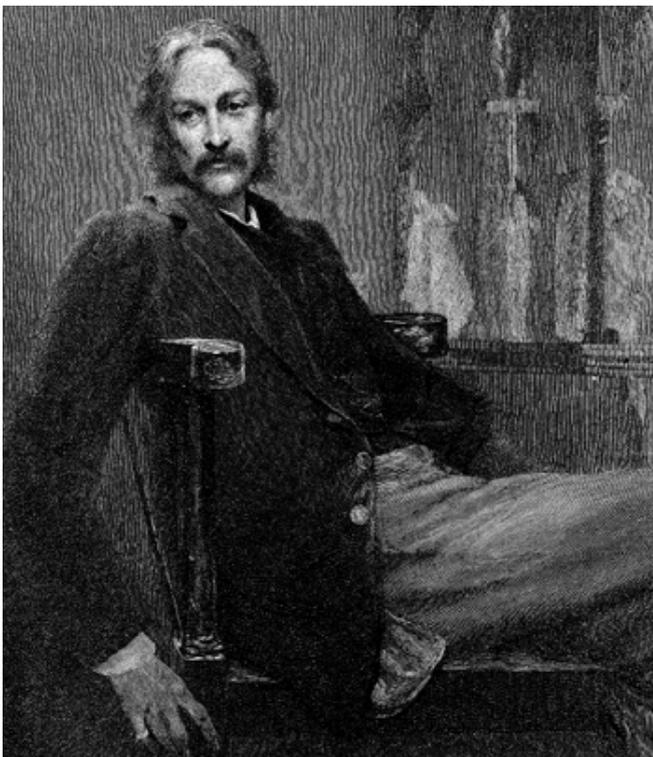

Jack Hunter

Anthropology and the Supernatural: From Spirits to Consciousness

Early Pioneers

Since its earliest incarnation in the nineteenth century, anthropology has expressly concerned itself with attempting to understand the supernatural and religious beliefs of human beings around the world. Edward Burnett Tylor, the first professor of anthropology at Oxford University, argued that religion could best be understood through an examination of the supernatural beliefs of “primitive” cultures, because in beliefs about spirits and supernatural powers could be found the seeds of the great world religions. These beliefs, Tylor thought, could be explained by assuming that so-called “savages” were irrational and, as a consequence, unable to make accurate inferences about their experiences of the world around them. He suggested, for example, that primitive man had great difficulty distinguishing real death from sleep and trance states, and so, from observations of such phenomena, erroneously posited the existence of a personal life-force, or spirit, that was able to both enter and leave the physical body under certain conditions. Progressing from the inference that human beings possessed an immaterial spirit, Tylor argued that it was not a huge leap to believing that other entities, such as animals, plants and rocks, also possessed spirits/souls, and thus the supernatural realm was born.



Andrew Lang

Andrew Lang, a contemporary of Tylor’s, criticized the emphasis on misinterpreted experience, arguing that “savage man” might not have been the irrational observer Tylor made him out to be. By drawing comparisons between ethnographic accounts of supernatural beliefs and contemporary reports of psychic phenomena, such as those investigated by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), Lang demonstrated that the perceived cognitive gap between Europeans and non-Europeans was not quite as wide as had initially been thought. If modern, rational Europeans of high respectability, like the early members of the SPR, had experienced phenomena they considered to be supernormal in nature, then why should the experiences and beliefs recorded in the ethnographic literature not also be taken seriously? Lang suggested, in contrast to Tylor’s misinterpretation theory, that supernatural beliefs might have their foundations in genuine anomalous experiences. Indeed, in his book *The Making of Religion*, Lang went so far as to hypothesize that paranormal experiences might have been major contributing factors in the early development of religious ideas. In other words, Lang suggested that supernatural beliefs need not be considered irrational if they were founded upon genuine paranormal experiences.

Of the two interpretations of psychical experience and belief proposed by Tylor and Lang, however, it was Tylor’s that became dominant within academic anthropology.

Social-Functionalism

Although Tylor’s interpretation became orthodox within anthropology, there still remained room for a theory that explained why apparently irrational beliefs in ghosts, witchcraft, magic, spirit possession, and the like were so persistent among human societies if they were nothing more than delusional. This theory came in the form of social-functionalism, that is the idea that supernatural beliefs persist only because they perform specific functions for a given society. This position developed from the writings of Emile Durkheim, the founding father of French sociology, who argued that religious beliefs and practices are essentially a form of social glue that help to ensure the cohesion and solidarity of social groups. Perhaps the best example of a social-functional approach is I.M. Lewis’ theory of peripheral spirit possession, which sees spirit possession as a means for repressed individuals, usually women, to protest against their conditions in a socially acceptable manner. Similar models have been applied to other systems of supernatural belief such as witchcraft, for example, which has been interpreted as a means by which incidences of misfortune can be understood and dealt with, and as a method for ensuring civility between group members for fear of

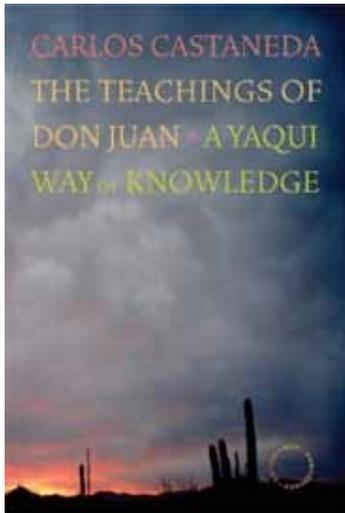
accusations of witchcraft. The social-functional perspective, then, combined with the Tylolean misinterpretation hypothesis, seemed to provide an all encompassing explanation for the persistence of apparently irrational supernatural beliefs.

But the social-functional approach fundamentally ignored both the significance of subjective experience for believers and the possibility that genuine psi phenomena might exist, assuming from the outset that the objects of supernatural beliefs, in line with Tylor's view, could possess no form of independent ontological reality. So, while social-functionalists were happy to accept that ritual practices engaging the world of the supernatural might perform an essential social function, they were unwilling to entertain the possibility that the supernatural realm was anything more than delusional fantasy or the product of outright fraud. It wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that certain anthropologists began, like Andrew Lang over 60 years previously, to question whether the functionalist framework really was the optimum model for understanding supernatural belief.

Castaneda's Influence

For many it was the publication, in 1968, of Carlos Castaneda's infamous book *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* that rekindled the supernatural debate in anthropology. Castaneda's book describes his experiences as a young anthropology graduate, learning the ways of the brujo (sorcerer/medicine-man/shaman) with Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Native American in Mexico. The book documents the author's experiences while consuming sacred psychoactive plants, as well as other anomalous experiences alleged to be caused by rival sorcerers, and presents them in an autobiographical ethnographic account.

There has been a great deal of debate as to whether the book represents a genuine ethnographic description of real events and experiences, or whether it is simply a work of imaginative fiction. Nevertheless, and regardless of its veracity, the influence of the book on subsequent anthropologists was enormous and inspired many to follow similar courses of ethnographic fieldwork in other societies. Once ethnographers began to participate, in an immersive manner, with the belief systems and ritual practices of their hosts, a whole new world of experience emerged as a valid field of ethnographic inquiry. Such an approach was to become known as the anthropology of experience, or the anthropology of consciousness.



Anomalous Experiences in the Field

Ethnographers such as Joseph Long, Bruce Grindal, Paul Stoller, and Edith Turner composed detailed ethnographies in which they described not only the beliefs and practices of their hosts, but also their own anomalous experiences while immersed in different cultural systems. Joseph Long documented an unusual apparition in Jamaica in which a self-propelled coffin was seen to move through a busy market square accompanied by vultures and a disembodied voice.

Bruce Grindal vividly described the re-animation of a corpse during a traditional Sisala death divination in Ghana. "What I saw in those moments," he wrote, "was outside the realm of normal perception. From both the corpse and *goka* came flashes of light so fleeting that I cannot say exactly where they originated... A terrible and beautiful sight burst upon me. Stretching from the amazingly delicate fingers and mouths of the *goka*, strands of fibrous light played upon the head, fingers, and toes of the dead man. The corpse, shaken by spasms, then rose to its feet, spinning and dancing in a frenzy."

Paul Stoller became a sorcerer's apprentice amongst the Songhay in Niger, only to be forced to return home for fear of magical attacks from rival sorcerers. "Suddenly I had the strong impression that something had entered the house," wrote Stoller. "I felt its presence and I was frightened. Set to abandon the house to whatever hovered in the darkness, I started to roll off my mat. But my lower body did not budge... My heart raced. I couldn't flee. What could I do to save myself?

Like a *sorko benya*, I began to recite the *genji how*, for Adamu Jenitongo had told me that if I ever felt danger I should recite this incantation until I had conquered my fear... I began to feel a slight tingling in my hips... The presence had left the room."



Edith Turner

Edith Turner described her climactic experience of a spirit-form at the culmination of the *ihamba* healing ceremony of the Ndembu in Zambia. "I saw with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh of her back," she wrote. "This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, a deep gray opaque thing emerging as a sphere. I was amazed—delighted. I still laugh with glee at the realisation of having seen it, the *ihamba*, and so big! We were all just one in triumph.

The gray thing was actually out there, visible, and you could see [the witchdoctor's] hands working and scrabbling on the back—and then the thing was there no more."



Paul Stoller

Transpersonal Anthropology and the Anthropology of Consciousness

Charles Laughlin defines transpersonal experiences as “those experiences that bring the cognized-self into question” and transpersonal anthropology as “the cross-cultural study of the psychological and sociocultural aspects of transpersonal experience.” A transpersonal anthropologist is, therefore, “one that is capable of participating in transpersonal experience; that is, capable of both attaining whatever extraordinary experiences and phases of consciousness that enrich the religious system, and relating these experiences to invariant patterns of symbolism, cognition and practice found in religions and cosmologies all over the planet.”

Through participating fully in the host culture, to the extent of accessing culturally relevant experiences, the transpersonal anthropologist is able to gain a perspective on a particular culture that could not be attained through any normal means of objective observation. Writing on his experiences with the Yanomami of the Orinoco Valley, Zeljko Jokic, for example, describes how his own subjective experiences under the influence of the hallucinogenic snuff *yopo* represented a point of intersubjective entry into the Yanomamo life-world. In attaining such culturally significant experiences



Zeljko Jokic

“No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded”

—William James

Methodologies and Approaches

In order to “see what the Natives see,” and to make use of transpersonal experiences as ethnographic data in the anthropology of consciousness, it is necessary to immerse oneself fully in the culture under investigation.

Fiona Bowie proposes a methodology, which she terms “cognitive empathetic engagement,” as a means to achieve this goal. Cognitive empathetic engagement is defined as a method by which “the observer...approaches the people or topic studied in an open-minded and curious manner, without presuppositions, prepared to entertain the world view and rationale presented and to experience, as far as possible and practical, a different way of thinking and interpreting events.”

Patric Giesler has proposed a methodology more geared towards the verification of psi phenomena as objective events in an approach referred to as “psi in process,” which “studies ostensible paranormal functioning in a natural cultural or subcultural context with the rigor of experimental control and statistical evaluation...without (or minimally) altering or disturbing the context.”

In a brief survey, Michael Winkelmann suggests that there is no single, unified anthropology of consciousness, but rather that there are several “anthropologies of consciousness” dealing with different aspects of the interaction between consciousness and culture. Winkelmann proposes a “five-field” approach including: paleontology (examining the evolution of consciousness); linguistics (examining the role of language in consciousness and experience); archaeology (examining different forms of consciousness in the past of modern humans); cultural anthropology (examining the interface between consciousness and culture); applied anthropology (using research into altered states of consciousness for real-world applications).

Conclusions

Writing at the dawn of the twentieth century, the philosopher and early pioneer of psychology, William James, summed up what I consider to be, potentially, the most important contribution of the anthropology of consciousness to our understanding of the universe as a whole when he wrote that “no account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.” The unusual phenomena investigated by parapsychologists, and the range of altered states of consciousness and supernatural beliefs encountered during ethnographic fieldwork, are aspects of the world in which we live and the cultures that have developed in it, and as such should not be ignored by the social sciences.

Although we are a long way from the acceptance of paranormal phenomena by anthropology, it is promising to see that both contemporary anthropologists and parapsychologists are coming to realize the mutual benefits each discipline can receive from the type of interdisciplinary collaboration suggested by Andrew Lang at the end of the nineteenth century. Over the course of the discipline’s development, anthropology has shifted its focus from attempting to explain away supernatural beliefs to an approach that accepts the significance of subjective anomalous experience in the development of such beliefs without applying a reductive interpretation. This is a positive step forward for our understanding of the ways in which consciousness and culture interact, and I look forward to further research in this direction.

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