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**[Review] *Descending with Angels:*
Islamic exorcism and psychiatry.
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Abstract

If the raindrops are carried down by angels, our souls are also taken care of. Or they should be. Suhr's book is about souls who were not taken care of properly and who were possessed by harmful spirits. While using phenomenological methods, the author takes the reader into the depths of anthropological enquiry.

One can only anticipate only the best from Christian Suhr. This is the second time I have the privilege to review one of his books; the first time it was a volume called 'Transcultural Montage' (2013) in visual anthropology which he co-edited. This time he authored a book and a documentary - this publication being imagined as bipartite. The written volume and a documentary complete each other, however it is easily imaginable each part being also more or less autonomous. Suhr's bipartition is an original approach indeed. It is advised to watch the movie before you start flipping the pages of this anthropological page-turner.

Suhr's book is a wonderful example of how a topic, usually elaborated from the perspective of religious ritual studies or even medical anthropology, can be tackled from a different corner in a quite original manner. Suhr opts exploring his topic with (re)framing the concept of invisibility, mainly from the point of view of phenomenology, and propos-

es as in-depth analysis of this concept the divide between two perceptions. The one between the mainstream society – a firm supporter of the material and visible, versus the cosmology of a religious community based on a belief-system with a pillar in the invisible, a significant factor in the spiritual ontology of the believer.

The volume (book & documentary) is a multifaceted anthropological endeavor and can be read and reread from various angles. For starters, as a study about spirit possessions in general. The author tackles the topic which is probably the most explored yet again remains the most difficult topic an anthropologist could ever choose to study: how to scrutinize a topic which can be easily dismissed as ‘superstition’. He ventures into descending in the auto-ethnography of the research-story, which I find extremely courageous from his part: Favret-Saada’s work (1977) comes to my mind.

From another perspective, this volume is also a delightful addendum to a topic dear to medical anthropology: ethnopsychiatry. Although there is not much from the gigantic corpus of ethnopsychiatrical work in the written part in this bipartition (except for some Tobie Nathan, according to the bibliography), this volume indirectly brings a great deal of the contribution to this field. It directly deals with the incapacity of the biomedicine to provide relief on psychological distress and with the phenomena of culture-bound syndromes.

This is a topic which has been dealt with in numerous anthropological publications, but Suhr is really making a solid argument for both sides. There is of course also its impact to the field of visual anthropology: anthropology was and remains a verbocentric discipline, but Suhr surely points toward fresh starts on how to explore both paths of scientific enquiry: words by images and images through words.

The facet which is most significant for me personally is the polemological structure and the content of this volume. The book is constructed on the opposition between the host-society and the community which is being hosted and the problems which arise from this relation. From one side we have a society in which cohesion is based on secularity and rationality. From another, we have a community whose interconnection is based on an englobing belief system that provides more than just a theological framework constructed on sacrality permeating every segment of human existence. As we can see from this case, it even offers a syncretic model of a psychological relief and treatment. Hence the friction between the two sides of the society.

My task doesn’t boil down to enumerating praises which this volume deserves.

I’m also to mention at least some elements which are missing or which are to be scrutinized. On the account of the high number of patients who are Muslims and are being treated in some of Denmark’s mental hospitals, Suhr enumerates the reasons one can usually get from the press: the fact that many are migrants and have come from various difficult, often war-devastated regions, traumatized by their previous life experiences. There is also, naturally the ‘break’ in social and cultural ties which happens with a new way of life they encounter in the new social, cultural and political setting which often seems dreamy from a distance, but quite dreary when it’s actually lived. Suhr is however completely oblivious of another potentially important factor which directly influences the mental health of individuals of Muslim background. Many Muslim societies

are practicing consanguineous marriages. Actually, the concept of 'Arab marriage' as a form of marriage is a marriage of cross-cousins (both of the spouses are cognatic cousins), and is a model well known in kinship anthropology (f.i. Héritier 1994, Seligman 1923, Atran 1985...). There are numerous studies (Saugstad & Odegard 1986; Abaskuliev & Skolbo 1975; Mansour et al. 2011; Mansour et al. 2010; Bener et al. 2012, etc.) which demonstrate that there is a direct correlation between mental health issues and inbreeding (consanguinity). Suhr could have at least mentioned this factual angle.

There is also the question of the prudish persistence with which Suhr is carefully avoiding the word 'fundamentalism' throughout his book, and instead uses the word 'orthodox' and 'orthodox islam' when writing about Salafism. Suhr does offer an explanation for his choice for nomenclature (page 6-8), however his explanation steams from the emic viewpoint. In that spirit, although he enumerates the problems of the Muslim communities in the Danish society – a pattern of clashes which is present nowadays across all Western European countries - he doesn't mention that this clash between the two resulted in killed persons right in the name of that 'orthodoxy'.

Maybe the answer to his reticence is to be found in his timid definition of *dawa*. It seems that Suhr is blissfully unaware of the socio-political side of this concept; hence the use of 'orthodox' and other euphemisms in his book becomes logical but anthropologically not acceptable. In tackling the topic such as the 'orthodoxy' and the place of islam in the Danish society, the author skillfully asks questions on controversial topics and leaves the reader to come up with his, her own answers. In that sense, Suhr is a masterful author and must be congratulated for it. His book has all the qualities of an excellent ethnography. It is an outstanding piece of a good contemporary anthropological work as it gets.

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