



## Embodied Powers, Deconstructed Bodies

### Spirit Possession, Sickness, and the Search for Wealth of Nigerian Immigrant Women

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**Abstract.** – Possession cults often proliferate during times of dramatic social and cultural changes (colonisation, evangelisation, war, etc.). The transitional and collective meaning of this phenomenon received many interpretations. On the other hand, not much attention was paid to the individual experience of change, to doubt, and to contradictory attitudes often accompanying choices such as religious conversion or immigration. This article addresses above all the following issues: 1) the relationship between possession and modernity; 2) the logic of possession and its unique ability to metaphorically catch complex and contradictory experiences; 3) the specific gender issues displayed by the nexus immigration/prostitution market through the female, possessed bodies; 4) the dialectics generated by possession among different idioms of daily life and embodied experience. [Nigerian women, immigrant, Mammy Wata, possession, commoditisation of bodies, cultural identity, medical anthropology]

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#### 1 Possession in the Realm of Modernity, Immigration, and Transnational Scenarios

In recent years, numerous works have looked at possession in urban and migratory contexts: among those pertinent to the African context are, for example, that of Corin (1976) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gibbal (1982) in Mali, Sharp (1993) in Madagascar, Somer and Saadon (2000) amongst Tunisian immigrant women in Israel, and the most outstanding work of all, that of Rouch on the Hauka in Ghana ("Les maîtres fous," a film shot in Accra in 1954). Less numerous are studies concerning the relationships between possession and migration in Europe and, in particular, in Italy.<sup>1</sup> However, it seems relevant to us to throw light on these events and these connections, especially when one wants to investigate possession in its relationships to modernity (Behrend and Luig 1999), to the places and subjects of production (Ong 1987), to the challenges of "millennial capitalism" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b, 2000), or the worrying expressions of what have been defined as "occult economics" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a). The analysis of such an interweaving contributes to the dissolution of those models which made possession a unitary concept, a contrivance whose sense and

<sup>1</sup> Among the former are: Adouane 2001–02; Capone et Teisenhoffer 2001–02; Halloy 2001–02; among the latter are: Speziale e Passalacqua 1998.