

PREFERABLY POSSESSED BY GOD UNCERTAINTY IN INTERPRETING POSSESSION TRANCE IN CAMEROON

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Abstract

The paper explores the cultural understanding of different possession trance forms among the Mbororo Fulani of Cameroon, nowadays devoted to the Islamic Tijaniyya Sufi order. It looks at how the Tijani Mbororo conceptualize the trance occurring in the course of *zikiri* (*dhikr*), a worship practice in which men – or women – dance and sing religious songs in a circle. The main focus is on the ideas revolving round the authenticity, or the falseness, of the individual *zikiri* trance states, as much uncertainty is involved in people's thinking of the possible sources of the trances they witness. Whereas the trance occurring during the *zikiri* is understood as a state in which people are "possessed by God", there are other possession forms, connected e.g. to traditional healing practices (*boori*) or attacks caused by witchcraft, in which people behave in a resembling manner, but are believed to be possessed by other spiritual entities or powers. The paper explores how a difference is made, and certain analogies are drawn, between the "divine" trance belonging to the Islamic worship and the other possession related behaviours. I argue that although the highly appreciated, and often pursued, state of being possessed by God is semantically set apart from possessions caused by various spirit agencies, in concrete situations the boundary between these differently contextualized possession forms is not so clear, and the way the Mbororo assess individual trance performances in *zikiri* gatherings often reveal certain disquiet, or at least minor discomfort, about the actual, possibly non-Islamic, source of the possession behaviour.