

**Beyond Belief:
Ethnography, the Supernatural and Hegemonic Discourse**

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Abstract

Cultural anthropologists often disagree on the ethnographic method that researchers are supposed to employ. Ethnographers are caught between contravening methodologies that either entirely immerse the researcher within the culture being studied, leading to limited objectivity, or that create so much distance between the researcher and the researched that shared perceptions of reality are completely negated. This negation reinscribes the hegemonic discourse inherent in colonial practice. In this paper, I argue that researchers need to attenuate their perspectives of Western superiority vis-à-vis the researched subject in the anthropological study of religion by allowing for the possibility of supernatural realities. In making this claim, I am not referring to a specific religious method or belief system, but simply to an allowance for a transcendence that cannot be solely attributed to humanistic origins.

Introduction

The scholarly discipline of cultural anthropology as it now stands owes its humanism and bias against theological understandings of supernatural phenomena to the towering figures of E.B. Tylor, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud. For Tylor, religious beliefs survive from primitive societies and are tantamount to superstition. Durkheim and Freud agree with Tylor that religions are no longer “true” in their literal descriptions of gods and the world. However, they still maintain the social and psychological significance of religions.¹ In their scholastic work regarding religion, this venerable triumvirate wholly embraces the naturalistic worldview bequeathed to them from Darwin’s evolutionary theory and they account for the origins of religion in thoroughly humanistic terms. Each of them attempt to account for people’s belief in supernatural beings through rational, sociological, or psychological interpretations of the human predicament that illustrate the reasons that people *mistakenly* believe in the supernatural. While couched in terminology that allows this self-deception to have an ameliorating function and role within societies, ultimately religious belief in the supernatural is subjugated in importance to the processes and activities engendered by religious beliefs, processes that are formulated and identified by the scholars themselves. This means that these founders of Western social science see themselves as explaining religion, allowing their readers to see behind the theological façade to the intricate and essential machinery—the mental, social, and psychological events—from which religious beliefs derive their origin and impetus.

When anthropologists adhering to a solely naturalistic worldview conduct fieldwork within societies where people’s lives are undergirded and circumscribed by the presence of deities and spirits, these societies and people are necessarily signified in the anthropologists’ writings. Signification refers to the process of giving names to realities and people that occurred during the period of colonization when Western societies objectified those features or characteristics that appeared novel or “other.” It occurs presently when “the active existential and self-identifying notae through which a people know themselves is almost completely bypassed for the sake of the conceptual and categorical forms of classification.”² With its dependence on naturalistic approaches to explaining religious beliefs and the supernatural, anthropology’s conflation of rationality with a non-theological worldview results in the theological “other” frequently being “signified” or renamed as part of a Freudian or Durkheimian process. This signification hearkens back to the oppression and hegemony that legitimated the expansion of Western imperialist rule, and it reinstantiates the primitive versus civilized dualism upon which this reign depended.

Whereas post-Enlightenment atheism works to subjugate the identities of indigenous peoples through the signifying of their religious otherness, the same kind of oppression also resulted from theologically ordained imperialism. David Chidester argues that European missionaries, travelers, settlers, and colonial agents acting as comparative religionists produced a “rhetoric of control” that reinforced and ingrained systems of exploitative power into the political structures of African

societies. “Indigenous people in strange lands appeared in travel literature as objects for conquest and subjects for representation. Their discovery, or invention, reinforced—or perhaps actually constituted—the notion of Europe by centering and surrounding it with a strange periphery.”³ The travel reports of Christian missionaries contributed to a global ethnographic consciousness in which conquest of the primitive peripheral societies surrounding a European center was validated through religious foundations. The irony is unmistakable: in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the non-European other was considered primitive for having a less than Christian religion, but in the twenty-first century, the non-European other is construed as primitive for having any religion at all.

As Charles Long describes, the European center is more than spatial and geographic; it is also ideological and epistemological. “The center of the epistemology was in the Western world; the data or the *other* that was to be interpreted came from those removed in time and/or in space.”⁴ The spatial distance between Europe, and later, North America, and the cultures of darker skinned people throughout the world mirrors the epistemological distance between the Western notion of self as “a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole ...”⁵ and the selfhood inextricably woven into the spiritual worldview that predominates in non-Western societies. Anthropologists enter into other societies with a mandate to take the native’s point of view,⁶ but the only reason to do this is “to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.”⁷ In other words, the only reason to figure out what *they* think they are up to is to add to the broad reservoir of knowledge that constitutes the Western epistemological spectrum and not actually to learn from the researched society conceptualizations of lived reality that can inform or explain the anthropologist’s own sociocultural context. This instrumentalization of fieldwork subjects exploits them; they contribute to academic research that secures tenure and garners academic respect, while the researcher remains distanced from the worldview being observed. Even in the midst of ethnographic research, the anthropologist maintains his or her epistemological center. Meanwhile, the subjects being observed most often exist on the fringes of the standards of rationality and scientific understandings of religion that the anthropologist favors.

In this paper, I argue that researchers need to attenuate their perspectives of Western superiority vis-à-vis the researched subject in the anthropological study of religion by allowing for the possibility of existing supernatural realities. In making this claim, I am not referring to a specific naming of religious methods, belief systems, or spiritual entities, but rather simply to an allowance for a transcendence that cannot be solely attributed to humanistic or naturalistic origins. This gesture of recognition toward the worldviews of those being researched will undermine the hegemony inherent in attempts to explain what other societies are *really* doing when they engage in rituals, ceremonies, and describe supernatural realities. My primary interlocutors for this task include four researchers who each adopt a different approach toward adopting the worldview of the societies that they study. Most oppressive is the method of exclusive naturalism, a method that leaves no room for supernatural entities, and which is adopted by Emma Cohen in her attempt

to interpret Brazilian spirit possession through the lens of cognitive science. Katherine Ewing's method, called assimilationism, is less oppressive in that she allows for the existence of spiritual phenomena that are not easily reduced to Freudian, Durkheimian, or other scientific explanation. However, in attempting to harmonize Freudian methodology with that of the culture that she studies, she does not acknowledge the inherent incompatibility between the Western psychological theories that she proffers with the supernatural worldview of the Sufi culture. The third and least oppressive approach, entitled supernatural absorption, is offered by Edith Turner. This method acknowledges the existence of the supernatural and narrows the epistemological gap between the researcher and subject by adopting the worldview of the culture being studied. In doing so, however, the researcher is forced to concur with a specific construal of supernatural reality that can negate the researcher's ability to be comprehensive and thorough in his or her analysis. The fourth method, which I call theological realism, is proffered by Mary Keller and it does not wholly abandon the tools of Western scientific analysis. It preserves the hermeneutical generosity of supernatural absorption while rejecting the oppressiveness of exclusive naturalism and assimilationism. However, it still allows for a theological discursive space where the supernatural is allowed to exist without necessarily being named. I argue for this posture as a method by which the ethnographical and anthropological study of the spiritual experiences of non-Western cultures and societies should proceed.

Exclusive Naturalism

For eighteen months, researcher Emma Cohen used ethnographic methods to study spirit possession in Belem, Brazil as part of an Afro-Brazilian religion known as *culto afro*.⁸ The leader, known as the *pai-de-santo*, and the other practitioners, known as *filhos-de-santo*, invoke the presence of deities known as *orixas*, *voduns*, and *caboclo* spirits who inhabit the body of the practitioner and through him provide relief and healing for resolution of issues presented by the inquirer seeking help. In one possession incident, Pai (the *pai-de-santo*) was possessed by a spirit named Rompe Mata. Cohen describes a particularly interesting portion of the ceremony:

Sighing and wiping his brow, Rompe mata announced his arrival in song, introducing himself as a curer and sorcerer. His voice was remarkably gruff yet frail, and as he rose to his feet, he took on the appearance of an old, stooped man of about twice Pai's forty-six years. He was aided down the steps toward me. A young woman was called from the back of the room to stand by my side against the wall. One of the participants handed me a battered tin bowl and instructed me to stay put. Rompe Mata moved toward us. Leaning forward he asked the woman beside me to locate the source of her pain. After prodding around the area at the side of her neck, he called for a lit cigar. He inhaled deeply and then blew the smoke directly into the area he had just inspected. He drew close to her neck and began to suck gently. After three or four seconds he turned toward me and spat into the bowl I was holding. Blood, spittle, and four pointed objects slightly longer than

matchsticks were expelled into the bowl. Again he sucked, and for a second time about three of the sharp objects fell into the bowl. A third and a fourth time he repeated the procedure until only spittle and blood appeared. The woman, who had clearly felt no pain and was displaying little emotional reaction, was led to a stool to sit down. The bowl was taken from me and placed on a nearby ledge. I was later informed that a total of thirteen bones from a species of catfish had been taken out of the woman's neck leaving no mark whatsoever.⁹

It is interesting that Cohen does not extensively excavate this possession ceremony as a site rich with potential for closer analysis of the origin of the pointed objects that landed in the bowl and she instead focuses on hypotheses about cognitive explanations for residents' *beliefs* about the role of spirits. Her actual explication of or dialogue with what happened at the possession ceremony seems underdeveloped and attenuated. Her foray into explaining why concepts are transmitted through naturalistic explanations seems to devalue the lived experience of those who first attracted her intellectual curiosity. Cohen's lack of attention to the real presence of catfish bones in the cup through her silence is just as oppressive as her other attempts to name and define their experiences. Perhaps catfish bones resist categorization as concepts. Or more plausibly, the elements of deception that she believes helped to produce the catfish bones are not worthy of the scientific analysis to which all aspects of the spiritual possession she studies is reduced. In another twist of irony, in order to preserve her exclusively scientific and materialistic analysis, the actual materials and objects—which we would expect would be the focus of analysis and examination—produced during the spiritual possession ceremony must be ignored.

In Cohen's ethnographic study of spirit possession in Belem, *The Mind Possessed*, she reduces the phenomenon of spirit possession to a concept. This reductionism leads her to explain and analyze behavior within spirit possession ceremonies and her informants' explication of this behavior by developing naturalistic hypotheses and testing them against theories of cognitive science. Each of these hypotheses assume a deficiency in how the researched describe their spiritual experiences, experiences that seemingly require an explanation that only Cohen's scientific theory can provide. For example, Cohen finds that the most easily transmittable religious ideas diverge only minimally from basic knowledge about how the physical, biological, and social domains work.¹⁰ Thus, concepts about spirits—since they have all the attributes of personhood and only lack a body—are easily transmitted. These ideas that are consistent with expectations of how the world functions but only violate one "category-level" property are called minimally counterintuitive concepts.¹¹ Therefore, when Belem residents discuss the presence of spirits and deities, Cohen chooses to re-interpret exclusively these descriptions of supernatural realities through naturalistic categories in order to explain why such beliefs are successfully perpetuated.

Another naturalistic explanation for the presence of spirits in the lives of Belem residents that Cohen employs is a mental mechanism called Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device, or HADD.¹² Cohen describes how all people learn, when encountering a moving object, to perceive it as an agent or nonagent. The shadows cast on a wall by a tree in a windy storm, however, may

be mistaken for an intruder or animal more readily for those with HADD. Cohen expands HADD to encapsulate spiritual conceptions as well. She suggests, “Agents with superpowers are particularly salient when explaining events that appear to be intentionally and purposefully caused, but for which no visible or human agent fits well.”¹³ When people live in environments marked by danger, uncertainty, and low probability of survival, Cohen postulates that “the incidence of phenomena that invoke the special powers of supernatural agents for explaining and predicting events increases under environmental pressures that threaten immediate survival and control.”¹⁴

These two examples reveal the intent of Cohen’s exclusive naturalism. Her goal is to locate the universal mental features and patterns that cause spirit possession to be a successfully transmitted cross-cultural concept since incidences of spirit possession are reported around the world. For Cohen, the possibility that spirits can actually be real is extraneous to her attempts to explain spirit possession. This is because “from the perspective of the cognitive science of culture, causal accounts of the origin, persistence, transformation, and significance of cultural phenomena must take this [our evolved mental architecture] as their point of departure.”¹⁵

Neither is Cohen convinced that she must share in the lived experience of the societies she observes as a participant. As a cognitive scientist, Cohen is most concerned with the development of generalizable hypotheses that can contribute to the development of cognitive theory. She disparages attempts at information gathering that envision as a benchmark for success the native informant’s acceptance of the data as real or meaningful. Cohen believes that this “insider” approach is fraught with risks, such as the risk of misrepresenting the causes of sociocultural behavior by “ignoring the explanatory potential and even the existence of causes that fall outside the actor’s meaning and purpose in everyday lived experience.”¹⁶

While I have mentioned only two of the theoretical devices that Cohen employs to explain spirit possession, the methodology that she uses does not vary. Based upon discoveries within cognitive theory, Cohen extrapolates the results of scientific research and proposes that this scientific research *may* account for the incidences of spirit possession, but that further testing is needed to make a causal connection. Cohen’s method reveals the circularity that undergirds her claims. First, if spirit possession is already defined as the result of certain mental conceptualizations in the opinion of the anthropologist, then the research will be geared to understanding the phenomena on the basis of how these “concepts” themselves are transmitted, understood, and utilized. Thus, all data, conclusions, and postulations will exude a reductionism that only finds that for which it was first searching. If one is only looking for a concept—and no other possibilities exist, then all scientific resources will be marshaled to provide evidence for this tendentious explanation. In the search for the universal, Cohen’s cognitive scientific vantage point acts as a stabilizing center for the shifting, chaotic delusions of the primitive “other.” She thus signifies, that is, reinscribes an intellectual hierarchy derived from colonialism, upon the residents within the Belem society where her ethnographic work was conducted.

Cognitive anthropologist Emma Cohen represents the first approach that I will interrogate.

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Assimilationism

Eschewing exclusive naturalism and its embrace of categories that restricts the researcher to scientific categorization and explanation of the behavior of the subjects being scrutinized, Katherine P. Ewing narrates her personal struggle with a dilemma that confounds many anthropologists. She describes the stigma of "going native" and the guild's perception that doing so is antithetical to the social scientist's objectivity and professionalism.¹⁸ While others argue that anthropologists are hard pressed to penetrate the linguistic ambiguities and symbols of their informants, Ewing argues differently. She postulates that "the experience of an abyss between the interpretive world of an anthropologist and the people he or she gets to know stems largely from the taboo against going native."¹⁹ This taboo ensues because of a refusal to acknowledge that those signified may actually impart knowledge about the world and reality to the researcher. Further, as Ewing insightfully discerns, "This refusal constitutes a hegemonic act, an implicit insistence that the relationship between anthropologist and 'informant' be shaped by the parameters of Western discourse."²⁰ In her personal experience, the actual practice of observation and recording her subjects' behavior becomes a means of distancing oneself from the "other," thus protecting the supposed superior Western epistemology of the researcher.

Compounding this issue of whether the epistemic distance between researcher and subject should be collapsed or maintained is the variable nature of understanding itself depending upon the culture one studies. As Ewing discovers in her work with Muslim Pakistanis, Sufis argue that Sufism is not learned, but is rather *absorbed* through a relationship with one's spiritual master. Therefore, "True understanding is not separable from firsthand experience and true belief."²¹ This issue becomes particularly salient for Ewing when she has a vivid dream, a dream that can be understood in vastly different ways depending on whether it is interpreted through the Freudian framework most familiar to her or through a traditional Sufi worldview.

Ewing recalls an encounter with a sufi saint early in her fieldwork who promised her that he would come to her while she was sleeping.

That night I awoke in the middle of the night, so startled from a dream that I sat upright. My awakening woke a young woman sleeping on a cot next to mine. She had visited the saint with me and had been critical of him. I told her about the dream, in which I had seen a white horse approach me. In the dream I had the clear sensation of something touching

my thumb, which startled me awake. The young woman declared that it had been the saint, just as he had promised. I marveled aloud about the power of suggestion, thereby placing the phenomenon immediately within a psychological interpretive scheme in which dreams come only from the dreamer's internal states, but I was haunted by the odd sensation of the touch.²²

Despite her own awareness of a distinct physical sensation that was so palpable and intense that it awakened her from her sleep, Ewing could not initially adopt a traditional sufi analysis of this experience. The ability of saints to appear across the boundaries of time and space were regular occurrences for Pakistanis and as such, posed no hermeneutical difficulty for them. Ewing, having been subjected to years of indoctrination regarding Western rational superiority, could not effectively confront the certainty that something had indeed touched her while she was sleeping.

Perhaps Ewing could have agreed with her roommate that the saint had indeed visited her, but this would have introduced confusion into her scientific understanding of the world, thus undermining and destabilizing her own identity as an objective and scientific researcher. Her identity as an anthropologist had to retain its prominence over against the worldviews of those she researched because she was taught to grant the Western understanding of reality ultimate supremacy, thus negating the concrete evidence suggesting that a supernatural explanation was plausible. Even though Ewing had heard from several Pakistanis who studied abroad about actual experiences in which their saint communicated with them and even helped them on exams, she did not take their claims to be representative of reality.

While recording these experiences, Ewing thought only about the implications of such "beliefs" for Pakistani concepts of self and personhood. She translated these reported interactions between sufi saints and practitioners into Freudian schemes that she labeled "magical thinking." Ewing admits that she initially brushed aside these accounts as something existing outside her parameters of belief, and therefore, she signified these reflections as having a completely scientific and naturalistic origin and foundation. The hegemonic impulse of this intellectual reordering of reality is unmistakable in Ewing's reflection on the experience: "I could not imagine taking on what I saw as beliefs characteristic of an uneducated Pakistani woman. I imagined that I was learning the beliefs of those whose parochialisms had not yet been eroded by the realities of modern life. I was studying the wholly Other." And yet, after the encounter, it was *only* Ewing who was left flummoxed by an inability to fully comprehend the experience. However, many years later Ewing realized that the saint did come to her in that dream, and her admission validates the supernatural worldview of the Sufis that she researched.

In grappling with the tension introduced by the disparity between her Western education and the supernatural beliefs of Sufis, Ewing later attempted to experience Sufism from the perspective of personal enlightenment rather than anthropological research. This transition occurred after Ewing was discussing with a Pakistani psychiatrist his patients' beliefs in saints. After indifferently mentioning her own dream, Ewing was taken aback by the sudden interest of this colleague in the specifics of her dream. She was confounded that someone who had been inculcated with the same

psychological and theoretical approach to interpreting these experiences with saints could also affirm the existence of a supernatural realm. To her credit, this disruptive experience forced Ewing to explore Sufism on a more intimate level. However, even after another meeting with a saint and a corresponding dream catalyzed by this visit, Ewing still teeters on the explanatory boundary between Freudian psychoanalytic dream theory and traditional Sufi beliefs. Her interactions with educated Pakistanis only exacerbate this tension because she is left wondering how these Pakistanis harmoniously integrate these two opposing worldviews. For example, in reflecting on the Sufi explanatory model, Ewing concedes, "If I accept such a proposition, there are implications for my experience of causality and for my place in a network of human relationships that are incompatible with the secularized world of the Western social scientist and the psychoanalyst."²³

Unfortunately, Ewing tries to harmonize these two seemingly incompatible world views by identifying points of epistemological convergence. Her method of assimilationism attempts to locate points of similarity where Islamic dream theory and Freudian dream theory correspond. Such an assimilationist approach is tethered to an idea of "belief" as the key to solving the interpretive conundrum, but it subjugates the Sufis' relationship with supernatural entities to an overreliance on prominent Western psychoanalytical models. Ewing seems to suggest that as long as a person can congruently believe in both models, then both models can be equally valuable and informative. She fails in her inability to identify the Sufi understanding of dreams and mysticism as itself beyond belief. The idea of belief remains wedded to a cognitive lens that can pronounce whether something is wrong or right based upon how closely it accords to the way that things really are. For many non-Western cultures, this detachment and objective reflection operates in contradistinction to their familiar inhabited world which is imbued with realities on various levels, including the spiritual. The educated Pakistanis that perplex Ewing can adopt two seemingly incompatible worldviews because these worldviews operate on two wholly different planes. The dimension of lived realities, spiritual relationships and supernatural interactions defy belief itself as a means of understanding these realities because they simply *are*. This prereflective existence does not impede the Pakistanis ability to understand scientific terminology and methodology. They differ from many Western imperialistic researchers in that they circumscribe the relevance and validity of the scientific approach by recognizing its limitations.

Supernatural Absorption

The work of Edith Turner provides a different path for anthropologists into the lived religious experience of societies than the methods offered by Cohen and Ewing. Turner, the wife of famed anthropologist Victor Turner, participated in an Ndembu ritual in 1985, thirty one years after she had first experienced the ritual with her husband as part of his ethnographic fieldwork. In the early 1950s the Ihamba tooth ritual was observed and analyzed by Victor and Edith Turner, and their observations, photographs, and field notes became Victor Turner's *Drums of Affliction*.²⁴ Victor

Turner interpreted the significance of the ritual through the sociopsychological tools of functionalism that had won the day. The things deemed important included the patients' psychological state, the Ndembu doctor's psychological skill, and the social reconciliation enacted by the ceremony. E. Turner writes how she and her husband initially found implausible what the ritual described.

The ihamba affliction runs like this: the patient has been bitten by the tooth of a dead hunter, an object normally kept as an amulet helpful for hunting. When the tooth is neglected, so the Ndembu told us, it enters someone's body and travels along the veins, biting and inflicting a unique disease. This thing is both a spirit and a tooth, as the actions of the doctors attested. It is removed by means of cupping horns after a lengthy ritual.²⁵

V. Turner interpreted the ritual through Freudian symbols, and he portrayed the doctor as continually building up and releasing tension—heightening expectation and collective angst until the act of producing the tooth by sucking it out of the body through a cupping horn led to shared group relief and a palpable solidarity.²⁶ One scholar's critique highlights the oppressive elements of V. Turner's epistemology: "So much for African medicine. There's nothing happening but hocus-pocus, delusion, and placebo. And this from a person who knows more about the subject than the author of this book and 99.9 per cent of his readers. Knowledge it appears, doesn't make the difference."²⁷

In response to the criticism of her husband's work, E. Turner agreed that he "had indeed treated Ihamba as a ritual of psychology, not religion, performed under the aegis of an African traditional doctor extremely skilled in social psychology. Vic regarded the symbolism of Ihamba as a mixture of moving poetry and undoubted hocus-pocus."²⁸ Following her husband's untimely death in 1983, E. Turner resolved to go back to Zambia to restudy Ndembu rituals. She did not go expecting to be profoundly and personally impacted by the ritual, but to study—on a deeper level—the impact of initiation rituals on the Ndembu people.²⁹

Turner's ethnography reads much differently than Cohen's, evidencing a different method that accords more weight to local descriptions of the supernatural. Her descriptions of the Ndembu are rich and textured, and there is the sense that she has earned their trust as a member of their society. Turner became involved in deep conversations regarding the extinction of Ndembu rituals in which she had participated over thirty years earlier, and her intimate knowledge of the Ihamba ritual and war rituals blur the distance between observer and researcher.

E. Turner notices that in her second trip to visit the Ndembu, the doctor identified the tension between the multiple delays and active progress of the ritual as caused by the spirit and its relationship to the patient's body and the group, leading to a different engagement from V. Turner with the ceremony in which she participated.³⁰ In describing Singleton—the doctor performing the tooth extraction—following the first of two Ihamba rituals that Turner would experience in 1985, Turner says that Singleton was "beginning to realize himself that I was not trying to denigrate what he did as superstition, but rather I was motivated by an excited love of the coherence and power with which all the elements of the ritual had climaxed."³¹

Turner decided to enter the Ndembu society open to their construal of reality, and she constructs a theologically discursive space where the unexpected can happen, with the unexpected being indicative of a certain reality, and not merely figments of imagination or hocus-pocus. Employing a method of supernatural absorption that engages and interacts with these realities as actually existing, she escapes the intellectual one-sidedness that revives the oppressive tactics of colonial elitism and she allows for the researched to have an identity outside of “otherness.” Throughout the text, Turner never writes *they believe* that a phenomenon occurs. Rather, she simply states, in terms of the Ndembu, what they together share as truth. For example, she writes, “The multitudinous exercises in jumping between levels and facets and modes, the laughter and pleasure. . . They are most economically explained as the desire of the spirit to manifest itself.”³²

Turner’s two durations of fieldwork in Ndembu society conducted over thirty years apart climax in her own experience of the supernatural.

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-delighted. I still laugh with glee at the realization of having seen it, the ihamba, and so big! We were all just one in triumph. The gray thing was actually out there, visible. . .and then the thing was there no more.³³

From the approach of exclusive naturalism, which is favored by Cohen, Turner’s discovery that spirits are real is misguided. The reductionism of exclusive naturalism would reduce Turner’s experience to processes within the mind. In defense of exclusive naturalism, Cohen reminds us that “whether or not spirits are real, perceptions and understandings of what they are, what they do, and what they mean are only ever located in human minds. As such, these features can be explained in terms of the general properties of our mental architecture.”³⁴ For exclusive naturalism, what cannot be categorized scientifically has no worth or role within scientific analysis or research.

Turner’s supernatural absorption inveighs against this exclusively scientific approach that remains a remnant of Western intellectualism and elitist thinking. She recounts other experiences with visions, dreams, and spiritual manifestations that occurred during her research of the healing methods of Inupiat Eskimos.³⁵ Turner admits that these experiences defy attempts to categorize them within a larger logical framework, and she observes that

Mainline anthropologists have studiedly ignored the central matter of this kind of information—central in the people’s own view—and only used the material as if it were metaphor or symbol, not reality, commenting that such and such ‘metaphor’ is congruent with the function, structure or psychological mindset of the society. Clearly this is a laudable endeavor as far as it goes. But the neglect of the central material savors of our old *bête noire*, intellectual imperialism.³⁶

In spite of her commitment to “going native,” Turner’s experiences reveal a larger dilemma. How do self-professed scientists engage in rituals as participants and acknowledge that spirits exist, *without* become subsumed within a particular worldview that would render it difficult to simi-

larly immerse oneself in another society due to possibly conflicting explanations of reality? Insofar as there cannot be shared universal agreed upon the identity and existence of these supernatural realities, how does the anthropologist continue the theorizing and analysis that makes the project translatable into different academic contexts? Does Turner's approach of supernatural absorption reduce the problem to an admonition that the anthropologist must also adopt the spiritual outlook of the societies that he or she studies?

Theological Realism

Perhaps the answer to how the anthropologist can maintain his or her rigorous approach to the academic ethnographic study of societies while avoiding hegemonic methods is found in the method Mary Keller utilizes in her carefully nuanced and theorized analyses of spirit possession. In her work, Mary Keller confronts the problem of belief that exists in Western contemporary anthropological and religious studies scholarship. Keller implicates the equation of religion with reasonable belief as a tenet of the West that inscribes a hierarchical dichotomy into the academic practices of scholars who attribute, at least implicitly, a primitivism to other cultures and experiences in the world. For Keller,

By thinking of religiousness as belief, the scholar sets up a study of something she or he does not literally believe in. The power of possession, an element of which is that the possession has attracted the scholar's attention, is elided in this caveat, giving 'us' a safe distance from which we maintain our fascination, similar to the experience of walking through a museum.³⁷

Keller rightfully perceives that what is exotic or strange to most contemporary American or European readers, including spirit possession, is something that much of the world has experienced or seen within their communities. She notes that even Western history includes numerous examples of spirit possession, suggesting that our consignment of this experience to "others" only underscores the degree to which the Enlightenment made rationalism the apotheosis of human life and denigrated other kinds of religious experiences.

Keller reviews the scholarly literature regarding spiritual possession to identify common themes and tendencies within this particular discourse. She discusses the limitations of social scientific and second wave explications of spirit possession. The first area, social scientific approaches to possession, produces the largest amount of documentation regarding spirit possession.³⁸ It includes the standard social science disciplines—anthropology, psychology, sociology—and combinations thereof—such as psychological anthropology, social psychology, and medical ethnography. Cohen's study of spirit possession in Belem would fit into this category, and most of these approaches resemble V. Turner's methodology in their naturalistic and sociological interpretations of spirit possession.

One of the emblematic social scientific studies of spirit possession listed by Keller includes Erika Bourguignon's *Possession* which was first published in 1976.³⁹ Keller applauds Bourguignon for expressing the desire to avoid imposition of Western norms upon the societies that she analyzed and for her refusal to interpret the possessed through the primitive/civilized dichotomy.⁴⁰ However, her attempted objectivity and scientific (psychological) analysis serves to construct a system of dissociational states whereby possession is explained. This means that she describes possession as a *real belief*, but it is not a belief held by Bourguignon herself who presents a subsequent interpretation of what is *really* happening within the ritual or phenomenon.⁴¹

For example, in a recent article, Bourguignon attributes possession in women to their attempt to do unconsciously what they do not permit themselves to do consciously.⁴² She alleges that these women enjoy ultimate deniability since they are neither responsible for nor aware of what is going on and do not remember it after the fact. Possession simply becomes a coping strategy that signals the presence of stresses within the society.⁴³ For Keller, this type of reductionistic analysis reminiscent of V. Turner's psychological explanations of the Ihamba tooth ritual removes the possibility that anything "spiritual" is happening to the possessed. The cosmological view of the possessed is discounted in favor of a Western scientific view that explains and identifies their self-deception. For Keller, this hegemonic discourse takes the shape of the colonizing activity that Chidester describes—if not in actual force, then at least in ideology. Whether or not Bourguignon explicitly employs a primitive/civilized dichotomy, she certainly sees herself in a more superior and capable position of judging the significance of supposedly spiritual experiences. As Keller infers, "the indigenous beliefs have been rendered suspect (*we* maintain a healthy attitude of skepticism toward transcendentals like spirits or deities) while social science is constructed as capable of knowing behavior—a knowledge that will allow us to understand this novel otherness, bringing it under our control."⁴⁴

In Keller's view, the recent spate of "second-wave" studies does not fare much better. Keller defines these studies as those that employ the methodologies of the social-scientific approaches including the impact of structures and power upon individual agency, but also take into account the impact of colonialism and capitalism and frequently use feminist or postcolonial theory in their interpretations. She identifies scholars such as Colleen Ward, Stephen Inglis, and Kathryn Erndl as recently publishing works in this category. Keller, who critically engages feminist and postcolonial discourse in her body of research, finds this scholarship fascinating and informative, but she identifies its limitations. Scholars in these fields frequently portray possession as forms of theater, forms of embodied social critique, or forms of social therapy.⁴⁵ As Keller explains, "The scholars represent the agency of the possessing spirits in terms of human forms of agency such as human creativity, human appropriation of power through symbolic embodiment, and human reinterpretation of material oppression in symbolic metaphors such as parody or idiom."⁴⁶ Keller does not dismiss the fact that enumerating all of the dimensions and complexities entailed in spirit possession may include these elements and facets. However, she understands that reducing possession

to exclusively humanistic origins generates an oppressive ideology that appraises the “other” as deceived—even if also resourceful and creative in resisting power—in their beliefs.

After painting such a pessimistic view of the scholastic landscape, does Keller have an answer? Her rejoinder carefully walks the tightrope connecting the naturalism of the social sciences to the spiritual ontology of the societies wherein spirit possession occurs. In bridging this gap, Keller retrieves a definition of theology by Richard Grigg. In his *Theology as a Way of Thinking*, Grigg defines the object of theology, *theos*, as the “infinite dimension of reality that can deliver human beings from certain fundamental threats that result from the fact that human being is finite being.”⁴⁷ Insofar as ancestors, deities, and spirits are appealed to for help in the face of threats to human existence, Keller argues that spirit possession can be understood to be a theological event.⁴⁸ It is not that she *knows* the entities causing the possession in and of themselves, for she admits that this is epistemologically impossible.⁴⁹ Rather, the question now transcends narrow epistemological categories of belief and reality to open up a discursive theological space that takes seriously how people define the source and origin of their religious experience.⁵⁰ Instead of simply suspending belief, the infinite (or transcendent) is allowed to break through into the finite as a way of explicating human/divine encounters such as spirit possession. As Keller explains, “New footing is required, located in a discursive space that allows for indigenous claims to stand (the claims are not dismissed or elided) while allowing for critical interrogation.”⁵¹ Keller’s method of theological realism understands that supernatural entities exist, but she does not assume that she can intimately know them, as Turner assumes.

Conclusion

Mary Keller recognizes the risks of bringing a theological hermeneutic to the explication of spirit possession insofar as the lines between theology and anthropology may be somewhat blurred. But for her, challenging the racist notions of belief, agency, and subjectivity introduced in the Enlightenment and brought to maturity during colonialism makes it a task worth implementing. Irrespective of the particular personal religious system an anthropologist adheres to, the only way to vitiate signification within anthropological study is to take seriously the claims of those being studied. Keller throws down her gauntlet: “I am suggesting that the unique element that distinguishes religious bodies as such is that they are bodies that negotiate with a power that exists outside of the anthropologic horizon.”⁵²

For hundreds of years, Europeans have been attracted to the beautiful and perplexing religious practices of societies all over world. The differing languages, rituals, and social organization manifest an “otherness” that is sometimes exciting, perhaps bewildering, and maybe even astonishing. However, anthropologists are constrained by the pressures of naturalistic presuppositions that need to explain. The act of explaining is not for the benefit of the researched, but for the

benefit of the scholar, the scholar's academic community, and the scholar's career goals. Such explication instrumentalizes the aesthetic power and multidimensionality of the society being studied by reducing their practices and cosmologies to Western categories that oppose and ridicule the society's own self-understanding. This ideological colonialism keeps the practice of signification always in vogue, and while the oppression is not as blatant as the violent subjugation enacted during colonialism, it is oppression nonetheless. Ethnographic methods and anthropological research will continue to be oppressive unless the scholar can take seriously that something, whatever it is, happens within the rituals that tap into gods, spirits, ancestors, that is outside of Freud, Durkheim, or Tylor's ability to explain. Unless anthropologists are willing to open a discursive space that allows for the transcendent and the supernatural, their research will continue to oppress and demean societies from which we have much to learn.

(Endnotes)

1 James S. Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 159. The book details the historical rise of a naturalistic approach to the study of religion that displaced the preceding theological approach.

2 Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 5.

3 David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Studies in Religion and Culture (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 7.

4 Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 70-71.

5 Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28, no. 1 (1974): 31.

6 In accordance with anthropologist Takami Kuwayama I purposely choose to use the word native in this article rather than the terms local or indigenous. For Kuwayama, the use of the word 'native' is a testimony to the colonial roots of anthropology, and it has political connotations, showing how those who were formerly colonized are now intruding into the academic space of their former oppressors. Takami Kuwayama, "'Natives' as Dialogic Partners: Some Thoughts on Native Anthropology," *Anthropology Today* 19, no. 1 (2003): 8.

7 *Ibid.*, 29.

8 In her glossary Cohen provides this definition: "*culto afro*: this was the shorthand term for the *culto afro-brasileiro*. *Culto* may be translated into "cult," but I have chosen to leave it in the original Portuguese, as it has a less perjorative significance in Brazilian usage. Most members are content to describe their

religious expression using this term, although some have recently campaigned for the *culto* to be regarded by outsiders as an acceptable religion like any other (e.g., Roman Catholicism, Assembly of God, etc.), thereby encouraging members and others to call their practices and faith a ‘religion.’ *ibid.*, 208.

9 *Ibid.*, 10-11.

10 Cohen, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition*, 16.

11 Cohen, *The Mind Possessed*, see 116-121 for an in-depth explanation of Minimally Counterintuitive Concepts.

12 Cohen, *The Mind Possessed*, 190.

13 Cohen, *The Mind Possessed*, 191.

14 Cohen, *The Mind Possessed*, 194.

15 Emma Cohen, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57.

16 *Ibid.*, 76.

17 Emma Cohen, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57.

18 Katherine P. Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe,” *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 571.

19 Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint,” 571.

20 Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint,” 571.

21 Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint,” 572.

22 Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint,” 574.

23 Ewing, “Dreams from a Saint,” 577.

24 Edith L. B. Turner, *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing*, Series in Contemporary Ethnography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 2.

25 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 2.

26 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 7.

27 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 8.

28 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 8.

29 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 9-10.

30 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 7-8.

- 31 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 89.
- 32 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 101.
- 33 Turner, *Experiencing Ritual*, 149.
- 34 Cohen, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition*, 63.
- 35 Edith B. Turner, "The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4, no. 1 (1993).
- 36 Turner, "The Reality of Spirits," 10.
- 37 Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 7.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 39 Erika Bourguignon, *Possession*, Chandler & Sharp Series in Cross-Cultural Themes (San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, 1976).
- 40 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession*, 29.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 42 Erika Bourguignon, "Suffering and Healing, Subordination and Power: Women and Possession Trance," *Ethos* 32, no. 4 (2004): 572.
- 43 Bourguignon, "Suffering and Healing, Subordination and Power," 571.
- 44 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession*, 31.
- 45 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 46.
- 46 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 46.
- 47 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 84.
- 48 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 84.
- 49 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 86.
- 50 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 86.
- 51 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 22.
- 52 Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute*, 227.