

## **Stambali: Dissociative Possession and Trance in a Tunisian Healing Dance**

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**Abstract** This study investigated Stambali, a Tunisian trance-dance practiced in Israel as a healing and a demon exorcism ritual by Jewish-Tunisian immigrants. The authors observed the ritual and conducted semi-structured ethnographic interviews with key informants. Content analysis revealed that Stambali is practiced for prophylactic reasons (e.g. repelling the 'evil eye'), for the promotion of personal well-being, and as a form of crisis intervention. Crisis was often construed by our informants as the punitive action of demons, and the ritual aimed at appeasing them. Communication with the possessing demons was facilitated through a kinetic trance induction, produced by an ascending tempo of rhythmic music and a corresponding increased speed of the participant's movements of head and extremities. The experience was characterized by the emergence of dissociated eroticism and aggression, and terminated in a convulsive loss of consciousness. Stambali is discussed in terms of externalization and disowning of intrapsychic conflicts by oppressed women with few options for protest.

**Key words** dance • demon possession • dissociative trance • Israel • Stambali • Tunisia

A Judeo-African legend has it that Jews came to the Tunisian island of Djerba in King Solomon's time. Archaeological findings and numerous texts prove the existence of Jewish communities in Tunisia during the first century CE. While the community in Djerba preserved its traditional Jewish character, as it had always resisted penetration of both Arab and Western cultures, other communities on mainland Tunisia absorbed Muslim and French influences into their ethos.

Although there were periods in which Jews felt tension in Tunisia, no anti-Jewish pogroms have been reported since the independence of Tunisia from French colonialism in 1956. Still, most Jews in Tunisia preferred to relocate rather than risk the sudden and unfavorable changes that characterized Arab-Jewish relations (Haddad, 1984). While many immigrated to France, most Tunisian Jews chose to move to Israel. From 1948 to 1970 over 40,000 Tunisian Jews settled in Israel in several emigration waves that caused the virtual disappearance of the Jewish community in Tunisia and a consequent infusion of some Tunisian customs into the Israeli multicultural fabric (Cohen, 1971). About 100,000 Tunisian Jews and their offspring are estimated to live in Israel today. Their style of life has undergone considerable change as a consequence of the circumstances of life in modern Israel (Deshen & Shokeid, 1974).

This article describes Stambali, a ritual trance-dance musical ceremony performed by Tunisian Jews in Israel for prophylactic and healing purposes. In a glossary of Arabic terms used by Tunisian Jews, D Cohen (1964) defined Stambali as:

a musical seance offered to possession jnun (demons) when they cause physical and mental illnesses. The orchestra consists of black musicians playing a large tambourine, castanets and bagpipes. The female patient (in fact, Stambali is practiced only for and among women) is enticed to dance to exhaustion.

Demonic beliefs were strongly held by many Jews who immigrated to Israel from the Arab orbit. In Morocco, demons were accorded a central role in structuring and explaining daily events (Crapanzano, 1973). Jews of the Maghreb readily adopted the traditions related to demons held by neighboring Muslims (Ben-Ami, 1969; Bilu, 1985). In fact, more than half of the 104 ailments identified among patients of Moroccan Jewish traditional healers in Israel turned out to be demonically caused (Bilu, 1978). However, while religious exorcistic rituals employed by rabbi-healers were the main curative practice among Moroccan Jews (Bilu, 1980), Tunisian Jews negotiated with the occult through entrancing music and a kinetic trance with a more erotic, secular flavor.

### *Indigenous Trance Dances*

Dance serves as a primary vehicle for religious and secular observance throughout Africa. It is part of the language of ritual in tribal interaction (Thorpe, 1989) and provided a mechanism for communal coping – an expressive outlet that contributes to adaptive functioning, particularly under difficult circumstances (Hannah, 1979). In many African cultures, kinetic expression is an important mode of symbolizing an ethos based on a harmonious relationship among nature, body and mind (Farr, 1977; Hale-Benson, 1986; Todson & Pasteur, 1976).

Kelly and Locke (1982) described the trance dances of the !Kung Bushmen and the role of the tribal showman in inducing trances and possession trances in the dancing tribesmen. The Nigerian Tuareg were said to cure *Tamazai*, 'an illness of the heart and soul' through music and dance in healing and exorcism rituals (Rasmussen, 1992). The Tuareg are also known for the *Guedra*, beatific, joyful female trance-dance that does not involve exorcism (Morocco-Dinicu, 1993).

Kennedy (1985) wrote about the Zikr ceremony among members of the Muslim Sufi order in Cairo, Egypt. Through accelerating movements in response to the rhythms of music and chant, participants attempt to 'leave their material bodies' in order to experience unity with God. Although the use of music and dance in orthodox Islamic religion is forbidden, the Sufis discovered that it helped in their meditative practices. For them, music and movement transcend words and logic and go to the heart of nature, 'connecting the seeker to the invisible rhythms of existence, bringing catharsis of emotion and enhancing internal peace' (Shafi, 1985: 84).

Trance-dances form part of Zar cult practices in Egypt (El-Guindy & Schmais, 1994). Women predominate in these rituals, where possession illness is dealt with through a dance-induced trance. A survey of 100 Egyptian women in the Zar ceremony indicated that most participants were unhappily married, housebound women; over half of them were described as 'hysterical' (Okasha, 1966). A similar ritual was described by El-Islam (1974) who studied 60 women participants in Qatar. The respondents lived under harsh social conditions and lacked a nuclear family because they were divorced or widowed. Salama (1988) explained that Africans believe that beauty renders certain women vulnerable to possession and rape by the Zar spirit, following which the woman may withdraw from society with symptoms of depression and dissociation. Possession-trance in the Maghreb was examined by Babes (1995) who argued that the trance of possession could be experienced as violent suffering or as a gentle madness, and claimed that it could be controlled in mystic ceremonies involving music and dance.

African slaves brought the Yoruba religion to Cuba where believers

attempt to achieve spiritual power in which the individual's material self is said to 'disappear,' burned up by the passion and energy generated by liturgical drumming, chanting, and dancing (Amira & Cornelious, 1992). Drumming, singing, and dancing are central to Voodoo possession trances-dances practiced in Haiti by descendants of slaves brought to the island from Nigeria, Dahomey, and Congo (Bourguignon, 1976; Ravenscroft, 1965).

African religions and culture were syncretized in Brazil with elements of Amerindian mythology and Roman Catholicism to create such cults as Candomblé, Umbanda, Quimbanda, and Macumba. The institutions created within these Afro-Brazilian sub-cultures provide ritualized psychotherapeutic treatments based primarily on kinetic trances (Ackstein, 1974a; Stubbe, 1980). Ackstein (1974b) claimed that through these ritual trances, millions of Afro-Brazilians find means of escape from daily worries, securing release of emotional tension, and liberating 'primitive instincts and tendencies.'

Although most of the literature on indigenous trance-dances is based on African cultures, a few reports exist on similar phenomena in Southeast Asia and the Pacific rim nations. Simons, Ervin, and Prince (1988) described the festival of Thaipusam in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in which devotees learn to become trance-adept through specific dance patterns in order to achieve profound religious and spiritual experiences. Fitzhenry (1985) observed self-induced trance-like states among indigenous folk dancers and their audiences in Australia, and Thong (1976) reported on mass trance dances in Bali, Indonesia, which were said to serve as communal emotional outlets.

An extensive literature search on Stambali, the Tunisian trance-dance, revealed only one source. Dekhil (1993) reported that possession-trance phenomena are common in Tunisian culture and experienced spontaneously or ritually. The possession experience is considered to be the encounter between two worlds, the overt world of human beings and the covert world of *djinn*s, the invisible demons. The encounter may be aggressive, possessive, or friendly. The Tunisian Arabic language has developed three different terms to differentiate the varieties: *meskun* denotes one who has a *djinn* living peacefully within him; *memluk* is a person who is possessed by a *djinn*; and a *medrub* is one who had been hit by a *djinn*. The term *mejnun* is generally applied to people who suffer from *djinn* aggression, and is the same as the word for crazy. Dekhil (1993) further explained that Stambali ceremonies are mainly held in Tunisia by what are termed 'black fraternities,' which practice a syncretism of African animistic beliefs and Islam. In their ceremonies, practicing Stambali healers are said to voluntarily invoke the benevolent possession of *djinn*s, harnessing their powers for curative acts designed to exorcise the affected people or premises.

The purpose of this study was to explore the practice of Stambali in Israel and the meanings of this ritualized trance-dance for participants. We aimed to describe the ceremony and also to interview informants who could provide us with phenomenological data through qualitative ethnographic methods.

## Method

We were interested in documenting the different objective observable aspects of the ceremony and in the subjective realities of the participants. We, therefore, observed a Stambali ritual and interviewed key participants who agreed to be our informants. Our many attempts at locating and contacting people knowledgeable about Stambali were initially encountered with suspicion, evasiveness, denial as to any personal involvement with the ritual, fear and flat refusals to cooperate. We were led to understand that some of the rejection was due to the perceived tensions between the positivist Western-oriented milieu of the absorbing Israeli culture and the mystical ethos maintained by some Tunisian immigrants. Some people we tried to talk to were concerned about our attitudes, as academics, toward folk healing; others were worried about their legal standing as folk healers.

### *Informants*

After having convinced those concerned of our respectful and judgment-free interest in Stambali, we were given an opportunity to observe the ritual and to talk to three informants: (i) a 40-year-old male chanter in the orchestra, (ii) a 56-year-old female lead dancer (the Arifa, a female folk healer), and (iii) a 27-year-old female participant in Stambali. The younger participant was an Israeli-born daughter of Tunisian Jewish immigrants; the other two had immigrated to Israel, 31 and 42 years earlier respectively. Our informants had between six and twelve years of schooling and lived in working class neighborhoods of small towns in the Israeli periphery.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data collection consisted of observing the ceremony and a series of semi-structured depth interviews based on ethnographic methods (Spradley, 1979; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Our interview guide included four central subjects extracted from the literature on indigenous trance-dances and our knowledge of dissociative states: (i) the setting, the course and the meaning of props associated with the ritual; (ii) the different circumstances and reasons for the practice; (iii)

the role of demons in the lives of participants; and (iv) the experience and outcome of this trance-dance. Each interview lasted one and a half to two hours and was conducted 'on the informant's territory,' namely a local cafe in the male chanter's hometown and the homes of the two female interviewees.

To enrich our sources, we included a personal account of the Stambali experience by the Jewish-Tunisian novelist, Albert Memmi, published as a story ('The Dance') in one of his books (Memmi, 1992). The recorded interviews and the observation notes were transcribed and coded, together with Memmi's story, for the various themes that emerged. These were sorted into the general categories formulated in our interview guide. Some of the themes identified justified the creation of new subcategories.

## Results

Content analysis of the transcribed observations, interviews, and Memmi's literary text identified several major content categories: (i) circumstances, (ii) ceremony and props, (iii) atmosphere, (iv) dissociative violence and convulsive behaviors, (v) possession experiences, and (vi) healing experiences.

### *Circumstances*

Stambali music and dance events are sometimes produced as extensions to major festive family celebrations, aimed at dispelling the harmful influences of the guests' envy.

After people had a lavish family reception for a bar mitzvah or a wedding or when they purchase a really beautiful home and are afraid of the evil eye, they do Stambali to prevent the evil eyes from harming them. [Participant]

Some Tunisian Jews in Israel seem to enjoy Stambali as a discrete form of

emotional aerobics in which they dance their problems away.

When people hear a Stambali is being organized . . . they come for the release . . . each with her own issues. . . . Nobody talks about what bothers her . . . each one is with herself. . . . They don't talk with each other . . . they are focused in their own heads . . . every participant knows what it is she wants to be released from . . . [Arifa]

The women of our house had already been living a good week in joyous anticipation of a mystery that made them forget all their dissensions. They tried to remain solemn about it, but were too excited to be able to conceal

their childish wild happiness. Actually, they were busy organizing a dance, with Negro musicians. . . . (Memmi, 1992)

Stambali ensembles are sometimes invited to negotiate with menacing demons at times of crisis.

When a woman has problems with her children or with her husband . . . when there is a difficulty in becoming pregnant . . . when problems are stubborn and refuse to leave . . . that is a sure sign of the demons at work, or that an evil eye had been cast . . . then you perform Stambali. [Arifa]

A sharp word, a mere question as to her right to hang her laundry across the roof terrace, were enough to make Aunt Maissa swoon away, collapsing on the ground and foaming at the mouth while her arms and legs beat the air like those of a sick mare. (Memmi, 1992) (on his aunt who required the ritual)

There was this little boy . . . he had beautiful blue eye . . . people booked at him and gave him the evil eye . . . he started to lose a lot of weight . . . the doctors couldn't find anything . . .

Then, his parents invited us . . . [Chanter]

### *Ceremony and Props*

All Stambali ceremonies involve the lighting of incense (Dekhil, 1993; Memmi, 1992). In the ceremony we observed the lead dancer was dancing around a metal tray on which the incense was burning totally engulfed in the smoke. She moved in the smoke seeming to utilize it for her own entrancing process. When we talked to her she explained that the incense also 'helps to dispel the bad atmosphere from the house.'

I had to make my way through a tangled throng of women who were watching . . . all peering deep into the cloud of smoke. How could they see anything at all? (Memmi, 1992)

The lead dancer and the dancing participants in the event we observed wore brightly colored dresses, shawls, and caftans.

You must wear red, especially if you are a lead dancer . . . the demons like those bright colors. . . . Never, under any circumstances wear black when you deal with them, they hate it. [Arifa]

Dekhil (1993) reported the use of white, green, and red materials in the garments of Stambali dancers. In Memmi's account we found the following description:

I recognized the tawdry finery that she had compulsed from her wooden boxed, the orange-colored *djebals* gown strewn with red and green sequins, the artificial silk *fouta* veil, brilliantly coloured. (1992)

The Stambali orchestra we observed consisted of bagpipes, a flute, large metal cymbals, tambourines, and tom-tom drums. Memmi (1992) described a similar ensemble, but Dekhil (1993) described Tunisian Stambali orchestras that were 15 musicians strong.

Stambali music is played in an ascending tempo to facilitate the increasing speed of the dancers' movements. When trance is achieved the orchestra changes rhythms to facilitate awakening.

The band drives the rhythm into my bones . . . they really know how to do it . . . the music gets into my nervous system . . . it activates my feet, my body, my hands. [Participant]

After the client falls down in convulsions they change the music, they slow down the pace until she calms down and there are no more convulsions. The lyrics are always in Tunisian Arabic . . . we ask the demons for mercy on the women or child we are helping . . . there are no standard words . . . we invent them as we go . . . [Chanter]

Stambali has no standard choreography. The movements are idiosyncratic and improvised.

The dance movements are powerful and wild . . . they look like the desperate movements of a person seeking help . . . the participating dancer is in ecstasy and the ecstasy produces the movements. [Chanter]

Almost every Stambali ritual requires animal sacrifice. Our sources indicated that for practical reasons (cost and convenience) a cock is commonly the preferred offering. The slaughter, viewing, and smearing of blood usually satisfy the needs of the angry demons and mark the successful resolution of the ceremony. We combined the ethnographic data of this category with those on the human–demon dialog presented below.

### *Atmosphere*

Stambali ceremonies are usually performed in a joyous atmosphere aimed at assuaging the demons' anger and at appeasing them.

We prepare all sorts of good food to be served to the participating guests, different salads and spicy oils, we also paint our hands with henna as if it were a wedding, to create a happy atmosphere of a true celebration. . . . The demons like happiness . . . [Arifa]

When we come to a home where a demon got angry we bring along candy and sugar and we place the stuff in the corners on the floor . . . [Chanter]

She did everything that could be expected of her as a worthy contribution toward her younger sister's recovery. Still her joy was very childish and she

could scarcely conceal it . . . (Memmi, 1992; on his mother's anticipation of the ceremony).

This is a dance performed by women in a women-oppressive society. In the safety of the permitting and holding environment of other women they seem to feel free to express a variety of erotic gestures and body movements.

Stambali is attended mostly by women . . . it is improper for a man to be there because some women can get immodest . . . We are there as the band but other men leave the room when the women are beginning to dance . . . [Chanter]

Some women, when they are in trance, they loosen their hair, their dresses come up during their wild movements, tear their blouses up, other simply undress . . . they don't really know what they are doing and perhaps they feel free among their women friends . . . they can make immodest gestures . . . [Arifa]

And this woman was dancing before me, with her breasts barely covered, abandoning herself unconsciously to magical contortions . . . (Memmi, 1992)

### *Dissociative and Convulsive Behaviors*

Participants in Stambali often report dissociative trance phenomena characterized by analgesia, involuntary and disowned behavior, and amnesia.

I have seen women in trance who lose their sense of pain. Some walk on ambers, others hold red hot charcoals in their hands, they never get burns and they don't seem to be in pain . . . Often their eyes are rolled up . . . you've got to watch them because they can hurt themselves . . . [Chanter]

A group of women starts to dance to the ever intensifying tempo of the orchestra . . . the Arifa usually gets into a trance after no more than 10 minutes . . . The room, by then is filled with incense . . . Shortly after that some participants start to lose it . . . their limbs move wildly, they scream and curse but many are surprised when you ask them about it, the kind of wonder: What? . . . Did I say that? . . . Did I do that? . . . I can't remember doing that! [Participant]

The musicians . . . seem to trace brief arabesques of sound which my mother follows obediently, her body swaying as if boneless in the slow dance of the charmed serpent . . . Faithfully my mother obeys the rhythm, or is it the rhythm that rules her from within? She must have lost long ago, all awareness of her surroundings. (Memmi, 1992)

Many of the dancing women seem to be controlled by fierce and at times explosive convulsive movements.

They sometimes throw themselves on other women . . . sometimes they throw themselves on the floor . . . many scream: Why? why? . . . mommy, help! . . . Don't! . . . Stop it . . . enough! They are in a trance, they have much power . . . they get so violent until they fall exhausted to the ground, shaking and trembling, then some actually faint . . . you have to watch out for them because they can hurt themselves. [Arifa]

Their eyes bulge out of their faces, veins swell in their foreheads . . . As for the dancer, she seems to explode, torn apart as her limbs begin to cast themselves wildly all around her. But how is one to stop this collective seizure of epilepsy? (Memmi, 1992)

### *Possession Experiences*

None of our three informants or the written text we analyzed gave us any hint of an intrapsychic process, a narrative that had been worked through during the trance dance. The ceremony seemed to involve intense dissociative experiences, with little introspection and no apparent psychodynamic insight for the participants.

I felt my soul left me during the dance. It was as if I was in the next world . . . everything changed, I felt no more pain . . . I never know what I am saying during Stambali, only the demons know. During the dance my soul leaves and the body is operated by the music and by the demon . . . [Participant]

When I dance the Stambali I feel I am being emptied, I fall apart but another force is moving my body. Sometimes I feel some sort of sorrow or pain come over me. It gets stronger with the music and then I need to be helped . . . [Chanter]

I get more and more dizzy, everything is spinning around me and I see nothing except that woman who has got the problem . . . I go to her and invite her to dance to rhythm of the band with me . . . she then gets ecstatic . . . After my soul leaves me the demon enters my body and it talks through my mouth . . . Sometimes my demon would tell the others how to help the sick woman, sometimes we ask her demon what it wants . . . and we comply . . .

You would never wake anybody up from their trance before her demon is out, that's dangerous . . . when we did that before she was ready she would beg us – no, no, I'm not done yet . . . [Arifa]

I was paralyzed, as if watching all of this through a glass pane . . . with all my consciousness vanished and my body disintegrated while I allowed the bagpipes to seize my nerves . . . (Memmi, 1992)

Demons, the dwellers of below, seem to react negatively to human aggression. Victims and perpetrators of aggression alike are liable to receive a demon's blow.

The demons don't like anger and rage . . . for example, say a child is taking a nice hot shower, he is relaxed, enjoying himself. Suppose his mother yells at him to hurry up and get out, that's forbidden. You must not provoke the demons. The child can get scared and the demon will get hold of him. They also get hold of people when the evil eye is cast . . . when there is envy. [Participant]

You've got to behave carefully not to upset the demons . . . If you notice a change in behavior, that a person is no longer himself . . . when people have serious family problems that refuse to go away, that's a sure sign that the demons are upset . . . The demons live down in the ground, or under the floor, or in the bathroom . . . you can't throw anything angrily on the ground, that for certainly is going to upset the demons . . . [Arifa]

When a child cries and the parents get angry at him that's not good . . . especially when the child is in an intimate place like the shower . . . They can get hold of you or your loved one even if you didn't mean any harm . . . But although the demons are dangerous there is no justice down there . . . You have to ask for their forgiveness . . . When a person does something violent the demons punish him for his violence . . . this can be very bad, a person can get a nervous disease, see bad things, scary lights, something can happen to his body, deafness, paralysis . . . When that happens you must ask the demons for mercy and help . . . [Chanter]

The demons require reverence and joyful appeasement, particularly after they have struck. Communication with them is carried out in trance. Final conciliation of demons is often achieved through animal sacrifice.

You shouldn't mock the demons, they can get very angry when you do that . . . Once a young lady laughed at her mother who was dancing Stambali and the demon entered her . . . The demons are invisible but powerful. They like to be respected . . . they like happiness, joy, fun . . . that's why we throw them these parties with good food, sweets and music . . . [Participant]

We try to appease the demons so that they will forgive and leave in peace . . . The demons can do evil but they also do good if you make them happy . . . if you are on good terms with them they will do you good . . . We never call them 'demons' so as not to offend them. When we address them we call them 'angels' . . . [Chanter]

When the suffering woman and I are in trance, we get asked: What do they want [the demons]? And then we get a reply . . . often they want a sacrifice and then a cock is slaughtered and the blood is smeared on the suffering woman's hands . . . [Arifa]

Like a puppet when the thread that guides it breaks, my mother now collapsed . . . limp as a rag, motionless . . . Khmeissa then placed her ear close to my mother and seemed to be listening attentively for a long while. Suddenly, she shouted: 'They have spoken! They have said: a red scarf and a white cock.' So the Djinoun spirits had answered . . . I no longer wanted to do anything that I had been taught to do . . . I'll no longer whisper to the Djinoun spirits, before throwing out water: 'Excuse me, please excuse me! (Memmi, 1992)

### *Healing Experiences*

Our informants were not always very forthcoming in their description of the healing experience and outcome of Stambali. Nevertheless, we learned that Stambali could be associated with specific health benefits, specific psychological benefits, as with a general positive cathartic experience.

People do the Stambali to get help with medical problems. There was this woman, she couldn't move her arm, I mean it was totally paralyzed. She came, she danced, she screamed, we slaughtered a cock and she got well . . . If you believe in this you can be helped . . . [Participant]

Dekhil (1993), who collected a few testimonies from Stambali participants, quoted one story of

a poor illiterate Tunisian woman who was so very ill that the doctors couldn't help her any more. A Stambali ceremony was organized for her and now she feels great. Since that night, every year at about the same date, she repeats the ceremony and slaughters a black cock at midnight.

Every person has a little secret, some emotional trouble . . . in our community we don't talk about such things . . . so when I am not well, I let it out during Stambali . . . I leave the band; I mix with the dancers. My thoughts become the movements of the dance. I dance so hard until this energy leaves me . . . I can't tell if it's me or the demon . . . [Chanter]

During the dance I ask the demons for forgiveness . . . this helps me gain a distance from the problems I have with my son . . . I don't believe in psychologists . . . when I am in stress and I can't organize a Stambali event right away, I prefer to put on a video cassette of one of the last dances I participated in and I do my own Stambali . . . After that I can treat my son differently and I don't take things to heart as much . . . [Arifa]

The babbling of relaxed women now spread like water boiling over . . . the individual women decided to . . . rise from the floor, and they all laughed. . . . The musicians . . . laughing among themselves with all their teeth showing white and yellow in their black faces. (Memmi, 1992)

## Discussion

Generally speaking, few external characteristics distinguished Jews and Moslems in Arab countries; they spoke the same language and they wore very similar clothes. Furthermore, Jews and Arabs shared many pre-Islamic beliefs and practices concerning the paranormal. For example, one central custom common to both religions of the Maghreb was the tradition of pilgrimage to tombs of pious men and saintly popular figures. During these memorial celebrations saints were asked for protection and blessings. Accounts of miraculous faith healing were often shared among the pilgrims. Frequently, Jews and Moslems revered the very same saints (Sharot, 1984). Tunisian Jews imported many of their cultural customs and activities to Israel. Deshen (1974), for example, described Judeo-Tunisian memorial rites (*hillulot*) that focus on Tunisian rabbis who died in Israel in recent years. These practices, very popular among the common people for generations, have been looked upon with disapproval by figures of the literary tradition. These syncretistic rites were seen by the Jewish Orthodox establishment to run counter to the austere monotheism of classical Jewish thought, and to violate acceptable codes of modest conduct prohibiting the mingling of men and women.

*Hillulot* are an example of the reconstruction of Judeo-Arab traditions of the Maghreb in Israel. Nevertheless, Tunisian immigrants had to cope with a social milieu that often undermined their group identity. In common with immigrants from other Moslem countries, Tunisian Jews in Israel had to adjust to different patterns of economic and social achievements, largely determined by the absorbing European Ashkenazi society. North African Jews became part of a larger society of Jews in which they were 'Algerians,' 'Tunisians,' and so forth. They had to integrate into a Western world at the price of discarding beliefs and traditions that were sources of ethnic pride. While many immigrants acculturated well and enjoyed material and personal rejuvenation, others became disillusioned by life in Israel, frustrated by their low placement on the socio-economic ladder, and angrily alienated from the Ashkenazi-dominated culture. Deshen and Shokeid (1974) argued that immigrants express their new experiences in the idiom of their traditional cultural symbols. We posit that the adherence to North African supernatural beliefs among some Tunisian immigrants and the re-emergence of such traditions among their Israeli-born offspring are the expressions of disenchantment and resentment towards the absorbing society. The prophylactic and curative rite of Stambali constitutes a symbolic act of defiance against Westernized medicine and psychology, and the romantic revitalization of the traditional Arab context in which they had felt more empowered.

Corsini and Wedding (1989) remind us that modern psychotherapy

developed in Europe and extended into North America, where the liberal political climate nurtured the development of individualism. In traditional societies, individuals are embedded in the collective identities of their families and tribes and see themselves as extensions of a collective core identity (Dwairy & Van Sickle, 1996). The Arab culture that influences our respondents is family- and society-directed. Conformity to a well-defined set of group norms is expected of every individual. A personal struggle for a separate individual identity, one that may diverge from the values of the parents and community, is perceived as disloyal and is discouraged. The Arab family was described as a 'cradle-to-grave social security system' (Marr, 1978). Individuality, claims Saudi scholar Saleh (1986), is but an illusion in the Arab world, where emphasis is placed on affiliation. How one appears in the eyes of one's peers is of prime importance. Arab society is a shame-oriented culture and potential public shame and shunning function as powerful social controls. Authoritarian male hierarchies are often repressive to women and children and parental authority is never to be challenged or criticized. These dynamics may preclude psychotherapeutic exploration of developmental processes, intrapsychic conflicts, or any meaningful confrontation of abusive authority figures within the family.

The Islamic influence on Arab psychology is revealed in the acceptance that life, as well as the future, are in the hands of Allah. Hardship is often faithfully accepted as the will of Allah, as fate, or as the outcome of external agents such as spirits or demons. From early childhood, Arabs are pressured to compromise their individuality and sacrifice it in exchange for the support and security provided by the family. As a result, many become detached from their true emotions and needs; Dwairy and Van Sickle (1996) claim that repression is an inevitable consequence of traditional Arab society. They regard repression as the intrapsychic means by which the Arab can avoid social condemnation and maintain social support. As a result, the individual Arab is said to become far removed from his or her self and tends to develop a false self that follows the practice of *musayara* (concealing one's true feelings and speaking and behaving in a manner which will be socially sanctioned; Geriefat & Katriel, 1989). Under such circumstances somatized distress may provide an important coping mechanism for internal conflicts. This phenomenon has been noted in Arab cultures (Al-Issa & Al-Issa, 1969; Gorkin, Masalha & Yatziv, 1985; Parhad, 1965; West, 1987), where self-disclosure and complaining may lead to disgrace. The inability to focus on the self to communicate and resolve intrapsychic conflict can result in both somatoform dissociations, such as the hysterical paralyses or deafness, and also psychoform dissociations, such as dissociative possession and trance disorders. In these persons, awareness takes the form of what Kirmayer (1992) has termed *unself-conscious awareness*, in which attention is directed

externally and the personal narrative is centered on a third person or 'it' (in our case, the demons of Stambali).

The women who dance the Stambali in Israel are the products of an unassimilated North African culture and many of the factors that influence Arab identity apply to them. Immigration to Israel forced them to choose between the more Western positivist approach to medicine and psychology, and their old ways. Although our respondents have chosen not to abandon their traditions, they seemed rather suspicious of our motivations. When they shared their understanding of the process, they mostly used an unself-conscious causal model, perceiving and presenting the unfolding conflict as external: a showdown between the Stambali band led by the Arifa, and the possessing demons. However, some confusion of paradigms was evident among our informants because they talked about the impact of the ritual in terms of a cathartic psychological process. The externalization of conflict in the possession along with the cultural codes of traditional societies made the investigation of personal histories among these women inappropriate. However, a doctoral dissertation written on trance phenomena in North Africa sheds some light on the narratives of some of these women. El-Aroussi (1992) described several kinds of demons known to possess women in the Maghreb. For example, (i) the *Banu al-Nu'man* are spirits that inhabit the homes of people and prey on virgins. When a virgin is attacked by one of them, she loses her sanity, is bound to suffer from nightmares, and becomes flirtatious with them; (ii) the *Afarit al-zawaj* are known for attacking young brides during the seven days following the wedding; and (iii) the *Sayatin al-afarit* who are said to prefer attacking beautiful sterile women. El-Aroussi (1992) described several sub-types of the *Sayatin al-afarit*: those who attack women who are coquettish and like to put on make-up; those who focus on the women's thighs; those who prefer to attack the women's breasts and render them paralyzed and without appetite; those who strike the women's genitals until they refuse to sleep with their husbands; those who force the women to disrobe.

Dissociative disorders involve a related mental process that, like possession-trance, produces a lack of connection in a person's psychological functions. Severe dissociated disorders are often associated with histories of child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse (Kluft, 1985; Kluft, Braun, & Sachs, 1984). Could the erotic and aggressive characteristics of the possessed and entranced women dancing the Stambali represent the externalization of an unspoken story of abuse? We could not find direct answers to this question but the literature indicates that participants in possession cults are often oppressed women with few options for protest. Through the exorcistic ritual they get a chance to non-verbally act out their plight and gain the social support of the other participants in the ritual (Lambek, 1989; Okaska, 1966; Salama, 1988).

Another helpful concept that can be applied to the understanding of Stambali is *peripheral possession*. In contrast to central possession, where the medium is possessed by the major deities of the society and is a respected member of the community, peripheral possession afflicts socially marginal and oppressed members who are experiencing high levels of psychological or interpersonal stress (Lewis, 1987). Kirmayer (1994) suggested that even dissociative identity disorder (DID) can be seen not only in terms of psychopathology but also as the emergence of a new form of social protest against the brutalization of women and children. He further posited that the cultural idiom of possession provides a socially sanctioned means of protest and contestation. However, unlike the dissociative disorders known in the West, the clients of Stambali do not seem to display dissociative symptoms outside the culturally sanctioned context of the ritualized healing dance. Instead, they seem to present with a wide range of somatic and emotional forms of distress. The idioms they use for communicating their pain and working it through are determined by their cultural codes: they remain loyal to their families and they do not disgrace themselves by self-disclosure and they try to appease the external authoritarian forces they believe have contributed to their misfortune.

Of particular interest was the role of demons in the control of anger and aggression. It seemed that the cultural milieu of our informants required specific control measures to allow for the expression of anger by women. Our informants seemed to fear demon reprisals in response to the expression of anger. The demons' perceived admonitions against expressed anger were related to a variety of prohibitions aimed at establishing a rather sedate regime of behavior. The possessing demons that invade those who aggressed as well as those who dance the Stambali for cathartic measures provide a sanctioned route for expressing violent behaviors by allowing non-self attributions of responsibility.

Denial of anger is common in Arab cultures, as anger is not recognized in the *Qu'ran*, and the constraints of life are not believed to be painful problems that justify any angry complaint (West, 1987). The violent movements displayed by many of the entranced female dancers of Stambali did not appear until their controlling observing ego 'disappeared' into trance. When that happened, the more raw expressions of emotion seemed to emerge and were then identified as demonic possession. This possession lasted until the dancer completely exhausted her need to express her feelings. When awakened prematurely, many female dancers had been reported to beg for the music to continue so they could finish 'dancing their demons away.' The ultimate show of aggression was represented in a frequently expressed request by the possessing demon to have a cock slaughtered. Often, the smearing of blood of the sacrificed animal on the

hands of the entranced dancer would be the only gesture that would satisfy the possessing demon.

For some Stambali dancers, the state of intense excitement, raised to a peak by the multimodal bombardment of the senses, was followed by a convulsive collapse, similar in appearance to descriptions of unmodified ECT (Sargant, 1967). Akstein (1987), a Brazilian psychiatrist, described rituals similar to Stambali among Afro-Brazilian spiritualist sects. He indicated that trance was frequently attained through rotational movements of the body, with the head in an unnatural position. His description resembled our observations of Stambali. Akstein (1987) suggested that these movements could lead to excitation of the vestibular apparatus. He speculated that the abnormal positioning of the body and its extremities in space create cortical inhibitions similar to those detected in certain types of animal 'hypnosis.' Akstein (1973) seemed to be deeply convinced of the curative powers in kinetic trance. He called the ritual trance dances of the African cultures a 'mass therapy' and adapted kinetic trance techniques for a new form of 'terpsichore trance therapy.'

Every system of symbolic healing is based on a model of experiential reality that Dow (1986) has termed a 'mythic world.' This is the explanatory model shared by the healer and the healed. Curing is, thus, often based on restructuring a disorder modeled in a mythic world. In Dow's model, the healer attaches the patient's emotions to transactional symbols particularized from the general shared myth. These transactional symbols are then manipulated to help the patient transact his or her own emotions.

Participants in Stambali rites in Israel seem to reject the transactional symbols embedded in Western models of psychotherapy, which emphasize introspection and an internal locus of control. The acculturation difficulties experienced in Israel by some of the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East stem, in part, from the attacks they have experienced on their cultural myths and values. Dow (1986) regarded such a situation as 'an attack on people's therapeutic lifeline to society' (p. 64) and predicted that it is likely to be strongly resisted. Somer (1993, 1997) described several cases involving Jewish Israelis of Middle Eastern cultural heritage who presented for consultation following unsuccessful treatment by various folk healers. The patients construed their distress in cultural idioms that implicated external supernatural causes. Although many of their symptoms resembled dissociative disorders, these patients refused to accept Western mythic constructs of their pain and could not see it as endogenously based.

## Conclusion

As a country that has absorbed a large number of immigrants from all corners of the world, Israel is a natural laboratory for the comparative

study of cultures. The opportunity provided to us by Tunisian Jewish immigrants to investigate the ritualized healing dance of Stambali enabled us to explore an indigenous belief system regarding illness and health that is characteristic of some Arab cultures. Our informants, torn between two mythic worlds, endorsed etiological explanations for their distress that involved external supernatural causes and displayed trance and possession behavior.

Following criticism of the lack of attention given to cultural factors in psychopathology, possession syndrome was accepted as a diagnostic category in the ICD-10 (World Health Organization, 1992) but it has not received the same level of recognition in DSM-IV (Lewis-Fernández, 1998). While the nosological acceptance of DID has supported the development of treatment protocols (e.g. Putnam, 1989), there are few documented psychotherapeutic strategies for trance and possession disorders. DID typically has a chronic course, with gradual response to treatment. Trance and possession, in contrast, can be of brief duration and highly responsive to culturally appropriate folk healing (Castillo, 1997; Lewis-Fernández, 1992). Western psychiatry must go beyond mere recognition of culture-bound syndromes to develop effective research-based treatments inspired by traditional practices.

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