

ment workshop are too overwhelmed by the hegemonic discourse and basically exert symbolic violence on the participants to the extent that the latter must surrender by accepting the new lingual order in which “it’s all about” their power of will.

This book would become a precious asset for scholars and student in the field of gender relations who are interested in understanding how gender becomes crucial in the creeping in of neoliberal ideas. Sa’ar beautifully exposes the dynamics through which the gender contract of earlier political economies is transformed. The fact, that historically women were not expected to become primary breadwinners in their families, legitimizes the expectation that woman’s economic activity would become the sole definer of the services they are entitled to benefit of. As gender, says Sa’ar, is a structural mechanism of control and exclusion, the social organizations of jobs, services, taxes, and so on, reinforce women’s blaming of themselves and their family obligation when justifying their inability to increase their income. Their own “choice” of maternal practices is taken as an explanation rather than the gendered allocation of resources in society.

I believe that the book is an excellent account of the pressures characterizing women’s survival struggles in Israeli society today occurring in the context of arrogant rhetoric, which practically ignores their breadwinning efforts in dealing the needs of those dependent on them. But more so, it is an elegant application of critical discourse analysis taking a step forward feminist critical discourse analysis which focuses on the ways in which radical feminist notions are appropriated by conservative discourses and used against women, or in the case of Sa’ar’s study, against women’s entitlement to dignity-based citizenship. The book is a must read for anyone still insisting on thinking of neoliberalism as dual in its effects allowing some to benefit of the new “freedom,” while some lose. According to Sa’ar, even if the spirit of empowerment is emotionally energizing, it is, nevertheless, morally and interpersonally destructive in isolating women by a language of community and solidarity. Sa’ar’s writing is thoughtful and precise and I believe the book chapters could serve as important discussion triggers in courses and seminars on a variety of topics. Orly Benjamin

**Schmidt, Bettina E.:** *Spirits and Trance in Brazil. An Anthropology of Religious Experience.* London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 226 pp. ISBN 978-1-4742-5567-7. Price: \$ 114.00

The author presents her results of research among Brazilian spirit possession cults/activities in São Paulo in 2010. She attended ceremonies at various Afro-Brazilian communities (Candomblé and Umbanda *terreiros*), Spiritist centers, and Pentecostal churches, interviewed priests and priestesses as well as ritual members like mediums and *filhos/filhas de santo* (initiated persons in Afro-Brazilian cults) experienced in spirit possession during trance. The religious area has numerically shifted in the last decades. The Catholic Church, traditionally the dominant religious group, lost its all-embracing supremacy

from 89% in 1980 to 65% in 2010. In the same period, Pentecostal churches advanced from 3% in 1980 to 14% in 2010 and Spiritist communities (Kardecism and Afro-Brazilian cults) from 1% in 1980 to 2% in 2010. People without religion increased from 2% in 1980 to 8% in 2010 (cf. IBGE <<https://bresils.revues.org/docannexe/image/1843/img-1.jpg>>). The contact of the population with possession activities, however, is much higher than the census numbers indicate. One estimates that more than 50% of the population, i.e., more than 100 million believe in and participate to some kind of “spirit possession.” Alone in the city of São Paulo, 14,000 Umbanda houses, 2,500 Spiritist centers, and 1,400 Candomblé *terreiros* are registered. The neo-Pentecostal churches build and are building new temples with capacities for more than 20,000 participants.

The book is divided in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the anthropological methodology the author adopted (participant observation, structured and informal interviews, biographies) and the main research fields of Candomblé, Umbanda, Spiritism and neo-Pentecostal churches. Though the structure of these communities differs widely and their religious background possesses different features, they have in common the experience of transcendental beings such as spirits, gods, ghosts, or spirits of deceased. The communication with these beings is essential for their self-understanding and identity. Therefore, the author focuses her attention to this experience of transcendental beings trying to understand, describe, and analyze the processes evolving inside the actors and outside the communities.

The second chapter analyzes the social setting of spirit possession. A shift also here from traditional participant groups of the lower class, principally black people, to the middle class of white people is a characteristic feature. The traditional overwhelming role of women as mediums changes to more diversity of people experiencing alteration of consciousness due to the loss of the African roots in which the social role of woman as marginalized and inferior person gained social power and prestige. Today, spirit possession received a broader acceptance in the society and became universal – therefore the shift in gender roles. My own experience in Candomblé *terreiros*, however, showed that the majority of mediums are still women and homosexual men, all induced to initiation in Afro-Brazilian cults through an overwhelming spirit manifesting itself by a mysterious illness. The illness only vanished through the acceptance of the incoming spirit by the possessed person. The question remains, therefore, why just women and homosexual men incline to such a “revelation” of a spirit. My impression was that the psychic predisposition for such an attitude belongs to the genetic matrix of that group of people and not to social or psychological factors of a reduced identity. Brazilians are adherent to a religious group, because they need help in cases of illness, misery, loss of employment, or family troubles. The religious mobility is very frequent. Not seldom the same person attends various religious groups in order to obtain the desired goal or he/she changes constantly the religious affiliation.

The third chapter reflects the debate about religious experience. The vast presentation of the academic discourses regarding the item illuminates the crucial point, how to interpret experiences made in trance by persons who are not able to analyze personally their experiences. The interpreter is generally an outsider, who does not know how to feel, experience, or articulate such an event, moreover, he/she is generally prejudiced against religious experiences of spirits or gods, because he/she denies “scientifically” the existence of such transcendental beings. Only in recent times, there are some attempts to consider religious experiences real events. The author writes: “The experience of ecstatic religions is the ultimate Other. It is also to a high degree ineffable. ... Nonetheless, despite being ineffable, the ‘radically other’ defines not only the experience but also the tradition as it is at the core of its practice despite its different function and ontology” (108). The question for the author is not to discuss the reality of transcendental beings but rather to describe and analyze the reality of experienced beings as others.

The case of possession is interpreted differently in the religious groups. The Candomblé community argues that the spirits do not “possess” personally their hosts, because the spirit’s personality would be too strong to be supported by a human body. Since the spirits are natural forces, they occupy the host with their natural power. The host manifests the presence of his/her spirit through songs, dances, and gestures. The host’s mind is unconscious during the spirit’s presence and is generally unable to remember something after awakening from the trance. The state of trance weakens the host in a way that he/she has to recuperate him-/herself from the physical exertion during hours. Trance can occur voluntary or involuntary; the host has to learn to control the coming of his/her spirit. The human body serves as vehicle for communication with the spirits, because soul and body form a unique complex of unity. The breath (*emi*) provides the body with life, the mind/consciousness (*ori*) gives the individuality, and the Creator-God himself (Orum) inserts the soul given with special elements of and connection to his/her innate spirit (*orixá de berço* or *de cabeça*). The host experiences the full harmony of body, mind, and transcendence during the state of trance becoming a unified personality in turning his/her *orixá* to visible manifestations in the ritual.

Umbanda and Spiritism interpret the mediumship in different ways. Possession is only a means to communicate with the transcendental world. Mediums fall voluntarily in trance in order to obtain advices for healing or counselling their clients. Umbanda furthermore knows devotion rituals acknowledging the presence and veneration of transcendental spirits. Spiritism, however, following the doctrine of Allan Kardec, rejects generally to be religion and defines itself a secular technic to communicate with the other world. It offers also cleansing sessions for possessed persons by maligns spirits. One of the preeminent features of Spiritism is its radical devotion to charity assistance for people seeking help.

Chapter 4 finally discusses the scientific paradigms in the body/mind debate. The author presents the different meanings of scientific interpretations beginning with the

Cartesian dualism of mind and body founded in the Platonic dichotomy of *Materia* and *mind/soul*. The problem rises today because spiritual experience cannot be measured scientifically and, therefore, cannot be reproduced in laboratories, nor can recent neurosciences provide an insight in that processes, because it is not very plausible that brain streams produce spiritual experiences. Spiritual activities need brain cells and streams in order to function, but they are not produced by them. Activities of the mind have to be learned by a process often of long duration and arduous endeavor. The mind has to train the brain cells to follow the mind’s intention such as hearing, speaking, writing, or thinking. Religious experience stimulates without doubt certain brain areas but cannot be explained through biological processes. Mediumship by trance is biologically a phenomenon of psychic dissociation, but is otherwise a mental experience that cannot be analyzed by biological measurements.

The conclusion of the author in chapter 5 results in the affirmation that spirit possession should be considered as a deictic concept. Spiritual experience depends on its geographical, historical, and cultural context and can only be understood in this unique context. The author concurs with Evans-Pritchard when he states that “there is no possibility of [the anthropologist] ... *knowing* whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration” (185). So, she concludes: “Whether the spirits, the *orixás*, or God exists is not the question, but rather how the relationship between human and non-human beings is maintained” (187). The term “spirit possession” may be ambivalent and sometimes contradictory, but its meaning can be described and analyzed by a deictic concept avoiding any essentialist or metaphysical definition. The author concludes her book with a quotation of an interview with a member of a Candomblé community: “I was seven years old when I lost consciousness, and my parents thought I had a seizure. ... And I did tests, CT scans, electro, a lot of tests and they never found anything. ... I believe that it was the first manifestation of the *orixá* when I was seven years old. ... And when I started [with Candomblé], which got me Xango, I could no longer practise anything else, I had not no desire to go to another religion. It is a complete world within Candomblé; to me it is very important. It changed my character, my personality, my social life, my patience, understanding of what is religion, understanding the limits of other people. I do not want to prove to people that my religion is better than others. I think you show that you have a good character through actions, and behind this is the religious principle, in a certain way. ... Just imagine a religion in which God, the gods come dancing with you and manifest in you, it is unique, it is very unique” (190).

“Spirits and Trance in Brazil” is one of the best empathetic depiction of spirit possession I ever read.

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