

# TALKING WITH THE SPIRITS: ANTHROPOLOGY & INTERPRETING SPIRIT COMMUNICATIONS

By JACK HUNTER

## ABSTRACT

Anthropological approaches to the study of spirit mediumship groups, and related practices, have usually tended to focus on social-functional interpretations, arguing that spirit mediumship groups function as a means to enable female practitioners to protest against their traditional roles as “mothers, wives and sexual partners” in oppressive male-oriented societies (Boddy, 1988; Lewis, 1971; Skultans, 1974). Such approaches, however, have failed to address the experiential core of these groups: members believe that they are able to make direct contact with the world of spirits, whether through communicating with spiritual entities channelled via entranced mediums, witnessing ostensibly paranormal phenomena in the context of séances, or through falling into trance themselves and experiencing direct communion with the “numinous” (Otto, 1958). The experiential element cannot be removed from an analysis of mediumship, as it represents the primary motive for séance attendance as the members themselves perceive it. To ignore it would be to detrimentally reduce the complexity of the phenomenon. In addition to providing an overview of a variety of anthropological approaches to the issue of spirit possession and mediumship, this paper will detail the experiences of an anthropologist exploring this experiential component while conducting fieldwork for his undergraduate dissertation (Hunter, 2009a). The fieldwork itself was conducted at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, a centre established specifically with the aim to promote and develop trance and physical mediumship. The fieldwork methodology was one of immersive participant observation informed by the work of Edith Turner (1993, 1998, 2006), who has advocated the necessity of complete immersion in ritual if its functions and effects are to be adequately understood. In an attempt to understand the role of experience for the members of the group, participant observation was carried out in séances and mediumship development sessions as a means to gain an appreciation of the types of experience encountered by both sitters and mediums. This paper will present the research findings and describe the experiences of the researcher while engaged in the field.

## INTRODUCTION

As a discipline concerned specifically with the study of humanity, anthropology has long had to tackle the issue of spirits: entities that seem to follow us, in one form or another, wherever we go. Anthropology, then, has a wealth of theoretical standpoints from which we can interpret the phenomena of spirit mediumship, possession and other forms of communication with the spirit world. Paul Stoller (1994, p. 637) has suggested that commentators on spirit possession have traditionally tended towards five dominant explanatory frameworks: “functionalist, psychoanalytic, physiological, symbolic (interpretive/textual), and theatrical”. These perspectives, amongst others, will be discussed in the following pages.

My own research into mediumship practices in Bristol (Hunter, 2009a) led me to some interesting questions concerning the way in which anthropologists interpret spirits, both methodologically and ontologically. I was puzzled when I found that the

spirits communicated with at the Bristol Spirit Lodge were much more than the abstractions I had anticipated them to be: when communicating through the physical body of the medium the spirits were essentially the same as any other human being. I realised that to those who participated regularly in séances the spirits were clearly thought of in terms of actual, objective, personhood (Hunter, 2010). Before I begin a discussion of this, however, it would be best to give a brief exposition of the various alternative perspectives that have grown out of anthropology's dealings with the world of spirits.

### *Spirit Mediumship and Spirit Possession*

This article will explore both spirit possession and spirit mediumship as related phenomena. It should be noted from the outset, however, that there are distinct differences between these two manifestations of spirit incorporation. Primary amongst these differences is the fact that while possession is usually—although not always—a spontaneous and undesired occurrence often requiring exorcism, mediumship is usually a voluntary practice. It will become clear when reading this article that although this distinction has been made the actual ethnographic facts do not fit so neatly into solid categories. The problems associated with labelling these, and related phenomena, have been widely debated in the anthropological literature (Lewis, 1971; Skultans, 1971; Winkelman, 1986).

### *Spirit Mediumship and Shamanism*

Many writers have sought to explore the link between spirit possession, mediumship and shamanism (e.g., Emmons, 2000). Shamanism, as it is used in contemporary discourse, is an exceedingly broad term referring to a wide array of beliefs and practices throughout the world. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1989) was keen to stress the need for a strict definition of the shaman so as to distinguish them from a variety of other “individuals possessing magico-religious powers”, such as sorcerers, magicians, medicine men, witch-doctors, priests and so on. In order to do this he highlighted several key characteristics of Siberian and Central Asian forms of shamanism (indeed from where the Tungus term ‘*šaman*’ originates), as examples by which we can judge whether a certain magico-religious practitioner is, strictly speaking, a shaman, or not. Eliade (1989, pp. 1-5) identified these characteristics as specific techniques by which a shaman achieves his/her desired result, for instance utilising special techniques for healing, ecstasy, and so on. Although there are clearly similarities between the shaman, the possessed, and the medium, in that all three are concerned with spirits of one form or another, Eliade (1989, p. 6) is quick to make this significant distinction:

It will be easily seen wherein a shaman differs from a ‘possessed’ person, for example; the shaman controls his ‘spirits’, in the sense that he, a human being, is able to communicate with the dead, ‘demons’, and ‘nature spirits’, without thereby becoming their instrument

According to Eliade's strict definition, a shaman does not necessarily have to become possessed to initiate communication with the world of spirits (though he/she often does), while mediums and the possessed must give their bodies over to the spirits, essentially surrendering themselves to spirit control. Jokic (2008) made some very interesting observations regarding the differences between spirit mediumship and shamanism while studying the state of modern Siberian Buriyat neo-shamanism. He noted that the Buriyat shamanic performances involved the possession of the shamans by spirits, and recognised that after the event the shamans claimed to have no memory of the séance proceedings — a trait particularly common in spirit possession and mediumship (Leacock & Leacock, 1975, pp. 206). When he asked the shamans about this they, after an initial defence of their shamanism, replied that at one time their shamans had been able to recall their trance journeys but that this skill had by now been forgotten. Jokic (2008, p. 43) suggests that:

the lack of memory (post-trance amnesia) in contemporary shamanic séances is the result of particular historical circumstances, in this instance discontinuity or decrease of practices during the repressive Soviet era. As a result the shamans could not progress to higher degrees that would enable them to have more lucid out-of-body experiences during their possession trances and consequently to have more continuity of memory

Such an example goes a long way towards highlighting the similarities and differences between shamanism, spirit possession and mediumship.

### *Pioneering Explorations*

No account of the development of anthropological approaches to the study of spirits would be complete without acknowledging the work of the early pioneers. Sir E. B. Tylor's contribution has been hugely influential in the history of anthropology's dealings with the spirit world. Tylor proposed that "the belief in spiritual beings" was the minimum definition of religion itself. From this perspective, therefore, spirit beliefs must be considered amongst the oldest of humanity. To refer to this 'primitive' ancestor of religion Tylor devised the term "animism", from the Latin *anima* meaning soul. He then attempted to delve deeper into the notion of an animated universe by trying to develop a theory to explain the origin of the belief itself. His theory suggests that belief in the existence of spirits arises from human observations of the world:

When the sleeper awakens from a dream, he believes he has really somehow been away, or that other people have come to him. As it is well known by experience that men's bodies do not go on these excursions, the natural explanation is that every man's living self or soul is his phantom or image, which can go out of his body and see and be seen itself in dreams (Tylor, 1930, p. 88).

Tylor then suggests that this idea is expanded upon to apply to other living creatures and features of the environment (plants, animals, rocks), and also to explain the facts of death, which in all outward appearances is much like a long sleep during which the

*anima* fails to return to its body. The assumption in this argument, however, is that the conclusions that have been widely drawn from such experiences are based on a complete misinterpretation of the data, Tylor is essentially suggesting that so-called 'primitive' humans are somehow less developed in their rationality and so lead themselves into misconceptions about the world. The notion that belief in spirits is a result of faulty logic and misperception has been exceedingly influential and widespread within anthropology.

The theorising of Emile Durkheim, the founding-father of modern sociology, has also been particularly influential. Indeed reiterations of his perspective, although appearing superficially different, are still commonly utilised today. Durkheim developed the notion of "social facts"; that is, ideas that while not necessarily existing as facts of physical nature continue to have a tangible influence on human social life. In his view, spirits are conceived of as social facts performing a specific social function, in particular the maintenance of social cohesion: "religious force is the feeling the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside and objectified in the minds that feel it" (Durkheim, 2008/1912, p. 174).

#### *Spirits and the Embodiment of History*

Paul Stoller (1994) has emphasized the importance of the concept of embodiment in understanding spirit possession and asserts: "there can be little doubt that the body is the focus of possession phenomena" (p. 636). He writes that spirit possession is a "commemorative ritual" utilising "gestures, sounds, postures and movements" (p. 640). Amongst the Songhay, with whom Stoller conducted his fieldwork, possession involves the bodily incorporation of spirits from six different spirit families, each one representing a particular period of Songhay history.

Similarly, Michael Lambek (1998) has noted the use of spirit possession among the Sakalava of Madagascar as a means to retain their history. Spirits representing different epochs of Sakalava history possess the bodies of mediums to give advice on the decision making activities of the present. There are many benefits to discussing such issues with the ancestors; for instance, it is possible to produce 'historically informed' responses to modern situations in a way that is 'pragmatic' while acknowledging the "concerns of earlier generations" (1998, p. 109).

Interestingly a similar theme appeared in my own dealings with the Bristol Spirit Lodge. On many occasions, during conversation with the circle leader, the idea arose of using spirit mediumship as an educational tool. It was suggested that mediumship provided the ideal means to teach history in that it allows direct communication with spirits who had lived on the earth in bygone times. Even in modern European spirit mediumship it seems that there is a yearning to reconnect with the ancestors: to bring the past back to life and use the wisdom of those who came before us to better inform the decisions we make.

#### *Spirit Mediumship as Theatre*

In our modern western culture when we see a theatre performance we do not suppose that the actor has *become* the character he/she portrays, rather we understand that they are *pretending* to be someone else (Foley, 1985, p. 27). In other societies, however, certain performances are understood in an entirely different way. Foley (1985), for example, explains how during Javanese trance dance performances the personalities of the dancers are believed to have been entirely “displaced ... by some other being”. Our interpretations of spirit mediumship performances, being based on our own ethnocentric understanding of what a performance entails metaphysically (i.e. a form of deception and nothing more), are therefore greatly distanced from the interpretations of those practising and observing such performances in their own culture. Beattie (1977) has pointed out certain assumptions often held by anthropologists considering spirit mediumship as theatre, and has suggested that they lead to a false interpretation of the way in which spirit mediumship is understood in non-western societies. He writes:

The first of these [assumptions] was that a medium had to be *either* in a state of possession, a genuine trance, *or* in a condition of normal everyday awareness. This too sharp disjunction allowed for no intermediate conditions; that there might perhaps be *degrees* of dissociation. And the second false assumption... was that if ‘possession’ was in some sense and in some degree an ‘act’ consciously performed, it followed that the whole thing was therefore fraudulent, a mere trick and not to be taken seriously. It did not take me very long to realise that this view was naïve and superficial (Beattie, 1977, p.2).

Similarly, I have noted elsewhere the difficulties associated with trying to distinguish between what might be termed ‘reality’, ‘performance’ and ‘fraud’ in the context of contemporary physical mediumship practice (Hunter, 2009b). Spirit mediumship may very well be a form of performance, but this does not necessarily detract from the possibility that something more profound is actually taking place. Firth (1967) has suggested that such performances can have a significant therapeutic effect, and McClennon (1993) has argued that shamanic performances operate in a similar fashion utilising sub-conscious cues and wondrous events to provide ‘proofs’ of the efficacy of their abilities.

### *Spirit Possession as Social Protest*

I. M. Lewis’ (1971) theory of peripheral spirit possession has been particularly popular in anthropological explorations of possession and mediumship practices around the world (Giles, 1987, p. 235). The theory suggests that individuals inhabiting ‘peripheral situations’, for example women in particularly male dominated societies, are at risk of possession from spirits that “play no direct part in upholding the moral code of the societies in which they receive so much attention”. Possession cults from this perspective are seen as nothing more than “thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex”. Lewis argues that when in the possessed state the protester is “totally blameless” for her actions — “responsibility lies not with them, but with the spirits” (Lewis, 1971, pp. 31-32). Analyses of spirit possession from this social protest

perspective have been conducted worldwide: for example, in the Zar possession cult of Northern Sudan (Boddy, 1988); amongst the Digo in Southern Kenya (Gomm, 1975); in the case of spontaneous epidemics of spirit possession in Malaysian factories (Ong, 1988); amongst Spiritualists in Wales (Skultans, 1974); and in Japanese literature (Bargen, 1988).

Mediumship can undoubtedly provide women with significant social benefits. Kilson (1971) has written of the transformation in status that spirit mediumship brings about in Ga society. The Ga consider women to be innately inferior to men; when combined with illiteracy, un-married life and, potentially, an inability to conceive children, this leads to a particularly low social standing. Through becoming a spirit medium a woman is able to achieve a degree of status that she could not have attained under her normal circumstances. Peter Wilson, however, disagrees with Lewis' hypothesis on the grounds that within so-called "male dominated societies", in which males and females operate in different spheres, it is not clear that women even necessarily feel downtrodden and neglected: "deprivation surely implies withholding that which is due, but in what traditionally male dominated society is it ever regarded as a woman's due that she be granted access to the man's domain?" (Wilson, 1967, p. 367). He implies, therefore, that to suggest spirit possession acts as a form of female protest in traditionally male dominated societies leads to a contradiction in terms: what are they protesting against if everything they have is all their society allows? Donovan (2000) has argued that Lewis' hypothesis, although being generally applicable to peripheral possession cults, might not be a complete theory, but rather must be supplemented by other perspectives.

#### *Spirits as agents and informants*

Bubandt (2009) has pointed to the huge benefits concomitant with treating spirits as informants during ethnographic research. While conducting fieldwork on the island of Ternate in Indonesia, Bubandt treated the spirits he encountered via entranced mediums as "methodologically real" through using them as informants to further his understanding of the political state of the society he was investigating. Through treating the spirits as methodologically real Bubandt was able to get "on with the business of studying the social and political reality of spirits" and recognized "that the invocation of spirits does make a difference in the field (to both the anthropologist and to the people we study) without opening oneself to accusations of political naivety or cultural solipsism" (2009, p. 298). Like the spirits in Madagascar (Lambek, 1998) and amongst the Songhay (Stoller, 1994), the spirits Bubandt encountered were figures from history brought forward to give advice on issues of modern politics, and as such they were key political agents — having a direct effect on the political decision making of the present.

#### *Is Spirit Possession Pathological?*

One of the great debates with regard to both spirit possession and spirit mediumship is concerned with whether or not these phenomena are symptoms of a pathological condition (Emmons, 2001, p. 72). Possession behaviours are often compared to psychological states such as dissociative identity disorder (DID), which in terms of

outward appearances bears certain behavioural similarities to both possession and mediumship. Crabtree (1988, p. 60) defines DID as “a condition in which two or more personalities manifest themselves in one human being”. In the early days of inquiry into these practices anthropologists were particularly keen to draw the conclusion that they were symptoms of mental illness. Psychoanalytic anthropology has also commented on spirit possession, arguing that the phenomenon is a result of traumatic experiences in the personal life-history of the possessed.

Another medical interpretation of spirit possession that was, until relatively recently, popular in the anthropological literature is the ‘nutrient deficiency hypothesis’, which essentially suggests that instances of spirit possession, particularly in women, occur as a result of malnourishment (Bourguignon, Bellisari & McCabe, 1983, p.414). Kehoe and Giletti (1981, p.550) write:

There is a strong correlation between populations subsisting on diets poor in calcium, magnesium, niacin, tryptophan, thiamine, and vitamin D, and those practising spirit possession; conversely, populations reported as having probably adequate intakes of these nutrients generally lack culturally sanctioned spirit possession

They suggest that spirit possession cults represent “institutionalised recognition of class endemic symptoms of nutrient deficiency” (p. 551). Naturally, however, the idea has been subject to much criticism as it is easy to see instances where the hypothesis fails to stand up to scrutiny. Bourguignon et al. (1983), for instance, have provided several counter arguments against the nutrient deficiency hypothesis. Many other anthropologists have directly questioned the idea that spirit possession is a pathological condition (Budden, 2003; Klass, 2003). Budden (2003) argues that the prevalence of dissociative possession and possession-trance states across the world, and the extent to which such states are “embedded within historical and cultural contexts” (p.31), indicates that the phenomenon is far from abnormal, indeed in many societies it may be a desirable state, with those able to incorporate spiritual entities at will being granted higher social status.

Spirit possession is, however, undoubtedly conceived of as related to illness in many societies, whether in terms of the illness being caused by an intruding spirit or being healed by a medium in trance (Freed & Freed, 1964; Lewis, 1971). Such societies may be thought of as ‘externalizing’ pathology rather than ‘internalizing’ it, as is the norm in the western scientific view (McClennon, 1993). It would seem reasonable to suggest, then, that spirit possession, depending upon the context within which it occurs, can be seen as both a cause and cure for illness.

### *Spirits as ontologically real*

Traditionally if anthropologists came back from their fieldwork experience having adopted some of the conceptual perspectives of the people they were studying they were said to have ‘gone native’. To go native has for a long time been a great taboo in academic anthropology, being considered an indicator that an ethnographer had lost

their objectivity. Edith Turner (1993) is an anthropologist who has been brave enough to breach this taboo in writing about the possibility that the spirit beliefs and related practices of so many disparate societies around the world might have some basis in reality. Her radical shift in perspective resulted from her own direct personal experience of an Ndembu healing ceremony in Zambia (Turner, 1998). At the culmination of the *ihamba* ritual, a long and emotional ceremony involving many participants, Turner perceived what she describes as a “spirit-form” being extracted from the back of the afflicted patient:

the traditional doctor bent down amid the singing and drumming to extract the harmful spirit... I saw with my own eyes a large gray blob of something like plasma emerge from the sick woman's back. Then I knew the Africans were right, there is spirit stuff, there is spirit affliction, it isn't a matter of metaphor and symbol, or even psychology. (Turner, 1993, p. 9)

Turner's personal realisation that there is much more to spirits — and indeed the paranormal in general — than the reductive theories of anthropology have hitherto managed to explain has essentially opened up a whole new arena of anthropological inquiry and understanding.

### *Approaching the Spirits*

It seems necessary at this point to give an insight into my own personal approach to the interpretation of spirits in the fieldwork setting. This is done with the aim to give the reader a broader contextual understanding for what follows. When I first started my undergraduate research I was predominantly interested in trying to understand *why* the belief in spirits was so widespread, and as such was not necessarily interested in their ontological status. As far as I was concerned I was investigating spirits as social constructions, and nothing more (a traditional sociological perspective). I was, nevertheless, entirely open to the possibility of there actually being spirits in an ontologically real sense. It was with this open-minded perspective that I first encountered the Bristol Spirit Lodge.

### *The Bristol Spirit Lodge*

Basing my approach on that advocated by Edith Turner, namely an immersive form of participant observation, I endeavoured to explore contemporary mediumship in Bristol at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, a non-denominational home-circle devoted specifically to the development of trance and physical mediumship. The Lodge itself was founded in 2005 by Christine Di Nucci after she was introduced to the world of physical mediumship séances by a friend. After attending a number of séances her new found interest blossomed into a full-blown fascination. In order to further her interest she had a 12'x10' wooden shed constructed at the bottom of her garden in which to conduct séances on her own terms. The séances were initially carried out in a small circle of close friends with new members attending occasionally. At the time of my

fieldwork early in 2009 the Lodge had a total of nine regular members, of whom two were developing mediums: Jon and Sandy.

The development process revolved primarily around séances conducted on a twice weekly basis: Tuesday evening sittings were set aside for the development of Jon's mediumship, and Thursday mornings were for Sandy's. Both Jon and Sandy were working towards the development of so-called face transfiguration phenomena, whereby energy around the face of the medium is apparently manipulated by discarnate entities in order to physically manifest facial features other than the medium's to the sitters. In addition to this, both mediums also went into trance in order to allow communications to be received from their respective spirit teams. Neither medium was usually able to recall the events of the séance while entranced.

The séances themselves followed a fairly strict and ritualised format. The proceedings began with the door to the Lodge being locked so as to avoid any unnecessary distractions. Once the sitters were all comfortably seated around the edges of the séance room, and the medium was positioned inside the cabinet (a curtained off corner of the room used by the medium to induce their trance state), an opening prayer was read primarily as a means to set the proposed intention for the session. For example the opening prayer might have featured any of the following invitations:

We invite physical healing for those that spirit feels able to heal  
We invite materialisation phenomena  
We invite spirit's support for our developing mediums  
We invite transfiguration phenomena to be displayed

The opening prayer itself reads as follows:

Heavenly father and Spirit friends  
We ask that you draw close to us tonight  
We are sitting together in love and light  
And are working only for the highest good  
We invite communication with the spirit world  
That is evidential of continuing life and consciousness  
We invite physical phenomena that may be witnessed by us all  
And be spoken about to others so that they too  
May become open towards belief  
We thank Spirit for their love and protection and  
Ask for a circular canopy to be placed over us all  
Thank you. Amen.

Following the opening prayer a CD was played while the medium relaxed into his/her trance state. The music served to provide a relaxing and positive atmosphere for the séance proceeding. The séances were generally conducted in red light conditions. The mediums at the Bristol Spirit Lodge were keen to demonstrate that there was no

trickery involved in what they did. Full blackout conditions were only occasionally used for special events or when spirit communication suggested that it should be so. The length of the séances was usually between one and two hours. During this time the first hour was generally spent in silence with the music playing while the medium's spirit team attempted to manifest physical séance phenomena: small lights, hazy mists, and face transfiguration. After an hour or so of this, members of the spirit team would come forward to communicate with the sitters. Questions were asked to the communicating entities on a wide range of topics: from metaphysical issues to politics. The communications were generally characterised by lucidity and intelligence (see Di Nucci & Hunter, 2009, for transcripts of séances at the Lodge).

When the ostensible spirits indicated that the session was coming to an end, the 'closing music' was played. This music was always the same, providing a reassuring and grounding focus of attention for both the medium and the sitters. When the medium 'returned' to normal waking consciousness the closing prayer was read:

We thank Spirit for their love and protection  
We thank Spirit for all that they have achieved  
We ask for Spirit to close us down now, and to  
Use any excess energy within this room for the purpose of healing  
May love and protection remain with us all  
Until we meet again  
Thank you. Amen.

All séances were recorded using a digital voice recorder, the aim being to upload the recordings to Lodge's website in order to disseminate the spirit wisdom that had been received. When asked whether the séance proceedings were religious in nature, all members responded in the negative. Spirit communications were understood to be a natural fact, regardless of any religious interpretation — séances were treated as experiments. Nevertheless there was evidently a sense of differentiation between the sacred space of the Lodge and the profane world outside. The Lodge space was treated with great respect; a respect that in many ways resembled religious awe. Even if the Lodge's practices were not considered religious, they certainly partook of at least a semi-religious character (reverential awe, prayers and so on).

### *Experiencing the Séance*

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the experiential component of séance practice at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, I participated fully in séances and mediumship development circles. This mode of inquiry was greatly influenced by the work of the anthropologist Edith Turner, who has written extensively on the necessity for total immersion in the study of spirit beliefs and rituals (Turner, 1993, 1998, 2007). It was important to my investigation that I expose myself to elements of experience that would simply go unnoticed from a purely observational perspective. I wanted to 'feel' what it was like to sit in séance.

I participated in numerous séances as a sitter at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, and in this capacity experienced some very interesting visual phenomena: apparent transfiguration of the medium's face and torso, small shining lights, hazes, mists and so on. I found it very difficult to classify these experiences as either objective or subjective. For the most part they seemed so subtle as to be a product of my own mind, and yet, interestingly, the experiences were often confirmed by other sitters. One example I recall vividly was when I noticed that the medium's head was now bald and rather stern looking. When discussing the events of the séance afterwards several of the other sitters commented independently (I had not mentioned what I had seen) that they had witnessed the transfiguration of the medium's head into that of a bald Chinese man. Moments like this really make one wonder, how can an apparently subjective phenomenon be witnessed by more than one individual?

In addition to sitting as a witness I also engaged in mediumship development and, to my great surprise, underwent some very peculiar sensations. I will now describe in detail the most peculiar, and profoundly affecting, experience I had while developing my own trance mediumship. Because Jon was unable to attend a séance on the evening of 10 March 2009, it was decided that the time would best be spent with the intention of development, and involved sitting in red light conditions and relaxing into a guided meditating. Michelle, a regular sitter who had had previous mediumistic experience, was placed in the cabinet, but the intention of opening prayer was for spirit intelligence to make itself known through *any* of the vessels present in the room.

After the prayer was read, the music was put on and we were told to relax "and just see what happens". As I sat there I decided I would mediate and enjoy the relaxing atmosphere. I closed my eyes and focused my attention on my breathing. Eventually I felt my hands tingling as they rested on the arms of the chair and my heart rate began to quicken. I started to feel as though I was going to lose control, as though I was verging on fainting. I wasn't afraid of losing consciousness; it didn't feel as though that would occur, but I did feel that I was becoming distanced from my physical body, as though I was somehow sitting just back from my body. It was a very peculiar sensation. At the point when I felt most distanced from my body I heard Christine say that she sensed a presence standing by me. This made me panic, because I too was feeling a distinct presence at the time, and her confirmation was shocking. In response to all of this I panicked and opened my eyes. My heart rate was still racing and I felt light headed. I had to regain control of myself; to calm down and reassure myself that everything was ok.

When I had regained composure I decided to begin my meditation again. This time the physical sensations I had felt previously came on again much faster; my heart rate increased and the tingling in my hands returned. I began to feel myself distancing from my body again, and at the point of greatest distance I felt as though there was a space in my body which could easily be filled, it was as though I had made room in my physical body by moving myself out of it. I then felt an energy move into my left hand, and my index finger began to rise of its own accord. It felt as though it were being lifted by a cushion of air. My second finger began to move upwards also, and soon my hand was

quivering on the arm of the chair. I was aware of the movement, but also of the fact that I was not consciously willing it to happen. I was observing the movement, but not with my eyes. This motion began to become more vigorous and soon my whole arm was vibrating and shaking from side to side. All the while my head felt heavy and was drooped down onto my chest. Soon my hand began to lower itself, and the energy felt less intense, and as it did so my hand's movement also became less intense. Soon it was only my two forefingers that remained up, and then these too had returned to normal. When it had all subsided I had 'returned' and was fully in control of my body. I was quite shocked by this experience, and it took quite a while before I was fully calm afterwards.

The second occasion on which this occurred was 19 March 2009. This was also a development sitting due to Jon's absence. I was sitting in the cabinet this time with the intention of conducting a guided meditation. As the meditation progressed it came to a point where the guiding was no longer having any effect. Christine noticed this and decided that she would stop guiding me. Soon after Christine had stopped I once again felt the vibration in my left hand, particularly concentrated on my two forefingers. The sensation was much less intense than on the first occasion but was nevertheless similar in many ways.

### *Conclusions*

It is clear that the phenomena of spirit possession and mediumship are complex and multi-faceted, as evidenced by the great many theoretical and methodological interpretations devised to account for them (cf. Dawson, 2010, pp. 1-22), and as such require multiple perspectives if they are to be understood. All of the interpretations described in this paper succeed in shedding light on these mysterious phenomena, though no single theory successfully accounts for all of their aspects, particularly (in my opinion) the parapsychological dimension. And yet, if we start to bring these perspectives together a much more coherent picture starts to take shape (Giesler, 1984): If we consider dancing, deception and trickery as methods by which mediums can induce altered states of consciousness, both in themselves and in observers, we begin to see the significant role of performance as a tool for spirit contact. We also begin to understand the role of participation in ritual performance, as Edith Turner discovered, in the manifestation of the supernatural world. Through this we start to fathom the significance of the social component in developing social realities, which in themselves may facilitate the mediation and experience of genuine spiritual entities and parapsychological phenomena. The experiential ethnographic method essentially bridges the gap between the theoretical interpretations, social and parapsychological components of spirit mediumship — it gives access to the elements that the more traditional approaches miss out on.

JACK HUNTER

## REFERENCES

- Bargen, D. G. (1988). Spirit Possession in the Context of Dramatic Expression of Gender Conflict: the Aoi Episode of the *Genji monogatari*. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* **48**(1), 95-130.
- Beattie, J. (1977). Spirit Mediumship as Theatre. *RAIN: Royal Anthropological Institute News* **20**, 1-6.
- Boddy, J. (1988). Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance. *American Ethnologist* **15**(1), 4-27.
- Bourguignon, E., Bellisari, A., & McCabe, S. (1983). Women, Possession Trance Cults, and the Extended Nutrient-Deficiency Hypothesis. *American Anthropologist* **85**(2), 413-416.
- Bubandt, N. (2009). Interview with an Ancestor: Spirits as Informants and the Politics of Possession in North Maluku. *Ethnography* **10**(3), 291-316.
- Budden, A. (2003). Pathologizing Possession: An Essay on Mind, Self and Experience in Dissociation. *Anthropology of Consciousness* **14**(2), 27-59.
- Crabtree, A. (1988). *Multiple Man: Exploration in Possession and Multiple Personality Disorder*. London: Grafton Books.
- Dawson, A. (2010). *Summoning the Spirits: Possession & Invocation in Contemporary Religion*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Di Nucci, C., & Hunter, J. (2009). *Charlie: Trance Communications & Spirit Teachings*. Lulu.com
- Donovan, J. M. (2000). A Brazilian Challenge to Lewis's Explanation of Cult Mediumship. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* **15**(3), 361-377.
- Durkheim, E. (2008/1912). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eliade, M. (1989). *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Emmons, C. F. (2001). On Becoming a Spirit Medium in a 'Rational' Society. *Anthropology of Consciousness* **12**(1), 71-82.
- Firth, R. (1967). Ritual and Drama in Malay Spirit Mediumship. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* **9**(2), 190-207.
- Foley, K. (1985). The Dancer and the Danced: Trance Dance and Theatrical Performance in West Java. *Asian Theatre Journal* **2**(1), 28-49.
- Freed, S. A. & Freed, R. S. (1964). Spirit Possession as Illness in a North Indian Village. *Ethnology* **3**(2), 152-171.
- Giesler, P. (1984). Parapsychological Anthropology: I. Multi-Method Approaches to the Study of Psi in the Field Setting. *The Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research*, **71** (4), 289-330.

- Giles, L. L. (1987). Possession Cults on the Swahili Coast: A Re-Examination of Theories of Marginality. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 57(2), 234-258.
- Gomm, R. (1975). Bargaining from Weakness: Spirit Possession on the South Kenya Coast. *Man* 10(4): 530-543.
- Hunter, J. (2009a). *Talking With the Spirits: An Experiential Exploration of Contemporary Trance & Physical Mediumship*. Unpublished Undergraduate Dissertation, University of Bristol.
- Hunter, J. (2009b). The Issue of Fraud & Performance in Mediumship. *PSI: Journal of Investigative Psychological Research* 5(2), 17-25.
- Hunter, J. (2010). Talking With the Spirits: More Than a Social Reality? *Paranormal Review* 54, 9-13.
- Jokic, Z. (2008). The Wrath of the Forgotten Ongons: Shamanic Sickness, Spirit Embodiment, and Fragmentary Trancescape in Contemporary Buriat Shamanism. *Sibirica* 7(1), 23-50.
- Kehoe, A. B., & Giletti, D. H. (1981). Women's Preponderance in Possession Cults: The Calcium-Deficiency Hypothesis Extended. *American Anthropologist* 83(3), 549-561.
- Kilson, M. (1971). Ambivalence and Power: Mediums in Ga Traditional Religion. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4, 171-177.
- Klass, M. (2003). *Mind Over Mind: The Anthropology and Psychology of Spirit Possession*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Lambek, M. (1998). The Sakalava Poiesis of History: Realizing the Past through Spirit Possession in Madagascar. *American Ethnologist* 25(2), 106-127.
- Leacock, S., & Leacock, R. (1975). *Spirits of the Deep: A Study of an Afro-Brazilian Cult*. New York, NY: Anchor Press.
- Lewis, I. M. (1971). *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- McClennon, J. (1993). The Experiential Foundations of Shamanic Healing. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 18, 107-127.
- Ong, A. (1988). The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia. *American Ethnologist* 15(1), 28-42.
- Otto, R. (1958). *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skultans, V. (1974). *Intimacy and Ritual: A Study of Spiritualism, Mediums and Groups*. London: Routledge & Keagan Paul.
- Stoller, P. (1994). "Embodying Colonial Memories." *American Anthropologist* 96(3), 634-648.
- Turner, E. (1993). "The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?" *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4(1), 9-12.
- Turner, E. (1998). *Experiencing Ritual*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Turner, E. (2006). Advances in the Study of Spirit Experience: Drawing Together Many Threads. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 17(2): 33-61.

- Taylor, E. B. (1930). *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization*. London: C. A. Watts & Co. Ltd.
- Wilson, P. J. (1967). Status Ambiguity and Spirit Possession. *Man* 2(3), 366-378.
- Winkelman, M. (1986). Trance States: A Theoretical Model and Cross-Cultural Analysis." *Ethos* **14**(2), 174-203.
- Winkelman, M. (1990). Shamans and Other "Magico-Religious" Healers: A Cross-Cultural Study of Their Origins, Nature and Social Transformation. *Ethos* **18**(3), 308-352.