

Review

Spirit Possession and Trance. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives, edited by Bettina Schmidt and Lucy Huskinson. London and New York: Continuum, 2010. x + 246pp. ISBN: 978-0-826435-74-3 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-441108-28-9 (pbk). £65.00/£24.99.

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Spirit Possession and Trance is one of the most captivating contributions to the field published in the last years. The editors have built the volume around discourses and debates arisen on occasion of the 2007 annual BASR (British Association for the Study of Religion) conference, Edinburgh University, and the 'New Interpretations of Spirit Possession' conference hosted by the School of Theology and Religious Studies at Bangor University in May 2008.

The study of trance and possession is discussed in courses such as religious studies, anthropology and the anthropology of religion, ritual theory and area studies. As both editors and authors note, trance and possession are forms of expression that find their place in a number of cultural manifestations, from sacred scriptures to ritual, from the visual arts to healing practices, from media to politics. The volume succeeds in discussing trance and possession as a living reality, and at the same time it provides fresh methodological reflections for future analyses. Trance and possession are explored as polyphonic texts and debated as a cultural reality that defines and is defined by contextual history and local stories, micro- and macro-geography, classic and vernacular literature, music, media and politics.

The various texts upon which trance and possession are built are discussed as a starting point for exploring regional variants of different religion. This approach is worth praising. Further, it is of great interest to learn how such phenomena can be both integrated in and isolated (if not marginalized) by the cultural system they are part of. Trance and possession, whose definition is acknowledged to be an elusive task and whose description—in the past—has been the object of controversial, if not biased, approaches, are examined as mobile experiential performances that inform society on many levels.

The book opens with an 'Introduction' (1-15) in which the editors, Lucy Huskinson and Bettina Schmidt, review early approaches (e.g. Frazer, Métraux, Eliade, Oesterreich) on trance and possession and explore how contemporary post-modern literature (e.g. Crapanzano, Lambek, Lewis, Bourguignon) is dealing with the dissonance that features them. One of the major concerns of both editors and contributors seems to be the place of consciousness. Are individuals in trance or possessed persons aware (conscious) of what they do and say? And if there is no consciousness, why is that so? What does it en-

tail? Different approaches are used to address such a delicate issue: the phenomenology of religion, cognitive theories, psychoanalysis, gender and subaltern studies, cultural anthropology, ritual and performance theory, media studies, and so on.

In the following chapters, a wide range of case studies is discussed along with an acute analysis of both theoretical issues and reflections on the ethics of fieldwork. Contributors include: Chapter 2, 'Animism rather than shamanism: new approaches to what shamans do' (16–34), by Graham Harvey; Chapter 3, 'Possession and self-possession: towards an integrated mind-body perspective' (35–52), by Geoffrey Samuel; Chapter 4, 'Spirit possession, seduction and collective consciousness' (53–70), by Louise Child; Chapter 5, 'Analytical psychology and spirit possession: towards a non-pathological diagnosis of spirit possession', by Lucy Huskinson (71–96); Chapter 6, 'Possessed women in the African diaspora: gender difference in spirit possession rituals' (97–116), by Bettina Schmidt; Chapter 7, 'Somali saar in the era of social and religious change' (117–33), by Marja Tiilikainen; Chapter 8, 'Taking possession of Santo Daime: the growth of Umbanda within a Brazilian new religion' (134–50), by Andrew Dawson; Chapter 9, 'Spirit attacks in Northern Namibia: interpreting a new phenomenon in the African Lutheran context' (151–70), by Kim Groop; Chapter 10, 'Divine possession and divination in the Graeco-Roman world: the evidence from Iamblichus's *On the Mysteries*' (171–85), by Crystal Addey; Chapter 11, 'Waking the entranced: reassessing spiritualist mediumship through a comparison of spiritualist and shamanic spirit possession practices' (186–204), by David Gordon Wilson; Chapter 12, 'To perform possession and to be possessed in performance: the actor, the medium and an "Other"' (205–22), by Sarah Goldingay; Chapter 13, 'On transformation of the spirit possession film: towards Rouch as "Emergent Method"' (223–39), by Saër Maty Bâ.

Authors, rather than providing a new definition of 'possession' and 'trance', move from previous literature and their own ethnographic work to discuss the performances and experiences of their informants. These are then analysed as (self)reflective communication processes where multifaceted and polyphonic cultural experiences are informed by the presence of the observer (who—in some cases—is an engaged scholar). For instance, Graham Harvey, in Chapter 2, discusses possession phenomena within animism and reflects on the shaman's performance. In particular he focuses on who a shaman is in his/her own culture rather than what s/he does (or is expected to do) in academic literature. A similar conclusion is reached—though from different perspectives—by Bettina Schmidt in Chapter 6, or by Louise Child who warns us about the 'inherent dangers with sociological analyses of possession that try to make direct links between structures of inequality and possession' (p. 53).

Other contributors (e.g. Geoffrey Samuel, in Chapter 3, or Lucy Huskinson, in Chapter 5) discuss if and how possession and trance can be examined in terms of pathology. Conclusions may be conflicting. However, one cannot but appreciate the efforts of contributors in establishing the ground rules for a more inclusive approach. Gender issues and narratives of love, longing and eroticism are also a key theme in the book (e.g. Schmidt, Child, Tiilikainen) while reflections about migration, diaspora and the relocation of religious practices—often as a consequence of colonialism—are analysed as relevant in informing rituals of possession or episodes of spontaneous trance (Dawson, Tiilikainen, Groop). The many and diverse examples of trance and possession described and discussed in this book also show how individual and collective experiences lead to the affirmation, consolidation and transmission of forms of power. This can be found in the use of performance theory and reflections on the

role of the arts and media in possession trance, as exemplified by Goldingay, Maty Bâ and Wilson.

The presence of trance and possession is ubiquitous not only in religious contexts. Irrespective of their relationship with the sacred, their output is not forcibly linked to spiritual experiences. Actions and words inscribed in performances leading to or requiring possession/trance often relate to mundane events, or to resolve situations of temporary crisis. The volume teaches us that those who experience trance and possession—or those who believe in them—are performers, learners and ultimately teachers. Trance and possession phenomena, though being experienced diversely, serve to the purpose of transmitting knowledge. Whether the aim is to heal or be healed, to communicate with gods and/or spirits, to cope with imbalance or marginalization, or to obtain something practical, they set the basis for communication and transmission of knowledge. In so doing the book proves to be an excellent and much needed resource for any reader interested in trance possession, either a student or a teacher.