mutually meaningful. Although Josephine continues to interact with the divine realm as part of her reality, as do Obeyesekere’s priestesses, her means of doing so has come to diverge from that of the ideal priestess.

The ideal of authentic spirit possession is reflected in the literature (cf. Bastin 2002, 2003; Kapferer 1983, 1997; Obeyesekere 1981, 1990; Spencer 1997) and was articulated to me by Sri Lankans with various levels of involvement in possession practices, from village skeptics to temple priests. According to these widely held cultural understandings, the possessed person enters a deep and authentic trance state during which that person has no consciousness and no control over his or her own body that has been fully taken over by the possessing being. During this possession, the spirit being uses the person’s body to enact its own desires. These possessing spirits demonstrate their powers by enabling and inspiring possessed adepts to perform marvelous feats. Credible priests and priestesses are able to bring on authentic trance states and invite possessing spirits into their bodies through ritual movements and offerings so that the spirit beings might speak through them, communicating with
onlookers, and assisting supplicants by identifying the causes of their suffering and suggesting remedies.

What is different about Josephine, is that, although she continues to attend and help organize celebrations of the gods and goddesses, she no longer feels inspired to demonstrate their power through her performance. Likewise, she continues to serve clients by facilitating communication with the spirit world; however she no longer does so in a deep, dissociative trance. Instead of embodying the cultural ideal of a possessed priestess, these days Josephine appears more as a Western-style psychotherapist might have hoped she would at the end of a treatment course: not only is she effective in her social role, but she no longer fully dissociates and is no longer engaged in what might be called abreactive behaviors. It would seem that Josephine has been cured of her “psychotic symptoms” (if we may call them that), at least for the time being, yet without explicit psychiatric intervention, something that is impossible according to Spiro. What is more, she seems happy with her life, with her community of friends and devotees, with her sexuality, and with herself.

Although she may be “cured” of her symptoms and she may be happy, she is now less culturally normative in her possession practices than before. This lack of normativity is neither in keeping with Obeyesekere’s criteria for progressive use of transformative personal symbol systems nor is it in keeping with the expectations of Josephine’s fellow devotees. To one popular young priest, as he said, pointing out Josephine from across the temple grounds, this was someone who had once had great power, but who now had lost the blessing of the gods. Josephine, however, was crafting her own explanation of the changes she too perceived. In her account, she was developing past these lower forms of spirituality to a more advanced and pure form.

In what follows, I present the outlines of Josephine’s story in more detail. I then focus on three areas of her life where Josephine identified significant and positive transformations through her spirit possession practice: her trance experiences, her sexuality, and her self-understanding. In the end, I return to discuss how this change might have happened, arguing for an extension of Obeyesekere’s conception of the work of culture to include not only the transformative potential of personal symbols, but the significance of embodied practice and of relationships as well.

**The Case: Josephine Māniyo**

I first met Josephine in May of 2001, when I visited the Kataragama temple complex in arid southeastern Sri Lanka. During that visit, several months before the annual festival season centered around the god Kataragama, the temples and the town were quiet. Although the dramatic devotional displays for which the temple is famous—possessions, firewalking, hook hanging, sand rolling—were not much in evidence, those devotees who were present had plenty of time to talk with me and my research assistant, Inoka Baththanage.
Knowing I was interested in arudha (possession trance), one of the temple priests suggested we talk with a māniyo who had the gift of possession by many gods and goddesses. While we waited for her to arrive, we wandered down to a small shrine off to one side of the complex where a crowd of devotees was gathered. As we watched four women dancing, in various degrees of trance, a businesslike lady in a neat sari made her way through the crowd, which made room for her as if she were someone of importance. She nodded graciously to them as she put down her purse and went about her efficient propitiation of the god of that shrine. This was our first encounter with Josephine, the māniyo about whom the priest had spoken.

Beginning that day and over three months that followed, we met with Josephine, interviewing her, chatting with her and her associates, and watching her work. Some of these visits were at temples, both Kataragama and Munnesvaram, the site of the island’s principal Kali festival. Others visits were at her home, which has a small shrine room in which she sees clients, students, and colleagues. Through our casual conversations and formal interviews with Josephine during these visits we came to understand something of her life history.

As with any narrative, the story emerged in the telling and listening that took place among us. It represents something of Josephine’s “effort after meaning” (Bartlett 1932:20; Cohler and Cole 1996:64), as well as my own, as she explains the events of her life in light of what she currently understands about herself. It is a narrative constructed in concert with others in her social world—the adepts, students, supplicants, and other storytellers and listeners, including the interviewers. Here, I present this lifestory as I understood it, pieced together from different tellings into a chronological sequence, paying particular attention to the parts that seemed most meaningful to Josephine and to those parts most meaningful to me.

Childhood

Aged 58 when we met her, Josephine was born on July 29, 1942, on the west coast of the island. In this area, roughly 20 kilometers north of the island’s capitol, the majority of the largely Sinhala population are Buddhists, with a sizable number of Catholics as well. Here, her family was not unusual. Her mother was Catholic and her father converted from Buddhism to Catholicism when they married. Josephine was the first child born to the couple, with six more to follow, although only four girls survived past infancy. In the early years of their marriage, Josephine’s father raised chickens and owned several small shops. Although they were not wealthy, Josephine says that they were financially comfortable early on.

However, while she was still young, the family began to have troubles that Josephine attributes to the sorcery of an envious relative. Around the time her younger sister was born, Josephine’s mother became pissu (crazy) and not long after, her father began to lose his businesses. As a result, Josephine had to care for her sisters, neglected her studies, and was deeply unhappy.
In the midst of this suffering, around the age of 13, Josephine’s grandmother died in her lap while promising to give her something, even though she had already given all her property to her own children. In accordance with local Catholic customs, the family went to light candles eight days after the burial. There Josephine fainted, burning herself with a candle that fell against her. Following this, she went to school but found that she could not study on Wednesdays or Saturdays, which she now knows to be days that are special to the gods. These episodes are the earliest references in her narrative to what were likely dissociative experiences that first occurred at a time of emotional difficulty. She now explicitly links these to her spirit possession practices, pointing to them as her earliest, although then unrecognized, experiences of arudha (possession trance).

It was around this time that her mother’s brother came for a visit and, seeing how Josephine was suffering, took her to live in his home in the center of the island, where he enrolled her in a Catholic school. At this new school, at around the age of 15, Josephine was taking her Ordinary Level exams and fell to the floor, shaking her head. She now thinks that she received an arudha in that class. From then on, every week she fainted. Her family ascribed this to illness, refusing to accept these spells as the spirit possessions Josephine now knows them to have been.

Despite these afflictions, she passed her O-level exams and had hopes of further training and a good job. However, soon after, her mother quarreled with her uncle and took her back home to the coast. There Josephine made money by weaving mats so that she could put herself through a shorthand course. When the nuns who had been her teachers heard that she was at home after passing her O levels, they invited her to teach a second-grade class, which she did for the next two years.

Then, in 1960, at the age of 18, this progress came to a halt when she was suddenly forced to marry. According to Josephine, this was the result of the trickery of an undesirable suitor, the mistrust of her own family, and her love of books. As a child she was forbidden by her mother to read novels, which she loved very much and read secretly. One day a servant at the neighboring house of her father’s aunt, a man 10 years older than Josephine, said he would give her a novel that night. When he came outside her window and coughed, Josephine sneaked out to meet him. He kept backing up, luring her to follow him and refusing to give her the book until they were at the door to his room. At that moment, one of her younger sisters called out for her mother back in the room she shared with Josephine. When Josephine’s mother came into the girls’ room, she discovered that Josephine was not there. The family searched everywhere for her, including the servant’s room where Josephine, terrified, hid under the bed while the man laid on top of it. At four o’clock in the morning, he pulled her out from under the bed and said she would have to marry him now. Josephine tried to explain what had happened, but her family did not believe her. Assuming she had had a sexual encounter, they forced her to marry.

Bitterly disappointed that Josephine had thrown away the education they had expected to bring money into the family for years before she was married, her mother refused to let...
Josephine come home, gave her nothing, and never saw her children. Although, her mother came to regret the forced marriage when she saw the bloodied cloth after the wedding night that proved Josephine had not been previously sexually involved with the man, still, mother and daughter were not reconciled. Cut off from her family, Josephine’s life became unbearable. Josephine said, “At that point, my childhood, my life from 18 became a nightmare.”

**Early Marriage and Childbearing**

Soon after her marriage, Josephine converted to Buddhism. She explained that, because the man she married was Buddhist, he took her directly to Kataragama after their wedding and asked her to worship. There she says she came to accept Buddhism because of her new knowledge and feelings about the god Kataragama. On this visit, her husband also took her to Vaedihitikanda, a sacred shrine-topped hill on the outskirts of the town of Kataragama. This is where she would later have her first recognized possession.

In those early years, Josephine claims no knowledge of sexuality or its relationship to childbirth. However, as I discuss in more detail in a later section, her husband regularly forced her to engage in sex with him. Within ten years, she would give birth to five children. Her eldest, born in 1962, was a boy. The following year, she gave birth to a daughter. When Josephine came home from the hospital with this baby in her arms, her husband beat her. By this point in their marriage, her husband, who was working as a driver, was having an affair with his boss’s wife. Things got even worse for Josephine. In 1966, at age 24, she gave birth to her third child, another girl. After this baby, Josephine says that she had a “broken mind.” The next year, she found she was pregnant again. This time, her husband tried to abort her pregnancy. Josephine says that she herself died following the injection and was born again. The abortion did not work and, in 1968, she gave birth to another boy. In 1971, at age 28, Josephine had her last child, a girl. Following this, her full possession and service to the gods began.

She says of her children that she never wanted them, does not care much about them, and expects nothing from them. “I was never happy. I didn’t care about my children much because I wasn’t happy.” She now has little contact with them. Although they used to help her with her priestess duties, they do not believe in her possession now and are ashamed of her.

**Becoming a Priestess**

Josephine describes being afflicted with spontaneous trance states, lost time, and compulsive behaviors during the early, child-bearing years of her marriage; these symptoms she now understands as part of the calling of the gods. Soon after she was married, she began fainting, shaking her head uncontrollably and frequently vomiting. She went around muttering to herself and was not able to fulfill obligations at home. If she did any polluting thing, like menstruating, going to a funeral, or eating beef or pork, she got this same illness. Sometimes she did not know what was happening around her.
She treated this illness by bathing in turmeric and lime water, which are ritually purifying as well as cooling for an overheated body. She suffered a lot and felt that there was some kind of god’s power in her. Nonetheless, she tried to control this because she feared it would cause more problems in her family life. Her husband wanted to send her to the state mental hospital, but a traditional Sinhala doctor said that she had a power they needed to remove. They tried to exorcise her, but the process only served to increase the power of the affliction.

Following the birth of her last child in 1971, Josephine’s dissociative episodes continued to be spontaneous, out of her control, and usually unremembered. However, they began to occur in ritual settings and to be infused with powerful, often violent religious imagery and emotions. The first of these full-scale possessions occurred when she again visited Vadidihitikanda with her children and husband. This possession by the demon form of Kali was verified by a priest at the shrine on top of that hill. It was then that she got her “warrant” from the gods to be a priestess.

She spent the next three months at home eating only greens and rice, devoting most of her time to worshiping Lord Buddha. She tried to cook and care for her family, but usually failed, something for which her husband did not scold her because she was now a practicing Buddhist and because he was afraid of her power. Josephine’s description of this period of time closely conforms to Obeyesekere’s description of the “Dark Night of the Soul” (1981) for the priestesses he interviewed.

Josephine’s dark night culminated with a fuguelike journey to the annual Kali festival at the Munnesvaram temple near Chilaw on the west coast of the island. One day, while living with her husband in Anuradhapura, far away in the north central region of the country, Josephine announced that she wanted to go home. Suddenly she set off, with no money, and walked the three kilometers out of the jungle to the main road. Her husband followed by bicycle. He brought money and accompanied her on the bus she boarded, which took her not to her natal home but to Munnesvaram, a place 50 kilometers to the north of it where she had never been before. It was at that temple that she has been told that she announced herself to be Bhadra Kali, a form of the goddess, and performed her first blood sacrifice, killing a chicken and drinking its blood, all in a trance of which she remembers only pieces.

Following this incident, Josephine felt herself compelled to visit more temples for reasons outside of her conscious awareness. One day, she announced that she wanted to visit her father and so headed into the central hill country, to Kegalla and the main shrine of the god Dãdimunda. There she ripped open the seven curtains veiling the image of the god and demanded that they display the statue, which, according to her, they do to this day. A few months later, she suddenly disappeared from her home again. When her husband caught up with her, she had taken a bus to Tirukketisvaram, near Mannar on the northern west coast, where thousands of Tamil Hindus gather for the Sivaratri festival in Siva’s honor. There her husband found her worshipping Siva and bathing the lingam. As she sat, unable to eat the food her husband had bought for her, she envisioned the Siva cobra emerging to shelter
her. Through these pilgrimages, she now had the power of Kataragama, Kali, Dādimunda, and Siva.

During this time, she was also worshiping at Buddhist sites. At one of these, she met a Buddhist monk who was involved with the gods. He was impressed by the strength of her power and took her on as a student. Under his guidance, she began to take on her role as priestess in earnest, eventually receiving possessions from nine deceased relatives who serve nine different deities, all of whom grant Josephine power.12

By 1981, when Josephine was 38, she says her family life was over. The gods demand sexual abstinence in their servants, so Josephine was authorized to refuse any sexual contact with her husband. One day, while he was with another woman, Josephine just took off, leaving him and her children behind, and went to the temple town of Kataragama for 15 days. During that time at Kataragama, she found two pieces of jewelry that a priest said were from the god’s right and left hands and were her mother and father. According to Josephine, it is through these gems, and not because of their father, that her children are doing well now financially. It was during that visit to Kataragama that she decided to officially divorce her husband.

Three years later, she spent a year working as a housemaid in the Middle East. However, like the goddess she identifies with, she was repulsed by tasks that involved cleaning pots and pans soiled with the food of others. Therefore, she was assigned to clean and care for the shrine room of the home, a duty that she found suitable to her calling as a priestess.

When she returned to Sri Lanka in 1985, Josephine built a small devala, a shrine room for her own gods, at which she earned money telling prophecies. She said to herself, “I don’t need a husband. If I have a god, that is more than enough.” She had this devala for seven years until she was evicted from the land as a squatter.

Immediately after breaking up that first devala, she settled on a plot of land given to her by the government. There she built a new devala and home where, as Josephine describes it, she lives “like a queen.”

**Josephine’s Current Situation**
Josephine has had a full break with her husband. She said that the last time she saw him, she finally refused to give him money, which he had consistently come to demand from her. Her children live nearby and she helps them financially, although she has little contact with them.

She now lives by herself in the partially completed two-room cinderblock house connected to her devala, which is full of pictures and statues of the gods, their favored objects, incense, and flowers. She has a rich social life. She is friendly with her neighbors, some of whom cook
for her and help in the devala. She interacts daily with her students, patient–clients, teachers, and other adepts. She also has a nascent sexual relationship with a young man for which she has received the blessing of the gods.

When I visited her in 2001, she claimed to have between 150 and 200 students whom she guides in developing their own arudha. Each Sunday, she makes the 10-hour bus trip to Kataragama to take part in temple activities and to visit with her teacher and other friends. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she runs her devala at home. Now, she says she remembers her arudha times and tells fortunes with a conscious mind. Since 1995, she has no longer been moved to make blood sacrifices herself, marking, she believes, her transformation from demonic possession to divine possession.

Transformations

In this telling of Josephine’s lifestory, we hear of a girl who experiences troubles, losses, and crushing disappointments. She meets each of these with a variety of strategies, both conscious and unconscious. Among these early strategies are dissociative responses, which later lead her to engagement in cultural practices of possession. Through engagement with this system, she is able to deal more successfully with many of her problems, including compulsive dissociation, a frightening sexual life, and frustrated identity aspirations. To illustrate these changes and the transformative work she is able to accomplish through participation in possession practices, I focus on three themes as they emerged in interviews: trance experience, sexuality, and self-understanding.

Changes in Dissociation

In her reports about her experiences of dissociation, Josephine says that, when she first went into trances, she would shake, lose consciousness, and have no memory of the event. But these trancelike episodes did not usually occur in a ritual context and she did not experience them as being infused with religious meaning, although she now realizes that these must have been the early effects of the calls of the gods to serve them.

Later, as an emergent and then full priestess, her trances were induced ritually but she still had no memory during them, and she participated in violent acts that were abhorrent to her when not in trance. Of these trances, she speaks of having “had no sense,” of being “not in her clear mind.” She says she was aware only of bits and pieces, images of the gods at first, and of the drumming, and later of feeling like there was someone else who was taking control over her body, over her voice, of feeling desires that were alien to her, desires she knew belonged to the deities possessing her. In these states, unlike the earlier bouts, she would say things and do things related to the gods. Still, most of what she knows about these occurrences she gathered from what other people told her afterward or from evidence she could see herself. For instance, when she made her first blood sacrifice, she says over and over that
she was in her unclear mind, that she had no senses. She remembers seeing the sacrifices, remembers asking for a rooster and being given one, remembers watching the way a more senior máníyo was slaughtering the goats. Then she says “While I was standing my eyes . . . were like . . . there was a blackout. I felt faintish . . . fainted and at last when I regained my clear mind . . . I had broken [off] the head . . . of the rooster and drunk the blood. Drunk blood and like this in one hand the head of the rooster. I remember that. In one hand the head of the rooster. In one hand the other side.” She says she immediately felt repulsed at what she must have done.

Josephine’s possession experiences now stand in marked contrast to these earlier experiences. Now, she only enters a light trance, if at all, and retains full control. She no longer participates in the more violent ego- and socio-dystonic acts. She said “From 1995, I don’t feel like drinking the blood of goats or chickens. Don’t feel like breaking a chicken either. . . . So that period must be over, no? That demon vanished. That is why I am beautiful.”

She remembers everything she does; even when she is doing the gods’ work she is in her regular, clear mind—although she says that on occasion, she may do a little “acting,” “for people who do not believe.” She even seems to forget that she once did not remember, accusing other priestesses who say they do not remember of lying. When I remind her of times she had described to me previously as times of amnesia, she agrees that it used to be different for her. She reasons that was because, in those days, it was a yaka dishtiya (demon possession). But now she says she meditates, a practice that she feels has made a significant difference. She says, “In those days, everywhere I am getting the arudha. Getting [it] in the bus also. At first in the bus, also speaking that [spirit] language.” When asked if things like that ever happen now, she says that they do not and that she is confident that they never will again. Now, she can not imagine not being in full control.

When Josephine recognized emerging change, she worked to create meaning around her new practices, attributing them to spiritual development. Above as in what follows, she has said that the difference is that in the past she was possessed by demons and now she is possessed by gods.

She also uses the idea of her increasing competence and control to make meaning of these changes. She even describes her efforts to achieve control through her negotiations with the divinities possessing her. She says, “The last time it came very powerfully was in Vedihitikanda [near the main temple complex at Kataragama]. . . . [But] I controlled it.” When I asked her how she did this, she said:

“Controlled” means I asked . . . a full vessel never shakes. Only empty ones. So everywhere I’m getting arudha. [So I say to God Kataragama,] “Don’t penalize me like that. God Kataragama, by your powers, allow me to just sit and tell shastara [prophesies]. Or just with my clear mind, let me do everything. Without arudha, let me cut sorcery.” Actually, [now] to cure, I don’t get the arudha. All things are done with a clear mind.
Here, she describes herself as successfully petitioning the gods to allow her to do their work with a clear mind, in full control of her possessions. She portrays herself as having transformed the demon inside of her into a goddess; this, in turn, has transformed Josephine and made her beautiful. She is working to craft the meaning of this change in experience as she describes herself as crafting a change in the experience itself. Unlike some of her competitors who have described this change in her as a loss of power, Josephine wants to say that this change is evidence of a much stronger power. She says, “I do all these things in my clear mind. Not in my unclear mind. If there is a real power, everything happens in the clear mind.”

**Changes in Sexuality**

Josephine also tells a story of a three-stage transformation in her sexuality, in this case from fear, force, and incomprehension to a sexually infused but sublimated devotional relationship with the gods to a new interest in and receptivity to sexual relationships with earthly men. When she was first married, Josephine says she knew nothing of sex and was afraid. She says she never wanted to have sex but her husband insisted. When she became a priestess, she resisted having sex with her husband and eventually left him.

Here, she describes her first sexual experiences with her husband, experiences in which she is scared, confused, and unwilling:

> I wasn’t an age to like things like that. I didn’t love and get married. I entered into a life I wasn’t used to. Because he wanted it, I spent that day like that. Because he needed it. I did that because I didn’t understand. I was scared. I thought that I’ve got “menses.” When I got up and saw it, I ran to wash my clothes so that no one would see me. Then I saw my youngest aunt and I called to her. I told her and she explained everything to me.

However, when she talks about the god Kataragama and his sexualized relationship with Sinhala women in general and with her in particular, she is playful and confident.

> Why does [God Kataragama] love Sinhala women? Now how much does he love us! . . . From God Kataragama, if there is something intensely desired, . . . help can be gotten from him if the stri linge [vagina] is made ready and a puja [offering] is made.

Her sexuality, which once brought her misery and powerlessness, now brings her the assistance of so powerful a god as Kataragama. In contrast to the constricted fearfulness that characterized her sexual relations with her husband, this sexual love is what she say makes her increasingly beautiful and alive.

When describing this love of Kataragama at one point, she makes a narrative transition that reflects a transition taking place in her life. She says:
Actually, God Kataragama is very amorous and like a bridegroom. Understood? So he is like us. Actually, we [devotees] are not allowed to have a family life. Living alone. A lot are like that. Now actually, I can lead a family life. With someone like this. I will also tell that clearly. When telling about this slave-life [i.e. life of a devotee], I must tell this also, no? Now to live . . . actually I can be with a man, with a young man. With a pure man. I have got permission. Because . . . impure . . . other men are not pure, no? That means . . . with a man who had been with another woman, we cannot be with such people. God Kataragama doesn’t like it. If we are living with a man who is handsome and strong like God Kataragama, then he . . . I have permission for that.

And it turns out, she has someone in mind: a student of hers, a young man of 25 whom she is guiding in the development of his own possession practice.13 She says,

We are talking . . . actually, we are living nicely with a lot of fun. Fun means we are eating, drinking, generally we are talking about different things about God Kataragama. . . . Often now when I go, all the boys are around me. Not in a bad way. Usually 25 years, 26 years, 27 years, 28—the young generation comes to me saying, Amme [Mother] or Māniyo. Some are running and kissing me. No one is thinking anything. Some are sleeping on my lap. Some are. So things like this are not prohibited by God Kataragama. Because he is happy. We . . . now I am a woman, no? He is happy if I am having fun.

In this she moves from being the terrified, helpless target of her husband’s destructive sexuality to being the seductress of the god’s beneficent and idealized sexuality to being an ordinary woman attracted to and attracting a kind of homey, nurturing sexuality with a nonthreatening but human man, and even playfully encountering other men in sexual ways. Recently, the gods have told her that she may have sex as long as it is with virginal men, something she is considering. What is more, she feels that this is all good and that she is pleasing to others, to the gods, and to herself.

Changes in Self-Evaluation
The changes evident in these excerpts are also apparent and meaningful to Josephine. In her reflections on her life, she says that her life is changed from one of suffering to one of beauty, not only through divine intervention but through her own good work and spiritual development. She says that her life was full of suffering until she became a priestess. Now she is beautiful and full of energy. She has work to do and supportive people surrounding her. She says this is because of the gods’ help and because of the pin (spiritual merit) both she and Kali Amma have earned through their work helping those who come to them.

She describes her life as full of beauty, happiness, and potential now. Because of the gods, her life is no longer full of suffering but instead is full of meaningful activity, joy, and sociability.
I didn’t see into beauty, wealth, or education before I got involved [with the gods]. It must have been something I had brought from my previous birth. I think this because I was very happy when I was small. But when I was living with him [her husband], I felt as if I was suffering a lot of hardships. It is only now that I am really happy. Once a week I go to Kataragama to worship the god and come back. And when I come home, these people are here. In the evening there is always someone here. And my life is jolly. . . . It is only now that I am starting to live.

Josephine feels that she even looks better now, that her very body has been transformed by her participation with the gods. She continually points out with pride how young she looks and how healthy she is, things she sees as marks of the gods’ blessing.

But all of these good things in her life are not simply because of good fortune or the whims of the gods. Through her own work she has transformed herself and the goddess within her, eliding the meanings of the two. At one point, Josephine told the story of how Kali had been reborn as a demon and then killed a man so she could not go back to being a goddess. But at Munnesvaram, Josephine sees that Kali Amma has been given a great deal of spiritual merit by the people who come there for help. Abruptly she begins to speak about herself, saying,

Then, actually, I did not live like this. Those days I was like a demon. Those days I was like a demon. . . . Now, it is not like that. Now after [Kali] Mn̄iyo became Sabon, I am very beautiful. Now Kali Mn̄iyo and god Kataragama both got together and made a new path for me, not like the old one.14

How did this happen? It happened through the accrual of pin for both Kali and Josephine through the good work that they have been doing together over the last 30 years. She says,

We are helping people to overcome sorrows, no? Curing diseases. If family life is a mess, we are fixing that. Then if there is sorcery, we are cutting that then binding it up. Doing benevolent things. . . . Giving pin to Kali Amma and to me also.

Like the goddess she serves, Josephine says that she has been internally and externally transformed through her activities as a priestess and the relationships that has fostered.

A Progressive Transformation

Josephine tells a vivid lifestory of moving from suffering to satisfaction, a move she attributes to her involvement with spirit possession. With this in mind, I want to return to the debate between Obeyesekere and Spiro; can involvement in spirit possession practices be curative? Both Spiro and Obeyesekere, along with Josephine herself, would agree that her life before becoming a priestess was full of suffering and signs of distress. Prominent in the story she tells is her suffering in relationships, suffering within herself, and suffering in her spontaneous, uncontrollable bouts of trance.
Most anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists who study religious trance agree that altered states of consciousness, such as those achieved in meditation, prayer, spirit travel, and spirit possession, experienced in certain culturally normative religious practices, are comparable, although not identical, to dissociative states experienced by certain people suffering from psychopathology. Although they offer a diversity of approaches, interpretations, and evaluations of these states as they occur among the people they study, Boddy (1989), Bourguignon (1979), Castillo (1994a, 1994b), Devereux (1980), Lambek (1993), Lewis (1989), Luhrmann (2004), Suryani and Jensen (1993), and Spiro (1997), as well as the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* ([4th ed., text rev.] *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association 2000) all consider states of religious trance as part of a more general category of dissociative phenomena. These phenomena include a range of mental states, from daydreaming to hypnosis to the disordered dissociative symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Dissociative Amnesia, and Dissociative Identity Disorder detailed in the *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Although much of the Western clinical and lay concern around dissociation, at least in recent years, has focused on problems of memory (Hacking 1995; Young 1995), the concern here is with the dissociated state itself, the experience of being in a state of trance, and effects on mental health.

As Luhrmann defines it, a dissociative trance state is “a simple behavioral pattern in which a subject displays intense absorption in internal sensory stimuli with diminished peripheral awareness” (2004:106). When entering dissociated states is habitual, out of the person’s control, and has a severe, negative impact on a person’s functioning in the world, it is usually considered problematic, in Western clinical practice as well as in other cultural systems.

To Josephine and others within her cultural frame, when possession trances are experienced as senseless affliction or spirit attacks, as they were before she became a priestess, the trances are explicitly identified as undesirable. Once Josephine fully takes up her role as priestess, however, she eliminates these spontaneous bouts of trance affliction, dissociating at will as part of her culturally defined and valued service to the gods. In these instances she sees the processes as filled with positive meaning. Josephine and those around her no longer consider her possession practices to be signals of trouble but rather signs of blessing and power. Josephine seems to have used the culturally available idiom of possession in ways similar to those whom Obeyesekere describes as having moved away from regressive and idiosyncratic expressions of misery to the culturally meaningful expression of more mature needs and desires, an assessment that marks the point of departure with Spiro who considers possession-trace episodes necessarily pathologic.

However, Josephine’s case gives us an opportunity to move these questions forward because her transformation story does not end with her becoming a priestess who dissociates in culturally meaningful ways. In Josephine’s story, there is a third step toward behavior she herself evaluates as a positive, progressive transformation and one that meets the criteria of mental health that Spiro lays out. At the point when I met her, Josephine no longer entered deep trance states at all, did not feel compelled into actions she identified as alien to
her own wishes and moral compass, was effective in her social world, and was finding happiness in both her priestess activities and the more mundane areas of her life. However, counter to Obeyesekere's markers of positive outcome, if we may call the arbitrary time at which I met Josephine an "outcome," she seems to be edging "out of the cultural frame" of expectations for a priestess (1990:68). Although she is unlike those in Obeyesekere's sample whom he deems psychotic by virtue of their severely impaired capacity for reality testing and withdrawal into a private and idiosyncratic worlds, her means of interacting with the divine realm has come to diverge from that of the ideal priestess, who, by definition, must enter deep and authentic trance states during which she has no consciousness and no control over her own body, which has been fully taken over by the possessing beings. It seems that Josephine’s work with her culture has led her through and away from the objective of creating a predictable kind of priestess.

So how might we understand this transformation that Josephine describes and her fellow adepts have noticed, a transformation that seems to be, in Spiro’s terms, a repair of the pathological consequences of severe traumas that he argued could not be achieved “except perhaps by means of prolonged psychiatric intervention” (1997:125)? It may be useful to compare the story that Josephine tells to the general trajectory expected for a successful “psychiatric intervention” of the kind Spiro recommends. Although some anthropologists (e.g., Boddy 1994; Kapferer 1997) reject the idea of comparing spirit possession practices with psychotherapy, the trajectory does bear a certain family resemblance to the story Josephine has told.

**Two Versions of the Work of Culture?**

In contemporary, mainstream U.S. psychotherapeutic practice, uncontrollable bouts of trance are seen as symptoms of post-traumatic stress and dissociative disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association 2000). According to the understandings of this cultural model as outlined in Figure 1, when people are faced with psychological traumas (prototypically: child abuse, war, and natural disasters) they may respond by spontaneously dissociating. Subsequent to the trauma, these dissociative responses may become problematic for those who experience them and for those around them, particularly if they become habitual and uncontrollable, if they are filled with frightening associations, or if they become elaborated into fragmented self-states, interfering with effective functioning in the world. When this problematic dissociation is presented to the clinician, the clinician identifies the dissociative experiences as symptoms of psychological disorder and engages with patients to explore and understand their diagnosis. Although these specific diagnoses, understandings about them, and treatment methods vary among patients and among clinicians, as well as over time and place as Hacking (1995), Young (1995), and Leys (2000) have pointed out, psychotherapeutic frameworks share common goals for patients to learn to bring their dissociation under conscious control, come to new understandings of their lifestories, and make positive changes in their functioning in the world.
Figure 1 illustrates that Josephine’s description of her life could be read as parallel to this process, as she transforms through the work of the cultural system in which she is engaged. In childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, Josephine was beset by a variety of difficulties. Powerless to correct them, she responded with compulsive dissociation. She encountered a variety of religious experts who interpreted her dissociation first as demon and spirit attacks and then, when the attempts at exorcisms failed, as possession by deities calling her to serve them. Having come to an interpretation that she could make sense of and make sense with, she experienced herself as simultaneously called by, resisting, and being driven by the gods, expressing and abreacting her feelings while in trance. Through her continued involvement with various religious teachers and possession practices, she learned to ascribe meaning to her dissociation and to control it, taking on the role of a priestess with full control over her entry into dissociative trances that were socially effective and culturally meaningful performances. Through her participation in this cultural system, she also was able to make important changes in her social relations: eliminating her husband’s control over her and giving up domestic responsibilities, gaining an income and a supportive social network, and taking on a valued social role. More recently, she has been engaged in a process of renegotiating this role to allow for her newfound inability or at least lack of desire to enter trance or to perform the violent and bloody acts on which she had built her reputation and her livelihood, as well as to accommodate her newly emerging interest in sexuality and her rising self-esteem, signs of well being that are perhaps more consonant with the goals of the Western model of therapy outlined above than of the usual Sri Lankan priestesshood.

It seems that for Josephine, her participation in these ritual practices has not just been adaptive but actually has been “curative” of her earlier psychological troubles—of her suffering within unhappy life circumstances and of her compulsive and problematic bouts of dissociative trance. If a “cure” means she no longer dissociates, as it might to some Western clinicians, then she seems to be cured. If by cure we mean that she has achieved an “enhanced sense of personal congruity and vitality,” which Cohler and Cole point to as the successful outcome of a course of psychoanalysis (1996:73), then she seems to have been successfully treated. And if a cure implies that one has achieved the subjective measures of happiness that she herself sets out—in this case, that she has a supportive social network of people with whom she shares intimacy and caring, that she finds her life and her work meaningful, that she feels loved by her gods and her friends, and that she feels good about who she is, then Josephine also seems to meet these criteria, all through the work of culture.
Three Ways the Work of Culture Works

Spiro’s assertion that these transformations could only be achieved through Western-style psychotherapy appears to be incorrect, at least in the case of Josephine. It may be that there are similar factors at work in both religious possession and psychotherapy that facilitate the kinds of personal changes that Josephine describes. For Josephine, there are at least three aspects to the improvement she noticed: changes in her dissociation, changes in her relationships, and changes in the meanings of it all.

Obeyesekere has given us a productive way to think about the ways that meanings are re-worked and communicated, intrapersonally as well as interpersonally, through the employment of personal symbols drawn, in this case, from the possession idiom. In engaging with symbols that are both publicly and psychologically salient, people are able to represent inner dramas and to reorganize these into narratives that feel good, make sense to self and others, and allow effective responses to new situations. Although less concerned with the intrapsychic effects of symbolization, other major figures in the anthropology of spirit possession have also focused on communication and manipulation of meanings. As Boddy points out in her review of this scholarship, “An issue threading throughout the literature is that of selfhood or identity: how possession creatively resitutes individuals in a profoundly alienating or confusing world” (1994:422). Kapferer (1983), Lewis (1989), Boddy (1989), and Lambek (1993) have each considered the ways that key participants in ritual possession trances express their social, relational, and personal troubles in culturally meaningful ways, ideally gaining redress and resolution. Similarly, a focus on identifying and reconstituting the meanings involved with psychological distress has also been at the heart of mainstream psychotherapeutic approaches of the kind Spiro recommended as Josephine’s only hope of a cure. Through this “talking cure,” insight is achieved and new narratives constituted (Schafer 1992).16

However, there are two additional aspects of Josephine’s transformation highlighted in her narrative: the actual practices involved and the establishment of positive relationships. Both of these aspects have figured in discussions of efficacy by scholars of both spirit possession practices and psychotherapeutic processes. I want to close by briefly arguing that these features be included in an extended conception of how the work of culture works.

First, practice and bodily involvement. These issues are central to prominent accounts of both psychotherapeutic effectiveness and spirit possession practices, although the terms differ. Early psychoanalytic theories of abreactions and catharsis (Breuer and Freud 1957), conceptions of dissociation and trauma (Herman 1992), as well as ideas about hypnosis, concentration, and imaging and the development of cognitive-behavioral therapy have all looked to the role that conditioned behavioral patterns and body states play in pathology and healing. Through the physical enactment of emotions, memories, states, and ideas, new links can be forged and new ways of being, thinking, and feeling can be practiced.
Recently, anthropologists have also noted the importance of embodied performance in their accounts of the power of spirit possession practices. For those looking at possession who are more psychodynamically inclined, like Suryani and Jensen (1993), abreaction and catharsis are also thought to play the key role allowing distressing emotions to be expressed and released in culturally sanctioned ways. Others like Kapferer (1983, 1997), explicitly reject a psychological approach but focus on the ritual structuring of action and performance as effecting transformation in consciousness. Csordas (2002) advocates approaching these issues with a recognition that the body includes both the mental and the physical, and is the starting point of both perception and practice. He suggests that the transformative power of ritual lies in the involvement of both the psychological and physiological in embodied engagement with meaning in the world.

One of the key practices a possession adept must master is the ritual induction of trance states. As Lewis (1989) points out in his review of spirit possession practices cross-culturally, the techniques for inducing these states fall into three types: sensory overload, sensory deprivation, and substance use. The Sinhala possession adepts I observed followed a cultural script for entering and exiting possession trances combining sensory overload and deprivation. The priestess begins by making certain she is ritually pure, having neither eaten nor engaged in anything offensive to the gods. At an auspicious time, she enters a space set apart and consecrated to the deity with whom she wishes to communicate, whether a temple setting or her own small shrine room. These sacred spaces are filled with images and symbols of the gods, a cacophony from drums and other temple instruments, and the scent and smoke of oil lamps and incense burned as offering and enticement. Gazing at the ritual objects, she rocks rhythmically, her head rolling in circles, her long hair falling out of its tight bun. As the tempo and intensity of her spiral rocking increase, so does the volume of her staccato moans that punctuate each circle, her eyes rolling back in her head. The trance state established, she suddenly jolts into the posture of the spirit who animates her, hands contrived into a divine mudra (gesture) or laid on the head of a petitioner. At that point the spirit is manifest, in full possession of the body of the priestess that it uses to dance and enjoy the offerings or to speak in the god’s own language to those seeking counsel. When the spirit is finished, there is again a jolt and the body suddenly deflates; the rhythmic sounds and movements stop. The eyes, no longer rolled back, look around with bashful confusion trying to guess what has happened as the hands smooth wild hair, rebinding it into a bun, and straighten disheveled clothing.

All those I saw in possession trance states in Sri Lanka participated in these stereotyped behaviors that marked them as being taken over by a spirit being. For many, they only experienced trance states when induced through such ritual means. When I would ask if they had ever received arudha while in an ordinary, nonsacred space, they could not conceive of that happening. However others, like Josephine, first experienced possessions as inexplicable and often terrifying attacks, outside of ritual settings. It was only through the guidance of ritual experts that they learned not only to make sense of these experiences but to control them. Through repeated practice entering and leaving trance under safe, controlled, and
meaningful circumstances they learned to control their propensity for dissociation and to use it in meaningful ways. It is through this practice that I believe Josephine was able to transform what had been a compulsive mental fleeing from stressful events, a state in which she had no conscious control over her own actions, into a culturally valued skill that she used intentionally and expertly. This embodied participation is part, I am arguing, of how the work of culture is accomplished.

The second feature that I argue be added to a consideration of the efficacy of the work of culture is the role that relationships play. The importance and power of relationships feature strongly in Josephine’s narrative, driving her misery as well as her happiness. Likewise, relationships play a key role in accounts of change in both the psychotherapeutic and possession literatures. Psychotherapeutic oriented theories focused on transference (Freud 1975), object relations (Loewald 1960), and attachment (Karen 1998), all emphasize the significance of relationships with important others, not just in the development of psychopathology but in its treatment.

Anthropologists have also noted the importance of social relationships and their renegotiation in their accounts of spirit possession. In surveying possession trance practices across cultures, Lewis (1989), Bourguignon (1979), and Boddy (1994) have all pointed to the significance of social structural dynamics. In what he calls “ritualized rebellion,” Lewis describes socially subordinate members of society possessed by spirits who speak on their behalf in ways that they could not. Bourguignon argues that those typically involved in trance practices are those most vulnerable within the social structure and that the trance experiences themselves reflect and respond to these stresses. Boddy sees possession episodes as entailing a “ritual reordering” of the relationships between self, others, and spiritual powers, which is “a process of self-construction and healing that takes place on several planes at once” (Boddy 1994:422). To Spencer (1997) and Kapferer (1983, 1997), both of whom examine spirit possession practices in Sri Lanka, the reordering of social relationships is principally what these rituals are about. One of the things that emerges in many of these analyses is the importance of finding a meaningful, socially understood and valued role that allows persuasive and sensible communications. Further, the quality of these relationships are both a sign of health and a source of transformation.

For Josephine, relationships, practices, and meanings are each essential parts to the transformation she has been able to make, and are all interwoven in her narrative. Her early embodied experiences of dissociation in response to crises in her relationships were both a sign and a cause of her suffering, and prompted her search for meaning. Her engagement with the possession idiom gave meaning to these embodied states as well as to the structured practice for controlling them. Through her participation in these practices, Josephine not only gained a more secure livelihood and a socially recognized role, but the practices justified and facilitated change in interpersonal relationships, allowing her to eliminate or alter those that were the source of misery while helping her cultivate more satisfying ones. These relationships with teachers, other adepts, students, and clients allowed her to rework
previously inadequate or painful social ties. In addition, the new relationships are satisfying in their own right, providing companionship, warmth, interest, and reflection of the good self, as well as support in times of crisis, purpose, and celebration. With these changes in her social world and changes in her embodied states, states that no longer include deep trances, Josephine has come to a renewed search for meaning by reworking personal symbols in her lifestory. In this process, we see the transformative potential of the work of culture, potential that is derived not only from the creation of symbolic meaning, but also from participation in embodied practices and relationships with essential others.

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Notes

Acknowledgments. The field research presented in this article was assisted by Inoka Baththanage and funded, in part, by the U.S.–Sri Lanka Fulbright Commission and the University of California, San Diego, Department of Anthropology and Friends of the International Center. I first wrote about this case as part of my doctoral dissertation (Chapin 2003:214–253). The analysis has benefited from the support of the National Institute of Mental Health and the comments of Tanya Luhrmann, Roy D’Andrade, Steven Parish, Mel Spiro, John Chapin, the participants in the University of Chicago’s Clinical Ethnography Workshop, and the reviewers for this journal. My gratitude belongs especially to the woman here called Josephine.

1. Like the priestesses whom Obeyesekere describes (1981, 1990), Josephine is a Sinhala speaker and member of Sri Lanka’s politically and numerically dominant ethnic group. Although there are Sinhala Catholic and Protestant Christians, most identify as Theravada Buddhist. Incorporated into this Buddhist practice and ideology is a space for gods, goddesses, demons, and other spiritual beings. Many of these gods and goddesses are associated with Hindu traditions of the island’s Tamil groups. Although the rituals involving gods and other spirits are marginal to the beliefs and practices of Buddhism, they are integral to the everyday lives of many Sinhala Buddhists. They have particular appeal to those seeking assistance with worldly concerns, because gods and spirits are understood to be part of this conditioned existence, able to interact with and influence human life in ways the Buddha cannot. Although the traditional conduits to the gods have been the male hereditary priests of long-standing temple sites, there are those who derive their religious authority from spirit possession, many of whom are women.

2. Traditional understandings of Buddhist doctrine hold that only lower forms of spirit beings like a yaka (demon) or preta (ghost) would possess a human, although these ghosts may, according to local spirit possession beliefs, convey the blessings of gods and facilitate communication with them. However, in everyday conversation, this distinction is usually lost and the gods are spoken of, understood, and experienced as the direct possessing agents.

3. This is the same temple complex at which Obeyesekere conducted the bulk of his fieldwork with possessed priestesses on which Medusa’s Hair (1981) is based. Kataragama is the name of the town as well as the name for the central god of the pilgrimage site.

4. Many of the people who visit Kataragama do so to make or fulfill vows in exchange for assistance from the god. These demonstrations of devotion range from simple offerings of fruit to dancing while carrying an arch associated with the god, to rolling in the hot sand of the temple grounds, piercing the skin with skewers or hooks attached to ropes, or walking over burning embers at the annual festival. For an account of the rise of these practices at Kataragama, see Obeyesekere (1978).
5. Ms. Baththanage accompanied me during all field visits and interviews related to spirit possession, assisted with translation and logistical arrangements, and provided indispensable insight and enthusiasm.

6. Māniyo is the title given to female priestesses who serve the gods, a respectful term for Mother. Māniyo is also the affectionate kin term title used for goddesses.

7. All interactions with Josephine were conducted in Sinhala, her first and primary language.

8. For a full description of this temple complex see Bastin (2002).

9. School attendance was free of charge and common for both boys and girls.

10. According to Josephine, because her family gave her away in marriage against her will and because they did not believe in her possession, “the person living in my body” (her grandmother’s spirit) later punished her mother with five and a half years of paralysis.

11. Kataragama is probably the most popular god among Sri Lankan Buddhists. See Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) for an account of his popularity.

12. The ability to be possessed at different times by a number of relatives (often a ritually significant number) and having special relationships with a number of gods and goddesses is typical of the possession adepts with whom I spoke.

13. Although priestesses are typically expected to be celibate, Bastin (2003:164) also reports that one of the Sri Lankan priestesses he interviewed was divorced and had taken her younger male ritual partner as her sexual partner.

14. Here, it is unclear whether Josephine is saying that Kali formerly was in her Sohon form, usually considered to be the Kali of the cemeteries, or whether in Josephine's personal mythology she understands Kali's Sohon manifestation to be her beneficiary. As Gombrich and Obeyesekere point out, these mythologies and their meanings are in flux in the contemporary devotional practice: “Kali is sometimes divided into two, Bhadra (‘Auspicious’) Kali and Sohon (‘Cemetery’) Kali, thus isolating her benign and her terrible aspects, . . . however the situation is complicated, for it may be the terrifying goddess who has the greatest power to help or bless” (1988:34).

15. I have drawn this model from my own training and clinical work with sexual assault survivors in the United States as well as the psychotherapeutic literature by Andreasen and Black (1995), Davidson (1995), Finkelhor (1986), Herman (1992), Nemiah (1995), Ross (1997), and Wong (1989); the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association 2000); and the critical scholarship of Hacking (1995), Leys (2000), and Young (1995). The general outlines of this cultural model are evident throughout the writings on trauma and dissociation, at least since Janet (Nemiah 1995:1282) and Breuer and Freud (1957) were writing at the end of the 19th century.

16. For a suggestive examination of the significance of different types of narratives in recovery, see Shohet (2007).

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