



**”“Lift your arms” or “be possessed”: the formidable  
transfer of the composition of gesture.  
Ethno-graphy(ies) of possession amongst the Peuls  
WoDaaBe of Niger”**

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Translated by Helen Boulac from  
"« Lever les bras » ou « être pos-  
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# **“LIFT YOUR ARMS” OR “BE POSSESSED”: THE FORMIDABLE TRANSFER OF THE COMPOSITION OF GESTURE**

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Translated by Helen Boulac from "« Lever les bras » ou « être possédé » : le redoutable transfert de l'écriture du geste. Ethnographie(s) de la possession chez les Peuls WoDaaBe du Niger", in *Corps*, 2016, n° 14, p. 239-248.

Writing dance is not easy and, for the researcher, it entails a certain number of difficulties and sacrifices. Firstly, due to the ephemeral nature of gestures, we never go back over the movement itself, but rather over the memory we have of it, and the marks we make. This implies a double somersault: that of perception with its process of selection, distortion and interpretation; and that of memorization with its power balances and blank spaces. Hence the “fictitious relationship” we have with dance, as Michel Bernard (2001: 205) underlines. Furthermore, it is difficult to transcribe, as illustrated by the multiplicity of notation systems. How is it possible to simultaneously and accurately account for space, time and energy in writing? How can we arrange a three-dimensional phenomenon into a two-dimensional space without im-

sing graphic effects that transform the very content of the subject under study? Finally, the "ethnological side" of the question needs to be considered. For writing is a constant reminder to the ethnologist that his approach is threatened by the risk of ethnocentrism due to the many meanings carried within each word.

So, we will be guided by an introspective way of thinking, in order to determine how the researcher's writings create, and even structure his subject. For this, we will adopt an ethnographic axis by studying possession amongst the Peuls *WoDaaBe* of Niger<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the first time I observed this phenomenon, I had not identified it as possession since what took place was a long way from the images I had in my mind. This situation on the field led me to question my prejudices as a researcher, as well as the way I described the events I observed. Consequently, after first presenting possession amongst the *WoDaaBe*, I will analyze their main gestural characteristics concentrating on their point of view, and from there I will consider the tensions and questions which the ethnologist faces when it comes to the writing of gestures.

## *Histories of possession*

Possession, created in Niger amongst the *Hausa*, the *Zarma-Songhay* and the *Fulani*, was previously not performed by the *WoDaaBe* who used to say of those possessed: "They are ugly, stupid, mad and evil." (Weneck, 1969: 9). They criticized possession since it did not correspond to the qualities of restraint that were valued in their social-moral code (*mboDangaaku*, "the way of being a *WoDaaBe*") and in their dances in particular. Yet, today they create dances during which the *bori*, the spirit, possesses the person. These are said to have first appeared during the 1960s<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that the *WoDaaBe* went through a vulnerable period that was worsened by the 1968-1973 drought. An elder, De'i, makes a link between the appearance of possession and times of crisis using these words: "After the drought, people danced the *bori* a lot ... Before that, the *WoDaaBe* did not know what the *bori* was. Somebody started trembling and we wondered what was wrong. Then, the people got in line and started singing. The person stood up, sang and danced. The *mooshi* appeared ... the chief's father wanted to stop the *mooshi* since it was becoming more important than the other dances. He threatened the young men who were dancing it. He prevented them from dancing. But, after his death, people became used to it. Before that, it was not accepted for young people to dance the *bori*. When we understood that young people liked it a lot, we left them alone and the *bori* dance spread. Now, all the young people dance it ... It all began like this. The *bori* comes from the *Haabe* (not Peuls). It didn't exist amongst the *WoDaaBe*. It appeared and spread like an epidemic." With the word "epidemic", De'i emphasizes the exogenous origins attributed to this phenomenon. He also considers possession to be an illness, which is one of the meanings it holds among many cults. The possessed, attacked by a spirit, must be cared for. Finally, he talks about the success of the *mooshi* amongst young people and its rapid growth<sup>3</sup>, which is in particular due to the fact that, unlike other *WoDaaBe* dances where men and women are separated, "The girls mix with the boys, and, together, in a disorganized circle, the Moo'si

<sup>1</sup> I studied possession mainly within the *Bii Korony'en* lineage from the Abalak region (1996, 1997, 1999, 2006 for a total period of one year). I also conducted interviews with other lineages, in order to cross-check the collected data.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Weneck mentioned in 1996 a "recent possession cult amongst the *WoDaaBe*" and "a new form of dance called Moo'si" (1969: 3,7). Marguerite Dupire confirmed its appearance during this period (1981: 176) and explained that young people now do "those possession dances that their fathers so despised during the 1950s" (1996: V).

<sup>3</sup> S. Weneck recalls: "The cult recently began in Tahoua, and it spread like wildfire across the regions of Dakoro and Tanout." (1969: 9)

starts ... The dancers move (very fast for the *WoDaaBe*) and they begin dancing either as a couple or separately ... After about ten minutes, one by one, the dancers have violent seizures and tremble... Possessed, the people scream at times, jump in the air waving their arms, fall to the ground, roll around and, in other words, it looks like a sabbat." (Weneck, 1969: 8)<sup>4</sup>.

However, during my field work during the 1990s, possession took on other forms. It was no longer limited to the *mooshi*, but could appear during certain *WoDaaBe* dances, showing the extent to which it had spread. Furthermore, the trances and movements described above were no longer seen. In a women's dance (*fijo rewBe*) that I attended, although the dancer was following the usual choreography, she completely stopped moving, placed her right leg in front of her left leg and swayed, throwing the weight of her body backwards and forwards. With her head down, her eyes closed, she lifted her arms above her, the palms of her hands opened out, and her hands shook. When I asked the onlookers what she was doing, they explained to me that she was possessed. "In the women's dance, she doesn't lift her arms. She claps her hands and takes steps. When she lifts her arms, it's the *bori*." (De'i). The raising of arms is therefore, for the *WoDaaBe*, inarguably a sign of the presence of the *bori*.

Possession developed amongst them and became part of their practices, taking on specific characteristics. We do not find pantheons of spirits, distinguished by their clothes, their movements, their music like amongst the Hausas. No musical instruments either, but singing, the clapping of hands and stamping of feet. Finally, gestures take on a form considered by my *bii korony'en* contacts to be specifically *WoDaaBe*: "The difference between *mooshi* amongst the *WoDaaBe* or amongst the *HaaBe*, is that the *WoDaaBe* don't use musical instruments and they raise their arms when dancing." (Ibi). This gesture can be found in all dances where the *bori* appears. It is therefore essential to analyze it in detail.

## *Analysis of gestures*

The first time that I saw someone being possessed, I thought it was a variation of the choreography. Thus, from the start, by being on the spot, I had to face my preconceived ideas. Having been conditioned by anthropology, influenced by Jean Rouch's films, I imagined possession to be a demonstration characterized by trances and a codification of gestures depending on the embodied spirit, which was far from what actually took place amongst the *WoDaaBe*. Of course, as science history has proven, the researcher does not think within an ideological void and is not free of prejudices. But while our sociocultural assumptions are often addressed, theoretical knowledge, scientific habitus are shown to be equally important. Anthropological knowledge had therefore pre-structured my viewpoint as it had that of other researchers. For example, Sophie Weneck spoke of "unauthentic" possession amongst the *WoDaaBe*: "My first impression, which, moreover, was shared by the Haoussas and Beri Beri who also watched the show, was that it was unauthentic, in other words that they were not truly possessed. It is difficult to explain why. Perhaps because, when their skirt began to fall down, the girls, who were trembling and in the middle of a seizure, found a way of putting it back in place, as if they were perfectly conscious and in control of their movements." (1969:9). These remarks are based on shows of possession which take effect as soon as the gesture is first

<sup>4</sup> Mette Bovin also refers to violent trances during the 1960s (2001: 50).

seen, when, to use G rard Lenclud's expression (1995:3), our "theoretical glasses" make us "only see what we are looking at" (p.4).

It therefore became crucial to return to the *WoDaaBe*'s point of view, by concentrating on the gestural identification introduced by the participants, the lifting of arms. For them, this gesture defines and differentiates them from others. But why this particular form? It should be noted that physical beauty holds a place of great importance amongst the *WoDaaBe* and it fulfils clearly defined criteria. "A handsome man has white teeth and eyes, a long neck, light colored skin, a flat stomach, he is tall, with a straight nose, narrow lips, a thin face ..." (Uma Barade). Young men strive to achieve this ideal in their dances. For the *yaake*, they highlight their eyes with Kohl eyeliner, and they darken their lips in order to emphasize the whiteness of their teeth and their eyes. They place an ostrich feather on the top of their heads, wear brass pendants on each side of their face and a long tunic which tends to make their body seem longer. Then they stand in line and make different facial expressions: they separate their lips, widen their eyes, squint, all of which contributes to their aesthetical demonstration. They lift their heels off the floor. Holding their back and head straight, they strive to achieve verticality with their body. Stretched legs, raised heels, an upward axial tension, they appear to hang upwards (photograph). We find this same structure amongst those who are possessed. The alinement of the body is extended by their two raised arms. This gestural transformation tends to fulfill the *WoDaaBe*'s criteria for beauty: the control of flow following the parameters identified by Rudolf Laban (1994), vertical movement which is in keeping with an elongation of the body, postural stretching which accentuates the lift.



Danse yaake, lignage des Bii Korony'e, Abalak, Niger, M. LASSIBILLE, 1996

Possession has therefore led to a reinterpretation. And while physical beauty is a matter of identity for the *WoDaaBe*, the lifting of arms corresponds to a definition of their own aesthetical identity. Whereas they had criticized possession for its ugliness and for being a practice originating from the *HaaBe*, the two being linked, the current form follows a logic of aesthetic appropriation. However, according to them, the raising of arms remains a central expression of possession: this movement, exceptional as part of their choreographic environment, expresses an extraordinary state. How, therefore, can we account for it? How can we write or describe a gesture which seems so simple, while still expressing the intensity it holds for the *WoDaaBe* and while still respecting their perceptions?

## Questions of writing

Gesture is often what tends to be missing from the text, since it is so much easier to name other aspects such as costumes, instruments, the general sequence of events ... Yet, it is at the center of the analysis of possession. Two methods are generally used to write it, words and notation, each having its own specificities and limits.

Words are the first and main tool used to describe gesture. However, apart from the limits of accuracy, words carry ethnocentric risks, and create difficulties due to the very process of categorization that they imply. Indeed, possession has given rise to different interpretations. Some researchers insist on its therapeutic role, basing this on the links between possession and illness. Others criticize this approach. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan explains that while illness is a starting point, it is important to be wary of "therapeutic evidence" and to consider two different "branches": possession caused by a socialized spirit who signs an alliance, an "election", and which gives rise to a ceremony, an adorcism; and possession caused by a "wild" spirit, who must be exorcised, which he explains is part of therapeutic treatment (1994:11). He adds that the current "therapization" debates form a legitimizing answer to the heavily criticized adoption of possession (Islamic context, influence of Western health systems...). Yet, as it turns out, over-interpretation concerns all perspectives once Olivier De Sardan's critique reintroduces a "therapeutic" branch the criteria of which should be examined. For these problems are partly due to the effect of categorization itself: while it is not always appropriate for those concerned, an analysis in religious or therapeutic terms underlies the distinction between these fields.

Another perspective can be added to this distinction, one that can be called choreographic or aesthetic. Researchers speak of "dances of possession" or "dances of spirits" (Vieillard, 1932) using the associated vocabulary, orchestra, male and female dancers ..., and often developing very detailed gestural descriptions. For the researcher's category-based view not only changes the terminology used but also the active content. This is why it is a considerable challenge to use choreographic vocabulary, with its technical and aesthetic dimensions. On the one hand, it can contribute to the recognition of a central aspect of the participants' vision, as with the *WoDaaBe* and to an in-depth analysis of the performed gesture. However, the ethnocentric risk is still present if the description of the gesture relies on our conception of dance, since a comparable category to ours does not necessarily exist (Royce, 1980: 7-10; Hanna, 1979: 17-19...). Furthermore, the relevant displays are not separated according to religious, therapeutic and aesthetic domains such as we define them. Thus, to refer to what we would call "dance", the *WoDaaBe* use several terms that can also be applied to *mooshi*. First, the term "game", opens up a realm of understanding which is far greater than the

word "dance". The *WoDaaBe* therefore define their practice as joy, in other words as an emotion. They also use the term *gamol* translated as "dance" in reference to the form of the gesture. Possession simultaneously becomes a healing ritual in the accounts given by the *WoDaaBe*, a form of entertainment for the young with all its emotional importance, depending on the terms used, and a dance with precise choreographic rules. Consequently, it cannot be contained within one unique and constant interpretation. In this respect, the categories established by ethnologists do not give full recognition to this interlocking of the practices and concepts used. Furthermore, despite the importance it holds for the participants, the reference to a "game" has not always been a central line of analysis. For example, J. P. Olivier de Sardan mentions that one of the phrases of the possession ceremony among the Songhay is pronounced *ganeendi*, the "entertainment" or "festival of the spirits" (1994: 10), and he writes: "We are neither in the domain of illness, nor in the domain of the cure, but indeed in the classic domain of group shows, in all meanings of the word: because there is a show which presupposes a well-made production, which is crystallized, stabilized" (p.13). This reminds us of Michel Leiris' approach, when he introduced the notion of theatricality (1980). He explains that the subconscious of those possessed is an ideal and that they have a course of conduct and a scenario to follow. Nevertheless, the possessed is not acting out a character for he is this character, and Michel Leiris makes the distinction between "performed theatre" and "lived theatre", another entrenchment of categories. While the performance aspect is quite rightly introduced, the "game" is not restricted to this and it takes on an important social position. In comparison, little research exists about it, which could be explained by the lack of importance it is given, or perhaps precisely because it does not seem to belong to any particular category. Yet, Michel Leiris expresses the game's full strength perfectly: "As long as I was not part of the game, everything – indeed - was just a "game" for me (sometimes a vain comedy, sometimes a fascinating show) and I dissipated my efforts with a ridiculous desire to become involved in this game each time that my role as an ideal observer of physical experiences became too much for me" (p. 141). The game is at the heart of the interlocking dynamics that we are talking about.

We can see to what extent the choice of words is key. J.P. Olivier De Sardan writes about this: "Like all "field" ethnologists who are constantly playing on the interpretation of "native" terms, be it consciously or subconsciously, I can imply a "religious" or on the contrary a "therapeutic" reading, simply by my lexical choices." (1994:9). That brings the researcher to talk about "divination" or "diagnostic", about "initiation" or "cure", "priest" or "healer", "adept" or "patient" ... It is the same thing using choreographic or aesthetic vocabulary. This shows that our way of organizing in categories structures our writings in a choice of vocabulary which adds color to the gesture in a very different way, and this is brought out by disciplinary divisions. The separation between arts and anthropology, in particular, places dance anthropology in a paradoxical position. Whilst dance analysis tools have mainly been applied to European dance and their North-American continuations, "dances from elsewhere" have been assigned to anthropology, which has defined the knowledge in terms of tradition, rite ... and which has avoided other aspects. As soon as the gesture or move is described, we categorize a multiple phenomenon via the words used.

Anthropologists suggest the importance of notation (Kurath, 2005, Kaeppler, 1998 ...) in relation to these limits. In addition to its accuracy, it would avoid the ethnocentrism of words by using signs. Yet, the view of the notator equally carries an interpretation, and a score "does not certify an objective authority, but the subjectivity of his point of view" (Launay, Menicacci, 1997: 38). Furthermore, writing a notation score means making choices from the mass of possible signs, and each system has its own visual angle,

which will have an impact on content. Finally, when I watch a dance, do I take that moment to be "representative" or do I consider it to be unique? Does "the dance" consist in the gesture of each performer or in the "constant characteristics" which can be seen from one dancer to the next? Does the notator note what he sees, the movement or the intention? The question of the point of view always remains. Thus, Judy Van Zile explains that a notation teacher "corrected" the score of a Javanese dancer who had specified details of a gesture that he considered important, but which could be included in one single sign. However, she explains, "If the aim of the score was to convey movement in the most economical way possible, the teacher's version was enough. If, on the other contrary, the aim of notation was to capture the way the movement was conceptualized by the dancer and, in this case, by a tradition, then adding symbols was justified and provided extremely important indications for research" (2005:229). Applying this to possession amongst the *WoDaaBe*, means noting the "lifting of their arms" without restricting it to a strictly anatomical view, while considering the significance this movement holds for them, and their terms (stand, raise, lift), in order to move from bones to flesh using Christine Roquet's approach (2002). Because, for an anthropologist, accuracy only means something when it is linked to the views which the movement echoes. Only then do the facts become ethnographically significant, and pass from movement to gesture.

With writing, research into gesture comes from a fundamental confrontation that notation systems do not avoid. Indeed, some conditions can account for the "indigenous voice" as proponents of post-modernism explain. But this point of view is not so easy to write down if efforts rely on the research tools themselves, which include graphic tools (Goody, 1979) and disciplinary tools amongst others. Writing therefore involves making terrible choices when, come what may, the researcher's pen has the last word. It acutely raises the issue of the anthropologist's relations with his interlocutors. How can we move from the "I" of an ethnologist and dancer who, for my part, has never experienced possession, to the "you" of his interlocutor who is trying to put his experience into words, to the "he" of the account? It is essential to identify the point of view from which the researcher describes the gesture, and this requires constant introspection. This is what is at stake in translation. As M. Kilani explains, "translation is not an assimilation of the other in oneself, but an appreciation of the distance between the other and oneself." (2000: 14). The ethnologist is constantly called on to translate, in other words to define and analyze "his places" according to the insights gathered by J. Favret-Saada (1977), be it on the ground or in his writings. And the fact of having experienced possession does not resolve in any way this inherent gap between oneself and the other<sup>5</sup>. "I am not the other" is the first methodological precaution to take on board.

## Conclusion

The analysis of gesture, more specifically within the framework of possession, has made it possible to upturn a certain number of preconceived ideas and filters inherent to scientific activity, and it has led us to consider the difficulties posed by writing, when lexical choices imply a religious, therapeutic, aesthetic reading. In this sense, considering the pragmatic dimension of possession, integrating the participants' point of view, makes it possible to question category choices with which researchers are confronted, and

<sup>5</sup> While Arnaud Halloy was initiated to the Xang , an Afro-Brazilian cult, he points out the similarities but also the differences between what he felt and how his "holy brothers and sisters" felt (2006: 106).

to realize how research has structured its subject from the outset. This is why "lift your arms" or "be possessed" stems from the formidable transfer of the writing of gesture.

It is therefore a matter of taking into account the participants' performances and activities which have their own categories and settings. An anthropologist's work in situ is no longer to be considered as a finished product developed within a fixed relation with respect to a stable object, something to which the final text can allude. It is a process built with a fragile link to a moving object, here the gesture. Far from one single frontal relationship between the researcher and his interlocutors, it is an interaction that has to be considered with its share of pressures and misunderstandings. Far from a strict opposition between the variability of the activity and the fixity of the model, it is, to use *WoDaaBe* semantics, a matter of understanding the "game" or "slack" and also of considering writing as a gesture made up of "compulsions, strategies and little apocalypses" (Launay, Menicacci 1994: p.41).

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