"Spirits are the Problem": Anthropology and Conceptualising Spiritual Beings

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This paper examines a variety of different theoretical perspectives on the nature of spiritual beings from within the discipline of anthropology. It takes a broadly historical perspective, outlining the development of key approaches from the earliest pioneers to the present day. It is argued that reductive explanatory models fail to account for the complexity of spiritual beings as social agents, especially in the context of the author's own research into contemporary trance mediumship, which forms the basis for this exploration of anthropology's engagement with spirits. It is suggested that an ontologically open-minded, participatory and experiential approach to the nature of spiritual beings, which emphasises the many *processes* involved in their manifestation as socially active agents, represents a potentially fruitful direction for future research.

Keywords: Anthropology; Experience; Ontology; Spirits; Theories

"Spirits are the Problem"

At a symposium on 'Anthropology and the Paranormal' held at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, in October 2013, folklorist David J. Hufford argued that for many in Western academia the belief in spirits represents the 'cut-off point' between the 'primitive' and the 'modern.' His paper explored the processes of disenchantment that have gradually overcome Western academic thinking, and highlighted some of the problems that contemporary encounters with ostensible spiritual beings pose for the dominant framework of Western rationalist materialism (which actively constructs itself in opposition to the 'spiritual'). In this respect, so Hufford argues, 'Spirits are the Problem.' It is from Hufford's paper, therefore, given on the very edge of the Pacific Ocean, that the title of this paper is drawn.

This paper will, then, survey a variety of different approaches to the 'problem of spirits' from within the discipline of anthropology, and in so doing will hopefully suggest some interesting directions for possible future research on contemporary entity encounters.

A Brief Note on Terminology

The term 'spirits' is a particularly broad one used to refer to a wide variety of ostensible non-physical entities, ranging from the spirits of the dead (as the spirits I encountered in the field claimed to be), to nature spirits, ancestors, Angels and deities, amongst numerous other varieties, types and forms (Evans 1987; Klass 2001: 57-

60). In the context of this paper the terms 'spirits' and 'spiritual beings' will continue to be used in this broad and inclusive way, primarily because many of the same conceptual problems arise whether we are talking about the spirits of the dead in suburban Bristol (see below), encounters with 'luminous entities' in the desert (Escolar 2012), meetings with 'the dragon' (Greenwood 2015), conversations with God in Evangelical Christianity (Luhrmann 2012), or even encounters with thousand eyed entities under the influence of DMT (Luke 2008). It is undoubtedly important to be aware of the broadness of this terminology, but for the limited purposes of this paper, which is intended as a general overview of key ideas, the terms 'spirits' and 'spiritual beings' work quite well.

My Own Encounter with the Spirits

My own quest to understand the nature of spirits arose first of all from my undergraduate study of a group of developing spirit mediums based in Bristol, who also became the focus of my current PhD research. Far from being abstractions, only speculatively spoken about with little real-world relevance (as I had initially thought of the idea of spirits and gods), the ostensible spirits I encountered at the Bristol Spirit Lodge were tangible. Manifested in three-dimensional space through the bodies of entranced mediums, these ostensible spirit entities emitted a very strong sense of 'presence.' They could be talked to and questioned directly, and even interacted with physically through their hosts. They were more than simple abstractions. Each spirit presented itself (physically and psychologically), in a distinctive and surprisingly consistent manner across weeks, months and even years of development, and through this process were able to build up a friendly, usually jovial, relationship with the regular sitters. Furthermore, these spirit entities apparently possessed some form of agency, in that they were seemingly able to affect change in the world around them (inspiring weekly séances, for example), and were quite capable of influencing the actions and behaviours of the social circle that built up to support and develop them. In a sense the spirits and the group were mutually sustaining one another, the spirits and the group were intimately connected with one another.

Mediums at the Lodge generally channeled a set group of spirits referred to as a 'spirit team,' which consisted of up to 16 distinctive spirit personalities. The characteristics of the spirits varied, from relatively weak two-dimensional characters (perhaps best described as caricatures), to highly developed, quite complex, personalities, with equally elaborate metaphysical systems detailing the nature of the afterlife, the 'mechanics' of spirit mediumship, the nature of consciousness, karma, and so on. Each spirit being had a particular role within their team, each working towards the development of specific physical phenomena (levitation, materialisation, dematerialisation, and healing, amongst others). One spirit in particular, a spirit by the name of Charlie, was especially impressive due to the consistency of his personality and kindly but authoritative style of communication. Following the completion of my undergraduate degree, I spent a great deal of time transcribing some of Charlie's philosophical and spiritual reflections on the nature of reality, along with his detailed answers to a wide range of everyday questions posed by sitters (Di Nucci & Hunter 2009). Even if these alleged spirits were little more than an elaborate act or performance put on by the medium (which they could well be), they were nevertheless particularly complex social actors and certainly deserved further investigation if they were to be understood.

To summarise my initial interest, then, I was firstly intrigued by the apparent imma-nence of the spirits I encountered in the field: they were not lofty abstractions, but tangible realities - talking to us directly from the corner of the room we were sitting in, very much present in the unfolding social drama of the séance. Secondly, I was im-pressed by the apparent complexity of their personalities (not in all cases, however), and thirdly I realised that at the very least the spirits I encountered were socially real, in fact they were the main characters in an ongoing social discourse between the liv-ing and the dead. It was these peculiarities of what I had witnessed in a garden shed in sub-urban Bristol that spurred me to investigate further down the rabbit hole of the paranormal in search of ways to better frame, conceptualise and understand such encounters between the living and ostensibly dead.

To this end, this paper will give an overview of anthropology's interactions with, and understandings of, the nature of apparent spirits as encountered in the field. The overview will be broadly historical, ranging from the earliest theories to some of the most recent, in the hope that they might shed at least some light on what is actually going on here.

Reductionism: Intellectualist and Cognitive Approaches

The first two theoretical approaches I would like to discuss are actually amongst the oldest – the intellectualist approach advocated by the earliest anthropological pio-neers, and the more recent but very closely related cognitive approach, which might be thought of as a descendent of the intellectualist tradition. Both of these approach-es can be classified as reductionist in their collapsing of the belief in and experience of spirits down to underlying psychological processes in order to 'explain them away.'

Animism

E.B. Tylor's theory of 'animism' is usually a good starting point in discussions about scholarly approaches to spirits. Tylor argued that animism, which he defined as 'the belief in spiritual beings,' represents the core feature of religion in general (Tylor 1930: 87-89). Putting aside the problems that are associated with this definition of religion, what is most important about Tylor's theory of animism are his suggestions about where this belief comes from in the first place. For Tylor, spirits are a theoreti-cal postulate devised by 'primitive philosophers' first of all to explain the difference between life and death, secondly to explain apparent encounters with people in dreams, and thirdly to explain the seemingly conscious activities of natural phenom-ena, such as the wind, rivers, lightning, etc. All of which, so Tylor reasoned, could be suitably explained by positing a non-physical spirit or soul (anima) that animates the physical body (or indeed any other natural phenomenon), but that is not dependent upon it, so that in trances, dreams or death the soul may leave the physical body be-hind and continue to exist independently.

Tylor's theory of animism is referred to as an intellectualist theory because it sug-gests that early human beings ('primitive philosophers'), were trying to make sense of the world around them through speculative philosophising. For Tylor, however, the conclusions drawn by early humans were fundamentally flawed given their lack of 'rational,' 'scientific' knowledge about the workings of world (a privilege of the Victo-

rian scientific worldview). From this perspective the belief in spiritual beings, and consequently all forms of religion, was entirely irrational and already superseded by scientific rationalism. In Tylor's own terminology, religion is a 'survival,' redundant in the modern world like some sort of evolutionary spandrel. Tylor's theory is, of course, heavily loaded with hegemonic assumptions about the mentality of 'non-western' peoples, and is heavily influenced by the kinds of social evolutionary theories that were popular in the late Nineteenth Century.

Cognitive Theories

In many respects, Tylor's intellectualist theory is the predecessor of the cognitive theories of religion proposed by the likes of Pascal Boyer, Stewart Guthrie and Justin Barrett. Guthrie's (1993) anthropomorphic theory of religion, for example, suggests that the belief in spirits emerges from our innate cognitive capacity to detect anthropomorphic features in the world around us, the classic example being to see faces in the clouds, or the face of Jesus in a piece of burnt toast. From such experiences, so it is suggested, the existence of spirits more generally is assumed. Of course, according to this view the spirits have no external reality, beyond the misperception of external objects. Just as Tylor implied that early humans misunderstood the world around them by inferring the existence of spirits, so Guthrie also suggests that belief in spirits is dependent on misinterpretation, combined with a lack of scientific understanding about how the brain works. Arguing along similar lines, and drawing on Guthrie's research, Justin Barrett's 'Hyperactive Agency Detection' theory for the origin of spiritual beings suggests that an inbuilt cognitive propensity to detect predators in the environment led to the emergence of beliefs about 'counter-intuitive' non-physical beings (Barrett 2000: 31-32). It is through the interactions of 'cognitive devices' such as these that supernatural concepts are formed.

Just as Tylor had implied that early humans misunderstood the world around them by inferring the existence of spirits through flawed intellectual reasoning, so Guthrie and Barrett suggest that belief in spirits is dependent on cognitive misinterpretation, combined with a ack of scientific understanding about how the brain works. In the words of Pascal Boyer the belief in spirits is a 'mere consequence or side effect of having the brains we have' (Boyer 2001: 379).

Comparative Psychical Research

Neither Tylor nor the cognitive scientists that followed him take seriously the possibility that spirit beliefs might arise from encounters with 'real' spiritual beings (which is, of course, the 'native' perspective). Their theories have been developed, in fact, as a part of a process of 'de-supernaturalisation' and 'disenchantment,' or as part of a process of 'naturalising' the supernatural. Both Tylor and the cognitive scientists seek to explain the persistent and widespread belief in spiritual beings by recourse to cognitive and psychological processes, leaving no room for the possibility of a transcendent, ontologically distinct, spirit reality.

There is, however, a non-reductive mirror-image of this approach, first advocated by Andrew Lang in the late 1800s. Lang was both an early anthropologist/folklorist and a psychical researcher, indeed he was president of the Society for Psychical Research in 1911, and as such saw clear parallels between the ethnographic literature

on spirit beliefs and the psychical research literature on the contemporary 'paranormal.' He therefore proposed the notion of 'comparative psychical research,' a comparison of the ethnographic and psychical research literature, and put forward the suggestion that all manner of religious and paranormal beliefs might actually have their origins in genuine anomalous experiences.

This idea is basically an early form of what David Hufford has termed the 'experiential source hypothesis' (Hufford 1982). From this perspective, then, rather than necessarily being the product of misperception, misinterpretation and cognitive illusion, spirit beliefs might actually be rational interpretations of genuinely strange experiences, whatever the ontological status of the objects of such experiences might ultimately turn out to be. This hypothesis, then, leaves open the possibility of 'real' spirit beings, but does not a priori assume them.

Relativism: Social and Cultural Reality

According to relativist approaches, the reality of spirits is understood to be socially and culturally determined - in other words, what is important is whether or not people within a given society actually believe in spirits. If they do, then spirits are real within that particular cultural framework and it is not the anthropologists' job to question the veracity of such beliefs, but rather to understand how the beliefs influence and affect social reality. This idea is summarised by E.E. Evans-Pritchard in his Theories of Primitive Religion, where he writes:

> As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration (Evans-Pritchard 1972: 17).

What we have here, then, is a form of ontological bracketing that has come to be recognised as the default position in the anthropology of religion. It doesn't matter whether the spirits are really real, what is important is that people believe them to be real. Of course, this is true, and it enables scholars to bring spirits into academic discourse without the need to enter into thorny debates about the reality or otherwise of spiritual beings.

A very good example of a bracketed approach in action can be found in the recent work of anthropologist Nils Bubandt (2009), whose ethnographic research in North Maluku incorporated the testimony of spirits embodied through traditional spirit mediums. In North Maluku the spirits of deceased political leaders still play a significant role in contemporary political life when they are brought back to offer their views, opinions and expertise. If the ethnographer were to ignore the contribution and testimony of the spirits in North Maluku, on the ethnocentric grounds that spirits simply do not exist, they would be neglecting a central component of a very real political system. Bubanbdt argues, therefore that spirits ought to be treated as 'methodologically real' in the field setting;. He writes that this allows the ethnographer to get on 'with the business of studying the social and political reality of spirits' and allows for the recognition that 'the invocation of spirits does make a difference in the field' (Bubanbdt 2009: 298). Bubanbdt does not suggest, however, that spirits necessarily be

thought of as ontologically real. His approach is purely pragmatic, but it does overcome some of the issues associated with Western academia's problem with spirits.

Despite the claim to neutrality in this kind of approach, however, the underlying paradigm in Western academia as a whole is nevertheless ontologically opposed to notions of magic, witchcraft and spirit beings (Northcote 2004), so that when such ethnographies enter into the wider scholarly discourse they are understood in terms of belief rather than reality - the implication being that 'what they believe to be real isn't really real because our reality is the only really real one.'

The Middle Ground: Between 'In Here' and 'Out There'

There is also a kind of Middle-ground approach to the problem of spirits.
Michael Winkelman's approach to spirits is an interesting one. Although he presents the case for understanding spirits as being shaped by the biological and cognitive structures of the brain and mind, he nevertheless stresses that the possibility of ontologically real spiritual beings remains open. He explains:

> …the notion that spirits reflect the structures of brain and mind is not to dismiss their ultimate ontological reality. Whatever may be "out there" as a foundation for spirits may exist independently of the brain and mind structure. But what we experience of that ultimate ontological reality is shaped by our brain and mind structures in ways that personify that unknown, rendering it humanlike in its qualities (Winkelman 2004: 91)

In other words there may be ontologically distinct spirits, but, just as with every other sensory experience, they must be experienced through our biological, cognitive and cultural filters.

In a sense, what Winkelman is talking about here has some relevance to Carl Jung's notion of the 'Psychoid,' a term that refers to the capacity of the Jungian archetypes (and, I believe, the 'psyche' more generally), to be simultaneously 'out there' and 'in here.' Jung conceived of the Psychoid as 'the bridge to matter in general,' and psychologist Jon Mills refers to it as a 'liaison between mind and body' (Mills 2014: 237). From this perspective, then, spiritual beings might be understood as a co-creation of internal biological, psychological and cultural influences interacting with ontologically distinct external stimuli, with spirits emerging at the intersection. Such an interpretation would account for both pan-cultural similarities (biological structures and ontologically distinct entities), and cross-cultural differences (psychological and cultural filters).

In his discussion of Spiritist psychic surgery in Brazil, anthropologist Sidney Greenfield, in an effort to understand the role of spirit beings in the process, drew upon the writings of psychologist Lawrence LeShan who put forward a third way in conceptualising the nature of spirit controls in trance mediumship (Greenfield 1999: 160-161). LeShan identified two explanations which dominate the debate over spirit controls – either they are the product of multiple personality disorder (now known as dissociative identity disorder), or they are 'real' spirits. LeShan suggests, however, a third way of thinking about these entities. He proposes that they might best be understood as 'functional entities.' He writes that functional entities:

> …do not have any length, breadth, or thickness. They cannot be detected by any form of instrumentation, although their effects often can be…They do not have continuous existence whether or not they are being mentally conceptualized…they exist only when they are held in the mind, only when being conceptualized, only when being considered to exist (LeShan 1995: 167)

LeShan's hypothesizing was inspired by the famous trance medium Eileen J. Garrett's spirit control, Uvani, who was notable for his consistency of character across years of investigation, as well as apparently presenting a completely different 'psychological profile' to that of his medium when subjected to psychological tests (Carrington 1957). Other examples of functional entities include mathematical postulates, such as mathematical square roots, which do not exist but which are nevertheless real in that they help us to solve real-life problems. Greenfield summarises this idea when he writes that a 'functional entity, therefore, is what we agree it is and/or does and when it does it' (Greenfield 1999: 161).

Ontological Turn

In a short but influential paper published in the journal Anthropology of Consciousness in 1993, Edith Turner posed the important question is 'The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?' Drawing on her own first-hand encounter with the Ihamba spirit amongst the Ndembu in Zambia, Turner called for a radical overhaul of anthropology's dominant framework for understanding the beliefs and experiences of their informants. She argued that anthropologists had tended to try to explain away elements of the cultures they studied that did not fit into the established and acceptable bounds of Western academia, and as such were failing to do what they had set out to do in the first place (to understand the worldview of the 'other'). Once again spirits are the problem. In a later paper Turner writes of the need to:

> [...] endorse the experiences of spirits as veracious aspects of the life-world of the peoples with whom we work; that we faithfully attend to our own experiences in order to judge their veracity; that we are not reducing the phenomena of spirits or other extraordinary beings to something more abstract and distant in meaning; and that we accept the fact that spirits are ontologically real for those whom we study (Turner 2010: 224).

Building on the foundations laid out by scholars like Turner, recent anthropologists have begun to open up new avenues for engagement with non-physical realities. In the introduction to the recent edited volume The Social Life of Spirits (2014), Ruy Blanes and Diana Espírito Santo recognise the need for anthropologists to try out new approaches to the issue of invisible spiritual beings. They argue that in order to do this we must move away from the more traditional reductive frameworks of social functionalism, pathology and cognitive science, which have dominated the discourse on spirit possession and mediumship, in favour of experiential phenomenological approaches and an emphasis on the social effects of non-physical entities, and the processes by which they become social actors (Blanes & Espírito Santo 2014: 7).

Diana Espírito Santo's work in the area of spirit mediumship is a particularly good example of how this new shift in perspective can be put into practice. Her research has focussed on exploring the processes involved in the development of the dead in

Cuban Espiritismo, for instance, which includes making, interacting, and forming relationships with life-sized dolls of the deceased as part of a process of 'materialisation' and interaction with the dead (Espírito Santo 2014: 199). The work of anthropologist Emily Pierini in the Brazilian mediumship group Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn), also explores the multi-layered experiential processes involved in the development of spirit mediumship (Pierini, 2014). My own research with trance mediums in Bristol similarly focuses on the social processes by which spirits are manifested in the context of the séance, through the use of bodily performance and reinforcement through dialogue (Hunter, 2013). This emphasis on performance, however, is not to say that that is all that is going on, but rather should be understood as part of the process of manifestation of socially active agents: the conditions that enable an ostensible spirit to exist in the social moment.

The recent work of Tanya Luhrmann (2012), investigating the American Evangelical Christian relationship with God also has relevance here. Luhrmann's research has focussed on the processes by which Evangelicals commune with God, specifically looking at prayer and the psychological phenomenon known as absorption (Luhrmann et al. 2010). Absorption is defined as an individual's capacity to get lost in their own mental imagery, and Luhrmann suggests that those with high absorption are better able to develop this close relationship with God. Now, it would be easy here for her to say that the experience of communing with God is nothing more than imagination, but Luhrmann doesn't go this far. Instead she explores the possibility that this is just a precondition for the experience of God (who may or may not exist). She suggests that 'absorption' is a skill that can be learned and cultivated by the practitioner in order to bring about 'unusual spiritual experiences of the divine' (2010: 66).

In a similar way I have suggested in my own work that the conditions found in Spiritualist séances are specifically geared towards the facilitation of ostensible spirit encounters - darkness as a form of sensory deprivation, and music for auditory stimulation, combined with meditation, for example, all of which are well attested means of inducing altered states of consciousness, which also appear to be preconditions for inducing experiences of spirit contact (Hunter 2010).

Conclusion

In my own research I have moved away from asking 'why questions' (such as 'why do people believe in spirits'), towards 'how questions,' namely questions about the possible processes involved (i.e. 'how do people communicate with spirits'). The reason for this is two-fold. Firstly, the question 'why do people believe in spirits' can quite simply be answered with 'because people have experiences that seem to suggest the presence of spirits.' This is Hufford's 'experiential source hypothesis.' I myself had an experience of this type while participating in a mediumship development session at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, during which my left arm, at the very least, seemed to take on a life of its own - an agency that felt as though it was distinct from my own consciousness - and perhaps it was, after all this does fit well with the Lodge's emic interpretation of such occurrences (Hunter 2011: 138-139).

Secondly, asking 'how do people communicate with spirits' presents researchers with the opportunity to engage with this research without the constant need to question the reality of spirits, which can often distract from what is actually going on. In

the words of parapsychological anthropologist Patric Giesler, we can 'assume that [spirits] could exist and proceed etically on that assumption' (Giesler 1984: 302-303). In this way we can bypass the hegemonic dismissal of alternative ontological systems (Howard 2013), and get on with the task of understanding the social, cultural and psychological processes involved in the manifestation of ostensible spiritual beings as distinctive social agents, as well as the consequent effects of these beings as they feedback into the psychological, social and cultural spheres of human life.

The main difference between this approach and the more traditional bracketing approaches discussed earlier has to do with underlying assumptions. While the traditional approach claims to be ontologically neutral, it actually continues to operate under the assumption that 'ours is the only real reality.' What I suggest is that we begin our inquiry from a much less ontologically certain position. In a sense this idea is summed up quite nicely by the neuroscientist David Eagleman's notion of a 'possibility space.' According to Eagleman's 'possibilian' philosophy the possibility space is a frame of mind in which the researcher celebrates 'the vastness of our ignorance,' and is 'unwilling to commit to any particular made-up story, and take[s] pleasure in entertaining multiple hypotheses' (Jansen 2010). In this way we are able to put into action what Fiona Bowie has called 'cognitive empathetic engagement' (Bowie 2013), a process of genuinely opening ourselves up to new ontological possibilities. I have tentatively given my own label of 'ontological flooding' to this active process of engaging with alternate ontologies, referring to an inversion of the traditional approach of 'ontological bracketing' (see Hunter 2015 for further elaboration). Through approaching the 'problem of spirits' from such alternative perspectives it is my contention that we might be able to move away from the kinds of reductive models discussed earlier in this paper, towards a more holistic, less hegemonic understanding of the nature and role of ostensible spiritual beings.

This is also the place where we might begin collaborating with the parapsychologists, whose goal has been to find and assess the available evidence for paranormal phenomena by experimental methods, and to try to find out how it all works (Caswell et al. 2014; Hunter 2014). This has been another area of my own work, following in Andrew Lang's footsteps by specifically trying to initiate a dialogue between anthropologists and parapsychologists (see also Schroll & Schwartz 2005 and Luke 2010). Parapsychologists have amassed, over the last 150 years, some very intriguing data regarding the possibility of survival after death, as well as for the so-called 'psi phenomena,' which include telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, and so on (see Cardena et al. 2015 for a recent overview of the field). Some of the most recent research with spirt mediums, for example, which employs stringent multiple blinded experimental protocols, appears to demonstrate at the very least some form of 'anomalous information transfer' taking place (Beischel et al. 2015). The challenge now is to discern whether this information is coming from deceased spirit beings, or from the minds of still living agents. This is an ongoing problem in parapsychology known as the 'survival versus psi' debate (Beischel & Rock 2009), and is a fitting place to end our excursion

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