



CALL FOR PAPERS

Embodying Modern “Scientific” Medicine and “Religious/Spiritual” Healing

A Comparative Perspective on Exorcism and Non-Voluntary Spirit Possession

International Conference

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, 13-14-15 December 2018

Organisers:

Francesco Piraino (Fondazione Giorgio Cini, KU Leuven)

Andrea De Antoni (Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto)

Spirit possession has been broadly defined as “any altered or unusual state of consciousness and allied behaviour that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit, demon, or deity. The possessed act as though another personality (...) has entered their body and taken control” (Crapanzano 2005, 8687). This definition has proven to be problematic, for the modalities of what is emically considered spirit possession differ according to societies and do not necessarily involve unusual states of consciousness (e.g. Cohen 2008). Consequently, socio-anthropological research has tended to focus on the particularities of possession in different contexts. Nevertheless, studies have highlighted the political dimensions of possession – or more general “occult” beliefs and practices related to spirits – as related to resistance to changes in socio-economic system as results of colonialism, modernization, capitalism, globalization and their related immoralities (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 2002; Lewis 1971; Ong 1987; Sanders 2008; Taussig 1980). These approaches have been useful for the understanding of the politics of spirits and possession, but they overlook individual experiences, as well as possibilities for cross-cultural research.

In recent years, social sciences have witnessed a renewed interest in the topic of possession and exorcism, also as a consequence of new approaches. On the one hand, mainly cognitive approaches argue that “what constitutes possession and the paths by which possession concepts and practices are transmitted (...), are informed and constrained by recurrent features of evolved human cognition” (Cohen 2008, 103). Similarly, it has been suggested that, in order to develop a cross-cultural comparison of spiritual experiences, phenomena that have local terms, but are associated to an unspecified broad range of physical events (e.g. “feeling the presence of God” among Charismatic Evangelical Christians), bodily affordances, or striking anomalous events, should be taken into consideration (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014). These perspectives have great potential for cross-cultural research, but they tend to “psychologize” or “internalize” spirits, thus not giving an account of the complexities through which their realities emerge within the social.

Different approaches have developed in the past decades, focusing on an increasing interest in embodiment. Corporeality has been recognized as a condition of human experience, and the body as the “existential ground of culture and self” (Csordas 1994b). Current scholarship widely acknowledged the **lived and moving body** as a source of **perception**: as the subject of motor intentionality, it is considered a bearer of practical knowledge and **skills**, developed through practice, with which we dwell in the world (Ingold 2000). This ecological approach pointed out the necessity of investigating human experiences and social phenomena from the perspective of perception of the body in its interaction with the environment, i.e. not only with other humans, but also with non-humans.

Recent research on possession and spirits in general, therefore, points at approaches that focus on “more than belief” (Jensen, Ishii, and Swift 2016), in order to highlight how the “agency of intangibles,” the “**social life of spirits**” (Espirito-Santo and Blanes 2013), as well as **spirit realities emerge** within the social through **practice, bodily perceptions** and **interactions with the environment**. Consequently, for instance, experiences with spirits and demons in Catholic Charismatic healing have been analysed from the perspective of bodily perceptions emerging through ritual practice (e.g. Csordas 1994a; Csordas 2002), hearing the voice of God has been identified as a cultural practice that can be learnt among American Evangelists (Luhrmann 2012), the making of spirits in Ghana and spirit possession rituals in South India have been seen as emerging not through cognition or belief, but through perceptions of the body “acting with things” (Ishii 2012), experiences in haunted places in Japan have been analysed as emerging through perceptions of the body moving in certain specific environments (De Antoni 2011), and possession and the devil during Roman Catholic exorcisms in Italy have been seen as emerging through “affective correspondences” among humans and non-humans (De Antoni 2017).

All these “embodied” approaches have a great potential for cross-cultural research and, yet, a comparative perspective is nearly missing. Moreover, in spite of the abundance of research on voluntary or shamanic spirit possession, there is a general lack of investigation of non-voluntary spirit possession, on how it emerges, and how affected people arrive to the point of being treated as possessed. Furthermore, there is a lack of data about how exorcism and modern “scientific” (bio)medical practices relate, particularly in contexts where the medical system is institutionalized.

This conference is a first step towards filling these gaps, while aiming at developing a comparative, **cross-cultural perspective** on spirit **possession and exorcism**, with a particular focus on the **interactions with medical practice** and practitioners. We invite contributions that focus on one or more of the following points:

- **Experiences** of people who are affected by **non-voluntary spirit possession** and their **case histories**
- Experiences of possessed people in their **interaction with medical practice**
- Interactions between **exorcists** and **medical practitioners**
- Experiences of possession and **bodily perceptions** as **emerging through practice**, rather than their symbolism, meaning making and cognition
- Interactions between humans and **non-humans**

We particularly welcome contributions that address issues such as the above on the basis of empirical case studies. We are also interested in contributions that explicitly use or experiment with innovative methods and/or tackle methodological questions specific to the conference theme.

Submission Process

Abstracts up to 300 words, accompanied by a CV, should be submitted in English by the 1st of August to exorcism.conference@cini.it. A notification of acceptance will be forwarded by the 1st of September. Following the notification of acceptance, we will require you to send us a draft chapter by the 1st of December, so that all the participants in the conference can prepare in advance. A few months after the Conference, we will ask participants to send us their full paper, to be published in an edited book.

We welcome submissions from doctoral students, early career researchers and established academics.

Economics

The Cini Foundation will provide accommodation on San Giorgio Island, coffee breaks and lunches for all participants. Participants will arrange and pay for their own transportation, and will be requested to donate to the Cini Foundation Library *Civiltà e Spiritualità* Comparete one book related to religious studies they authored or in which they have participated. Extra funding may be available to cover the travel expenses of a limited number of junior scholars who cannot obtain funding from their own institutions. If extra funding is needed, please indicate this in the email with which you submit your abstract.

References

- Cassaniti, Julia L., and Tanya Marie Luhrmann. 2014. "The Cultural Kindling of Spiritual Experiences." *Current Anthropology* 55 (S10): S333–43. doi:10.1086/677881.
- Cohen, Emma. 2008. "What Is Spirit Possession? Defining, Comparing, and Explaining Two Possession Forms." *Ethnos* 73 (1): 101–26. doi:10.1080/00141840801927558.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff. 2002. "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (4): 779–805. doi:10.1215/00382876-101-4-779.
- Crapanzano, Vincent. 2005. "Spirit Possession: An Overview." Edited by Lindsay Jones. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA. Detroit.
- Csordas, Thomas J. 1994a. *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . , ed. 1994b. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2002. *Body, Meaning, Healing*. 2002 edition. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- De Antoni, Andrea. 2011. "Ghost in Translation: Non-Human Actors, Relationality, and Haunted Places in Contemporary Kyoto." *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology* 12: 27–49.
- . 2017. "Sympathy from the Devil: Experiences, Movement and Affective Correspondences during a Roman Catholic Exorcism in Contemporary Italy." *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology* 18 (1): 143–57.
- Espirito-Santo, Diana, and Ruy Blanes. 2013. "Introduction: On the Agency of Intangibles." In *The Social Life of Spirits*, edited by Ruy Blanes and Diana Espirito-Santo, 1–32. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Ishii, Miho. 2012. "Acting with Things: Self-Poiesis, Actuality, and Contingency in the Formation of Divine Worlds." *HAAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2): 371–88. doi:10.14318/hau2.2.019.
- Jensen, Casper Bruun, Miho Ishii, and Philip Swift. 2016. "Attuning to the Webs of En: Ontography, Japanese Spirit Worlds and The 'tact' of Minakata Kumagusu." *HAAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (2): 149–72. doi:10.14318/hau6.2.012.
- Lewis, I. 1971. *Ecstatic religion: an anthropological study of spirit possession and shamanism*. Harmondsworth ; New York: Penguin Books.
- Luhrmann, Tanya M. 2012. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York: Knopf.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Sanders, Todd. 2008. "Buses in Bongoland Seductive Analytics and the Occult." *Anthropological Theory* 8 (2): 107–32. doi:10.1177/1463499608090787.
- Taussig, Michael T. 1980. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.