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AN AUTHOR MEETS HER CRITICS


Comments by Diana Espirito Santo

"Why spirits?" asks Emma Cohen (97)—why are concepts of intentional and agentic supernatural beings such as spirits and gods so prevalent cross-culturally? What makes them appealing, contagious, and lasting? And what kinds of assumptions about the world and its workings do they entail and do they generate? In *The Mind Possessed*, Cohen offers us some answers; to some degree by appealing to her ethnography of the Afro-Brazilian practice of *batuque* in the Amazon-bordering town of Belém, but mostly by subordinating particularistic concerns to what she considers more general 'scientific' ones. However, it may be the questions, rather than the answers, that merit revising.

Cohen holds that the minds of human beings are constrained by certain tacit (and largely unconscious) assumptions about the natural and social world, inherited from our evolutionary past ('naive biology', for instance, or, more important in this case, 'theory of mind'; consistent with the modularity thesis). Following authors such as Barrett (1999, 2004), Boyer (1994, 2001), and Sperber (1996), she argues that the spirit beliefs that are likely to be transmitted from one person to the next generally consist of a balance of intuitive (the spirit has thoughts and feelings) and counterintuitive principles (the spirit has a mind but no body). Furthermore, spirits (such as *orixás*) are catchy ideas because they are socially relevant—they are believed to have access to crucial 'strategic information', and this keeps people coming back. Possession, Cohen explains, is an interpretation of what can be regarded as a relatively normal 'alternative state of consciousness', one based on the over-attribution of agency, both from the perspective of the possessed and from that of his or her audience ('subtle contextual cues and psychological biases come into play' on both ends [131]).

Comparatively little attention is given to the structure and experience of possession, or to how it is properly learned and developed over time, which strikes this reader as paradoxical given the author's concern with explaining the continued existence of these phenomena. By disembedding the conceptual from the phenomenological, Cohen ends up not being able to say much about the 'cognition' leading up to and of spirit possession itself, 'on the ground' (as she often says), which is a historical, intersubjective process, some aspects of which are shared and others unique to each person. In other words, because she separates so determinately native explanations from the so-called objective ones, Cohen is unable to transform ethnographic categories into vital analytical ones, permitting a rather one-sided conversation to take place. That the former kinds of explanations are relegated to the status of 'beliefs'—by

...
the social and non-social world that surrounds it” (1992: 21, quoted on p. 96; italics added)—Cohen denies herself the chance to produce an original cognitive ethnography with what can only be fabulous data on the indissociability of psychology, physiology, and cosmology.

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Comments by Arnaud Halloy

In The Mind Possessed, Emma Cohen lays the foundations of a naturalist approach to spirit possession. Her project is an ambitious one: "to present generalizable accounts of the emergence, form, and spread of recurrent, widespread features of possession phenomena" (61). By providing a "synthesized explanatory account of spirit possession and mediumship" (96), able to integrate ethnographic material with findings from cognitive sciences, she aims to identify and describe "certain mechanisms of cognition" that contribute to "the particular form and incidence of possession among a group of Afro-Brazilian cult participants in Belém" (97) in the north of Brazil.

After introducing the reader to the history and ethnographic setting of the culto afro (chapters 2 and 3), Cohen offers an overview of the divergent interpretations of possession in