

STUDIA INSTITUTI ANTHROPOS 48

Boris Wastiau

***Mahamba***

The Transforming Arts  
of Spirit Possession  
among the  
Luvale-Speaking People  
of the Upper Zambezi



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and 5 skizzes

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This book is about symbolic practice in the spirit possession rituals known as mahamba in the upper Zambezi region, specifically among the Luvale-speaking people of North-Western Zambia. In it, rituals of possession are analysed as transformational practices that operate changes in the subjects undertaking them, but also as phenomena

that transform along time in specific historical and sociocultural contexts. The mahamba are numerous in kind, in turn addressing serious illness, infertility, madness, failure, social distress and other ills. Alternatively displaying the features of ad hoc therapeutic rituals or those of overtly religious cults, and calling membership of men as well of women, mahamba can lead into initiation to a religious sodality, to admission in a professional cast, or simply to the restoration of regular health and social status.

What is specific to the transformations affecting the people and the rituals themselves? Are they related and which can be the cultural and/or sociological factors determining them? How is symbolism produced and what is the role of shrines and artworks? A historical perspective and the analysis of two sets of contemporary rituals are combined to advance elements of answer. The main hypothesis is that a process of poesis, the generation of symbolic fields, is due to the existence of a core processual structure that endures in possession rituals, whatever the sociological function that they fulfill. It is contended that the mahamba are instruments for structuring history that people constantly reprocess to face their predicament.



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