cation, age, sex, place of birth and residence, ethnic group and linguistic affiliation of the teller. I could find no such identification of the teller accompanying most of these published texts. It would be interesting to know if the tellers of these tales were different in any significant way from those who told the tales of a more common kind.

However atypical the tales or their tellers may be, it should be emphasized that these are fascinating stories. Some are familiar from elsewhere in Africa, like those which chronicle the separation of God and Man but others deal with the origins of thunder, death, agriculture, copulation between men and women, marriage, and the beginning and ending of female infanticide. In this latter case the role of Naawen is limited to an intervention similar to that of the biblical God when Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac. Naawen intervenes, as a female child/woman who has escaped the ruling that all female children should be killed at birth, is about to be sacrificed to an earth-shrine (tengbaang). The opposition of chiefship (naam) and custodian-ship of the earth-shrine which is so well known from Fortes' Tallensi ethnography, is here reflected in the ten versions of the story of a girl saved from death by Naawen.

Professor Schott views this volume as 'a small contribution to the immense work... (of) preserving the oral traditions of African peoples before these riches vanish forever.' My own research in northern Ghana indicates that the sunsuelima is indeed a narrative form which is changing rapidly and, with literacy and use of modern media, may disappear. Nevertheless, it is a form which is still much appreciated and may well be given a further lease of life by the dedicated work of Schott and his associates. Further publications in this series will be awaited with great interest.

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GIBBAL, Jean-Marie, Genii of the River Niger, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, xiv, 204 pp., 0 226 29051 4 (cloth), 0 226 29052 2 (paper).

Genii of the River Niger is a candid, sensitive and well-written account of the Ghimbala healing cult, popular among the people of the River Niger's upper band in eastern Mali. In the tradition of Leiris, Levi-Strauss and Balandier, Gibbal's writing hovers between ethnographic analysis and literary account, reminding us that the ethnographer is
inevitably caught up in the invention, as much as in the representation, of cultural worlds. From his travels, Gibbal brings back a wealth of fleeting impressions, partial sensations, and opaque truths. Conscious that his perspective both fosters and inhibits particular insights and wary of rendering spirit possession too transparent to the analytical gaze of his readers ('certain words, attitudes, and events escape my comprehension . . . Besides, why would one want to say everything, and especially to explain everything?' p. 171), Gibbal wants Ghimbala to speak on its own terms. Rather than rendering ritual explicable solely within a rationalist framework, he offers poetic testimonies to the convulsive beauty of the ceremonies, sharing with us the sensory grounds of his experience and casting trance as a temporal, emergent phenomenon which sometimes 'escapes social control and fractures institutional reality' (p. 165).

Ghimbala centers around the Niger which, even in its present shrunken state, 'is no less than the axis of life' (p. 20) in this region of Mali. To immerse us in the rhythm of the Niger’s floods and falls by which villagers and spirits live, Gibbal builds his account as a river journey, the river becoming the main artery along which the narrative flows. Besides providing a physical anchor for the genii and their followers, the river cements the unity of the cult by providing a channel for the information, rumors and ideas that circulate upstream and downstream. Spirits are the powerful mediators between the world of above and the world of below: some of them possess both aquatic and terrestrial homes which they variously occupy depending on the size of the river. Villagers are episodically reminded of their presence when an overloaded pirogue capsizes in the river or when flood waters drown someone. These unfortunate events are the work of the genii who regularly intervene in the lives of humans.

Yet, it is not this dimension of the cult which Gibbal has chosen to focus on here. Rather, he turns his attention to the ceremonies which constitute a ‘sacred drama [that] actualizes the fundamental link that unites’ (p. 89) people and spirits. Though this moment of great intimacy between the mediums and their mystical masters must be seen as a ‘privileged moment in their relations’ (p. 92)—and perhaps a privileged moment for the ethnographer as well—Gibbal warns that the ultimate reality of trance cannot be reduced to interpretation by outsiders or insiders. All one can do then is to engage in poetic arguments of images that translate the intensity of possession into the fixity of words.

Motivated by a ‘search for substantiality beyond the perception of a