Playing with perspectives: spirit possession, mimesis, and permeability in the buuta ritual in South India

Miho Ishii Kyoto University

The aim of this study is to investigate spirit possession through the lenses of mimesis, permeability, and perspectivity. Recent studies have explored the significance of perspective exchange as reciprocal subjectification. At the same time, the importance of reflexive self-awareness amid perspective exchange has been noted. Linking studies on perspective exchange with those on spirit possession, this article tries to show an alternative understanding of perspective exchange as the de-subjectification and generative transformation of self and other. Focusing on the buuta ritual in South India, I examine perspective exchange as the capability for freeing oneself from one’s subjectivity enough to let various perspectives come and go through the permeable self. Being permeable and reflexive, the buuta impersonator plays with multiple perspectives to transform both his and others’ perspectives to enable all to become ‘real’ humans in relation to the deity.

This study aims to investigate spirit possession through the lenses of mimesis, perspectivity, and permeability. Linking studies on perspective exchange to those on spirit possession, this article presents a view of spirit possession as the basis of people’s everyday social relations and a sophisticated art performed to mould the behaviour of humans in relation to deities. At the same time, this study attempts to elaborate a way to understand spirit possession as well as the mimetic, permeable, and transformative mode of one’s being as a part of the essential potentiality of humanity.

Spirit possession has often been analysed in terms of perspective and its alternation. Kapferer (1979; 1991), based on Mead’s (1934) argument on the construction of the self, studies demonic possession in Sri Lanka as the disruption of reciprocal perspectives between the possessed self and healthy other. Kapferer then describes the exorcism as the process of reconstructing their intersubjectivity. By contrast, Boddy (1988: 19; 1989: 350-1) analyses the zâr possession in Sudan as an occasion for the possessed to achieve a broadened perspective, which enables her to see the world ‘with the eyes of the spirit’, to transcend her everyday reality and her self.

Some scholars focus also on the concept of permeability to comprehend spirit possession. Boddy defines possession as ‘a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable,'
flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable’ (1994: 407). In the same manner, Keller insists that it is necessary to revalue ‘receptivity and permeability beyond the usual, negative associations of such openness with passivity and weakness’ (2002: 9) in order to interpret the agency of the possessed.

These arguments show that spirit possession has been regarded as a phenomenon concerning foremost selfhood and its shifting or fluid boundaries. This theme of shifting the boundaries or of a metamorphosis of the self in relation to the other closely relates to the notion of mimesis: the human faculty to ‘yield into and become Other’ (Taussig 1993: xiii).

The studies regarding spirit possession as mimetic practice tend to focus on its critical function. Stoller (1995), using Benjamin-Taussig’s notion of ‘mimetic faculty’ (Benjamin 1966: 96–9; Taussig 1993), describes Hauka possession in West Africa as the tactics of the colonized to mimic the colonizers in order to divert their power and to master them. Rosenthal (1998: 75-6, 95-7) analyses Gorovodu possession in Togo as a mimetic ritual which manifests commentaries on ‘modernity’. In a broader context, Boddy argues that the notion of mimesis enables us to recognize ‘the multidimensioned resistances possession cults evince to Enlightenment myths of context-free Reason, the mischief they work with capitalist reifications, their iconoclastic interpretations of commodities and bodily disciplines’ (1994: 425). Thus spirit possession characterized by perspective alternation, permeability, and mimesis has been analysed as an ‘embodied critique’ (Boddy 1994: 419) of modernity, colonialism, or global political and economic domination.

This understanding of spirit possession as the critique of modernity and other hegemonies corresponds to a view that distinguishes the possessed self from the ideal modern Western self. Here, the studies on spirit possession link with those on self and personhood. For instance, Smith (2006: 19, 74-5) points out that Boddy’s (1994: 407) definition of spirit possession, as the exposure of the fluid and permeable nature of personal identity, coincides well with the features of South Asian personhood, which is fluid, divisible, and permeable. The possessed or South Asian person is described in contrast with the ideal Western, ‘impermeable, autonomous person’ (Marriott 1976: 110, quoted in Smith 2006: 74).1

Pointing out the critical function of spirit possession and also highlighting the fluid and permeable characteristics of the possessed, some of these approaches have effectively posed alternatives to the ‘possessive individualism’ of the West (MacPherson 1964, quoted in Johnson 2011: 417).2 At the same time, by attributing these characteristics specifically to the possessed, this vein of argument has alienated the experience of the possessed as well as the permeable, mimetic status of one’s being from ordinary human experience.3

However, as Boddy (1994: 425) partly admits, mimesis, permeability, and perspective alternation are all integral parts of one’s being in relation to others. In this sense, the possessed may be those who best exercise the mimetic faculty as ‘an inherent part of the human condition’ (Willerslev 2007: 9). Still, as we will see later, the possessed person is not so permeable as to lose his self completely, just as the ‘modern’ person is not so impermeable to let nothing enter into her self.

To deepen the investigation into permeability, mimesis, and self-alternation in spirit possession, it is beneficial to consider a number of studies on perspective exchange, which extensively discuss comparable issues. Though there are various arguments on this subject, mainly in the fields of developmental psychology, phenomenology, and

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philosophy (Husserl 1973; Mead 1927; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]; Piaget 1954; Sakabe 1999; Schütz 1970), here I focus on the anthropological discussion of the ideas of perspectivism and attempt to introduce into this debate the concept of Perspektivität, or ‘perspectivity’, as presented by the German psychiatrist and phenomenological anthropologist Wolfgang Blankenburg (1991). This enriched discussion will allow me to analyse the buuta, or ‘spirit’, worship in a coastal area of Karnataka, South India, focusing on the experiences of the buuta impersonators performing as, mimicking, and partially and temporarily becoming the deities.

The exchange of perspectives between humans and nonhumans
In his article ‘Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism’, Viveiros de Castro (1998) presents perspectivism as the key concept characterizing the human-nonhuman relationship in Amazonian societies. According to indigenous Amazonian theory, animals and spirits regard themselves as people, while they perceive humans as spirits or animals. Every animal species possesses a soul or spirit; hence they are conscious subjects capable of having their own point of view. Or rather, in the context of Amerindian perspectivism, it is more accurate to say that this point of view creates the subject. Though animals see things in an analogous way to the way we do, each species sees different things because every species has its own bodily uniqueness and ways of being that constitute a habitus (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470-2, 476-8).

Focusing on shamanism and warfare in Amerindian societies in a more recent article, Viveiros de Castro (2004) advances his argument on perspectivism. Here he not only points out the difference of perspectives among the species, but also considers the exchange of perspectives between humans and nonhumans, between self and other.

According to Viveiros de Castro, shamanism is the capacity to cross ontological boundaries and adopt the perspective of nonhuman subjectivities. It is also a form of acting that presupposes a mode of knowing: to know the object by personifying it and taking on its point of view. Shamans can turn into nonhumans such as animals and spirits and see them as they see themselves. But this act also entails risk. If ordinary humans happen to see a nonhuman in human form, they may be overwhelmed by the nonhuman subjectivity and be transformed into an animal or a spirit. Thus for Viveiros de Castro, a ‘meeting or exchange of perspectives is, in brief, a dangerous business’ (2004: 468).

Similar to shamans, warriors are also engaged in the dangerous business of exchanging perspectives with their enemies. In the same way that the shaman turns into an animal to acquire its perspective, the warrior must become his enemy to apprehend him from the inside. By gaining the enemy’s perspective and seeing himself as the enemy sees him, the warrior can become himself as a full subject. This kind of enmity is ‘a reciprocal subjectification: an exchange, a transfer, of points of view’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 479).

Viveiros de Castro’s arguments on perspectivism have had a great influence on recent anthropology and have evoked much discussion. Through examinations of his ideas from various angles, some scholars have tried to present alternative understandings of perspective and its alteration. For example, Turner (2009) calls attention to the social, relational, and alterable aspects of the human body, which play a fundamental role in perspective transformation. Finding vestiges of structuralism in Viveiros de Castro’s arguments, he claims that the author’s perspectivism characterizes perspectives as fixed aspects of species identity, like synchronic signifieds abstracted from
discourse. Against this, Turner argues that perspectives are rooted in the synthetic social and physical body, such that they can be transformed along with the transformation of the body, which is integrally and socially connected to other bodies. According to Turner, the body ‘is not an abstract object with a fixed, culturally human perspective, but a process comprising a series of transformations, each of which entails a transformation of perspectives’ (2009: 30).

Here, Turner presents a clearly different understanding of perspective transformation from that of Viveiros de Castro. Although Viveiros de Castro also surely considers the transformation of both body and perspective, he mainly deals with the drastic and total interchange of one set of body-perspectives with another: for example, a shaman shifts into animal form to assume its perspective, and then reverts to his human body-perspective. By contrast, Turner focuses on the more gradual or generative transformation of the body itself, which is accompanied by perspective transformation. 5

Before considering this issue in detail, however, let us examine Willerslev’s argument (2004; 2007) on hunter-prey relations and perspective exchange among Siberian Yukaghirs. According to Willerslev, in the world of the Yukaghirs, persons can take on a variety of forms such as trees, spirits, and mammals, of which human beings are only one type. Humans and animals can move in and out of different species’ perspectives by temporarily assuming alien bodies. Among the Yukaghirs, ‘this capacity to take on the appearance and viewpoint of another being is one of the key aspects of being a person’ (Willerslev 2007: 2). It is their faculty for mimesis, Willerslev argues, which allows the Yukaghirs – especially hunters – to be similar to other species.

To lure and kill his prey, a hunter imitates its behaviour. Through this mimetic practice, he can assume the animal’s point of view to exercise critical power over it. However, this is dangerous for the hunter because he may lose his original identity and undergo an irreversible metamorphosis (Willerslev 2004: 629). To avoid this risk, the hunter must retain his self-awareness during his mimetic practice. Even if he behaves as an animal to gain its perspective, he still has to maintain his identity and a kind of ‘depth reflexivity’ to be able to turn back into himself. Willerslev calls this state of the hunter’s consciousness a ‘double perspective’. Taking on an alien body, therefore, does not imply the full identification of a person with the other but a ‘partial one’ (Pedersen 2001: 416). It permits the person to act in between identities. It also gives him ‘a new potential for action, as he is freed from the bodily limits of both his own species and those of the species imitated’ (Willerslev 2007: 95-96).

While arguing the significance of perspective exchange for the Yukaghirs, Willerslev points out the danger of a total exchange or fusion of perspectives and emphasizes the importance of retaining reflexive self-awareness amid perspective exchange. Here perspective, subjectivity, and identity are considered not as the fixed, stable, or intrinsic foundation of a person but rather as a vulnerable condition that can easily be transformed, eroded, or dissolved. 6 Willerslev’s argument is most significant in showing the transformable and contingent aspects of perspective. His insight into reflexive self-awareness, one based not on a firm faith in a stable and consistent self but rather on an understanding of its vulnerability and transformability, has invaluable importance.

None the less, his argument cannot fully grasp the possibility of people not only switching their perspective momentarily but also transforming themselves through the continual experience of perspective exchange, since Willerslev stresses the protection and recovery of one’s original identity. In other words, when a hunter returns to the encampment from the hunt and turns back into himself, can he turn back into exactly

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the same self? Or rather, hasn’t he been altered by his experience of exchanging perspectives with his prey? This latter possibility suggests that the hunter enters into a gradual process of transformation to become a ‘real’ or ‘better’ hunter/human in relation to his prey: he modifies his embodied perspective and his self accordingly to suit the social relations with his intimate other – his prey. To consider this possibility is to consider seriously the reflexive and alterable aspects of one’s self, body, and perspective. How, then, can one alter one’s perspective as well as one’s self while not totally losing one’s self? In the next section, I will consider this issue based on Blankenburg’s ideas of perspectivity, self-referentiality, and permeability.

From perspectivism to perspectivity

In Wahn und Perspektivität (Delusion and perspectivity) (1991), Blankenburg presents the notion of perspectivity as a key term for investigating how people relate themselves with the world. According to Blankenburg, this notion connotes that one’s relation to the world is always restricted by one’s situation and hence is relative. Perspectivity is also characterized by the fact that a person is a corporeal existence living in the here and now. Perspectivity thus indicates that all givens are related to the subject, and, at the same time, every human being is related to the world as l'être-au-monde (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]).

In order to relate themselves with the world in a ‘non-delusional’ way, people need to overcome their subject-centred perspective to accept other people’s perspectives. This is considered the decentralization of the subject as well as his or her transition to an object-centred mode of existence. Blankenburg uniquely explains this in terms of one’s situation, acts, and mobility. According to him, one possible way for a person to communicate with something (or with the other) is by walking around it, while another way is to enter into it. To what extent and in what ways a person is able to see things from the other’s viewpoint depends on the mobility of that person, and one form of this mobility is that of going outside oneself to enter into the other (Blankenburg 1991: 6, 11).

Transferring oneself into the other to gain the other’s viewpoint is nothing but the exchange of perspectives. Thus for Blankenburg, perspective exchange is essential for people to relate themselves with the world. At the same time, he calls attention to the problem with the idealistic model of total perspective exchange. According to Blankenburg, the resistance preventing people from completely transferring themselves into the other is as important as their relative ability of transferring themselves into the other, since if total perspective exchange is realized, people may easily lose themselves. In order to relate oneself with the other and the world, therefore, it is necessary for a person to know by experience not only the possibility of exchanging perspectives, but also its limitations (Blankenburg 1991: 16-17).

While asserting the importance for people to exchange their perspectives deliberately, Blankenburg also points out the significance of the passive aspect of perspective. People need the ability not merely to select or change their perspectives intentionally, but to play among various perspectives, in other words, to let various perspectives play through their selves. In Blankenburg’s theory of perspectivity, the contingency of perspective and the permeability of the self (1991: 106) are thus essential, since these aspects allow people to free their perspective from being fixed by their subjectivity. This permeable aspect of the self, however, does not entail the diffusion or total loss of the self.
The transformation of one’s perspective does involve a kind of self-alternation. Yet according to Blankenburg, in order to perceive this transformation of perspective and alter oneself, one should not identify oneself totally with the transformation, but rather respond to and process it self-referentially. In other words, what matters most is to let various perspectives play self-referentially. Blankenburg concludes that the ability of transforming perspectives is the fundamental potentiality of humans to relate themselves with, or behave toward, the world and themselves (1991: 106–9).

Blankenburg’s thought corresponds on many points to both Viveiros de Castro’s and Willerslev’s arguments. This is especially true regarding Blankenburg’s insight into the mobility, coexistence, and co-operation of various perspectives; furthermore, the limitations of perspective exchange correspond to a striking degree to Willerslev’s ideas on the hunter’s mobility accompanying his mimetic practice, double perspective, and depth reflexivity.

At the same time, it is remarkable that Blankenburg presents his notion not as perspectivism but as perspectivity. In contrast to the idea of perspectivism, which connotes relatively fixed or intrinsic characteristics of perspectives for every person or species, the idea of perspectivity emphasizes the flexible and contingent characteristics of perspective. Moreover, it indicates people’s ability or potentiality not only to retain or change their perspective voluntarily, but also to free themselves from their own subjectivity by playing – self-referentially – with various perspectives.

This idea enables us to see the relation between perspective and subjectivity in a fresh way: contrary to the idea of perspectivism, which tends to attach greater importance to the immanent connections between perspective and subject/subjectivity (see, e.g., Viveiros de Castro 1998: 476–7; 2004: 467), here the perspective does not necessarily presuppose or create the subject. Rather, perspectives can appear to a person, operating and playing among themselves through the person while leaving subjectivity out. Blankenburg’s argument also shows people’s potentiality to generatively transform their perspective as well as their self without totally losing their self. To exchange perspectives with the other and remain ‘sane’ (Asad 2003: 73), people do not necessarily adhere to their ‘original’ self. While undergoing the incessant transformation of both their perspective and their self, people certainly may be aware of the transformation and respond to it self-referentially, creating ever-new relations with the world and themselves.

Blankenburg’s argument thus indicates a way to consider both intra-human and human-nonhuman perspective exchange not only as a part of a mythological or ethnographic ontology clearly contrasted to Western modernist thought, but also as a part of the essential potentiality of humanity to relate themselves to the world. Yet new potentialities of these terms can be found in ethnographic contexts such as in the spirit possession of the buuta ritual through the examination of perspective exchange between humans and nonhumans in terms of perspectivity, permeability, and self-referentiality.

The mimetic art of buuta impersonators

Buutas are deities and spirits worshipped widely in South Kanara, the coastal areas of Karnataka. They are generally considered deities, such as apotheosized local heroes or heroines who met tragic deaths, and the spirits of wild animals such as tigers, serpents, and wild boars dwelling in the midst of deep forests, in dark marshy places, or on steep hilltops.

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The buuta ritual consists of spirit possession, oracles, and interactions between the devotees and the buutas incarnated in impersonators belonging to the Nalike, Parava, and Pambada castes (all designated scheduled castes). In the rituals held in the buuta shrine (buutastaana), these impersonators play various roles as buutas. Namely, they dance in spectacular costumes, sing oral epics (paad·dana), narrate oracles, and judge problems among the devotees. Among the devotees at the buuta shrine, the most important role is played by its patrons. Most of them are the landlords of local manors called guttas and belong to the Bañ· caste.14 Praying for divine protection for their families and the whole village, they offer local products such as paddy, areca nuts, and coconuts to the buutas.

Among all the patrons, the head or gaḍipatinaar of the highest-ranked guttu has a particularly close relationship with the buutas incarnated in the impersonators. In any buuta ritual at the shrine, the gaḍipatinaar responds to every word and act of the deity, appeases the deity’s anger, and speaks to the deity on behalf of all the other devotees. As we will see later, the gaḍipatinaar and the deity incarnated in the impersonator are in a dialogical and mutually reflexive relationship in which one’s position is always determined in relation to the other.

I conducted fieldwork in the two adjoining villages of Mudu Perar (East Perar) and Padu Perar (West Perar) in Mangalore Taluk.15 In the village buuta shrine in Perar, several buutas such as Balavaanđi, Arasu, and Pilicaamunđi are enshrined. According to the paaddana in Perar, Balavaanđi is the spirit of a local hero who was killed by his ex-master, while Arasu is the king of buutas, and Pilicaamunđi is the spirit of wild tiger. The roles of the impersonators of these buutas are hereditary, being played by the male members of a Pambada family living in the village. Though the Pambada is matrilineal in general, the role of the buuta impersonator is inherited from father to son. Among the Pambada family in Perar, two youths – Dayananda and his second cousin Satish Pambada – play the central role as the impersonators of the three main buutas. They have succeeded the profession and role of buuta impersonator from their fathers, who were also prominent impersonators.

Satish, born in 1974, is the impersonator of Balavaanđi, the chief deity of the village buuta shrine. In the yearly festival (neema) in the village shrine, Satish, possessed by Balavaanđi, first appears in half-naked, furious form and then as an androgynous deity wearing make-up and a beautiful sari. In the last part of the ritual, Satish-Balavandi, wearing an anī (a big halo-like structure made of coconut leaves) and riding on a beautifully decorated wooden horse with wheels, parades around the precinct of the shrine and narrates oracles in front of the heads of the guttas. Satish narrated his story of becoming Balavaanđi’s impersonator in Perar this way:

Following my father, I started this profession when I was 11 years old. At that time I performed only small deities and not great daiva [the honorific name for buutas]. Here, in our village, I started to perform Balavaanđi after my father died two years ago ... This means that this profession is hereditary. An outsider cannot be the impersonator of these daivas (Satish Pambada, 16 June 2008).

Dayananda, born in 1975, is the impersonator of both Arasu and Pilicaamunđi. On the first night of the neema, Dayananda performs Arasu, the king of buutas. Dayananda, possessed by Arasu, elegantly dances in front of the guttas and runs around the precinct along with two gaanja·ge (oilmen) holding burning torches. Wearing an anī, he then sings the paaddana, receives vegetarian offerings from the guttas, and narrates an oracle to
them. From the third night until the end of the neema the next afternoon, Dayananda performs Pilicaamunđi, a wild tiger deity. After dancing and narrating an oracle, Dayananda-Pilicaamunđi holds a court (vaaku piripuni) along with the Baṅṭ priest-medium called mukkaldi, where they judge the devotees’ various problems. In the last part of the ritual, Dayananda-Pilicaamunđi receives vegetarian offerings as well as the blood sacrifice of chickens outside the main shrine.

According to Dayananda, he started his profession as a buuta impersonator when he was 12 years old. At the beginning he performed a buuta called Bavano, who is an assistant buuta of Pilicaamunđi. When he was 15, he started to perform one of the raajandaiva (kingly buutas) with the help of his father. He narrates the succession of his profession as follows:

Yes, I have inherited this tradition from my father. But it was already in my blood too, as we belong to the community of performers. For example, you don’t need to teach a frog to swim; it swims on its own. Just like that, in some places, it comes spontaneously through the power of the daiva. Sometimes my father gave me some hints or knowledge, and our own observation also helps us ... When I was a child, I observed my father performing various daivas. After several years, I performed the attendant deity, following the raajandaiva performed by my father. This helped me to learn [the performance] (Dayananda Pambada, 16 May 2008).

Like Satish and Dayananda, most boys born in the Pambada family frequently attend the buuta rituals with their close male kin. They take on various small tasks such as tearing coconut leaves into shreds to make the performer’s skirts, holding up the mirror when the performer is making up his face, or fanning the performer after his performance. Through these various minor tasks, these boys learn the techniques of ritual preparation and its process, the dance and paad·dana of each buuta, and the way of communication between the buuta and the devotees. Some of them make their debut as an attendant buuta when they are 10 to 15 years old.

As Dayananda pointed out, the art of the buuta impersonator is gradually acquired by a candidate through his observation and practice of the performance among his kin. In this sense, it can be considered that the art is acquired first through copying another’s performance: a young candidate begins by mimicking the performance of his father, brother, or paternal uncle to learn how to behave as the buuta impersonator, and, furthermore, as the deity itself. Through this mimetic practice, he also learns how to relate his bodily self to others on the ritual stage: for example, to the heads of the guttus, the mukkaldi, musicians, and other ritual workers. In other words, he gradually modifies his perspective to relate himself to the other actors in the ritual. We will return to this issue later.

Multiple mimesis and the gift of being possessed

To become a buuta impersonator is, first of all, to learn how to mimic the deity and assume its perspective – just as to become a hunter among the Yukaghir entails learning how to mimic the animal to assume its viewpoint. However, contrary to the Yukaghir hunter, who directly imitates his prey’s behaviour, the buuta impersonator does not mimic directly what are believed to be buutas, such as the wild tiger or serpent. Rather, the candidate imitates another performer impersonating the deity to assume this perspective. In this sense, for the buuta impersonators, taking on the deity’s behaviour and perspective is the mimesis of mimesis, or double mimesis. However, if we examine their mimetic practice more carefully, we soon realize that it should be
characterized rather as *multiple mimesis*: the senior impersonator, whose performance the candidate imitates, must have also acquired his art through mimicking his senior, who was in turn also mimicking another performer. Thus the performance of an impersonator is possible through a chain of multiple mimetic practices in which the deity is regarded as the always-implicit prototype. Here, the impersonator’s perspective inevitably assumes the multiple perspectives of the other mimicking the other mimicking the other, and so on, just like when a person looks into two opposing mirrors.

At the same time, for experienced impersonators, the deity exists not only as an imaginative prototype far beyond their mimetic practice, but as the actual power, or *śakti*, which comes over their bodies through spirit possession. 17 Most impersonators, moreover, assert that without incarnating the deity’s power, their performance cannot be successful. In this sense, the art of the *buuta* impersonator consists not only of the active ability to imitate another performer to acquire his perspective, but also of the passive capability of *being possessed* by the deity and being given its perspective. This capability or gift, however, cannot be acquired by the impersonator’s intentional practice alone, but rather can only be given by the grace of the deity. To receive this divine favour, the impersonator tries to keep himself in the state of *niyama niṣṭhā* (devoting oneself to the rules), the ideal condition from which to invoke the deity’s power, as Dayananda explains:

*From this discussion, it is clear that the *buuta* impersonator first acquires his art through a chain of mimetic practice within his community and that thus both his art and his perspective inevitably assume a certain degree of multiplicity. At the same time, however, his art is incomplete unless he has the capability of being possessed and receiving the deity’s power. Corresponding to Blankenburg’s point about both the active and passive aspects of perspectivity, it is only through the simultaneously active and passive ability to relate oneself to other people and deities that the *buuta* impersonator can take on the deity’s perspective.*

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Playing with perspectives
How, then, do the impersonators realize their experience of incarnating the deity’s power and assuming its perspective? Here I consider this question by focusing on the experiences of the Pambada impersonators and the *mukkaldi*.

According to Dayananda Pambada, the deity possesses him momentarily, while its power remains longer in his body to vitalize it.

*By contrast, Satish Pambada expresses his experience of being possessed as *aakarṣaṇe*, the moment of divine fascination.*
Satish: At the moment [of being possessed], my consciousness concentrates totally on the daiva. This is the moment of aakarṣaṇe. For about three seconds, my soul goes to the daiva ... Then I recover my senses enough to be able to distinguish people.

Ishii: During the ritual, you have to call every guttu’s family name in order.¹⁹ If you were to make a mistake with the order, it would create major problems. If you lose consciousness, how can you remember this order?

Satish: No, by that time I have already recovered my senses. After aakarṣaṇe, a time of s´aanta svabhaava [the calm status of mind] will come. When people chant prayers and throw petals and grains on me, I receive aavees´a [spirit possession].²⁰ After that I know what to do next (Interview with Satish Pambada, 16 June 2008).

Lastly, Baareekrishna Shetty, the mukkaldi of Balavaṇḍi, describes the alteration of his bodily senses caused by spirit possession this way:

Baareekrishna: The moment the daiva enters into my body, I can’t see other people at all. It lasts for only a few seconds though. After that I recover my consciousness, but the power of the daiva still remains in me. Because of that, I sometimes feel unusually fierce anger. Balavaṇḍi especially is always angry. When the daiva enters my body, a bodily alteration occurs. I feel my hands and feet become stiff, and my stomach fills with gas. My face also changes.

Ishii: After you have passed the power to the Pambada,²¹ can you free yourself from these feelings?

Baareekrishna: Here in Perar, from the flag hoisting until its lowering ceremony [from the start to the end of the neema], we don’t know when Balavaṇḍi will come to us. I can be possessed anytime. Even when Balavaṇḍi possesses the Pambada, he can suddenly come to the mukkaldi. That is the speciality of this place (Interview with Baareekrishna Shetty, 2 July 2008).

As shown in these narratives, for the buuta mediums, spirit possession is experienced for only a few seconds. When the deity enters his body, the medium is totally fascinated by its power. Though he soon recovers his senses, he is still overflowing with the deity’s energy, which enables him to behave as the deity throughout the entire ritual. Thus, in order to behave as the deity in the ritual, the medium must first let the deity enter his body and then recover from the captivation to work his reflexive awareness to ‘know what to do next’. Contrary to our common supposition about spirit possession, it is not always the case that the medium is completely overwhelmed by the deity’s power and loses himself; rather, he should experience the doubleness of being both the deity and himself. In other words, the medium incarnates the deity’s power in himself and yet keeps his self-reflexivity in order to activate both his and the deity’s perspectives together. This corresponds to the Yukaghir hunter’s double perspective, which enables him to retain his depth-reflexivity while assuming the other’s viewpoint (Willerslev 2007).

As noted, the art of the buuta impersonator consists of both active and passive aspects: the art is acquired practically through the mimesis of an intimate other, and at the same time it is gifted only by divine favour. This gift for being possessed, however, is not purely a blessing; it can also be dangerous for its recipient. As illustrated in Baareekrishna Shetty’s narrative, the medium cannot foresee how or when the deity will possess him. It suddenly comes over the medium regardless of his will and forces him to alter his bodily senses, sentiments, and perspective. Therefore, the ultimate art of the buuta medium is that of accepting the new perspectives which unexpectedly appear to him, activating them, and playing with them without being totally absorbed into them. In other words, it is the art of letting various perspectives — of the self, of the other performers in the chain of mimetic practice, and of the deities — play among themselves through his self, and yet doing so self-referentially.
How, then, does the medium transform his perspective as well as his self through the continual experience of mimicking and becoming the deity? To consider this question, it is necessary to examine the relation not only between the deity and the impersonator, but also between the impersonator and the other devotees in the ritual. The next section explores the impersonator’s transformation through these ritual transactions as well as his self-modification.

Ritual transaction, performativity, and the transformation of the self

In the neema, the buuta impersonator must first prepare for his performance by breathing a prayer in front of the deity’s altar. He then puts on his make-up, a special garment, anklets, and other ornaments. His make-up and garment indicate the particular deity he is going to perform. Through this process of dressing himself, the impersonator gradually prepares his bodily self to become the deity, and, at the same time, to be identified as the deity by others. This process can be considered as the transformation of his social body (Turner 1995; 2009), which is inevitably accompanied by a certain degree of vitalization or alteration of his bodily senses. Dayananda explains the necessity of the visual, auditory, and olfactory factors for the buuta performance as follows:

The most essential things for the performance are ruupa, rasa, and gandha. Ruupa denotes the garment of the daiva: make-up, a red smock and trousers, tiri [a skirt made from coconut leaves], anklets, silver headgear decorated with flowers, and ani. All of them are a part of the ruupa and they are very important for the performance. Rasa refers to the instruments and songs (vaadya sangiiita). Drumming is indispensable for the performance. Gandha means the scent of flowers and sandalwood paste ... The ritual becomes meaningful only when these things are complete. If they are complete, the daiva will spontaneously come into the performer’s body (Dayananda Pambada, 16 May 2008).

The performer’s social body is transformed from his mundane form into divine form by means of the ritual circumstances and paraphernalia. Above all, he is performatively transformed into the deity through the ritual transactions with the other participants.

In the first stage of the ritual, called the gaggaradecci, the gadipatinaar chants a prayer to summon the deity into the medium’s body. The impersonator’s body begins to shake at the moment the gadipatinaar offers the prayer, and the other guttu heads throw rice and flowers on him. The impersonator possessed by the deity (hereinafter referred to as the deity-impersonator) dances around the precinct and greets the head of each guttu (Fig. 1). The next stage is the recitation of the paaddana by the deity-impersonator in front of the thousands of devotees thronging the shrine. In the third stage, called the neemadecci, the deity-impersonator wears an ani and is followed by the priests, heads of guttu, musicians, and the other main workers; they all march around the altar together. After speaking oracles, the deity-impersonator receives a young coconut from the gadipatinaar, pours its juice on the floor, and gives it back to the gadipatinaar with blessings. At the end of the ritual, the deity-impersonator touches the hands of each guttu head with his sword and gives them blessings also.

As seen above, the whole ritual is constituted through the mutual communication and transactions between the people and the deity incarnated in the impersonator. The most significant and repeated form of communication is the dialogue and mutual gifting between the guttu heads and the deity-impersonator. The deity-impersonator calls out the names of the guttu heads, repeatedly accuses them of ritual mistakes, and
demands the restoration of ritual order. In return, the guttu heads respond to the calls of the deity-impersonator, try to appease his anger, and beg for mercy. They regale the deity with various offerings, which the deity-impersonator receives; in return, he gives them blessings. In this ritual transaction, the gadipatinaar always accompanies the deity-impersonator in order to respond to his every act as a representative of the devotees; at the same time, the deity-impersonator needs the presence of the gadipatinaar so that through their interaction he can make his divine power conspicuous to all the devotees. They are thus in a dialogical and reflexive relation, which demonstrates the ‘ideal’ behaviour of the deity and the human in relation to each other.

This ritual transaction allows the devotees to form a link between their everyday worlds and the deity’s world: it constitutes and substantializes the social relation between humanity and the deities (cf. Appadurai & Breckenridge 1976). This does not necessarily mean, however, that humans and deities or their ‘worlds’ exist prior to their ritual transaction. Rather, they performatively come into existence through the process of ritual transaction. Through the verbal and physical communication with the deity incarnated in the impersonator, as exemplified in the interaction between the gadipatinaar and the deity-impersonator, the people come to partially assume the deity’s perspective, which re-moulds their perspective from mundane to divine: the people transform themselves into beings related to the divine world. In the same manner, the impersonator also assumes the people’s perspective through the ritual transaction, seeing himself as the deity, and thus transforms his perspective into one of a deity related to the human world. Through the ritual communication and transactions, each actor learns and re-learns how to behave and relate him- or herself to the other, and modifies his or her perspective in relation to the other.

At the same time, it is notable that even though the impersonator performatively becomes the deity in the course of the ritual transaction, he is not completely subjectified as the deity. Rather, as the expert impersonator, he keeps his self in a reflexive and permeable state through which multiple perspectives appear, act, and play among themselves. In this sense, the whole ritual is primarily designed not for the

Figure 1. The deity-impersonator greeting the gadipatinaar. (Photo: Miho Ishii.)
subjectification of the impersonator and devotees, but rather for introducing the divine perspective into the everyday human world and activating it in order to decentralize, shake up, and estrange the latter, if only temporarily.

To enable this temporary transformation in the ritual, the impersonator must undergo the longer and subtler process of self-alteration. As noted, once a person has become a buuta impersonator, he should keep his bodily self in the state of niyama niṣṭhe, the appropriate state for invoking divine power into his body. Satish and Dayananda describe their daily practice of self-modification and their newly acquired characteristics as impersonators this way:

We, as buuta performers, should not eat food offered at a funeral. I’m strictly following this rule. Apart from that, we should not eat food prepared by a woman who is menstruating. Also, we should not eat food in the houses of Aachari, Catholics, or Muslims. Though it is not easy for us to obey all the niyama today, we try to be in a state of purity (sudda) as much as we can (Satish Pambada, 16 June 2008).

When a Pambada is selected as a buuta performer, he is purified by a Brahman priest. This ritual is called kalas´asnaana. After this ritual, he becomes immune to pollution that occurs through either death or birth. He becomes free from it. The performer can attend neither a birth ritual nor a funeral. Furthermore, the performer shouldn’t be bitten by a dog, be gored by a buffalo, be beaten by a man, or beat others ...

He should obey various rules (Dayananda Pambada, 6 August 2008).

Through continual ritual practice and daily self-modification, the impersonator enters into a gradual process of transformation to become a ‘real’ or ‘better’ impersonator in relation to the deity and others. Furthermore, in this process he comes to assume a sort of divine characteristic, or purity, which distinguishes him from others as a religious expert.

As we have seen, the buuta impersonator undergoes perspective transformations at various levels and for various durations. He transforms his perspective by mimicking other performers, altering his social body, communicating with ritual participants, and being possessed by the deity. It is through these complex and generative processes of perspective transformation that a person comes to acquire the art of impersonating the deity: that is, the art of entering into the other, and at the same time letting the other enter into oneself, without totally losing one’s self. The self here, however, is not a subject obtaining an immanent viewpoint and voluntarily switching it to another, but rather a reflexive state or condition through which a person is able to let various perspectives come and go. For the buuta impersonator, niyama niṣṭhe is thus the manner in which he modifies his self to be in the right condition for the deity to come and play through his body.

Conclusion

As Boddy (1994: 422) remarks, the issues threading the literature on spirit possession have been those of selfhood, identity, and their alteration. By analysing spirit possession as an embodied critique of modernity, and also highlighting the fluid, permeable, and mimetic characteristics of the possessed person contrasted with the ideal Western person, some studies have posed this as an alternative to the modernist view of ‘autonomous individual’ (see Johnson 2011: 417). None the less, they have not sufficiently elaborated how to understand the permeable, mimetic mode of one’s being as part of the essential potentiality of humanity.

In the fields of philosophy and phenomenology, by contrast, mimesis and reciprocal perspectives have long been regarded as integral parts of the human condition (e.g.
As seen in Blankenburg’s (1991) argument on perspectivity, it is necessary for a person to partially exchange his or her perspective with that of the other to relate him- or herself with the world. Being permeable and moving outside oneself to yield to others, people can free their perspectives from being fixed by subjectivity and instead play with multiple perspectives.

This argument suggests that perspective alternation, permeability, and mimetic practice are not necessarily manifestations of the possessed or any specific personhood, but the fundamental human potentiality to mould one’s self in relation to others. Yet this potentiality can be actualized only through the practices of people under specific circumstances. Hence ethnographic context remains indispensable to our understanding of people’s lived experience and to the enrichment of the notions of perspectivity, permeability, and self-referentiality.

For Blankenburg as a psychiatrist, the ‘others’ with whom a person exchanges perspective refer to other humans, and ‘the world’ means the everyday human world. However, as described by Viveiros de Castro and Willerslev and shown in this article, the others with whom a person may exchange perspective are not limited to humans. Moreover, the world to which people relate themselves is not merely the ordinary human world but also the world(s) consisting of all creatures, spirits, and divine beings.

Just as people take on other humans’ viewpoints to decentralize their perspectives in relation to these others, the hunter gains the prey’s viewpoint to re-mould his or her perspective in relation to the animal and the medium assumes the deity’s perspective to alter his or her perspective in relation to the deity. Though in all cases perspective exchange, permeability, and mimesis are critical, neither the ‘others’ nor ‘the world’ one encounters and relates oneself to is the same in every environment, for every person, and at every moment.

Through the continual practice of communicating with various others and assuming their perspectives, people generatively mould and transform their perspectives, selves, and modes of worlding (Chakrabarty 2000: 111). In situations where perspective exchange transcends the boundary not merely between humans but also between humans and nonhumans, the terms ‘perspectivity’, ‘permeability’, and ‘self-referentiality’ reveal their broader meanings and indicate how people can live in and play with worlds beyond their everyday human perspective.

By communicating with the deities, the buuta impersonator goes outside his ordinary human self and enters a new state of selfhood. Moving between perspectives, he relates both himself and his fellow humans with the world of deities. Nevertheless, this does not primarily imply the (re-)subjectification of the impersonator and the people into deity and devotees, respectively, but their de-subjectification. This allows them to become more permeable, flexible, and still more reflexive; they can then transform their perspectives and selves in relation to others, while remaining aware enough of the transformation to process it self-referentially. The art of the buuta impersonator as mimetic expert is consequently that of enabling people’s partial assumption of a divine perspective, thus opening the way to another mode of worlding.

NOTES

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1 On the issue of self and personhood in South Asian societies, see also Marriott & Inden (1977), Busby (1997), Daniel (1984), and Sax (2002). Additionally, Freeman (1999) analyses spirit possession and the
permeability of persons in a highly local context. On the emergence of the notion of ‘spirit possession’ in relation to those of ‘self’ and ‘person’ in early modern European philosophy, see Johnson (2011).

Recent studies on magical-religious phenomena, including spirit possession, tend to analyse them not as a mere critique of modernity, but as components of it (e.g. Behrend & Luig 1999; Comaroff & Comaroff 2002). One can still find in this new trend the vestiges of the conventional framework of recasting these phenomena as political discourses about modernity. For a critical view of this trend, see Kapferer (2003) and Ranger (2007).

At the same time, as Johnson critically points out, nearly all ethnographers ‘must now at least address the prospect of their possession, respond to it, apologize for its lack, somehow account for it, as they construct their authorial position in relation to the work of spirits’ (2011: 417, italics original).

See, for example, Kohn (2007), Pedersen (2003), Pedersen, Empson & Humphrey (2007), and Swancutt (2008).

Holbraad and Willerslev (2007) also present an alternative to Viveiros de Castro’s model by illustrating the Inner Asian ‘transcendentalist’ model characterized by the asymmetrical, temporal, and generative transformation of one’s perspective.

On the instability and vulnerability of the self and body, see also Taylor (1996) and Vilaça (2005).

In her investigation of Mongolian games, Swancutt (2007: 240) points out that shifts in perspective bring about long-term changes in personhood. Santo (2012) analyses spirit mediumship in Cuba as the mutual constitution of self and spirit, which implies the development of a particular kind of self.

Wolfgang Blankenburg (1928-2002) was a psychiatrist and philosopher who studied philosophy under Martin Heidegger. He succeeded Ludwig Binswanger’s work into Daseinsanalyse and contributed significantly to the development of phenomenological-anthropological psychiatry in Germany.

Blankenburg distinguishes between ‘delusional’ and ‘non-delusional’ relations with the world and regards the latter as ‘healthy’ in a relational rather than a normative sense.

Here Blankenburg criticizes Husserl (1973), Mead (1927), and Schütz (1970); this corresponds to Willerslev’s (2007: 22-6, 189-90) criticism of Bird-David (1999), Heidegger (1962), and Ingold (2000).

The permeable ‘self’ indicates an embodied self which re-creates itself through its transformations. This corresponds to Nietzsche’s notion of the self as a ‘bundle of perspectives’ (Hales & Welshon 2000: 159).

The native language of the region is Tulu and hence the region and people are generally called tulianaadu and tulunna, respectively.

On buuta worship in general, see Brückner (2009) and Gowda (2005). On other spirit possession rituals in the region, see Claus (1979).

While Banj is regarded as the ‘dominant’ caste in the area, most of the caste groups in the research field are designated as ‘Other Backward Classes’ in Karnataka State. For the political-economic background of buuta worship in the area, see Ishii (2010).

These two villages had comprised a single village called Perar until they were administratively separated in 1904. In this article I call both Mudu Perar and Padu Perar simply ‘Perar’. The fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted from May to September 2008; in March, August, and September 2009; and from December 2010 to January 2011.

Buuuta worship at the village level is characterized by relatively systematic training and ritual processes similar to those of other theatrical performances in India (e.g. de Bruin 2006; Frasca 1990). In another article (currently under review), I will discuss the worship of the ‘kingly buutas’ as compared to the more individual, affective, and uncontrolled possession by ‘lesser’ buutas.

In Tulu, sakti can refer to power, the existence of the supernatural powers of the buuta, and the buuta itself (Upadhya 1997: 28-34).

This ability of the impersonator can be understood with Kramer’s (1993: 58) notion of ‘passiones’ (see also Ishii 2012; Lambek 1993: 312; Lienhardt 1965: 150-2).

In the buuta ritual, the deity incarnated in the impersonator calls the names of the sixteen guttus according to their rank.

Aakarsan and aaveesa mean spirits’ ‘attraction’ and ‘possession’, respectively (Upadhya 1988: 219, 277). Possession by buutas is variously described such as jooga (ecstasy), darsana (troubling owing to spirit possession), and buuta pattuṇḍu (‘the buuta caught...’) (see Claus 1984; Smith 2006: 138).

In the neema, the mukkaldi and the Pambada impersonator are usually possessed by turns.

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Jeux de perspective : possession par les esprits, mimèse et perméabilité dans le rituel du buuta en Inde du Sud

Résumé

Cette étude a pour but d’examiner la possession par les esprits à travers les prismes de la mimèse, de la perméabilité et de la mise en perspective. Des études récentes ont exploré la pertinence de l’échange de points de vue comme subjectivation réciproque. On a relevé, dans le même temps, l’importance de la conscience de soi réflexive au sein de l’échange de points de vue. Le présent article, établissant des liens entre les études sur l’échange de points de vue et celles sur la possession par les esprits, tente de faire apparaître une compréhension différente de l’échange de points de vue, vu comme la dé-subjectivation et la transformation générative de soi et de l’autre. En se concentrant sur le rituel du buuta dans le Sud de l’Inde, l’auteure considère l’échange de points de vue comme la capacité de se dégager suffisamment de sa propre subjectivité pour laisser différents points de vue aller et venir à travers le Moi perméable. Perméable et réfléxif, celui qui incarne le buuta joue avec de multiples points de vue pour transformer son point de vue et celui des autres, afin que tous puissent devenir des humains « véritables » en relation avec la divinité.

Miho Ishii is an associate professor at Kyoto University. Among her publications are ‘From wombs to farmland: the transformation of suman shrines in southern Ghana’ (Journal of Religion in Africa, 2005) and ‘Acting with things: self-poiesis, actuality, and contingency in the formation of divine worlds’ (HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory, 2012).

Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University, Yoshida-honmachi, Sakyoku, Kyoto, 606-8501, Japan. mishii@zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp