

Book Review: Kalpana Ram's Work

'Phenomenology in Anthropology' and 'Fertile Disorder'

Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston (Eds.). (2015). *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective* (Afterword by Michael Jackson). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. (330 pages)

ISBN: 978-0-253-01780-2

Cost: ebook \$34.99; cloth \$85.00; Paperback \$35.00

Kalpana Ram (2013). *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press. (336 pages)

ISBN 978-0-8248-3630

Cost: \$34.20

by **Seth Palmer**

The two works reviewed here engage with embodiment, subjectivity, and experience, all three of which are of central concern both to the project of phenomenological anthropology and to the study of the anthropological category known as "spirit possession."

Ram's ethnography *Fertile Disorder* (which explores women suffering from "afflictive possession" in Tamil Nadu) and the volume *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective* edited by Ram and Houston, engage with these three topics of anthropological intrigue. They add to the growing interest in phenomenology within anthropological inquiry, an interest which as Jackson notes in his afterword, was largely absent at the time of publication of his edited volume on the same topic over twenty years ago. That work, *Things as They Are* (1996), was the last major edited volume on phenomenological anthropology, so that *Phenomenology in Anthropology* (2015), then, is a welcome addition to the literature.

If phenomenological accounts are meant to provide a "sense of perspective" (2015, p. 4) on individual human experience, then *Phenomenology*, with contributions from thirteen different scholars, provides a sense of perspective on the state of the field of phenomenological anthropology itself. The volume attempts to make several interventions, one of which is the recognition, by Ram and Houston, that social institutions are themselves phenomenological and, thus consciousness cannot and should not be singularly located by anthropologists in a willful, agentive, human subject. It is here that the edited volume, they claim, breaks with some earlier works in phenomenological anthropology: "we need to give up the primacy afforded to these domains [choice, will, reflection, and conscious expression] in the definition of experience. Concepts such as intersubjectivity and embodiment are not simply extensions of older understandings of experience. They also, in very important senses, mark the limits of consciousness itself" (2015, p. 8). Ram also critiques the privileging of "conscious expression" within the domain of experience and subjectivity in *Fertile Disorder*; her argument is apt since possession in Tamil Nadu beautifully illustrates the limitations of anthropological analyses purely wedded to self-reflection, agency, and consciousness.

While some contributions in *Phenomenology* are more rigorous than others, both in terms of theoretical engagement and ethnographic density, part of what may make the volume appealing to specialists is the fact that not one of the major three theorists in phenomenology – Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger – is privileged over another. Rather, contributors drew from the theorists and theoretical traditions that they found most appropriate for their own purposes. Other contributors, for example, engage with Sartre and Pierce. Some contributions, such as those by Csordas and Throop, make important theoretical interventions. Some of the most rigorous contributions investigate phenomenological theory as an anthropological object. Timmer, for instance, dizzyingly illuminates how religious and theological crises attached to “wonderment” and historicism rest both at the heart of Heideggerian phenomenological theory and professed biblical connections between Israel and North Malaita by his interlocutors in the Solomon Islands. The last section of the volume is composed of contributions in which anthropologists consider the production of ethnography informed by phenomenology beyond the traditional non-fictional, authoritative, academic writing genre. Contributors here examine the potentialities offered by photography, creative writing, and poetry as ethnography.

This reader was convinced by the utility of drawing from multiple writing styles and media forms in telling ethnographically rich and theoretically rigorous stories; needless to say, this is an argument that has been made for some time now. Other arguments in this section were less convincing, such as the assertion that ethnographic writing on love has much to learn from the literary heights of romance novels; the seemingly populist argument naively ignores how that genre is, like ethnography, value-laden and emerges from a particular (Western, heteronormative) genealogical trajectory.

Jackson’s afterword – while it engages relatively little with other contributions – is both instructive and insightful given that, as many of the contributors note, he has played an instrumental role in bringing phenomenology into anthropological circles.

Finally, in her contribution, Ram engages with Heidegger's articulation of ‘mood’ (*stimmung*) and how it may be used to inform ethnographic work. Ram finds it productive to attend to moods as phenomenological and affective phenomena; in her contribution she focuses specifically on anxiety, and what this mood may tell anthropologists about ethnographic trends as they emerge in interlocutors’ discourse. As an orientation to the world, and an experience that does not define the subject yet which colors the subject’s movement, action, and language, Ram's attention to mood is thought provoking and adds a new phenomenological layer to anthropological literature influenced by the affective turn.

In *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and the Provocation of the Modern*, Ram critiques the notion that Western, anthropological theories of subjectivity must attach themselves to “mental states and with ideas, thoughts, and inner emotion” (2013, p. 3). She describes this as a “mentalist” reading of agency, readings that privilege “will, desire, choice, and planning” (2013, p. 3) while ignoring more embodied notions of knowledge. It is of little surprise that Ram should take issue with mentalist readings of experience given that trance is her topic of inquiry. Her ethnography joins other current, innovative work on the subject making this truly an exciting time to be a graduate student working in spirit possession studies.

Fertile Disorder could be grouped with several other theoretically innovative works that have recently been published, including the edited volumes *Spirited Things: The Work of “Possession” in Afro-Atlantic Religion* (2014), and *Trance Mediums and New Media: Spirit Possession in the Age of Technical Reproduction* (2015). Ram’s ethnography is among the more

rigorous monographs on the topic to have been published as of late. *Fertile Disorder*, which examines the nexus between spirit possession and fertility in Tamil Nadu, is theoretically astute and perhaps best left to specialists and graduate students.

In fact, one runs something of a theoretical marathon throughout the monograph, engaging with, among other theorists: Bordieu (habitus), Kirsteva (abjection), Butler (gender trouble), Foucault (governmentality), Gramsci (state intellectual), Deleuze and Guattari (affect), de Certeau (minor practices), Chatterjee (nationalism), Freud (the unconscious), and Merleau-Ponty (body of habit). One wonders if the theoretical arguments contained within the ethnography could, perhaps, have been deployed more efficiently or systematically - and, perhaps, more sparingly - alongside deeper engagement with the richly textured and temporally deep ethnographic material that Ram's own experience brings to bear on the work. As soon as ethnographic narratives begin to gain momentum in the text they seem to be slowed down by theoretical instrumentation; if Ram truly wanted to effectively illustrate how social theory has been gained "at the expense of magicity" (2013, p. 273), Ram may have considered allowing the magic of story telling to play a more prominent part in the ethnography.

The question of modernity's (dis)attachment to possession, which figures centrally in her ethnography, has been taken up by others, perhaps most famously by Ong (1987) in her research on female factory workers in Malaysia. Ram, however, distances herself from this work by stating that "I have focused attention on the ways in which possession makes visible what modernity *leaves out* of its adjudications" (2013, p. 272). This is but two sides of the same coin, however, as Ong's work equally attends to what the march towards modernity misses in the lives of the factory workers. In *Fertile Disorder*, readers find modernity in the form of the Indian nation-state that regulates Dalit women's bodies and how we - as social theorists - are to read those bodies that fall into the passionate, temporal space of possession. It is here that Ram's work shines. Is possession what modernity has 'left out'? The question is provocative, and Ram provides a most scrupulous examination of its consequences, but the question also presumes to know exactly what 'possession' is and, at times, universalizes the category (see Johnson 2014). For instance, Ram claims that "modernity leaves out of its formation adjudications ... the world of spirits, ghosts and deities" (2013, p. 272). This may be true in the ethnographic context described, but there are moments when this, and similar arguments about 'possession' deployed in the ethnography, create generalizations regarding the category of 'possession' and "spirits, ghosts, and deities." In northwestern Madagascar where I work, mediumship and *tromba* spirits are wrapped up in local royal politics that have direct consequences upon the very 'modern' project of national elections.

Curiously, Ram draws from de Certeau's articulation of "minor practices" and applies it to possession practices in Tamil Nadu fishing villages. It is clear from the text that in Tamil Nadu, class-based forms of difference are able to render possession "superstitious", and thus relegate it to the sidelines of "modern" progress. Possession becomes a "minor" practice insofar as it has been subsumed - although never entirely - by the so-called secular, scientific concerns of local intellectuals attached to the state and its medical apparatuses. It remains to be asked, however, from whose perspective is possession "minor"? While Ram certainly does not consider possessed women to be marginal to local life or to her ethnographic work (to the contrary, in fact), it was not altogether clear to this reader what considering possession to be a "minor practice" does for the ethnography and its theoretical argumentation contained therein.

The genealogical legacy of attending to gender in anthropological explanations of spirit possession is not lost on Ram, who references, draws from, and challenges those anthropologists and sociologists whose work on the topic has come before. Ram references Lewis' (1966)

argument that possession by female spirit mediums in Somalia is a “marginal” practice within a patriarchal society, one that allows women to express themselves despite being an otherwise “subordinated” population. Ram (2013, p. 84) rightly provides a strong critique of the male chauvinism embedded in Lewis’ (1966) argument. Since Lewis proposed his theory on gender and possession, feminist anthropologists, such as Boddy (1989), have long since asked: from *whose* perspective are women (in Somalia, Tamil Nadu, or Northern Sudan) considered to be “marginal,” anyway? Ram expands the question of gender outward to consider how the study of “possession” relates to the question of emancipatory and left-liberal politics more broadly. For instance, Ram (2013, p. 269) argues that Marxism often reads that which is embodied as automatically “in the service of power,” and she wonders what other potentialities may be offered by Marxist thought if it didn’t presume such a reductive analysis.

Ram’s contributions to the literature on gender and possession are two-fold. Firstly, she draws renewed attention to the female medium’s body and how it is regulated by the nation-state and biomedicine. Her work on the “health of the nation-state” is considered alongside women’s health in family planning programs throughout India (2013, p. 23); this material resonates with older anthropological literature on the body, both the (female) human body and the metaphor of the national body. Like Boddy’s (2007) work on colonial Sudan, Ram examines how women’s bodies are read, regulated, and controlled by the state, and how experience and perception become key themes in “afflictive possession” described by Ram and *zār* as studied by Boddy. Family planning and, more broadly, Western public health regimes, become both a discourse and a mode of knowledge-production, but so too do possession practices, as *Fertile Disorder* shows. Secondly, also as in Boddy’s (1989) earlier work on possession in Northern Sudan, Ram (2013, pp. 114, 151) examines the phenomenological parallel between bearing a child and bearing a spirit. Ram poses difficult questions about how possession may challenge straightforward understandings of agency; again, these are questions that have already been posed by others, but Ram infuses them with new life and urgency. Nevertheless, despite Ram’s critique of “mentalist” readings of experience, relatively little current anthropological literature on possession privileges this shallow reading of agency as she describes it.

At times, her critique seems like a straw man argument, one that is not representative of the nuanced, emergent work in the field. It simply is not true that anthropological studies on gender and possession today propose “either ‘false consciousness’ or the clear perception provided by the emancipatory discourses of Marxism or feminism” (Ram 2013, p. 265).

While there is no need for Ram to engage with psychoanalytic theory, there has been a deep tradition within anthropological studies of possession to draw from psychoanalysis, the very field that coined the term “consciousness” in the first place (and which goes largely unexplored by Ram). Given that Obeyesekere (1981) famously wrote about mediums beyond what Ram describes as a “mentalist” reading of agency, it is surprising that Ram barely engages with his work. Ram is troubled by Obeyesekere’s reading of agency (2013, p. 143), but one wonders if Obeyesekere and Ram are simply speaking past each other because they were dealing with dramatically different types of female mediums (the mediums that Obeyesekere worked with are described, at the onset of mediumship, as being very troubled). And even though Ram critiques Obeyesekere for pulling from European myth stories, Ram doesn’t seem to consider how much Euro-American social theory drives her own ethnographic text.

As in the work of Throop and Csordas, ultimately Ram attempts to “take phenomenology out of a philosophical domain into an empirical context” (2013, p. 6). In this, she succeeds brilliantly. The interplay between the philosophical and the empirical also play out in Ram’s argument that the phenomenological experience of possession is itself an emic practice of theory-production and

meaning making for interlocutors. Indeed, throughout the ethnography Ram succeeds in convincing readers that, yet again, spirit mediumship provides fertile ground for the blossoming of anthropological theory.

References

- Behrend, H., Dreschke, A., & Zillinger, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Trance mediums and New Media: Spirit possession in the age of technical reproduction*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Boddy, J. (1989). *Wombs and alien spirits: Women, men and the Zār Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Boddy, J. (2007). *Civilizing women: British crusades in colonial Sudan*. Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press.
- Jackson, M. (Ed.). (1996). *Things as they are: New directions in phenomenological anthropology*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.
- Johnson, P., C. (Ed.). (2014). *Spirited things: The work of "possession" in Afro-Atlantic Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewis, I. (1966). Spirit possession and deprivation cults. *Man* 1(3), 307-329. doi: 10.2307/2796794
- Obeyesekere, G. (1981). *Medusa's hair: An essay on personal symbols and religious experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ong, A. (1987). *Spirit of resistance and capitalist discipline: Factory women in Malaysia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
-