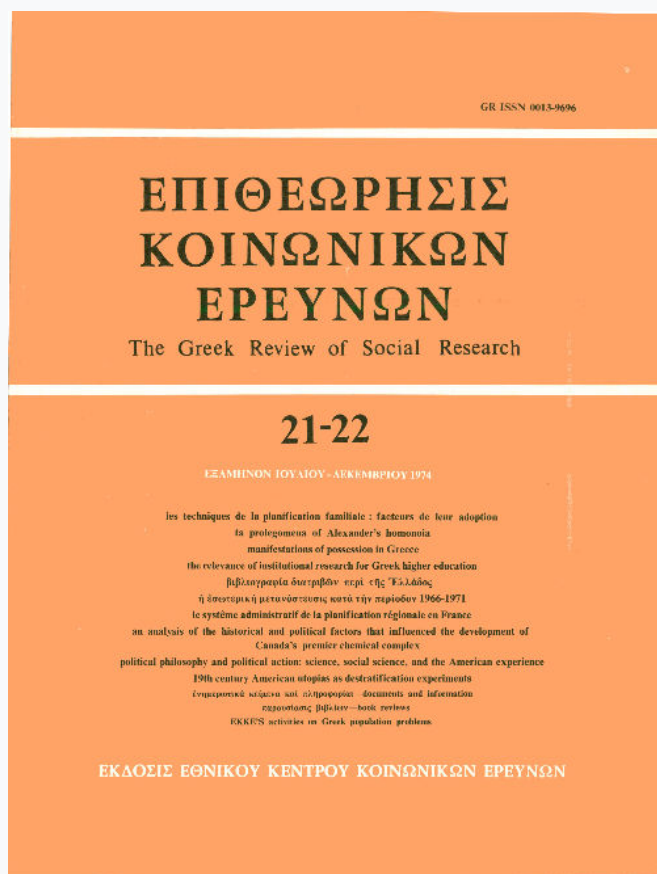


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# manifestations of possession in Greece

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Possession as a phenomenon in hellenic society is by no means a thing of the past. It has persisted down the centuries in certain areas of Greece, notably in the area considered to be the first home of the worship of Dionysos outside Asia Minor, that is to say, in Thrace.

We shall come later to these contemporary manifestations. For the moment let us turn our attention to the past.

For students of the classics, the most famous and vivid account of possession is to be found in the *Bacchae* of Euripides in which a company, or thiasos, of women, the maenads, in a state of ecstasy and a condition of enthusiasm is described as celebrating a dionysiac ritual on the slopes of mount Cithaeron near Thebes. This ritual is at one and the same time an act of frenzied worship of the god and a form of therapeutic union with him.

The condition of ecstasy and enthusiasm was generally considered to be the result of a kind of mania or madness, the cause of which was then, and has since been, variously explained.

According to the popular conception all madness was possession by a supernatural power, that is to say, by a spirit or daemon or, more importantly for us, by a god. This condition, however, did not necessarily imply a state of mental aberration on the part of the one possessed.

At the other end of the scale so to speak the doctors in an age of only faintly dawning science relied on the theory that the body is composed of four humours. An excess of one of these could produce disease, thus disease of the mind was thought to be produced by an imbalance of humours particularly of black bile. Somewhere between these two extremes lies the explanation—to cite but a few sources—offered by the historian Herodotus, the philosophers Plato and Aristotle and the dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

## a. historical examples

Herodotus in the *Persian Wars* (Book 6) recounts that the Spartan king Cleomenes, being recalled from exile, had no sooner returned than «he who had never been altogether of sound mind, was smitten with downright madness and after physically assaulting his subjects he was finally put in the stocks.» However he managed to get hold of a knife with which, having grossly disfigured himself, he finally committed suicide. «The Greeks», says Herodotus, «generally think that his fate came upon him because he had once forced the Delphic oracle to give an answer he wished to hear. The Athenians held that his death came about by supernatural intervention because he cut down the sacred groves when he invaded Attica by way of

Eleusis. His own countrymen, however, the Spartans, declared that his madness proceeded not from any supernatural causes but only from a habit of drinking wine unmixd with water, which he learned from the Scythas.»

One form of sickness, epilepsy, here as elsewhere, occupied a middle place in the scale of evaluation being considered as either from the gods or as something with a purely physiological or psychological cause. Herodotus describes the case of the mad King Cambyse, who murdered his young pregnant wife, as a madness resulting either from his usage of the Egyptian god Apis or from «the sacred sickness,» in other words epilepsy.

This latter explanation, as E.R. Dodds points out in *The Greeks and the Irrational* (p. 65), is relatively advanced thinking, unknown to earlier times and not popularly shared even when Herodotus was writing in the fifth century B.C.

#### **b. the philosophers**

We will limit ourselves here to references from Aristotle and Plato.

##### *1) Aristotle*

In the eighth book of *Politics* Aristotle deals with the education of youth and the importance of music in education. The ancient Greeks, indeed, appear to have been particularly sensitive to the power of music, as we see not only here but elsewhere, notably in Plato's *Republic*.

In the *Politics* (Book 8, ch. 5) Aristotle discusses the power of music as a comfort or pleasure after labour and grief. «We should also examine», he says, «if it tends to improve our manners and our souls.» It is in this connection that he uses the word *enthusiasm* and by implication, perhaps, indicates that music exercises a certain «possession.» «This will easily be known», he says, «if we feel our dispositions anyway influenced thereby; and that they are so, is evident from many other instances as well as the music at the Olympic Games; and this confessedly fills the soul with enthusiasm; but enthusiasm is an affection of the soul which strongly agitates the disposition.» In a later chapter (ch. 7) he likewise insists that enthusiasm is so powerful in some as to overpower the soul. The phrygian music in particular is characterized as filling the soul with *enthusiasm*, «...as has been well described by those who have written philosophically upon this part of education... the same holds true with respect to rhythms; some fix the disposition, other occasion a change in it; some act more violently, others more liberally. From what has been said it is evident what an influence music has over

the dispositions of the mind and how variously it can fascinate it.»

I cite these passages because they are of interest in our context by virtue of:

- a) the power of music to induce enthusiasm,
- b) the interesting fact that Aristotle speaks of the enthusiasm-music as Phrygian, the country held to be the place of origin of the Dionysiac rites,
- c) his insistence on the power of rhythm.

##### *2) Plato*

###### *a) Timaeus*

Earlier we referred to the medical explanation of madness as a condition created by an imbalance of the humours especially by an excess of bile. In this connection it is interesting to note that in the *Timaeus* Plato arrives at his discussion of divination and prophecy—both forms of possession—from an explanation of the disposition of the parts and functions of the liver.

«That part of the soul which is subject to appetites for food and drinks and all other wants that are due to the nature of the body they (that is to say those who made us) planted midway between the midriff and the boundary of the navel. This area, a manger for the feeding of the body, is housed as far away as possibly from the counselling part... and in as much as they know that it could not understand reason and that, even if it did have some share of the perceptions of reason, it would have no natural instinct to pay heed to any of them, but would be bewitched for the most part both day and night by images and phantoms... to guard against this God divided and constructed the form of the liver and placed it in this part's abode.»

When all is functioning well and all parts around the liver are cheerful and serene «in the night it passes its time sensibly, being occupied in its slumber with divination seeing that in reason and intelligence it has no share. For they who constructed us, remembering the injunction of their Father, when he enjoined upon them to make the mortal kind as good as they possibly could, rectified the vile part of us by thus establishing therein the organ of divination that it might in some degree lay hold on truth. And that God gave unto man's foolishness the gift of divination, a sufficient token is this: No man achieves true and inspired divination when in his rational mind, but only when the power of his intelligence is fettered in sleep, or when it is distraught by disease, or by reason of some *divine inspiration*. But it belongs to a man when in his right mind to recollect and ponder both the things spoken in dream or waking vision by the divining and inspired nature... and all the vision-

ary forms that were seen, and by means of reasoning to discern about them all wherein they are significant and for whom they portend good or evil in the future, the past or the present. But it is not the task of him who has been in a *state of frenzy* and still continues therein to judge the apparitions and voices seen or uttered by himself; for it was well said of old that to do and to know one's own and one's self belongs only to him who is sound of mind...»

There is, perhaps, among other things a foreshadowing of Coleridge's definition of poetry as «emotion recollected in tranquillity.»

#### b) *Phaedrus*

The above passage from the *Timaeus* fits closely the Apollonic form of possession which is one of the four kinds listed in section 244a of the *Phaedrus*. Discussing love and the insanity of the lover, Plato points out that insanity is not necessarily an evil for «in reality the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods. For the prophetess at Delphi and priestesses at Dodona when they have been mad have conferred many splendid benefits upon Greece both in private and in public affairs, but few or none when they have been in their right minds.» In section 265a, again pursuing the subject of love as a form of madness, Plato distinguished two kinds of madness, one arising from human diseases and the other from a divine release from the customary habits. This release is of particular significance in Dionysiac possession.

The four divisions of divine madness he ascribes to four gods:

- a) *prophecy* inspired by Apollo,
- b) *the mystic madness* by Dionysos,
- c) *the poetic madness* by the Muses,
- d) *the madness of love* inspired by Aphrodite and Eros and which, he says, is the best.

Our concern here is with the prophetic madness and with the mystic madness, inspired by Dionysos. The Greek word is *telestike* which may also be rendered as *teletic* or *ritual madness*.

#### c) *Ion*

We cannot leave Plato without citing the parallel he draws between the «possession» of the inspired poet and that of the Bacchantes (533, 534). He is pointing out to Ion, the rhapsodist, that his profession is neither inspired nor a true «techné» (or art) and goes on to add that both the true epic and the true lyric poet is inspired and possessed by a god—«as those caught up in the delirium of the Corybantes are no longer under the control of reason when they dance, neither are the lyric poets when they compose.

The moment their feet respond to harmony and cadence they are caught up in a bacchic trance and under the spur of that possession like the bacchantes who drink honey and milk from the rivers when possessed but not in their senses, the lyric poets do the same.»

For examples of the prophetic and ritual madness let us now turn to

#### c. the dramatic poets

One of the better known examples of *mania* is dramatized by Sophocles in the *Ajax*. However, since it does not fall within the category of possession here being discussed, I have limited the quotations to two very pertinent examples:

##### 1) *Aeschylus*

From Aeschylus we take his portrayal of Cassandra in the *Agamemnon* whose mantic gifts have been conferred on her by Apollo.

Brought back from Troy to Argos as part of his booty by Agamemnon, Cassandra foretells the fate that is to befall her new master and herself.

Stepping down from the chariot in which she has arrived, after Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have gone into the palace, she calls upon Apollo horrified at what she sees in her vision:

«Oh shame upon earth  
Apollo! Apollo!»

Thereafter, in great detail, she unfolds the immediate future and the death of Agamemnon and finally her own.

The chorus recognizes that she is possessed:

«You are possessed of god, mazed at heart  
to sing your own death song...»

«It is clear», says O'Brian-Moore (*Madness in Greek Tragedy*), «that the ultimate cause is a god, that her powers as the chorus implies are due to divine influence. When first she begins her revelation, crying out to Apollo, the chorus remarks that 'even in the slave's heart the gift divine lives on.'»

Clearly the possessed Cassandra is in distress of some kind throughout the prophecy but it appears to be a distress largely brought on by the horror of the events she foresees. However, it is clear that the actual possession by the god is not in itself a pleasant experience and that the prophetess suffers physically as a medium at a spiritualist seance is reported to.

A full and very interesting description, as if from an eye witness, of Apollonian possession is to be found in the fifth book of Lucan's *Pharsalia*.

The Roman general Appian has gone to Delphi to consult the oracle on the future of Rome. «No priestess had occupied the sacred tripod for many

years.» Appius forces the priest to open the temple and search for the pythoness, who at first refuses to cooperate but finally agrees under duress.

«She approached the lip of the great chasm and seated herself upon the tripod. Then for the first time she experienced the divine afflatus, still active after so many centuries, and Apollo genuinely possessed her at last. He forces his way into her heart masterful as ever, drowning out her private thoughts and draining her body of all that was mortal so that he could possess it wholly. She went blundering frantically about the shrine, with the god mounted on the nape of her neck, knocking over the tripod that stood in the path. The hair rose on her scalp and when she tossed her head the wreaths went flying across the bare floor. Apollo's fury was so fierce that fire seemed to boil from her mouth. He whipped her, goaded her, darted flames into her intestines; but at the same time kept her on the curbs and prevented her from disclosing as much as she knew.»

Apparently her vision roamed over all history and the secrets of the cosmos before she finally came to Appius and his answer. Whereupon «her mouth foamed frenziedly; she groaned, gasped, uttered weird sounds, and made the huge cave reecho with her dismal shrieks. In the end Apollo forced her to use intelligible speech and here is the response she gave:

*Appius, you shall avoid the tremendous  
perils of warfare  
Taking your lonesome ease in Euboea, that  
haven of refuge.»*

A vivid description truly but one wonders how, from so brief an utterance, Lucan could have concluded so much. One must remember, however, that it is the nephew of Seneca writing and in a manner that recalls something of his uncle's style.

One further interesting point is raised by the description of the violent movements of the Pythea, namely the theory that at some time the Apollonic and the Dionysiac joined forces. Rhode following Nietzsche, his friend, claims that this occurred when Dionysos went to Delphi and with him ecstasy entered the cult. Kurt Latte (*Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 33, Jan. 1940) rejects this view claiming that there is no evidence for the connection.

## 2) Euripides

With Euripides we come to Dionysiac possession which is a group, rather than an individual, possession. «The worship of Dionysos», says W.K.C. Guthrie (*Greek and their Gods*, ch. 5), «which can never be wholly explained, as it is useless to try to account for his nature by an origin in one single functional type such as that of the vegetation god, however many

characteristics of that type he may display. Always there is something more.»

Perhaps Plutarch's description of Dionysos as quoted by Dodds will help. «His domain is... the whole of the *hydra physis* (the moisture in nature)... that is to say not only the liquid fire in the grape but the sap thrusting in a young tree, the blood pounding in the veins of a young animal, all the mysterious and uncontrollable tides that ebb and flow in the life of nature. Only much later was he identified as Bacchus, god of wine, with his satyrs and his nymphs. Nor is the current notion of Bacchanalian orgies properly applied to the true Dionysiac ritual. The meaning of orgy is an act of devotion, the celebration of secret rites, and to be a bacchante was not to revel but to have a particular kind of religious experience—the experience of communion with the god which transformed a human being into a bacchante.

Wine might be drunk but so was water or milk at these ceremonies.

*Enthusiasm* and possession were induced likewise with the help of other means, namely music and dancing.

The dancing climaxed in the tearing to pieces and eating raw of an animal, which may have signified the god himself. This should not surprise a Christian.

«As the principle of animal life Dionysos», says Dodds, «is the unrestrained potency which man envies in the beast and seeks to assimilate—the cult is an attempt to achieve communion with this potency. The psychological effect was to liberate the instinctive life in man from the bondage imposed by reason and social custom: the worshipper becomes conscious of a strange new vitality which he attributes to the god's presence in him—one with the god, one with his fellow worshippers, one with life on earth.» And since the life of a woman was then more constrained by society, it was to her that Dionysos seemed most liberating and attractive.

We may separate off the history and development of this Dionysiac cult, then, into the following stages:

### 1) the first arrival of the cult into Thrace from Lydia and Phrygia

The cult of this Thracian divinity was closely related to the cult paid by the Phrygians, people almost identical with the Thracians, to their mountain mother Cybele whose corybantic rites (from the Corybantes or the companions of Cybele) were likewise celebrated with wild dances and music.

The Dionysiac festivals were held on mountain tops by night to the music of cymbal, drum, and the maddening unison of the «deep toned flute.» The participants were mostly women, strangely dressed in flowing gowns and carrying snakes sacred to Sa-

bazius, the Thracian Dionysos. They carried thyrsus-wands, with the spear points concealed in ivy leaves and, reaching a pitch of sacred frenzy, they fell upon the beast selected as their victim, devouring the flesh raw. A strange rapture came over the frenzied and possessed dancers, uniting them to the god with therapeutic results.

As Dodds says «the joys of Dionysos had an extremely wide range, from the simple pleasures of the country bumpkin, dancing a jig on greased wine skins, to the *omophagos charis* of the ecstatic bacchanal. At both levels, and at all levels between, he is *Lusios*, the Liberator, who lets you stop being yourself and thus sets you free.»

Dodds further advances the interesting theory that the main appeal of the god to the archaic ages was because not only was life in that age, often a thing to escape from, but more specifically because the individual, as the modern world knows him, began in that age to emerge for the first time from the old solidarity of the family and found the unfamiliar burden of individual responsibility hard to bear. Dionysos could lift him from it. The aim of his cult was ecstasis which again could mean anything from taking you out of yourself to a profound alteration of personality. And its psychological function was to satisfy and relieve the impulse to reject responsibility, an impulse which exists in all of us and can become under certain social conditions an irresistible craving.

2) *The spread of the cult to Hellas* and its rejection—giving rise to myths such as that around which Euripides built his *Bacchae*

The *Bacchae* tells how Dionysos, son of Zeus, and the Theban princess Semele, who is travelling the world to make himself known as God to Man, comes to Thebes where his worship has been rejected even by Agave, sister of Semele and the mother of Pentheus, King of Thebes. Dionysos casts a spell upon Agave and her women, and sets them dancing on Mount Cithaeron. Pentheus, who is bitterly hostile to the new religion, tries to imprison Dionysos and is himself put under a spell. He goes up the mountain and in a moment of illusion is taken for the animal which is to be slain by the women, his head being severed by his mother. Only as she recovers her senses does Agave realize what she has done.

For Euripides, Pentheus exemplifies the limitations of ordinary human reason, closed to the mysteries beyond the material world.

3) *The hellenization of the cult*

Concerning this period Dodds writes: «in the course of the centuries which separate the first appearance

of Dionysiac cult in Greece from the age of Euripides it was brought under state control and lost much of its original character, at any rate in Attica.» Nor were political considerations wanting. In the sixth century Cleisthenes, the tyrant of Sicyon, at war with Argos did away with the worship of the Argive hero Adrastus and transferred to Dionysos tragic choruses with which Adrastus had been honored.

Peisistratus, tyrant of Athenae, to dim the importance of the local hero cults which the aristocracy controlled, not only used the splendour of the Panathenaea with its Homeric recitals, he also built a new temple of Dionysos and enriched the religious calendar by founding or reorganizing a spring festival of the god, the most magnificent of them all—the Great Dionysia of the city.

The Athenians of Euripides' time had no biennial winter rite, no mountain dancing, no eating of the animal; they were content to send a delegation of women to represent them at the celebrations at Delphi.

Even so Dionysos was worshipped as the incarnation of all natural life and vigour in the fullest and widest sense as the typical exponent of the most eager enjoyment of life. Even art, the highest expression of the courage and pride of life, drew, as Rhode points out, much of its inspiration and aspiration toward the infinite from the worship of Dionysos, and the drama, that supreme achievement of Greek poetry, arose out of the choruses of the Dionysiac festival.

To this, however, we may add that in developing out of the festivals of Dionysos, the drama moved sufficiently away from them to allow the country people to ask of the official theatre «What has this to do with Dionysos?»

The association of Dionysos with the theatre introduces another interesting aspect of the phenomenon of possession since it is of the essence of the profession of the actor.

The art of the actor «retains», says Rhode, «a profound and ultimate connection with its most primitive source that strange power of transfusing the self into another being which the really inspired participant in the Dionysiac revels achieved in his ecstasy.»

Perhaps that in part explains the attitude of the Christian Church to theatre from the beginning—an attitude which, in some quarters, persists today. Certainly this capacity of the actor for being «possessed» troubles those in charge of his spiritual welfare. The present writer, some years ago, once asked the chaplain of the French Actor's Guild what his principal problem was. It turned out to be the danger to the actor of losing his «true personality» in others, and hence his inability to be a conscious recipient of grace in his own person thereby endanger-

ing his salvation, since grace is applied only to the individual.

To return, however, to the past and the hellenized Dionysiac ceremonies. Outside Attica they did not so completely lose their primitive quality, notably at Delphi. As Rhode has pointed out «... in spite of all attempts to moderate and civilize it outwardly, the cult of Dionysos retained as its most enduring feature a tendency to be ecstatic and the extravagant that was continually breaking out in threatening or alluring guise.»

Euripides had spent some time in Macedonia and possibly saw the primitive Dionysiac rites performed which he portrays in the *Bacchae*.

Dodds offers an interesting reason for this. «At Athens, Dionysos had been tamed but it does not follow that the Dionysiac temper had vanished and there is in fact plenty of evidence that during the Peloponnesian war—probably as a result of the social stresses which it generated—religion of the orgiastic type began to emerge again under other names... Attic literature began to be full of references to the eastern and northern mystery gods, Cybele and Bendis, Attis, Adonis, and Sabazius. In relation to the *Bacchae*, the last named is of especial interest. He is an oriental counterpart of Dionysos—an unhellenized Dionysos whose cult retained the primitive appeal and much of the primitive ritual which the Attic Dionysos had since lost. Sabazius still promised his initiates what Dionysos had once promised—identification with deity, by the old means—an ecstatic nocturnal rite performed to the music of flute and kettle drum... the past had in fact returned, or was trying to return.»

Thus we now come to a new stage in the history of «possession» in Greece.

#### d. the second coming of Dionysos

As indicated in a reference in Plutarch (*Life of Alexander the Great*) there was a considerable spread of the cult of the Thracian-Macedonian Dionysos at this time (4th cent. B.C.) as there was during the later Greco-Roman period.

Olympias, the mother of Alexander, seems to have been an initiate in various mystery cults. Plutarch tells of a serpent frequently associated with primitive Dionysiac rites, being seen beside her in bed. It appears that «the women of the country were of old extremely attached to the ceremonies of Orpheus and the orgies of Bacchus... in many things they imitated the Thracian women about Mount Haemus from whom perhaps we may derive the Greek word 'threskeuein,' signifying 'the exercise of extravagant and superstitious observancies.' Olympias, being remarkably ambitious of these inspirations and desirous

of giving the *enthusiastic* solemnities a more strange and horrid appearance, introduced a number of large, tame serpents which often, creeping out of the ivy and the mystic fans, and entwining about the *thyrsi* and the garlands of the women, infused terror into the spectators.»

#### e. Dionysos and christian times

##### 1) Byzantium and after

From early Christian times onward, in Asia Minor and in Thrace, evidence exists of the continued survival of sects, ostensibly Christian though regarded as heretical, that performed ceremonies indicating a survival of Dionysiac rites.

An element in all this was the peasants' search for a simple religion—something that answered to their needs.

The subject has been extensively treated in an extraordinarily valuable and interesting book *Dionysiaka* by Katerina J. Kakouri.

«It is known», says Katerina Kakouri, «that in the European Greece of Antiquity the frenzy of the sacred bacchantic *thiasoi* restrained by the joint activity of the state and of the Delphic oracle... took refuge in certain religious movements of an almost sectarian character. A similar phenomenon is observed at a subsequent date in Asia Minor. The cult of Dionysos, being indigenous to that region since time immemorial, found refuge during the Christian era in heretical forms of worship of an 'enthusiastic nature.'»

That bands of these heretical Christians migrated from Asia Minor to Thrace from the eighth century onward is of considerable significance for anyone tracing the continuity of the Dionysiac phenomenon.

«The heresies of the Byzantine era arose from the adherence of christianized adolators to their ancestral beliefs and rites.»

Banished by the Church and State they were continually on the move and in Asia Minor «cohabited with the eastern peoples of the hinterland and, with the rites of another religion, enriched the idolatrous substratum of their own heretical worship. Bacchantic worship found kindred forms in the hinterland and, very probably, ecstatic fire-walking among them... The idolatrous bacchantic religion became for Christians also a sacred madness leading to supernatural visions, enthusiastic dancing, and oracular prophecies. Groups of heretical Christian replaced closed sacred *thiasoi*. The illegality of this strengthened the cryptic character of it and made holy silence imperative, and the need for dogmatic training preserved the process of initiation.»

There is no need to elaborate further on this. It is

sufficient for our purpose to establish a link between the past, both ancient and less remote, and the present. One particular sect however among the many should be named—the Messalians or Massalians who are described as Thracians.

Runciman in his *Medieval Manichee*, describing how the early heretical traditions were preserved, gives a place of primary importance to «a sect known as the Messalians or Massalians, sometimes called by the Greeks the Euchites or Praying People—Messalian is a grecized form of the Syriac word for praying—and sometimes the Enthusiasts or the Choreutes or Dancers.»

## 2) Contemporary Greece

It is a natural step from the Euchites of yesterday to the Anastenarides of today, a sect, like the Messalians originally Thracian, and now to be found in certain villages of Macedonia and who can also be described as Enthusiasts or Choreutes or Dancers. In their rites the phenomenon of possession and the Dionysiac spirit survive.

A film of these rites will be shown during the conference. Here, we will give therefore only such detail as may be needed to supplement the information provided by the commentary.

«The Anastenaria, that is to say the ceremonies of the Anastenarides (the word comes from the Greek for to sigh)», says Kakouri, «have preserved the ancient Dionysiac ecstatic cult, even in twentieth century Europe and are grouped into an autonomous religious confraternity or sacred *thiasos*. They are governed by twelve plenipotent initiates and have as their high priest a chief Anastenaris. They consider the icon of their patron Saint Constantine to be their leader. Their great public ceremony, which reaches its peak with an ecstatic performance of fire-walking, takes place on May 21st, the feast of Saint Constantine and his mother Helen.»

The sacred *thiasos* has in its keeping another ceremony that of the Kalogeros which is performed on *Cheese Monday*, the last Monday of the pre-Lenten period. This feast lasts a day and one phase of it is a very simple drama. The object of this drama is to assure players and audience a good year, and prosperity for cattle and crops.

A film of this ceremony is likewise to be shown. It is enough to notice here, where our principal concern is with possession, that the ceremony of the Kalogeros may not begin unless the chief Anastenaris becomes possessed—thus assuring supernatural approval.

The Anastenarides are dualists, worshippers of fire and water, enthusiasts and prophets and under-

take to exorcise cattle diseases and even certain human ills.

They have private shrines paralleling the sacred groves of antiquity, each enclosing a sacred spring. They likewise have their own sanctuary where the sacred utensils of their cult are kept. These consist of:

a) *icons* which are carried during the ceremonial dance and have a thick handle to allow a firm grip when the dancers are in ecstasy. They are hung with small bells, a method of repelling evil. The icons represent Saint Helen and Saint Constantine and the Anastenarides believe that it is the icons that give them the strength to walk on fire.

b) *the sacred kerchiefs* tied in knots to the icon also kept alongside them in the sanctuary. They are believed to be strengthgiving and are carried at certain moments instead of the icons.

c) *musical instruments*, these are the lyre and the sacred drum which has always accompanied secret rites and which the Anastenarides believe is able of itself «to feel the invisible presence of the saint.»

### *The Calendar for the Ceremony*

1. On *October 27th* of the year preceding the ceremony, money is collected to buy the sacrificial animal and wheat for the baking of bread to be used at the ceremonial meal.

2. On *January 18th* the initial outlay for the animal is made—traditionally a bull, but a ram is acceptable. The animal should be black, have lived an odd number of years and be more than three years old. It must be unblemished in every way and never have been put to work.

3. *May 2nd*. The day scheduled for the women to clear the sacred enclosure.

4. *May 20th*. The icons and sacred handkerchiefs are taken from the church to the sanctuary where a vigil is kept, and the sacrificial animal placed before the icon stand. Lighted candles are set between its horns and it is sanctified by incense. The sacred drum is beaten and a pre-ecstatic condition is induced. On the eve a sacred meal is also eaten.

5. *May 21st*. On the opening day of the feast, which lasts for three days, the order of ceremonies is as follows:

i) *The sacrificial animal* (or animals) is taken to the church where, decked as on the previous night, it is blessed by the priest of the village church. The Church, while officially disapproving of these ceremonies, does not entirely outlaw them, presumably for tactical or discretionary reasons.

The animal is then led to the sacrifice and killed over a pit, the site of which has been chosen by the chief Anastenaris while in a state of ecstasy. The animal is then skinned, later to be cooked and eaten at a banquet of the initiates.

ii) *The icons are blessed.* A house to house visit is made and finally the group assembles at the house of the chief Anastenaris.

iii) *Preparation for the fire-dance.* Over a period of time the Anastenarides work themselves up into a state of trance and the signal being given to light a fire in the center of the village, all is ready for the final stage.

iv) *The fire dance.* The company in a state of ecstasy dances towards the fire. This is today's substitute for the mountain dance of the old dionysiac rite.

«Round the sacred embers», says Kakouri, «as round an altar, the initiates form a ring and a new dance begins. The music with its 'tune that maddens the soul' incessantly protracts its rhythm and sound. The drum, louder than ever, beats against the strained nerves of the possessed. The stimulus of the rhythm as it gets faster and faster excites the dancers to the point of frenzy so that the devotees are brought to the highest pitch of spiritual disturbance, ecstatic intoxication.

'The saint (Constantine) commanded me and I first went into the fire when I was eighteen years old... He always commands', said a chief-Anastenaris.

By the intervention of the saint in conjunction with his holy mother Helen—the successors to Dionysos—the possessed, as they dance, put out the burning embers and through their power consign to the dark, cinders, sickness, animal diseases and ill fortune.»

So the Anastenarides believe and their faith is strong, as the present writer, who witnessed the ceremony a year ago, can testify.

#### conclusion

Such, in very brief outline, is the long story of the reign of Dionysos who came to Thrace at least two thousand years before Christ and, with his astonishing capacity to survive, is still there—revealing a profound and compelling tendency of the human mind.

Has he also a place in our industrial society? It is

a possibility as Jean Rouch suggested in his remarkable film *Les Maitres Fous* in which an African sect finds relief from the strain of life in a westernized city, by way of ecstatic possession and rites paralleling the Dionysiac.

Indeed it is a paradox of our society that by virtue of science and technology we are, at once, the masters of nature and the slaves of the machine. But this does not give us a sense of being part of nature—part of the continuum—part of whatever force there is, God or no God. Dionysos gives his adherents that sense of union with the forces of nature and at the same time a sense of freedom from constraint, and who is more constrained than the industrial factory worker?

Perhaps the so-called hippies are in search of Dionysos. Certainly the model of the *Bacchae* of Euripides is in many of their minds. In an article in the *Humanist* for March/April 1968, defending the use of Marijuana, the author accuses its opponents of the «Pentheus Approach.» Thus he draws an analogy between them and the opposition of Pentheus to Dionysos.

In Florence earlier this year the *Teatro Stabile di Genova* presented a hippie-version of the *Bacchae*.

In Greece last year, the present writer shared a feast of dancing and wine and *sparagmos* and *omophagia*—(the animal was on a spit and the flesh was cooked)—with the people of Delphi and Arachova on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. It was truly an *oreibasia*, a mountain dance, recalling the Maenads and their nocturnal dance, for the people go up overnight to celebrate in the darkness of the woods.

And who could forget the peaceful ecstatic countenances of the dancing Anastenarides of Ayia Helene with their air of release and union with the god? Who in watching them could fail to have a sense of being shut out from something that the compelling music and the flying feet were inviting him to join?

Could it be that, one day, Dionysos might come again—descending on a key industrial city such as Detroit and there restore to those constrained by the machines a freedom created by his music and his ecstasy?

Spirit-possession, in its simple form, is invariably connected with mental anguish and physical suffering. This is true where the shaman is admittedly a neurotic-epileptoid, and it is even more patently either where he is compelled, by the demands of the layman, to induce artificially a trance condition or true seizure, or where he is forced to simulate one.

Paul Radin, *Primitive Religion*.