

Where Humans and Spirits Meet: The Politics of Rituals and Identified Spirits in Zanzibar. *Kjersti Larsen.* New York: Bergahn, 2008. 184 pp.

EMMA COHEN

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

In this book about spirit possession in Zanzibar Town, Zanzibar, Kjersti Larsen provides a rich account of the interdependent lives of humans and their spirit guides, healers, friends, and lovers. Her largely descriptive account is framed within weighty themes in contemporary anthropology—distinction and difference, gender and identity, otherness and mimesis, performance and parody. By letting careful ethnographic description do most of the talking, she has produced a refreshingly straightforward, engaging, and highly valuable contribution to this literature.

The book begins with a broad introduction to the research themes, aims, and context. Larsen makes clear that her interest does not lie in exploring deeply the motivations or even intentions present in the performances and parodies she witnessed. Having become persuaded by the reality of spirits, she is “reluctant to ascribe clear intentions to either the spirits’ actions or people’s relations with spirits” (p. 16). Rather, she aims to show that when humans and spirits meet, norms and rules that are part of everyday life are overturned and largely replaced by a new normative code—that of the spirits. She argues that when spirits take control of the bodies of human hosts, hosts become “an other”—a spirit, a person of the opposite sex, a member of another ethnic origin or a different religion, or someone who behaves in ways that would normally be deemed inappropriate. Larsen further argues that through these experiences of transformation, participants empathetically

understand and experience what it is to be other. Because the categories of “other” represented by spirits correspond to real social categories in everyday life, participants come to understand and experience the emotions and dilemmas of other members of society with whom they coexist as spouses, friends, and neighbors.

In the second chapter, Larsen begins by tracing the political history of Zanzibar’s plural society. Located on the East African Swahili Coast, Zanzibar was an important port of call for 19th- and early-20th-century trade and traffic. A stream of immigrants of diverse origins, from slaves, trades people, and merchants, to Islamic scholars, colonial administrators, and their descendents settled there. Zanzibaris maintain distinctions in terms of their diverse origins today, differentiating between themselves in terms of “makabila,” or cultural-ethnic “tribe.” These groups live alongside one another and intermingle peacefully, but their identities are marked through distinctive preferences for foods, dress, music, names, and so forth. These differences are important in the context of spirit possession rituals. Spirits are members of tribes also, and they only ever possess the bodies of people from a different tribe.

The physical and ideological segregation of men and women reflect a further important distinction in Zanzibar Town. Women and men are described as psychological opposites—whereas women are said to be emotional and lack self-control, men are perceived to be strong and rational. Both sexes are expected to conform to a broad range of social conventions and norms. In addition to gender-specific expectations—for example, that the husband provides for his wife and family and the wife obeys her husband—this includes a generic ethic of modest concealment and reservation that applies to everyone. Spirits are also either male or female, and may possess people of either sex. Their behavior is guided by a different set of rules, however, that replaces modest reservation with frank disclosure and openness.

The following chapters convincingly portray how the norms of this plural society are both excessively stereotyped and violated when spirits “climb to the head,” or inhabit, the bodies of their hosts. Preferences and behaviors typical of the tribe or gender to which the spirit belongs are expressed and exaggerated. At the same time, many other rules and standards of everyday life are openly violated. Normally shy and deferential women may be possessed by a brash and indecorous spirit, and, particularly when inhabited by a male spirit, stand up for themselves against others, including men. Responsibility for such behaviors is perceived as lying with the spirit, who is stronger than the host and thereby takes control of the body. Because spirits are not humans and are not subject to the same code of conduct as humans, they are judged by a different set of standards. The host receives no blame and, indeed, the violation of societal norms, and even at times the integrity

of the host, generates a comedic effect. Because spirits are more powerful than humans, however, they can potentially be as much a source of threat as they are of humor.

The final chapter concludes by relating the ethnographic material to relevant theoretical approaches within anthropology on performance, empathy, embodiment, and mimesis. Ultimately, Larsen argues that her focus on sameness and difference enables one to grasp what it means to be human for the Zanzibari.

Where Humans and Spirits Meet is a sensitive and rich portrayal of the phenomenon of spirit possession in Zanzibar Town. Despite apparently striking commonalities—as well as interesting differences—with spirit possession phenomena across other parts of the region, continent, and, indeed, more widely, there is, however, surprisingly little engagement with the broader ethnographic literature. Deeper descriptive and explanatory questions of both local and cross-cultural import are largely ignored. In the context of Zanzibar possession, for example, why are some everyday norms the focus of parody and comedy in possession rituals and not others? Why are some life situations (e.g., misfortune) attributed to spirit activity and not others? Although these kinds of “why” questions are not explicitly and systematically addressed by Larsen, her erudite description of the ideas, practices, experiences, and contexts surrounding spirit possession in Zanzibar more than allows interested readers to begin to consider them for themselves.