

Culture



Michael LAMBEK, *Human Spirits. A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte*, Cambridge University Press, 1981. 219 pages, US \$13.95 (paper), US \$32.50 (cloth)

Chester E. Gabriel

Volume 4, Number 1, 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078326ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078326ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Gabriel, C. (1984). Review of [Michael LAMBEK, *Human Spirits. A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte*, Cambridge University Press, 1981. 219 pages, US \$13.95 (paper), US \$32.50 (cloth)]. *Culture*, 4(1), 83–85.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1078326ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1984

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

etc., and how the Dobe use them in their famous medical practices, the collective healing trance so well filmed by the Marshalls.

The last part of the book turns to the relations of the Dobe with their encroaching neighbors, the pastoralists *cum* agriculturalists, Herero and Tswana, who have increasingly penetrated !Kung territory, bringing change in the ecology and in interethnic relations. The Dobe are changing; intermarriage takes place but always in one direction, !Kung women marrying Blacks but never the reverse, since !Kung are seen as inferiors. There are vivid descriptions of the Dobe views on social change, on the White man and his world, on temporary—or long term—work for the Blacks in cattle kraals. Lee explains, with vivid examples, the conflicts experienced by some Dobe who had wanted to copy the Blacks, but who still were tied to their relatives in such a way that their endeavours at “modernization” (such as undertaking agriculture) could not succeed. Migrant work and government intervention—schooling, land reform—are also explained, together with the dilemmas associated with them, but Lee is very careful not to enter into value judgements and leaves the reader to ponder over the changes—for better or for worse?—, an answer the !Kung themselves cannot provide....

However, Lee is more blunt in a postscript on the !Kung in Namibia who have been “resettled” and engaged in numbers in the South African Army to fight the S.W.A.P.O. Drunkenness is alarming and fights and murders are sharply on the rise. The !Kung of Botswana are certainly in better shape. They had a longer time span to adjust to new conditions, and there is no war raging in their country, but the future of the Dobe remains problematic. Lee has seen the change over twenty years of fieldwork. He regularly visited the area and saw the change in motion, so to speak. This is quite different from what has been done previously—at least by Americans—i.e., the anthropologist doing his one year of fieldwork and returning twenty years later to do a re-study. Here, we are able to measure all the steps, all the stages affecting the same individuals, who speak their minds throughout the book.

The greatest compliment we can make to Lee is that he has used his own experiences and adventures among the Dobe to elicit discussion with *them* about these. Throughout the book, one gets the feeling that a professional anthropologist is discussing anthropology with the group he is studying, the Dobe as much making Lee’s ethnography as he

does theirs. This is a frank and open dialogue across cultures.

This excellent book ends with a critical filmography, telling where to get the films, and a selected bibliography in which the most important works are singled out. A beautiful introductory book from start to finish.

Michael LAMBEK, *Human Spirits. A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981. 219 pages, US \$13.95 (paper), US \$32.50 (cloth).

By Chester E. Gabriel
McGill University

This book provides us with a richness both in descriptive detail and in theoretical insights. The author himself points out that in general most treatments of spirit possession have tended to concentrate “on explanation, in terms of function or cause, to the neglect of meaning” (p. 5). This work is concerned with meaning and the stated primary goal is interpretation or explication: “the goal is to reduce the strangeness of other people’s symbolic construction without thereby sacrificing their richness and complexity” (p. 4). The basic premise of the work is that trance behaviour must be viewed not as something unconnected and deviant, but as a cultural system. Literature from the world over points to the remarkable frequency of the possession trance phenomenon. Lambek posits that these findings may even suggest that the potential for trance is normal in humans. The key point, however, is that “the appropriateness of its manifestation is frequently a matter of cultural definition” (p. 6). Within societies in general (in this case Mayotte) there are cultural patterns that form and generate the trance behaviour in the first place. But there is another construct, or perhaps, another level involved. The author points out that if humans in their ordinary state of consciousness operate under these cultural models, then once the individual is in trance and conscious memory is blocked, and hence, usual culture patterns, then this culture must be replaced with a special “trance culture” (p. 6). These “trance cultures” can vary widely just as do the particular societal cultures of which they are a part. This work attempts to capture “trance culture” on Mayotte, the southernmost island of the Comoro archipelago located in

the Mozambique Channel between the coast of East Africa and Madagascar.

The authors uses, as an organizing model or metaphor, the consideration of trance culture as a "text" or series of "texts" (inspired by the work of Geertz, Ricoeur and others, which he deals with). Considering trance as a text, Lambek feels, is a procedure "at once broader in scope and more precise than traditional forms of anthropological inquiry" (p. 8). Using "text" as a metaphor for trance culture allows the author to consider systematically such aspects as: "the relations of units within a text, the relations of a text to other texts, particularly those in the same genre, to the creators and audience of the text and to nonliterary events outside the text" (p. 8).

Some very interesting observations result. He points out that although the spirits who constitute the world of trance are not outside culture, yet, by the people, they are viewed as being outside the culture that makes up everyday life. In spite of this the spirits are free to act in ways seen as particular to their own particular world, but which nonetheless impinge on daily Mayotte societal living. This overlapping positioning of Mayotte culture and spirit culture and the possibility of movement between the two domains is "essentially constructive, providing a fertile field for the generation of novel and intellectual and emotional experience. In this way possession may be considered a system for thought and expression" (p. 10).

Of particular interest to those familiar with the possession literature are the sets of conventions that Lambek identifies. In considering trance as a text, the author profitably points out that the way to make such "texts" understandable is to arrive at the system of conventions by which its actors make sense of the phenomenon. In other words, it can be shown that trance behaviour contains a number of conventions that permit the observers to interpret it as possession. For Mayotte, Lambek lists five: "(a) the distinction between humankind and spirit kind is signaled primarily by codes of food and gesture; (b) the primary referent is illness; (c) host and spirit are distinguished as separate persons—the spirit dominates the conversation, making demands and dispensing or withholding information; (d) contact between human and spirit is established first by means of incense and then through the neurophysiological state of trance and, in the 'absence' of the host, through third parties; (e) the message contains the contradiction between the explicit benevolence and implicit malevolence of the spirit" (p. 11). These sets of conventions are dealt with in detail throughout the book. As

someone specialized in Brazilian forms of spirit cults, I find these particularly useful, because, with a little further elaboration on item (d), the conventions fit the Brazilian situation remarkably well. Hence, these general theoretical conclusions are particularly useful if we are ever to arrive at some cross-culturally comparative regularities which will enable wider generalizations on possession trance to be made. Lambek's theoretical treatment, I find, has facilitated this.

Both the theory and the richness of ethnographic detail are presented in an orderly fashion, the book being divided neatly into three parts. Part I deals with spirits and hosts in Mayotte and includes topics such as: an overview of Mayotte society, possession and Islam, the nature of spirits, trance and illness, and trance as a system of communication. Part II deals with what Lambek labels the "syntagmatic dimension", the unrolling of specific activities in specific case histories. Part III, the "paradigmatic dimension", deals with the stable patterns within the possession phenomenon. This includes treatment of the types of ceremonies and identification of what Lambek presents as the key aspects of the entire trance phenomenon: hierarchy and inversion. Although theoretical aspects are neatly woven throughout the text and treatment of specific ethnographic cases, this last section provides detailed analysis of these two key features: hierarchy and inversion (the detailed reading of which I leave to the reader).

On these points as well, I appreciated the parallels that could be drawn and applied to the Brazilian examples. These parallels and others, even in ritual procedures, spirit types, illnesses treated, relationships between hosts and spirits and spouses and spirits, to name a few, are exciting for the questions they provoke. Are the similarities due to a common African heritage (only briefly mentioned), or are they even more general and basic? Should one revert to a more detailed comparison of both societies to get at the answers? This is a procedure indicated by yet another conclusion the author draws and well worth quoting here in its entirety: "The richness of possession is derived precisely from the paradox that it faces courageously and does not pretend can be resolved: the individual versus society; the ideal functions of the powerful versus their actual imperfections; public acceptance versus private dissent. Imperfection is inevitable, a part of spirit (read 'human') nature, but so are the attempted means of social redress, an uneasy tension—the actual state of human affairs—is represented brilliantly in the dialectic of human ritual and spirit behaviour" (p. 171).

In short, the author has succeeded in taking the particularities of Mayotte culture and Mayotte "trance culture" and presenting them in such a way as to make them not only intelligible to other researchers, but—comparable. This success alone is sufficient to recommend the work to researchers and readers interested in trance phenomena.

Dan SPERBER, *Le savoir des anthropologues. Trois essais*. Coll. Savoir, Hermann, Paris, 1982. 141 pages, bibliographie, index.

Par Yvan Simonis
Université Laval

Ces trois essais sont les suivants: «Ethnographie interprétative et anthropologie théorique» (chap. I: pages 13 à 48); «les Croyances apparemment irrationnelles» (Chap. II: pages 49 à 86) et «Claude Lévi-Strauss aujourd'hui» (chap. III: pages 87 à 129). Dans son introduction, Sperber nous dit que son chapitre I «repren­ d en partie, modifie et complète la substance de mon article "L'interprétation en anthropologie" paru dans *L'Homme*, 1981, XXI, I (p. 10). Son chapitre II publie en français un texte destiné initialement à *Rationality and Relativism* (Martin Hollis et Steven Lukes, eds.) à paraître au moment de la publication du livre en français. Quant au chapitre III, il reprend et augmente «considérablement» un texte de 1978 publié en anglais en 1979 dans *Structuralism and since* (John Sturrock, éd., Oxford University Press).

Ce livre n'apporte donc pas vraiment du neuf pour ceux qui connaissent un peu les écrits de Sperber, sans compter que son livre *Le symbolisme en général*, publié en 1975, continue de l'inspirer ici. Sur le fond, la bataille (ou la position) est la même: qu'est-ce qui est scientifique en anthropologie?

De quoi parlent ces trois essais? Leurs thèses sont présentées par l'auteur en peu de mots. Le premier essai «suggère que l'ethnographie, dont la vocation est essentiellement interprétative, et l'anthropologie, dont la vocation est essentiellement explicative, pourraient entretenir des rapports plus fructueux à condition de se libérer l'une de l'autre» (p. 10). Le second essai remet en cause «les arguments en faveur du relativisme cognitif, et en particulier l'argument décisif que semblent fournir les diversités des croyances humaines»

(p. 10). Sperber propose une solution rationaliste au problème de cette diversité. Enfin, dans le troisième essai, consacré à Lévi-Strauss, Sperber veut «illustrer les difficultés, les incertitudes et les lueurs d'espoir que comporte toute recherche théorique en anthropologie» (p. 10).

Qui lit Sperber sait qu'il affronte une pensée dense, clairement écrite et exigeante. En réagissant à ses propos, je renvoie le lecteur à ce livre, il sera juge de la pertinence de mes réactions car il n'est pas possible ici de présenter dans le détail le contenu de ces essais.

Par de savants détours, Sperber nous dit comment, à son avis, éviter le piège des «interprétations» et nous engager sur la voie d'une anthropologie scientifique, mais il y met de telles conditions qu'il révèle, à mon avis, l'impuissance de son projet et le formalisme dépassé de son épistémologie. Se moquer à ce point de l'apport du relativisme culturel, des interprétations ethnographiques et penser que son propre discours (qui n'est ici que logique et nullement scientifique) sera pris au sérieux, n'est pas réaliste. Non pas qu'il ne faille pas prendre Sperber au sérieux, mais parce que son projet est impossible si on passe les propos de l'auteur au tamis de ses exigences pour autrui. Alors, les propos non scientifiques de Sperber valent-ils quelque chose? Sperber (moi aussi) dira oui. Dans ce cas, les interprétations ethnographiques peuvent aussi valoir quelque chose, et Sperber doit logiquement l'accepter, et pas seulement à condition qu'elles servent à la science. Et puisque Sperber se fait à l'idée (à la représentation semi-propositionnelle!) que l'anthropologie culturelle qui se veut scientifique «doit comporter — je serais tenté de dire: doit être — une épidémiologie des idées» (p. 42), on est tenté d'évaluer les risques de contagion des idées de Sperber:

Quand on veut "voir les choses du point de vue d'autrui", c'est, en vérité, la représentation qu'autrui se fait des choses que l'on cherche à se représenter. Pour pouvoir inférer ce que sont les choses de la représentation qu'autrui s'en fait, il faut disposer d'hypothèses complémentaires, par exemple de l'hypothèse qu'autrui se représente des choses comme elles sont. Croire voir les choses du point de vue d'autrui, c'est donc confondre la représentation de l'objet avec l'objet, la prémisse (à elle seule insuffisante) et la conclusion, les interprétations anthropologiques souffrent typiquement d'une telle confusion (pp. 28-29).

Sperber propose, dans son premier essai, de sortir de cette confusion en ajoutant aux interprétations ethnographiques, qui ne sont que des représentations de représentations (celles de l'ethnographe sur celles des informateurs), «un com-