This volume is both frustrating and quite interesting, and it serves as a reminder of why edited volumes are so useful and also why publishers are disinclined to publish them. This one opens with an introduction that states the following as its thesis: “We must always adopt a flexible, working hypothesis of the nature and role of spirit possession and trance to enable the assimilation of new insights and to hold contradictory evidence in creative tension” (p. 9). Some few pages later the authors restate the non-committal summary “What is called for and what is within our grasp is a general greater awareness of, and empathy with, the presence of other, equally valid perspectives” (p. 13). A more accurate account of the book is that it presents twelve essays on spirit possession written largely by active U.K. researchers, and that they disagree on how best to understand the phenomenon. What do these researchers see when they look at this complex behavior we call spirit possession?

All have something to offer. The first three essays (by Graham Harvey, Geoffrey Samuel, and Louise Child) have largely critical aims. They resist various claims that there are important psychological dimensions to spirit possession and that spirit possession can be explained in terms of trance or cognition. Graham Harvey emphasizes the actor’s perspective and argues that most actors within an animist world experience themselves in relationship to other beings — and that they do not experience themselves as having states of mind. The implication is that describing them as having states of mind is thus misleading. In his conclusion, Harvey explains that he finds words like “shaman” and “spirit” constraining; he prefers words like “person” and “relationship.” Geoffrey Samuel takes up the cudgels more explicitly. “The cognitive science approach is only really convincing in so far as one accepts the fundamental assumption that cognitive categories — as distinct from, for example, emotional or motivational issues — are the main human variables that underlie religion” (p. 37). It is not clear how he derived this characterization of the approach, whose main claim is that intuitions about invisible agency evolved out of the fear that one would be killed by a predator. Then he explains that spirit possession — all of it, apparently — is a pathology of the self. Louise Childs takes issue with I. M. Lewis’ observation that spirit possession can seem to have a sexual component: she finds it reductive. She prefers to use Jean Baudrillard on the seductive: “For Baudrillard, modernity’s obsession with the female orgasm is directly connected with the contemporary West’s exaltation of various quantifiable and productive structures and forms, including
those of the economy and the libidinal theories of Freudian psychology, which together inform the logic of pornography” (p. 60). These scholars do not want their experience of spirit possession contaminated by Western concepts. The last essay in the volume, by Saër Maty Bâ, makes this point most explicitly: “‘African’ spirit possession is transgressive; through and beyond mimesis, it smashes European philosophy and symbols” (p. 235).

The remaining essays are more constructive. Lucy Huskinson argues that dissociation is neither inherently pathological nor non-pathological; that discussion has been active in the U.S. for a while, but is newer in the U.K. context. Huskinson approaches the issues differently than has been done in the States — she uses analytic psychology — and she builds a theory of consciousness shaped by the presence or absence of intense distress. Bettina Schmidt takes up one of the old, unanswered chestnuts in the comparative study of religion: Why are women (more or less) more religious than men? She wrestles with the cognitive science of religion here: she thinks that there really is something to the claim that women are socially and emotionally different than men (they think more about what others are thinking) and that this difference may explain their different religiosity. And yet she is not entirely comfortable with her own conclusions. She wants to emphasize learning more than she thinks the cognitive science approach does.

Another group of essays describes the way spirituality changes as its practitioners become more self-aware and more modern — although they do not necessarily agree on exactly what that means. Marja Tiilikainen's essay on the Somali saar practices in Finland show that the practice becomes more self-conscious abroad; Andre Dawson's account of the way an old Brazilian ayahuasca religion becomes more expressive and psychologized for the urban individuals who practice reiterates this general observation. Kim Groop presents spirit attacks in northern Namibia as an expression of the stress of modernity and its failed promises for so many.

Then there are three essays that are quite fascinating because they really set out to capture what happens in spirit possession — at least in one context. One is by a classicist, Crystal Addey, and gives an excellent account of Iamblichus’ model of the relationship between divine and human. David Gordon Wilson, himself a medium, compares modern mediums with modern shamans and concludes that what they do is much the same (he does not consider non-modern, non-Western shamans). Sarah Goldingay offers a compelling comparison between mediumship and acting. She introduces the idea of the “technical self”: 