



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte* by Michael Lambek  
Ivan Karp

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passivity in the pre-Oedipal situation, the Oedipus complex of the male, and in Greek drama seems questionable. Willner's 1982 work has reinterpreted the Oedipus trilogy and other Greek dramas from a feminist perspective. As she points out, Antigone as portrayed in Sophocles and other female "heroic" characters receive scant attention in Freud. In Tibetan society, the Taras and other females, who play no small role in the development and establishment of Buddhism in Tibetan mythos and history, are psychoanalyzed by Paul from an exclusively male perspective. One is left wondering about the significance of female heroes and the models of and for Tibetan culture played by these characters in the psychological development of Tibetan-Sherpa males and females.

This well-written book is a must for all scholars interested in psychoanalytic anthropology, the Sherpas, and the Tibetan Buddhist cultural heritage.

***Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal: An Ethnopsychiatric Study of Tamang Shamanism.* LARRY PETERS. Other Realities 4. Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1981. ix + 179 pp., illustrations, figures, references. \$15.50 (paper).**

ROBERT A. PAUL  
Emory University

This book is the result of the author's fieldwork in the Tamang village of Tin Chuli, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, in the course of which he apprenticed himself to a Tamang shaman named Bhirendra. One of the eight chapters is devoted to an account of his experiences as Bhirendra's disciple, while the remaining chapters give the more usual kind of ethnographic data, most of them also collected from Bhirendra.

The chapter on Peters's apprenticeship is in many ways the most interesting and provocative, since it illustrates with admirable candor the great obstacles in the path of the possibility of such an undertaking. One can only go so far but no farther in such an enterprise without taking very great risks—psychological, existential, and medical—which Peters, probably wisely, was unwilling to take. As he points out, he does not, after all, really believe in the spirit world to which Bhirendra was bent on introducing him; he was not prepared to enter a *de rigueur* initiatory psychosis, hopefully temporary; and, most telling of all, when he and his son were seriously ill, they went to the missionary hospital, not to the shaman. Nonetheless, the experience was useful in convincing him of the subjective reality of at least some of the features of shamanistic trance, and also in establishing rapport with Bhirendra—up until the moment he took his family for treatment to the Western doctor.

This whole discussion raises the important question of just how seriously anthropologists are prepared to take the "other realities" they en-

counter, and what the implications of this are for theory. The recent work of Michael Harner (1980), *The Way of the Shaman*, who did go through the initiatory psychosis and came out the other side convinced of the truth of shamanism—not to mention the notorious Castaneda affair—indicates both directions and perils in future research in shamanism and altered states generally.

The rest of Peters's book contains information on Tamang religious roles, native medical beliefs, the nature of trance among Tamang shamans, and a case history of a disease and its cure. It thus contributes to the ethnography of the Tamangs, a group relatively less extensively documented so far than, say, the Magars, Gurungs, or Sherpas; and to the growing literature on shamanism in Nepal. Given the excellent field opportunity the author had, however, both the quantity and the quality of ethnographic information are rather disappointing. While Peters often refers to the numerous myths recited during ceremonies, no texts are given, and only the sketchiest outline of the contents is indicated. Similarly, the single and rather atypical case history ought to be just one of a number of such described. And the entire presentation of the cosmological system within which Tamang shamanism operates consists of a single, one-page chart that is nowhere explained or elaborated on. The rather high-powered theoretical arsenal marshaled to analyze the data thus seems out of proportion with the rather slight material to which it is applied.

The book will nonetheless be of value to students of Nepal and of Nepali shamanism in particular. Undergraduates may well find it approachable, intriguing because of the author's apprenticeship, and useful because of its rather extensive review of the theoretical literature on shamanism and trance in general. There are some quite good black-and-white photographs of Bhirendra in performance. As ethnography, however, it is an example of what might be called, to paraphrase Geertz, thin description.

***Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte.* MICHAEL LAMBEK. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981. xx + 219 pp., tables, figures, stylistic conventions, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50 (cloth), \$13.95 (paper).**

IVAN KARP  
Indiana University

*Human Spirits* is a very interesting study of the experience and interpretation of trance as spirit possession among the Malagasy speakers of the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte in the Comoros. Lambek's orientation is to the interpretive side of social analysis and focuses on the experience and meaning of trance in context. On the one hand, his neglect of the explanatory dimension of trance and possession in Mayotte leads him to

make some curious assertions about the lack of relevance of trance to social organization and nontrance settings. On the other hand, his description of trance as a situated meaning system and a performance activity is one of the best on record.

A real strength of Lambek's book are his accounts of séances as processes in which messages of authenticity and inauthenticity are displayed in order for the people of Mayotte to explore and, perhaps, to negotiate relationships. This dimension of the work would have been even more significant if he had provided detailed studies of the changing patterns of relationships as they affected and were affected by the onset of possession; this would have led Lambek into a more epidemiological study. Unfortunately, he precludes this possibility by arguing that the interpretation of possession as affliction by the people of Mayotte causes rather than alleviates illness. This odd assertion seems more the product of Lambek's cultural determinism than of any evidence in the material he presents.

The limitations of a single perspective should not detract from the merits of this study. A real advance in the study of possession phenomena is Lambek's examination of possession as play and the manner in which he relates the play attitude to the conceptualization of some categories of spirits as children. His description of the manifestation of children's play in the process of exploring marital relationships opens up ways for us to understand ritual as therapy and the role of cultural forms in the interpretation and negotiation of social process.

Lambek achieves his analysis by distinguishing between what he terms the "syntagmatic" and "paradigmatic" dimensions of possession. These unhappy terms detract from what he is trying to do. In the former he treats possession séances as a contingent sequence of events in which the actors interpret the signs of possession and perform the rituals associated with them. A major conclusion of his account of possession as a sequence of events is that possession is a form for examining the constituent elements of the Mayotte theory of humanity and society, that it is a Mayotte form of enacted social theory.

In his account of the "paradigmatic" dimension, Lambek examines how categories are invoked in the performance process to provide a frame for interpretation. It is in this part of the book that he shows how ritual and play forms are intermingled through the use of categories associated with different types of personhood, such as "child," "adult," and "slave." This last aspect of his study brings the book together and is its major contribution. In spite of his neglect of social organization as an aspect of the interpretation of possession, Lambek has given us an excellent study of the meaning and process of possession and trance.

**The Foundations of Structuralism: A Critique of Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Move-**

**ment. SIMON CLARKE. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble (Sussex: The Harvester Press), 1981. viii + 264 pp., abbreviations, bibliographies. \$26.50 (cloth).**

FREDERICK H. DAMON  
University of Virginia

This book, one in a series devoted to philosophical issues, is written by a British sociologist. The author has high praise for structuralism and Lévi-Strauss, but he discounts both by placing the movement in Western intellectual history. Those who keep up with structuralist criticism will find that the book covers ground already, and better, traversed by others. Yet Clarke engages some of structuralism's best features, and the historical critique he launches on the role of the unconscious in the movement is important.

The narrative structure of the book is historical. After an initial chapter justifying the focus on Lévi-Strauss, there are two chapters devoted to looking at French culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Both Lévi-Strauss and Sartre are located in this intellectual milieu. Two chapters (4 and 5) deal with *Elementary Structures* and its repercussions. Chapters 6 and 7 review Lévi-Strauss's writings from about 1950 to 1962. Clarke seems more at ease discussing Lévi-Strauss's and Chomsky's philosophy than either dual organization or principles of classification. According to Clarke, both men missed what was vital in Jacobson—a functionalist orientation to meaning. The eighth chapter considers the *Mythologiques* series, Clarke preferring Propp's formalism, which he thinks does not separate form and meaning. The last chapter returns to the intellectual history raised in the second and third chapters. The middle of the book is disappointing but its two ends are provocative. However, one may need a working knowledge of Marx's *Grundrisse* and *Capital* to make much sense out of the argument.

The book's content may be generated by three oppositions: a British as opposed to a French perspective; sociology, or perhaps philosophy, juxtaposed to anthropology; and the ahistorical anthropology of the 1950s and 1960s with the more current historical perspective. The British/French opposition comes out most clearly in the discussion of *Elementary Structures*. In Clarke's view, Lévi-Strauss confused two arguments: one concerns the functions of exchange, which are either vacuous or tautologous, the other concerns the formal interrelations in any symbolic domain. Clarke credits Needham and Dumont for distinguishing between these two, dispensing with the exchange argument, and running out the concern with form until it became absurd. "Needham, to his credit, seems belatedly to have recognized this, and to have disappeared up his naval [sic] into a Wittgensteinian void" (p. 115). Comments like this, plus an occasional carefully worded argument, make this book fun to read.

But they also make the book disturbing. Much of Clarke's argument against structuralism is constructed by quoting or paraphrasing