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# Paranthropology

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*Invoking the Rational in  
Acknowledging the Irrational:  
A Haunting in Malta*

*Experiences of Synchronicity and  
Anthropological Endeavours:  
An Anthropologist Goes Weird*

*And more...*



# **Paranthropology**

**Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal**

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Welcome to *Paranthropology* Vol. 4 No. 4, the fourteenth issue of the journal and the last for 2013. In “Harry Potter and All That” Simon Deins presents an overview of research into the psychology of childrens’ beliefs about, and understandings of, magic. Henry Dosedla then examines “Divination Systems Within Archaic Shamanic Traditions of Central and Eastern Europe,” exploring the varied rituals and divinatory techniques of the Carpathian basin. In “Art and Transpersonal Experience,” Charles Laughlin presents an approach to art grounded in transpersonal anthropology and Tibetan tantric visualization techniques, providing a new framework for the ethnographic interpretation of artistic productions. Christel Mattheeuws then gives an account of some of her experiences of synchronicity while conducting fieldwork amongst the Zanadroandrena in Madagascar, and her subsequent experiences coping with chronic fatigue syndrome. John Micallef’s paper “Invoking the Rational in Acknowledging the Irrational” examines traditional Hares hauntings in Malta from the perspective of Maltese youth groups and their rationalisations of supernatural events. Finally, Fiona Bowie reports on a recent conference on “Anthropology and the Paranormal” held at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California.

I hope you enjoy this issue, and we’ll be back with more in 2014.

Jack Hunter

## Contents

**Harry Potter and All That:  
Children’s Understanding of Magic  
– Simon Dein (4–10)–**

**Divination Systems Within Archaic  
Shamanic Traditions of Central and  
Eastern Europe  
– Henry Dosedla (11–16)–**

**Art and Transpersonal Experience:  
Anthropology of Spiritual  
Symbolism and Tibetan Tantric  
Buddhist Visualization Practice  
–Charles D. Laughlin (17–29) –**

**Experiences of Synchronicity and  
Anthropological Endeavours:  
An Anthropologist Goes Weird  
– Christel Mattheeuws (31–40) –**

**Invoking the Rational in  
Acknowledging the  
Irrational: A Haunting in Malta  
– John Micallef (41–46) –**

**Anthropology and the Paranormal:  
Report on a Symposium at the  
Esalen Institute  
– Fiona Bowie (47–50) –**

# Harry Potter and All That: Children's Understanding of Magic

Simon Dein



The topic of magic has been a longstanding interest of anthropologists and to a lesser extent of psychologists. The classical anthropological conception of magic involves the belief that supernatural forces can be compelled to act in certain ways for good or evil purposes through the recitation of specific formulae and In general, the term refers to beliefs and behaviors in which the relationship between an act and its effect is not empirically or scientifically verified. For the most part the term connotes faulty logic and non-scientific reasoning and frequently the term has been applied to non-Western peoples or cultural "others." Magical thinking appears to be a cultural universal and constitutes an important aspect of religion and in many instances it is impossible to meaningfully separate the two. In religion supernatural agents have the power to cause impossible feats to occur, for example creating a universe *de novo*.

While It appears that belief in magic has diminished in the western world with its emphasis on rationality, objectivity and demythologization, many people continue to be interested in the phenomenon as demonstrated by the large number of books, films and websites devoted to magic. Individuals who are well versed in critical thinking and logical analysis will sometimes behave in ways which directly oppose their educational experience, purposefully acting in accordance with statements based on magical principals when placed in high-risk situations (Rozin, Millman & Nemeroff 1986). Anthropological studies reveal that adult belief in magic among adults is still high in modern industrial society (Rozin, Millman & Nemeroff 1986; Luhrmann 1989; Jahoda 1969; Zusne & Jones 1982; Rozin & Nemeroff 2002).

Early anthropologists and sociologists viewed magic as an evolutionary stage, contrastable with religion, or as providing evidence of 'primitive' as opposed to rational thinking. While Tylor (1871) regarded magic as "one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind," he did not view it as superstition or heresy. Radcliffe-Brown (1922) posited

that the function of magic was to express the social importance of a desired event, while Malinowski (1954) regarded magic as directly and essentially concerned with satisfying the psychological needs of the individual. Sir James Frazer (1890) in *The Golden Bough*, ordered magic, religion, and science in a grandiose evolutionary scheme. Magic, according to him, preceded religion on account of the fact that the former was logically more simple. Sigmund Freud (2011) saw magic as the earliest phase in the development of religious thought (Totem and Taboo). Edward Evans-Pritchard (1937) in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* described how magic was an integral part of religion and culture deployed to explain events that could not otherwise be understood or controlled.

While anthropological and sociological approaches focused on magic as a social phenomenon, the role of individual psychology was directly implicit in the views of Tylor and Frazer and expressed more in the work of Malinowski, who frequently proposed psychological explanations for belief in magic. With the development of ethnographic methodology, functionalist and psychological interpretations emphasized magic as a way of fulfilling emotional and social needs. During the last quarter of the Twentieth century, new ethnographic research and theoretical assessments resulted in a revival of interest in magic, with the term being applied in novel ways and in new contexts, especially emphasizing magic in relation to modernity and the power of the state. Luhrmann's work on modern-day witches in England, subsequently published as *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* discussed the ways in which magic and other esoteric techniques both served emotional needs, magic came to be reasonable through the experience of practice (Luhrmann 1989). For adults magic may give an illusion of control which can be beneficial psychologically (Zusne & Jones 1982; Langer 1975). It may have an humanising function making the inanimate world more humane (Subbotsky 2000). The social science literature generally portrays magic as a superstitious

phenomenon associated with uncertainty, unpredictability and frustration. While social scientists to date have largely studied magical thinking in adults the focus of this paper is on magical beliefs in children. As I shall go on to discuss, magical thinking in children may confer positive psychological benefits and play a significant part in the development of creativity and problem solving activities.

### Children's Belief in Magic

As Subbotsky notes, psychologists have long been interested in the fact that young children in western cultures are not constrained from the grips of rationality. It is only between six and nine years of age that children stop believing in the reality of magic (Subbotsky 2004). Piaget developed a classic theory of four developmental stages according to which children between ages 2 to 7 would be classified under his Preoperational Stage of development (Piaget 1926). During this egocentric stage children are perceived to not be able to use logical thinking and children strongly believe that their personal thought has a direct effect on the world. Piaget labelled as "magical" children's beliefs that they could cause some event merely through their own thoughts or gestures. Children acting as if they could obtain a valued object through wishing would be said to be engaging in magical reasoning.

Piaget reported how four to seven year olds attributed consciousness to non-animate objects. As children grow older and have more experience of objects in the world, magical thinking is replaced by logical and scientific thinking. According to him children could not understand the difference between reality and fantasy until they were at least seven or eight years old. Yet others have characterised magical thinking as characteristic of early childhood (Piaget 1929). Karl Buler (1930) held childhood to be a time when children really believed in dwarfs and giants. Bettelheim (1976) postulates that in children magical play is fuel for imaginary role play and fantasizing helping them to cope with the chaos of their subconscious lives and master life difficulties and to maintain independence and power.

The current view resulting from recent research cross culturally is that young children have a much better understanding of what is real and what is not than Piaget suggested, but that they acquire different aspects of this knowledge at different ages. The child also substitutes magical beliefs concerning fairies, goblins, and other phenomena that violate expecta-

tions with plausible expectations and shows improved ability to distinguish appearance from reality. Recent accounts of cognitive development however portray young children as constructing systematic and coherent theories of the world (Rosengren & Hickling 1994); young children can readily differentiate real from imaginary objects (Harris *et al.* 1991). Contemporary literature suggests that between the ages of three and six, children often have rich magical cognitions; for example, they typically maintain that magic is real. By age six or seven, children come to realize that magic involves deception, and that any ordinary person can learn to perform magic. Even three year olds can understand the difference between pretend actions and entities and real ones. In the psychological domain specifically, by the age of 3 children understand that certain mental states, like desires, can drive actions, and, in return, certain events can produce mental states (Bartsch & Wellman 1995). Children are aware that they cannot alter a physical object "just by thinking about it" (Estes, Wellman & Wooley 1995).

Thus recent research points to the fact that even young children have a better understanding of what is real and what is not than Piaget suggested. Several factors may explain this age related decline: Increased knowledge of cause and effect; parental and family input and encouragement, cultural legitimization (or delegitimation), religious beliefs and active role playing. Fundamentalist Christian parents for instance equate fantasy with lying and view it as a threat to truth. They therefore strongly discourage it. Hodge & Tripp (1986) have argued that watching television may play an important part in helping children to develop concepts of reality and fantasy. Cartoons, they speculate, may have this special function for young viewers.

However it is not uncommon for very young children to maintain beliefs in the reality of supernatural beings (Harris *et al.* 1991; Rosengren *et al.* 1994) and many have trouble differentiating fantasy from reality (Subbotsky 1985), and label certain events as magic (Johnson & Harris 1994). Young children are more likely to believe in fantasy figures such as superheroes, tooth fairy, Santa Claus and monsters than older children (Principe & Smith 1998). In the realm of magic, specific causal laws or regularities are considerably relaxed (Rosengren & Hickling 1994). In relation to wishes, research indicates that preschool-age children understand a great deal about wishing but also believe in its efficacy. Vikan & Clausen (1993) showed 4- and 6-year-old participants drawings of

children and told them that the child was making a wish in an attempt to influence another person depicted in another scene. Children were asked to assess the efficacy of the child's wish. Results indicated that 94% of the 4- to 6-year-old children maintained they could influence others by wishing (Wooley *et al.* 1999). These authors note that although children hold that wishing 'works', and that it involves the mind exerting a direct effect on physical reality, they also understand that wishing it is dissimilar from ordinary mental causality. When questioned about the magical nature of wishing, children's responses indicate that they view wishing to be more similar to magical events, like a frog becoming a princess, than to ordinary events, like water running out of a faucet.

In terms of differentiating fantasy from reality Wooley, Brown & Boerger (2006) argue that children have this ability by the age of three. On the other hand Rosengren & Hickling (1994) assert that magical thinking emerges during the preschool years rather than as existing as a cognitive operation since birth. These authors investigated children's magical explanations and beliefs in two studies. Follow-up assessments revealed that most 4-year-olds viewed magic as possible under the control of an agent (magician) with special abilities, whereas most 5-year-olds saw magic as tricks that anyone could learn. More recent studies suggest that children of four and five years hold a belief in magic, but not an overwhelming 'magical' orientation. Although children believe that wishing works through the mind and exerts a direct effect on physical reality, they also understand that wishing differs from ordinary mental causality.

Johnson & Harris (1994) presented 3-5-year-old children with various hypothetical object transformations, some possible and some impossible. Preschool children made a distinction between outcomes they consider magical and more ordinary outcomes. More recent work suggests that young children believe in magic (Harris *et al.* 1991; Subbotsky 1985). While children as young as four years of age verbalise the fact that magic can only occur in fairy tales, in their actions four to six year olds behave as magic believers, acting as though magic is real. Beliefs in 'fantastic entities' are widespread among preschoolers yet in their verbal judgments deny that magic can be real. This may occur on account of the costs and benefits of engaging in magical behaviour in different circumstances (Wooley *et al.* 1999; Wooley 1997). Magical thinking is found particularly in children's explanations concerning death, whether involving the death of a family member or pet, or their own illness

or impending death. These experiences are often novel for a young child, who does not possess the experiential context to provide an understanding of the ramifications of the event (Webb 2010).

Children often use magic to explain events that both seem impossible and for which they lack alternative explanations. Wooley & Phelps (1994) presented children with physical events that violated their expectations, and asked the children to explain how the events happened. Children between 4 and 8 years of age employed magic as an explanation for physical events when adequate physical explanations were not readily apparent. Especially preschool children tend to view events that they do not understand as magic. Work by Johnson and Harris also indicates that, when faced with an impossible outcome, 3- to 7-year-old children often speculate that the event must have been effected by magic. Thus it appears that until about age 7 or 8, appeals to magic are made in explaining unusual events. However, Phelps and Wooley's research also indicates that by the age of 8 most children do not view magic as a real force that operates in the world and instead use the word "magic" to indicate the presence of a trick.

Subbotsky (1994) found that, in verbal reports, 4- and 5-year-old children normally distinguish between events which are possible in the real world and those which occur only in books and fairy tales. However, when children are placed in a conducive context they may act as if supernatural events are possible. He read children a story about an allegedly magical item, such as a box, that was able to change pictures into real objects. He then left children with the box and watched to see if they attempted to perform the magical event. Even though a majority of the children initially stated that pictures could not be turned into real objects, children as old as nine attempted to produce the magical response in this situation. Thus at the age of 4 years, in their verbal judgments, most preschoolers are sceptical toward the possibility of "mind-over-matter" magic, yet in their actions, they act as if they really believe in magic.

Chandler & Lalonde (1994) explored the extent to which 3- and 4-year-old children are willing to label events as "magic." Rather than being presented with hypothetical or pretend transformations, in this study preschool children were presented with an apparatus adapted from one of Baillargeon's (1991) infant habituation studies. The apparatus included a screen which appeared to pass completely through a solid object in blatant violation of physical laws. Children's reactions to this impossible event were re-

corded. Two thirds of the children labelled this occurrence as "magic."

What can we conclude from the above? While belief in magic declines with increasing age, children are not always proficient at determining what is real and appear to be taken in by 'fantastic' events in a number of different types of situations. These include situations that would usually be unfamiliar to a child; or where contextual cues suggest that a "special event" is occurring in which different causal rules apply; or situations that trigger a strong emotional response, such as fear. Emotions can result in a blurring of the fantasy-reality barrier. While the 'standard' development account proposes that as children get older they cast aside magical thinking and adopt more disciplined rational scientific thinking, recent evidence challenges this position. Magical and rational thinking occur concurrently throughout development and are in competition with each other. Furthermore thoughts about magic, far from appearing in early childhood, may actually depend on the child acquiring knowledge of everyday principles and constraints. Thus in modern highly industrial cultures, magical cognitions occur in preschool children as a legitimate, conscious form of belief coexisting with children's belief in physical causality and is reinforced by the social environment. Scientific rationality does not necessarily abolish magical beliefs.

What happens to beliefs in the power in magic in the transition from childhood to adolescence? Adults may at times entertain magical explanations of events and superstition in western cultures remains prevalent, as does belief in the paranormal including faith healing, astrology and demonic possession. So belief in magic does not disappear completely. Subbotsky (2011) asks how a belief in magic can coexist with a belief in science in the mind of a rational, educated adult? A possible explanation, he suggests, is that magical beliefs survive in the rational mind by descending into the subconscious. According to him in modern industrial cultures, magical beliefs appear in preschool children as a legitimate, conscious form of belief coexisting with children's belief in physical causality and is supported by social environment. In older children and adults, as a result of scientific and religious education, magical beliefs descend into the domain of the subconscious.

## The Effects of Magical Thinking on Cognitive Development

Despite the fact that multinational industries (such as toy production and entertainment) exploit and support magical beliefs in children and many television programs for children include magical characters, we know surprisingly little about the effects of magical thinking and magical beliefs on children's cognitive and social development. Magical thinking and belief in fantasy characters may have a key role in helping children take someone else's perspective.

Subbotsky *et al.* (2011) examined whether encouraging children to think about magic would actually help them to be more creative. Children viewed excerpts from a Harry Potter film (the first one). These either included magical elements, or they did not. Before and afterwards, the investigators tested the children's creative powers using some standard setups (problem solving, drawing creatively, and so on). The study found that children who watched magical scenes demonstrated more creative thinking. The effect was significant. Although both groups improved, the improvement in the 'no magic' group was around 50%, whereas it doubled in the 'magical scenes' group. The authors concluded that: "Magical thinking enables children to create fantastic imaginary worlds, and in this way enhances children's capacity to view the world and act upon it from multiple perspectives. The results suggested that books and videos about magic might serve to expand children's imagination and help them to think more creatively." He asserts that rather than an impediment to scientific reasoning or a byproduct of cognitive development, in children magical thinking is an important and necessary complement to these processes, enhancing creativity at problem-solving and reinforcing coping strategies, among other benefits. Furthermore the ability to move beyond actual reality may facilitate the acceptance of strange or anomalous religious ideas.

Given that magical themes constitute a large part of the content of much of children's literature, can such themes have negative effects on psychological development? Harry Potter is a series of seven fantasy novels authored by the British author J. K. Rowling describing the adventures of a wizard, Harry Potter, and his friends Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger, all students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The main theme relates to Harry's quest to overcome the Dark wizard, Lord

Voldemort, who is determined to be immortal, conquer the wizarding world, subjugate non-magical people, and destroy all those who defy him, especially Harry Potter. In the Harry Potter series magic is depicted as a natural force that can be used to override the usual laws of nature. Many fictional magical creatures are found in the series, while ordinary creatures sometimes demonstrate new magical abilities in the novels' world. Objects, too, can be given magical properties.

Taub and Servaty-Seib's (2009) paper *Controversial Content: Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children* examines the religious and psychological ramifications of the Harry Potter books. One of the common criticisms of the Harry Potter series is that the stories deal with magic: Various churches have denounced the books, and their author, J. K. Rowling, has been accused of being a witch herself.

Another criticism of the Harry Potter series is that the distinction between fantasy and reality is blurred; the real world and magical worlds are intertwined. However, as Sharon Black (2003) points out in *The Magic of Harry Potter: Symbols and Heroes of Fantasy*, Rowling makes several important points about the real world through fantasy and illustrate the flaws and injustices in reality through fantasy. Furthermore the magic in the books might satisfy the readers' needs to find meaning in today's unmagical world and increase their ability to explore real life through imaginative interaction with unreal characters and situations. Since however most children at five are able to understand magic as something fictional, the danger of children being lured into the world of witchcraft is minimal. Rowling is confident that children can easily discern where reality ends and fantasy begins (Schafer 2000). Her affirmation accords with Bruno Bettelheim (1976), who remarks that any child familiar with fantasy understands that these stories "speak to him in the language of symbols and not that of everyday reality" (p. 62).

### Bettelheim Continues

The child intuitively comprehends that although these stories are unreal, they are not untrue; that while what these stories tell about does not happen in fact, it must happen as inner experience and personal development; that [fantasy] tales depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence. (p. 73).

He further asserts that the images suggested to the child through fantasy can be used to "structure his daydreams and give better direction to his life" (p.7) and that the unreal metaphors and symbols of the story become the raw materials to experiment with reality.

Black concludes that through the unreality of Harry's magical world, children learn to deal with the reality of family, friends, and school—and she can definitely distinguish the real/specific from the unreal/true.

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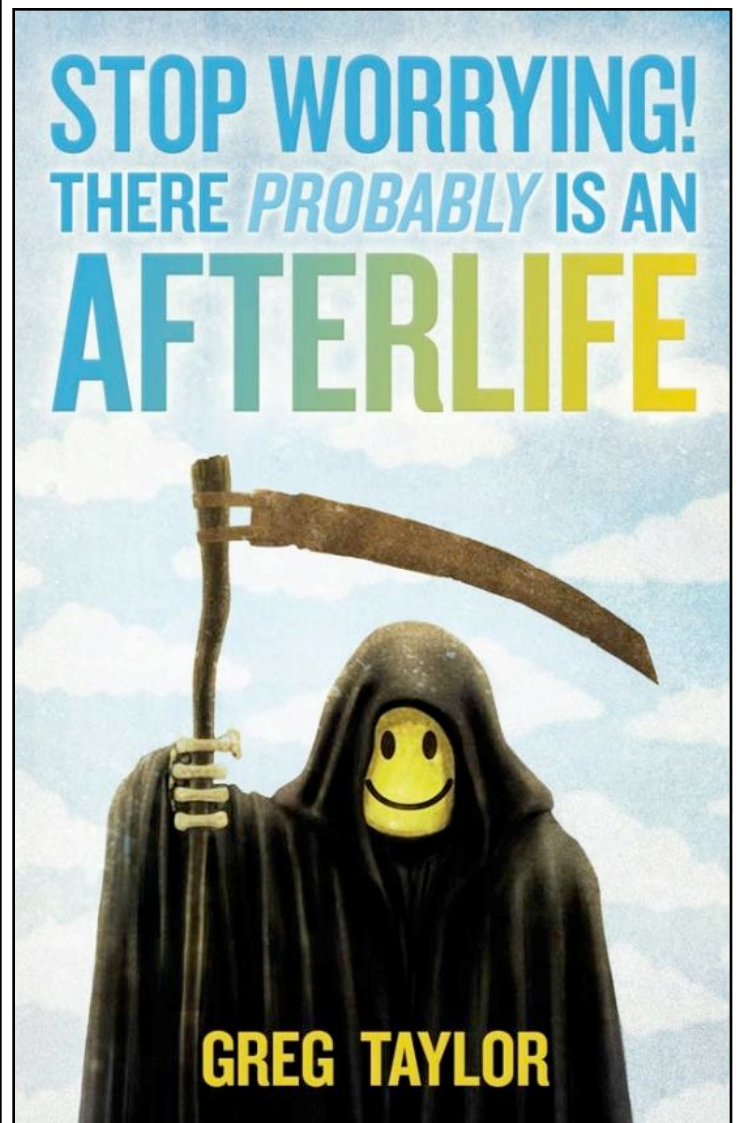
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**New Publication:**



<http://www.amazon.com/Worrying-There-Probably-Afterlife-ebook/dp/B00GBLRNTS>

# Divination Systems Within Archaic Shamanic Traditions of Central and Eastern Europe

Henry Dosedla



## Abstract

Divination rituals are a distinct component of ancient folk beliefs found in remote parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Such rituals were not only practised towards the end of the year, but also involved the use of distinct herbal substances, thus revealing significant parallels with traditions still shared by contemporary archaic societies in parts of northern Eurasia. While many of these features were once common in alpine regions these still could have survived within parts of the Carpathian Basin where they are now experiencing something of a revival after periods of suppression due to several decades of communist rule. A prominent role within this context are practises by means of so-called “helping animals” especially in the case of figurine divination as part of Carpatho-Slovakian folk tradition.

## 1. Introduction

Within Central and Eastern European folk traditions there are several customs and beliefs regarding divination, including all kinds of oracles and other ways of fortune telling. Apparently the majority of such activities are connected with the winter season, especially with the midwinter period between solstice on December 21st and Epiphany on January 6th, marking the end of the Christmas cycle. This is related to the turn of the year when there is great interest in catching a glance of the future. Another reason is the fact that most of these traditions may be traced back to cults of the pre-Christian era which significantly were connected with the darkest and most sinister twelve nights of midwinter when, according to widespread folk belief, many kinds of supernatural energies are activated and all sorts of ghostly entities were imagined to be roaming around (Motz, 1984).

Some of these traditions continue in many alpine regions and supposedly bear indications of some possible shamanic origin, apparently evident in similar traditions shared by several ethnicities of the Carpathians. This applies most clearly to a distinctive divination practice marked by involving so-called “helping animals.”

## 2. Seasonal and Social Settings

Though there are apparent similarities between alpine folk traditions, namely of the south eastern Alps, and those of the Carpathians - due to some common ecological, as well as economical, conditions - there are also distinct particularities shared by various ethnicities and language groups. Disregarding any present or historical boundaries as well as different religious persuasions, their settlement patterns were always of great geographical diffusion thus resulting in numerous individual communities isolated in remote regions (Gunda, 1966).

### 2.1 Midwinter Customs

Due to the importance of seasonal conditions within rural life most folk traditions were centred at midwinter with a number of marked days each of them attributed to a particular Catholic Saint. Owing to the fact that there is a difference of ten days between the former Julian calendar and the modern Gregorian calendar there is also the same difference between the modern date of solstice on December 21st and the former date of December 13th. Accordingly this has resulted in a variety of dates reputed to mark the beginning of the midwinter period, starting as early as All Saints Day on November 1st, dedicated to the memory of the deceased, followed by St. Martin's

Day on November 11th, marking the end of pastoral activity and also the start of the slaughtering season, whereas St. Catherine's Day on November 25th marked the start of a four week period of fasting until Christmas (Motz, 1993).

A number of divination customs take place on St. Andrew's Eve on November 30th, on St. Lucia on December 13th, being identical with the former solstice date, as well as at the Eve of St. Thomas on December 21st representing the modern date of solstice. Other divination customs are fixed to Christmas Eve on December 24th or to New Year's Eve on December 31st, and finally to Epiphany on January 6th. Though the main focus in this paper is on fortune telling by means of animal figures this ought to be regarded within the distinct context of divination customs of the Carpathian regions (Suhr, 1969).

## 2.2 Other Occasions

Depending on the seasonal growing of distinct plants there are some oracle customs observed during early spring without any fixed date. While divination customs connected to the midwinter period are usually performed within families, there are other occasions when the help of some foreign divination expert is demanded.

Within the regions between the Alps and the Carpathians there were many villages with so-called persons of "wisdom" usually acting as traditional healers or herbalists and ritual experts involved in the proper performance of customs (ranging from child-birth rituals to funerals). Among these village experts some were distinctively reputed for their divination abilities and therefore were occasionally employed by clients faced with various personal problems (Ruszel, 1972).

In addition to resident diviners there were also cases of ambulant diviners who eventually showed up at occasions of public gatherings, parish fairs or pilgrimages. Another such special occasion was the Roman Catholic feast of Assumption, also known as "Our Heavenly Lady's Day," at which occasion the annual blessing of medical herbs is celebrated within the church.

As a significant fact throughout the Carpathian regions Protestants as well as many Orthodox Christians would not only share traditional customs according to the Catholic festival calendar, but would also make use of potions secretly fetched from the

holy water font of Catholic churches for use in magical rituals.

## 3. Traditional Techniques

According to all the traditional occasions regarded proper for divination customs there were also appropriate ritual techniques ranging from numerous plant oracles and archaic methods of extispicy, to the application of various technical devices as in the case of particular oracle stools. Since a great number of midwinter customs are based on the preparation of distinct traditional dishes, most of them are concerned with aspects of fertility and are also part of divination practises which, throughout the Carpathian Basin, would generally take place on St. Lucia's Day (13th of December), marking the former date of solstice (Motz, 1993).

### 3.1 Plant Oracles

Oracle plants are, in general, concerned with the expectation of next spring during the winter season, mostly including Hellebore or Christ Rose, which were the main topic of a recent contribution to *Paranthropology* (Dosedla, 2013).

In similar ways the growing of other plants around Christmas may be taken for some sign as to the weather conditions of forthcoming year. This applies to twigs of prune or other fruit bearing trees collected on St. Barbara's day (December 4th) or St. Lucia's day (December 13th), and are kept in a vase. Seeds of wheat may also be put on a plate with water on the same date producing fresh green sprouts thus encouraging expectation for a good harvest during summer.

Many such customs were performed on St. Lucy's Day, when peasants were eager to obtain indications of weather forecast for the coming year and young women tried to find out who might become their future bridegroom.

A Slovenian so-called onion oracle worked by the use of twelve pieces of onion covered with salt, each of them presenting one month of the year. Those pieces on which the salt would melt were taken as a sign for a rather wet month.

In another so-called apple oracle an apple was cut open, and if the seeds formed a regular five-pointed star this meant good health (Kotnik, 1931/32).



### 3.2 Bone or Slaughter Oracles

Traditionally a goose is slaughtered and fried to celebrate St. Martin's day on November 11th with a distinct breast bone which then is taken and used as an oracle. According to its white, red or brown colour indicating expectation of either a mild or cold winter.

Throughout Slovakia and adjacent Carpathian regions St. Thomas' day is the date for slaughtering a pig for the Christmas celebrations. In some regions especially inhabited by the Hungarian minority there was an oracle custom by means of the liver or the shoulder-blade, as in the case of a widespread tradition of the Balkan Peninsula.

Also the fish – mostly carp - traditionally consumed as a feast meal on Christmas or New Year's Eve played a significant rôle as an oracle indicating a fruitful new year (Gunda, 1966).

### 3.3 Other Techniques

Another oracle custom practised on New Year's Eve, in addition to the casting of lead or wax, consisted of hiding special significant objects such as a spoon, knife, nail, comb or other household articles under cups which, when uncovered, could reveal some indications of what possibly could be expected in the course of the coming year.

Numerous other kinds of oracle customs were practised by unmarried girls by means of throwing their slippers in a distinct way intending to find out indications of some future bride groom. For the same purpose several kinds of goose oracle were once common.

Another widespread custom involved the use of a particular stool which had to be made of seven distinct kinds of wood, by means of which when sitting on during Christmas service in church one was expected to detect which person within the community could be identified as a witch (Russel, 1972) Fig. 1 & 2.

While such customs in the Alpine regions usually were executed either on the Eve of St. Andrew or of St. Thomas, within the Carpathian regions this distinctively occurred on the Eve of St. Lucia.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

## 4. Food Traditions

A vast diversity of customs during the midwinter season were based on the preparation of distinctive traditional meals, some of them also bearing specific oracle features. As in the case of other midwinter customs, which within the Carpathian regions significantly were connected with St. Lucia, there are a great number of records from the Balkan Peninsula indicating some apparent geographical congruence. Besides the fact that meal sharing customs during midwinter festivals in an apparent ritual context were a common feature throughout Europe this applies not only especially to the Carpathian regions but also to some regionally predominant St. Lucia complex (Maticetov, 1951).

According to multiple investigations by anthropologists and folklorists, having collected pan-European material on this topic since the early Nine-

teenth century, the mythological character of St. Lucy may be traced back to some pre-Christian goddess-like underworld figure combined with fertility concepts, those of death and resurrection as well as apparent shamanic features.

Since one of these main features is the aspects of summer and winter, and likewise of life and death, all symbolized by the contrasting principle of light and darkness, the Christian martyr Lucia, who according to legend became blinded, may have been the reason why the archaic demoniac figure was replaced by or at least step by step became shaded into this Saint (Motz, 1982).

Also in folk mythology this oscillating figure is believed to roam around during midwinter nights blessing the pious and chasing the disobedient. Her punishments include injuries caused by her sickle or axe, as well as so-called "gastrotomy" by ripping up bellies which then are stuffed with thistles and thorns or stones, thus clearly indicating shamanic aspects, besides closely resembling similar female midwinter demons of alpine and Nordic regions (Hultcrantz, 1961).

Those St. Lucy customs involving ritual meals can be interpreted in the same context, according to ancient fertility concepts combined with offerings to the spiritual world and the deceased, and the same applies to all paraphernalia dealing with divination. Within the Carpathian Basin as well as parts of the Balkan Peninsula this applies the most to the widespread custom complex of so-called "St. Lucy bread," "St. Lucy cake" or other traditional pastries in various distinct shapes bearing similar names (Celandier, 1936).

According to regional variety these pastries may be made of maize, wheat or other cereals, as well as of a combination of different cereals, and sometimes are also mixed with beans, nuts, other fruits and several herbs with distinct properties and meanings within herbal folk tradition, including powdered rhizomes of hellebore (Hofler, 1908). As in the case of the annual Christmas or New Year's "halászlé" (traditional Hungarian fish soup), which on this occasion may contain some amount of hemp as well as hellebore, these are also usual ingredients of such ritual cakes (Dosedla, 2013).

In addition to an aspect of influencing fertility by ritual consumption or offering of food there are also distinct divination customs combined with such pastries. This may even apply to similar Northern and Western European midwinter traditions as in the French case of the so-called "King of Beans" at

Epiphany, when a hidden bean in a cake is taken as a sign of good luck for its finder (Sebillot, 1968).

#### 4.1 Pastries of figurative shapes

In some cases these pastries in Carpathian tradition are just of rather simple round and flat shape, and are apparently often named by terms such as "pogaczy" or "pogácsok," being Slavic and Hungarian derivations of the Graeco-Macedonian term "mpogatsas," which all may be traced back to a common term referring to "pagan," thus indicating some pre-Christian origin.

On the other hand there are innumerable cases of other varieties including symbolic figures and floral, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic shapes which in many ways may be interpreted as relating to a vast complex of pre-Christian traditions, but without any significant divination aspects (Mal, 1940).

Common symbolic figures used in such pastries are varieties of braid-like shapes, having been interpreted as relating to distinct archaic sacrifice traditions. Other symbols are ring-shaped, referring to the wheel as the cycle of the year as well as of life, or variations of a cross, eventually resembling some kind of swastika referring to the sun. There are also triplex shapes referring to the divine trinity of pagan as well as Christian tradition, and rhomboid shapes referring to feminine fertility. Also various floral shapes such as leaves, a triple twig, or an ear are common fertility symbols.

Anthropomorphic shapes are also a widespread European tradition, as in the case of the gingerbread man, and are regionally known by terms referring to Saints or other legendary figures, but apparently are not so popular in Eastern Europe except for in the form of a "baby in arms" also representing a fertility symbol (Lid, 1928).

#### 4.2 Animal shaped pastries

There are also numerous cases of baked animal figures used in the same symbolic context, including pig, horse, deer, hare, cock and hen or various other birds, though without any significant divinatory aspects.

Apart from this there is still another Carpathian tradition only shared by distinct divination experts in isolated communities belonging to the descendants of the former local Hungarian minority. Due to the apparent state of remoteness that prevailed during the Second World War, and the subsequent period of

communist rule, until very recently anthropological fieldwork there has resulted in a great amount of immensely revealing documents on folk traditions of a most archaic character, partly indicating the one or other relationship with distinct elements of shamanism. This applies the most to the element of the so-called “táltos”-traditions partly still alive within Hungarian folklore (Dioszegi, 1998).

According to historical evidence the term “táltos,” in the sense of a “bearer of (magical) wisdom,” goes back to the most ancient periods of the Finno-Ugrian tribes, when shamans were not only an institutional part of tribal life during pagan periods but also long after the foundation of the Christian kingdom of Hungary in 1000 AD.

Thus “táltos” traditions in several parts of contemporary Hungary, as well as the more remote regions of neighbouring countries with considerable Hungarian minorities have survived in many respects until very recently and have eagerly been studied and documented by anthropologists (Hoppal, 2007).

Apart from their main role as herbalists and traditional healers, persons referred to as “táltos” were (and still sometimes are) also consulted by villagers for their reputation as diviners. In spite of the various other ways of fortune telling partly mentioned in a previous volume of *Paranthropology*, a prominent method is based on the use of so-called “allátos képek” (animal figures) representing distinctive symbolic values and spiritual powers (Dosedla, 2013).

According to oral lore such figures were once usually cut out of leather, but in the course of enforced Christianisation were condemned as “devilish tools” and thus burnt together with other ritual utensils of the pagan period. Thus for the sake of concealment such figures henceforth were only made of perishable material, such as unfired clay, or by using pieces of animal shaped pastry exclusively reserved for special occasions. This is significantly attested to by archaeological evidence of zoomorphic clay figures which have been abundantly found in caves and other resting sites of Palaeolithic hunters of the Danubian Basin and adjacent regions.

Depending on occasion of a session either held at midwinter or any other time demanding the solution of a problem the fortune telling set in use may consist of one or two handfuls of animal figures, which are chosen according to distinct methods, resembling the choosing of sticks applied in the Chinese I Ching oracle (Dosedla, 2010).

One important initial step of an “allátos kérdésni” or “aking the animals” session is to address

the proper “godfather animal” in each case. This animal character may be chosen in a special session for a new born child in order to find a suitable means of protection. While such a talisman figure may accompany a person throughout their lifetime, there are also cases of finding some substitute or additional “animalic patron” during other ritual sessions held at crucial stages of life.

Apparently the main characters were figures of local feral animals also surrounded by intricate superstitious beliefs, as well as domestic cattle, sheep, pigs and fowl, but, occasionally, more exotic animals were also included. Though until quite recently most Carpathian village people were ignorant of the real existence of elephants, camels, lions or apes they still had some nebulous ideas of their appearance according to Bible stories or fairy tales, which also applies to the figure of the dragon (Dioszegi, 1998).

As a significant feature of this context there are a couple of animals of magical importance referred to by “hidden” names instead of their “true” ones which should never be uttered, as in the prominent case of “farkas” (i.e. “the one with the brush”) meaning the wolf, or “medved” (i.e. “honey liker”) meaning the bear.

Since this is paralleled in many Eastern European as well as Central Asian languages, such linguistic taboos and “magical nicknames” may be taken as indications of some form of common shamanic tradition (Duchacek, 1971).

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Henry Dosedla conducted fieldwork as an archaeologist and social anthropologist during the early seventies among the last societies representing Neolithic standards in Melanesia dealing with their environment management, mythological folk biology, medical traditions and religious concepts including divination systems Dosedla was also engaged in several development programs and documented gradual stages of cultural change and related social effects. After retirement from the Prehistory Department of the German Museum of Agriculture at Hohenheim University/Stuttgart his further research and publications have focussed on parallels between recent archaic societies and conditions in prehistoric Europe.



# Art and Transpersonal Experience: Anthropology of Spiritual Symbolism and Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Visualization Practice

Charles D. Laughlin



## Abstract

Most traditional art forms are an expression of the spiritual dimension of a culture's cosmology. Religious art and iconography often reveal the hidden aspects of spirit as glimpsed through the filter of cultural significance. Moreover, traditional art, although highly abstract, may actually describe sensory experiences derived in alternative states of consciousness. The often fuzzy concepts of "art" and "spirit" are analyzed and then operationalized in a way that makes them useful for cross-cultural research. The fact of the universally abstract nature of traditional art is analyzed and used as a clue to the function of art in expressing and penetrating to the spiritual domain. A "continuum of representational-associational abstraction" is described. These concepts are applied to the author's experiences while a practicing Tibetan Tantric Buddhist monk. The practice of Tibetan visualization practice is described. A perspective is developed that essentially supports Wassily Kandinsky's contention that abstract art is the expression of an "inner necessity" of spirit. The article argues for a greater sensitivity among ethnologists for the sublime nature of spiritual art.

All means (in painting) are sacred when they are dictated by inner necessity. All means are reprehensible when they do not spring from the fountain of inner necessity. . . The artist must be blind to 'recognized' and 'unrecognized' form, deaf to the teachings and desires of his time. His open eyes must be directed to his inner life and his ears must be constantly attuned to the voice of inner necessity.

-- Wassily Kandinsky

## Introduction

Anthropologists have long known that most traditions of art on the planet are both abstract in form and expressions of their society's system of sacred knowledge (see e.g., Hatcher, 1985; Layton, 1991; Morphy and Perkins, 2009). Moreover, the religious systems of most traditional cultures incorporate techniques for altering members' states of consciousness to one extent or another. Most cultures require alteration of consciousness while initiating the young into full participation in the society's spiritual life (Bourguignon, 1973; Dobkin de Rios and Winkelman, 1989). Unlike our own technocratic societies, the

linkage between abstract art and transpersonal experience is often direct and fundamental in the everyday lives of people. Thus any attempt to understand the inner meaning of traditional art—for that matter, any attempt to understand much of modern art in our own society—is futile without some grasp of people's range of transpersonal experience, as well as the cosmology which is both expressed by the art's iconic form and within the context of which the art is interpreted. Traditions of art are in fact systems of symbols that are part of a much greater cultural and experiential context, a context that must be entered experientially and intimately by the student if he or she is going to be able to critique the art from within a local tradition.

I wish to explore the relationship between art and transpersonal experience for whatever clues we may find about how the human mind makes sense of its own operations. I will present a phenomenological approach to art and transpersonal experience that will explain some of the universal properties of art, in particular the common association of abstraction and aesthetics that defines what we usually mean by the concept of "art." In order to do this I will have to reformulate the very fuzzy concepts of "art," "abstrac-

tion” and “spirit” in a way that makes them applicable to cross-cultural research. I will then apply the perspective to an understanding of how Tibetan tantric Buddhist practitioners utilize art to evoke and interpret alternative states of consciousness.

### Operationalizing Art

I have elsewhere analyzed the problems we anthropologists face in defining art—after all, it is a very ethnocentric term (see Laughlin, 2004). Hence, I will only briefly mention my conclusions here in the interests of space. A cross-culturally workable definition of art requires that we incorporate at least four major dimensions, aesthetics (the dimension of attractiveness, beauty, taste; Maguet, 1971, 1986),<sup>1</sup> significance (the dimension of meaning and the relation between the object’s meaning and the society’s cosmology/religion; Eliade, 1986; Layton, 1978), utility (the dimension of usefulness, purpose, intention, function; i.e., Alfred Gell’s, 1998, notion of “agency”), and sublimity (from the root sub, “up to”, and limin, “threshold; therefore, threshold to an experience of the sacred; Turner, 1969). In other words, what art anthropologists are really interested in studying are material culture and performances that involve imagery combining aesthetics, significance, utility and sublimity in some mixture. As the exact interaction between these four attributes may vary from situation to situation, and among cultures, anything like a crisp definition of art is pointless.<sup>2</sup> What we can do, however, is lay out an operational definition to guide our understanding of the underlying processes producing art. We may define art in general as any imagery that is the result of the coalescence of aesthetics, significance and agency, realizing that one or two of these may not be strongly present and that the peoples themselves may not recognize one or two of these as important. But again, recognizing that much of the art encountered in the field has a mythopoeic refer-

ence, we may define sacred art as the confluence of beauty, significance and utility in imagery which has associated with it the sublime, regardless of how the imagery is interpreted.

It is also important to note that a culture may or may not recognize a social status or role similar to our “artist,” and may or may not conceive of artistry as distinct from the transmission of significance or technological intention, but the material intersection of these three qualities (beauty, symbol and, to a lesser extent, utility): (1) have been demonstrated in research with captive primates and other animals (Alland, 1977), (2) crop-up naturally in children’s art cross-culturally (Kellogg, 1969; Alland, 1983), (3) are universal to human cultures (Dissanayake, 1988, p. ix), and (4) have been so since Paleolithic times—more than 15,000 years ago (Dissanayake, 1988, p. 53-55). The universality of this combination cries out for a neurobiological explanation, for artistic proclivity obviously existed prior to complex cultural variation and enculturation. As I will show below, it is my position that this universality is explained as being mediated by an essentially artistic brain. The brain recognizes and experiences beauty, just as it imposes significance and initiates purposeful action in the world (Donald, 1991). When these three semiosomatic processes intersect in material objects or in cultural events, we in modern technocratic society will tend to recognize “art.”<sup>3</sup>

### The Sublime Dimension of Art

What ethnologists often find in traditional cultures is a profound appreciation of the sacred in what we Euroamericanaussies conceive of as inorganic matter. Moreover, there is a universal recognition among peoples that there is a hidden dimension to nature, a dimension containing the animated and powerful, but normally unseen forces that shape events in the world (see Laughlin and Throop 2001). Even if we take a

<sup>1</sup> For example: “Art consists in the production of, maintenance of, and appreciation of, instruments made or molded for the purpose of producing experiences of beauty” (Baum, 1972:7).

<sup>2</sup> As Dark (1978, p. 34) notes, our own English terms like “decoration,” “craft” and “art” are somewhat interchangeable, overlapping and flexible.

<sup>3</sup> Because our English concept of art is so fuzzy, we tend to use hedges to express more precise kinds of art. We may recognize the merely beautiful (“ornamental,” “decorative,” “fine,” or “art for its own sake”), the beautiful and useful (“craft”) and perhaps the merely significant as “conceptual” or “symbolic” art.

strictly psychodynamic view of spirit—that is, that spirit is the projection of our own inner and largely unconscious and archetypal nature upon extramental reality<sup>4</sup>—the loss of the sense of the sacred and the spiritual in modern society has been accompanied by an interruption of an essential process in spiritual discovery, maturation and expression. As those who have actively followed paths of transpersonal discovery may attest, dialog with the depths of the psyche is generally carried out by way of imagery encountered in the hypnagogic, fantasy, ritual practice, drug trips, visualization techniques and various apperception methods such as the esoteric tarot. What may be accessed by way of these techniques is a panoply of extraordinary (or “anomalous;” see Cardena, Lynn and Krippner 2000) experiences; numinous encounters that may be interpreted by the individual or the society as living spirit.

The dialog between the conscious self and either the unconscious or the spiritual dimension of reality (depending upon one’s point of view) remains intact for many traditional peoples, especially those cultures whose core symbolism derives from shamanic imagery and practices (Winkelman, 2010). This dialogue means that the core symbolism within their cultural heritage remains pregnant (Cassirer, 1957) with cosmological meaning, and much of this symbolism gets coded as “traditional” or “folk” art in the eyes of people raised in technocratic societies. Thus I want to retain the use of the terms “spirit” and “spiritual” for the recognition by peoples everywhere of what Eliade (1986) called “cosmic religiosity,” the recognition of a sacred or occult dimension behind or within the everyday world of appearances.

### Sublimity and Abstraction

Ethnologists have long recognized that nearly all traditional art (see Redfield, 1971), as well as all modern art (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972:302), is abstract in

style.<sup>5</sup> In my opinion, this fact provides an important clue to understanding the power of art to penetrate into, evoke and express the transpersonal domain of the human psyche. I have discussed the relation between abstraction and spirit in great depth elsewhere (see Laughlin 2001, 2004). Briefly, my argument runs like this: Art products may be placed along a continuum from representative abstraction at one extreme to associative abstraction at the other extreme. All art is abstract, but what determines the position of an object or performance on the continuum is their principal focus within the overall process of apperception. In other words, what part of the overall process of apperception is being objectified or “bracketed.” Is the main intention of the piece the description of sensed objects (like in a landscape by Winslow Homer)? Or is the focus upon some adumbrated property of the act of perception itself (as in a pointillist painting by Seurat)? Or is it an expression of an internal emotion, an intuition, an idea, or an eidetic image spontaneously arising from the unconscious depths (as with impressionist imagery of Van Gogh or Cezanne)? The more the focus of the art is upon internal processes within the psyche or spirit, the more “abstract” the art product will appear to be (in modern parlance). As most of traditional art is on about spirit, then it is by necessity abstract. In other words, the more sublime we perceive the art to be, the more abstract it will appear relative to external reality.

### The Use of Art in Tibetan Buddhist Visualization Practice

Although we know from ethnology that the use of eidetic imagery is virtually universal among the world’s shamanic traditions (see Noll, 1985; Winkelman, 2010), the systematics, complexity and sophistication of image-based contemplative traditions may vary considerably. I can think of no better example of the use of art to evoke eidetic imagery and transpersonal experiences in an ideational society than that of

<sup>4</sup> A process considered by some to be fundamental to animism and the origins of religion; see Guthrie (1993).

<sup>5</sup> See Laughlin (2004) for an in-depth analysis of the neuroanthropological processes of abstraction in both traditional and modern art.

Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> I spent more than a decade researching Tibetan Buddhist meditation techniques as they were practiced in monasteries in Nepal, India and various places in Europe and North America (from 1978-1985 as a Tibetan Buddhist monk). I used the time-honored ethnological tradition of "participant observation," but not so much in the interests of understanding Tibetan culture per se, but rather to uncover the procedures and psychological properties involved in attaining transpersonal realization. The experiences I will report differ from spontaneously occurring transpersonal experiences in at least three respects: (1) they occur as a consequence of a conscious intention to seek specifically targeted, transformative experiences, (2) they occur within the temporal frame of the development of consciousness, and (3) they involve an unusual degree of reflexivity as an active ingredient of the experience. With respect to the latter difference, the techniques used to incubate these experiences presume for their efficacy a facility for what we biogenetic structuralists have elsewhere called mature contemplation (Laughlin 1989; Laughlin, McManus and d'Aquili 1990).

### Transpersonal Anthropology

Transpersonal anthropological research of necessity takes on a reflexive, as well as a developmental perspective (Prattis 1997, Laughlin, 1989, 1994b). Thus, the phenomenology of reflexivity is, itself, part of the participant-observation, for intensification of awareness changes the experience of self and world (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982), sometimes permanently. Just as with any intense fieldwork, the doing of transpersonal ethnography changes the organization of consciousness of the ethnographer. He or she may never be the same again, and everything written about culture and society thereafter takes on the ineluctable cognitive and affective stamp of that change (Young and Goulet, 1994; Goulet and Miller, 2007).

Transpersonal ethnography is really just traditional "participant observation" taken to its natural extreme. It depends upon the researcher being able to apply something like the process of spiritual exploration outlined by Ken Wilber in *A Sociable God* (1983:133):

1. **Injunction:** Any transpersonal exploration begins with the injunction, "If you want to know this, do this." The presumption is that there is something to find out about the host's way of life that must be lived to find out.
2. **Apprehension:** The work is done, the "thick participation" carried out, and cognitive apprehension and illumination of "object domain" addressed by the injunction are attained. In other words, once we do it enough, we come to understand it more fully.
3. **Communal confirmation:** The experiences attained are checked with those members of the host culture who have adequately completed the injunction and apprehension procedures. We chat with folks and find out if what we experienced is similar to what they experienced.

With respect to my own work among Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, operationalizing the injunction phase was relatively straightforward. Tibetan gurus teach by a system of ritual initiations (wang kur, literally the "transmission of power" or "empowerment") that dramatize the attributes of the focal deity. In an esoteric sense, the lama becomes the deity right in front of the initiate. And the deity represents a state, or series of states of consciousness being manifest by the guru, and to be eventually realized by the initiate. Through disciplined practice of visualization, the initiate is taught to create, identify with and then eventually becomes the mind state represented by the deity. The initiate participates rather passively in the initiatory drama, but is given more active meditation work to complete in the weeks and months following the initiation. In keeping with many esoteric religious systems, the lama knows the extent of the maturation of the initiate's meditation by the experiences reported back to him as the initiate's work unfolds. In addition to visualization, the procedures incorporate such ritual drivers as chanting, percussion, intense concentration, fasting and special dieting, breathing exercises, postures, so forth. All of these drivers participate collectively in incubating and eventually evoking specifically targeted transpersonal experi-

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<sup>6</sup> Vajrayana (Tib., rdo rje theg pa) is a cover term for the Tibetan version of Mahayana Buddhism. "Vajra" refers to the "indestructible diamond mind" of the wisdom accruing from the direct realization of emptiness. "Yana" means "vehicle" and points to the inseparability of method and wisdom (means and ends) that is so fundamental to the Tibetan form of contemplation.



ences that become the meaning of the symbolism for the initiate (Wilber's second phase "apprehension and illumination"). Confirmation is attained in dialogue with one's teacher and with other meditators who have undergone the same or similar procedures and experiences. It becomes clear over time that in order to comprehend the meaning of the symbolism, one must do the work necessary to flesh out the intended and experientially rich meaning. In a word, if the ethnographer hasn't undergone the apprehension phase, he or she cannot comprehend the real meaning the symbolism holds for the native, regardless of how articulately the native may have described his or her own experiences. This is why exegetical methods simply will not get the job done – not if the goal of the research is to apprehend the meaning of esoteric symbolism as understood by an adept.

### **The Role of Art in Visualization Practices**

A central principle in all meditation systems may be summed up as: you become what you meditate upon. This is as true for the Makah Indian use of masks in their wolf rituals (Ernst, 1952) as it is for the Navajo use of sandpaintings in healing rituals (Reichard, 1939, 1950). Likewise, the role of art in the realization of distinct mind states is central to Tibetan tantric practices. The real task is to be able to imagine oneself as the focal deity. By this I mean, one must learn to create the image of the deity in one's mind's eye and hold this image for lengthy periods of time as the object of concentration. Usually, one must learn to create and hold an eidetic image before the mind's eye. The techniques used by Buddhists of all sects are actually quite old, and predate the time of the historical Buddha to earlier shamanic cultures. Among these techniques are meditations upon templates (Skt., *kasina*) that represent the four elements: fire, air, water and earth (Buddhaghosa 1976). Other devices represented space, light, the three primary colors and white. These practices probably originated from meditations upon naturally occurring phenomena, like sun light falling in patches on the floor of a forest, or a bare patch of earth. In fact, it is likely that the first forms to be used in meditation among Upper Paleolithic shamans were natural features that became simulacra (features like Sleeping Ute Mountain in Colorado where the mountain "looks like" a reclining person; Laughlin 2011:83-84; Devereux, 2010: 34-37). Only later were materials sculpted to more closely resemble iconic forms. By Buddhist times, monks were instructed to craft their own de-

vices which were often portable and used in the monastery. By then it was understood that in order to internalize an image, it is more efficient if the visualizer himself craft the object, thus bringing into play the natural eye-hand coordination process (Laughlin, McManus and d'Aquili 1990:202).

By the time Vajrayana tantric Buddhist practices were developed, Tibetan Buddhists were using sacred scroll paintings (*thang ka*), usually of particular deities or clusters of deities, as objects of veneration and devotion. Tantric practitioners to this day carry this much further and use these paintings as foci of meditation and visualization, especially when carrying out their foundation practices (*sngon 'gro*) in which meditation on images of the guru are important (Jackson & Jackson, 1984:9-13; Laughlin, 1994a). For instance, in order to emphasize the unbroken lineage of teaching going back in time from one's living guru to the Buddha himself, one is to visualize a gigantic tree with the entire lineage of teachers sitting on branches amongst other and more esoteric symbols – the so-called Refuge Tree.

There exist a number of schools of Tibetan Buddhism, each with a variety of discrete meditations involving visualizations, many with their appropriate scroll painting. Appropriate scroll paintings are very accurate replicas of the description of deities and surroundings found in the empowerment texts from which the initiation rituals are drawn. Thus, Tibetan scroll painters (either the meditator himself, usually a monk, or a professional painter) are no more free to change the form of the art than, say, a Navajo medicine man is free to alter the sandpaintings he uses in healing rituals (Laughlin 2004). In fact, for a practitioner familiar with the *wang kur* tradition, the description of the visualization contained in the text is sufficient to generate an accurate image of the deity. But beginners are aided substantially in their practice by gazing at an appropriate scroll painting and using it (or in modern times, a photograph of it) to enhance their visualization.

### **Visualization and Symbolic Penetration**

As I say, there are many variations on Tibetan tantric meditations using visualization. However, all of the ones of which I am familiar are designed along the same lines; in other words, they have the same structure. We have elsewhere discussed this structure at length under the topic of symbolic penetration (Laughlin, McManus and d'Aquili 1990:188-211). Simplifying somewhat from what we wrote earlier,

the process of symbolic penetration as ritualized in Tibetan tantric Buddhism involves:

1. **Preparation.** The meditation generally begins with a set of ritualized preparations, including purification (clearing and calming the mind, quieting the stream of chatter that is considered normal thought and that so easily distracts the mind, reminding himself that his body is an empty vessel, that all things are impermanent, and perhaps dedicating the practice to someone ill or to the awakening of beings.
2. **Constructing the image.** Generating the visualization by gazing at an external image or text (in Buddhist terminology, the parikammanimitta, the term nimitta meaning "sign," "mark" or attribute of the parikamma, or initial exercise). The external image may be a picture of the deity, or the description of the deity in a text. The deity may be internalized either in toto or piece by piece, depending upon the skill of the adept. The intention of the practice is to internalize the image of the deity as an eidetic image (in Buddhism, the uggahanimitta, or "sign of grasping" or learning the image) constructed before the mind's "eye," independent of the external reference.
3. **Concentration on the eidetic image.** Once the meditator is able to hold all or a portion of the external image as an eidetic image, the eidetic image becomes the focus of concentration, and the external image is ignored. If the meditator loses the eidetic image, then he may return to the external image to refresh the internal image.
4. **Identification with the deity.** The eidetic image is first constructed as if it were in front of and distinct from the meditator. But once the image is stabilized, the meditator imagines that the deity enters his body and becomes one with the meditator. The meditator imagines his body has been transformed into the insubstantial and radiant body of the deity.
5. **Inner yoga.** When sufficient skill has been developed in stabilizing and internalizing the eidetic image, the meditator may be instructed to shift his meditation to the internal energy flow within his transformed radiant body. This focus is aided by imagining various symbols (such as flowers, colored disks, spheres,

spinning wheels, fountains, etc.) placed in the heart or other energy centers of the body.

6. **Dissolution of the image.** The meditator is instructed to end his meditation by dissolving the imagery into a point of light and then watch the point of light vanish. The last meditation is upon the formlessness of the Void.

At first glance, this staged process seems very neat and crisp, but real practice is often far more complex, fuzzy and even downright sloppy than this schematic implies. For instance, some meditators are poor visualizers. So far as I can tell, this makes little difference. I myself am a mediocre visualizer, and often only have a vague sense of the eidetic image during the internalization phase, but this seems to make no difference to the impact of the meditation. For what happens when one concentrates with sufficient intensity upon the internal image is that things begin to happen, whether the image itself is clear or not. Let me summarize some of the things that I have noticed doing this kind of work over many years, and that might be of interest to students of transpersonal research:

1. **Perfection of the image.** One thing I noticed was that during the process of stabilizing the eidetic image, the image perfects itself. This is automatic and no conscious intention is required; all that is required is sufficient concentration upon the eidetic image. If there are flaws in the scroll painting or other kasina (imperfect line or dirt on the picture, crack in the ceramic bowl, filth in the patch of light in the forest, so forth), they tend to disappear, and the geometry of the forms take on an archetypal perfection. This is similar to the perfection of gods and goddesses encountered in visions and in dream life where they may exude a perfection and beauty unmatched by any real person encountered in waking consciousness.
2. **Image comes alive.** Sooner or later in this work, the image comes alive and begins to move and do things independent of the meditator's intention. The deity for instance may begin dancing in flames, or flying through a cloud-filled sky. If the eidetic image is a two dimensional mandala, the mandala may become a tunnel and one may find oneself whizzing down the tunnel into other percep-

tual experiences. Depending upon the instructions one is given by one's teacher, one may drop trying to stabilize the eidetic image and just watch what transpires with the living imagery. Depending upon the intensity of concentration, one may become totally absorbed in the moving imagery and lose the sense of a separate Watcher. Some teachers will consider this a hindrance to the intent of the practice. This is one type of "secret sign" (in Buddhist terms, the *patibhaganimitta*, the "conceptual" or "counterpart" sign) that may arise during meditation.

3. **Other Secret signs.** Other kinds of "secret signs" may arise as a consequence of concentration upon the eidetic imagery. The critical thing to note here is that there is no logical connection between a particular eidetic image and the "secret signs" that arise as a consequence of meditating upon it, but the relationship is nonetheless lawful and inevitable. Indeed, teachers may evaluate the development of a student's work by the "secret signs" reported back to him. Meditation upon the breath for instance may result in visual forms appearing like skeins of beads or bubbles. Meditation upon a body of still water may produce the image of steam or mist or bubbles arising from a mirror surface. In point of fact, sufficient concentration upon any eidetic image will lead to "secret signs." Such "secret signs" are the real answers of zen koans for instance. And when these "secret signs" arise during meditation, they may in turn become the object of concentration, and with sufficient concentration upon them, full ecstatic absorption may occur.

4. **Simplification of the image.** Not only may concentration upon the eidetic image cause it to perfect itself and to give rise to "secret signs," the image itself may become radically altered and simplified, and this altered image may thereafter automatically replace the eidetic image at any attempt to reconstruct it. In other words, every time one tries to reconstitute, say, the deity in the mind's eye, that image is automatically replaced by the simplified image.

These and other attributes of visualization practice are independent of culture and are the lawful consequences of symbolic penetration. Indeed, they would

seem to be the result of penetration of neuropsychological structures to the very archetypal foundations of consciousness. What one is doing by reporting "secret signs" to the guru is in effect communicating the extent to which symbolic penetration has potentiated the future growth and development of the target neurocognitive structures, structures that are considered to be essential to the eventual goal of the practice; in the case of Buddhism, the realization of Nirvana and the attainment of enlightenment.

## DEMCHOG-DORJE PALMO MEDITATION:

### A DETAILED EXAMPLE

In order to give a better feel for the use of art as a penetration device in Tibetan tantric work, and by extension the use of visualized sacred iconography in other cultures, let me describe one kind of meditation



Fig.1: Karlo Demchog in yab-yum with Dorje Palmo depicted in a Tibetan thangka. As with all multi handed deities, the implements held in each hand (skull cup, arrow, lotus, etc.) represent distinct, experienced attributes of the mind-state that is the essence of the deity.

that I experienced during a lengthy retreat at Kagyu

Samye Ling Monastery near Dumfriesshire, Scotland in 1982.<sup>7</sup> My task during this retreat was to complete the meditation commitment incurred in receiving the empowerment (wang kur) for the male deity, Korlo Demchog (Skt: Chakrasamvara) and his female consort Dorje Pagmo (Skt: Vajravahā). This is a typical yab-yum (“father-mother”) meditation; that is, the male and female principles in harmony, equivalent to the Chinese yin-yang, and symbolized by a male and female deity in sexual union (see Figure 1). This particular meditation is closely allied with meditation and yoga pertaining to the energy body, the system of psychic energy (dumo, or tumo, meaning “inner fire or heat;” equivalent to the Skt. kundalini and Chinese chi) that animates our physical and spiritual being (see Laughlin 1994a). The Tibetan model of the body is similar to that of the Chinese (see Wu, 2013), the “energy body” being a system of insubstantial tubes or veins through which psychic energy (lung, “air”) flows, with the central core of the body animated through a central channel and seven energy centers or chakra.

What I shall do is trace some of the highlights of this practice as I experienced them, but leaving out the more vagarious and tedious elements that arise when a distinctly neurotic American anthropologist turns his mind to this kind of adventure. The meditation is guided by a text called a sadhana which, among other things, gives a precise description of the focal deities to be visualized. Yab-yum meditations are all focussed upon an image of a nearly naked male and female figure in sexual union, an image that may also be illustrated in a scroll painting, or a photograph of such a painting. This is a common form of meditation device: a typical male-female image in the Tibetan tantric system (Guenther, 1987), and may be considered to be the tantric iteration of the common pattern of syzygistic imagery found in traditional cosmologies and iconography around the world.

## Beginnings

The preparatory stage of the meditation is designed to calm and focus the mind upon appropriate reasons for doing the meditation work—a

ritualized pep-talk. I will not go into this other than to say it is fairly standard among the yogas learned by the student. Once the primary meditation begins, the central image in this case is that of a young, naked, dark blue male figure (Demchog) standing and embracing a young, naked, vibrant, fiery red female figure (Dorje Palmo). They are depicted in sexual union—one may just glimpse the male’s genitals between Dorje Palmo’s thighs. One may be instructed to gaze briefly at the picture of the yab-yum and then close the eyes and retain the image as long as one can. I had done this in earlier visualization practices and by the time I was working on Demchog, I was able to internalize the image fairly quickly, although it was often vague and hard to hold. Being vague did not seem to matter, however, for if I was able to focus steadily on the eidetic image of the yab-yum, deeper calm would rapidly ensue and various secret signs would arise spontaneously.

The meditation began with imagining the two figures as depicted in the picture as being somewhat above and in front of me. After a few days of doing this for hours at a time, various signs began to transpire. One of the first things I noticed was that, as with other such meditations, the eidetic image perfected itself. Elements in the picture dropped away while others remained, and the sense of it being a photograph vanished, along with any flaws in the photo. The colors became vivid and took on natural hues, as though the colors in the photo were mere approximations. Moreover, the coloration became radiant as if lit by an inner light, rather than some extraneous light illuminating a picture.

Those who have done this kind of work will know that eventually the deities “come alive” in the sensorium, and instead of one struggling to hold an eidetic image, the meditation becomes one of watching the radiant figures who have taken on a life of their own “do their thing” be-

<sup>7</sup> I was given permission to do an intensive retreat there by the center’s abbot, Dr. Akong Tulku Rimpoche, and carried out work given me by my own guru, Ven. Namgyal Rimpoche.

fore the mind's eye. Much of the movement of the images was of them dancing in fire. But how the yab and yum interacted with each other within the dance began to reflect the state of my consciousness in the moment relative to watcher and unconscious. Not only that, but within a few days, the Demchog-Dorje Palmo humanoid figures had transformed into two simple *bindus*<sup>8</sup> (dot, point, sphere or bubble; see Shakya, 2000) radiating respectively in blue and red. The dance



**Fig.2: The classic Chinese yin-yang symbol, depicting the entanglement of yin in yang and yang in yin. Thus are the yab and yum bindus united into the single bindu of unity.**

between the red and blue bindu-ized yab and yum became the dance between my male and female self, and when the state of consciousness was one of opposition between the male and female elements of my consciousness, the bindus would remain distinct and relating to each other by differential size and complementary activity. But when my consciousness was experiencing ecstatic union, the two bindus would become part of a larger symbol, with the blue male bindu in a red field and the red female bindu in a blue field, and the two fields swirling around and

around, intertwining with each other. Thus it was that I learned first-hand the phenomenological origins of the Taoist yin-yang symbol (see Figure 2).

I should add that to this very day, nearly thirty years later, all I have to do to see these bindus is close my eyes and they will be there, reflecting in the same way the balance and interpenetration of the male and female principles in my consciousness operating in the moment. For instance, when I am intensely watching the male and female aspects of consciousness while meditating, the bindu representation will resolve into the yab and yum bindus with a smaller, more intense and often golden bindu standing between the red and blue spheres. In the intervening years, I have learned a great deal about meditating on the bindus themselves which, in an intensive meditation situation will not only reflect processes operating in the consciousness, but will indicate both work to be done and answers to burning questions posed of the meditation.

As the original art forms of the thang ka become naturally simplified during meditation, they also become more universal. Symbols like Demchog and Dorje Palmo, as with Jesus Christ or the Navajo's beloved Changing Woman, are heavily loaded with cultural attributes. But as they simplify before the mind's eye, they take on increasingly universal forms; forms like flowing water, colored mist, dissolution of the physical body, spheres, lightning bolts, rocks, naked human forms, so forth. All of these are examples of the secret signs associated with the original object. In this case, the Demchog-Dorje Palmo duo became colored spheres and mists.

### **Working With the Yab and Yum Separately**

One of the techniques commonly used in this practice is to imagine oneself alternatively as the male deity (the yab) embracing the female (the yum), then as the female deity embracing the male. The feeling of being held by the other fig-

<sup>8</sup> Skt: bindu (Tib: tig le or thig.le) meaning "drop" or "dot", and connotes the essence of the male and female energies, and combined refers to the essence of the Buddha mind.



ure was at times very palpable, almost physical, and the sense of bonding became ecstatic. At this point one is imagining that one is insubstantial, translucent and full of radiant light, and that energies are moving through various channels of the energy body. One powerful practice is visualizing that with each out-breath (usually while reciting an appropriate mantra), a string of pearls flows from the heart and out of the yab's nose and into the yum's nose and down through her heart and into her genitals, then with the in-breath the pearls enter the yab's penis (erect and inside the yum's vagina) and up the central channel to the yab's heart.<sup>9</sup> While one is imagining being the yab, the pearls are flowing in one direction and being the yum, the reverse direction. The experience one has of the body is of insubstantiality and free energy flow, and the ecstasies (blisses) that accompany the circulating energies are beyond description.

Naturally enough, it was far easier for me to identify with Demchog than with Dorje Palmo, so I spent a lot of time working on transforming my self-view into that of a young, vivacious, red-skinned female with an empty, radiant body. While identifying with the yum, I would take on a certain submissive relationship<sup>10</sup> to the yab, and would imagine quite successfully being entered by "his" erect penis. Meanwhile, during this retreat I was wearing the long flowing red robes of the Tibetan monk which would become a woman's skirts. I would daily take long walks out on the moor where all I ever saw were herds of sheep and the occasional shepherd in the distance. There came a point in these meditations when the female image penetrated deeply into my unconscious and I began to act out the part, and on several occasions found myself dancing lightly across the moor singing "I'm a girl! I'm a girl!" at the top of my lungs. Part of my observing mind was fascinated with these spontaneous transformations, while another part was amused

by associations with Julie Andrews in the movie, *The Sound of Music*. This and many other anima-related experiences in both visions and dreams occurred during this period.<sup>11</sup> The first task each morning would be to analyse the yab-yum and psychic energy laden dreams of the night before (see Laughlin 2011: Chapter 13), and I wrote more poems while in the yum state during this retreat than ever before or since. My visual system constantly projected images of erect blue penises and open red vaginas emitting bindus upon the paper at which I was gazing while writing notes (some of these I would draw with colored pencils on top of my writing).

### **Conclusion: Ethnology and the "Inner Necessity" of Spirit**

I have suggested an approach to art: (1) that may be applied to artistic productions cross-culturally, (2) that allows the ethnologist a flexible, but operationalizable definition of artistic production, (3) that allows the analyst to take into consideration the often ineffable sublimity of art, to get into what the great modern artist Wassily Kandinsky (1977 [1914], 1982) called the inner necessity of spirit in art (4) that recognizes the true function of abstraction in art, (5) that allows the researcher to distinguish between cultures in which spiritual art is embedded in a mythopoeic world view from those materialist cultures in which spiritual art is, as it were, cast adrift, (6) that explains the seeming paradox between cultural conservatism in artistic styles and the often profound spiritual consequences of artistic production. Above all, we can see how abstract, spiritual art may be seen as an inevitable outcome of humanity's essentially symbolic nature; our predilection to comprehend our world and ourselves by way of spiritually pregnant symbolism. We humans may well have been this way for tens of

<sup>9</sup> There are yogas in which the direction of flow of the pearls (or bindus) is reversed.

<sup>10</sup> See Steinberg (1993, pp. 162-163) on submission as a feminine attribute.

<sup>11</sup> This type of meditation evokes many experiences that in Jungian terms would be considered anima-related from the male perspective (see Laughlin 2001 on this issue).

thousands of years (Lewis-Williams, 2004). In more materialistic cultures, the tendency is toward apperception of the external world, but in modern art and in most traditional cultures, we see an opposite spin toward apperception of the psychic or cosmological depths through abstract expression. This linking of the various functions of imagery (aesthetic, significant, utility) and sublimity is fundamental to humanity, and requires on the part of ethnologists a greater sensitivity for, and appreciation of the transpersonal dimensions of life and culture. Ethnologists have a regrettable predilection for the obvious and superficial when it comes to describing and analyzing symbolic activity. Moreover, ethnographers have historically shied away from direct experiences of the sublime, the transpersonal dimensions of their hosts' experiences (Laughlin, 1989, 1994b). It is perhaps far easier to ask our informants "what does that image mean" than to actually participate in the imagery in a direct symbolic way. But when it comes to spiritual art, there is no alternative if one wishes to get to the real bottom of things, to fully comprehend the "inner necessity" that gives sublimity its voice through art.

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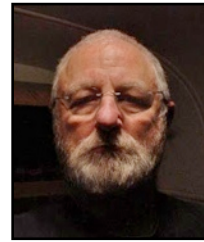
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# Experiences of Synchronicity and Anthropological Endeavours: (Part 1) An Anthropologist Goes Weird

Christel Mattheeuws



Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, is almost totally ignored by the academy. He is said to be a mystic, a cultural universalist and anti-Semite. In a more positive sense, he was concerned about the spiritual condition of humanity in the modern period. 'Jung was interested precisely in what dominant intellectual culture relegated to the margins, including religious and 'paranormal' experience, and thereby was himself banished to the margins' (Smyers 2002:477). Although I do not wish to measure myself with great people like Jung, I have experienced a similar marginalisation. I have suffered a long traumatic period between 2001 and 2010 because I had become a different person after my anthropological fieldwork in Madagascar. During that period I had a series of experiences of synchronicity and relations with the dead, most often related to my strong emotional link with Madagascar and my longing to go back there. Jung was the first person to study these phenomena, which often occurred in experiences with his patients forming a crucial part in their healing process. Writing about synchronicity and anthropological endeavours has the same effect on me. This is what synchronicity is all about. In synchronistic experiences boundaries between subject and object, mind and matter, praxis and theory, experience and thinking or reflecting become blurred. I am therefore very grateful that the editor has agreed to publish a tandem essay of which the first part recounts my experiences, while a second part published in the next issue will reflect academically on the phenomenon of synchronicity.

## Fieldwork in a Malagasy Village Between September 1999 and September 2001

Although I had thought, until recently, that strange things started happening to me only since I returned from Madagascar in September 2001, my field diary

says differently. My first strange experience was on Saturday 26 February 2000 during my first crossing to Ambodifany. This is what I wrote in a comment to Cristian Simonetti on his paper 'the risk beyond relativisms' on 29 October 2009:

I crossed for the first time the Mangoro River along which our village was situated, in order to visit a village of another clan who was matrimonially related to the Zanadroandrena. While walking in the rice fields, I saw unexpectedly and out of the blue - hence without any manipulation of my sight - a vague appearance, only for one or two seconds. This appearance was quick but clear and I wondered what this Amerindian was doing here. Why did I think of an Amerindian? Because of his typical cap and poncho in white and black colours. This year (2009) I saw a picture that reminded me of what I saw in the rice fields so many years ago in Gregory Cajete's book *Native Science* published in 1999, in the chapter called native stories of creation and emergence. 'It is a picture of Kokopelli, one of the archetypal figures of Pueblo mythology, representing the seed bringer, the life symbol of creative energy that is part of all things - humans, the earth, and the cosmos as a whole. It is the symbol of the procreative and creative nature of all life, organic and inorganic' (Cajete 1999:31). Was this coincidence or not? Indians have something in common with Asians as far as early migrations are known and accepted somewhere in the northern Asian regions. During my trip to Thailand in the summer of 1982, I visited the mountain tribes in the north. When I was flying home I thought that it might be interesting to write my graduation thesis about one of these tribes, since I had heard that they had come from China (I did Chinese studies). This thesis became a work on the migrations of the Miao from north China to South China. One year after graduation, I went to Taiwan where I ended up again among the aborigines of the island. And during my

studies in anthropology I landed in Madagascar, whose inhabitants speak an Austronesian language, probably coming from Indonesia and/or Malaysia. The aborigines of Taiwan are also Austronesian. Taiwan is considered as the hearth from where people migrated over the Indonesian Islands and other places. Finally, apart from my life story in tune with people's past migrations - I only learned about these movements after I had moved myself - again life choices that have not been manipulated by knowledge, but the knowledge that emerged from or in movement - I have learned from stories in Madagascar that the spirits appearing in possession have a common history with the people studied. There is no spirit in which the Zanadroandrena have interest that does not share an event, a period of history or a place in the past with the Zanadroandrena. There must have been somewhere or somehow an encounter of life-paths.

A second ghostly appearance occurred in my own house, having been the house of late Ranampy, around May 2000. When I arrived home after work I had the feeling that someone was there. I went to look everywhere but did not see anyone. The third day however, a ghost appeared of a man, sitting on the chair near the entrance. I was not afraid. I assumed it was Ranampy.

On 4 May 2000 a healer from Antananarivo arrived in the village saying that he worked with Vazimba of Majunga. Only the day before I had told my local assistant Ernest that we should go to the area of Majunga to define its relation with Antanimbaritsara. One day later, I had just finished writing a letter to a friend explaining that I would not need to be afraid of sorcery because the family of Ernest protected me. Ernest enters my house and tells me that according to the healer, someone wants to harm me, but I should not be afraid because I am well protected. I had to bring sweets and money to two graves northwest of my house to calm down the jiny. Strikingly, in the northwest corner of my house I always found good inspiration and answers to my questions. The presence of the healer in the village had taken me out of my concentration and stability. I was present at a ritual to expel evil by sucking out a bad bone from someone's belly. I was asked to support the person and felt that I had literally been sucked up. I also had the feeling that a new chapter in my research was being opened too early. I felt emotionally and spiritually lonely and felt the need to talk to someone on the same level. When I finally could have some rest on 11 May 2000 and caught up with my notes, I came to

the preliminary conclusion that maybe the knowledge of destinies, and the astrological months and days bringing the destinies, form the basis of a skill to manipulate good and bad fortune. When I read this now on 9 August 2013, that moment of my fieldwork had been a genuine growing point into meaningful insights. My thesis became what it is embedded in this experience.

The voices of Vazimba, or other creatures, these inner voices as how I experienced them when sitting in the northwest corner of my room, took over at a certain point. Around the end of November 2000, I therefore decided to go to Tana to have a rest away from the field. Once there, the voices stopped. I assumed I had just been tired, that there was nothing to worry about. However, on my return to the village just before Christmas 2000, in the moment when I left the forest and caught the first view of the Mangoro River and Zanadroandrena land, the voices came back saying: "You don't need to look too far. We are nearby." Shortly after that, I experienced the effect of these jiny that opened up an understanding of the phenomenon of clashing jiny. After New Year, Ernest suffered an alcohol poisoning. At least that was what everyone thought. The situation evolved into something different: an alleged attack of jiny that had started before New Year when he was almost drowned when taking a bath in the river. In the days following we could not face each other without getting upset or angry without any reason. When he got very ill his father used a remedy of burning rubber and other stinking things to expel the bad forces. When his wife told me to sniff up the remedy while watching, just in case, I got an instant vision that things had to be solved by the local healer. He let us both inhale fumes while sitting under a sheet to exorcise our jiny. We were told that our reactions towards each other were caused by the clashing jiny and had nothing to do with our own consciousness.

For the rest of my stay in 2001 I did not note any strange happenings anymore. The research went smoothly and I became increasingly integrated in the local life of the people. By the end of my stay, my movements became overloaded with all kinds of obligations, such as visits to sick relatives, greeting newborns, attending marriages or engagements and so forth. I had become part of the community.

## **My First Trip Back to the Village in March 2003**

In March 2003, one and a half years after I accomplished my fieldwork, I returned to the village Sarogoika. I intended to complement my data on weather features and possible historical cycles in the light of an astrological understanding of Zanadroandrena land. I went back to the village with two questions in mind that had emerged during the past couple of months. Do the Zanadroandrena understand the astrological destinies in terms of the changing features of the weather, and is their history related to the backward movement of the astrological moon in the sun year over a course of about 30 years? I was particularly concerned about the way I should formulate the second question in my survey among the people without giving any hint or whatsoever towards the answer I was looking for. But luck was with me. The answers were given to me without even having to pose my questions. While I had been pondering over the weather features in relation to Zanadroandrena astrology in Belgium, some members of the Zanadroandrena family had suffered material destruction from severe thunder attacks which they related to sorcery. Forces of thunder and other related weather aspects became the discussions of the day since then. If this was not enough cause for distress, the wooden posts of their ritual centre, that gathers all the invisible forces of the land, had also collapsed. During their yearly ritual at the centre that took place in the beginning of March the healer in charge of the place revealed that they should renew the posts in the beginning of April. "If not, they would have to wait about 30 years before they could do it again," he said. At the time of my visit in March 2003, the new moon bringing the destiny Alasaty, the destiny of the Zanadroandrena in relation to their land, had almost reached its starting position in conjunction with the path of the sun and other stars before it would move, once again, backwards through the solar year. Ever since, I understood the Zanadroandrena destiny Alasaty, by them described as the simmering fire in autumn, as the marriage of earth and sky when the village slumbers for a while wrapped in the silence of the morning haze. This image was given me in a dream while sitting on a sloop together with the healer and someone invisible - my Self maybe - the day before I travelled to Madagascar.

The experiences just described are examples of what Jung called synchronicity. The term refers to a

certain psychic event (a vision, a dream, a feeling) that is meaningfully paralleled by some external non-psychic material event without a causal connection between them. Synchronic experiences have no logical explanation or physical cause. My dream revealed the meaning of the destiny of Alasaty in relation to the Zanadroandrena ritual centre in the sacred moment of what the Zanadroandrena call a big year, which happens only every 30 years when the astrological moon, the sun and stars coincide in the destiny. In particular the realisation of the coincidence of my mental work at home in Europe on the weather features and the life of sun and moon in relation to Zanadroandrena astrology with the physical thunder events in the village in Madagascar and the collapse of the ritual centre, carried for me 'a certain numinosity, a dynamic spiritual charge with transformative consequences' (Tarnas 2006:51). I would write my thesis as a different person than I was before, but not without difficulties.

## **September 2001 to September 2008: Writing My thesis in Difficult and Bitter Times**

From my first step back in Belgium in September 2001 I have never been the same again. I also think that the people around me felt the same way. I could not adapt to the 'luxury' again after spending 18 months in very sober circumstances. I loathed the amount of food and the general mentality and interests of people. I had the impression that people were in a certain way mentally ill. But little by little this impression was projected back onto me, turning me into the person who was sick and in need. It started with outbursts and ended with chronic fatigue syndrome, only diagnosed in 2010, yet from a retrospective point of view I had the first symptoms in the first half of 2006. On top of this, I had never been well accepted back into my job. Being bullied for two years from 2002 till 2004 day in day out, I begged to be discharged. Also, at the job service I became considered as a difficult person and had to be helped by a social assistant. We got along well, but soon she had to leave her job because of pregnancy. In the academic field, my Belgian supervisor had denigrated me in public saying that my writings made him sick. It is true that I had problems to fit the very dynamic life of the Zanadroandrena of Madagascar I wrote about into what appeared to be a rigid astrological time and space structure. But I did not get help to

solve this problem. I left the university in 2004 and continued writing on my own. I was lucky that friends and family continued to support me. But, as already said, I was treated as the person who was distressed and in need.

I never felt any obstacles in writing my thesis after leaving the university. This convinced me that it was the right thing to do. At the very moment when I lost my job and left the university I started to read the book *The Perception of the Environment* by the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000). I normally don't buy books, but from seeing the reference I knew I had to purchase it. The way he understood life could be applied to Zanadroandrena astrology. In his light I could write a first draft in three months. He would become my new supervisor at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) in 2007, and the astrological architecture of Zanadroandrena life became an example of Ingold's ecology of life. I passed my viva in September 2008.

## 2006: Separation

Underneath, however, the destruction of my life would continue. The year 2006 I call the year of separation because of an occurrence somewhere in the month of February. One day I was working on a chapter while singing along to a Malagasy song that was playing on my DVD-player. Since I did not understand the title I looked it up in the dictionary. I read: separation. It struck me like a thunderbolt. I fell off my chair and started crying in despair. The following three months I was laying on the sofa only to get up when my daughter came home from school. I needed to prepare a smile on my face for an hour before she would come in with her sunflower grin. I felt as if I was bleeding and I became very thin. In this period I had a series of dreams about getting a flight just for myself, accompanied by a man of whom I only saw his legs and the fact that he was reading a newspaper and by a lady who was sitting next to me. I was talking to her about the chartered plane because the flight was fully booked but she did not understand what I was trying to say. We arrived in a place that looked like a tourist resort. I saw people who looked familiar and were all in pairs like my brother and sister, and my parents. I saw my Belgian supervisor who said "you see, you do not have to go so far to do what you want." I thought to myself: "let him think what he wants, I am still reaching out for Africa." The dream ended when I came ashore on an

island welcomed with open arms by an old black man. The next day I would dream about arriving at a hotel and accidentally getting in the wrong bed where a man was sleeping. He got up and said that it was alright. When he left through the door I saw a woman with grey hair in the corridor. Suddenly worms came out of my a.... When I tried to catch them they changed into all sorts of different creatures like fish that jumped away and changed whenever I tried to grasp them. On the third day, I dreamed about people and myself acting like robots and not able to get away. Suddenly I saw a young African girl sitting behind a school desk. I begged her: "please, you are African, get some magic medicine to rescue us." Then I woke up. I think now that this series of dreams referred to my future stay in Scotland.

The visit of two Malagasy friends in August and September 2006 for an internship on a goat farm was an emotional disaster because they ended up being exploited by the farmer, while I was taunted by him as someone who had no connection at all with nature and animals. The farmer also left no stone unturned to put a hurdle between me and my friends. After they left I was close to suicide. Only the lovely face of my daughter held me away from this most destructive act. Then my misfortune seemed to change. In less than a year later I would have the first opportunity to present my work at a conference in Sheffield, in March 2007, and I would be heading to Aberdeen to write up my Ph.D. in April 2007.

Normally new air heals, at least in my experience. But not in this case. From the very beginning of my stay in Aberdeen I could feel that I did not react normally to this new challenge, although I was given the opportunity to change my destiny. Maybe the chronic fatigue prevented me, of course without knowing. Whatever is said or written about chronic fatigue, I think that, in my case, the impossibility to adapt in Belgium along with the chain of traumatic events described here caused the syndrome that would ruin my health and life in the following years. In the beginning I would be struck by it only once in a while until it became chronic in 2009 because of continuous distress and longing for my definite return to Madagascar. Only in June 2010 would I be diagnosed as suffering from chronic fatigue. Since 2012 I became highly sensitive to most of the food I ate. Curiously, the diet I am taking now reminds me very much of my diet during my fieldwork in the village.

## 2007: The Attack

On Tuesday 19th and Wednesday 20th June 2007, I took part in the seminar Landscape and Narrative organised by my department. It was very interesting, but I became very sad when listening to the speakers' stories about changing attitudes towards the landscapes from a traditional holistic and experiential understanding towards a scientific analytical one. I did not understand how the speakers could tell these stories without shedding tears. I realised that it would not at all be easy to bring my story of Madagascar and the Zanadroandrena into academia. I had envisaged contributing to an alternative way of development with Madagascar as a leading figure. I started crying and went home before the end of the day. The weather and place was as sad as me. Seaton Park was covered with a strange grey desolated silence. For some reason I decided to stop and sit for a while on a bench to light a cigarette – something I had never done before. In despair I asked God to give me a sign. A man suddenly appeared from behind the bushes and asked me 'if I wanted to play' while showing his d.... I thought if I just walked away he would give up. Instead he followed me. I started to run while screaming like a beast to scare him and to attract attention. A man with a little white dog saw me and waited for me, while the attacker ran away shouting that I was a crazy woman. The man with the little white dog would accompany me home where the estate guard called the police for us to testify about the incident. Eventually, the event embedded in its strange setting had upset me so much that I wanted to go back to Belgium. I wanted to get rid of having been haunted for so many years and I did not feel safe in the far north. But friends and colleagues persuaded me to stay, giving me the contact numbers of victim support and a university psychologist. This helped me, although it would take me months before I stopped getting an instant shock whenever someone approached me from the back. The most important lesson I learned from the incident was that, however desperate I might feel, I was not ready to die. My immediate reflexes told me this. When I had the chance to go back to Madagascar in September 2007 to attend a conference, I visited the village where I got protective medicine to support me throughout the last part of my dissertation which I defended on 10 September 2008 (10/09/08). This merit and happy moment was overshadowed by the fact that my friend Ernest was at the same time in France for an intern-

ship in the concurring project of the village. I felt betrayed and exiled from the village where I had lost my heart. Was this the meaning of counting down to eight in the date of my viva? In Madagascar this is a very bad omen, as you will see.

## A First Encounter With the Dead in March 2008

On Saturday 8 March I had a visit from an Italian Ph.D. student from St. Andrews. My colleague Peter Loovers had introduced him to me, saying that he thinks he had found a soul-mate since he was intended to study the sky during fieldwork. He arrived around noon and we spent the whole afternoon together. I was feeling very strange that day. In the following night I had a nightmare. Something rather heavy had fallen on my bed. On Sunday in the course of the morning I would suddenly realise that it was not a dream but real. I got frightened and had to rush retching to the toilet. I did not vomit but suffered from a contracting stomach. I burst out in tears of fear. In the evening I had the sudden impulse to read my chapter on the famadihana, a ritual for the dead to bring them into the sphere of the ancestors. I read in silence, but when I came to the passage:

After a long discussion about the economy involved in a famadihana, my informant and I agreed that there was a financial aspect to be noted concerning the ritual. Yet, when I proposed that if the event were abolished, then the financial gains could be used directly to support the living, my informant asked me "and what will happen to the dead if we do so?"

I repeated aloud, "Yes, what will happen to the dead?"

The next day, on Monday, I went to work. When I was reaching to a pile of towels to take one, they suddenly took the shape of shrouds used in the village to bury a corpse. On Tuesday morning when I entered the kitchen at home I suddenly felt an intense cold entering my bones and I rushed into the garden. A few seconds later my roommate called me in to take a phone call from my daughter. She brought me the sad news that my friend Ann, her daughter and two girlfriends were killed in a violent car accident. On the spot I could place the experiences of the past few days. It was the confused and frightened soul of my friend who had come to me. She knew the text of



the famadihana because she had translated it into English to send to Tim Ingold as an example of my work. She was at the time very moved by the way the Zandroandrena and others physically cared for the dead. Therefore, in the evening I talked to her, telling her that she should not be afraid, that people were very sad and would certainly take well care of her. The haunting stopped. When I had the courage to look for details of the accident on the internet I found out that it happened on the same moment as the Italian student stood in front of my door.

### **2009: If I Suppress Bad Things From Entering My Mind They Penetrate Through Dreams and Trancelike States: The Big Clash**

The year 2009 in particular was marked by a heightened sense of reality, a surreal connection with Madagascar and contact with the dead that put the past ten years into perspective, paralleled with the increase of symptoms of chronic fatigue.

When my birthday on 26 January 2009 was approaching I saw that this day would bring the destiny Alasaty along with new moon. This destiny was the destiny of my village. Although I had never applied Zandroandrena astrology or any other form of astrology in my own life decisions, I decided that sending my dissertation out to the world of anthropologists on my birthday and Alasaty destiny would be a beautiful and good thing to do. Hence, on the morning of 26 January 2009 I sent a digital copy of my dissertation to several professors accompanied with a letter. In the evening of the same day I received an emergency email from a Belgian friend in Madagascar telling that the capital Antananarivo was set on fire, which would eventually lead to a coup d'état by Rajoelina and the flight of the onset president Ravalomanana to South Africa where remains to date. 26 January 2009 would enter Malagasy history as Black Monday. This was the clash of destinies which I had feared for several years. Already during the internship of my Malagasy friends in 2006 I had told them that there was something happening out of my own hands, as if I was the battlefield of good and bad forces. The event of 26 January 2009 brought me into a kind of shock resulting in a desperate letter to my Belgian friend on 27 February 2009 opening up on the happenings of the past years. On 20 April I would find out that this was the day when a befriended professor's son committed suicide. I was

more and more wondering whether what I felt or went through was only about me, my ego, or whether I also felt things from outside me. For example, about two weeks before the clash I dreamed of a young lady from the village visiting me. Suddenly she changed into an old woman telling me that there were many dead. I also had many dreams before and after the clash about Malagasy people's faces becoming suddenly black. Or one night I dreamed that I came into the realm of the night and crocodiles preventing me from throwing fresh lettuce in the waste bin. They, however, did not attack me. They were friendly and I could nestle myself against them. They even showed me a cave where I saw a young man moving around in peace. The few times I visited another realm was through a whirlpool-like experience. I liked it, because I was aware that I would see the unknown. Yet, on Friday night 17 April 2009 I was in someone's room in Madagascar enjoying an angelical experience at a small standing stone, with rose petals swirling down and tiny bells ringing with a high pitch. The room strangely had black and white tiles with dark red furniture. Suddenly I was swallowed by a whirlpool. But instead of letting myself go as I normally do, I was extremely frightened because I did not know what was happening. I woke up in a sweat. Finally, a last dream literally brought me the message that I did not only see bad things growing, but also the ground in which we grow was polluted. Was this about me or also about others?

The coincidence with Black Monday and sending my dissertation around the world embedded in the stream of dreams that proceeded and followed, made me reconsider my connection with Madagascar. I had always felt myself going against the new wind blowing over Madagascar. The president Ravalomanana, who was elected in 2002 and then re-elected in 2006, wanted to develop his country supported by international community funding. I did not like this because I knew from experience that the island would be destroyed. Therefore I had been looking for alternative ways of development to set an example. Since our destinies seemed somehow connected on 26 January 2009 I started to compare our paths. This was mainly hinted by a flashing blue light that emerged when I woke up one day shortly after the coup, with a voice saying that I had to try to understand the situation and balance the clashing forces. To my surprise I found out that I arrived in the village during the same month as Ravalomanana became mayor of the capital in December 1999 as leader of the political blue party Tiako iMadagaskara (I Love Madagascar).

Shortly before the presidential elections in December 2001 I had arrived back in Belgium and had a series of dreams in which I visited the village but did not recognise it anymore. The village had become a modern village with flowers on the balconies of the houses, and modern shops. The big road that used to connect the village to the open highlands led to a huge cathedral. And my friend and wife were sitting unhappily and impoverished in their deteriorated house. In another dream I had become a tourist in the area that did not have open access anymore. I was guided by a Dutch tourist guide. I would have similar dreams later on, for example about the village that had started to work with people from Holland who reconstructed the whole area of Moramanga. The national colour of the Dutch is orange, which is also the colour of the party Tanora Malagasy Vonona (Determined Malagasy Youth) that led the coup under the leadership of Rajoelina. I have always suspected that the village supported him (certainly in the beginning) since my dreams about Joel, a young Zanadroandrena, and the fact that during my second last visit in 2007, the elder people of the village had made the firm decision to give way to the young people instead of caring too much about tradition. The decision to follow the competing line of development instead of going on with my alternative one also points in this direction and coincides in time with Rajoelina running for mayor in the capital. This story is an amazing synchronistic example which I could easily explain in terms of Zanadroandrena astrology. It made complete sense. But here, in the UK, it was understood as just coincidence. I had to struggle with it alone, and to find ways of balancing the forces myself.

### **July 2009: The Dead Bringing Light in Moments Most Needed**

After the viva in September 2008 my supervisor and I prepared an application for the British Academy. I would not get a grant but a relation was laid with Brian Goodwin of the Schumacher College to collaborate on a project about Goethean Science. Brian Goodwin was a biologist who had inspired Tim Ingold towards a holistic and relational anthropology in the 90's. Yet, in the first part of 2009, I was not able to keep on the relationship with Brian because I could not find an adequate way to phrase my questions. However on Thursday morning 16th July 2009 I suddenly had the inspiration and I had a craving to

contact him. When I searched for his email, I remember I looked very intensely at his picture on his website. Then I wrote an email. The next day I saw there was a reply. I thought "that is quick," upon which I was drawn into prayer. When I realised I was praying I told myself "silly Christel, now you already start praying, wishing for good news before you open a mailbox." I opened the mail. It was a message from Schumacher College saying that Brian died on Wednesday evening 15th July.

On 23rd July 2009 Veronica, my landlady, also died. I was house-sitting during the time when she was ill. When I received the news on 24th July I went into the garden. There I saw for the first time a flower blossoming that I had been waiting for since spring. While weeding in spring I had left some plants untouched because I had the feeling that they were Veronica's flowers. Therefore, when I saw the first blossom I instantly knew that Veronica was safe. On the day of her funeral I wrote the following email to her family and friends:

Veronica will always have a special place in my heart. Her generosity and care does not know limits. I can feel it until today. And I am convinced that she is now in a very peaceful land. The day she gave her breath to the sky, is the day that a beautiful flower in her garden opened its leaves. I was waiting to see that flower for several weeks and there, suddenly, it was. Beautifully purple with a yellow heart. The colours of the dress a priest wears on Eastern Day. That's why I know that Veronica is in a peaceful land. I hope that this prayer helps to fill our hearts with silence and rest.

Around 20th July 2009 I received a letter from the university saying that I had been granted the position of Honorary Research Fellow. I was happy, but at the same time I felt so exhausted that I knew something needed to happen if I wanted to make full use of the opportunity to do something with my academic merit. On Saturday 25th July 2009 I bought a new computer. While sitting on the bus, I suddenly remembered that once, long ago, when I had just moved into Veronica's house in August 2007, I had noticed a place for spiritual healing - the volunteer healers say that their personal angel guides their hands when they go along the astral body of the patient just outside the physical body. A voice inside me told me to go there instantly. I was lucky since the

volunteer was just about to leave. It was a very emotional first encounter. I would go there almost weekly for several months. It helped me physically and emotionally. It helped to open my eyes, make the right decisions and come gradually to an understanding of what was happening with me.

On 23rd August 2009 my house mate left the house allegedly because I wanted her to. This happening gave me the final push into complete collapse. I was very deeply hurt because I cared very much for her. It took only a short while before I was physically forced to give up everything apart from work. Though I would also be absent from my job for several months between 6th October 2009 and 14th January 2010. After getting back to work, I collapsed again by 14th March 2010. Yet I didn't dare to take time off because I was afraid to lose my job. Only then after so many years, did it cross my mind that I might have something more serious and chronic. I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue in June 2010. I was yet more and more bullied at work, again. It would come to a new clash by November 2010. Luckily by then my health issue was taken seriously by the board and I got a replacement. From then till today, my work life and social life has so far been better as far as my health condition allows me to feel fine. Every year it gets a bit better, due to more peace of mind, medication, and a special diet I had to start in 2012 because I became sensitive to many types of food.

The spiritual healing gave me not only the gradual understanding of my physical problems, but also of my sense of 'reading what is not there' which seemed to be very strong at that time. On 13th October 2009 I had an experience at the healing centre with another volunteer that destroyed the magic of how I'd arrived there. She was cool and cold, and when I was talking about the other volunteer, saying that she was putting a lot of time in talking and discussing with me, I instantly got the feeling that I should not have mentioned this. A few days later, on 16th October 2009, I prepared a letter to my volunteer friend about the happening. I described it as having the feeling there was a thunderstorm hanging above my head. On 25th October 2009 we had a small fire in our kitchen because of an electricity failure. I phoned my healing friend in fear. During this phone call I learned that there were internal problems among the volunteers. I must have felt this during the healing session on 13th October 2009. I think that something similar must have happened when I was writing the letter about the thunderstorm hang-

ing above our house. And this would also explain why my housemate had left in August in despair although she was meant only to leave in September. When I'd asked her if my friend and family, who were planning to replace her, could come a bit earlier and stay in our guest room, she offered me to see if she could find another place to stay so that my friend could take over her room sooner than planned. I was very surprised by this unexpected and generous offer. I exclaimed in an automatic and repeating manner like a lingering record "It never crossed my mind to ask you this, it never crossed my mind to ask you this, it never ....." Only when I came to realise my behaviour I stopped. After having learned what might have been behind the experience at the healing centre, I became aware that I must have reacted also on my housemate's thoughts and not on what she was actually saying. In this context I fully understood her anger a few weeks later, saying that I have always wanted her to leave because I made an agreement with my friend behind her back.

Apart from this, there was also a growing belief among the healers that I was in a situation against which I could do nothing as such. I saw attacks coming but I was completely unprotected. Like with thunderstorms, the more the danger approached the heavier and more frequent the attacks became. This was in pace with my health problem that became more and more severe and the growing disbelief of people concerning my experiences and hence, my growing loneliness.

### **My Encounter With a Medium**

To deal with the problem I was sent to a medium who worked with me for three times. During my first visit on 25th November 2009 I became very touched and emotional by the encounter. To my surprise, the medium saw and communicated with Brian Goodwin. I was very astonished because I never met him in life. I only had a very short correspondence with him, the last one on the very morning after his death. But it was certainly him because she did described him as I saw him on the photo, and she mentioned in connection to him the name Margaret whom I visited at the Pishwanton project on 27th July 2009 with Tim Ingold and Jen Clark. This was a few days after Brian's death and my first spiritual healing. During that visit I had deliberately not mentioned his death. But Margaret had made it a meeting in memory of him because she had felt his presence. When we had

some time left to have a walk we were lost in the field. At a certain point when Tim was trying to lead us back to the path, I joked that I did not want to be led into the marshes, upon which his foot sank into a marshy spot..... When we were heading to the car, my stomach contracted urging me to stay for the night. I had a very interesting talk with Margaret about Brian and my work on Tim Ingold, Goethe and the Zandroandrena of Madagascar. She told me that Brian was a good friend but that he did not believe in spiritual and ghostly encounters, and certainly not into bringing these kinds of experiences in his relational biological work. I have the same relationship with Tim Ingold. I cannot discuss the invisible in relation to his otherwise mind-opening work in anthropology. I am wondering now how Brian must have felt when he appeared to the medium since he became a spirit himself.

The medium said that he wanted me to know, that although he is not here now, he is aware of the distance and separation I have come into. He is also aware that my steps are guided. "Where I am now, I must be." He is also aware about my feeling hurt because of misplaced loyalty. "Yet, I should believe in myself. Help is on its way."

During my second visit on 10th January 2010, I asked the medium if she could try to make contact with Madagascar. She could feel that I was fine when I was there during fieldwork. No rush, comfortable, happy with myself. She entered a paddy. Her feet became wet. I became part of that picture. "I would have been happy to stay there, not to move, and to stay full of courage and wonder. I had a need to go on. I was in a current. I had a big clash when I came back to Belgium. In Madagascar, I was loved unconditionally, here, I came back in the darkness and was pulled down." The person who told her all this was someone with a goatee like an old Chinese - many healers in Madagascar have a goatee. He also tells that my friend Ernest lacked that sensitivity of me. "I'd grown out of him, I'd left him behind holding fast my dream. I should not worry, I would find the people." Then suddenly, the medium went unexpectedly into a trance - this means that higher beings took over from her. I was called their child and urged to pursue my research in Scotland or other places. After this experience I felt exhausted. It took an effort to get home and lay down to sleep. It is possible that this was due to my, then, still unknown condition of chronic fatigue. But at that time it felt like a healing moment. Spiritual encounters can be healing. I became somewhat addicted to these kinds of experi-

ences, that lessened after 2010. Without these experiences it is more difficult to feel complete and not bored. Yet I would never enhance experiences with special techniques because I am only interested in a free flow of emergent experiences. I want it natural.

On the First of February 2010 I had finally prepared a letter to the village (Ernest) that was more or less written in a positive note. On the moment when I posted the letter, I got the feeling that someone was with me and gave me a fine breeze. On Wednesday 3rd February I went to the healing. I did not say anything about the happening to the healer. But she suddenly said (for the first time ever since I went there) "someone stands next to you. I can see it once in a while. It's there on and off." That afternoon, after the healing session, I went home to sleep. I had a double dream. In the first part, Fidel, a deceased brother of my friend Ernest, took me to the village for a visit. He was wearing his yellow jacket and dark red shorts as I had known him. We walked along a straight path where I saw the faces of different male people between the trees on the side - they might have been ancestors. It was a peaceful visit and I thanked him. Only when I woke up, would I realise that he had already passed away. In the second part of the dream I visited my parents' home. When I entered the room where I normally sleep it was occupied by someone from the department of anthropology. He apologised for the mess and his presence. I told him that it was nothing, that I would find another room to stay. When I entered my mother's meditation room, she was sitting there as a happy grandmother carrying a baby. Strangely, the baby had a blue-ish gloom. I said to myself: "will white babies nowadays appear very different from what I have been used to?" After I woke up, I wondered if this could refer to the birth of my spiritual life. I felt very happy after the dream. When I told the healer the content of the dreams the following week on 14th February 2010, she explained to me that I might have been taken away in that dream. She also let me know that it was no problem to contact the medium. I went to see Winnie on 26th February 2010 and told her about my wish. She started with the request for someone to come with whom I had a sense of belonging. The person who came was certainly not Fidel because his hair was combed to the side and he was lacking teeth. For a long time I have thought, with some reservations however, that it could have been one of my grandfathers. But since they died a long time before my visits to Madagascar I did not see my sense of belonging. When I went back to Madagascar in July 2012 I saw

a photo of the deceased healer Ramariavelo corresponding with features described by the medium, and also to the accurate setting in which the man and the medium encountered each other. They were in a rural setting in the bright sunshine during the harvest. The man showed how they went from place to place to harvest with the help of horses [cows] and celebrated after the work was done. They had a simple philosophy of life along with the seasons. He had a comradeship with me, a good feeling about me - like with Brain I have never known Ramariavelo in life, but he was still very much alive in the memories of the people and their rituals. He told Winnie that when I was put on a placement for the university, I had kinds of experiences which I could accept as true knowledge, showing me the simplicity of tuning in and becoming very close to spirit. If people lost someone to spirit they grieved and rejoiced the eternal cycle. I was also close to a woman. I was pulled in and was made like a sister. Then Winnie felt again wet feet, joy, soft clay, a river bath, and all things put to good use. And she was also informed about the balanced relationships I met there without cutting off when something bad had happened.

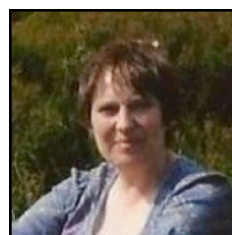
### On Track Again

In the past two years, the weird experiences have calmed down. The good ones, as well as the bad ones. Yet, I feel I am getting on track again with small steps at the time. Maybe my guides have therefore silenced, giving me the open space to proceed. I live, since August 2010, in a fine and sunny flat in a green area. I am patient at the NHS Camphill medical practice that works along anthroposophical inspirations. I attended a painting workshop there for several months, until September 2011, inspired by Goethe's theory of colours. This helped a lot to bring movement in my body and mind, and make me attentive again to colours and light out there and in me as well. I was sad when Jenny retired and left to Devon. Yet, whenever I am inspired, I still bring it alive in water colour paintings. Since 2011 I speak yearly at about 3 conferences and prepare my first publications. Next academic year 2013-2014 I hope to be strong enough to start applying for scholarships because I need to get away from the kitchens and continue my research. Writing about synchronicity is part of my healing, and I am happy to find out that I see Goethe, Tim Ingold and the Zanadroandrena in Jung. This means

that I am still on the same track, yet completely different.

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# Invoking the Rational in Acknowledging the Irrational: A Haunting in Malta

John Micallef



As professionals preoccupied with defining the boundaries of what Eric Wolf famously described as ‘the most scientific of the humanities, and the most humanistic of the sciences’ (1964:88), anthropologists remain stubbornly preoccupied with the ‘great divide’ between that which is logical – the *logos* – and that which is mythical – the *mythos*. This is especially true for those of us engaged within the fields of belief, religion, and the supernatural. The ongoing debate about how the ethnographer should approach and interpret field accounts and experiences involving the supernatural has been highly polarized, with some arguing for at least partial sharing and acceptance of informant beliefs as our own (Evans-Pritchard 1937:99, Turner 2002:151) on one side, and others advocating for a more cautious grounding in the discipline’s secular roots (Fabian 2007:xi) on the other. In attempting to reduce the gap between *logos* and *mythos*, in this paper I aim to bring fresh perspective to this debate.

Between 2005 and 2007, I spent time doing fieldwork with a number of young people in Malta, whose ages ranged from sixteen to twenty eight. I was looking at patterns of style, identity, and belief as these occurred across different groups of Maltese youths, which I categorized and qualified in terms of social geographies. The informants I refer to in this paper form part of a group I call the ‘mainstream youth group,’ and present more traditional, lower to middle class background traits. As an ethnographer, I was especially interested in the impacts that social, economic, and political transformations following the nation’s accession into the European Union<sup>1</sup> were having on these youths’ supernatural beliefs and discourse.

In drawing on my fieldwork for the purposes of this paper, I refer to the Maltese popular stories about the ghost of *Hares*, and proceed to describe an experience which I shared with two informants in the

field. I am concerned with showing how, rather than acting as opposing forces, supernatural discourse and scientific and historical discourse may co-exist and come together in contemporary supernatural belief, experience, and narrative. I also intend to argue that interactions with the supernatural require a level of engagement in active processes of evaluation, which in themselves evoke a form of calculated rational thought. Thus, rather than asking what a theory of ‘great divide’ between belief versus non-belief in ghosts and spiritual manifestations can reveal to us as ethnographers, I invite the reader to consider a quasi-symbiotic interplay between a rational explanation and a supernatural cause for such manifestations, and how this may be reflected in contemporary socio-cultural realities.

## Of ‘Hares’ and Haunting

In popular Maltese folklore, the *Hares* is a ghost that haunts a particular house to which it is for some reason attached. The word *Hares* literally means ‘to protect’ in Maltese, and is most likely derived from the ancient Roman term *Lares*, implying household deities and protectors. Within the Maltese folkloristic context, the *Hares* is said to perform ‘practical jokes to frighten people’ (Aquilina 1987:506), and make its presence known to the tenants of the house it occupies through a number of mischievous manifestations. These are said to include sounds of deep breathing, moans and dragging chains at night, as well as sudden materializations of the ghost as the figure of a fully clothed Moor. According to popular belief, when the ghost appears to one of the house tenants, it presents him or her with a ‘gift’ by indicating the location of buried treasure or money. The treasure is often hidden under some part of the house grounds, so the tenant can dig it up privately, without others knowing it. If the tenant speaks about the ghost or the source of his wealth to anyone else, how-

<sup>1</sup> Malta officially became a full member of the European Union in May 2004.

ever, the treasure immediately turns to worthless snails, and the *Hares* becomes a malevolent ghost (see Attard 1983:2-3).

Tales of the *Hares* may reflect a historical association between hidden treasure, Muslim sorcerers and old Maltese buildings. In sixteenth-century Malta, licenses were issued by Grand Masters of the Order of St. John to 'members of the elite' of Maltese society, as permission to look for treasures believed to be buried under local ruined houses and chapels. The license consisted of a written agreement stating that in the eventuality that any treasure was found, 'one-third of their finds were to be handed to the Order's treasury' (Cassar 1996:73-74). The relatively widespread belief that hidden treasures were indeed buried beneath these buildings' grounds was fueled by a contemporary practice of 'depositing excess cash underground for safe keeping' (ibid. 1996:74). As Cassar notes, a 'Muslim slave who practiced divination' or other forms of magic was often employed to help in these treasure hunts. The Muslim sorcerer was expected to 'locate' and eventually indicate the exact site where the treasure was buried, after performing a magical ritual (ibid. 1996:75).

Although the popularity of tales of Moorish household ghosts may have dwindled amongst the Maltese in recent years, my mainstream youth group informants often used the term *Hares* in referring to any ghost or spirit believed to haunt a place. The term was not only used to refer to ghosts haunting a

house, but also in the case of ghosts haunting any other space. Informants thus often used phrases like 'They say the *Hares* appears there'<sup>2</sup> and 'They say there is the *Hares* in that house.'<sup>3</sup> In these cases, they would not have gone through a supernatural experience themselves, but they would have heard stories from other people about the place or house in question. In using 'they say' without specifying who 'they' are in such phrases, my informants would also be avoiding explicitly revealing their own beliefs about the existence of ghosts.

The role of the *Hares* in contemporary Maltese discourses of supernatural belief became especially evident to me, during a chain of events, one Friday night in December 2006, whilst in the company of mainstream group youths Justin and Patrick. I had met these two informants at one of their usual hang-outs that night, and Justin told me he had heard rumours about 'the *Hares* appearing in a street in Bormla.'<sup>4</sup> At that point Justin called Patrick, a Bormla resident,<sup>5</sup> who confirmed he had heard a family member say there had been three separate reports about the apparition filed at the Bormla police station the week before:

'.... You know the big main road with the bus stop? There, three times this week. People are driving past at round about three in the morning and they see a small boy of about six years, alone next to the bus stop and waving. They

<sup>2</sup> *Hemmhekk jghidu jidher il-Hares*

<sup>3</sup> *Go dik id-dar jghidu hemm il-Hares*

<sup>4</sup> *Qed jidher il Hares go triq Bormla*

<sup>5</sup> Also known as Cospicua, Bormla is the largest of the 'three cities' situated in Malta's Southern Harbour area and collectively known as 'Cottonera'. Its history as an inhabited place dates back to Neolithic times, and today the town has a population of approximately 6,000.

stop of course, because you would not drive past a six year old boy who is alone in the street at that time of night. They stop, and the boy walks up to the driver's side of the car. When the driver pulls the car window down, the boy's face contorts, and he vanishes into thin air. It happened three times to three different people for sure, because they reported at the police station...'6

Justin and Patrick then told me that close to the place where the apparition had been seen, there was a well in which two children had drowned years before. They speculated about the apparition being 'the soul'<sup>7</sup> of the boy who had died in the well, and he might be looking for prayers, or a priest to 'bless'<sup>8</sup> the place. When I asked them about whether they believed the apparition was really supernatural, or was more likely due to someone playing practical jokes, Justin replied with:

'I don't know, it could be, but for three different people to say they saw a boy vanish into thin air and report it to the police, then there must be something going on.'<sup>9</sup>

At that point, I suggested that, since neither one of them drove and I did, I could drop both of them home myself that night. I also said that since it was on our way, we could drive by the place where people had reported seeing the apparition of the boy. Both Justin and Patrick chuckled, and in the casual tone of voice which they had used in telling me the entire story, they agreed. They did not seem frightened or

anxious at the time of my suggestion, so when the time to leave came, I called both of them to my car. It was well past midnight, and at my reminding them that we had to drive down the Bormla road, both of them looked a little concerned, yet neither of them said anything. This changed, however, once we approached the place in question fifteen minutes later. As I drove down the Bormla road, I began to slow down when the bus stop, and the exact point where the incidents were reported as having occurred, was in sight. When Justin, who was in the passenger seat, realized I was slowing down, and that I intended to stop next to the bus stop, he jolted up, and whilst biting down on his fist, said:

'Jay,<sup>10</sup> Jay, Jay don't you dare stop Jay! Don't you stop, because I won't ever speak to you again!'<sup>11</sup>

### Place, Sense, Purpose and Death

Like most other reports and accounts of supernatural manifestations which I gathered in Malta, the account of the Bormla street haunting focused on three general points, which succeeded each other:

1. The place in which the manifestation is believed to occur.
2. The human sensuous and emotional experience, such as visual and auditory experience, which is associated with the manifestation.

<sup>6</sup> ... Taf il-main road il - kbira tal - bus stop? Hemmhekk, tlitt darbiet dil - gimgha. Ikunu qed isuqu n - nies f'xi t - tlieta ta filghodu u jaraw tifel zghir ta xi sitt snin, wahdu hdejn il bus stop u jxejjer. Jieqfu hux, ghax mhux sa tibqa ghaddej tara tifel ta sitt snin wahdu fit - triq dak il - hin bil - lejl. .... .... cotd. jieqfu, u t - tifel jersaq lejn in - naha tad - driver. Kif inizzel il - hgiega d - driver, wicc it - tifel jingibed u jisparixxi fix - xejn. Grat tlitt darbiet lil tlieta min nies differenti zgur, ghax irrapurtaw l - ghassa."

<sup>7</sup> "ir - ruh"

<sup>8</sup> "ibierek"

<sup>9</sup> "Ma nafx, jista jkun, imma biex tlieta min - nies differenti jghidu li raw tifel jisparixxi fix - xejn u jirrapurtaw lill - pulizija, sinjal li hemm xi haga."

<sup>10</sup> My first name is John, but I was given the nickname 'Jay' by mainstream group youths, once they began to accept and trust me as a participant observer

<sup>11</sup> "Jay, Jay, Jay ara ma jfettillekx tieqaf Jay! Ara ma jfettillekx tieqaf ghax ma nkellmek qatt izjed!"

3. The purpose for which the manifestation is believed to occur.

An accurate description of place and context was given significant attention by informants in discussions about any ghost manifestation. In line with what Gillian Bennett (1999) suggests, narration describing such supernatural phenomena frequently involved a description of '...precise conditions...dates and times and places' (ibid. 1999:52) which were in any way relevant to the manifestation. Within my ethnographic context, this focus may have been tied to both a belief that a '...spirit can dwell in matter or in nature' (Stewart 1999:102), as well as to knowledge of any past events tied to the place in question. As in the case described above, Maltese towns and places with a rich history, such as Birgu, Bormla and Valletta, were more frequently cited as settings for spirit related phenomena by my informants than other, newer Maltese towns. The documented history of a place, therefore, plays a crucial part in generating an ideal setting and context for reported supernatural phenomena. Old houses with a rich history are more likely to be haunts for the Hares, and a street which is close to a location where some tragic event has previously occurred provides the perfect setting for a haunting.

Informant reports of ghost manifestations also included descriptions of what people present sensed, both physically and emotionally, during the event. Like place and location, visual and auditory experiences, as well as other bodily sensations such as sudden drops in temperature and changes in emotional state were often essential elements of these reports. Sensuous experience was moreover linked to the place where the manifestation was believed to occur. An apparition of a knight in armour, for example, was more plausibly witnessed in a place with ties to previous occupation by the Knights of the Order of St. John. Similarly, an unexplained emotional feeling of sorrow may have been associated with a location where some traumatic death had previously occurred. In the ethnographic example above, visually experiencing the sudden apparition of a child with a warped face on the street is placed within a wider context and linked to the previous untimely death of children in a nearby well. Moreover, the fact that the death was untimely and tragic seems to in itself justify the unearthly and apparent tormented form of the apparition, in this case a warped or contorted face.

The purpose for which the manifestation is believed to occur involves what Vladimir Propp terms 'lack' and 'liquidation' (ibid. 1968 cited in Bennett 1999:58). Lack may refer to any kind of deficiency or absence in the life of the people involved in the manifestation, such as a 'lack of mental or physical health; a lack of knowledge in domestic arrangements...or any sort of danger or distress' (Bennett 1999:58). Liquidation refers to a perceived compensation for this lack through the events which accompany the supernatural manifestation, such as the persons who are witnessing the manifestation being cured of their illness or acquiring some needed knowledge (ibid. 1999:58).

Although Propp and Bennett refer to lack and liquidation in terms of the life of the persons witnessing manifestations, my informants also tended to perceive lack and liquidation in relation to the ghost involved in the manifestation. It was common for informants to maintain that a ghost was the 'soul of a human who had died and left suspended business on earth' or was 'seeking prayer.' In such cases, liquidation of lack would involve ritual, such as a blessing of the place where the manifestations occur, as well as prayer and masses said for the repose of the soul. In line with this view, my informants Justin and Patrick speculated that the purpose of the apparition was that it was seeking prayer or blessing, possibly because such an untimely and unnatural death caused the soul to remain trapped and manifest itself on earth until it could 'move on' through prayer or ritual.

## Rationality and Resilience

When I asked direct questions about whether they believed in the existence of ghosts, Justin and Patrick were careful in their reasoning and in avoiding to give me a definite answer. Rather than immediately attributing the reported events to supernatural causes, they rule out other possibilities before considering, in Justin's own words, that 'something is going on'. They carefully 'weigh' the Hares reports in relation to 'what they might be concealing' (Stewart 1991:112), and whilst voicing such 'grave doubts' (Stewart 1999:111) about the authenticity of these reports, my informants at no point outrightly deny that the Hares may exist and that these reports may be true. This may be because, as Stewart argues in relation to belief in the *exotika* in contemporary Greece, denying the existence of the Hares could 'inauspiciously invite direct attack,' and therefore, whilst one is free to be-

lieve or not believe, investigating such things is perceived as dangerous (ibid. 1999:111).

Whilst Justin and Patrick freely come forth and discuss reports of the apparitions with me, they are not willing to delve into or investigate these reports themselves. When Justin realises it was really my intention to stop my car in the Bormla street, he switches to a state of urgency and repeats my nickname 'Jay' in emphasis, before strongly urging me to drive away. Whilst being able to come up with rational arguments in discussing reports of Hares apparitions from a distance, these informants do not want to get involved in looking for any sort of evidence concerning these events. This became more evident as my fieldwork in Malta progressed. As my questions to mainstream group informants became more direct, their unwillingness to look for evidence of any reported supernatural phenomena became clearer. In a similar manner, for example, whilst walking up a street in Valletta with a group of mainstream group youths early one evening, I asked twenty one year old Harry whether he would walk that same street alone if I switched all the street lights off and told him that the Hares appeared there. He answered with 'I do not know if the Hares exists or not, but no, I would not do it.'<sup>12</sup>

### Cause, Effect, and Reason

Reports and accounts of ghost and spirit manifestations such as the one presented above may not be as fantastic and mythical as they first seem. Rather, these are often recounted in relation to some known and confirmed past event which was associated with the place in which they were witnessed, and firmly grounded in a documented historical past. Even in its popular 'original' form, the Maltese Hares draws characteristics and physically materializes as a Moor and is believed to be linked to hidden treasure buried somewhere beneath the haunted space, thus finding roots in factual past events. Moreover, such historical links seem to not only give the supernatural event a context, but they also lead to an attribution of a level of authenticity to the reported manifestation, and through them people become more inclined towards believing that it is real. The cause of the supernatural manifestation, therefore, lies within past historical events.

Sensory experience plays a similar role in legitimizing the manifestation, in two senses. Firstly, the very experience, be it visual, auditory, or just a change in feeling or emotion gives the event its core. If the sensory experience cannot be explained away as having been caused by a natural occurrence, the supernatural cause is resorted to. Especially when the experience is shared by more than one individual, over a stretch of time and multiple times, the supernatural event gains authenticity and those reporting it gain credibility. Secondly, the manifestation is legitimized when the sensory experience in any way corresponds to the historical context, and to any part of those past events which have precipitated in the manifestation. The effect of the supernatural event is therefore manifested as sensory experience, which in some way or other directly conveys sensory experience of the original causative events.

A supernatural event is also legitimized by the purpose it is perceived as having. In the ethnographic example presented, Justin and Patrick perform what Gillian Bennett terms 'radical reinterpretation' (ibid. 1999:51) of the Bormla apparition in terms of a Catholic context, by suggesting that the supposed ghost may have been one of the dead children looking for prayer or a ritual of blessing. A perceived purpose brings the manifestation full circle in authenticity, because it is the reason for its continuous occurrence over time.

In considering cause, effect, and reason, my informants therefore still engage in a 'scientific precision' at the point at which they have to attribute meaning and purpose to the manifestation, and when they attempt to formulate a chronological sequence of events which could have led to the manifestation of the Bormla ghost. The very mythical essence of the manifestation is thus placed within, and most remarkably justified by, a very logical framework and sequence of events. Through their discourse, informants like Justin and Patrick implied a rational approach towards Hares stories, and consideration of natural, scientific explanations for unexplained events clearly come through. Nonetheless, among my mainstream group informants there still seemed to be a general belief in, at the very least, the possibility that reports of ghost apparitions may be authentic, and that the phenomena they involve are supernatural. Consequently, many of these informants were not willing to venture to a place reputed to be haunted at

<sup>12</sup> *'Ma nafx il-Hares jezistix jew le, imma le, ma naghmiliex kieku'*

night, or get personally involved with the supernatural. Thus, whilst they were able to analyze Hares stories and weigh them against a scientific, rational model from a distance, they were not ready to expose themselves and investigate the stories first hand, because they still feared any potential supernatural harm. In view of this, we should consider the possibility that the apparent logic and legitimacy attributed to paranormal occurrences through discourses of historiography and science may be at the core of such a persistent resilience of the supernatural cause, in a contemporary Western world.



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# Anthropology and the Paranormal: Report on a Symposium at the Esalen Institute

Fiona Bowie



From 13th–17th October 2013 the Centre for Theory and Research (CTR) at the Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California, invited group of scholars to discuss the contribution that social and cultural anthropology, and related disciplines, can make to our understanding of the paranormal. The Esalen Institute was founded in 1962 by Michael Murphy and Richard Price, and is in the vanguard of the human potential movement (see *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Jeffrey J. Kripal, University of Chicago Press, 2007). Michael Murphy, director of the Centre for Theory and Research, as well as being a most gracious host, took part in our discussions. Michael Murphy's vision is one of transforming society through dialogue and personal growth. He has the courage to 'think big' and encourages others to do the same. Esalen's stunning setting on California's Pacific coast, with its abundance of wildlife, beautiful grounds and natural hot springs, provide a wonderful backdrop to the work carried out there. This includes a wide range of personal development workshops, holistic therapies, and symposia for people from the worlds of politics, economics and academia.

Before we met email discussions between invited participants got underway on the use of the term 'paranormal'. The word is commonly used in a Western setting but less useful when discussing non-Western societies where the boundaries of what is considered normal may vary considerably. The symposium was built on a long-running series of discussions that had been looking at evidence for the survival of consciousness from a variety of scientific and humanistic perspectives (known as SURSEM or the Survival Seminar). One outcome from these meetings was the publication in 2007 of *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*, edited by Edward and Emily Kelly and others. A second volume is in preparation. Around half the participants at our symposium had been involved in the SURSEM discussions. The inspiration for the Anthropology and the Para-

normal symposium was the journal *Paranthropology* edited by Jack Hunter. Jack, along with Jeffrey Kripal and David Hufford, were responsible for putting together the participants for this symposium, with Frank Poletti in charge of practical arrangements. Our discussions also benefited from the presence of the Chair of the CTR board, Sam Yau, and the symposium funder, Deb Frost. For some sessions we were also joined by Michael's PA, Jane Hartford, and a young member of the Esalen workforce, Lauren, who won a ballot to join our symposium as community representative.

## Common Themes

I identified three common, overlapping themes that emerged from our discussions, with different emphases, to some extent along disciplinary lines. These can be summarised as epistemological, hermeneutical and morphological concerns.

### 1. Epistemological concerns: 'We know that there is something real going on'.

David Hufford coined the term 'Experiential Source Hypothesis' (ESH) for phenomena that appear to manifest across time and culture, as a result of personal experience. In Hufford's case the key experience was sleep paralysis accompanied by the sound of someone approaching, the sensation of being suffocated and the sense of an evil presence. Many years after his own experience he conducted fieldwork in Newfoundland and found that what he had regarded as an unpleasant, private, and for all he knew unique experience, was culturally recognised as visitations by the 'old hag' (work published under the title, *The Terror that Comes in the Night*). The key features of this experience turned out to be universal, although the interpretation of them varies from one culture to another. Another example of the experiential source hypothesis was given by Gregory Shushan, who has



From left to right, back row: Michael Murphy, Susan Greenwood, Jane Hartford, Jeffrey Kripal, Raphael Locke, David Hufford, Charles Emmons, Jack Hunter, Thomas E. Bullard, Stanley Krippner, Edward F. Kelly, Loriliai Biernacki. Middle row: Edith Turner, Tanya Luhrmann, Ann Taves, Deb Frost. Front row: Geoffrey Samuel, Antonia Mills, Fiona Bowie, Sam Yau, Frank Poletti, Paul Stoller, Gregory Shushan.

studied near death experiences (NDEs), across unrelated cultures. Shushan found that he could reconstruct the key features of a NDE, as widely recognised in the writings of Bruce Greyson (who produced the so-called Greyson Scale), and Raymond Moody's nine elements of a NDE, from his sources, without reference to these more recent American studies. The main characteristics of a near death experience appear to be universal and relate to actual individual experience, not easily explained by cultural programming, expectation or neurology.

The work done by the SURSEM group, and set out in *Irreducible Mind*, provided a clear platform from which we could assert the reality of the paranormal, or anomalous experiences, and it was not necessary to go over that ground again.

The epistemological concerns expressed within the group took the character of:

a) *Problems of audience and translation.* The dominant materialist paradigm in the academy and elsewhere in Western societies tends to lead to self-censorship

and produces a deep-seated anxiety around finding terminology that is acceptable to the gatekeepers of this hegemonic discourse, while not wishing to deny the reality of spirits or paranormal phenomena. In published works most scholars, including those present, are therefore parsimonious with their statements, seeing their work as the 'thin end of the wedge', as Geoffrey Samuel put it, in a hostile academic environment. Many scholars in this field refuse to state their conclusions in public (such as Ian Stevenson with his work on reincarnation at the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia) lest it damage their reputation for scientific balance.

b) *'We don't know what it is, or how to explain it'.* There were various levels of engagement, knowledge and experience relating to the issues discussed. Some participants had many years experience as healers, shamans, witches and mediums, (as well as out-of-body travellers, lucid dreamers, practitioners of meditation and followers of various spiritual paths), drawing on many different cultural idioms and tra-

ditions. Others were newer to the field and at an earlier exploratory stage, or used a less experience-near form of knowing. There was not surprisingly a gradient from those who were testing initial hypotheses to those who had a deep personal knowledge of, and context from which to explain, the 'paranormal' (the term was not one that was generally adopted when referring to a non-Western context).

- c) Following from this, some discussions returned to questions of what we mean by terms such as 'real' and 'know'. The role of personal knowledge based on direct experience was a sub-theme that ran throughout our discussions, without being fully explored. In fact the extent of 'experience-near' knowledge within the group (based on ritual performance, training as a medium or healer, or shamanic initiation, for example) did not fully emerge until it was time to part at the end of the symposium. This may well reflect the caution that academics are used to exercising when it comes to revealing personal experiences and orientations, even within a 'safe space' such as that created at Esalen.
- d) Each contributor had around 30 minutes to introduce themselves and to give an informal summary of their work, followed by an hour for discussion (papers were distributed ahead of the symposium). In almost all cases participants described an 'Ah-ha' moment that persuaded them that what might be described as paranormal phenomena are real. For the social anthropologists this often takes place in a non-Western setting – as when Edie Turner saw a gray plasma blob leave an Ndembu woman during an Ihamba healing ritual, and Paul Stoller's encounter with sorcery in Niger. Stanley Krippner described numerous personal encounters with the paranormal power of shamans and mediums. For Jack Hunter in his study of a physical mediumship circle it was personally losing control of his body whilst in a light trance that persuaded him that there is at the very least a real somatic element to physical mediumship. This moment of personal knowing could be more prosaic, but equally life-changing for the researcher. Such was the case with Ed Kelly's encounter with Bill Delmore, a research subject at the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia, who consistently scored 35% or, 10% over chance, guessing one of four items on a random probability machine. For Fiona Bowie it was the recognition of the similarity in certain descriptions of the afterlife and how it operates in a wide variety of unrelated settings and

cultures that led to a deeper engagement with the topic. The 'ah-ha' can therefore be cognitive and intellectual as well as somatic or sensory.

## 2. Hermeneutical or interpretive questions

There was general agreement that studies in this field of research need to incorporate the perspective or standpoint of both researcher/s and subjects, and be as inclusive as possible. Each issue needs to be examined from as many dimensions as one can find. Another way of putting this is the necessity of using both left and right brain, to be open to phenomena that challenge our existing presuppositions. Ann Taves for example, in her work on Mormonism's founding golden plates, revealed to Joseph Smith, was concerned to find a way of talking about the plates that overcame a dualistic true/false or believer/detractor dichotomy. Rafael Locke focused on what makes a good researcher, and the need for those involved in laboratory psi experiments to take account of cultural factors that they may not be aware of. Eddie Bullard tried to hold a middle ground in the contentious and divided field of ufology. Charlie Emons and Susan Greenwood grappled with first-person research, in which subjective knowing and 'going native' are central to the enterprise but potentially compromising at the same time. BUT, it was clear that we all have our 'boggle thresholds' (such as one UFO contactee's encounter with a giant ant in Eddie Bullard's case), and we need to be aware of our personal boundaries and how we react to them. It is only then that we can come up with new interpretations and understandings of challenging phenomena. The process is essentially dynamic and dialogical.

## 3. Morphological discussions, i.e. 'What is it that we know?'

This is where careful, descriptive ethnographic work comes to the fore, with analysis and interpretation following rather than preceding the ethnographic process. Although this direction of movement (from practice to theory) is central to most social and cultural anthropology, it is often problematic when faced with necessity of coming up with hypotheses and premature results in grant applications, based on a model of science or quantitative social science, in which hypothesis testing and theory form the basis of subsequent research, rather than arising from the empirical investigation. Within this arena, some of

the research presented focused on sociological questions such as ‘who’, ‘why’, ‘what’, ‘when’, i.e. the social context and its actors. Other research and subsequent discussions were more concerned with the phenomenological content of the experience (while not ignoring contextual questions). These tended to be somatic and often deeply personal experiences that opened the researcher to new understandings of their ethnographic material, and their own path in life. In different ways these interests were reflected in Tanya Luhrmann’s work on prayer among Evangelical Christians, Geoffrey Samuel and Loriliai Bieracki’s deep engagement with Buddhist and Hindu religious practices, and Susan Greenwood’s cultivation of magical consciousness. For Antonia Mills, working with First Nations peoples in British Columbia, the experience of one of her children being recognised as a reincarnation of a member of the group she was studying, and her subsequent own ‘memories’ of a previous life as a member of one of these groups, transformed her understanding of reincarnation among these peoples, as well as informing her understanding of her own life trajectory. The importance of story telling, another sub-theme, identified as a central form in which knowledge about the ‘paranormal’ is disseminated, was introduced by Jeff Kripal. It was demonstrated by some wonderful formal and informal story telling throughout the symposium by a number of colleagues (most notably in an evening of paranormal tales around the fireside – a kind of academics’ karaoke!).

These fascinating, sometime challenging, and often humorous, discussions tended to flow around and across each other, weaving a colourful tapestry. They provided a platform from which to continue our various explorations but did not of themselves provide a unified vision of a way forward. It is in the nature of Esalen’s symposia that relationships and ideas nurtured here are likely to be maintained and developed. Several of the participants, for example, will be attending the 6th Exploring the Extraordinary conference in Gettysburg, PA, from 21st-23rd March 2014, hosted by Charlie Emmons (all are welcome!).

### Snake healing ceremony

After the official discussions had ended, Rafael Locke invited those who were still at Esalen (and who could be out of bed before 7am) to take part in an Australian Aboriginal snake healing ritual on the lawn outside Murphy house. (Those up early enough got to see a full moon set over the Pacific Ocean, a wonder-

ful counterbalance to the spectacular sunsets we had enjoyed each day). Rafael is a shamanic healer as well as a cultural anthropologist, and he started by telling us one of the founding dreamtime myths of the formation of the land and first creatures in Australia. It included a spider with her egg-sack of spiderlings, who crossed the land in the stomach of a python, creating the landscape and its physical features as they travelled towards the centre. At a certain point the spiderlings matured and burst out of the egg-sack. Finding themselves in the darkness of the snake’s stomach they ate their way through the stomach lining until they reached the light of the outside world. They were then scattered by the wind to form the creatures of the air, earth and water. The snake was wounded by their activity but not fatally, and after resting recovered. She sloughed her skin, which was given life to become her companion, and together the snakes became powerful healers who will come when summoned. I saw our symposium participants a little like the spiderlings, struggling to reach maturity and then to fight their way through the walls of ignorance, fear and doubt towards the light that is the birthright of every human being. Each one, like the different creatures who were formed from the spiderlings, has a different and unique role. The institutions through which we fight our way may be wounded, but can also be renewed and find a healing power that can be used for the renewal of society. This might seem rather a utopian vision but it is consistent with Esalen’s mission to renew and transform society through dialogue, and through connection with the earth and one another.

Paul Stoller summed up the mood of the symposium with his post-Esalen farewell: ‘The Songhay people have a lovely custom at farewells. They never say ‘goodbye’. Instead they say *kala ni kaya* which means, “until your return”. Looking forward to our returns’.

Fiona Bowie studied Anthropology at the Universities of Durham and Oxford. She has taught in departments of Theology and Religious Studies and Anthropology in the Universities of Wales, Bristol, Linköping in Sweden and Virginia. She is a member of Wolfson College, Oxford and Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King’s College London. She is founder of the Afterlife Research Centre and is currently working on ethnographic approaches to the study of mediumship and the afterlife.





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