

Mediumship as Ordinary Experience: An anthropological discussion of ordinary vs non-ordinary – What is the difference?

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Introduction

In 2004, shortly after I had moved to Oxford, Peggy introduced me to the work of Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Research Centre. At first sight this might seem strange as I had studied religions with non-ordinary experiences for years, and my alma mater was the Philipps-University in Marburg, the home of the Rudolf Otto archive and its unique collection of religious artefacts founded by Otto. Otto is still seen as one of the founding fathers of the study of religious experience and his famous publication *The Idea of the Holy* still sparks controversy. One would assume therefore that I was very familiar with the study of religious experience. However, my research did not focus on experience itself but as part of rituals and performances as is usually the case in anthropology. While trance, shamanism, and mediumship are indeed anthropological topics, the focus is on the activities, their functions for the participants and their place in society. But having moved to Oxford and changed discipline from anthropology to the study of religions, I decided to use the time at the University to start new research on spirit possession and trance which would focus on understanding the *experience*. Therefore I followed Peggy's recommendation and looked into the work of the RERC. Several years later, after having moved to Wales, where the RERC had moved, I even became director of the RERC, a position that Peggy herself had held for many years. I can even say that Peggy, who had guided me during my years at Oxford, put me on the path to stepping into her shoes so many years later.

My connection to the RERC derives from my research into mediumship religions. From an anthropological perspective, spirit possession and trance are the core practices of many, if not all, African derived religions, my main research area. In my PhD I avoided

an engagement with the experience although the thesis focused on two vernacular religions with different forms of mediumship. As I wrote in the introduction to my thesis, any research on mediumship requires that we are willing to step out of our familiar world and into the world of spirits and orishas - like the children in Narnia stepping through a wardrobe, we need to change our perception of reality (Schmidt 1995: 11). Despite my statement of the need for open mindedness, my thesis focused on questions of identity and gave less attention to the experience itself. My later research followed the same pattern. While my fascination grew steadily, I analysed my research data with regard to migration, gender, performance, cultural theory and more – but still stepping away from an engagement with experience. My move to the UK changed my perspective and my many conversations with Peggy over the years helped me to realise that my fascination with experiences such as spirit possession and trance opens a new path of enquiry.

However, Peggy's interest is on ordinary experience while I study what I describe as non-ordinary experience (Schmidt 2016). The term 'ordinary' refers to two different aspects, both of which will be discussed in this contribution to Peggy's Festschrift – firstly, the experience of 'ordinary' people (as distinct from charismatic religious leaders) and, secondly, the categorisation of the experience as ordinary (not 'spiritual' or 'religious' or 'non-ordinary') by those experiencing it. A linked issue is the place of the experience; whether they have to take place in a specific setting. Under Peggy's guidance the Religious Experience Research Centre continued to collect accounts of the experiences of ordinary people with a power beyond themselves, with the transcendent, with God or whatever they call the divine, according to Alister Hardy's original initiative. The archive contains accounts of experiences during a walk outdoors, in nature, while listening to the radio, or while reading a book. While some refer to an experience in a religious setting such as a church, most recall experiences in ordinary, non-religious settings that had an impact and sometimes profoundly changed their lives.

For anthropologists there is no question that the experience of ordinary people is our focus. However, the experiences I encountered during my research took place in rituals. Most communities even argue that one should not allow the manifestation of an *orixá* (i.e., an African spiritual entity worshipped in the Americas) in an ordinary environment as the human medium needs protection that can only be provided within a specific setting and by the community. I once observed such interference myself. It took place in New York City, during a theatre performance of a group of Haitian musicians and dancers. One of the dancers who was also a mambo, a Vodou priestess, suddenly changed her behaviour from dancing gracefully to behaving unexpectedly. I was told later that she experienced the approach of a *lwa* (i.e., a Vodou spirit). Her assistant immediately jumped up from his seat in the front row of the audience, walked onto the

stage and ordered the master drummer to change the rhythm in order to prevent the full manifestation of the spirit. While music, dance movement, costumes and so on seemed as in a ceremony, the setting and the body of the medium were not prepared for the incorporation and it had to be stopped (Schmidt 2008). The medium – as well as the audience – could have come to harm if the manifestation had been allowed to continue.

Nevertheless, despite of the setting during which the experience takes place, my focus, along with that of Peggy, was on the experience of ordinary people. The Caribbean immigrants in New York City I worked with were indeed ordinary people. They struggled with money, children, relationships, health as well as political insecurity. However, I agree with Peggy that in study of religion and in particular in the study of religious experience their experience is often overlooked, or, as Johnson declared, research about their experience is ‘hopelessly inadequate’ (1964: 96). Peggy’s attention towards ordinary people reflects a critique made by Rainer Flasche against early historians of religion such as Rudolf Otto but also Friedrich Heiler and Gerardus van der Leeuws. Flasche argues that these scholars distinguished between two different kinds of religions, “Gelehrten-Religion” and “Religion des Volkes”, which one could translate as ‘elite religions’ and ‘vernacular traditions’ (Flasche 1991: 251). For Flasche the distinction reflects the ethnocentric attitude towards religion in the first decades of the 20th century which impacted on the development of the study of experience. Peggy’s efforts to increase the attention given to the study of the experience of ordinary people can also be seen, therefore, as part of the ongoing de-colonization of our disciplines. However, as I will demonstrate below, there is another genealogy of the study of experience that anchors it in the experience of ordinary people. It derives from early anthropology, an area often overlooked by scholars today. Following Peggy’s interest, in the first section of this article I will look at the contribution of two early scholars in the field. I will start with Robert Ranulf Marett. Marett, an early Oxford anthropologist put the study of experience and emotion of people at the core of early anthropology. Comparing his work with Rudolf Otto’s approach, I show that theologians such as Rudolf Otto attached ‘religious’ to ‘experience’ and made it “special” and as a result distinguished these experiences from ordinary experiences.

The second factor is the categorisation of experience as ordinary (as distinct from religious or non-ordinary). Most of my interview partners in my research area differentiate between ‘religion’ – in most cases Catholicism – and their daily practice of ‘serving the spirits’. While the latter can also be seen as religious or spiritual, some interview partners went further. Some of the Kardecists I spoke with describe themselves as non-religious. For them, their practice of communication with the spirits of the deceased is a ‘technique’ that has nothing to do with ‘belief’ or religion. While the French founder of the movement,

Allan Kardec, described his teaching in line with early Christianity, before the corruption of Jesus' teachings by the Church, many Latin American Kardecists today focus more on the communication or healing, and less on Christian ideals. A common feature of Kardecism and African derived traditions is therefore the reluctance to describe their practices as 'religious', though from an academic perspective they are based on 'belief in the power of the spirits and the deities'.

These problems with academic labelling have preoccupied me for a while. How can I discuss forms of Brazilian mediumship when practitioners themselves do not use the term (see Schmidt 2021)? After struggling with academic concepts for a while, I began describing their experience as 'non-ordinary' in order to avoid the trap of identifying them as 'religious' or 'spiritual'. For me the label 'non-ordinary' serves as an umbrella for all kinds of experiences, whatever the categorization. I also put forward the idea of 'provincialising mediumship' to widen the understanding of what we call mediumship (Schmidt 2016b). However, is this label fair to the experiencer? Or am I still stuck in Western classifications? In the second section of this article I will discuss my research on mediumship within the wider debate of ordinary experience. Following Peggy's approach, I will ask whether a categorization of mediumship as an ordinary experience could increase our understanding of the practitioners' point of view. I will embed the discussion within anthropology, in particular within Hallowell's concept of 'other than human persons' and Ingold's critique of agency. In the conclusion I will come back to the wider discussion of ordinary and reflect on its theoretical and methodological importance.

The Study of the Experience of Ordinary People

The early anthropologist Robert Ranulf Marett (1866-1943) put emotions and experience at the heart of his approach to religion. "I hold that religion is, psychologically regarded a form of experience in which feeling-tone is relatively predominant" (Marett 1906: 267, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 652). Consequently he wrote in a later article that "I have not sought to explain so much as to describe ... how it 'feels' – to live in such a wonder-world" (Marett 1909:xxiii, xxviii, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 650). Despite having succeeded Edward B. Tylor as Reader of Anthropology at Oxford upon his retirement in 1910 and becoming later the first chair of social anthropology at Oxford (in 1934) until Radcliffe-Brown took over the duties, Marett is often overlooked in historical overviews of early anthropology. However, this neglect does injustice to his contribution to the development of the discipline. Even more he is usually overlooked when discussing early contribution to the study of experience, perhaps because he was not interested so much

in religious experience but in ordinary experiences. Even in my own contribution to anthropology of experience (Schmidt 2016) I did not mention him but started with a much later anthropologist, I.O. Lewis. However, in this article I want to correct this oversight and show that Marett's work represents the link between early anthropology and the study of experience.

Different from Tylor who defined religion as belief in spirits, Marett described religion in relation to emotion. He used the term *awe* to express this fundamental feeling within religions that "drives a man ... into personal relations with the supernatural" (Marett 1909: 13, 15, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 652). This feeling motivates people into action and he wrote, in the language of his time, "savage religion is something not so much thought out as danced out" (Marett 1909: xxxi, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 652).

Every scholar of religious experience will immediately see the link between Marett's ideas and the theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) as both based their approach to religion on experience. Otto even referred to Marett explicitly as the one who "more particularly comes within a hair's breadth of what I take to be the truth of the matter" (Otto 1929: 15, n. 1, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 656). However, for Otto religious experience was *sui generis* and the most important form of experience. Marett rejected this notion and suggested, as Bengtson writes, "that 'awe' may be a compound of natural feeling such as fear, love, reverence, etc. (1932, 1933a). The experience is conditioned both by 'antecedent historical conditions' and 'psychological conditions operating here and now' (1920b:127)" (Bengtson 1979: 656). Marett's use of the term experience is therefore much wider than Otto's. Instead of limiting it to religious experience and the experience of religious people, Marett did not distinguish between religion and ordinary experience; and he also did not single out religious people. As an anthropologist he was interested in the experience and emotions of ordinary people.

Otto, on the other hand, while interested in the experiences of ordinary people, categorised them as religious and defined it as the feeling of awe and fear in the presence of God (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). His opus magnum was *Das Heilige: Über das irrational in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917) [published in English under the title *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*] in which he described in detail the uniqueness of religious experience. Referring mainly but not exclusively to Christian and Jewish rituals that inspired the feeling, he argued repeatedly for the need of special tools for the understanding of religious experience. Despite good sales figures, the book received a mixed reception which reflects the scepticism towards the study of religious experience. Otto even became concerned that the offer of a chair in Systematic Theology in 1917 would be withdrawn because of the immanent release of his book. He wrote in a

letter “Ich rechne, daß, da ich durch mein Heiliges in Marburg wohl einigermaßen unmöglich geworden bin, Wobbermin, der so wie sie der Nächste sein würde, hinkommen würde“ (letter to Hermann Multert, quoted in Kraatz 2014: 3, translated as “I believe that I am probably unacceptable in Marburg due to my The Holy and that Wobbermin who is probably the next on the list will come to Marburg”). But his concern was wrong, and Otto was appointed to the chair at the University of Marburg. Despite a difficult relationship with his fellow theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth, Otto managed to make his mark at the university. When the University of Marburg celebrated its 400th anniversary in 1927, Otto succeeded in his effort in establishing the Religionskundliche Sammlung as a university institution outside any faculty constraints. His passion for non-European religions and their material objects led to the inflammatory description of the collection as Otto’s *Götzentempel* made frequently by students of Bultmann and Barth who dominated theology. Steven Ballard argues that “one of the most fundamental grounds of disagreement between the theological position of Otto and that of Bultmann and Barth (a controversy which still divides Christians in these early years of the twenty-first century), lay in the very different estimations which were made of the status of the other great world religions in relation to Christianity” (2000: 5). Despite being a Lutheran theologian Otto did not see the Christian revelation as qualitatively unique, which was the common position in theology at his time. Instead he followed Friedrich Schleiermacher’s position who had argued that the “feeling of the infinite” was present in all religions. Ballard even argues that Otto’s principal aim in the book was “the desire to demonstrate the autonomous nature of religion, and to ground this in an empirical study of religious experience” (2000: 43).

However, Otto’s understanding of the empirical was rather limited. For Otto “the *sensus numinis* has an objective epistemological function ... and the subjective and the objective aspects of religious experience can be distinguished” (Ballard 2000: 43). But Otto did not ground his ideas on evidence, as pointed out by J.M. Moore in his critique of the book: “Otto writes as if a feeling of immediate presence were sufficient evidence of true presence, but this is by no means the case. ... a feeling, however vivid, cannot guarantee the validity of an inference” (Moore 1938: 92-93, quoted by Ballard 2000: 43). Instead Otto grounded his argument on a form of “independent religious value-judgment” (Davidson 1947: 42, quoted by Ballard 2000: 44-45). In Otto’s words: “There will, then, in fact be two values to distinguish in the numen; its ‘fascination’ (*fascinans*) will be that element in it whereby it is the *subjective* value (=beatitude) to man; but it is ‘august’ (*augustum*) in so far as it is recognized as possessing in itself *objective* value that claims our homage” (Otto 1932: 52, quoted in Ballard 2000: 45). The problem is that for Otto, “the experience of the numinous carries with it its own ‘Wahrheitsgefühl’” (Ballard

2000: 48, the term could be translated as 'feeling of truth'). His passion to establish religion on unique, autonomous grounds puts him at odds with academia. While his attack on the reductionist approach to religion makes him so popular among some, it also influences any Otto reception. "As a phenomenologist of religion, he cannot do other than interpret the signs of the Holy without noticing the similarities that present themselves. As a Christian theologian, however, a major item on his agenda is to demonstrate, through a process of comparison and contrast, where certain religions (and here we cannot help but think he has Christianity principally in mind) are superior to others" (Ballard 2000: 137).

Marett on the other hand was an empiricist in an anthropological manner. He taught his students the value of fieldwork, the encounter with people, and the importance of academic rigour. He even saw anthropology as biological science and presented himself often as a "child of Darwin" like his predecessor Tylor and other contemporaries. However, different from Tylor, Marett divorced evolution from the idea of progress (Bengtson 1979: 647). "It is the mark of a crude evolutionism to assume that more complex stands for better all around. So let us as far as we can be content to note that the mental life of the simple society is different from that of the complex society, without being necessarily better or worse on that account. Everyone of us is after all a potentiality of opposites" (Marett 1924: 38, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 648). Throughout his work Marett insisted repeatedly that while evolution implies the process of becoming more complex, we do not know whether "man has done well to abandon the simple life", and he continued that "this is a question of life, not of fact" (Bengtson 1979: 648 with a quotation from Marett 1934:36). Hence, for Marett progress is not necessarily universally unilinear, and he insisted we should disdain from making value judgements but focus on ethnographic facts.

And here lies Marett's importance. I put Marett even on a par with Edith Turner whom Fiona Bowie describes as the key figure in the (alternative) experiential lineage of anthropology (2016: 26). While Bowie highlights the similarity between Andrew Lang, a contemporary of Marett, and Turner due to their position towards the ontological question whether the spirits are real, I see a stronger trajectory between Marett and Turner as both place the study of experience within the academic world on empirical grounds. Marett's effort also led him to the understanding that cultures are equally valid. As Bengtson writes, Marett insisted that "the 'savage' is neither more nor less religious than the 'civilized'" (Bengtson 1979: 653, referring to Marett 1936: 166).

To some degree, Otto also expressed an openness towards other forms of experience, which put him at odds with fellow theologians. The encounters with other religions and experiences influenced him throughout his life. Already as a student, he studied, while visiting England in 1889, the Anglican High Church and later the Greek

Orthodox Church while visiting Greece in 1891 and 1895. In 1895, he travelled to Egypt where he studied the Coptic Church as well as had his first encounter with lived Islam which he continued to study in 1911 while travelling in Northern Africa. Even more influential was his first Asian journey in 1911/12 that took him to India, Myanmar, Japan, China and Russia. These journeys, which he continued after his move to Marburg, influenced his understanding of religion. Otto also studied Sanskrit though, according to a comment made by Kraatz, not very well (2014: 8). Nevertheless, the fact that he made the effort to study Sanskrit while most of his fellow theology students in Göttingen focused only on languages useful for the study of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and also that he travelled the world in order to encounter other religious traditions made him an exception at his time.

However, in his publications Otto referred mainly to religious personalities and the accounts of their experience instead of the experiences of ordinary people. For Flasche (1991) this distinction reflects the ethnocentric attitude towards religion in the first decades of the 20th century. When Otto argues for a universality of religious experience, he had in mind a Western concept of religion. Nevertheless, by putting awe at the centre of his ideas Otto presents an avenue out of the ethnocentric focus on belief in God as the fundamental concept of religion. Despite his own struggle with his theological understanding of Christianity as superior, Otto was in awe of other religious practices and showed us the importance of non-rational and personal experience. Marett, on the other hand, taught us that the study of experience and emotion can be empirically grounded. Instead of shying away to study something we cannot see, we need to overcome cultural bias by turning our attention towards the lived experience of people and see it as grounded in empirical verification. By emphasising the need of empirical encounters with people he put the study of ordinary people and their experience and emotions at the core of the anthropological field of religious experience.

Mediumship as Ordinary Experience

The term 'mediumship' embraces a range of practices commonly labelled as 'spirit possession' or 'trance'. The body of the human medium becomes the vehicle for the communication between different realms, whether it is by incorporation or other techniques such as automatic writing or receiving messages from the deceased through hearing or seeing something non-ordinary. The incorporation of a spiritual or divine entity – usually labelled spirit possession – was often described in studies about African derived traditions such as Vodou in Haiti or Candomblé in Brazil with the metaphor of 'riding a horse' (e.g., Deren 1953). The *Iwa* or *orixá* (also spelled *orisha* in English language

publications) is the 'rider' that takes over control of the horse, the human medium. Agency is given in this case to the deity that is in control while the human horse is the instrument. Following this argumentation, Mary Keller (2002) argues that we need to take the agency of the deities into consideration when studying spirit possession. Criticizing the functionalistic approach that focuses on the functions of the practice for the medium or the society, she pushes for an understanding of spirit possession as a collaboration of the possessing agents and the possessed. Other scholars argue that the metaphor of 'being ridden as a horse' does not acknowledge sufficiently the agency of the medium by putting too much emphasis on the possessing entity. Roberto Motta, for instance, argues that mediums are not transformed to helpless victims but remain vital for the body trance, as he describes mediumship (Motta 2005). Supporting Motta's argument Mark Münzel compares mediumship with the performance of a dressage horse which the rider guides through the elegant and difficult routine: without the rider the horse would not accomplish its complex task as well as vice versa, without the horse the rider could not carry on (1997: 153).

Münzel's example of a dressage is similar to Tim Ingold's example of a kite with which he challenges the debate on agency. Ingold criticises the division between material and immaterial as a legacy of anti-idolatrous iconoclasm of the early Protestants. He argues that it is wrong to define animism "as a system of belief that attributes life and even spirit to objects that are ostensibly inert, [instead] animism is ... a way not to thinking *about* the world but of being alive to it, characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is in perpetual flux, never the same from one moment to the next" (2013: 214). He explains what he means by using the example of a kite. A kite is an inanimate object when being built indoors but becomes alive when taken out to fly. However, it would be too simplistic, according to Ingold, just to give agency to a kite because that would omit the wind and forget that it is "a kite-in-the-air". Ingold argues instead that "things move and grow because they are alive, not because they have agency" (2013: 219). For Ingold, "animism is about what it means to be alive to it [the world]. To be alive to the world is, in a word, to be *sentient*." (2013: 224).

And it is this understanding of being *sentient* that can widen our perception of mediumship. Mediumship involves encounters of human mediums with possessing entities such as spirits of deceased ancestors or divine entities that are also sentient, alive to the world though not in the sense that a human being is alive. The emic perception whether the experience can be seen as non-ordinary or as ordinary depends on the specific context. Practitioners of African derived religions such as Candomblé perceive the *orixás* as forces of nature. They reject notions that perceive possessing agents as

singular entities as the *orixás* would have the power to destroy a human body if it acted singularly. Consequently, they oppose the description of their experience as 'incorporation' or 'spirit possession' as these terms diminish the quality of the *orixás* (see Schmidt 2016: 108-118 for further information). Even the term mediumship is not widely accepted due to similar arguments. The perception of the entities as forces of nature, to highlight the quality of multitude instead of singular, is also important as it explains why one *orixá* can manifest in different human bodies and different ceremonies at the same time and can even feature different characteristics.

So far, I have approached mediumship as a non-ordinary experience and the possessing agents as 'divine' or otherwise 'special'. It reflects the position of practitioners of most African derived religions in Brazil who campaign for the recognition of their communities as religions. Although they have not yet been very successful with regard to the national census, their effort resonates with my treatment of mediumship as non-ordinary experience. However, the position of spiritist mediums is very different. Mediumship within spiritism includes a range of practices including automatic writing, seeing, hearing or sensing the present of spirits and other forms of communication. And this is the clue - spiritist mediums see their practice as forms of communication techniques, nothing more and nothing less. They reject the definition of their experience as non-ordinary, most even decline to link it to any religious or spiritual realm as for them the spirits exist, or, to use Ingold's term, are alive, just without a physical body (for now). A founder of a spiritist hospital in Brazil, where healers channel spirits of deceased medical doctors, challenged me various times in an interview and insisted that 'incorporation does not exist'. While he later acknowledged that he received instruction from his guardian angel via automatic writing, I struggled to understand his reluctance to use certain terms. Initially, I thought that the root of the problem was my language skills (i.e., my lack of sophisticated Portuguese). However, I realise now that the problem was my insistence on seeing the communication with the spirit realm as non-ordinary. Instead spiritists describe mediumship as a means of communication, a technique, which is perceived as ordinary, as normal. A medium becomes a vessel - like a telephone. Why was it so difficult for me to accept their definition?

When speaking to a non-academic audience, I am often asked whether spirits, *orixás* and *Iwa* exist and whether it is really possible to communicate with them. I reply usually that as anthropologist I am not interested in these questions as they refer to the wider questions of what reality is and what truth is. But recent conversations have shown me that I am still avoiding the ontology of spiritual entities. As Bonnie Glass-Coffin points out, anthropologists are using cultural relativism to step aside from these core questions. By always contextualising experiences with non-ordinary reality anthropologists are still

“domesticating and dismissing them, colonializing knowledge even as they claim to honour the truth of the Other” (2013: 117). My categorization of the mediumship experiences as non-ordinary is a reflection of my perception of the world and not that of the mediums. While some anthropologists such as Fiona Bowie and Charles Emmons (2014) go a step further and argue that spirits are also ontologically ‘real’ and the experience with them consequently empirically verifiable (Bowie 2016: 28-29), I seem to be unable to follow their lead. But I do not want to superimpose my perspective onto the practitioners. While I am unable to embrace the experience myself – perhaps incapable of doing so, I need to find a way to deal with this problem and take hold of a form of understanding by maintaining an academic stance that is based on empirical grounds, like Marett taught us so long ago.

Perhaps a way forward is for me the debate on personhood and agency within anthropology. I find in particular Irving Hallowell’s insight into the Ojibwa worldview useful, in particular his phrase ‘other than human beings’. Hallowell discovered that Ojibwa language makes a fundamental distinction between ‘animate persons’ and ‘inanimate objects’ however in a different way from that understood in Western societies. As Hallowell points out, not all persons are humans - since some persons are ‘other than human beings’:

But if, in the world of a people, ‘persons’ as a class include entities other than human beings, then our objective approach is not adequate for presenting an accurate description of ‘the way a man, in a particular society, see himself in relation to all else’. ... It may be argued, in fact, that a thoroughgoing ‘objective’ approach to the study of cultures cannot be achieved solely by projecting upon those cultures categorical abstractions derived from Western thought (Hallowell 2002: 21).

Hallowell defines a person therefore as a larger category that includes all “creatures that communicate intentionally and behave relationally to others” (Graf 2017: 28). Hallowell’s key point is ‘social relations’ between persons, human and other than human which highlights, as Graf summarises, an inclusive worldview in which humans share the world with other ‘relational persons’ such as “tree people, fish people, bird people, stone people” (2017: 28). Hallowell illustrates it with a story in which he asked an elder of the Ojibwa whether all rocks are alive to which the elder replied ‘no, but some are’ (Hallowell 2002 [1960]). The crucial aspect is the relationship between us and them. As Harvey writes, it ‘is not “how do we know stones are alive?” but “what is the appropriate way for people, of any kind, to relate?”’ (Harvey 2010: 20). And Hallowell goes even further

because he relocates, as Morrison writes, “the religious in the actual relationships which constitute the everyday world” (Morrison 2000: 35). Hence, while for Hallowell the relations between persons (human and non-human) are core to the understanding, he takes them out of the religious realm and places them in the ordinary world.

I am coming back here to my initial critique of the early scholars in the field of religious experience. As I explained in the first section, my main critique against Otto and others is the classification of experience as religious – in the Western understanding of what religions are (or should be). This bias in favour of a Protestant form of religion led Otto to putting *numinous* on a pedestal, despite his fascination with other religions. It is also visible in William James’ description of his own experience while walking in the Adirondack Mountains: “The streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the God of all the nature mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life” (James and James 2008: 76). While my own argument was to widen the understanding of religious experience so open that it includes all different types of non-ordinary experiences, Hallowell’s position of taking it out of the religious realm presents a cleaner solution.

To clarify – Hallowell does not write about belief system or religion. Instead he uses the term worldview and defines it as ‘a relational way of being in the world’, and, as Graf writes further, “relationships are seen as a matter of responsibility between humans and other animals, plants, and even cosmic beings who share the same world and have socio-religious motives towards each other (Morrison, 2000, p. 23ff.; see also Viveiros de Castro, 1998)” (Graf 1995: 96). In this sense spirits are sentient elements of the world, and, in the end, part of an ordinary experience. It does not matter that they lack materiality and cannot be seen in the same way as the rocks in Hallowell’s example or the kite in Ingold’s. As Hallowell explains so eloquently, it is not the rock itself, hence not the material aspect that has agency (... not every rock is alive, only the ones that talk back...). Ingold also challenges the assumption that all material objects have agency and insists that agency is linked to being alive to the world, being sentient. He argues that “the problem of agency is born of the attempt to reanimate a world of things already deadened or rendered inert by arresting the flows of substance that bring them to life” (2013: 219). Instead he focuses on the process of creating to the movement of building, to “flows and transformations of materials” (2013: 214). In this sense it is neither the human medium nor the spirit of a deceased medical doctor who treats the patients. Instead by working together they establish a relationship to the environment (e.g., of other humans) which puts in motion the healing. In this sense the mediums are similar to shamans who have to develop relations with animals in order to secure “the best possible benefits from this connection with the environment” (Hamayon 2013: 285). Of interest for

my discussion of mediumship and the ontology of spirits is Hamayon's distinction between soul and life force which leads to her definition of spirits. The soul of any living being is located in the bones and nourished by the life force which is located in the meat (flesh) of the body. Life force is a substance that may vary in quantity and quality during lifetime and circulates between species to keep them living and animated. The soul, however, is according to Hamayon an individual entity that survives after death and can be reborn for a new life but strictly within the same human line or animal species. In order now "to enter into a relationship with a species it is necessary to address its 'spirit', a kind of generic soul not linked to any particular animal and therefore not concerned by the cycle of life and death" (p. 286-287).

Hamayon's description of life force echoes to some degree the concept of *axe* (or *ashe*) within African derived religions (Schmidt 2012). *Axe* within Candomble is the substance that varies in quantity throughout life and circulates not only between species but also between the realms. It is given by the divine while humans repay with sacrifices (Schmidt 2013). *Axe* gives and maintains life though it originates from the divine creator. Hamayon's distinction between a generic soul and the soul as individual entity is, however, different from the perception of spirits among Brazilian mediums. They argue it is possible to communicate with specific, individual spirits that can pass on their knowledge to the human world via various communication techniques such as automatic writing.

Where does this discussion lead me on my journey into a better understanding of mediumship? The relationship to the entities, whether they are African deities, spirits of deceased medical doctors, or guardian angels are crucial for all aspects of mediumship. The interchange of *axe* is at the core of African derived religions. Without it, life does not exist. But one needs to be grateful for it or fear the consequences. In this sense, following Hallowell's arguments, the spirits and *orixas* are alive, part of our shared environment. It does not matter that we cannot see them; they are persons (i.e., have agency) just like humans. However, they are not part of my world. Despite attending numerous rituals and appreciating the performance, I have not encountered them, I have not felt them. McClenon argues that "modern scientists tend to ignore the social reality of supernatural accounts" because our understanding of the supernatural is "shaped by the Western notion of nature and causality" (1995: 107-108). In this way, my understanding of reality is still based on the Western concept of seeing the world. However, is it really important to understand the experience of others or is it not more important to accept them? Josephson argues that "the religious studies is still haunted by the legacy of the Enlightenment in its rejection of 'superstition'. ... In defining religion in terms of monolithic essences (transcendent, sacred etc.), the discipline has historically produced a

'remainder' of things that do not count as religion and are therefore outside our realms of inquiry." (2013: 339). I agree with his critique. I see the rejection of some beliefs and practices or the labelling of them as superstition or magic as relics of the ethnocentricity of our colonial past. As Marret had previously argued, we need to be open to study all experiences and all practices. There is no difference in value. The recent shift to lived experience (McGuire 2008) and the practices of ordinary people (Vásquez 2011) changes the way we study and teach religions. We stopped excluding experiences and teach students to apply their understanding of beliefs and practices to whatever community they want, including non-religious people. In this way, yes, mediumship is an ordinary experience for the people experiencing it. It is part of their daily practice like the spirits, deities and other "other than human beings" are part of their ordinary environment.

Conclusion: The Importance of Ordinary Experiences

I will end this journey with some last comments about the significance of studying ordinary experiences. When the topic of ordinary experience as the theme for the Festschrift was suggested I thought, well, I could write about non-ordinary experience in distinction to ordinary. However, the journey took me in a different direction. I realise now that my internal discussions with Peggy's ideas while working on this chapter directed me to a wider acceptance of mediumship as never before. On the one hand it is about the importance of studying the experience of ordinary people. Johnson had already argued in 1964 that "the experience of ordinary people (those who do not employ technical philosophers' theories and techniques) has been incorrectly observed and evaluated" (1964: 96) and Alister Hardy's focus was explicitly on ordinary people whose experience he collected, studied and presented in various publications (Hardy 1966, 1979). However, the classification of their experience remains a point of contention. How shall we identify the inexplicable, i.e. supernatural? Barbara Walker writes, that "Referring to something as "supernatural" is not to call it unreal or untrue" (1995: 2). She elaborates that the term 'supernatural' is: "a linguistic and cultural acknowledgment that inexplicable things happen which we identify as being somehow beyond the natural or the ordinary, and that many of us hold beliefs which connect us to spheres that exist beyond what we might typically see, hear, taste, touch, or smell. For some the supernatural is a natural part of life, and supernatural experiences not only are considered "normal" but, in some instances, are expected to occur, with personal attitudes and behaviors shaped and acted out on the basis of those expectations." (Walker 1995:2)

In this sense, mediumship, i.e. the communication across different realms, can be ordinary, part of the natural life. What becomes defined as ordinary or non-ordinary

depends on the individual and the society as it is culturally specific (see also McClenon 1995:107). Walker also argues that these events might have an "other-worldly" quality but not necessarily an extraordinary quality for people (Walker 1995: 4). Following her argument David Hufford puts forward an "experience-centered theory of the belief in spirits" (1995:11). I am closing the circle here by putting forward the importance of anthropology of experience which is not impacted by questions whether spirits exist, mediumship is real and so on. While I still argue that the study of experience has to be grounded on empirical evidence, 'rational and empirical grounding do not prove a belief to be true' as Hufford writes; and he continues that "many false beliefs are rationally held on empirical grounds (e.g., the belief that the sun went around the earth, as held in antiquity), and many true beliefs are held without rational or empirical grounds" (1995: 18). I conclude with a final thank you to Peggy. She invited me to her home, she made me feel welcome, and she taught me the importance of ordinary experience.

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