

Lecture 5:

Experiential Anthropology

(The anthropology of consciousness, and the anthropology of the paranormal)



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Lecture outline

- Over the course of this lecture we will be introduced to the history and development of experiential anthropology, from the earliest pioneers, to the most recent exponents.
- As we progress through this historical overview we will discuss some of the problems and benefits associated with an experiential approach to the study of religion.

E.B. Tylor



“When the sleeper awakens from a dream, he believes he has really somehow been away, or that other people have come to him. As it is well known by experience that men’s bodies do not go on these excursions, the natural explanation is that every man’s living self or soul is his phantom or image, which can go out of his body and see and be seen itself in dreams” (1930, p.88)



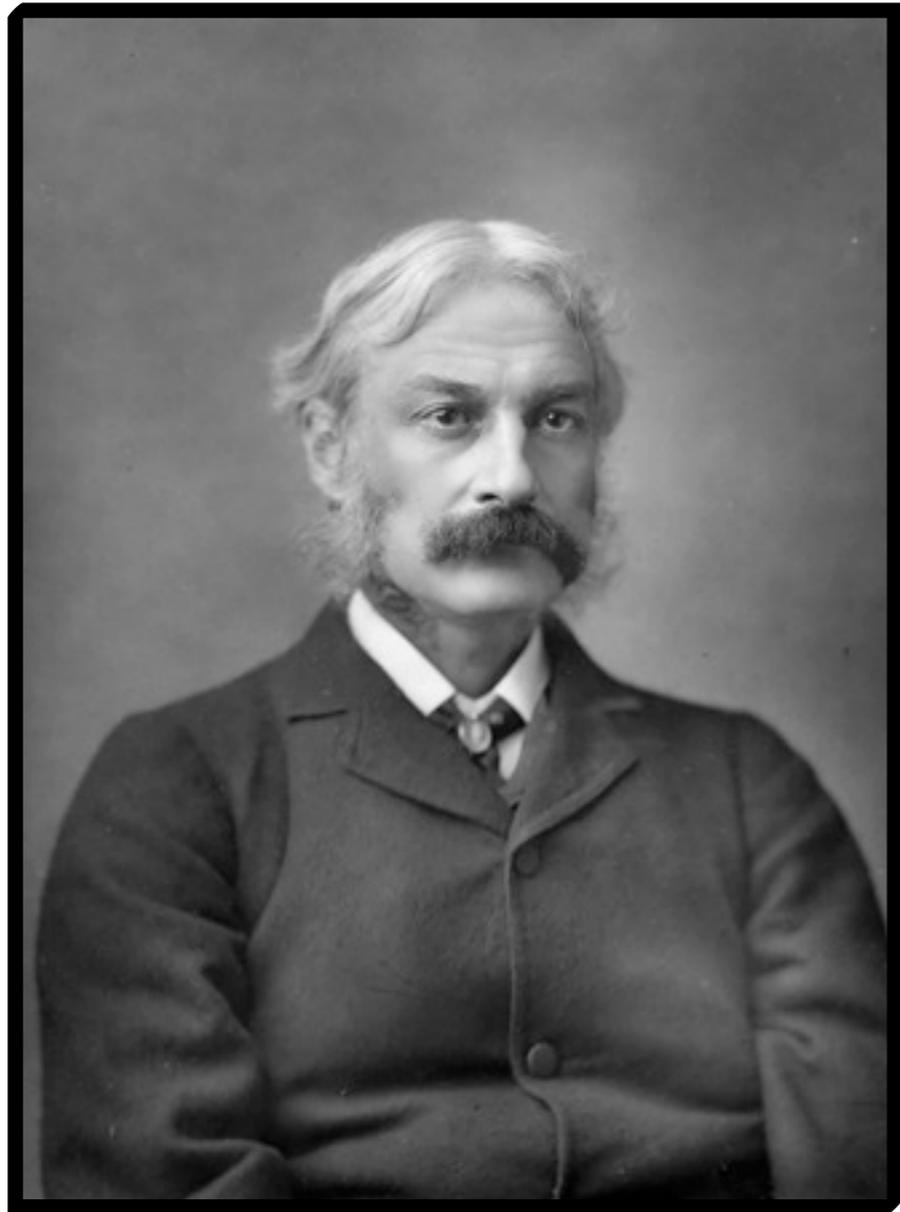
“...failed to make out how either raps, table-levitation, or accordian-playing were produced...”

“...[h]is trance seemed real...”

“...very curious, and her feats are puzzling to me...”

“...there may be a psychic force causing raps, movements, levitations, etc...”

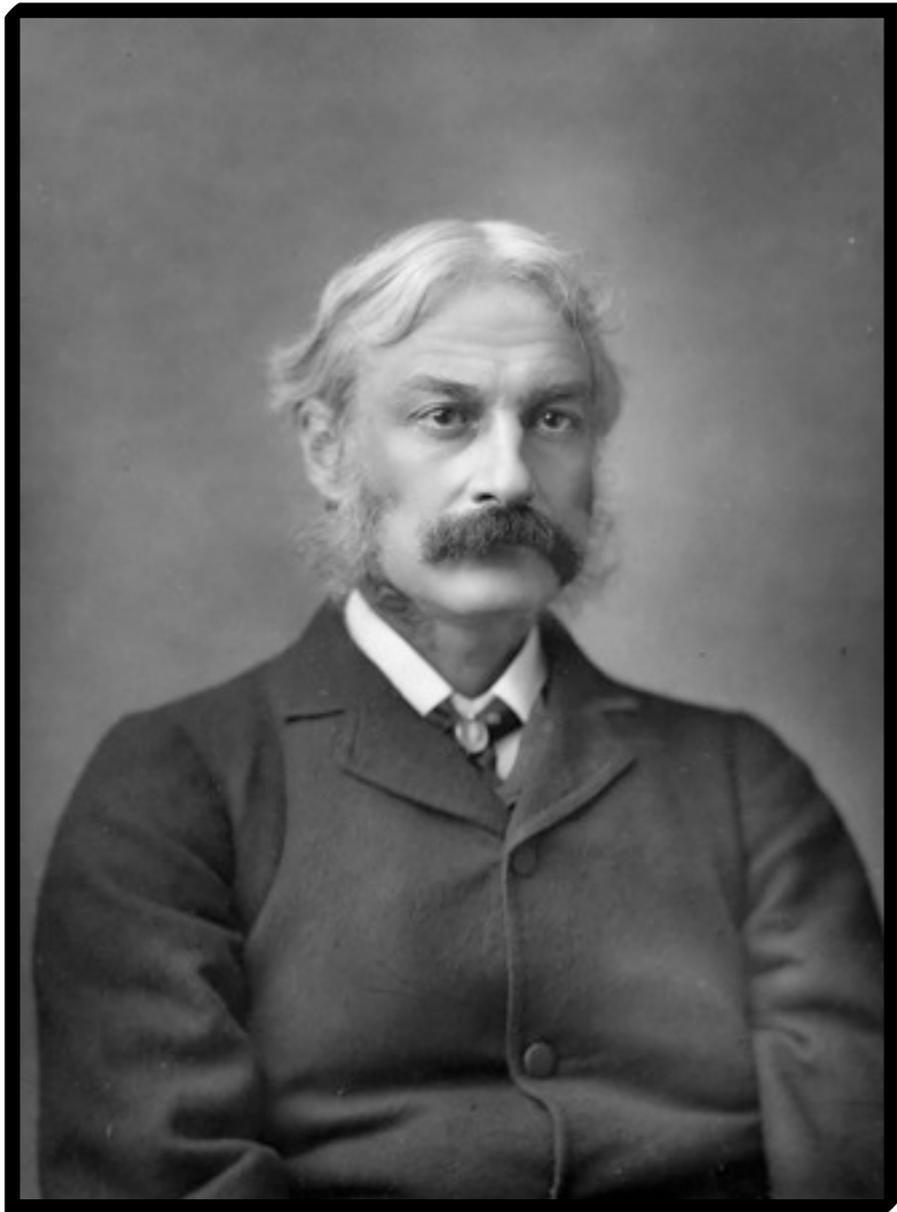
Andrew Lang



‘such things as modern reports of wraiths, ghosts, ‘fire-walking,’ ‘corpse-lights,’ ‘crystal-gazing,’ and so on...are within the province of anthropology.’

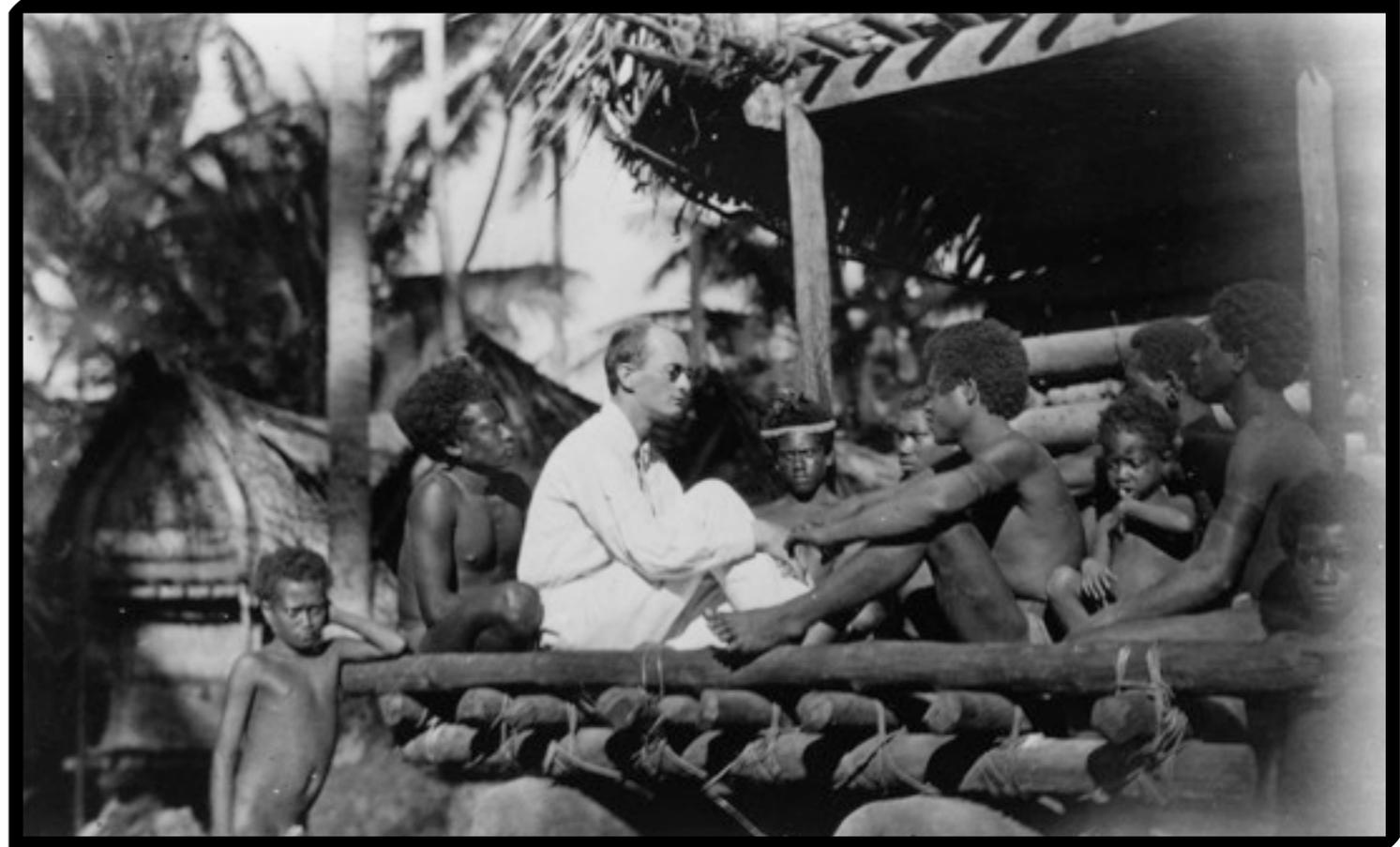
Lang disagreed with Tylor’s explanation of misinterpretation, and suggested that paranormal beliefs might have their origins in genuine paranormal experiences.

Comparative Psychical Research



- Psychical Researchers had been focussing only on cases from within the Euro-American context.
- Anthropologists had only been investigating supernatural beliefs in so-called 'primitive' cultures.
- Lang suggested that the two disciplines could learn a lot from one another.

Fieldwork



Moving into the 20th Century, anthropology's emphasis shifts from the arm-chair perspective of Tylor, Frazer, *et al.*, toward an ethnographic, field based perspective.

See especially Boaz and Malinowski.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard



““About midnight, before retiring, I took a spear and went for my usual nocturnal stroll. I was walking in the garden at the back of the hut, amongst banana trees, when I noticed a bright light passing at the back of my servant’s hut towards the homestead of a man called Tupoi. As this seemed worth investigation I followed its passage until a grass screen obscured the view. I ran quickly through my hut to the other side in order to see where the light was going to, but did not regain sight of it. I knew that only one man, a member of my household, had a lamp that might have given off so bright a light, but next morning he told me that he had neither been out late at night nor had he used his lamp. There did not lack ready informants to tell me that what I had seen was witchcraft. Shortly afterwards, on the same morning, an old relative of Tupoi and an inmate of his household died. This fully explained the light I had seen. I never discovered the real origin, which was probably a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas.” (1976: 11)

E.E. Evans-Pritchard



‘As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration’
(Evans-Pritchard 1965:17)

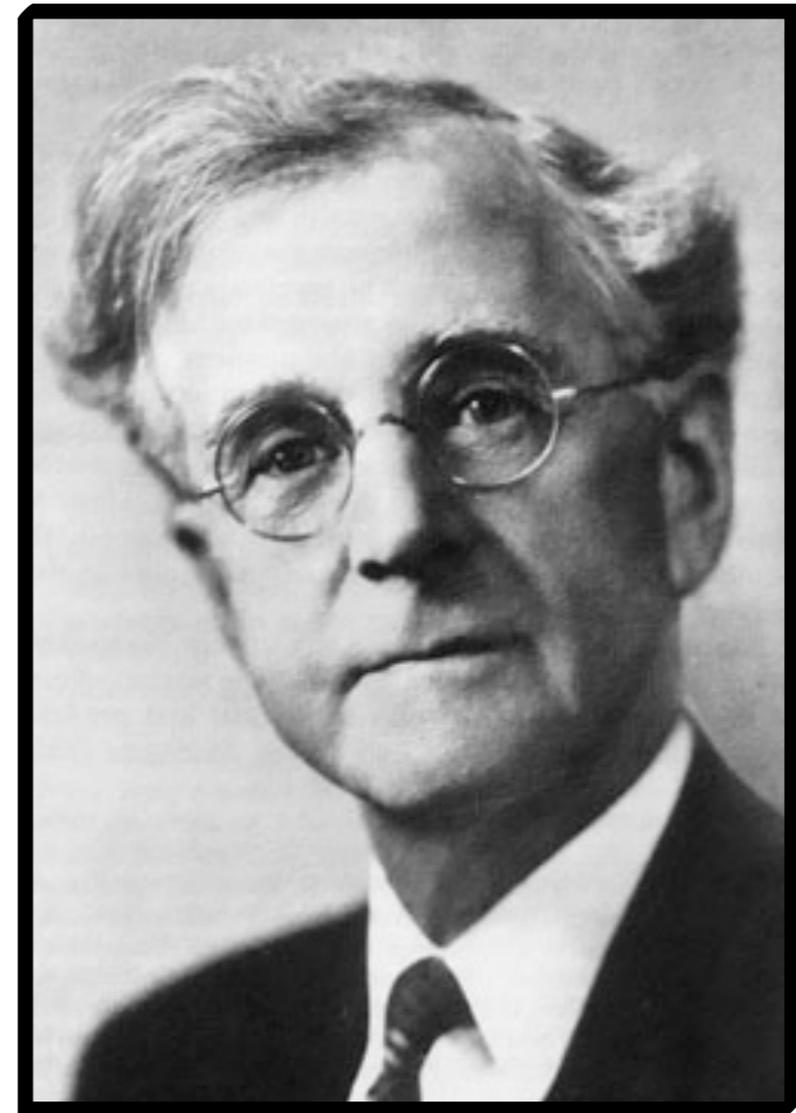
Alexandra David Neel



“All of these seekers after miracles would perhaps be most surprised to hear me say that the Tibetans do not believe in miracles, that is to say, in supernatural happenings. They consider the extraordinary facts which astonish us to be the work of natural energies which come into action in exceptional circumstances...”

John Reed Swanton

‘...a significant
revolution which
concerns us all is taking
place in a related
branch of science’

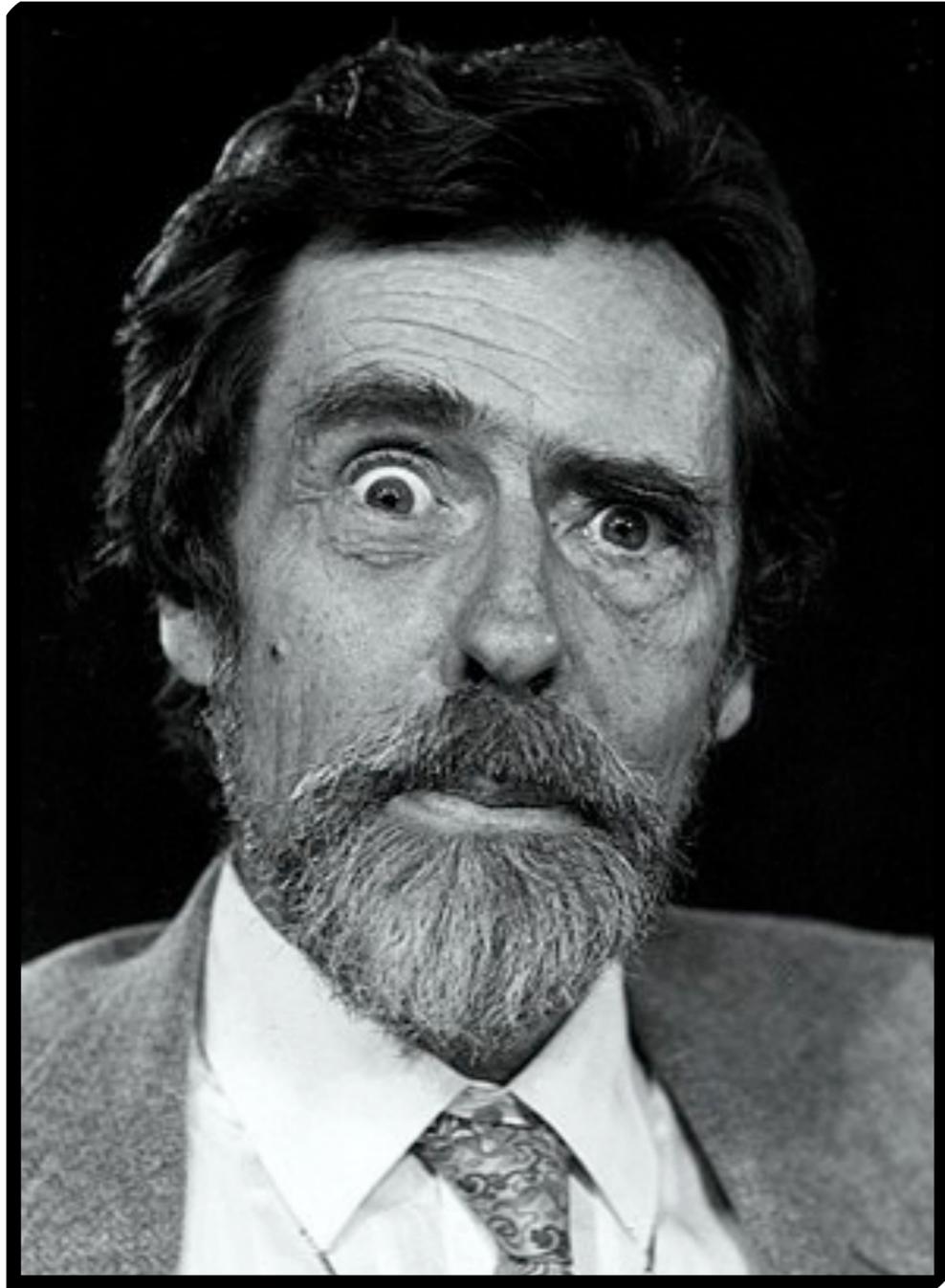


C.W. Weiant

“(1) to summarize the development of parapsychology, (2) to take note of the influence of parapsychology upon anthropologists, and (3) to point out the desirability of cooperation between parapsychologists and anthropologists” (1960:1)



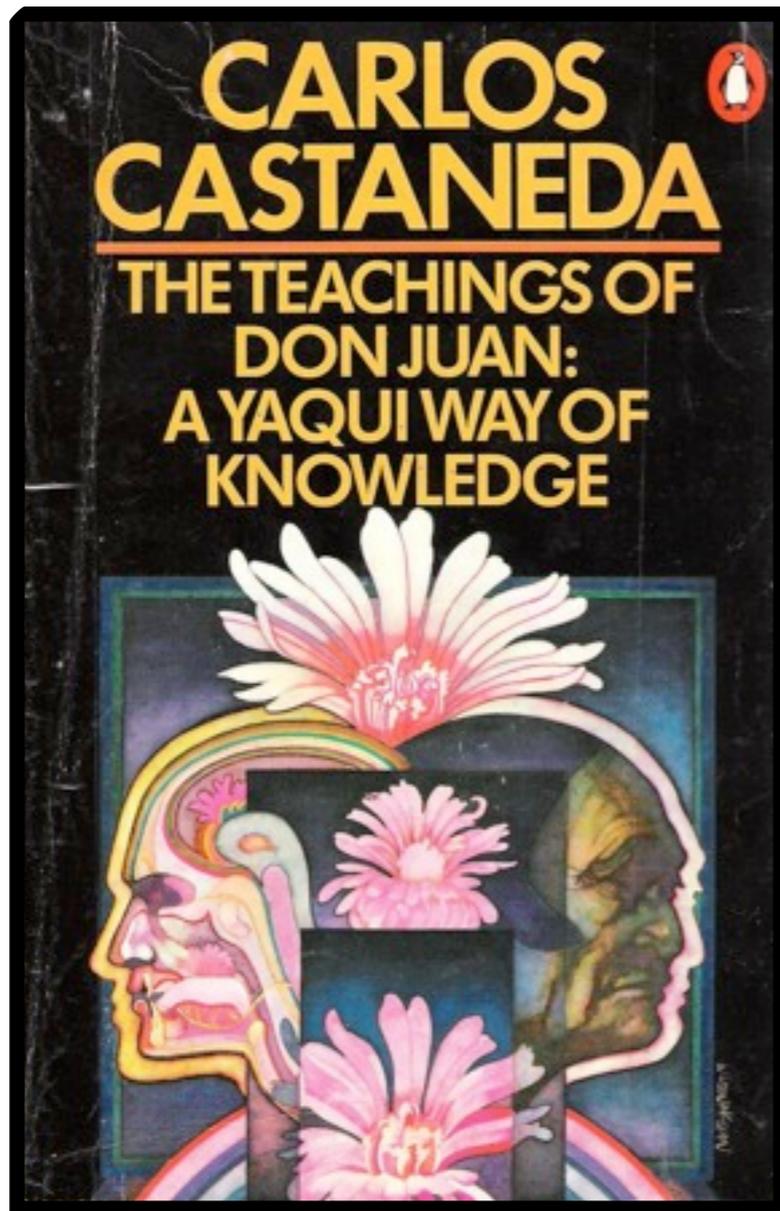
Francis Huxley



“Social anthropologists study a number of things which should be of interest to parapsychologists... So far, however, the evidence they have gathered in these subjects has ignored the possibility of ESP rather than confirmed or denied it. There seem to be three reasons this is firstly, that they...tend to think in terms of ‘body’ and ‘mind’, without knowing how to bring these two categories together; secondly, that even if an anthropologist were interested in the study of ESP, the proof of its existence is so tricky that he prefers not to waste time on it; thirdly, that he is more interested in social regularities than in individual happenings...”

(Huxley 1967, p. 281)

Carlos Castaneda



Ernesto de Martino

The Social Drama of the Paranormal



“...in the laboratory, the drama of the dying man who appears...to a relative or friend, is reduced to an oft repeated experiment – one that tries to transmit to the mind of a subject the image of a playing card, chosen at random.”

Margaret Mead



Mead had taken part in parapsychological laboratory experiments using Zener cards with psychologist Gardner Murphy, and was interested in understanding the social and psychological dynamics of psychic sensitives. In 1969 Mead's reputation as a highly respected member of the intellectual community, and her openness towards psychical research, were influential in the incorporation of the Parapsychological Association into the American Academy of Sciences, thus crystallising (if controversially) parapsychology's status as a valid area of scientific inquiry.

1st International Conference on Anthropology and Parapsychology

- In 1973 the first International conference on Anthropology and Parapsychology was held in London, sponsored by the Parapsychology Foundation.
- Followed swiftly by Joseph K. Long's conference on a similar theme, and the publication of the book *Extrasensory Ecology*.

Joseph K. Long and *Extrasensory Ecology*



“A persistent ignoring of the relevancy of parapsychology in anthropology is nothing less than scientific ethnocentrism”
(Long, 1977d, p.7)

Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness

States of Consciousness and Consciousness Studies:

Dreams, possession, trance, dissociation, cognitive theory, epistemology, methodology, evolution of consciousness, psychotherapy, cultural psychology.

Shamanic, Religious, and Spiritual Traditions:

Eastern, Western, and indigenous religions; shamanism; healing practices; ritual; music and dance; cultural and religious preservation and activism.

Philosophical, Symbolic, and Linguistic Studies:

Myth, oral traditions, language, archetypes, body and mind, comparative studies, visual anthropology.

Psychoactive Substances:

Studies of psychoactive plant use in traditional and contemporary practices, ethnopharmacology, psychopharmacology, healing, addiction and recovery.

Anomalous Experience:

Psychic phenomena, reincarnation, near-near-death experiences, mediumistic communication, divination.

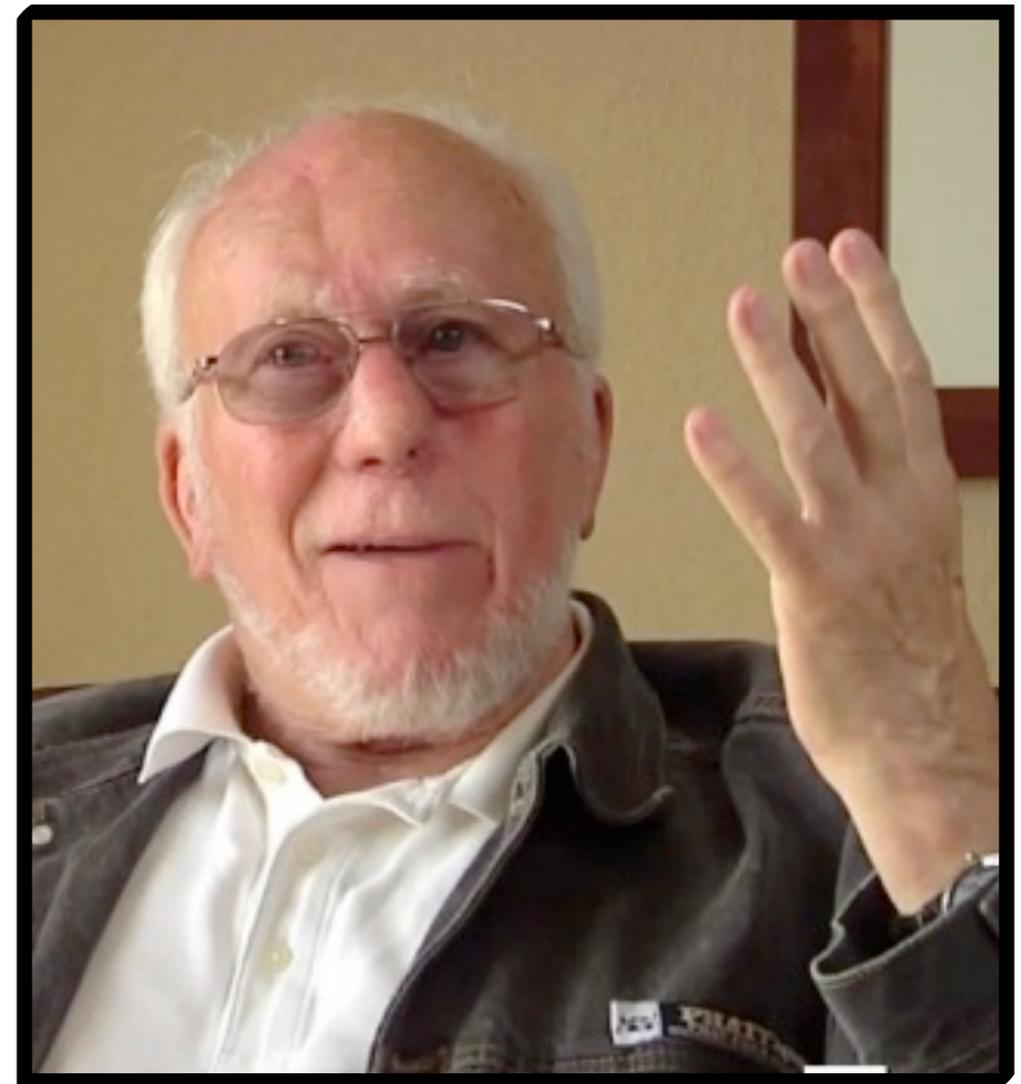
Established in 1989.

Robert Van de Castle

Ethnographic research can allow
us to:

“...observe at first hand how psi
products can be shaped by
environmental and cultural
influence...”

(1976:152).

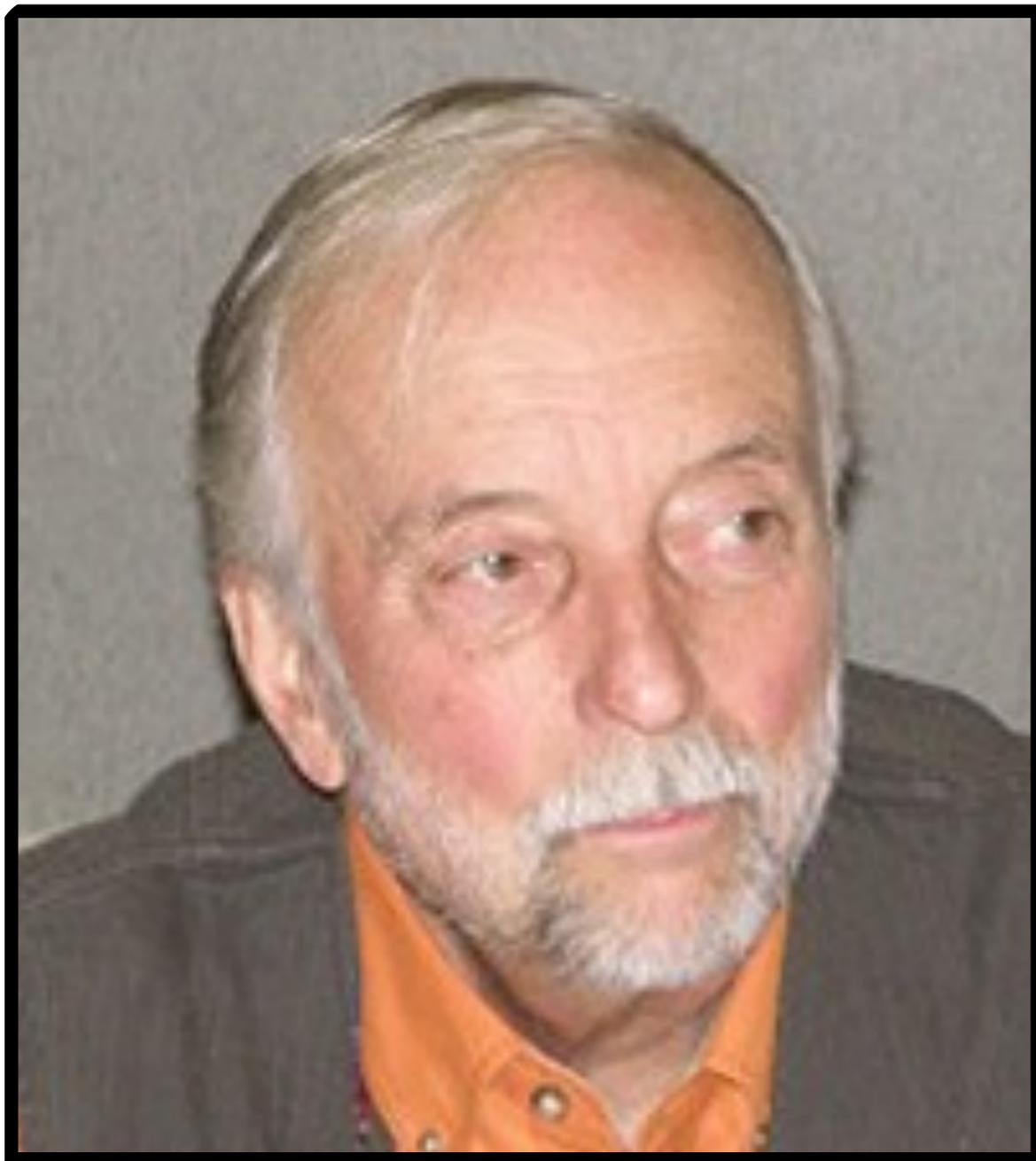


Experiential Source Hypothesis



David J. Hufford
and Sleep Paralysis

Experiential Source Hypothesis



“The primary theoretical statement of the approach might be roughly summed up as follows: some significant portion of traditional supernatural belief is associated with accurate observations interpreted rationally. This does not suggest that all such belief has this association. Nor is this association taken as proof that the beliefs are true.”

(Hufford 1982:xviii).

Experiential Source Hypothesis



“A major advantage of the experience-centered approach for carrying out this task is that it does not require presuppositions about the ultimate nature of the events investigated, although it can provide some information relevant to investigations of that nature”

(Hufford, 1982:256).

Michael Winkelman - Magic and Psi

Michael Winkelman's 1982 paper 'Magic: A Theoretical Reassessment' challenged dominant anthropological theories of magic as purely social and psychological phenomena by putting forward the suggestion that systems of magic, shamanism, witchcraft, divination and healing might actually be employing psi for their efficacy. Winkelman notes several key correspondences between traditional forms of magic and the research findings of parapsychology, including the central significance of:

- * Altered states of consciousness
 - * Visualisation techniques
 - * Positive expectation
 - * Belief



Paul Stoller



“Suddenly I had the strong impression that something had entered the house. I felt its presence and I was frightened. Set to abandon the house to whatever hovered in the darkness, I started to roll off my mat. But my lower body did not budge [...] My heart raced. I couldn't flee. What could I do to save myself? Like a sorko benya, I began to recite the genji how, for Adamu Jenitongo had told me that if I ever felt danger I should recite this incantation until I had conquered my fear [...] I began to feel a slight tingling in my hips [...] The presence had left the room...”

Bruce Grindal

“As I watched them I became intensely aware of their back-and-forth motion. I began to see the goka and the corpse tied together in the undulating rhythms of the singing, the beating of the iron hoes, and the movement of feet and bodies. Then I saw the corpse jolt and occasionally pulsate, in a counterpoint to the motions of the goka. At first I thought that my mind was playing tricks with my eyes, so I cannot say when the experience first occurred; but it began with moments of anticipation and terror, as though I knew something unthinkable was about to happen. The anticipation left me breathless, gasping for air. In the pit of my stomach I felt a jolting and tightening sensation, which corresponded to moments of heightened visual awareness. What I saw in those moments was outside the realm of normal perception. From both the corpse and goka came flashes of light so fleeting that I cannot say exactly where they originated. The hand of the goka would beat down the iron hoe, the spit would fly from his mouth, and suddenly the flashes of light flew like sparks from a fire. Then I felt my body become rigid. My jaws tightened and at the base of my skull I felt a jolt as though my head had been snapped off my spinal column. A terrible and beautiful sight burst upon me. Stretching from the amazingly delicate fingers and mouths of the goka, strands of fibrous light played upon the head, fingers, and toes of the dead man. The corpse, shaken by spasms, then rose to its feet, spinning and dancing in a frenzy. As I watched, convulsions in the pit of my stomach tied not only my eyes but also my whole being into this vortex of power. It seemed that the very floor and walls of the compound had come to life, radiating light and power, drawing the dancers in one direction and then another. Then a most wonderful thing happened. The talking drums on the roof of the dead man’s house began to glow with a light so strong that it drew the dancers to the rooftop. The corpse picked up the drumsticks and began to play.” (Grindal 1983: 68)

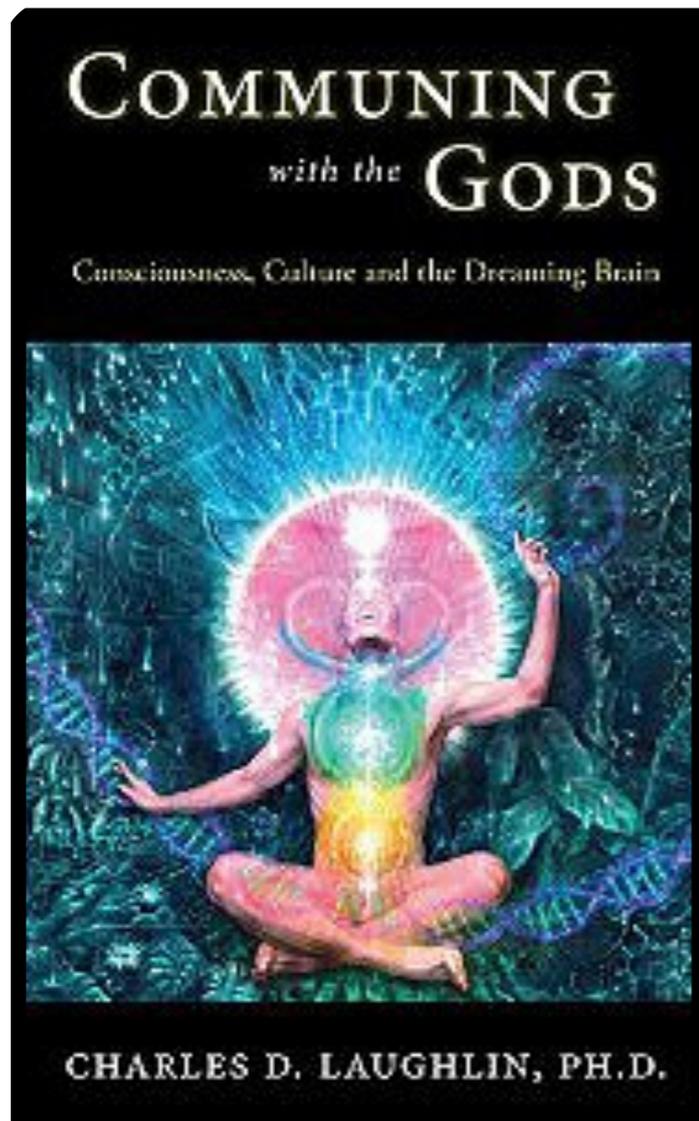


Patric V. Giesler

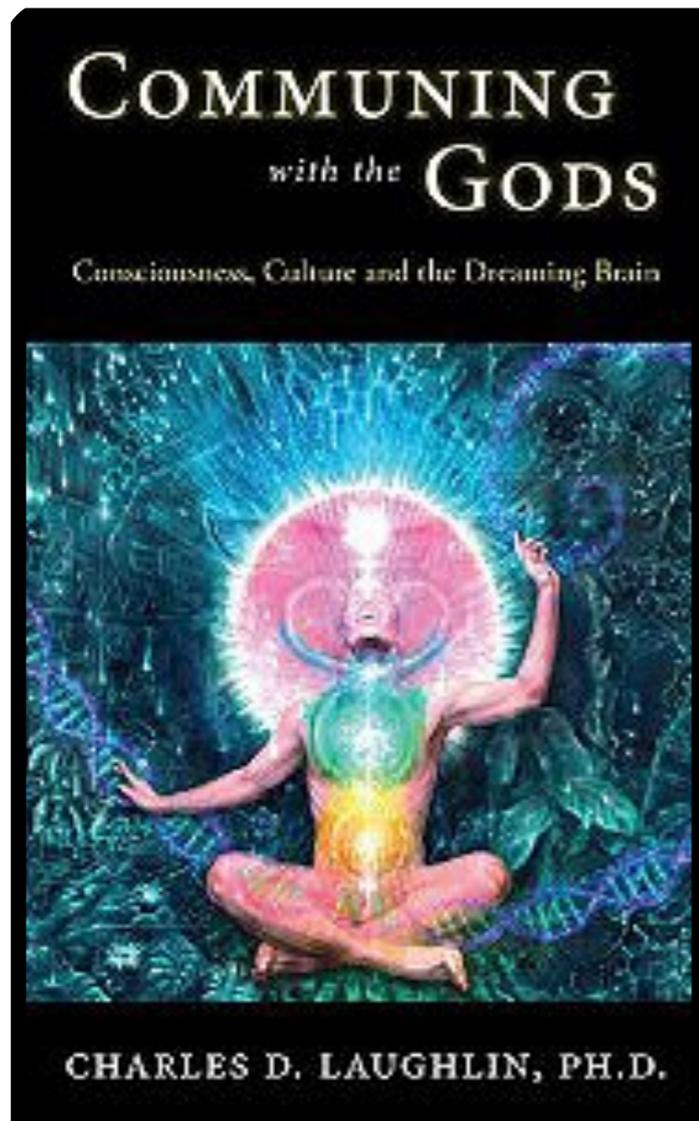


“...one of the purposes of anthropology is to explain the ontology, development, and function of the beliefs, practices, and claims of magico-religious experiences...it should assume that psi could exist and then proceed etically on that assumption”
(Giesler 1984:302-303)

Charles D. Laughlin



Charles D. Laughlin



‘a movement in science toward seeing the significance of experiences had in life, that somehow go beyond the boundaries of ordinary ego-consciousness, as data.’

Charles D. Laughlin



‘Transpersonal anthropology is simply the cross-cultural study of the psychological and sociocultural significance of transpersonal experiences..’

(Laughlin, 2012: 71)

State Specific Science



Charles T. Tart

“Perhaps the most important and creative idea I’ve had in my half-century career as a psychologist has been the establishment of state-specific sciences. The basic idea is to greatly expand our ability to gain knowledge by practicing the essence of science in a variety of states of consciousness, instead of just one, and to be able to study and eventually use the unusual experiences of altered states more clearly.”

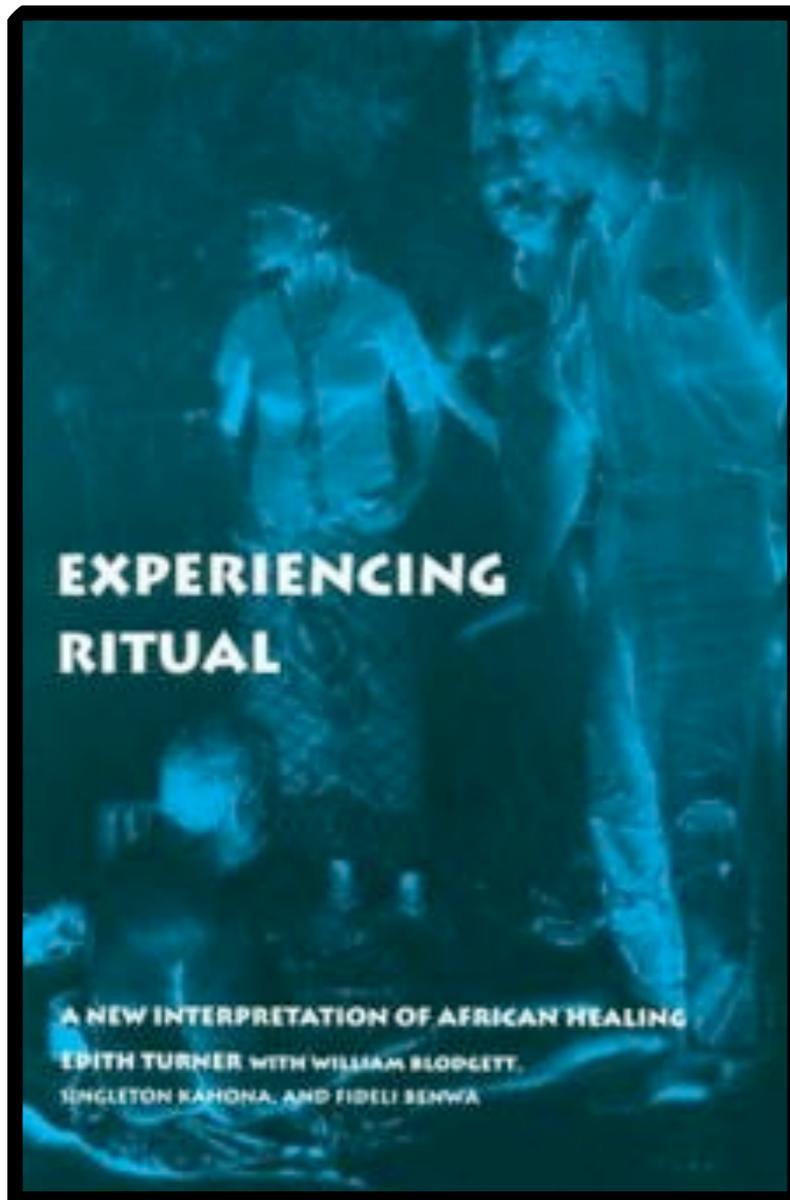
State Specific Science



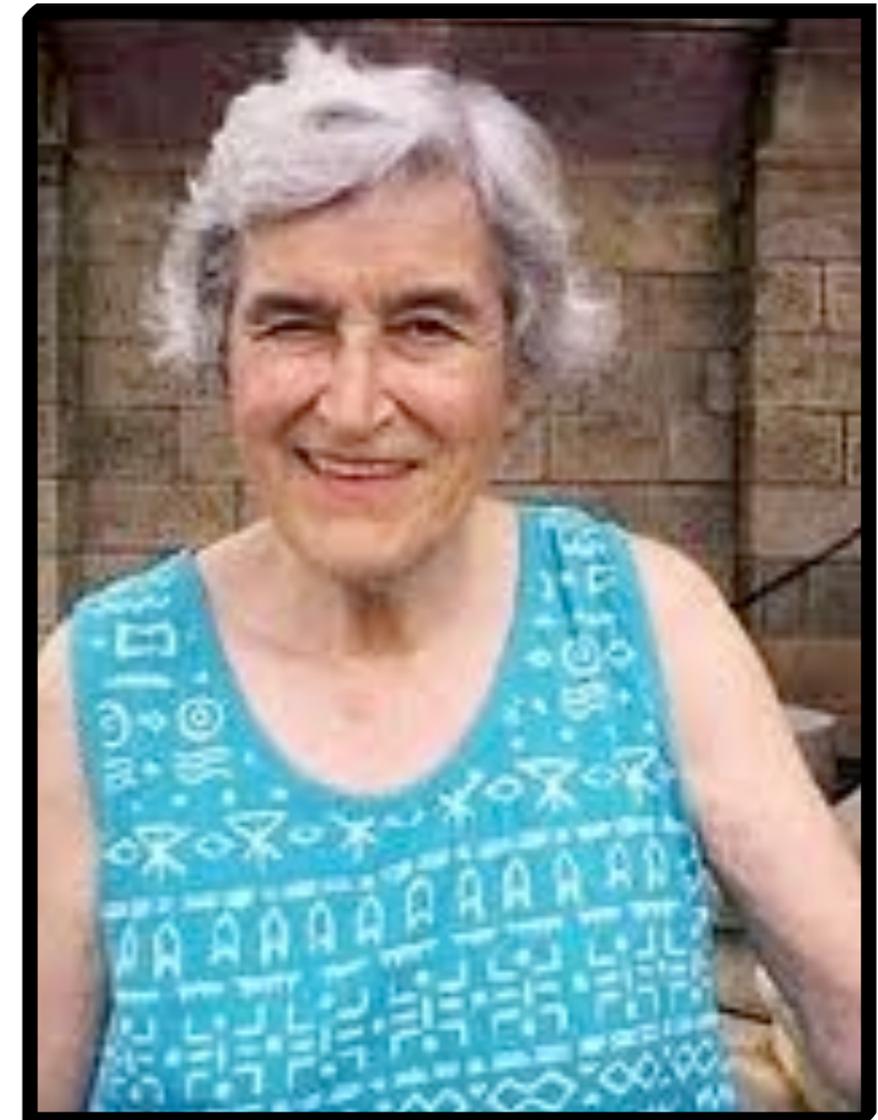
‘One must be willing steep oneself in the symbolism, to live it to the full’ and in so doing one may have the opportunity to directly experience the kind of powerful adventure that enlivens the natives’ view of themselves and their cosmos’

(Laughlin, 2012:96)

Edith Turner

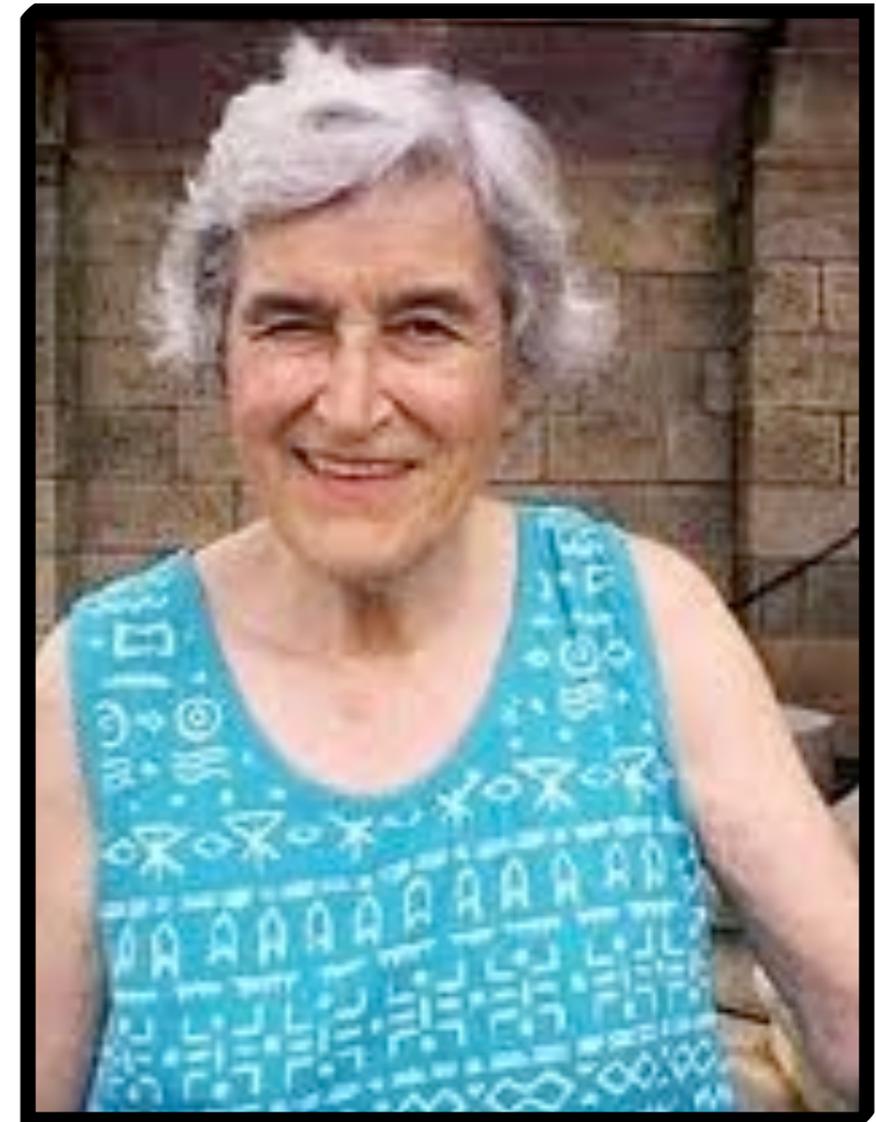


We must “learn
to see as the
Natives see”
(1993:11)



Ihamba Ritual

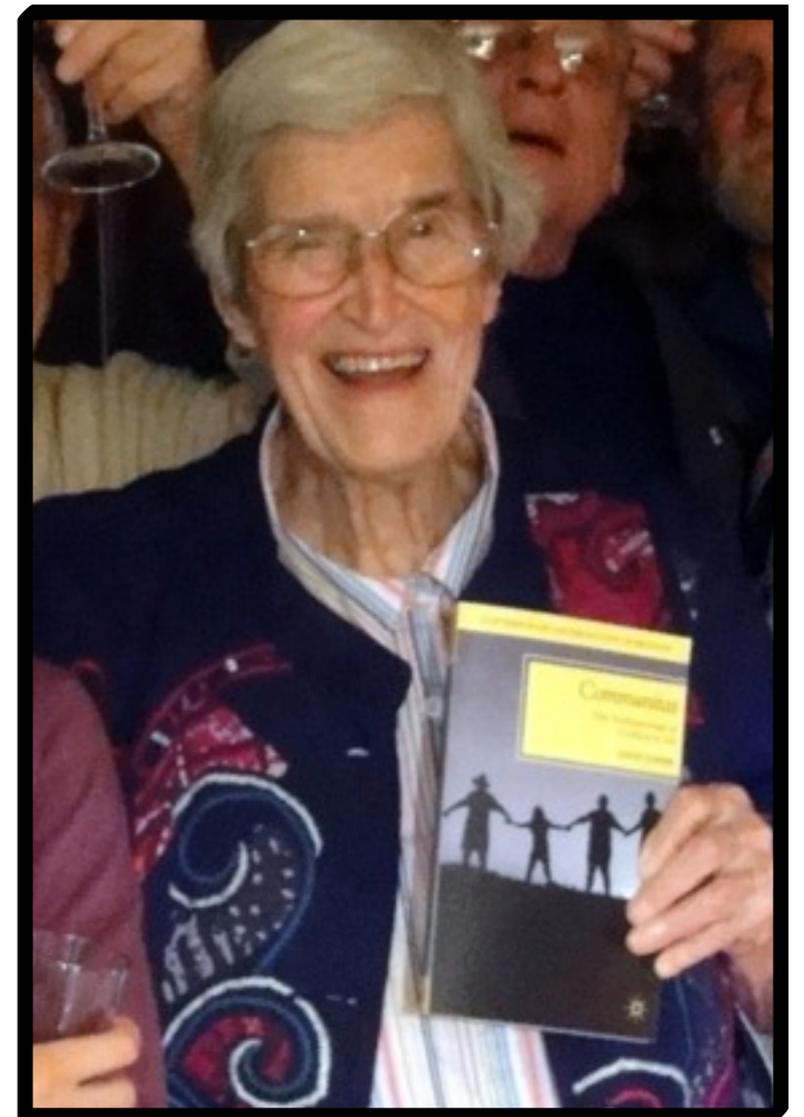
"And just then, through my tears, the central figure swayed deeply: all leaned forward, this was indeed going to be it. I realised along with them that the barriers were breaking -- just as I let go in tears. Something that wanted to be born was now going to be born. Then a certain palpable social integument broke and something calved along with me. I felt the spiritual motion, a tangible feeling of breakthrough going through the whole group. Then Meru fell -- the spirit event first and the action afterward... Quite an interval of struggle elapsed while I clapped like one possessed, crouching beside Bill amid a lot of urgent talk, while Singleton pressed Meru's back, guiding and leading out the tooth -- Meru's face in a grin of tranced passion, her back quivering rapidly. 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 realisation 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 you could see Singleton's hands working and scrabbling on the back- and then the thing was there no more. Singleton had it in his pouch, pressing it in with his other hand as well. The receiving can was ready; he transferred whatever it was into the can and capped the castor oil leaf and bark lid over it. It was done." (Turner 1998: 149)



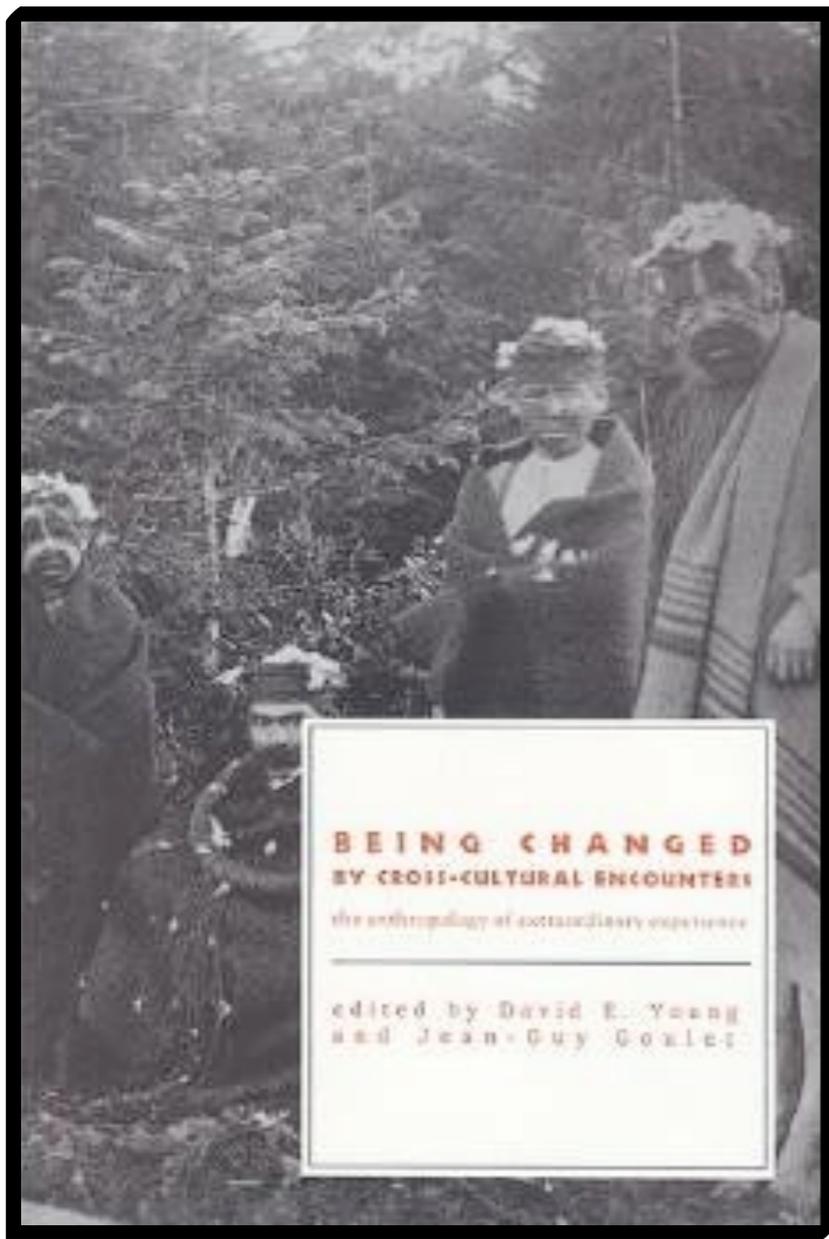
Edith Turner

“[...] endorse the experiences of spirits as veracious aspects of the life-world of the peoples with whom we work; that we faithfully attend to our own experiences in order to judge their veracity; that we are not reducing the phenomena of spirits or other extraordinary beings to something more abstract and distant in meaning; and that we accept the fact that spirits are ontologically real for those whom we study.”

(Turner, 2010, p.224).



Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters



“(1) provide personal accounts by anthropologists who have taken their informants’ extraordinary experiences seriously or who have had extraordinary experiences themselves, (2) develop the beginnings of a theoretical framework which will help facilitate an understanding of such experiences, and (3) explore the issue of how such experiences can be conveyed and explained to a ‘scientifically-oriented’ audience in such a way that they are not automatically dismissed without a fair hearing.”

Zeljko Jokic

“I treat my own experiences not only as subjective, isolated events of my own intentionality of consciousness but as an intersubjective dialogic product arising within the interpersonal field of social relations. Shamanism for me is a point of intersubjective entry into the Yanomami lifeworld, and the resulting experiences are the window that provides my own subjective insights into that world” (Jokic, 2008, 36)



First-Person Parapsychology



“I am asking for the reclamation of the anomalous experience itself from the arm’s length stylisation of it as a dysfunctional dimension of being human. I am not saying that the inclusion of first-person science is essential in all domains of our research, but it may certainly be advantageous in some areas.”

First-Person Parapsychology



“...it can help us transcend the intellectual gulfs of ethnocentrism, pragmacentrism, and the fear of the implications arising if our theories are actually right...Getting inside our subject matter may also be an ethical imperative, and...may have a positive transformative and cathartic effects upon us as researchers...”

Fiona Bowie

Cognitive Empathetic Engagement



“[...] the observer [...] approaches the people or topic studied in an open-minded and curious manner, without presuppositions, prepared to entertain the world view and rationale presented and to experience, as far as possible and practical, a different way of thinking and interpreting events” (Bowie, 2010:5).

Fiona Bowie

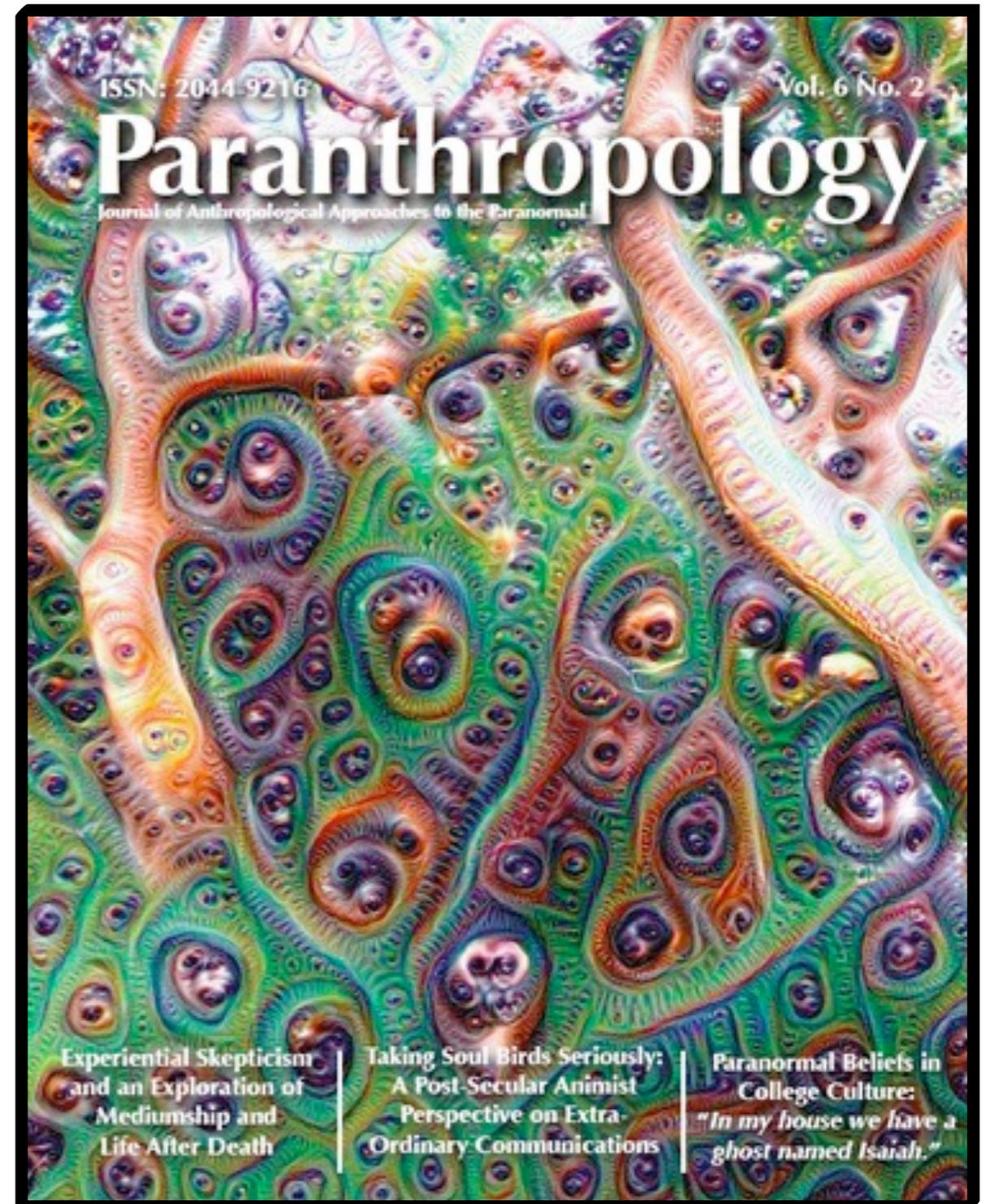
Cognitive Empathetic Engagement



“The methodology I am proposing seeks to do justice to the meaning and content of people’s beliefs and practices, without bracketing out certain areas that may be uncomfortable, as this can lead us to ignore areas of central importance to people’s lives” (Bowie, 2012:105).

Paranthropology

- Name derived from a paper given at Joseph Long's conference in the 1970s.
- Linguist Roger Wescott.
- Journal established in 2010.
- Specifically exploring the paranormal anthropologically.



Fabian Graham

What differentiates Paranthropology from the anthropology of religion?

“...paranthropology [defines] itself in relation to the phenomena themselves, and not to the belief systems, scientific or religious, that have evolved to support the phenomena”

(Graham, 2011:21).



‘Ontological Flooding’

- An inversion of the traditional bracketing approach in the study of religion/supernatural belief/the paranormal.
- Instead of demarcating certain things as unsuitable for scholarly investigation (e.g. spirits, psi phenomena, etc.), we must embrace an open-minded, open-ended perspective. Don't bracket anything out.
- Entertain multiple possibilities and see where it leads.

What is the point?

“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.”

(Howard, 2013).

Moving Forward



Questions

- What do you stand to achieve through taking an experiential approach to the anthropology of religion?
- What can it add to our investigations?
- Is it the responsibility of anthropologists of religion to investigate the *reality* of the objects of supernatural beliefs?
- What are the limitations of bracketing as a methodological tool?
- Can anthropology learn anything from disciplines like parapsychology?

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