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AN AUTHOR MEETS HER CRITICS

Around The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition by Emma Cohen.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, ix + 241 pages.

■ Comments by Diana Espirito Santo

“Why spirits?” asks Emma Cohen (97)—why are concepts of intentional and agentive 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



definition implicitly lesser kinds of ‘truths’—with which no real ontological dialogue is possible, reads like a justification of this authoritative stance. Further, by squeezing her data to fit to the universal models of spirit ‘beliefs’ that she defends, my suspicion is that Cohen glosses over potentially important ethnographic details relating to local understandings of matter, spirit, and personhood; ‘nuances’ that could compromise some of her main assertions, including the fact that what is appealing to the evolved psyche about possession is that it provides spirits with their missing part—physicality (Cohen says nothing about other dimensions of spirit ‘materialization’ in the lives of her informants). Finally, in chapter 4, Cohen’s frank irritation with overly descriptive ethnographies (which eschew the ‘scientific method’ and which she attributes to the “dominant agenda of anthropological scholarship, in which the sole mandate of epistemological relativism produces a situation in which anything goes” [73]) is founded on an alarmingly circular definition of what counts as legitimate anthropological knowledge and theorization. On closer inspection the so-called relativists share a great deal more with those who defend the cognitivization of the anthropology of religion than certain of the latter authors might be willing to admit: both conceptually colonize the ‘other’ by redefining and redeeming ‘otherness’ (see Argryou, 2002), that is beliefs in spirits.

But it is not Cohen’s analysis that registers as particularly objectionable. In fact, it follows well from the central claim of the cognitivists: namely, that culture is transmitted from one mind to another, thus the job of anthropology consists in uncovering the mental mechanisms whereby some ‘bits’ of culture are more likely to be successful (i.e., memorable) than others. Sperber (1996) has called this task “an epidemiology of representations”, and Cohen’s book is testament to the viral catchiness of his thesis, especially in its alluring suggestion that a scientific explanation of religious phenomena (“true materialism” [101]) is not only possible but also explanatory. Cohen does a fine job in wedding the existing neurological and psychological data with the ethnographic facts she selectively expounds. But the book inevitably reads a little too much like a ‘just so’ story throughout. And this is because there is something distinctly unsettling about the presumption that possession behavior/experience is primarily about the acquisition of concepts. Rather Cohen should make a clearer differentiation between her informants’ real-time and a posteriori rationalizations of spirit possession, which might be predominantly conceptual, and their actual know-how, which would require acknowledging that inferential knowledge is not just conceptual but embodied. Basing one’s conclusions on the innate ‘attractiveness’ of certain ideas seems at the very least like a wasted opportunity to properly explore a complex and multidimensional field of religious transmission.

Few anthropologists or psychologists would defend the idea that the human mind is completely devoid of some inference systems whose continued existence has been facilitated by their adaptive value, with language as a case in point (Karmiloff-Smith 1999). But it is an entirely different thing to suggest that a pre-existent ‘design’ or mental architecture (in advance of its development) underwrites all learning and knowledge (Ingold 2001: 125). Indeed, it is very unlikely that cultural knowledge is adequately described in propositional form, as many authors have successfully demonstrated (e.g., Clark 1997; Hutchins 1995; Lave 1988). Rather, their evidence points to the importance of sensory and motor participation in the development of perception and skill, and to an understanding of cognition in which the ‘cognitive’ cannot conceivably be reduced to mental operations alone. All of this matters because in effectively reproducing views of the minds such as that of Tooby and Cosmides and the ‘interactionist’ research paradigms they foster—“The rich complexity of each individual is produced by a cognitive architecture, embodied in a physiological system, which *interacts* with

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 Afro-Brazilian cult Culto Afro (chapters 2 and 3), Cohen offers an overview of the divergent interpretations

of possession in anthropology (chapter 4), but also in disciplines as diverse as medicine, neurology, and sociology (chapter 5). She highlights the necessity to go beyond ‘impressionistic speculations’ and theoretical reductions in the explanation of possession, which is sometimes described as mere pathology (as in some medical approaches), as a neurological or psychochemical mechanism (the Calcium Deficiency Hypothesis) or as the simple product of ‘sociological forces.’ I focus my review on the subsequent chapters in which she presents and develops her hypotheses pertaining to the mental mechanisms that account for the success of possession phenomenon around the world.

A first set of hypotheses concerns the cognitive structures underlying the conceptualization of spirits (chapter 6). Very sketchily, Cohen argues that human beings are natural Cartesians (see also Bloom 2004). This intuitive understanding of mind/body interaction is what supports the possibility of what she calls ‘mind migration,’ the core conceptual framework of possession phenomenon. Drawing on Pascal Boyer’s (2001) theory of religious representations, Cohen defends the idea that spirits—because they are part of the ontological category of ‘persons’—generate a rich set of intuitive inferences regarding their nature. Because, in the case of possession, they are able to migrate from one body to another, spirits fall into the category of ‘minimally counterintuitive’ concepts. This cognitive feature is what makes spirit possession a cognitively attractive phenomenon, facilitating its memorization and transmission.

In chapter 7, in my view the most innovative but also the most controversial one, Cohen analyzes the way people actually perceive possession during possession episodes. Her main hypothesis is that the perception of possession brings two potentially conflicting cognitive devices into play. On the one hand, ‘theologically correct’ discourse (Barrett 2004) about possession depicts a mutual influence between the possessed and the spirit. She calls this the *fusion principle*. On the other hand, “whatever the case may be, at any moment, there is only one intentional agency represented—one mind and not two—as operating within the body, to which outward behaviors are attributable” (139); this is what she calls the *displacement principle*. According to Cohen, the ‘displacement principle’ should be considered the default cognitive mechanism at work in possession, precisely because it is sustained by largely intuitive assumptions; the fusion principle is described as an a posteriori and reflexive interpretation that is only relevant when the principle of displacement “no longer helps one to make sense of a situation” (145).

In chapter 8, Cohen aims to identify the cognitive mechanisms that explain the tight link among the presence of spirits, possession phenomena, and misfortune. Her conclusions tend to reinforce classical (functionalist and intellectualist) interpretations of afflictive possession and witchcraft, in which both are seen as the result of a social causality: many ambiguous events, most of the time unhappy and personally significant, are perceived as the result of a supernatural intentionality, itself colored by strong moral intuitions about why such events happen. Within such a theoretical framework, possession and the communication it establishes are understood as helping to predict and control the circumstances of recurring misfortune. According to Cohen, a good cognitive candidate for explaining why supernatural agents are so often involved in the causal explanation of misfortune is the “Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device” (Barrett 2004), characterized by a tendency to overestimate the attribution of agency to events in the environment.

I want to make two critical comments in connection with this work. The first is ethnographic and draws on my own research in a quite similar Afro-Brazilian cult, the Xangô cult of Recife, in the northeast of Brazil. It pertains to Cohen’s model of personhood and suggests an alternative framework to her analysis of the perception of possession. I wonder about the

relevance of positing an “intuitive sense of incongruence ... about the indivisibility of personhood” in a cultural context in which simultaneous possession of the same deity by many initiates is the rule rather than the exception, and where the self is conceived as intrinsically multiple (Segato 1995), that is, as a crossroad or ‘stage’ where various entities (*orixás*, *ori*, a spiritual entity corresponding to the person’s spirit or destiny) may express themselves in various ways (through possession, but also on the levels of personality, preferences, and physiology). A related question concerns the respective cognitive weight given to the ‘displacement’ and ‘fusion’ principles in the perception of possession behavior. My claim would be the opposite of the one Cohen proposes: the displacement principle in the Xangô cult reflects a ‘theologically correct’ discourse, describing an ideal trance state involving unconsciousness and the full control of the possessed by the possessing spirit, while the fusion principle—characterized by the perception of a mutual interaction between the possessed and the spirit or deity—is a constitutive cognitive mechanism of possession perception. Some first-hand ethnographic data support these ideas.

First, possession is not an on/off, monolithic phenomenon, but rather a continuum of psycho-biological changes that vary from slight emotional arousal to the ideal possession state. Cult members are experts in discriminating the relevant behavioral and emotional cues that indicate the intensity of trancing and the immediate stages whereby mediumship is developed. Mixed intentionalities are what is actually perceived in all cases where there is no ‘full presence’ of the deity or spirit. Second, perception of possession behavior may change according to cultural ideas and representations about possession, including not only concepts about what possession *is*, but also ideas about how it is learned, how the spirit ‘gets close’ (*se aproxima*) to the possessed body, how the spirit is held to interact with his or her ‘child’ during possession episodes, and so on. First trance episodes, for example, sometimes look like a fight between the novice and his or her deity, in which he or she might start crying or become panic-stricken, making wild and uncoordinated movements, and so on. Third, Xangô members recognize at least two categories of possession: ‘unconscious possession’, which corresponds to the ideal possession such as that described in Cohen’s displacement principle, and ‘conscious possession’, in which possessed people say, for example, that “they know that they are talking, but don’t know what they say.” Finally, it should be noted that possession involves a much more complex ‘mind-reading’ system than ordinary interaction. Possession behavior is ritualized and theatrical, providing distinct expectations about the respective role of actions, perceptions, intentions, and emotions in the observed behavior. Such “pragmatic preconditions of participation” (Houseman 2003) are determining factors in the kind of intentional and communicative interplay that is taking place between co-present agencies.

My second criticism is theoretical and applies to much cognitively oriented research in anthropology. Emma Cohen focuses almost exclusively on how people *think* about possession. However, if one wishes to take into account the *process of possession*, that is, how spirit possession is learned and how possessed/spirit interaction evolves over time, such an overly ‘representational’ conception of cognition is prejudicial. Maybe more than any other social phenomena, possession is lived through affects and percepts which, along with the conceptions of possession Cohen rightly identifies, are good candidates for explaining its wide success around the world (Halloy 2009). Pragmatic conditions of possession phenomenon such as the form of ritual language, relational patterns, spatial work, objects, images, substances and body manipulation, are also crucial in determining the way people think about, feel, perceive, and interact with possessed people. In substance, the question cognitive anthropology

should pay more attention to is not just how intuitive thinking constrains cultural practice, but also how cultural practice may (deeply) transform intuitive thinking.

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■ Comments by Pierre Liénard

Mind-boggling!

Emma Cohen communicates her thoughts beautifully! Her writing transports us seamlessly from elating, moist, tropical borders to no-less-exciting, but somewhat drier (and less torrid), theoretical climes. Cohen's seminal idea of treating *possession* as a window into ordinary functional aspects of our cognition is tantalizing. We already knew that the study of nonordinary cognition observable in mental illnesses and other psychological and psychiatric disorders does tell us a whole lot about human 'normal' cognition. Cohen's decision to focus on altered states of consciousness in an Afro-Brazilian religious tradition and on some of the explicit representations systematically associated with that—should I dare—mind-boggling phenomenon is original and ingenious. Furthermore, an essential plus to me, the whole endeavor is a resolute attempt to sail away from the too-oft-navigated Derridean-hermeneutical-sophistic-cum-postmodernist waters. It is not an overstatement to claim that the study partakes of one of the powerful impetuses that have been driving anthropology's scientific revival for the past decades.

I was so enthralled by the material presented that I felt somewhat frustrated. That is, I wanted more details than the inherent limitations tied to the format of a book allowed Cohen to add. I am thrilled to be given the opportunity to interact indirectly with the author through this review-response process and hence to facilitate the publication of more significant data.

Cohen has noted (36) that race, as a biological category, does not come up often as having much significance when it comes to membership in an Afro-Brazilian cult. One becomes

Afro when one becomes an initiated member of a *terreiro* (i.e., a community of Afro-Brazilian cult members) regardless of one's obvious ethnic affiliation. Knowing how important in Brazil skin color (and all its recognized subtle variations of shade and hues) are for the definition of an individual's identity (see the extensive lexicalization of those differences), I am a bit surprised that it would be the case that race as an observable category focusing on ethnic features (e.g., hair, skin) would be so easily relegated to oblivion. Is it true that racial information is irrelevant to the members of the Afro-Brazilian cult? Probably the 'official' discourse does maintain that, but I am wondering whether racial identity does not creep back up into more implicit representations in the minds of the participants to the cult. What is the ratio between black and white *pais* (i.e., leaders of the religious community)? Is there any evidence that people might be essentializing racial origin as an indicator of a privileged access to the cult? If we look at the proclaimed genealogy of power transmission between masters and novices, do we find an over-representation of reference to black leaders? Are we indeed in a situation of a fundamental rejection of any racial category? Do people appraise black and white *pais* the same way? The well-known fact that South American Amerindian *pajes* (medicine men) are treated as essentially different (usually as more powerful and the source of new magico-religious materials) from non-Amerindian medicine men seems to suggest that probably the treatment of the racial category in the Afro-Brazilian cult could well be slightly more complicated than Cohen's claims let us believe.

At several places in her work, Cohen tackles an essential problem that has fueled much debate in the literature on possession: the possession's true or fake nature and good or bad quality as appraised by observers and participants to the cult. Cohen does great work in analyzing the flagrant discrepancies between participants' explicit statements about individual possessions and their beliefs that the *hosts* are indeed possessed. Knowledge of the hosts' usual behaviors and attitudes outside of the realm of possession seem to 'contaminate' observers' appraisal of the hosts' possessions (see, e.g., 148–49). Something seems to be missing in that superb analysis of people's appraisal of possession: A systematic inquiry into people's criteria of appraisal. I was craving for more ethnographic details! How do people go about judging? What do they take into consideration? Are there any identifiable templates that ease people's decisions about the nature of the possession? A couple of actual examples would have been appropriate. Descriptions of actual possessions (involving or not involving an identical entity) with the specific reactions and judgments of observers would have provided some essential information for the study of the phenomenon. This leads me to my main critique. The book is missing a good detailed description of a 'typical' possession (or of the different types of possession as Cohen alludes to when talking of *pai's* various possession/trance-like episodes). It would also have been very helpful to have some sort of description of the major entities and of their typical ways of manifesting themselves as described by 'knowledgeable' people, then to compare that to what happens in actual possessions. Do we see an evocation of the typical official templates of manifestation or do we see systematic departures from the norm?

Finally, Cohen alludes to a very important debate in the study of religion. What is the evolutionary role of notions of supernatural agents—as gods, supernatural entities, and other spirits have come to be known in the literature—in enhancing genetic fitness? Though bringing into the same explanation a proponent of a by-product hypothesis and two proponents of an adaptationist view, Cohen does not clearly address the matter.

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■ Response to Comments by Emma Cohen

In *The Mind Possessed*, I sought to explain the incidence and spread of a range of ideas and practices associated with spirit possession phenomena. I argued that new cognitive scientific perspectives on how human minds work are important for answering old anthropological questions concerning human cultural recurrence and variability. Why are some ideas and practices highly recurrent and stable across variable social, cultural, historical, or environmental contexts, while so many other possible ideas and practices never even arise? Why do some cultural phenomena enjoy relatively effortless success in transmission—that is, in generation, acquisition, communication, and memory—while others remain localized, are easily corrupted, or swiftly retreat back into oblivion? What are the mechanisms that stem and abet the transmission of culture, and how do they work? Drawing on my own ethnographic research in Brazil and the descriptive accounts of many others, I attempted to generate and substantiate a series of hypotheses and proposals concerning the spread and appeal of ideas about spirits, possession, and healing.

Although thoroughly interdisciplinary, the book was written primarily with an anthropological audience in mind. It is therefore a great privilege to receive the careful and critical commentaries of three anthropologists who are eminently qualified to assess the book's strengths and weaknesses. I thank the editors of this journal for the opportunity to respond to these comments. I sincerely hope that this will not be 'the last word,' but rather an invitation to continue a discussion that includes a wider audience and that, most important, stimulates constructive and valuable debate on theoretical and methodological issues of broad significance to our discipline. Many of the tentative hypotheses put forward in the book may garner little empirical support, may be replaced with alternatives, or may be forgotten. My hope is that this will not compromise a more general ambition that motivated my work—to stimulate and contribute to the advancement of the data-driven generation, systematic testing, and broad reinstatement of explanatory theory within sociocultural anthropology. I believe that we can one day present some reasonably confident answers to the questions posed above. To this end, I prioritize them in the book. It is also to this end that, in the current absence of the vast amount of data required to privilege any particular answers, I remain skeptical of the partial, provisional, tentative accounts I have provided.

My three critics' assessments of the general project vary widely—from 'original and ingenious' to 'stimulating,' to 'a wasted opportunity'; the questions need revising, the answers need revising, the answers need enriching with more data. Despite the disparities, there is much I agree with. I recognize that there are dimensions of possession phenomena, relevant to the overall questions, that I have not paid sufficient attention to in both theory and description. I am grateful to my critics for their detailed comments, some of which incorporate relevant ethnographic data and analysis, and I attempt to address the doubts and queries expressed. There are some more general objections to the project, however, that I wish to consider first. These objections strike less at the specific details of any claims and more at the foundations upon which these claims were constructed. Because of their potentially far-reaching importance for conducting a cognitive science of culture (or indeed the science of human behavior more generally), and because they appear to echo a general cynicism regarding explanatory theorizing in anthropology that I endeavor to critically address in my book, I prioritize these broad areas of potential disagreement.

At the outset of her critique, Diana Espirito Santo suggests that the questions I set myself, rather than the answers, need revising. With respect, I remain a little baffled by this proposal, not least because I failed to find an example of a single question to which Espirito Santo

objects. Indeed, the critique proceeds to focus on the answers, broadly concluding that the analysis is not “particularly objectionable,” but that it fails to “properly explore a complex and multi-dimensional field.” This is not the place for a comprehensive defense of the general questions that motivated my research, whether in terms of anthropological pedigree, timeliness, precedent, or some other more or less agreed-upon set of criteria. It may be useful, however, to at least clarify the broad aims of the research, and provide some general background, before assessing how and in what ways my endeavors may have failed or otherwise.

The project started from the observation (for which I do not take credit) that not all human cultural phenomena are equivalently and evenly spread across all human populations. Some ideas, for example, are more widespread than others; some are more persistent, stable, and ancient than others; some reliably arise considerably earlier in human child development than others. Some spring up like stubborn weeds with little or no explicit encouragement, while others fail to take root even in the most favorable of environmental conditions.

In answer to the obvious question of why this lack of parity exists, some anthropologists have proposed that the unique structures of evolved human cognitive architecture may be, in part, responsible (see, e.g., Sperber and Hirschfeld 1999). Just as there are constraints on the cognitive skills and motivations of fish, birds, dogs, and chimpanzees, so too are human mental, and thus behavioral, phenomena powerfully modulated by the workings and affordances of human cognitive mechanisms. If this were not the case, we would fail to be impressed by anomalous cognitive abilities some individuals have to encode and recall the contents of a phone book from as little as an instantaneous glance, or the practiced expertise of the world’s champion chess masters, or indeed the unique perspectives through which people with autism view their social worlds—simply put, in the absence of cognitive constraints, such qualities would not be anomalous.

The broad claim, then, is that the structures that permit culture also constrain it—they do not support the generation, acquisition, and storage of every idea equally. Insofar as this is correct, we should expect to see patterned variation in human cognitive outputs (ideas, beliefs, etc.), and these patterns should be explainable, in part, in terms of how cognitive structures work.

How cognitive structures work is by no means a settled question. Nevertheless, over half a century of experimental and observational investigation within the cognitive sciences has generated some remarkable discoveries, and an increasing number of anthropologists are enthused by the possibility of developing the above broad claims into researchable questions and testable hypotheses. In *The Mind Possessed*, I take up this challenge, drawing from ethnographic data on possession phenomena as well as relevant advances in developmental and cognitive psychology to both raise and answer questions about cultural variability and recurrence.

I was not concerned with what counts as “legitimate anthropological knowledge” or with what possession (however it is demarcated and defined) is primarily about. I do not set out to determinately separate ‘native’ and ‘scientific’ explanations. I agree with Espirito Santo and others that it is unlikely that all human thoughts, knowledge, and motivations are readily revealed in propositional statements elicited by direct questioning techniques. It is precisely for this reason that I see such promise in the methodologies developed within the cognitive sciences that probe out-of-awareness attitudes, inferences, heuristics, and biases. Contrary to Espirito Santo’s suspicion, I am least of all motivated to conceal recalcitrant, nonconforming nuances and details under a thick, imperious gloss, or to squeeze, press, or cajole data to fit models. I was chiefly concerned with answering questions that arose out of my fieldwork experiences and my review of the broader literature—questions such as why certain ideas

about what happens when someone is possessed by a spirit are particularly widespread; why people appear to acquire and use Theological Idea A when they are explicitly taught that alternative Theological Idea B is the correct one to adopt and use; why it occurs to people that misfortune does not just happen according to random coincidence; why they seek out special kinds of agents—spirits and deities—to diagnose and heal illnesses, and under what conditions and in what populations certain ideas about spirits, possession, and healing are likely to flourish.

Possession, however it is defined, is complex and multifaceted. By focusing on the questions above, I have ignored potentially many others. By exploring the influence of certain cognitive constraints, I have not done full justification to the entire causal complex. As I argue at length in the book, the growing literature on how minds work is a fruitful place to look for at least partial answers to this particular set of challenging questions and problems. Turning tentative answers into testable hypotheses, and devising methods for their substantiation, are much tougher tasks. Although I believe I barely got started along this road, *Espirito Santo* summarizes the result as reading “a little too much like a ‘just so’ story throughout.” For every apparent ‘just-so’ generated by this theory-building exercise, there is (or there should be) a ‘not-so’ against which it may be tested. Testing between two alternatives necessarily entails some provisional identification of what kinds of data are relevant and what are not. The process is slow, incremental, and stepwise, and each step is necessarily selective in scope. But every test promises to reveal a fraction more of the big picture. The glass-as-good-as-empty reaction of the knee-jerk cynic in relation to this kind of work contrasts starkly with the glass-perhaps-no-longer-dry reaction of the measured skeptic.

Yet what if the description that motivated the more specific questions and hypotheses was inadequate, as at least two of my critics seem to suggest? If I had paid more attention to the phenomenological experiences, the affective properties, and the ‘embodied know-how’ of possession would the resulting questions (and answers) look different? Both *Espirito Santo* and Arnaud Halloy criticize a lack of attention to affective and experiential dimensions in my account (relative to the attention paid to conceptual dimensions). *Espirito Santo* demands a clearer differentiation between concepts and embodied know-how, while Halloy suggests that an “overly ‘representational’ conception of cognition is prejudicial” when one wishes to take into account how a medium’s experience of possession evolves over time. Halloy further presents interesting and highly relevant data from his own research with members of another Afro-Brazilian religious group in Recife, northeast Brazil that he claims suggest an ‘alternative framework’ for the analysis.

I agree that the analysis focuses primarily on conceptual underpinnings of possession practices and the cognitive mechanisms that potentially permit and constrain these concepts. It is not clear to me, however, that concepts could or should in fact be separated from ‘embodied know-how’ inherent in the practices. On the contrary, people’s physical sensations prior to, after, and sometimes during possession appeared to be integral to their interpretations—or concepts—of what possession entails; that is, of how medium and spirit are integrated during a possession episode. Physical movement, physiological arousal, and bodily manipulation via such varied practices as eating, drinking, drumming, dancing, singing, healing, and the donning of ceremonial apparel are indeed salient components of Afro-Brazilian religious life. Careful descriptions and analyses of these elements are potentially indispensable to an account that would seek to explain, for example, how a novice medium becomes an expert medium. In the accounts developed in *The Mind Possessed*, I endeavor to avoid setting up contrasts between affects, percepts, and concepts. This is, in part, because I do not subscribe to the position that human cognition readily cleaves into embodied/experiential stuff on one

side and conceptual stuff on the other (or, for that matter, *innate* and *cultural* stuff). Rather, I take as given that, for example, misfortune (such as illness or poverty) activates negative affect, and I suggest that this might be an important factor contributing to people's motivations to seek out mediumistic services. Without doubt, there are causal factors contributing to the global incidence and spread of the spirit possession phenomena under question that are absent from my account. The challenge I put to my critics is to specify how the incorporation of candidate factors, however they are classified or labeled, potentially contribute to enhancing the explanatory power of that account, or, indeed, to its revision. Better still would be to systematically and empirically demonstrate this hypothesized contribution.

Halloy's ethnographic observations are fascinating and relevant to understanding how people conceive of possession. This question is at the heart of my research and my ethnographic observations yielded a complex set of problems that ultimately revealed, unsurprisingly, that the answer varies according to whom, how, and the context in which one asks. In brief, two principle conceptualizations of possession were present in the community with which I worked. One entailed that the spirits effectively displaced the hosts from their bodies—an experience that was variously described as taking over, dominating or controlling. The other entailed a merger between the spirit and the host, such that the possessed individual would be represented as neither host nor spirit, but a new, fused person. My observations of the frequency of use of these concepts led me to propose that the 'displacement', or take-over, description of possession had a transmission advantage over the merger, or 'fusion' description. Possession was very rarely described in terms of fusion, and the concept was only ever expressed to me by two people. One of these, the cult house leader, presented the fusion description to the community as the 'theologically correct' account of what is happening when someone is possessed (adapting a version of this concept also to explain how something similar happens across a lifetime of mediumistic episodes). Yet the fusion concept appeared to have great difficulty sticking. The displacement concept, in contrast, prevailed despite no explicit or authoritative instruction. Indeed, in more informal contexts, even the cult house leader regularly made inferences about the behaviors of possessed mediums that strongly suggested that he was reasoning about these possession episodes in terms of displacement, not fusion. In chapter 7 of the book, I discuss further evidence of the advantage of displacement over fusion and speculate that these patterns of transmission may be attributable to intuitive biases guiding reasoning about the social world.

Halloy contends that his data suggest an alternative framework for approaching and understanding these issues, but, intriguingly, there are many parallels between his data and mine. Indeed, every straightforwardly ethnographic claim he makes for the Recife group equally applies to the Belém group with which I worked—they too talked about gradations of arousal and spirit approximations; they described possession as something to be developed over the life-course, and regularly attended mediumistic 'development sessions'; they distinguished, in principle, between conscious and unconscious possession-trance (though, in practice, almost everyone claimed to experience only unconscious trance); some, as I described, talked of possession as a fusion between spirit and medium and not as a complete spirit 'take-over'.

I suspect that the main differences between the two communities lie in the incidence, spread, and frequency of use of these various ideas. If this is correct, then the issue of how environmental and cognitive differences contribute to this difference is an intriguing, and ultimately answerable, empirical question. A systematic comparison across these two communities could shed some valuable light on the matter. Halloy's use of the word 'expert' to describe the abilities of cult members who accurately perceive and interpret possession in terms

of fusion is perhaps revealing. How do new recruits conceptualize possession? How is the novice's interpretation revised, if at all, through possession experiences and/or theological discourse and teaching? What does it take to become expert, and what, if any, is the common baseline? How consistently do people employ the fusion concept across different contexts (e.g., talking about how possession works in the abstract, telling stories about the behavior of a particular individual during a possession episode)? Here, lurking in Halloy's critique, I believe, is an ideal opportunity to follow his concluding mandate: to pay attention not just to how intuitive thinking constrains cultural practice, but also to how cultural practice may transform intuitive thinking.

Liénard questions my claim that race was not a salient part of everyday Afro-Brazilian religious life. Certainly, people are not oblivious to the racial variety that characterizes the city in which they live. They recognize that, right across the country, varieties of race correlate with varieties of status, wealth, education, and even perceptions of beauty. I can only reiterate that at the time of my research, race did not appear to be a particularly salient or consequential element of Afro-Brazilian religious identity in Belém, for members and nonmembers alike. Nevertheless, Liénard poses some thought-provoking questions that I believe could scratch below the surface of the everyday discourse upon which I based my assessment. For instance, in the book, I describe the value that cult house leaders increasingly place on being able to trace authentic African ancestry. This is properly conceived of in terms of spiritual ancestry, that is according to one's lineage of initiating fathers and forefathers. It would be particularly interesting to explore the possibility that a leader's perceived spiritual authenticity could be strengthened or weakened by cues to racial membership. It is perhaps worth remembering, in posing and investigating such questions, that racial variability, and perceptions, salience, and implications of racial membership, vary widely across Brazil. Here again is a potentially rich opportunity to explore the interplay between stated beliefs and tacit intuitions, and the feedback between cognition and environment.

Finally, I can only respectfully acknowledge Liénard's principal requests for more detailed descriptions of different types of possession episodes, for a systematic inquiry into the criteria by which people appraise possession, for systematic comparisons of accounts about possession and actual possession episodes, and for a clear assessment of the evolutionary implications and consequences of ideas and practices concerning spirits, gods, and other supernatural entities. These are very reasonable requests, but I fear that not even a book-length sequel could do them justice. Indeed, despite eighteen months of daily participation in Afro-Brazilian religious life, and in countless ceremonies, rituals, conversations, and interviews, I confess that I am unsure whether my fieldnotes and transcripts would yield the kind of systematicity required to answer Liénard's penetrating questions. The criteria by which people appraise possession, for example, proved difficult to examine *systematically* via standard interview, casual conversation, and opportunistic observation. Most of what I gleaned from the opportunities that arose appears in the book and subsequent papers. More fundamentally, the majority of problems and questions I address in my book surfaced or developed toward the end of my fieldwork period and subsequent to my return from the field. I did not take the questions with me to the field, much less the follow-up questions that now arise from these initial problems. Since then, however, in a series of papers following the book, I investigate these issues further through the systematic collection of data using a range of ethnographic and experimental methodologies.

A conclusion, or 'last word,' seems inappropriate in light of all that has not been adequately discussed. I look forward to further opportunities to continue discussion. Ultimately, I look forward to progressing toward answers to the challenging explanatory problems concerning

human cultural, and cognitive, recurrence, and variation raised here and in the book. To this end, it has been a privilege to meet my three critics; perhaps there are more than three?

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