On Belief and Parapsychism: Individual Experiences and Collective Discourse[1]

Manuela Palmeirim

Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

Email: mpalmeirim@hotmail.com

Abstract

In line with the Durkheimian tradition, anthropology has played down the role of (individual) 'experience' in favour of (collective) 'belief' in understanding ritual and religious phenomena. As a result of this focus on collective constructions and representations, individual narratives of psychic experiences did not seem to fit within its scope, being at their best catalogued as various kinds of dreams. This article examines the striking similarities between written descriptions of psychic experiences in the Western world and collective discourses on spirits, ghosts, zombies, doubles, sorcery and the invisible, with which the anthropologist is only too familiar. Ultimately, it calls for the imperative need to acknowledge the intimate connection and ongoing communication between individual experience and collective belief, between psychic and religious territories. Ethnographic data from my research in Zanzibar, as well as from other contexts in diverse geographies, will be used for the purpose of the argument.

Keywords: Anthropology of religion; belief; parapsychism; religious experience; ritual healing

Is *all* that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

(Edgar Allan Poe, 'A Dream within a Dream', 1849)

The reading of Robert Monroe's now-classic *Journeys Out of the Body*, the first of a series of three books,[2] is at the very least a disturbing journey. His vivid, detailed, and

[1] I dedicate this text to Henrique Lázaro. I also thank Pat Caplan for her reading and relevant suggestions.

[2] *Journeys Out of the Body* (1971), *Far Journeys* (1985) *and Ultimate Journey* (1994), Garden City, New York: Doubleday.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

undoubtedly genuine descriptions of his psychic experiences cannot leave one unmoved and indeed challenge the core of one's scientific mind.

Robert Monroe, a successful radio broadcasting executive from an academic family who died in 1995 at seventy-nine, was once stunned by an event occurring during a period of relaxation before sleep. As he lay on the couch to rest one afternoon, he felt struck by a warm beam of light, apparently coming from the sky, which left his entire body shaking violently and unable to move for a few seconds. This vibration repeated itself many times in the next few weeks, always when he lay down to rest or sleep. Although he could feel the vibration, he could not see any visible signs of his body shaking. Eventually, he saw himself dissociated from his body and was led on journeys out of his physical being, the so-called OBEs (Out-of-the-Body Experiences) or, in paranormal language, astral projections. Thinking that he was showing signs of some mental disorder, Monroe sought medical assistance only to conclude that there was nothing wrong with his health as far as could be detected. Could these be hallucinations? Some sort of dreaming? Finally, he decided not to fight these occurrences. In a progressive and systematic attempt to comprehend such bizarre and inexplicable events, he ended up developing a technique to bring about this kind of experience at will.

As the owner of one of the largest mass-production radio program companies of his time, Monroe risked his reputation by publishing his notes on his experiences. Later, he founded the Monroe Institute in Virginia, a research institute studying the mind where a group of researchers explored the possibilities of human consciousness by observing the experiences of several trainees initiated in the techniques of mind dissociation.

Like Monroe's account, many are written descriptions of similar experiences. Still, the unique aspects of his book – and the reason it stands as a breakthrough – is that he was a very down-to-earth man with a practical approach and a scientific mind who veered away from mystical language, clouded by or imbued with religious interpretations. Furthermore, while other people experiencing similar phenomena could undergo one or a few spontaneous episodes over a lifetime, Monroe managed to control these events at will to some extent. Hence, he experienced them with some periodicity during quite a lengthy period of his life.[3] In his book, one can follow a slow and progressive discovery

[3] There are reports of other individuals who could deliberately induce these OBEs, such as Oliver Fox, who published detailed accounts of his experiences in the 1920s, and Sylvan Muldoon, who published works between 1938 and 1951. However, none of them engaged, as Monroe did, in experimental tests hoping to provide objective data.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

process achieved by using empirical data from an extensive and consistent career of individual experiences.

Scientific writing has long discarded narratives of individuals who have experienced, or claim to have experienced, psychic phenomena during sleeping or waking states (such as premonitions, feelings of déjà-vu, visions, revelations, telepathy, extrasensory perception and precognitive experiences, synchronicity, out-of-the-body journeys, and near-death experiences, among others), relegating these accounts to the unreliable and untrustworthy realm of the paranormal or giving them the status of imaginary and mystical constructions. The fact that the terms 'paranormal' and 'parapsychic' carry such negative connotations led me to use the word 'psychic' instead, a direct derivative of 'psyche'. It should be remembered that, though extraordinary, these phenomena can be experienced by ordinary and healthy people and occur worldwide (on this issue, see, among others, Servadio, 1966, pp. 109–110; Tedlock, 1992). As Stanislav Grof wisely puts it: 'Once the ability of the human psyche to access new information without the mediation of the senses is generally accepted, there will be no need for a discipline specialising in the study of a relatively narrow selection of specific psychic phenomena. What in the past was considered "paranormal" will be seen as a normal capacity of the human psyche' (Grof, 2006, p. 173).

Nonetheless, these phenomena have attracted the attention of some small groups within the scientific community. After the downfall, in the first decades of the twentieth century, of the academic studies in this field undertaken in the United States by Stanford and Duke universities (studies led by John Coover at Stanford and by William McDougall, Joseph Rhine, and Karl Zener at Duke),[4] the scientific interest in these occurrences grew in the 1980s and '90s. Psychologists have since continued laboratory research on all types of dissociative states and psychic phenomena (A. Berger and J. Berger, 1991). Since then, the centre of academic research in this field has shifted from the United States to Europe (mainly to the United Kingdom) over the last decades (Irwin and Watt, 2007, pp. 248–249).

The fact that most people cannot produce these experiences at will has been a severe disadvantage for psychologists wanting to study these events in the laboratory. Also, the

[4] J. B. Rhine's book *New Frontiers of the Mind* (1937) divulged Duke's laboratory research results to the general public.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

accounts narrated are often encased in personal interpretation and religious beliefs, leaving researchers unable to separate data from their mystical garb (on the difficulties that psychic research faces, see Ebon, 1966). Overall, the scientific consensus is that there is insufficient evidence to support the existence of such phenomena, the general conclusion being that these experiences, when not fraudulent, are 'all in the mind', that is, illusions concocted by the mind. Nevertheless, the conviction of thousands of narrators of these episodes and the remarkable similarities worldwide exposes that science can no longer ignore the pressing need to look seriously at this phenomenon.

Critical scientific data have come to light since the studies on brain waves led to the discovery, in the 1950s, of the correlation between periods of rapid eye movement (REM) during sleep and dreaming of a hallucinatory type. Furthermore, neurophysiologists discovered that the pontine brainstem cells are activated during sleep, giving the dreamer a kinesthetic effect as if the balance organ was stimulated, which results in dreamers perceiving themselves as moving in space. This finding suggests a significant step in understanding dreaming reports of travelling in space (Tedlock, 1992, p. 14). It can, eventually, be an essential path towards unveiling the phenomenon of OBEs in the waking state.

As with most scientific writing, anthropology has yet to pay due attention to the richness of the accounts of individual dissociative experiences. Focusing on *collective* constructions and representations, individual narratives attributed to personal psychic experiences do not fit its concerns. Likewise, the study of dreaming, seen as a topic that relates mainly to individuals, has long been marginalised by anthropologists concerned with 'social facts' (Bock, 1980, pp. 131–138). Moreover, anthropology has played down the role of 'experience' in favour of 'belief' in understanding ritual and religious phenomena (see E. Turner, 1992, for instance).

In this article, I suggest that it is helpful to make the connection between these individual narratives and collective beliefs by looking at the striking congruences between written descriptions of psychic experiences in the Western world and collective discourses on spirits, ghosts, zombies, doubles, sorcery and the invisible, with which the anthropologist is only too familiar. In so doing, I argue for the heuristic value of 'experience' in understanding magic and religion, particularly in its ability to generate collective belief. Bringing together belief and experience *as inner states*, this proposal can also reconcile anthropology and psychology, the collective with the individual.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

OBEs and Monroe

Psychologists define an out-of-the-body experience (OBE) as an event in which the experiencer appears to perceive some part of the environment from a location other than that of their physical body at the time. A 'second body' (the expression adopted by Monroe) seems to detach itself from the physical body, which lies in relaxation, unaware of it all, and undertakes journeys, sees distant places, and goes through obstacles and walls. Another feature of such astounding experiences is that the experiencer *knows* at the time of the occurrence that they are not dreaming, and even afterwards will maintain that what was seen or experienced was real or felt real. Charles Tart, a renowned psychologist, has researched such phenomena and explains: 'The experiencer seems to possess his normal consciousness at the time, and even though he may reason that this cannot be happening, he will feel all his normal critical faculties to be present, and so knows he is not dreaming. Further, he will not decide after awakening that this was a dream' (2017 [1972], p. 3). These experiences can be brought about by great emotional stress, brain trauma, sensory deprivation, dehydration, extreme physical effort, mental induction (falling asleep without losing mental awareness), deep trance, meditation, near-death experiences, brainwave synchronisation via audio or visual stimulation and psychedelic drugs, among others. Some people can deliberately induce these episodes (Tyrrell, 1943, p. 149; Aspell and Blanke, 2009).

Although many narratives are available on such experiences, I chose Monroe's for its clarity, analytical and systematic approach to the phenomena, and his rare ability to control such journeys at will. He took careful notes of the hundreds of OBEs he underwent over twelve years. Although he recognised that his mind constantly influenced him to fit what he saw or experienced into a familiar framework of thought, he tried to resist this impulse as much as he could. He also attempted to direct journeys of his second body to places where there were people with whom he could check the veracity of the incident afterwards. His willingness to submit to laboratory studies on his abilities was ignored (Tart, 2017, p. 7). Charles Tart – who wrote the introduction to Monroe's first book – was the only scientist who undertook laboratory work with him as a subject. Although the observations brought out some intriguing data, they were insufficient to prove the existence of such journeys outside one's mind (Tart, 1967, 2017).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

A few passages of Monroe's experiences will help draw a picture of the intensity of such events and allow future comparisons with narratives by shamans, healers, and religious figures reported in the anthropological literature.

In Monroe's case, the OBEs were usually announced by a strong feeling of vibration in the entire body. Let us read the narrative of his first travelling experience, which was preceded by a few odd (but less remarkable) incidents:

> It was late at night, and I was lying in bed before sleep. My wife had fallen asleep beside me. There was a surge that seemed to be in my head, and quickly the condition spread through my body. It all seemed the same. As I lay there trying to decide how to analyze the thing in another way, I just happened to think how nice it would be to take a glider up and fly the next afternoon (my hobby at the time). Without considering any consequences – not knowing there would be any – I thought of the pleasure it would bring.
>
> After a moment, I became aware of something pressing against my shoulder. Half-curious, I reached back and up to feel what it was. My hand encountered a smooth wall. I moved my hand along the wall the length of my arm and it continued smooth and unbroken.
>
> My senses fully alert, I tried to see in the dim light. It *was* a wall, and I was lying against it with my shoulder. I immediately reasoned that I had gone to sleep and fallen out of bed. (I had never done so before, but all sorts of strange things were happening, and falling out of bed was quite possible.)
>
> Then I looked again. Something was wrong. This wall had no windows, no furniture against it, no doors. It was not a wall in my bedroom. Yet somehow it was familiar. Identification came instantly. It wasn't a wall, it was the ceiling. I was floating against the ceiling, bouncing gently with any movement I made. I rolled in the air, startled, and looked down. There, in the dim light below me, was the bed. There were two figures lying in the bed. To the right was my wife. Beside her was someone else. Both seemed asleep.
>
> This was a strange dream, I thought. I was curious. Whom would I dream to be in bed with my wife? I looked more closely and the shock was intense. *I* was the someone on the bed!
>
> My reaction was almost instantaneous. Here I was, there was my body. I was dying, this was death, and I wasn't ready to die. Somehow, the vibrations were killing me.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

> Desperately, like a diver, I swooped down to my body and dove in. I then felt the bed and the covers, and when I opened my eyes, I was looking at the room from the perspective of my bed.
> What had happened? Had I truly almost died? My heart was beating rapidly, but not unusually so. I moved my arms and legs. Everything seemed normal. The vibrations had faded away. I got up and walked around the room, looked out of the window, smoked a cigarette (2017, pp. 27–28).

After having experienced the 'vibrations' six more times without the courage to pursue the lead any further, he finally decided to try the floating experience again:

> With the vibrations in full force, I thought of floating upward – and I did.
> I smoothly floated up over the bed, and when I willed myself to stop, I did, floating in mid-air. It was not a bad feeling at all, but I was nervous about falling suddenly. After a few seconds I thought myself downward, and a moment later I felt myself in bed with all normal physical senses fully operating. There had been no discontinuity in consciousness from the moment I lay down in bed until I got up after the vibrations faded. If it wasn't real – just a hallucination or dream – I was in trouble. I couldn't tell where wakefulness stopped and dreaming began.
> There are thousands of people in mental institutions who have just that problem (2017, p. 30).

At this time, he still considered himself the victim of hallucinatory episodes or some sort of neurotic aberration. As he overcame some of his excitement and fear at such happenings, he developed a technique of 'rolling' out of the physical body at will. He then underwent more daring and impressive journeys in his non-physical body. He started trying to direct his flights to the houses of friends or people of his acquaintance in the hope of being able to cross-check data with them. On one occasion he travelled to visit a friend, the well-known psychologist Dr Foster Bradshaw, who was supposedly in bed with a cold (2017, pp. 46-47). As he approached the doctor's house, flying 'over trees' and with 'a light sky above', he saw the psychologist and his wife outside the home, much to his surprise, as Dr Bradshaw was reportedly sick. After returning from the OBE, and already in the evening, he phoned the couple and asked them where they had been between 4 and 5 o'clock that afternoon: 'She [Mrs. Bradshaw] stated that roughly at four

  ISSN: 2057-2301

twenty-five, they walked out of the house toward the garage. She was going to the post office, and Dr Bradshaw had decided that perhaps some fresh air might help him, and had dressed and gone along' (2017, p. 47). The time checked, and so did the overall look of their clothes.

This and other matching data throughout his experiences won over the sceptic in Monroe. No longer able to ignore 'the elephant in the room', he is left in an abysmal dilemma:

> That first evidential experience [referring to the episode above] was indeed a sledge/hammer blow. If I accepted the data as fact, it struck hard at nearly all my life experience to that date, my training, my concepts, and my sense of values. Most of all it shattered my faith in the totality and certainty of our culture's scientific knowledge. I was sure our scientists had all the answers. Or most of them.
>
> Conversely, if I rejected what was evident to me, if to no one else, then I would also be rejecting what I respected so greatly: that mankind's emancipation and upwards struggle depends chiefly upon his translation of the unknown into the known, through the use of his intellect and the scientific principle (2017, p. 31).

He comes to accept the second self as a reality, no longer a mere figment of the mind, subsequently making all kinds of experiments during his OBEs to figure out the features of this non-physical body. He recounts:

> I was again on the couch, feeling very smooth vibrations. I opened my eyes and looked around, and everything looked normal and the vibrations were still there. I then moved my arms, which were folded, and stretched them upward as I lay on my back. They felt outstretched and I was surprised (I am past proper use of the word astounded) when I looked, for there were my arms still folded over my chest.
>
> I looked upward to where I felt them, and I saw the shimmering outlines of my arms and hands in exactly the place they felt they were! I looked back at the folded arms, then at the bright shadow of them outstretched. I could see through them to the bookshelves beyond. It was like a bright, glowing outline which moved when I felt them move or made them move willfully. I wiggled my fingers, and the glowing fingers wiggled. And I felt them wiggle. I put my hands together, and the glowing

  ISSN: 2057-2301

> hands came together, and I felt my hands clasp each other. They felt just like ordinary hands, no different. (…) I rubbed the outline hands over each outline forearm, and the arms felt normal, solid to the touch. I moved one outline hand to the shelf by the cot, and I couldn't feel the shelf! My outline hand went right through it (2017, p. 167).

As a result of his multiple experiences, Monroe finally defined the attributes of this other body as follows: (1) the second body has weight, that is, it is subject to gravitational attraction, although much less than the physical body. It has small density and little mass, and this accounts for the fact that it can go through walls; (2) it is visible under certain conditions, as on some occasions he viewed radiated light around the perimeter of the body form; (3) the sense of touch is similar to that of the physical body; (4) it is pliable and plastic, taking whatever shape is desired by the individual; (5) it appears to be the reverse image of the physical body; (6) there seems to be a 'cord' linking both bodies (a fact often referred to in esoteric literature); (7) there is a relationship between the second body and electricity and electromagnetic fields (2017, pp. 176–178).

None of the passages quoted conveys how overwhelming and utterly dazzling the *experience* of reading the whole of Monroe's book is. I do not dare make assumptions about the reality of the content of these experiences, which have been pointed out frequently, appear to defy the laws of physics as we know and accept them to be. What can draw a man of such scientific convictions into the idea of the *existence* of a second self may still need to be accounted for, but at least it demonstrates how *real* these experiences feel for those who undergo them. Whether altered states of consciousness, hallucinations or unknown dimensions of the mind or universe, the fact is that these are, without a doubt, very much *real* happenings for those who experience them in such a way as to become *life-changing* events.

Juma's 'weird dreams'

As in many African societies, most of the Swahili people of Zanzibar, where I undertook fieldwork,[5] attribute severe disease to an external agency. Most commonly called *majini* (sing. *jini*), spirits possess one's body and inflict sickness or misfortune. These spirits can

[5] Fieldwork in Zanzibar Island was carried out intensively in 2008-2009 and intermittently since then. I thank the Portuguese Foundation for Technology and Science (FCT) for funding my first research period there.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

act of their own accord or be sent by sorcerers (*wachawi,* sing. *mchawi*),[6] in which case they will bring severe illness, death, bad luck, and severe calamity or hardship. When practising these evil deeds, the *majini* can be called *mashetani* (from the Arabic *Shayṭān*, Satan), although there is no clear distinction between these two terms.

Some *majini*, however, afflict a patient in such a way that that person must undertake some task, most commonly the job of healing. In such cases, the spirit's 'host' (*kiti*, which also means 'chair'), once successfully healed, should become a professional healer (*mganga*, pl. *waganga*) and practice the trade guided by that spirit (or spirits). While in an altered state of consciousness, the more spirits a *mganga* can summon and establish a relationship with, the more powerful they become.

As healers, *waganga* are feared people in that they deal with *majini* and possess great knowledge of *uchawi,* the secret wisdom of sorcerers. This knowledge enables *waganga* to cure by counteracting and neutralising the latter's attacks. However, when a disease is too severe, a healer may have to contact the *wachawi* themselves for advice or negotiate the rescue of a patient targeted to be killed by sorcery. The *wachawi* will then tell the healer that they want to free the patient from their malevolent action. Thus, there is an evident ambiguity here: *uchawi* is secret knowledge that can be harmful but can also become the key to curing acute and critical diseases. Consequently, *waganga* and *wachawi* are not 'enemies' as such.

These *wachawi* are ordinary villagers with whom one may unknowingly work or socialize. However, to become a *mchawi* one must have 'killed' a close relative, that is, believed to have caused or been the origin of their death. *Wachawi* are said to meet at night and have their main quarters and domains at a place called Gining'i. On Zanzibar Island (Unguja), this gathering point is on deserted open land (*jangwani*) near the village of Makoba in the Bumbwini area.

While researching illness and sorcery on the island of Zanzibar, I met Juma.[7] Juma and I both lived in Stone Town, and we chatted from time to time when we happened to see each other. Having found out that I was doing research in Bumbwini-Makoba, he asked

[6] I use 'sorcerers' as a translation of *wachawi,* and 'sorcery' as that of *uchawi* for these translations appear to be closer to the Swahili concepts than those of 'witch' or 'witchcraft', notwithstanding the ambiguity – and often the overlapping – of these terms (on this subject see Turner 1964; Kapferer 1997, for instance).

[7] Pseudonyms have replaced real names.

me if I would accompany him to seek treatment there for his various physical and emotional troubles (weakness, constant fatigue, difficulties in memorizing and learning, sexual impotence, and business failure). He explained that he was born in Bumbwini and that his late grandfather had been one of the major *waganga* there; that he had already consulted several healers to treat his afflictions to no avail and was now convinced that his condition had its roots back when his grandfather had a severe conflict with a rival *mganga* there, in Bumbwini. He, therefore, reckoned that he could only be cured with the involvement of the *wachawi* of Gining'i. Given that, healers from Bumbwini-Makoba had to plead for the help of the *wachawi,* who would eventually free the patient from their malevolent influence in return for an agreed payment.

We made all the necessary arrangements with the *baraza la waganga* ('council of healers') of Bumbwini-Makoba to consult the wachawi at Gining'i (an episode fully narrated in a recent article, Palmeirim 2021). I accompanied Juma on this trip and during all the procedures that it entailed. Juma paid the first instalment of his treatment and was supposed to make a second payment of three hundred dollars sometime after, without which the ire of the *wachawi* could be aroused and the cure doomed to fail.

Juma and I lost contact for a few years. When I came to meet him again, we recalled our trip to Bumbwini. I then learned that he had never returned to pay the remaining three hundred dollars. I was surprised, as he had displayed great fear of the *wachawi* throughout the process. Would this not jeopardise his treatment and raise the fury of the *wachawi*? It was then that he told me about his dreams.

Not long after the episode we underwent together, and having already completed the first payment, he started having 'weird dreams' (he used the expression in English). He explained to me that those dreams took place not in the world of 'real dreams', not in 'real life', but in *mazingira ya utatanishi* ('the realm of *utatanishi*', from *utata*, which means 'complexity, ambiguity, prodigiousness'), referring to what is commonly called in the literature the world of sorcery and the 'invisible'. In these 'weird dreams', he met the same *mchawi* twice. The sorcerer warned him to pay the other half of the money to Gining'i. However, in the third dream, they started fighting, and Juma won, leaving the *mchawi* bleeding. As soon as this happened, he saw himself in Bumbwini, and a healer on a scooter was speeding away from him. His spirits (*majini*), with whom he maintains a relationship, told him that these healers and sorcerers were 'small people' and that he should not bother paying the rest. All his subsequent dreams showed that his spirits

  ISSN: 2057-2301

were mighty, so he had nothing to fear. After this set of dreams, he felt cured and later got married.

Juma insisted that his dreams were 'weird dreams', not 'real dreams' as such. It was during the dream that he suddenly found himself in Bumbwini. This discourse is not unheard of in Zanzibar, where w*aganga* are unanimous in claiming they can communicate with spirits (*majini*) in a state of vigil, and travel in space.

In Zanzibar, dreams are regarded as premonitory and can influence one's perception of everyday life while awake. However, the Swahili people do not confuse these realms, even though what many refer to as 'reality' and the dream world may often overlap. Why, then, should Juma and the *waganga* in Zanzibar (and indeed elsewhere) reiterate that their experiences should not be confused with mere dreams?

The 'dream theory' of Primitive Religion and the 'dream' in anthropology

In his book *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Evans-Pritchard labels the founding anthropological theories of Edward Tylor and Herbert Spencer on primitive religion as the 'soul theory' and the 'ghost theory', respectively. This separation is artificial and lies merely in emphasis, as Evans-Pritchard himself reckons, for both theories can be considered two versions of a 'dream theory' on the origin of religion (1977, p. 25). In Tylor's animism, the experiences of death, disease, trance, visions and, above all, dreams led the 'primitive man' to the idea of the soul, an immaterial entity inhabiting the physical body from which it could detach itself to undergo independent ventures, the dreams. Then comes the overriding concern of his time with the formulation of evolutionary sequences: the idea that the soul would later extend to beings other than humans as well as to inanimate objects (to account for beliefs ascribed to some primitive societies), and from the soul, the idea of spirits would have arisen. Spirits would finally have developed into gods in the superior form of religion (Tylor, 1871, vol.2).

Herbert Spencer formulates his theory in a slightly different way. Dreams led humans to the idea of duality, the existence of a double, a soul wandering in dreams at night. Souls have an afterlife, as demonstrated by the appearance of the dead in dreams, the so-called ghosts. In Spencer's eyes, this latter concept is at the very origin of religion, for the ghosts of ancestors and superior beings would, in time, become gods to be worshipped (Spencer, 1898, vol.1).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Even if one cannot subscribe to the causality sequences proposed by Tylor and Spencer, we can at least agree that the concepts of soul, ghost, spirits, and dreams – in all their conceptual diversity – are of overriding importance when examining religious systems. Of course, the variety of empirical contexts denies, as we now all know, the proclaimed evolutionary stages. However, the concept of the *duality* of the human being has always been asserted. Evolutionists saw it as a result of fallacious thinking whereby dreams were *erroneously taken as real experiences* by 'primitive man' (see, for instance, Tylor, 1871, p. 425).

Much of what has been translated in anthropological literature as 'dreams' are indeed dissociative experiences of a nature not too different from the ones described by Monroe: events which take place on the threshold of sleep and which have been equally discarded on the basis that 'civilised men' who experience them *erroneously claim that they are real*. Indeed, the well-established association of many religious, shamanic and healing practices throughout the world with psychic experiences make it plausible that the religious knowledge of 'primitive men' (which includes the concepts of soul, ghost and spirit) is more likely to emerge from experiences of a second self of the kind Monroe describes than from their inapt or clouded interpretation of dreams. So much so that the definition with which Tylor presents us in *Primitive Culture* of the concept of soul, responsible for dreaming, resembles in many aspects that of the second self of Monroe's: 'a thin unsubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapour, film, or shadow'; 'capable of leaving the body far behind, to flash swiftly from place to place'; 'mostly impalpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power'; 'appearing to men waking or asleep as a phantasm separate from the body of which bears the likeness' (Tylor, 1871, p. 429).

Based on extensive ethnographic records, anthropologists have used the word 'dream' as an overall-encompassing term to designate all sorts of experiences narrated as taking place during sleep or semi-sleep states. The term appears to embrace such diversity of experiences that scholars felt the need from early times to organise them in typologies. A student of Seligman's, Jackson S. Lincoln (1935), was one of the first anthropologists to attempt a classification of the dreams of various North American Indians.[8] Revisiting Malinowski's notion of 'official dreams' from *Sex and Repression* (1927), Lincoln

[8] On the rich ethnography on dreaming of the Mohave, Crow, Yuma, Sioux, Blackfoot, Seneca, Kwakiutl, and other North American tribes, see Gifford 1926; Spier 1933; Wallace 1947, 1958; Eliade 1951; Devereux 1951, 1957, among others.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

introduces the concept of the 'culture pattern dream' in contrast to the more subjective phenomenon of the 'individual dream'. Culture pattern dreams are socially induced and carry cultural significance, making them particularly relevant to anthropological inquiry. In contrast, individual dreams – typically spontaneous and experienced during sleep – primarily reflect personal psychology (Lincoln, 1935, pp. 22–23).

Most existing typologies are superimposed upon the data and disregard indigenous classifications.[9] An example of a typology of dreams in more recent literature – again issuing from an etic point of view – is that of Katie Glaskin based on her ethnography on Australian aborigines (2011, pp. 51–52). Glaskin compares the categories of dreams she distinguishes with Lohmann's dream theories (Lohmann, 2007). Ordinary dreams and nightmares are differentiated emically in some Australian aboriginal groups. Then she considers the 'shared dream', where more than one person has the same dream; dreams which appear to fit into Lohmann's category of 'generative dreams' in that they predict and also contribute to generating future events; 'prescient dreams', which foretell the future or refer to recently occurred events (events which the dreamer could not have known through other means); and the ones she labels as 'innovative dreams', that is, ancestral revelations which disclose to the living higher and special knowledge (in the case of the aboriginal Australians, they reveal new songs and ritual material which will be incorporated into their ceremonies). The latter, Gaskin says, fit into two of Lohmann's theories: 'the soul travel theory' and 'the visitation theory', depending on if the dreams express the experiences of a part of the self (such as the soul, in some contexts) which leaves the physical body during sleep or if it is a spiritual visitation to a stationary dreamer (Gaskin, 2011, p. 51; Lohmann, 2007, p. 43). She also considers that her prescient dreams might encompass those Lohmann includes in his 'discernment theory', dreams which imply 'a state of consciousness more powerful than waking thought' (Lohmann, 2007: p. 42). Gaskin still adds 'lucid dreaming' to this list, usually experienced by people said to have special abilities and powers, who are also more likely to have innovative dreams (2011, p. 55).

As we can infer from the above, anthropologists catalogue a grand panoply of experiences from an etic standpoint as 'dreams'. As a result of this, an inevitable statement is also made about these experiences, which we acknowledged to be similar to the descriptions of extrasensory and dissociative events that launched this text: that

[9] On classifying dreams, see Kilborn 1992. An exception to this is, for instance, el-Aswad's interesting work on dreams in urban and rural Egyptian communities (2010).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

they are of a nature or essence no different from other dreams and therefore should be treated as such. By putting data from various perceptual and cognitive categories in the same basket anthropologists have thus avoided the morass and utterly awkward task of taking seriously experiences narrated to them that are of an explicit psychic nature.[10] Price-Williams refers to how dreams in the waking state are most often relegated to nocturnal dreams in the researcher's mind, or else assigned to the category of 'visions', with all the value judgement associated with the term. Moreover, he stresses that visions should not be confused with the 'active imagination' of dreams in a waking state.[11] The former 'are usually spontaneous and characteristically burst through into an individual's ordinary consciousness' while the latter is a method 'used consciously, and can be construed in terms of learning' (1992, pp. 250–251). He further remarks that confusion in terminology also stems from the inaccurate use of 'dreaming' as the translation of indigenous terms (Price-Williams, 1992, pp. 249–250). Moreover, informants often struggle to find the appropriate word in the researcher's language to express their experiences and may settle, like Juma above, on describing these happenings as 'weird dreams'. Indeed, there may be a misunderstanding here and our formulations may evidence more of the failure to listen attentively to our indigenous informants' claims than portray the narrators' clouded minds. Monroe, for one, goes to great lengths to distinguish his experiences from nocturnal dreams:

> The experiences differ from the typical dream state principally in the following ways:
> (1) Continuity of some sort of awareness;
> (2) Intellectual or emotional (or blends of the two) decisions made during the experiences;
> (3) Multivalued perception via sensory inputs or their equivalents;
> (4) Non-recurrence of identical patterns; and

[10] Interesting is Erika Bourguignon's thesis (1972, pp. 422–429, referred to by Tedlock 1992, pp. 17–18) of a common frame of reference organising in a continuum the ordinary and ritualised dreams situated at the REM-sleep pole and distributing various types of experiences in altered states of consciousness along the spectrum with possession trance at the far-end pole.

[11] Here, Price-Williams adopts Carl Jung's notion of 'active imagination', altogether different from the ordinary imagination in which images are allowed to pass through one's mind effortlessly and passively. Instead, the active imagination is a laborious and engaging process of shutting up critical faculties to bring into awareness images and emotions that are perceived as objective and felt as real (Price-Williams 1992, pp. 247–249).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

> (5) Development of events in sequence that seem to indicate a time-lapse. The most certain statement that can be made is that when the condition exists, you are as aware of "not dreaming" as you are when you are awake (2017, pp. 179–180).

In fact, since ancient times, cultures insisted on the privilege of a few being able to undergo the action of 'doubling', that is, of liberating one's second self from the physical body to journey where it chooses (for instance, Tedlock, 1992, pp. 1–8). Claude Lecouteux, a specialist in Middle Age Germano-Scandinavian literature, shows that in Northern and Central Europe narrations of these phenomena are prevalent from times that predate the medieval era; the widespread concept of a 'double' (or several doubles, as in the Old Norse traditions) being, most certainly, prior to the rise of Christianity itself (Lecouteux, 2003).

Mediums, Healers and Shamans

Most mediums, healers and shamans throughout the world claim that in order 'to see' beyond the surface of reality (to see the cause of an illness, for instance)[12] and 'travel' distances, they must be in an enhanced state of consciousness, which can be reached or triggered by different methods, be it trance, meditation, asceticism, entheogens, severe sickness, food or sleep deprivation, self-flagellation or another form of physical pain, dance, music, or other. Only in that state can they communicate with the spirits and be guided by them in the act of healing. Only in that state can they 'see', and that kind of seeing is vital to diagnose illnesses caused by sorcery or witchcraft. The lengthy descriptions gathered by Richard Katz among the Kung of the Kalahari Desert specify how the *num*, the spiritual energy, heats up and is activated to enter *kia,* the altered state of consciousness, which is the key to healing:

> Kinachau, an old healer, talks about the kia experience: 'You dance, dance, dance, dance. Then num lifts you up in your belly and lifts you in your back, and you start to shiver. Num makes you tremble; it's hot. Your eyes are open, but you don't look around; you hold your eyes still and look straight ahead. But when you get

[12] On the healers' ability *to see* the cause of a disease in different contexts, see E. Turner 1992, pp. 170–174.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

> into kia, you're looking around because you see everything, because you see what's troubling everybody. Rapid shallow breathing draws num up. What I do in my upper body with the breathing, I also do in my legs with the dancing. You don't stomp harder, you just keep steady. Then num enters every part of your body, right to the tip of your feet and even your hair.' (Katz, 1982, pp. 41–42)

Or, as described by Kau Dwa, another powerful healer: 'In your backbone you feel a pointed something, and it works its way up. The base of your spine is tingling, tingling, tingling, tingling. Then num makes your thoughts nothing in your head' (Katz, 1982, p. 42).

This continuous 'tingling' recalls the vibration which preceded all of Monroe's OBEs: at first rough vibrations 'as if your body is being severely shaken right down to the molecular or atomic level', which one can learn to control and smooth down to become a mere sensation 'of body warmth, slightly tingling, but not excessively so' (Monroe, 2017, p. 214). This process of apprenticeship is clearly described for the aspiring !Kung healers:

> By singing and clapping the healing songs, they stimulate the num to boil. The intensity of their singing can help to determine and regulate the depth of kia (Katz, 1982, p. 46).
>
> (…)
>
> If their kia is coming on so fast that their fear escalates and prevents them from experiencing the kia, the teacher may make them stop dancing for a while, or drink some water, or lie down – all to "cool down" their too rapidly boiling num. The num must be hot enough to evoke kia but not so hot that it provokes debilitating fear. It is never a question of merely putting num into the students; the correct amount is critical (Katz, 1982, p. 47).

Likewise, the mind's emptiness and steadiness required to enter *kia* is also pointed out by Monroe as an absolute must to achieve dissociation from the physical body (2017, pp. 208, 211, 216). In the Norse sagas, those who 'leap out of their skins/spirit' (*springa af harmi/moeði*) are in great danger, and they cannot be interrupted or their name uttered (Lecouteux, 2003, pp.34, 48). In other narratives this author mentioned, the psychic's

  ISSN: 2057-2301

immobile body cannot be touched, lethargy being a condition *sine qua non* of the journey afar (Lecouteux, 2003, pp. 37–38, 85, 94, 100).

These experiences are dominated by what Monroe calls 'the fear barrier': fear of the unknown, frightful experiences, pain and, above all, fear of death, the sensation of being killed by the vibrations (2017, pp. 205–207, 77, 28). The motif of death is indeed recurrent in all accounts of these experiences, both the fear of it and – as control is acquired – the certainty of being able to survive it (Tart, 2017, p. 4), as well as the readiness to die (Monroe, p. 156). All these themes characterise the experience of the !Kung healer who enters *kia*:

> Kau Dwa makes the further dimensions of this painful fear explicit: 'As we enter kia, we fear death. We fear we may die and not come back!' This fear of death without an experience of rebirth evokes its own special terror for the Kung, as it has for persons in every culture. When potential healers can face this fact of their death and 'willingly' die, the fear of num can be overcome, and there can be a breakthrough to kia (Katz, 1982, p. 45).

What is terrifying about that death experience is that it feels *as real as* death, the only difference being that the dead person will be gone forever while the healer can return to life.[13] When a !Kung succeeds in enduring such an experience, they will enter a deeper stage of *kia*, the 'full kia', where they acquire healing capacity.[14] The difference between 'beginning kia' and 'full kia' takes us back once more to Monroe's description of his entrance in deeper layers of his out-of-the-body journeys, what he calls Locale II and Locale III (2017, chs. V and VI, in particular).

When in 'full kia' a !Kung healer 'sees properly' and is then able to heal. In the words of Kau Dwa: 'When you kia [sic], you see things you must pull out, like the death things that god has put into people. You see people properly, just as they are. Your vision does

[13] There is also a clear connection between OBEs and NDEs (near-death experiences), but I will not develop this interrelation in the current text.

[14] Katz gives a clarifying explanation: 'The dynamic that moves one from an experience of beginning kia to full kia is being able to 'die.' This dying should not be reduced to the Western concept of psychological death or ego death. Nor do I find evidence that the Kung call this dying a 'half-death'. For the Kung, it is simply dying. This dying and attendant rebirth are the central expressions of transcendence in Kung healing. When persons still seeking num experience this death, it signifies their capacity for full kia and healing. It is said that they have finally 'drunk num.' (Katz 1982, p. 99) A low percentage of those who experienced beginning *kia* attained full *kia*.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

not whirl' (Katz, 1982, p. 42, see also p. 106). Indeed, the state of body dissociation is all about 'seeing'. Monroe describes how once one is familiar with being separated from the physical body if one *thinks* of seeing, one will see: 'You learn that you can see in all directions at once, without turning the head, that you see or don't see according to the thought (…)' (2017, p. 184). He specifies, 'There will be no sensation of eye opening. The blackness will just disappear suddenly. At first, your seeing may be dim, as if in half-light, indistinct or myopic. It is not known at present why this is so, but with use, your vision will become more sharp' (2017, p. 222).

Narrations like the ones collected by Froelich Rainey in *The Whale Hunters of Tigara* also bear striking resemblances to descriptions of OBEs. Reconstructing the heritage of the Eskimo of Alaska, Rainey describes that in the old days every shaman or visionary (an *angatkok*) was 'invited' by the spirits (*tungai*)[15] to visit them. The shaman's own 'spirit' (*ilitkosaq*, the author warns us of the dangers of translation) would then leave his body to enter the spirit's world. 'When his spirit had departed from his body, that mundane body remained in a trance until its spirit returned' (1947, p. 275). He tells us the story of Asetcak, a famous Eskimo shaman who flew from one of the Diomede Islands to the 172 miles distant St Lawrence Island in search of the son of his host (1947, pp. 277–278). The narrations gathered by the author tell of the method adopted by Asetcak to get into flying ('he always flew with one knee drawn up and arms outstretched'), his frustrated attempts, his difficulties in descending, and even the technique a shaman teaches a neophyte to be able to return to the body after a journey.

Accounts such as these have often been relegated to the realm of the Eskimo 'system of beliefs'. Rainey tells us that this widely known tale was not even doubted by 'the well-educated Eskimo who have been away at school or those men who interpret at the mission and run the cooperative store' (1947, p. 279). However, taken simply as *beliefs*, these accounts might have been anchored in real extrasensory experiences, for they have all the features of the OBEs Monroe describes: the need for a dissociation technique to initiate flight, which includes, like in the case of Asetcak, the 'stretching' of the non-

[15] The *tungai* were 'spirit-beings who might be the spirits or souls of dead men or animals or simply beings of the air or the ground who had no connection with actual men and animals.' (Rainey 1947, p. 275)

  ISSN: 2057-2301

physical body (Monroe 2017, pp. 177, 225–226), the failed and aborted trials and the difficulties in descending. Monroe also describes the terrifying fear of being unable to return to the physical body (2017, pp. 206, 224–225) and his discovery of the efficient rotation method to move in and out of his physical body (2017, pp. 220–222).

Indeed, one cannot deny the striking resemblances between individual psychic descriptions and the collective beliefs on the dual nature of the human being. Ghosts, thought to be spirits of the dead, are said to be see-through, light-weight bodies, able to levitate and go through obstacles and walls. All these features are shared by the second body of Monroe's OBEs (2017, pp. 52, 166–67, 169–70, 176). Again, it is not by accident that a sorcerer is understood in many contexts as a being who can travel afar, see afar, hear afar and transmute himself or herself into different shapes and animals. To return to the Swahili context, this is an ability of both spirits (*majini*) and sorcerers (*wachawi*), who 'transmute themselves' (*kujigeuza* or *kujibadilisha*) into cats, dogs, bush babies, and other animals or natural things. Curiously enough, this is also a property brought up in Monroe's descriptions of the ductile non-physical body:

> If left alone, it [the non-physical body] reverts to your normal humanoid shape. If you consciously think it into a given shape, I suspect you take that form. You might convert temporarily into the shape of, for example, a cat or a dog. Could this be the source of the werewolf and vampire bat mythology? I'm not so sure I want to give it a try [he concludes] (2017, p. 170, see also p. 183).

Again, the widespread idea of the existence of zombies in many ethnographic contexts[16] may be seen to echo the apparent death or catalepsy of the physical body while its double travels afar. Among the Swahili of Zanzibar, these 'zombies' are considered ordinary individuals whom sorcerers captured just before burial. I was told that though deceased people appear dead in the eyes of their relatives, who cry and grieve for them at the burial site, they have 'in reality' been taken by the *wachawi* to Gining'i, the latter replacing the deceased with a double who is buried instead. At Gining'i, the *wasukule*[17]

[16] References to 'zombies' can be found in other African contexts (see, for instance, Niehaus 2005) and the Caribbean, showing remarkable similarities with the Zanzibari constructs (e.g. Ackermann and Gauthier 1991; Littlewood 2009).

[17] John Middleton (1992, p. 182) states that these 'zombies' are called *ng'ing'inge*. However, Mohamed A. Mohamed, in his dictionary (2011), mentions this term (*ging'ingi*) as a variant of *gining'i* to designate not the zombies but the place where they live and where sorcerers meet at night. This is also the meaning I collected for the word in the field.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

(often compared to enslaved people) take care of the *wachawi*'s estate, living under social rules that invert those sanctioned in commonplace society.

Although claiming that there are close similarities between the collective discourse on doubles – be it soul or souls, spirits, zombies or ghosts – and the experience of the second body in individual psychic narratives, I am not asserting that the two discourses coincide nor that the claims of healers that 'they go places' should necessarily portray their ability to undertake real out-of-the-body experiences. Indeed, attaining an enhanced state of consciousness is not an everyday event and those who do may only experience it once or twice in a lifetime. But would the fact that a healer did or did not undergo a real experience be of utmost importance for their accomplishment as a healer? Lévi-Strauss's commentary on the episode of the Nambikwara sorcerer/witchdoctor who disappeared in the thunderstorm, narrated in his well-known article 'The Sorcerer and his Magic' (1963), is of great help in understanding the mechanism which may be at stake here.

Lévi-Strauss tells us of his own experience among the Nambikwara Indians of Central Brazil. One evening, the group's sorcerer, with whom he was camping, did not return to the camp in the evening at the usual time. After a couple of hours the whole community was worried and convinced that he had been killed either in an ambush or attacked by some wild beast. His two wives and son wept. Later that night, they finally found him 'crouching silently, shivering in the chilly night air, dishevelled and without his belt, necklaces and arm-bands (the Nambicuara wear nothing else)'. The sorcerer then explained that the thunderstorm which had broken that afternoon 'had carried him off to a site several miles distant, which he named, and then, after stripping him completely, had brought him back to the spot where we found him.' The next day he was back to his routine and had recovered all his adornments*, a fact which did not stir up any surprise among the fellow members of his band*, as Lévi-Strauss points out (1963, p. 170).

Such a puzzling event would be easily comprehended should the narrative of the sorcerer be taken seriously and understood as an out-of-the-body experience. But did he really experience an OBE? Would it be significant if he did not? Lévi-Strauss's remarks are here quite significant. Indeed, although some members had shown some scepticism and offered a different interpretation of this episode, these doubts could not go beyond mere conjecture. No one would ever entertain the idea of declaring it a hoax, *for it*

  ISSN: 2057-2301

remained in the realm of plausible experience: 'He had probably not flown in the wings of thunder to the Rio Ananaz and had only staged an act. But these things might have happened; they certainly happened in other circumstances, and they belonged to the realm of real experience. Certainly, the sorcerer maintains an intimate relationship with the forces of the supernatural' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963 p. 171). Hence, real individual dissociative experiences can form the basis of a collective discourse which gains some degree of autonomy and in turn serves as the basis to interpret experience.

Conclusion: on Experience and Belief

In the classical labelling of Evans-Pritchard (1965), Tylor and Spencer formulated 'psychological' theories of religion**.** For once – and their evolutionary bias discarded for the moment – psychology and the individual's 'dreams' were at the basis of a collective system of representations, religion. This association, however, was not to hold for long as anthropology was to abandon the psychological grounds of religion in favour of the Durkheimian assumption that social phenomena can only be explained or examined in their own terms. And oddly enough we are still enslaved by this legacy. In line with the Durkheimian tradition, anthropology has played down the role of (individual) 'experience' in favour of (collective) 'belief' in understanding ritual and religious phenomena, which has meant the divorce between anthropology and psychology. In her exhaustive study on ritual, Catherine Bell states bluntly at the opening of a chapter: 'The study of ritual has always assumed the close association of rite with belief. As we have seen, ritual has generally been thought to express beliefs in symbolic ways for the purposes of their continual reaffirmation and inculcation' (1992, p. 182). Likewise, the anthropology and sociology of dreams insist on dealing with dreams as 'text' (Ricoeur, 1970) or as 'intentional *messages*', leaving to psychology the approach of dreaming as 'internal *experiences*' (Fabian, 1966, p. 560, my emphasis).

The data presented in this text calls for the imperative need to establish the intimate connection between individual experience and collective belief. It is not claimed that we should embark on a psychological interpretation of social facts or reduce the latter to a summation of personal experiences. But a close link has to be acknowledged. The ritualised healing practices and experiences of shamans, healers and mediums analysed earlier are *not* mere reaffirmations, enactments or portrayals of a (more or less coherent) set of beliefs. The question of *experience*, undergone by the individual or

  ISSN: 2057-2301

passed on by others who lived through different states of consciousness, the emotions and perceptions of self, truth, reality and agency, have an overpowering presence and bearing.

Amid an array of scholars in general, and of anthropologists in particular, ready to ignore or relegate narratives of psychic episodes to the realm of mere contrivance, delusion or, more comfortably, to the realm of 'belief', there have been some who made moves towards arguing the heuristic value of 'experience' in the understanding of sorcery, ritual and religion (Turner and Bruner, 1986; Jakobsen, 1999; Bowie, 2013, for instance). As far back as the end of the nineteenth century, Andrew Lang, the Scottish poet, novelist, literary critic and anthropologist who was influenced by Tylor, deserves a special mention within the history of anthropology for his pioneering and tenacious interest in psychical research and all things 'hallucinatory'. His works, *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts* (1897) and *The Making of Religion* (1898), are, among other writings of his, unequivocal examples of such interest and awareness. Testimony of his daring thought, he proposed at the opening of *The Making of Religion* to compare 'savage beliefs [on visions, hallucinations and clairvoyance] with the attested record of similar *experiences* [his italics] among living and educated civilised men' (1898, p. 3).

Indeed, it is more of *experience*, rather than collective belief, that narratives of healers, shamans, religious visionaries and mediums talk about. As a psychologist who did fieldwork with the anthropologist Richard Lee, Katz is untiring in stressing this fact when writing about ritual healing among the Kalahari Kung: 'Although the Kung distinguish between final death when the soul permanently leaves the body, and the death of *kia*, when the soul goes out but then hopefully returns, there is only one *experience* [his italics] of death, and the experience is what matters' (Katz, 1982, p. 116). Monroe makes a statement connected to this same idea: 'It is impossible to convey to another the 'reality' of this non-physical eternity. As stated by many in centuries past, it must be *experienced*'' (2017, p. 80, my emphasis).

The concept of 'belief', central to anthropological studies of religion since the beginning of the discipline, is far from clear and consensual (a comprehensive presentation of the intricate anthropological debate surrounding this concept can be found in Bell, 1992, pp. 182–189). Mainly assumed as a matter of collectively significant propositions and ideas, social analysis of belief has mostly turned its back on the diversity of ways in which participants adhere, interpret and relate to the so-called 'system of beliefs'. On the other

  ISSN: 2057-2301

hand, if not a single and embracing worldview, beliefs are also about inner convictions, about internal and individual mental states. This is the opening argument of Rodney Needham's *Belief, Language and Experience*, where he argues that belief is best left to psychology. Social analysis may indeed address how society prompts and shapes such mental states. Still, it cannot examine a person's inner convictions and determine whether they correspond to a state of 'belief'. Belief cannot be demonstrated or measured insofar as it cannot be proven that it conforms more or less with what most people in society believe (1972, pp. 1–7). In this sense, I claim that the concept of belief comes closer in nature to that of (individual, inner) experience and that the studies on belief are bound to comprise limitations similar to those of the studies on experience. If it is possible to gather a discourse on beliefs or a narrative of an out-of-the-body episode, belief and experience *as inner states* cannot be objectified, grasped from the exterior or passed on to someone else.

In bringing together belief and experience, no longer corollaries of the opposition collective vs. individual, we come close to Lévy-Bruhl's thought, pointed out by Needham as the first anthropologist to raise the question of the boundary between these two concepts. The 'mystical experience',[18] as Lévy-Bruhl calls it, cannot be clearly distinguished from the notion of belief because the experience of the invisible world confirms what the 'primitive men' were already taught by tradition (1938, p. 15).[19] Indeed, it is widely accepted that extrasensory experiences of the sort which healers, mediums, and visionaries describe are induced and interpreted by religious convictions and, as such, beliefs are modelling factors of experience. If this is so, the opposite equation appears equally feasible: that is, personal psychic experiences may inspire, beget, or even be at the very core of religious beliefs (which, in turn, shape how one perceives experience itself). Individual experience can induce personal belief, both as

[18] For Lévy-Bruhl, 'the mystical experience is at the same time a revelation and a psychical complex in which the emotional elements (*éléments affectifs*) occupy a predominant place' (1938, p. 15, my translation).

[19] Needham makes a fascinating remark as he draws our attention to the fact that the word 'experience' in English comes from Latin with the meaning of 'making a trial or test' (as in an experiment). In contrast, the German word (*erfahrung*) comes from the Old High German *irfaran,* meaning 'to travel, traverse, pass through, to reach or arrived at'. He adds that in fifteenth-century German, to be 'experienced' (*bewandert*) means the knowledge derived from being widely travelled and 'astute' (1972, p. 172). This sense is much closer to Lévy-Bruhl's concept of 'mystical experience' and the use of 'experience' in this text.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

inner states and running the risk of obliterating each other. Consequently, it is plausible that several individual psychic experiences might also trigger collective belief as a cultural construct and worldview.

German philosopher Thomas Metzinger, out of meticulous thinking, makes a clear connection between OBEs and the notion of the soul: 'In short, the particular phenomenal content of OBEs led human beings to believe in a *soul*. (…) Given the epistemic resources of early mankind, it was a highly rational belief to assume the possibility of disembodied existence' (2005, p. 80). Other scholars have advanced arguments in the same direction. Gregory Shushan (2018) demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between experience and belief centred on his extensive analysis of near-death experiences (NDEs), Michael Winkelman (2016) argues a similar point in his study of shamanism and John Homiak, studying the Rastafari visionary communication in Jamaica, affirms that a continuum exists linking the intrapsychic experiences of dreams to the 'communal discourse of reasoning' (1992, p. 243). More openly, Fiona Bowie states: 'I suspect that first hand and recounted experiences of 'magical' phenomena (…) have profoundly shaped the ways in which human beings in all times and places have formed their religious ideas and cosmological outlook' (2018, p. 2). And indeed, prophecies and religious systems worldwide have incessantly claimed that they originated from the (higher) knowledge disclosed in mystic revelations resulting from dreams and altered states of consciousness.

There is undoubtedly an inextricable relationship between collective religious belief and inner experiences of the sort mentioned.[20] One cannot deny the resemblance of both discourses and, consequently, the possibility that religion might be a corpus of collective representations built out of *real* psychic experiences in the sense of *lived* experiences and *perceived reality*.[21] These experiences are crucial sources of knowledge and, in this sense, believing is *knowing*. This is why there is no room for neglecting the notion of experience (as an individual's inner state) in anthropology. On the other hand, personal interior experiences are not impervious to cultural worldviews and thus against what

[20] Michele Stephen advances a theory on why this should be so based on her 'dual memory model', which comprises the 'autonomous imagination', based on emotion and sensory imagery, and the verbal/semantic memory (2003, pp. 110–111, in particular).

[21] When I say 'real experiences', I mean that they are real because they were lived and felt or perceived as real by the individuals who underwent them. However, I do not exclude the possibility of having more reality to them than meets the eye with our present scientific knowledge.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Needham claims, cannot be entrusted to psychology alone. There is a relentless communication and interchange between these two poles, between psychic and religious territories. However, as Price-Williams justly claims, 'The problem for an anthropology of the imaginal is to find out why one imaginary production elicits social support and another does not. The social matrix is crucial, for on this depends the development of an institutional setting for what otherwise would be mere individual images' (1992, p. 261).

As a plea to establishing a bridge between individual experience and belief as a collective construct in the study of religious and ritual phenomena, I recall as a final note the idea of 'plausible experience' brought about by Lévi-Strauss in the episode recounted earlier of the Nambikwara sorcerer who claimed to have travelled afar carried by a thunderstorm. No one dared declare his story a sham (although some might have raised some conjectural doubts) because the story remained in the sphere of plausible experience, that is, similar events had happened on other occasions, and in that sense, it also 'belonged to the realm of real experience' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 171). Belief is not necessarily based on one's own but, most commonly, on other people's inner experiences, present and past, and judges and interprets events based on plausibility.

References

Ackermann, H., and Gauthier, J. (1991) 'The ways and nature of the zombi', *The Journal of American Folklore,* 104(4), pp. 466–494.

Aspell, J., and Blanke, O. (2009) 'Understanding the out-of-body experience from a neuroscientific perspective', in Murray, C. D. (ed.) *Psychological scientific perspectives on out of body and near death experiences. Psychology research progress*, New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Bell, C. (1992) *Ritual theory, ritual practice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berger, A. S., and Berger, J. (1991) *The encyclopedia of parapsychology and psychical research*, Paragon House Publishers.

Bock, P. (1980) *Continuities in psychological anthropology.* San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.

Bowie, F. (2018) 'The dialogue between experience and interpretation: Paradigm shifts at the junction of science and the occult', presentation in the conference *The*

futures of magic: ethnographic theories of unbelief, doubt, and opacity in contemporary worlds. Available at: DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.19808.99840

Devereux, G. (1951) *Reality and dream: the psychotherapy of a Plains Indian*. New York: New York University Press.

-------- (1957) 'Dream learning and individual ritual differences in Mohave shamanism', *American Anthropologist*, 59, pp. 1036–1045.

Ebon, M. (1966) 'Parapsychological dream studies', in von Grunebaum, G. E., Caillois, R. (eds) *The dream and human societies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 163–177.

Eliade, M. (1951) *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*. Paris: Payot.

El-Aswad, el-Sayed (2010) 'Dreams and the construction of reality symbolic transformations of the seen and the unseen in the Egyptian imagination', *Anthropos*, 105, pp. 441–453.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1958) [1937] *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

-------- (1977) [1965] *Theories of primitive religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Fabian, J. (1966) '*Dream* and *charisma*: *"Theories of dreams" in the Jamaa movement (Congo)', Anthropos, 61(3–6), pp. 544–560.*

Fox, O. (1962) *Astral projection*. New York: University Books.

Gifford, E. W. (1926) 'Yuma dreams and omens', *Journal of American Folklore*, 39, pp. 58–69.

Glaskin, K. (2011) 'Dreams, memory, and the ancestors: creativity, culture, and the science of sleep', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17(1), pp. 44–62.

Green, C. E. (1968) *Out-of-the-body experiences*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Grof, S. (2006) *When the impossible happens: adventures in non-ordinary realities*. Canada: Sounds True.

Homiak, J. (1992) 'The mystic revelation of Rasta Far-Eye: visionary communication in a prophetic movement', in Tedlock, B. (ed.) *Dreaming: anthropological and psychological interpretations*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 220–245.

Irwin, H. J., and Watt, C. (2007) *An introduction to parapsychology*, McFarland.

Jakobsen, M. D. (1999) *Shamanism: traditional and contemporary approaches to the mastery of spirits and healing*. Oxford: Berghahn.

Kapferer, B. (1997) *The feast of the sorcerer*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Katz, R. (1982) *Boiling energy*: *community healing among the Kalahari Kung.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Kilborne, B. (1981) 'Pattern, structure, and style in anthropological studies of dreams', *Ethos*, 9(2), pp. 165–185.

-------- (1992) 'On classifying dreams', in Tedlock, B. (ed.) *Dreaming: anthropological and psychological interpretations*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 171–193.

Lang, A. (1897) *The book of dreams and ghosts*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.

-------- (1898) *The making of religion*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Lecouteux, C. (2003) *Witches, werewolves and fairies: shapeshifters and astral doubles in the Middle Ages*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963) 'The sorcerer and his magic', in *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books.

Lévy-Bruhl, L. (1938) *L'expérience mystique et les symboles chez les primitifs.* Paris: Alcan.

Lincoln, J. S. (1935) *The dream in primitive cultures*. London: Cressett Press.

Littlewood, R. (2009) 'Functionalists and zombis: sorcery as spandrel and social rescue', *Anthropology and Medicine*, 16(3), pp. 241–252.

Lohmann, R. J. (2007) 'Dreams and ethnography', in Barrett, D., McNamara, P. (eds) *The new science of dreaming*, vol.3: *Cultural and theoretical perspectives*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

Malinowski, B. (1927) *Sex and repression in savage societies.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Metzinger, T. (2005) 'Out-of-body experiences as the origin of the concept of a "soul"', *Mind & Matter*, 3(1), pp. 57–84.

Middleton, J. (1992) *The world of the Swahili: an African mercantile civilization*. Yale: Yale University.

Mohamed, M. A. (2011) *Comprehensive Swahili-English dictionary*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

Monroe, R. A. (2017) [1972] *Journeys out of the body*. Great Britain: Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.

Muldoon, S., and Carrington, H. (1969) *The phenomena of astral projection*. Rider & Co.

Niehaus, I. (2005) 'Witches and zombies of the South African Lowveld: discourse accusations and subjective reality', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (incorporating Man)*, 11(2), pp. 191–210.

Palmeirim, M. (2021) 'The illusion of reality and the reality of illusion: staged performance, trickery and prestidigitation in ritual', *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 51(3–4), pp. 452–478.

Price-Williams, D. (1992) 'The waking dream in ethnographic perspective', in Tedlock, B. (ed.) *Dreaming: anthropological and psychological interpretations*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 246–262.

Rainey, F. G. (1947) *The whale hunters of Tigara*, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, 41(2), pp. 231–283.

Rhine, J. B. (1937) *New frontiers of the mind: the story of the Duke experiments.* New York: Farrar & Rinehart.

Ricoeur, P. (1970) *Freud and philosophy: an essay on interpretation.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Servadio, E. (1966) 'The dynamics of the so-called paranormal dreams' in von Grunebaum, G. E., Caillois, R. (eds) *The dream and human societies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 109–118.

Spencer, H. (1898) *The Principles of Sociology*, Vol. 1, London: Williams and Norgate.

Spier, L. (1933) *Yuman tribes of the Gila River*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stephen, M. (2003) 'Memory, emotion, and the imaginal mind', in Mageo, J. M. (ed.) *The dreaming and the self: new perspectives on subjectivity, identity, and emotion*. New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 97–129.

Shushan, G. (2018) *Near-death experience in indigenous religions*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tedlock, B. (1992) 'Dreaming and dream research', in Tedlock, B. (ed.) *Dreaming: anthropological and psychological interpretations*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 1–30.

Tart, C. (1967) 'A second psychophysiological study of out-of-the-body experiences in a gifted subject', *International Journal of Parapsychology*, 9, pp. 251–258.

-------- (2017) [1972] 'Introduction', in Monroe, R. *Journeys out of the body*. Doubleday & Co. Inc.

Turner, E. (with Blodgett, W., Kahona, S., Benwa, F.) (1992) *Experiencing ritual: a new interpretation of African healing*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Turner, V. W. (1964) 'Witchcraft and sorcery: taxonomy versus dynamics', *Africa*, 34, pp. 314–325.

Turner, V. W., and Bruner, E. M. (1986) *The anthropology of experience*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago.

Tylor, E. B. (1871) *Primitive culture*. London: John Murray.

Tyrrell, G. N. M. (1943) *Apparitions*, London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd.

Wallace, A. F. C. (1958) 'Dreams and the wishes of the soul: a type of psychoanalytic theory among the seventeenth century Iroquois', *American Anthropologist*, 60, pp. 234–248.

Wallace, W. J. (1947) 'The dream in Mohave life', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 60, pp. 252–258.

Winkelman, M. (2016) 'Ethnological and neurophenomenological approaches to religious experience', in Schmidt, B. (ed.) *The study of religious experience*. Equinox: Sheffield, pp. 33–51.

  ISSN: 2057-2301