

Workshop No. 8

Discernment: Recognising the Presence of Spirits

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Discernment is a key skill in many traditions concerned with non-physical, non-ordinary beings, whether in the context of shamanism, spirit possession and mediumship, or spirit release therapies and ghost hunting in contemporary post-industrial societies. How do practitioners know that spirits are present? How do practitioners distinguish between what they perceive to be an external, ontological other and the 'normal' self? What methods are employed to make this distinction? Inherent in such questions are issues relating to the nature of personhood and consciousness – what exactly constitutes a 'person,' and what is 'consciousness'? This workshop will explore the theme of discernment from a range of different cultural contexts, and will discuss the implications of traditions of discernment for wider questions about the nature of consciousness and self.

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Spirit Release as Therapy: An Alternative Western Tradition

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Exorcism has been practiced and is still practiced in Western Christian Churches, but there is a parallel tradition of spirit release therapy, often growing out of conventional psychiatric and psychological practices. The assumption is that some forms of physical and mental illness or disturbance are caused by changes in the patient's energy field that allow foreign entities to attach themselves.

These energetic attachments can take many forms and one of the tasks of the spirit release practitioner is to discern the type of entity that might be troubling the patient. At one end of the spectrum there might be sub-personalities that have become split off in times of trauma, but which are part of the same individual and can be reintegrated. At the other extreme are dark force entities that intend to cause harm and misery. In between are lost or earthbound spirits, thought forms and emotional ties emanating from both the living and the dead. Some attachments may involve non-human beings from other realms or members of the *devic* kingdoms (elves, fairies and so on).

While the cosmology of spirit release might seem a strange mixture of European folklore, Jungian psychology, science fiction and Western esotericism, it is also fairly consistent among practitioners. As publications and practices continue to develop spirit release is gaining in popularity and visibility, presenting an alternative to the more established church practices of exorcism.

This paper will give an overview of some of these trends and attempt to map the main features of contemporary Western spirit release.

Key Words: Spirit release, exorcism, spirit attachment, therapy, possession.

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**Drinking blood, dancing on swords:
What a deity can do, and a human cannot**

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For the Ghoras (possessed-dancers) of the Kāmākhyā temple complex (India) there is nothing strange that Goddess Kāmākhyā possesses a human. For devotees too possession by Goddess Kāmākhyā and the other deities of the temple complex is not surprising. The problem is, rather, to discern genuine possession.

Every year in August the Ghoras become possessed by Goddess Kāmākhyā and the other deities of the temple complex. For three days they dance to the beat of drums. During the dance devotees worship the Ghoras and beg for their blessing. When the dance is over, the Ghoras go back to their everyday life.

When a man first claims to be possessed by one of the deities of the temple complex, he is not allowed to dance unless elder Ghoras consent. The newly acknowledged Ghora as well as the seniors ones are expected to drink the blood from the head of goats, immediately after they have been sacrificed, and to dance on swords before the thousands of devotees gathering for the festival. According to both the Ghoras and the devotees, if a Ghora is unable to drink this blood or if his feet get cut on the swords, it means that he is not really possessed by any deity. Ghoras express their concern thereupon and, during the month preceding the dance, observe a set of restrictions in order to make their bodies fit to be fully possessed by the deities.

According to Ghoras, they cannot decide whether to dance or not. The dance, display of the Goddess' awesome power, depends upon Her inscrutable, capricious will; it is Her *līlā* (play). The deity presence in the human body is subject to unpredictable ups and downs. Just before dancing on swords, Ghoras rush to the Goddess' altar, which is believed to "charge" them with divine power.

Based on extensive fieldwork, the present paper explores the ambiguous feelings that the Ghoras express in the delicate phase preceding the dance. How do the Ghoras perceive the deities' overwhelming intervention in their lives? How do they prepare for the temporary obliteration of their selves? Scenes of my documentary film *Ghora: Waiting for the Goddess* (2014) will be screened to show the most significant moments of the dance.

The pan-Indian concept of śakti (divine feminine creative/destructive power) will be evoked, with reference to the Kāmākhyā temple complex, one among the most celebrated site for śakti cult in South Asia.

Key words: Possession, Goddess Kāmākhyā, Ghora, dance, śakti, Hindu temples, sacrifice, blood, swords, power.

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What discernment traditions might tell us about the nature of consciousness

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Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with spiritualist trance and physical mediums in Bristol, UK, as well as on the wider cross-cultural and ethnographic literature on spirit possession and mediumship, this paper will explore the ways in which mediumistic experiences lead to expanded conceptions of the nature of the self, and will explore the potential contribution of taking extraordinary experiences seriously in the context of the personhood debate. This paper will analyse core features of mediumistic discernment traditions, focussing specifically on experience (i.e. how is the presence of spirits determined, experienced and distinguished from 'normal' consciousness), and will ask what these techniques of discernment might reveal about the workings of

consciousness and the nature of the Self. In particular it will be argued that an awareness of extraordinary experiences in post-industrial societies reveals surprising variations in conceptualisations of the self, including the presence within 'Western' cultures of self-concepts that have historically been classified as 'non-Western,' or 'dividual.' What is particularly interesting about these expanded notions of the self is that they seem to contradict the standard models of mind and self implied by the dominant paradigms of materialist science.

Key words: Consciousness, Discernment, Experience, Personhood, Spirits, Trance

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Moral corporalities: Non-human others, perspectivism and Christianity in Amazonia

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It has by now become commonplace to understand human to non-human relations among indigenous groups especially in Amazonia, but also beyond, to be characterised by some variety of the perspectival logic in which a subject's perspective is a feature of the body rather than that of mind, and where relationships precede form. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's seminal work, in human-non-human encounters in perspectival cosmoeses a human being may be left to occupy the second person position –you – in a relation to a non-human occupying the first person subject position – I. In such a case, the bodily perspective of the non-human becomes dominant in the relationship and subsequently, the human person drifts away from his or her human condition. It is largely in the moral sphere, as immoral behaviour, that the presence of non-humans and their influences on humans can be detected. In this paper, however, I wish to explore the question of discerning the presence of the non-human others among Christians in indigenous Amazonia. How is the presence and influences of the non-human others of Christianity, especially God and the Holy Spirit but also Satan, discerned among the indigenous Yine people living in the Peruvian Amazonia? To what extent does the Yine perspectival logic characterise these relations? Or does Christianity provide novel ways of gaining knowledge of non-human presence? Relating the case to recent discussions in the field of Anthropology of Christianity, the paper suggests that while the discerning in these cases still takes place largely on the basis of morality, the relationships to Christian others differ from the relations to other non-humans in the Yine social cosmos especially in regard to the emphasis placed on the closed body and inner subjectivity instead of open consubstantial personhood.

Keywords: Amazonia, indigenous people, Yine, non-humans, Christianity, perspectivism, corporeality

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Spirit Release Therapy and the Art of Discernment

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Spirit Release Therapy (SRT) has been used by pioneering clinicians and acknowledged by some researchers in psychology since the 19th Century, although the name SRT is a recent label that was originally introduced as Spirit Releasement Therapy by William Baldwin in 1995.

SRT, as a clinical method of removing troublesome spirits, is more able to discern the difference between the spirits of the deceased who remain earthbound and the more damaging non-human demonic, otherwise known as Dark Force Entities (DFE) that are traditionally 'exorcised' by the Roman Catholic Church.

To the SRT practitioner, the term discernment not only refers to the art and skill in discerning whether or not spirits are present, but more importantly the discernment between different types of spirit, which is important in determining what method is used to aid the spirit in moving on or being captured and escorted away to another realm of existence.

This presentation demonstrates, with the aid of a video recording of the process, the method of discernment and removal of discarnate negative entities by an SRT adept at work. Following the presentation, participants of the workshop will be able to discuss the method of discernment applied in this particular case.

Key words: spirit release therapy, clinical spirit release, clinical discernment, psychiatry, possession.

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**Discerning Spirits, Defining Selves:
Learning Semi-conscious Trance in the Vale do Amanhecer**

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This paper explores the process of mediumistic development in the Brazilian Spiritualist Christian Order Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) drawing on ethnographic research in temples in Brazil and Europe. This process is described by mediums as being culturally shaped according to the purposes for which it is used. Since mediumistic practice in the Vale do Amanhecer is aimed at releasing discarnate spirits obsessing humans – that is disobsessive healing – these spirits need to be discerned from the medium and the spirit guides, and controlled during a semi-conscious trance. Control and discernment are skills to be learned; and emotions, feelings and bodily experience play a pivotal role in this process. In illustrating the different modes of discernment as culturally informed, the discussion addresses specific notions of the self as produced through the bodily and affective dimensions of this process, and how these embodied notions, in turn, inform therapeutic experiences.

Key words: Vale do Amanhecer; mediumship; trance; learning; discernment; self; body; emotion; Brazil.