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Knowledge and Belief

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Are spirits real?



- Part 1: Belief in Spirits
- Part 2: Does it matter whether spirits are real?

Part 1: Belief in Spirits

- Worldwide phenomena and connected to a range of different religious traditions
- Diversity of spirits
 - Spirits of nature
 - Anthropomorphic spirits



Anthropomorphic spirits

- Spirits of Ancestors
 - Part of indigenous religions worldwide
 - > often labelled ancestor worship or veneration
 - Embedded also in other religions or cultures
 - > honouring the ancestors
 - e.g., in China
 - Also part of Christianity, e.g., in Roman Catholicism

Veneration of Ancestors



- Spirits of the dead (i.e., not just ancestors)
 - Core aspect of spiritism / spiritualism
 - Focus on communication with spirits of the dead
 - Often not seen as religious or spiritual tradition but as means of communication

Spiritism in Latin America

- Teaching about the existence of spirits and the possibility to communicate with them
- Allan Kardec (1804-1869)



Spiritist Altar in Puerto Rico



Fig. 6. Altar at Centro Espiritista of Don Miguel Flores, Barrio, Puente Jobos, Guayama, Puerto Rico, 1987. The Medium Unit is an elderly man who reads the lectures and prayers from the books of Kardec (left). Don Miguel is placing *el servicio* in order for the rituals (right).

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Botánicas in New York



Spiritist Hospital in Brazil



Part 2

- Does it matter whether spirits are real?
- Perhaps watch now the trailer of the documentary *Medium*.

Activities

- Trailer for documentary Medium (link on Moodle)
 - You can also find a link to the whole documentary on Moodle

CORE READING

- Turner, Edith. 1993. 'The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study'. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4(1), 9-12.

Re-cap of discussion about definitions

- Belief - an acceptance that something exists or is true, especially one without proof
- Knowledge – facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education

Common approach in anthropology

- 'Religion is what religion does' (Evans-Pritchard)
- -> important is what people tell us about their practices and beliefs, not whether we have evidence to support the claim
 - -> it does not matter whether spirits are real, only that people belief in them

But ...

- Does this approach create division between us and them?
- -> Division between the Western rationality and a different kind of rationality elsewhere?
- -> Does it not reflect an arrogant attitude towards other cultures?

Edith Turner (1921-2016)

- Reflecting on her experience among the Ndembu in Zambia
- Attending healing ceremonies in the 1950s and then again in 1985
- She insists that we should not reduce 'the phenomena of spirits or other extraordinary beings to something more abstract and distant in meaning' (2010: 224).



Edith Turner writes that ..

- by putting a barrier between their way to see things and the Ndembu, they denied “the people's equality with us, their ‘coevolness’, their common humanity as that humanity extended itself into the spirit world.” (1993: 9).
- Reflecting on her experience in Zambia in the 1950s

Returning to Zambia in 1985

- Different experience when attending the healing ceremony in 1985
- "Then I knew the Africans were right, there is spirit stuff, there is spirit affliction, it isn't a matter of metaphor and symbol, or even psychology." (1993, 9)

Peak Experience

- only possible if the researcher sinks oneself fully in it
- “Thus for me, ‘going native’ achieved a breakthrough to an altogether different worldview, foreign to academia, by means of which certain material was chronicled that could have been gathered in no other way.”
(Turner 1993, 9)

Edith Turner writes that ..

- “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)

Multiplicity of beliefs

- We trend to describe them as aspect of culture
- But does this question the accuracy of these native ontologies for other, more materialistic modes of knowing?
- Is it more “scientifically” appropriate to verify these experiences as ‘symbolic’?
- -> Question of ontology

Definition of Ontology

1. the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being.
2. a set of concepts and categories in a subject area or domain that shows their properties and the relations between them.

Ontological turn

- our *knowledge of the world* is culturally constructed
- perhaps reality itself might be constructed
- "Ontology forces me to acknowledge the heterogeneity of existence,"
(<https://www.struggleforever.com/ontology-me/>)

Classical Example

- "*From the Enemy's point of View*", by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (The University of Chicago Press, 1992)
- -> led to the development of a theory of *Perspectivism*

Further Readings

- Turner, Edith. (2006) Advances in the Study of Spirit Experience: Drawing Together Many Threads; Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness Distinguished Lecture, American Anthropological Association Meetings, San Jose, 2006. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, pp. 33–61.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (1998). Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society*, Vol. 4 (3), pp. 469-488.

Summary

- Belief in spirits is widespread and embedded in various religious traditions
- But based on belief, not knowledge
- The debate about whether spirits exist led to an ontological turn
- -> multiplicity of beliefs

Tasks for Seminar

- Watch the trailer of the documentary Medium (or the whole video)
- Read the short article by Edith Turner
 - Turner, Edith. 1993. 'The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study'. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4(1), 9-12.
- **Consider how it applies to your research interest.**