



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
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Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Anthropology of Experience

- Part 1: Founding Fathers

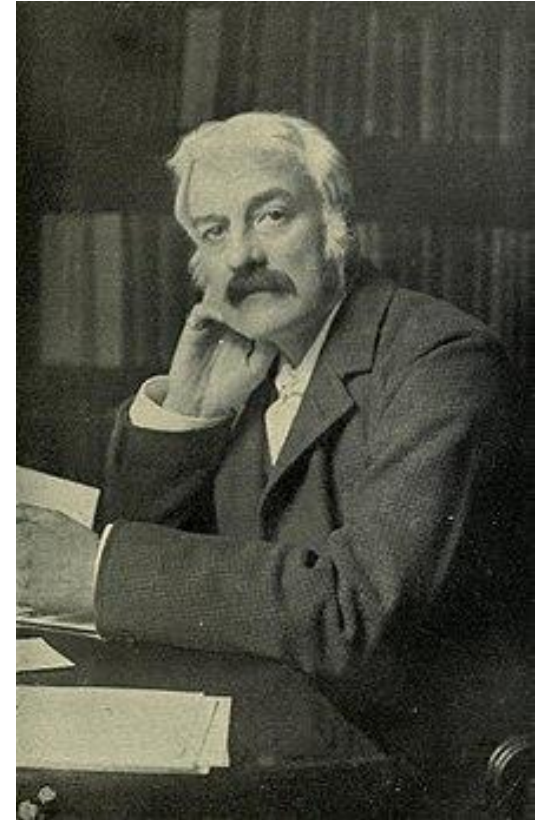
- Andrew Lang
- R.R. Marrett

Part 2: Anthropologists today

- Edith Turner
- Fiona Bowie
- Jack Hunter

Andrew Lang (1844-1912)

- Classicist (St Andrews and later Balliol College, Oxford)
- Fellow at Merton College, Oxford until 1875 (had to resign due to marriage)
- Described as “devoted Tylorian”
- But “the most radical and damaging attack [on Tylor’s views about the origin of religion] came from two of Tylor’s pupils”, Lang and Marett (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 31)



Critique against Tylor

- Approach to religion
 - Lang disagreed with Tylor's intellectualist approach to the question of the origin of religion
 - Instead of Tylor's focus on belief (i.e., religion originated in belief in spirits) Lang focussed on practice, following Robertson Smith

Lang's comparative approach

- we need to understand the customs and manners of other people in their own terms
 - “No one sees more clearly than Mr. Lang the need of bringing his readers' minds to bear on myths from the point of view of other ages” (Tylor 1887: 277)
- Little evaluative language in his writings
- Focus on social facts

Controversy with Tylor over spiritualism

- Huge popularity in Britain, even Alfred Russel Wallace, who developed at the same time as Darwin the organic evolution
- -> Tylor wanted to investigate it though he was rather dismissive
 - Spent a month in London and attended several séances

Notes on Spiritualism (1873)

- Unpublished (in Pitt Rivers Museum)
- Full of ethnographic description but also some dismissive comments
 - contrast between Tylor's public and private attitude towards Spiritualism

Lang's critique

- Lack of professionalism
 - Tylor should have been guided by observation and not private feelings
- Critique against Tylor's notion of spiritualism as survival from earlier stages of development
 - Instead to be seen as inventions

Duff-Cooper on Lang's legacy

- Lang “suggests something which is intriguing: that it is man’s pre-social (non-cognitive or imaginative) aspect which is prior (takes precedence)” (1986: 200, with reference to Bateson 1973).
- “this perhaps suggests that people are more inclined to the imaginative aspect of their nature than to the intellectual or cognitive aspect of it” (1986: 201).

R.R. Marett (1866-1943)

- Classicist
- In 1910 E.B. Tylor's successor as Reader in social anthropology at Oxford
- In 1934 chair of social anthropology (until Radcliffe-Brown arrived at Oxford)



Evolution not identical with progress

- "It is the mark of a crude evolutionism to assume that more complex stands for better all around. So let us as far as we can be content to note that the mental life of the simple society is different from that of the complex society, without being necessarily better or worse on that account, Everyone of us is after all a potentiality of opposites."
(Marett 1924: 38, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 648)

Focus on emotion and action

- “I have not sought to explain so much as to describe ... how it ‘feels’ – to live in such a wonder-world” (Marett 1909:xxiii, xxviii, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 650).
- “... savage religion is something not so much thought out as danced out” (Marett 1909: xxxi, quoted by Bengtson 1979: 652).

Marett and experience

- Marett “suggests that ‘awe’ may be a compound of natural feeling such as fear, love, reverences, etc. (1932, 1933a)” (Bengtson 1979: 656).
 - The experience is conditioned both by ‘antecedent historical conditions’ and ‘psychological conditions operating here and now’ (1920b:127).” (Bengtson 1979: 656)

Edith Turner (1921-2016)

- Anthropologist of experience
- For a long time overlooked by more mainstream anthropologists who focus on her husband, Victor Turner



- Initial known as collaborator of her husband Victor Turner, a British anthropologist working on Ritual studies who became professor in Chicago
- After his death in 1983 she continued his work
- Became lecturer in anthropology at University of Virginia in 1984
- However, she developed a much stronger focus on experience

The Reality of Spirits

- Edith Turner's article on the 'The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?' (1993) is now considered a classic example of anthropology of experience
- The describes in it her own experience while on fieldwork in Africa

Excerpt from The Reality of Spirits

- "...And just then, through my tears, the central figure swayed deeply: all leaned forward, this was indeed going to be it. I realized along with them that the barriers were breaking...Something that wanted to be born was now going to be born...Suddenly Meru raised her arm, stretched it in liberation, and I saw with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh of her back. This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, a deep gray opaque thing emerging as a sphere. I was amazed...I still laugh with glee at the realization of having seen it, the ihamba, and so big!"
(Turner, 1998, p. 149)

- Turner insists that we should not reduce 'the phenomena of spirits or other extraordinary beings to something more abstract and distant in meaning' (2010: 224).
 - What can be learn when attending ceremonies as scholars?
 - And how can we reflect on our own experience?

Edith Turner's reply

- "Again and again anthropologists witness spirit rituals, and again and again some indigenous exegete tries to explain that the spirits are present, and furthermore that rituals are the central events of their society. And the anthropologist proceeds to interpret them differently. There seems to be a kind of force field between the anthropologist and her or his subject matter making it impossible for her or him to come close to it, a kind of religious frigidity. We anthropologists need training to see what the Natives see" (Turner, 1993, p 11)

Fiona Bowie

- PhD in anthropology from Oxford
- Taught at University of Wales and at Bristol
- Founded the Afterlife Research Centre at Bristol
- Wrote textbook Anthropology of Religion



Afterlife Research Centre

- Seminar and workshops in Bristol
- Now mainly online (since retirement of Fiona Bowie)
- <http://www.afterliferesearch.co.uk/>
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Cognitive, Empathetic Engagement

- Inclusive methodology
- But firmly within the academic boundaries
("...is a method and not a belief system",
Bowie 2016, p. 31)
 - data needs to be interpreted

Bowie (2016)

- Cognition - an attitude of openness, not rushing to explanation or prematurely looking for closure
- Empathy - seeing the world as others see it
- Engagement – bodily engagement

- Cognitive, empathetic engagement as a method and not a belief system
- References:
 - ‘Building Bridges, Dissolving Boundaries: Towards a Methodology for the Ethnographic Study of the Afterlife, Mediumship and Spiritual Beings’. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2013) 81 (3): 698-733
 - ‘How to Study religious Experience: Historical and Methodological reflections on the Study of the Paranormal”, in: *Study of Religious Experience: Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. by B. Schmidt. Equinox 2016, 13-32.

Jack Hunter

- PhD at Bristol (Fiona Bowie as supervisor)
- PhD thesis about spiritualists in the UK
- Now part-time lecturer at UWTSD (for two MA Programmes)
- Founder of journal Paranthropology



Paranthropology

- <http://paranthropologyjournal.weebly.com/>
- Founded in 2010
- free on-line journal devoted to the promotion of social-scientific approaches to the study of paranormal experiences, beliefs and phenomena in all of their varied guises

'Spirits are the Problem' (2015)

- Article in the Journal for the Study of Religious Experience
- Includes his own encounter with spirits in a spiritualist setting in the UK
 - “In my own research I have moved away from asking 'why questions' (such as 'why do people believe in spirits'), towards 'how questions,' namely questions about the possible processes involved (i.e. 'how do people communicate with spirits'). “ (p. 83)