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## Book Review

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COHEN, Emma. 2007. *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ix + 241 pp. (hbk). ISBN: 978-0-19-532335-1. £26.99.

*The Mind Possessed* is both a timely and an interesting book. It is timely because it engages cognitive scientific approaches at a time when their usefulness in the academic study of religion is increasingly being debated. Likewise, it treats spirit possession at a time of renewed interest in spirit-orientated religiosity. The book is interesting because its ethnographic sections are well sourced and engagingly written. Arguing that hermeneutical approaches to spirit possession do not do adequate justice to the phenomenon they seek to explain, *The Mind Possessed* is an impassioned plea for the relevance of concepts and theories arising from recent developments in cognitive science of religion. To this end, Cohen's book combines ethnographic material arising from eighteen months' fieldwork in the Brazilian city of Belém with informed understandings of some of the most recent theories of mind. The result is a stimulating and easily readable work which leaves the reader well informed about both the Afro-Brazilian context of her anthropological studies and the latest findings of cognitive science in respect of individual religious experience and collective ritual practice.

Chapter 1 of *The Mind Possessed* sets the scene by both introducing the book and the author's dissatisfaction with some of the traditionally dominant modes of academic engagement with spirit possession. This disquiet is revisited in chapters 4 and 5 as Cohen critiques the now dominant hermeneutical paradigm (ch. 4) and received psychiatric, physiological and sociological "explanations" of spirit possession (ch. 5). These well-informed chapters are preceded by a balanced and informative historical and ethnographic account of her research context. From chapter 6 onwards, the book steadily builds a case in favour of the most relevant insights, concepts and theories which cognitive science furnishes in respect of spirit possession. As such, the nuts and bolts of the science of cognition (e.g. "cognitive mechanisms," "counterintuitive systems," "theories of mind," and "attribution theory") are lucidly introduced and zealously applied to the incidence and transmission of (in addition to the preponderance of women involved in) spirit possession. In effect, and whilst acknowledging the variability of cross-cultural representations of spirit possession, Cohen argues that "fundamental continuities in the ways that spirits are represented in human minds" are best explained by "recent advances in the scientific investigation of the processes of cognition" (p. 101).

As one drawn naturally to a combination of sociological explanation and hermeneutical exploration, I welcome this book's reminder of the interpretative limits of these approaches. In the same vein, Cohen admirably underlines the dangers of ignoring recent arguments in respect of inherent psychophysical processes and their implications for contemporary understandings of religion in general and spirit possession in particular. In combination with its

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ethnographic contextualization of particular Afro-Brazilian belief and practice, these assertions make *The Mind Possessed* an interesting, informative and provocative book.

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