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Skill and Scale in Transnational Mediumship

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ORGANIZATION

Marcello Muscari
Universidade de São Paulo

Ehler Voss
Universität Siegen
DFG research project
Social innovation through the non-
hegemonic production of know-
ledge

Martin Zillinger
Universität zu Köln
a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the
Humanities Cologne

CONTACT

Marcello Muscari
mmuscari@gmail.com
Leonie van Dreuten
ldreuten@uni-koeln.de

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Program

Monday, 25.09.2017

- 13:00 Opening
- 13:30 – 15:00 2 Presentations, 20 Minutes Discussion
Rodrigo Toniol: Capturing Spirituality and Setting Religion
Bettina Schmidt: Anthropology of Religious Experience: a Deictic Approach to the Study of Mediumship
- 15:00 – 15:30 Coffee Break
- 15:30 – 17:00 2 Presentations, 20 Minutes Discussion
Viola Teisenhofer: “Is It Me or Is It the Entity?” Mediumship, “Spiritual Development” and Ritual Interactions in the Temple Guaracy, a Transnational Umbanda Shrine House
Marcello Múscari: On African Spirits, Planets and Shamanic Journeys: Exploring Rituals as Scale Shifting Technologies among a German Umbanda
- 17.00 – 17.30 Break
- 17.30 – 18.15 1 Presentation, 20 Minutes Discussion
Fiona Bowie: Spirit Release Therapies. Healing Networks and Mediumistic Practices in Contemporary Britain
- 18.30 – 19.30 Key-Note Lecture
Inger Sjorslev: New Skills New Rituals. From Possession to Precision in Two Brazilian Religions

Tuesday, 26.09.2017

- 9:30 - 11:00 2 Presentations, 20 Minutes Discussion
Helmar Kurz: Transformation of Spiritist Practice. A Journey from Germany to Brazil and Back
Emily Pierini: The Mediumistic Body. Learning Spirit Mediumship in the Vale do Amanhecer
- 11:00 – 11:30 Break
- 11.30 – 13.00: 2 Presentations, 20 Minutes Discussion
Anja Dreschke: How to Become a Shaman in Cologne. Spiritual Practices and Embodied Knowledge in Popular Reenactment
Aline Ferreira: Healing Skills. Non-Indigenous in the Search of Forest Technologies
- 13:00 – 14:30 Lunch Break
- 14:30 – 16:00 2 Presentations, 20 Minutes Discussion
Ruy Blanes: Silent Prophets. On discernment, Mediation and Anti-Aesthetics in Angolan Prophetism
Ehler Voss: Scaling the Skill. Learning Mediumship in a Spiritualistic Church in California
- 16:00 – 16:30 Final Discussion

Rodrigo Toniol

Capturing Spirituality and Setting Religion

This paper aims to discuss the the uses, appropriations and varied repercussions of the category of spirituality on the medical sciences. Precisely, my concern is to reflect about the way in which this category has emerged as a variable in clinical research. Research conducted by the medical scientists of these groups use a wide range of technologies that aim to identify, isolate and interpret the spiritual condition of people and the effects of spirituality on their health conditions. In this paper I'm especially interested in the creation and use of these technologies, ranging from questionnaires to the mapping of brain activity, by scientists in Brazil. The emphasis in the mentioned technologies and instruments is due to the fact that, besides being a form of "access" to spirituality, questionnaires, magnetic resonance imaging and brain activity mappings are important mediators for spirituality to emerge as an entity clinically visible and assessable by doctors and researchers. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the technologies, used by medical scientists, of assessment of spirituality and then reflect on how the category spirituality has been articulated and has mobilized actors and institutions dedicated to the promotion of health care. Through this empirical frame, this paper also presents reflections about the way in which the idea of spirituality, in healthcare settings, have configured a special set for the religion in the public space.

Bettina E. Schmidt

Anthropology of Religious Experience: a Deictic Approach to the Study of Mediumship

The study of mediumship sits on the borderline between anthropology and study of religions. While anthropologists and in particular cultural anthropologists have long studied spirit possession, they focused often on a functionalist approach by studying why people become possessed. The perspective of the practitioners was usually pushed aside. Following the work of Edith Turner and others coming from ritual studies the focus in anthropology shifted to the inclusion of the experiencer's point of view. However, these studies are still on the edge of the discipline and pushed aside even further since the rise of cognitive anthropology.

The study of religions, on the other hand, which anthropologists tend to ignore due to its link to theology, had traditionally focused on mainstream religious experiences such as divine visions. Vernacular practices such as mediumship were usually overlooked by scholars from study of religions despite some early voices pushing for the study of a variety of experiences. The result was a somehow distraught picture of the religious landscape where the study of divine visions seemed more acceptable than the study of speaking with spirits.

In my work I theoretical framework (Schmidt 2016b). Hence, we still need to study the universal features but within a local context. Referring to my research in Brazil I will show in my paper how a combined approach that includes aspects of anthropology and study of religions can help with the study of mediumship and similar experiences.

Viola Teisenhoffer

“Is It Me or Is It the Entity?” Mediumship, “Spiritual Development” and Ritual Interactions in the Temple Guaracy, a Transnational Umbanda Shrine House

This paper aims to discuss the process of mediumistic training in the Temple Guaracy, an Umbanda shrine house located in Brazil which has several offshoots in Europe and North America. In order to offer participants a “spiritual development” in its different locales, the Temple draws on the mediumistic practice of Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion focused on the worship of spiritual entities and divinities related to nature, in the elaboration of its ceremonial activities. The Temple’s practices and tenets appeal to individuals, Brazilians and foreigners, who are not at all familiar with the Afro-Brazilian religious universe, but rather with different therapeutic and spiritual practices aimed at self-enhancement (meditation, yoga, Reiki, transpersonal psychotherapy, etc.). In this context, mediumistic practice becomes an effective technique of self-enhancement or “spiritual development”, as it is termed in the Temple. Indeed, mediumistic practice consists here of revealing the participants to themselves and to others in a new perspective which is that of the spiritual entities invoked in ritual, endowed with the capability to unveil the “real nature” of human beings.

Based on extensive fieldwork among French mediums of the Temple Guaracy in Paris and in São Paulo as well as a formal analysis of their rituals, I intend to show how, in this context, the process of becoming a medium provides participants with skills of recognizing themselves and others as essentially spiritual beings rather than becoming the depositaries of any given Afro-Brazilian religious tradition. I wish to show, on the one hand, that this process relies on complex relational shifts generated by a subtly regulated ritual device which produces ambiguous and “extraordinary” persons who are both humans and entities. On the other hand, I argue that the ritual experience participants are afforded in the course of their mediumistic training enables them to engage in and even to create analogous practices that make up the universe of contemporary spirituality.

Marcello Múscari

On African Spirits, Planets and Shamanic Journeys: Exploring Rituals as Scale Shifting Technologies among a German Umbanda

Since ten years, in the German region of North-Rhine-Westphalia, a self-help group for “personal development” have been integrating practices from the Afro-Brazilian religion called Umbanda to their ritual repertoire, after some leading group members returned from a visit to Sao Paulo, Brazil. Ever since, the group at “Sansorio – Casa Saint Michal: Haus des reinen Wasser” has been combining ritual techniques they have learned in Brazil with practices taken from “family constellation”, “systemic therapy“, “Shamanism“ and “zodiac”, producing their own new assembly of ritual practices and mythical references. On this presentation I will explore how rituals may work in converting individual’s inner feelings into collective dynamics, and so operate scale shifting in the process to achieve individual’s “personal development”.

Fiona Bowie

Spirit Release Therapies: Healing Networks and Mediumistic Practices in Contemporary Britain

The term 'spirit release therapy' and presence of individuals who advertise their skills as 'spirit release therapists' are relatively recent – gaining ground in the last couple of decades in the UK. The idea that spirits can cause problems to the living, can attach themselves to someone, attack them psychically, and even take over their minds and bodies to 'possess' them, is certainly not new. Spirits, usually but not only of the deceased, who continue to trouble the living and who may need help to 'move on' appear in one form or another in all cultures and geographical locations. As far as we can tell they also have an ancient pedigree and human societies have evolved various means of dealing with spirits, honing specialised skills of exorcism, 'de-obsession', soul retrieval, healing and spirit communication. Anthropologists have been interested in documenting such beliefs and practices since the inception of the discipline in the Nineteenth Century. Spirit practices and the unseen world of psychic forces, be they in the form of witchcraft in Africa, spirit possession in Brazil, shamanistic practices in Northern Europe or Australia, or the so-called folk beliefs of Europe that stubbornly resurface whenever presumed to be on the verge of extinction, remain ubiquitous. What is new is a particular configuration of ideas concerning spirit release as a therapeutic tool in the United States and the United Kingdom (and no doubt elsewhere) that currently finds expression in a range of publications, web sites, conferences, group and individual healing practices. It is this loose-knit community of healers and clients, very much dependent on modern means of communication and technology, and the ideas and practices that are in circulation within it, that I wish to discuss in this presentation.

Theoretically a priori as mistaken or inferior (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, 2007), are all part of this wider engagement with interconnectivity and process. Whether we use terms such as 'new materialism' or 'the anthropology of ontology', similar ideas recur. For my purposes these trends sit comfortably with the views of contemporary spirit release practitioners and their clients. We live as modern, rational, scientifically educated individuals in a world that is constantly interacting with and open to the influences of external forces - spirits – and it is assumed in most instances that the processes involved can be explained in physical terms and studied scientifically by those who are sufficiently open-minded. It is a world of vibration, energy, frequencies, intention, experience and matter, constantly interacting with one another in ways that can be documented and described. There is an element of predictability, sufficient for the development of expertise and for healing practices to be tested and honed, and unpredictability, as life and experience are never wholly replicable, and each new event affects the composition of the whole.

In this talk I will give an overview of some of the key texts and ideas current among spirit release practitioners and their clients, and describe the ways these circulate and serve to build up overlapping networks that encompass both academic university departments and individual practitioners operating well outside the mainstream. Using case studies and illustrations of mediumistic readings and therapeutic encounters, we can approach more general questions concerning the ontological status of these practices – an area that has for long been taboo among social scientists - as well as giving a phenomenological account of contemporary spirit release therapies. In doing so I am indebted to the pioneering work of Edith Turner (1993). In opening-up the question of the 'reality of spirits', she enabled the

sorts of discussions that take place in Young and Goulet (1994) and Goulet and Miller (2006), which acknowledge the extraordinary and transformative encounters that take place through an engagement with alternative world views. Like David Hufford (1982, 1995) and Gregory Shushan (2013, 2014) I find both the similarities and differences involved in comparative studies of anomalous phenomena (for want of a better term), including mediumship and spirit release, suggestive of a core of experiential data that is, as Jack Hunter remarks (2013, 2015) innately human, whatever its source.

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Inger Sjørsløv

New Skills New Rituals: From Possession to Precision in Two Brazilian Religions

The paper will be based on two empirical examples, one from the Brazilian Candomblé, the other from one of the newer Pentecostal churches in Brazil, Igreja Universal Reino de Deus - The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, hereafter the Universal Church. I may begin with a little autobiographical anecdote from my fieldwork in the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé in the 1980es. The point of this has to do with enskilment as method and learning, and the learning of skill through practise communities (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991; Pálsson 1994). A key topic will thereafter be bodily techniques of mediumship (cf. Mauss 1973 [1936]) as reflected through possession. I see possession as a figure or gestalt, which in a performance perspective plays an essential role in sociality (Sjørsløv 2012). Techniques of mediumship are related to what has been termed education of attention (Gibson; Bird-Davie 1999), or craft and apprenticeship (Ingold 2011; Sennet 2008), as well as role (Metraux 1952).

From Candomblé the paper moves on to another kind of rituals, namely those performed in the Universal Church, a church quite different from the Candomblé terreiros. This is a relatively new variety of a Pentecostal church, which has become popular in urban Brazil, but it has also stirred critique and controversies, among other things for its hostility to the Afro-Brazilian religions. The rituals of this church require a kind of skill quite different from the techniques of the body in Candomblé spirit mediumship.

Literature on the global growth of Pentecostalism has asked which kind of involvement participation requires on the part of the participants, and it has been argued that the popularity and globalization of the Pentecostal churches have to do with the minimalism of rituals (Robbins 2009) – and we might add, thereby of skill requirements. In this paper the argument is, however, that there is more to it in terms of the character of skills. The learning process among Evangelicals (in the US) has been characterized as metakinetic and relational in addition to cognitive, and emphasis has been put on the personal relationship with God that is developed in prayer and expressed in conversion narratives (Luhmann 2004; 2012). Some of these characteristics also apply to the Evangelicals in The Universal Church. My contention in the present context is, however, that in order to become wiser on the role of enskilment and the type of skills required we need to pay more attention to ritual and look for ritualization in unorthodox ways. This implies a closer look at the character of space, physicality and material context, as well as objects and symbolic references in the ceremonies performed. It also requires an open eye to a different kind of symbolic referents than usually looked for in religious contexts. The argument is based on a contention that an

analysis of ritual cannot exclude neither performative aspects (cf. Tambiah 1979) and what they require in terms of bodily skills, nor the interpretation of symbols as referents (Turner 1967) or standing for themselves (Wagner 1986).

I studied the Universal Church in the Temple of Solomon in Sao Paulo, and at other places where this church has opened new temples in former cinemas and store houses in the midst of urban life. The physical scene, the temporality of ritual sequences, the form and character of the performances, and the material objectifications in the Church as well as its use of the media, all of this point in the direction of the influence of globalization. But in which ways, and what does it tell us about enskilment and ritual techniques of the body? The paper will invite a discussion on such issues by moving forward from the immediate interpretation of the Temple of Solomon as an example of globalization through its cultivation of Israel and the Old Testament. By paying attention to the physicality and spatiality as well as temporality and the conditions of access to the Temple, an argument will be that key features of the modern globalized world become enchanted (cf. Weber 1922) in ritual, framed in paradoxical ways that relate to globalization, while at the same time encompassing continuity with a local traditional past.

The overall argument of the paper is that a new community of practise, informed by media and globalization, not only requires but also builds on a new kind of skills quite different from the bodily techniques of classical spiritual mediumship, and that a type of ritual is being developed, which both enforces and celebrates such new kinds of skills. This is in sharp contrast to the skills and techniques required in more classical possession rituals such as the Candomblé.

For the sake of stylizing the argument - and in the name of alliteration - I oppose these new skills to possession by summing them up as precision.

Helmar Kurz

Transformation of Spiritist Practice: A Journey from Germany to Brazil and Back

Throughout the 19th century, various Spiritist movements developed around the world. In Germany, philosophical considerations regarding the ontology of the human soul and its survival after death influenced the advent of diverse Spiritist circles and mediumistic practices. Two different theoretical approaches influenced this phenomenon: Anglo-Saxon Spiritualism and French scholar Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail's Spiritism, which according to his pseudonym Allan Kardec is also known as Kardecism, and integrates the concept of reincarnation. Another highly contested influential concept was medical doctor Franz Anton Mesmer's Animal Magnetism. In early 20th century Brazil, Spiritist Adolfo Bezerra de Menezes introduced these concepts into contemporary discourses on Mental Health, discussing obsession by a discarnated spirits and fluidical disturbances as causes for madness. Throughout the 20th century, many authors and medical professionals in Brazil further developed this approach, and on the turn to the 21st century, various Kardecist psychiatries and Spiritist centers offer relief of mental, emotional or psychological distress by techniques which involve mediunity in various ways. Due to migration processes, these techniques were re-introduced to Germany by Brazilians, and in 2017 there are about 15

Kardecist centers organized within the German Spiritist Association (DSV – Deutsche Spiritistische Vereinigung), where Brazilian and German Spiritists come together. Additionally, the annual PsychoMedizin-Kongress in Bad Honnef integrates members of the Brazilian Spiritist Medical Association (AME – Associação Medico-Espírita), German “alternative” medicals, and followers of various “esoteric” movements. Practices of mediunity receive less consideration, the creation of “places of wellbeing” seems to gain more importance, especially to Brazilians, and – surprisingly – it is mainly German members of the Spiritist groups who want to develop approaches integrating mediunity and health-care. This paper will introduce and discuss recent fieldwork data and case studies from Brazil and Germany according to five main questions:

- 1) How central are mediunity practices to Kardecism?
- 2) How are they involved in mental health care?
- 3) How are they transnationally communicated and contested?
- 4) Which importance do they have in Brazil and Germany?
- 5) How are they implemented, taught, transformed, and contested?

Emily Pierini

The Mediumistic Body: Learning Spirit Mediumship in the Vale do Amanhecer

Spiritual trance has been often associated with transcendence or amnesia. Yet, modalities of mediumship described by practitioners as being ‘conscious’ or ‘semi-conscious’ are rather understood as ‘grounding’ the medium in the body. The Brazilian Spiritualist Christian Order Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) develops these modalities of mediumship for purposes of spiritual healing, called ‘disobsessive healing’, which involves the release of spirits remained trapped between the planes after death and thus affecting humans. The process of mediumistic development focuses primarily upon bodily enskillment, educating the body of the medium to discern, control and manifest spirits according to a culturally recognizable way. This paper delves into the sensory and affective aspects of learning mediumship to explore the construction of a mediumistic body, with its porous frontiers enabling encounters between human and non-human spirits. The body as a means to learn and discern spirits through multi-sensory images. Comparing the experiences of mediums in the Temples of the Amanhecer in Brazil and Italy, it discusses how shared emotions and feelings are developed through a multidimensional process of learning.

Anja Dreschke

How to Become a Shaman in Cologne. Spiritual Practices and Embodied Knowledge in Popular Reenactment

Spiritual Practices and Embodied Knowledge in Popular Reenactment During the last decade mimetic practices of imagining, embodying and situating (past) events evolved into a form of vernacular culture symptomatic of an increasingly mediatized world. To explore popular reenactments as form of situated learning I draw on the example of the ›Cologne Tribes‹, a

community of amateurs whose members reenact the historic life worlds of the Huns and Mongolians as a leisure activity. In their performances they creatively appropriate globally circulating audio-visual media representations, which are transformed into diverse forms of

corporeal and material (self-)stagings. From a media anthropological perspective this process of remediation can be considered as a complex exchange of signs, things and persons in which visual, sonic and textual inscriptions are translated into bodily actions and material artifacts. In my article I focus on the adaptation of spiritual practices that is of particular significance for the social fabric of the ›Cologne Tribes‹ who developed their own way of shamanism by amalgamating a broad variety of ritual traditions ranging from Catholicism to Siberian shamanism. Taking up Tim Ingold's notion of enskilment I explore how the shamans are trained in a longstanding process of practice-based learning.

Aline Ferreira Oliveira

Healing Skills: Non-Indigenous in the Search for Forest Technologies.

In this presentation we discuss how certain practices of Panoan indigenous groups from Acre (Brazil) – mainly the Yawanawa, Huni Kuin and Katukina - are emerging in urban centres through rituals in holistic centers, farms, Santo Daime's church and various events around the world. These relations between indigenous, non-indigenous and non-humans, usually called "alliances", drive us to consider it as new communities of practice and enskilment where shamanic techniques are being traded, re-invented and combined with others. Although we are dealing with multiple cosmologies, we can think of these encounters (between humans and also other beings) as connections that enable ontological translations and are experienced through intensive and sinestetical interacting worlds. We will reflect on the forest's technology and analyze how the medicines – ayahuasca (Amazonian psychoactive beverage), snuff (fine-ground tobacco with ash), sananga ("forest eye drops"), kambô ("frog vaccine") and yutxi (pepper) – connect themselves and transform the flow of knowledge, producing new ways of skills development.

Ruy Llera Blanes

Silent Prophets. On Discernment, Mediation and Anti-Aesthetics in Angolan Prophetism

In this paper I propose to discuss a modality of spiritual mediumship that questions mainstream interpretations of such phenomena as processes of materialization, manifestation and aesthetic display. I will use the case study of the prophetic cultures of the Tokoist Church in Angola, a Christian prophetic movement that emerged in the late colonial period, founded by a former Baptist student called Simão Gonçalves Toko (1918-1984). The church was founded after what was described as a 'Pentecostal event' (Blanes 2014), but subsequently developed a form of prophetic spiritualism - locally referred to as *corpos vates* or 'foreseeing bodies' - that produced an internal archive of prophetic knowledge, handed to the world through the channeling effected by spirits of ancient prophets. In this work we observe processes of enskilment and 'learning to discern' that produce what I call 'silent

prophets', a human-spirit relationship based on secrecy and semiotic reduction. These 'silent prophets' constitute a form of mediumistic and prophetic practice that are opposite to what Dick Werbner (2012) recently called 'holy hustlers': they are anonymous, secluded, anti-materialistic and anti-aesthetic. Invoking ethnographic and historical research conducted among the Tokoist corpora vates between 2007 and 2015, I will use this discussion as a pretext for a debate on the aesthetics of religious / spiritual mediation.

Ehler Voss

Scaling the Skill. Learning Mediumship in a Spiritualistic Church in California

This paper is based on an anthropological fieldwork among Spiritualists in Northern California. Using the example of a spiritualistic church it follows the different ways its members became part of the church, and it focuses on how some of the members get more and more involved in the practice of mediumship, how they become more or less serious apprentices, and how some of them turn to teachers and thus become or become not leading figures within the church. In doing so this paper outlines a controversy within the church concerning the right way of doing mediumship, and it explores the different influences that lead to the actual practices of learning, enhancing, and scaling mediumistic skills.