

**The Law of Possession: Ritual, Healing, and the Secular State.** *William S. Sax* and *Helene Basu*, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 272 pp.

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“‘Spirit possession’ . . . is found in all human cultures and is often associated with healing.”

This simple assertion of a human universal, voiced with confidence on page 1 of this beautifully conceived and competently executed volume, conceals a tangled genealogy that runs through the history of modernity. To pick at one early thread, founding arguments about what constituted a proper legal subject, capable of entering into contracts, turned on the essential identity of a contracting person through time, illuminated by contrast to unstable persons, such as African slaves, who might be possessed by spirits other than their own “Corporeal Spirit,” as Thomas Hobbes put it in *Leviathan*. Their lack of a “continuous accountable self” and thus of the capacity to possess under the law meant that slaves could legitimately be possessed by humans as well as by spirits (Johnson 2011, 406). While the historical specifics of this genealogy do not concern the contributors to this volume, they are nevertheless committed to the idea that spirit possession—signaling unstable subjects neither firmly bounded nor always in possession of themselves—continues to be intertwined with the

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modern civil subject, particularly the subject of law. To explore spirit possession, they insist, is always in some way to interrogate the subject of modernity.

Most of the eight essays are crafted with care, and their ethnography is extraordinarily suggestive. In Gujarat, for instance, the spirit of the saint Bava Gor presides as a judge over trials by ordeal, in which men or women suspected of crimes are tested by being made to run with their ankles shackled (Helene Basu). In Malawi, ongoing endeavors to disentangle law and witchcraft are accompanied by a concern that witches be held legally accountable for their crimes (Arne S. Steinfeldt). In Tamil Nadu, the deaths by fire of 25 mentally handicapped people near a Sufi healing shrine have given new energy to efforts to “cleanse” indigenous healing practices and extend the reach of the modern (Bhargavi Davar). In Maharashtra, an antisuperstition organization vigilantly pursues secularization and rationalization with educational programs that stage mock exorcism rituals (Johannes Quack). In western Kenya, a ritual healer supervises courtroom procedures divided into stages of mention, hearing, judgment, and outcome, modeled on the Kenyan juridical system (Ferdinand Okwaro). In the Central Himalayas, Goludev, a Hindu god of justice, accepts petitions from devotees and dispenses *nyaya*, substantive justice, as opposed to the *niti*, or procedural justice, of secular courts, highlighting a contrast between the fluid, unstable subject of divine justice and the contained individual civil subject (Aditya Malik).

This heterogeneous material has been organized through a relatively streamlined set of concepts. The “modern” is not to be characterized by a secular-sacred divide, which would distinguish clearly between secular law, involving self-possessed modern subjects, and quasi-legal practices involving subjects defined by their capacity to be possessed by different others. Instead, following Bruno Latour, the modern is a bundle of concepts, techniques, and procedures as varied as nationalism, electricity, and legal institutions. Elements in this bundle

are easily combined with elements outside of it—secular vocabularies inscribed into religious practices and vice versa. Yet if modernity has any overarching characteristic, it is the compulsion of self-consciously modern subjects to “purify” (in Latour’s term) the bundle of elements seen not to belong to it.

The editors use the idea of purification as a conceit to organize the volume into three parts. In the case studies of part 1, triumphant purification is under disintegration; in part 2, practices and discourses of purification are shown to be directly at work; in part 3, purification processes have not been at all successful in disentangling law from possession. While this division is hardly as neat as advertised, it does lend the volume a degree of organizational coherence. This conceptual framework is laid out in a clearly written introduction, which works through classic definitions of modernity, modernization, and modern subjectivity before complicating them with the idea of possession. The introduction and many of the chapters could be excellent teaching tools.

Readers will be attracted to different contributions in this volume, depending on their interests and the varied quality of the ethnographic material. For this reader, two of the case studies are particularly compelling. The first is Dominic Steavu’s thoroughly researched and sharply argued history of exorcism and the state in Chinese medicine. Currently, the Chinese state claims to have seamlessly integrated traditional Chinese medicine and Western biomedicine. This claim depends upon the rigorous suppression of the undesirable side of traditional medicine—its contact with supernatural beings and cosmologies. Yet this cleavage did not begin with the introduction of modernity. Chinese imperial states and their Confucian allies worked continuously to stamp out the perceived excessive, heretic, and heterodox aspects of local magical healing practices. Indeed, Steavu argues, the founding concerns of the Chinese state during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) were managing,

overseeing, and bureaucratizing supernatural forces, particularly the force of the dead. In showing such processes of purification operating millennia prior to the introduction of modernity, he provides a trenchant counterexample to the organizing assumptions of the volume.

A second exemplary case study is William Sax's ethnography of the courts of justice of divine kings, gods who rule local polities in the Western Himalayas. Sax describes the court of Pokkhu Devta, a divine king with no territorial claims, and works carefully through a complex case in which a woman accuses her sister-in-law of sleeping with their father-in-law. The ritual to discover the truth and deliver justice fails when the young woman who makes the accusation refuses to participate, yet the failure reveals much. This is compelling ethnography, attentively observed, skillfully delivered, and thoughtfully analyzed—a fitting conclusion to a successful volume.

## <h1>Reference

Johnson, Paul. 2011. "An Atlantic Genealogy of 'Spirit Possession.'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53 (2): 393–425.