BOOK REVIEW

Schmidt, Bettina E. 2016. *Spirits and Trance in Brazil*. London: Bloomsbury. xi + 226 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4742-5567-7 £81.00 (hbk); 978-1-3500-5792-0 £26.09 (pbk); 978-1-4742-5569-1 £25.04 (e-book).

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Keywords: Brazil; Candomblé; Umbanda; Spiritism; ecstatic religions; mediumship.

In her *Spirits and Trance in Brazil*, Bettina E. Schmidt provides an in-depth examination of Brazilian ecstatic traditions and the role they play in enriching the academic discourse on the study of living religions. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2010 in São Paulo through the lens of the participant observer, Schmidt employed interviews and informal conversations alongside actively participating in rituals. Overall, we get a detailed overview of the various ways a relationship between human and non-human beings can occur in Candomblé and Umbanda Spiritism as well as in New Age movements and charismatic Christianity.

The author realized that the way people understand and live their practices does not follow a coherent pattern nor are practitioners consistent in the belief system adopted. Consequently, there appears to be a conflict between the linear understanding that scholars seek to achieve and the incongruity of the factual manifestations. The use of a deictic approach can hence help the scholar interpret living religions without reshaping them to fit a theoretical agenda. *Deixis*, as the author explains, is a term that indicates words whose meaning is dependent on the context and would methodologically translate into a “provincialization” of the experience which takes into consideration locally specific features. This perspective is presented as potentially fruitful in the study of religious experience, for it allows the endorsement of a “holistic approach”.

The book is articulated in five chapters. In the first chapter, the methodology and the traditions addressed are introduced and put in relation to the wider research context in the field. Brazilians practise different religions at once and can label their experiences in different ways (e.g., religious, agnostic, atheistic). Interestingly, they also make a distinction between the omnipotent and creator god and the spirits, whose powers derive from the creator.

In the second chapter, the matter of gender is addressed to explain why spirit possession appears to be predominantly experienced by women. The author clarifies that spirit possession tends to be mainly practised by people belonging to a less influential social class, for whom becoming a medium might be one of the very few ways to get social recognition. An overview of the literature on the topic is presented, highlighting the key role of social and political changes in understanding the matter as women’s status in society is shown to reflect their religious role.

The third chapter focuses on extraordinary experiences and how the scholar can address them without dismissing the interviewees' point of view or be considered to have gone native. A mediation between a theoretical standpoint and lived religions that won't dismiss either needs to be found. Different traditions show, in fact, different interpretations, and the researcher, being an outsider, cannot judge them to fit a certain theoretical agenda. The experienter has to be in charge of explaining the practice, even if said explanation presents inconsistencies. The author also suggests that certain categories should not be opposed (sacred and social) or limited (religion) for they can, respectively, help understand each other and extend their field of action to be more inclusive.

In the fourth chapter, the paradigms concerning body/mind dualism are addressed. The author suggests that the inclusion of a material dimension may avoid the tendency to interpret the possession experience as solely occurring in the realm of pure belief. Spirit possession relates also to the area of human practice and should be understood accordingly. Schmidt also covers other reductive explanations of mediumship, such as biological and psychological interpretations that in some cases see spirit possession as a form of mental illness.

The conclusion summarizes the concepts expressed in previous chapters and further relates them to the research inquiry of lived religions. Emphasis is placed on the centrality of the relationship created between practitioners and the spirits, rather than the question of whether the latter exist or not. The corporeal experience during rituals has the most significant value for it represents the core aspect in the maintenance of said relationship and tells us a story about structure and dynamics within a specific community.

Schmidt's book not only provides a thorough investigation of spirit possession in contemporary Brazil but also contributes to developing a more inclusive system in the study of living religions. Adopting a deictic perspective can help many scholars read an interconnected pattern where a theory-based approach sees contradictions. Such a lens may, therefore, be able to integrate different interpretations and encompass the incongruities found in contemporary religions in a comprehensive meaningful paradigm.