International Conference

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

*A Comparative Perspective on Non-Voluntary Spirit Possession and Exorcism*

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, 13-15 December 2018

Organisers:

Andrea De Antoni (Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto)

Francesco Piraino (Fondazione Cini)

**PROGRAMME**

**DECEMBER 13th**

09:30 – 10:00

**Opening Remarks**

Francesco Piraino (Fondazione Cini) and Andrea De Antoni (Ritsumeikan University)

10:00 – 11:30

***Keynote Lecture –* Beings Without Bodies:** Contemporary Catholic Exorcism and the Discourse of Evil

Thomas Csordas (University of California San Diego)

11:30 – 11:50 Coffee Break

11:50 – 12:50

**Embodied Alienation:** The Politics of Medicalized Involuntary Possession in Nicaragua

Maria D. Venegas (University of Pittsburgh)

12:50 – 14:30 Lunch Break

14:30 – 15:30

**Between Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and the Devil’s Whispers:** Reconfiguring Islamic Healing and Psychiatry in Contemporary Egypt

Ana Vinea (University of Michigan)

15:30 – 16:30

**Living with Spirits:** Interactions between Humans and Non-Humans

Marta Camilla Wright (University of Bergen)

16:30 – 16:50 Coffee Break

16:50-17:50

**Metaphors of Air and Embodied Social Change in North India**

Akanksha Awal (University of Oxford)

**DECEMBER 14th**

10:00 – 11:00

**Fragile Beings:** Care, Practice, and the Path of Spirit Possession

Miho Ishii (Kyoto University)

11:00 – 11:20 Coffee Break

11:20 – 12:20

**When Ancestral Shrines Turn into ‘Physicians’ Consultation Rooms:** Bodily and Sensorial Approaches to Spirit Possession Practices in Northern Zimbabwe

Olga Sicilia (University of Vienna)

12:20 – 14:30 Lunch Break

14:30 – 15:30

**“She’s Coming out Dead or Alive”:** Sufi *Jinn* Extraction and Scientific Healing in the Qadiri-Rifa’iTariqa

Melinda Krokus (Marywood University)

15:30 – 15:50 Coffee Break

15:50 – 16:50

**Modern Eastern Orthodox Stances on Spirit Possession and Exorcism:** Tradition and Innovation

Yuri Stoyanov (University of London)

**DECEMBER 15th**

10:00 – 11:00

**Disembodying Spirits:** Moving from Wild to Cultivated Channeling

Adam Klin-Oron (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Israel)

11:00 – 11:20 Coffee Break

11:20 – 12:20

**Disclosing Experiences of Spirit Possession:** An Analysis of Testimonials about Spirit Possession Published on Japanese Spiritual Healers’ Websites

Birgit Staemmler (University of Tübingen)

12:20 – 14:30 Lunch Break

14:30 – 15:30

**Where I End and You Begin:** Steps to Comparing Entanglements of Spirit Possession and Biomedicine

Andrea De Antoni (Ritsumeikan University)

15:30 – 15:50 **Closing Remarks**

Francesco Piraino (Fondazione Cini) and Andrea De Antoni (Ritsumeikan University)

**ABSTRACTS**

***Keynote Lecture***

**Beings Without Bodies**

Contemporary Catholic Exorcism and the Discourse of Evil

Thomas Csordas (University of California San Diego)

The 21st century resurgence of exorcism in the Roman Catholic Church marks a new moment in the relation among religion, rationality, and experience in the contemporary world. Could there be a practice more challenging to post-Enlightenment rationality than that of an exorcist, constantly facing off against an invisible preternatural enemy who by its ontological nature is more intelligent than any human adversary? A principal challenge of ethnographic research on this phenomenon is to understand the experience of the afflicted (as well as of the exorcist and mental health professionals who consult with them). One approach to this understanding is in terms of what demonic “manifestations” can tell us about human embodiment as a function of personal affliction, social malaise, and cosmological struggle.

**Embodied Alienation**

The Politics of Medicalized Involuntary Possession in Nicaragua

Maria D. Venegas (University of Pittsburgh)

This paper explores the individual experiences of *Grisi Siknis* in the context of biomedical institutions politicizing possession in Nicaragua. For the native Miskitu of Nicaragua, *Grisi Siknis* is a contagious illness that results from non-voluntary spirit possession and affects predominantly women. This experience is characterized by numerous psychosomatic symptoms, such as headache, aggressive behavior, and loss of consciousness and periods of rapid frenzy. While *Grisi Siknis* belongs to realm of traditional healing systems of the region, given the contagious and gendered nature of this experience, the local biomedical institutions have redefined *Grisi Siknis* as a collective hysteria with the goal to push the intercultural policies of inclusion in the region. I argue that the process of medicalization of *Grisi Siknis* by the biomedical institutions and their politics of inclusion further essentializes, culturalizes and psychologizes the experience of possession alienating and ironically excluding the most affected by this experience. The goal of this paper is twofold: 1) to unravel the process and practices through which the local biomedical institutions redefine possession experience in the region. 2) To explore the individual experiences of *Grisi Siknis* in the context of medicalization of possession. Specifically, I show that in practice, *Grisi Siknis* becomes an alienated affliction, untreatable by biomedicine and dismissed as a real experience. For the most afflicted then, *Grisi Siknis* provides an embodied language (“embodied resistance,” Venegas 2018 in press) and “affective correspondences” (De Antoni 2017) to speak out about anxieties related to socio-economic conditions, migration, physical, emotional, and sexual violence of those afflicted by it. This paper contributes to Studies of Science and Technology (STS) and Interpretive Medical Anthropology by providing empirical evidence on the ways possessed individuals and biomedical ontologies and practices relate, interact, and create different conceptualizations of possession experience within particular social, political and economic contexts.

**Between Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and the Devil’s Whispers**

Reconfiguring Islamic Healing and Psychiatry in Contemporary Egypt

Ana Vinea (University of Michigan)

Since the 1980s, and in the context of the Islamic revival, the Egyptian therapeutic landscape has witnessed the increased visibility and popularity of a revivalist type of spirit exorcism, locally known as Qur’anic healing (*al-‘ilāg bi-l-Qur’ān*). By reconfiguring centuries-old therapeutic practices in a multilayered dialogue with biomedicine and psychiatry, Qur’anic healing has become the knot of heated public debates about what afflictions exist in the world and who has the authority to speak about and treat them. In this paper, I focus on one aspect of these debates concerning the conceptualization and relationship between OCD (*al-waswās al-qahrī*) and devil’s whispers (*waswās al-shayṭān*), a form of disturbing auditory intrusion of invisible devils or evil *jinn*. The paper puts in dialogue the positions of Qur’anic healers and psychiatrists to show that the two groups do not uniformly support one side of the dichotomy (i.e., psychiatrists, OCD and Qur’anic healers, the devil’s whispers). Instead, both groups are internally divided between two positions. The first is one of “ontological equivalence” whereby the two categories are collapsed into one, psychiatrists claiming that devil’s whispers are OCD, and Qur’anic healers the exact opposite. The second position agues for “ontological multiplicity” and brings together those Qur’anic healers and religious psychiatrists who recognize both categories and see their task to distinguish their overlapping symptoms. Through this discussion, I argue that these different perspectives and the debate itself point not to a clear-cut relation between Islamic exorcism and psychiatry, but to dynamic, ongoing processes of redrawing the boundaries between the seen and the unseen, and between the religious and the scientific in the sphere of health and healing. It is through such processes that both Islamic and psychiatric traditions are continuously remade in contemporary Egypt.

**Living with Spirits**

Interactions between Humans and Non-Humans

Marta Camilla Wright (University of Bergen)

Interaction between humans and evil spirits is part of life of many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. The evil spirits are understood as uncountable and can possess people under various circumstances. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians regard possessed people at times “not conscious” - the person is not present and the body is left with the spirit (or spirits).

The importance of interaction between humans and evil spirits is particularly evident at the many holy water sites in Addis Ababa. In the view of most Ethiopian Orthodox, embodied evil spirits take part in social life, have conversations and interact with other superhumans mediated by human beings, or material objects. They interact with human beings, for instance with clergy during exorcisms or other people present at holy water sites or elsewhere.

Based on recent field research among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians at holy water sites in Addis Ababa, this paper will explore aspects of this interaction between humans and non-humans, discussing empirical material gathered through participant observation, informal conversations and interviews.

**Metaphors of Air and Embodied Social Change in North India**

Akanksha Awal (University of Oxford)

In Hindi-speaking north India, a common way of socially remarking on a personality change witnessed in a person inhabiting an institution of modernity, such as living in the city or having been educated, is by regarding them as having been afflicted by the *hava* (atmosphere) of the place. Anthropologists studying spirit possession have usefully highlighted how discourses of spirit possession reveal a resistance to social transformations brought on by globalisation and neoliberalisation (Douglas, 2010; Gellner, 1994; Littlewood, 2009; Ong, 1988). However, these studies overlook the embodied experience of individuals having been imputed with spirit possession. In my fieldwork among lower middle class young women in Ghaziabad district of north India, although spirit possessions were few and far between – actual ghostly encounters are thought of as remnants of a bygone era – the use of ghostly metaphors was rife. For instance, people would say: *padai ka bhoot chada hain* (she has become afflicted by the ghost of education) or college *ki hava lag gai* (she has been afflicted by the *hava* of college).

Focussing on the embodied practices of educated young women, I show that young women exhibited a change in their comportment after having been in the affective atmosphere of the college, such that they became more assertive or laughed without restraint. Socially, their affective practices of anger and laughter were deemed as them having been afflicted by the ghost of education. Further, young women imputed with having been afflicted by the *hava* of college were said to be out of mind. Therefore, unlike other studies on spirit possession, young women I worked with remained careful to deflect these imputations of ghostly afflictions and policed their dressing sense and behaviour. Focussing on these practices, I show the relationship of educated women, sometimes socially viewed as ghosts, with the social. I do so to explain how the use of the phrase, college *ki hava*, becomes a metaphor for young women to articulate how they feel haunted by their unrealised aspirations, while at the same time avoiding a triggering of mental health interventions.

**Fragile beings**

Care, Practice, and the Path of Spirit Possession

Miho Ishii (Kyoto University)

Over the past two decades, the body, corporeality, and embodiment have become growing concerns in the social sciences. Thomas Csordas, in his introduction to *Embodiment and Experience*, writes that ‘beginning in the early 1970s, and with increased energy in the late 1980s, the body has assumed a lively presence on the anthropological scene, and on the stage of interdisciplinary cultural studies’ (1994:1). Referring to Frank (1991), Feher (1989), and others, Csordas (1994) points out that in recent social science, the body has been transformed from object to agent.

However, for scholars focusing on the agency of the body, the notion of *agent* is not a synonym for *subject-agent* with clear intentions (Asad 1993: 13-16). As Talal Asad, Brian Turner, and others point out, embodied human beings are frail as they are prone to illness, ageing, and disability (Turner 2001, 2008: 242-262; Turner and Rojek 2001; see also Hutchinson 2006: 7-8). The agency of embodied beings thus lies not in their capacity to act as autonomous subjects but in their capability to relate with others through their vulnerability, frailty, and *passiones* (Asad 2003: 67-99; Frank 1995: 48-50; Lienhardt 1961: 150-152). More precisely, their agency emerges only through embodied relations with others.

Considering these issues in terms of spirit possession, its incipient stage is interesting. In Southern Ghana and South India, where I conducted intensive fieldwork, spirit possession is often suggested to be an illness, and most patients take various measures such as consulting doctors and diviners for help. If it is ascertained that the illness is caused by a spirit, and if the patient accepts the diagnosis, he or she follows the path of becoming a spirit medium (this is called *akom* in Twi, the language of the Akan people in Ghana) and learns to live with spiritual beings. Dissimilar to the process of exorcism described by Bruce Kapferer (1979), it is observed here that the patient who has been overwhelmed by the power of uncontrollable possession gradually masters the skill of appeasing the power and achieves the ‘double perspective’ of the spirit and the self (see Willerslev 2007; Ishii 2013). Through training and performances as a spirit medium, the trainee begins to accept the passionate and contingent power and creates new relationships with others, including spirits.

In anthropology, the practices of spirit possession are often contrasted with those of modern medical care. While modern medical care aims to combat disease and reclaim the healthy and autonomous self, possession is viewed as something that indicates an alternative, non-modern-Western self, and way of being (e.g., Smith 2006). However, recent anthropological studies on modern medical care present a new perspective. For instance, in her ethnography based on fieldwork in a Dutch university hospital, Annemarie Mol (2002) demonstrated that a disease is not an entity that exists automatically but is rather *enacted* through various practices of, and relationships between, humans and nonhumans. She also demonstrates the multiplicity of a patient’s body on/in which various practices are enacted.

Likewise, spirit possession is not a firm entity but is enacted and actualised through various practices of, and relationships between, humans and others, including nonhumans. This requires us to consider *both* the similarities and differences between modern medical care and possession more carefully, which can be noticed only when we ‘remove the brackets’ of each practice (see Mol 2002: 54). It may be multiplicity, contingency, or the passion of embodied human beings that forms the basis of their similarity. Meanwhile, their differences may be based on how each practice creates and recreates the meaning and relationships around the concerned body.

In this presentation, I will investigate the above issues by focusing on spirit worship and possession in Southern Ghana and South India, referring to the medical care for mental illness in Italy, as described in Matsushima (2014).

**When Ancestral Shrines Turn into ‘Physicians’ Consultation Rooms:**

Bodily and Sensorial Approaches to Spirit Possession Practices in Northern Zimbabwe

Olga Sicilia (University of Vienna)

Spirit mediums and ancestral cults in Zimbabwe have been extensively studied by both historians and anthropologists for its political implications in historical processes dating back to early rebellions against colonial rule in the 1890s, or even earlier as in the case of the Zambezi Valley under Portuguese imperialism. Recent works have recast the figure of the medium within ethnographic accounts of ontological uncertainty in social and religious life. They have explored the multi-faceted ambiguousness and precariousness intrinsic to the authenticity of mediumship and possession in Zimbabwe, showing how ambivalence and uncertainty of performance are constitutive of mediumship, while they offer at the same time both opportunities and dangers for mediums. In these studies, however, the phenomenological dimensions of spirit possession practices remain largely overlooked.

Based on long-term field research in the mid-Zambezi Valley (Zimbabwe), this paper aims to offer an understanding of *mhondoro* possession ceremonies beyond its discoursive (possession as text) and spatial (possession as performance) dimensions. Thus, the paper uses possession rituals hold at two particular shrines – whose ancestors are locally in high demand for their therapeutic and distress solutions, to explore sensory experiences and communication between mediums possessed and adherents seeking treatment. Ancestral spirit mediums in Zimbabwe do not constitute a form of ‘professional’ body. As vessels or containers of the ancestor, they have to convincingly prove throughout their lives the authenticity of their mediumship, risking otherwise ostracism if practitioners of the cult perceive that the ancestor has bodily ‘abandoned’ the medium. This points to the fragile and ambivalent nature of mediumship materialized in the medium’s exchange and agency. How do patients bodily perceive their communications with the ancestor through the medium? What sensorial knowledge (and extra-sensorial one such as ‘visions’, dreams, intuitions of mediums) relate to possession practices in the mentioned two shrines? These aspects are part of the paper.

**“She’s Coming out Dead or Alive”**

Sufi *Jinn* Extraction and Scientific Healing in the Qadiri-Rifa’iTariqa

Melinda Krokus (Marywood University)

This paper re-examines tabled fieldwork from the early 2000s. It documents the ongoing task as a researcher to relate my conceptual language to the ontological configurations I encounter (Espirito Santo and Blanes 2013, 16) and the discovery that this does not occur without significant conceptual, methodological, and theoretical consequences. The title of this paper is a quotation from the head *shaykh* of the Qadiri Rifa’i Tariqa (QRT), a United States-based transnational Sufi order with roots in Turkey, as he walked to a computer in upstate New York to extract a *jinn* via Skype from an Egyptian disciple (*murid*) working in South Africa. I will examine the case history of this *jinn* possession and extraction alongside that of an American *murid*’s experience highlighting initial perceptual differences and eventual shifts in perspective regarding “really real” *jinn* exorcism. These details will also complicate the conceptual divide between “scientific” medicine and “spiritual” healing. Of help here is Tim Ingold’s reflection on the trajectory of his own questioning and observation that resulted in his beginning to see (*theoria*) in “the perspective of dwelling, a way to overcome the entrenched division between the ‘two worlds’ of nature and society, and re-embed human being and becoming within the continuum of the lifeworld” (2011, 4). I will narrow a teeming Sufi “lifeworld” – a world that is learned as it is critically encountered – to meetings with *jinn*, who as beings of “smokeless fire” (*Qur’an* 55:15; 15:27) are notorious for dwelling in human beings without their permission. Drawing on participant observation, current interviews with the QRT *shaykh*, two psychologists with whom he consults, and QRT murids as well as recent scholarship on possession/exorcism, I will address basic questions of recognition and diagnoses of *jinn* possession and/or mental illness, methods of extraction and interrelated questions concerning imagination and theoretical analysis.

**Modern Eastern Orthodox Stances on Spirit Possession and Exorcism**

Tradition and Innovation

Yuri Stoyanov (University of London)

The historical roots, evolution and current articulations of the approaches to spirit possession and exorcism in Eastern Orthodox cultures demonstrate both suggestive analogies and dissimilarities to the corresponding Western Christian stances. However, they have attracted much less comprehensive investigation and attention than their Western Christian counterparts. The proposed paper will first present a survey of traditional Eastern Orthodox stances on demonic possession as part of the broader spectrum of Eastern Orthodox understanding and treatment of mental illness and disorders. This survey will include a typology of the principal forms of demonic activity and operation against humans (physical assaults, use of dreams and misleading visions, actual possession, etc.) and main practices (exorcism prayers, healing icons, parallel techniques of demon-control) of recognizing and expelling demonic influences from humans in the historical standard and alternative Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Re-focusing on the modernity, the paper will present some telling test cases from post-Communist South-Eastern Europe illustrating the interweaving of tradition and innovation in such modern religious/cultural/medical contexts. In these cases traditional practices underlying the veneration of healing icons, pilgrimage to monasteries and healing springs, popular public readings of St Cyprian’s exorcism prayers by priests can variously interact with medical practice and practitioners and novel treatments of psychiatric disorders. Some cases betray religio-political connotations resulting from the process of return of religion to the public space in post-Communist Eastern Europe amid the new evolving patterns of multiculturalism, religious co-existence and rivalries.

The analysis of these little-known and -examined cases of exorcism and possession in modern Eastern Orthodox settings will enrich the cross-cultural study of this problematic, furnishing highly relevant examples of the use of traditional and innovative/experimental methods in cases perceived as spirit possessions and requiring clerical, charismatic or medical expertise.

**Disembodying Spirits**

Moving from Wild to Cultivated Channeling

Adam Klin-Oron (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Israel)

Channeling, a New Age form of spirit mediumship, is a hyper-individualized religiosity, claiming each person can create her own reality. And yet, most channelers hold to very similar beliefs and practice their craft in a uniform manner. This, for most channelers, involves moving through two stages: First, in the wild phase, they undergo powerful experiences of direct encounters with non-material beings who can be harsh and demanding; sensations involve overt and strong embodiment; the experience can be horrifying; and its meaning remains obscure. In the second, cultivated, stage, channelers come to understand these raw experiences through pre-existing narratives of meaning learned from friends and literature; channeling sessions are much less embodied; the entities channeled are benevolent; and both the content and form of the sessions come to emphasize empowerment.

This paper addresses the ways in which a strongly embodied and jarring experience of compelled possession is transformed, without declared intent or official cultural transcripts, into an intentional and standardized relationship of cooperative possession in which embodiment is, ostensibly, relegated to the background. Taking control of bodily sensations accompanies taking control of spiritual relationships, in a process in which the channelers, in effect, institutionalize religious practices and beliefs while staying firmly rooted in a milieu stressing individualism and lacking any formal institutions: A wild experience of raw embodiment is domesticated into a cultivated practice adhering to social and personal preferences and involving accepted scripts of embodiment among the Western Middle Class.

**Disclosing Experiences of Spirit Possession**

An Analysis of Testimonials about Spirit Possession Published on Japanese Spiritual Healers’ Websites

Birgit Staemmler (University of Tübingen)

Belief in possession by various spirits and deities has a very long history in Japan. Some of this possession is voluntary or accepted, whereas some is regarded as the cause behind illnesses and misfortunes. Many possessing spirits are said to take possession of someone because they want to draw attention to something that is troubling them.

This paper is based on the data collected for research about Japanese spiritual healers’ websites. Many of these websites contain testimonials of (alleged) customers who narrate about their experiences of involuntary spirit possession and exorcism. The analysis of these testimonials will focus on the way spirit possession, its causes, consequences and exorcisms are described. It will analyse the language used to describe the physical and emotional sensations attributed to spirit possession, the explanations given for the occurrence of spirit possession, and the psychological functions of the rituals of exorcism.

Testimonials are paradigmatic illustrations of self-disclosure on the Internet. Because of their anonymity they often describe quite openly the effects of spirit possession, the process of coping with it and the explanations and treatment by the spiritual healer. Even those testimonials that are written by healers, faked or severely copy-edited present spirit possession and exorcisms the way spiritual healers, that is those professionals who offer relief from problems associated with spirit possession, want it to be seen by Internet users and potential customers. These testimonials are therefore excellent sources for an understanding of the emic perspective of various aspects of involuntary spirit possession in present-day Japan.

**Where I End and You Begin**

Steps to Comparing Entanglements of Spirit Possession and Biomedicine

Andrea De Antoni (Ritsumeikan University)

This paper is an attempt to elaborate a comparative perspective on phenomena of possession in relation to biomedicine. In order to so, I will rely on ethnographic data about experiences of possession among people who undergo Roman Catholic exorcism in contemporary (Central) Italy and Shinto exorcism in contemporary Japan (Shikoku). I will start from the premise that the experiences of interactions with spirits is “far from confined to ‘event’ formats” (Espirito Santo 2012:253) and that it emerges as “meshworks” of specific feelings and perceptions of the body moving-in-the-world, and as a result of “affective correspondences” with the environment (De Antoni 2017). Firstly, I will introduce discourses of possession in the two contexts, and present the array of symptoms from which phenomena of possession and spirit realities emerge. I will briefly examining the associations of symptoms from which spirits emerge in the social and are perceived as external or internal, thus trying to “capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture” (Csordas 2002: 61). Subsequently, I will present some cases in which symptoms were (not) treated through biomedical practice, thus resulting in moving sufferers towards religious healing. In this sense, this paper will also show the processes through which the border between biomedicine and religious healing were negotiated through practice. I will argue that a focus on feelings and bodily perceptions, emerging in correspondence with the environment, is fundamental in creating a comparative perspective on phenomena of possession.