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Introduction

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In his introductory text *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, Brian Morris laments a "seemingly sharp and unnecessary line of demarcation" between folk and historical religions (Morris 1987:3). By historical religions he means doctrines that have at one time or another been associated with states and that, like states, have recorded histories—what one might call "high" religions. While acknowledging that literacy and state systems have important implications for religion, Morris notes a bias in comparative studies: only high religions "are treated as conceptual entities" while

> the religion of tribal cultures is dismembered and treated piecemeal. [T]he general tendency has been to concentrate on one aspect of the ideological system. Symbolism, spirit possession, myth, and witchcraft, for example, are often treated as an autonomous set of beliefs and activities, almost independent of other aspects of the culture, and theoretical perspectives are directed specifically to one facet of religious life. (Morris 1987:3)

In this volume we argue for a more equitable approach to high and folk religions, one that relies on an appreciation of cultural as well as historical contexts. We see the gods of high religions and the spirits of folklore as ends of a continuum, the entirety of which has an important presence in every religious system. All religious phenomena—those institutionalized by states and those gossiped about by folk—are only

superficially understood when isolated from other aspects of culture, or when shorn of their historical dimension.

We address the theoretical disjunction that Morris identifies in several ways. First, like our intellectual ancestors—such Enlightenment thinkers as Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer—we seek, in chapter 1, to develop cross-culturally valid generalizations about the place of gods and spirits in systems of religion. These thinkers incorporated animism, totemism, belief in magic, polytheism, monotheism, and even science into a unified theoretical framework, albeit one now discredited because of its ethnocentric assumptions. Intellectualist and progressivist in orientation, they saw historical religions evolving from folk beliefs originating in the (mis)application of rationality to certain types of experience, such as dreams and death. Like nineteenth-century English missionaries who found "savages" in the slums and hovels of London (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:265–296), evolutionary theorists of religion were surrounded by "superstitions" in their own land. They nonetheless anticipated that as people became more "civilized"—as they were exposed to the rigors of science—religion and spirits would fade away.

They were wrong, of course. As the ethnographic accounts in this volume bear witness, and as any observer of postmodern cosmopolitan society can attest, mystical folk beliefs have not only survived but have flourished alongside high religions and science. Rather than vanish, spirits have been assigned different roles in contemporary societies. Our aim in this volume is to examine the changing roles that gods and spirits have played in various cultures, relating them on the one hand to specific historical and cultural contexts, and on the other to cultural and psychological universals.

Unfortunately, the shortcomings of the early evolutionists' attempts at generalization have come to taint the validity of any comparative project in the anthropology of religion. The result is a mythic division in our intellectual genealogy reminiscent of the disjunction Lévi-Strauss (1963) assigns to totemic models of history: anthropology's lineage tends to be divided between a time of ancestors, when larger-than-life scholars held bold, encompassing views, and a present in which such pretensions are inherently suspect. Yet as the extent and quality of our data increase, anthropologists are in fact better placed to make comparisons. We therefore aspire in chapter 1 to transcend particularistic ethnographic accounts, informative as they are, and to seek again a comparative, universalist vision of religious experience.

Second, we endeavor to bring spirits back to their rightful place in theories of religion, beside the gods with whom they coexist. A corollary to Morris' observations—that state religions are treated as conceptual entities, and folk religions as collages of unrelated parts—is that discussion of spirits in the theoretical literature on religion has been marginalized. Although a number of outstanding ethnographic studies have focused on spirit-centered phenomena, such as spirit possession, the implications of these works have been more or less excluded

from texts on comparative religion, whether anthropological, sociological, or philosophical in orientation. This exclusion may reflect, in large measure, the overwhelming influence of sociological theorists like Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, who focused more on gods than on spirits, and on the ways gods function in industrialized society. These theorists exiled spirits to the margins of human experience, rendering them more the results of psychological aberrations than culturally understandable constructs. But spirits as well as gods perform vital social, cultural, and psychological tasks for people occupying an uncertain world. The theoretical challenge, as we define it, is to determine what kinds of work each does when historical circumstances require, and the ways the work of gods and spirits articulate with one another in religious systems.

Taking shifting senses of self and the world that selves inhabit as our point of departure, we are committed in the ethnographic chapters to an analysis of culture at the intersection between psychological, social, and historical processes. We seek to overcome conceptual oppositions that have limited earlier anthropological thought about religion. Although the various chapters perform this task differently, we believe these differences represent the variety of theoretical approaches necessary to a cross-cultural understanding of contemporary religious practices, practices that controvert any set way of thinking about religion.

Some chapters address resistances and subversions (Mageo, chapter 2; Akin, chapter 7); others address silences and uncertainties (Howard, chapter 6; Feinberg, chapter 5) or cross-currents of sentiment and obligation (Gordon, chapter 3; Hezel and Dobbin, chapter 9); and still others consider the discursive and practical contradictions that spirits elicit from the living (Besnier, chapter 4; Whitehouse, chapter 8; Hollan, chapter 10). Through these diverse approaches, as well as various foci germane to spirits in culture (rites of reversal, dreams, illness beliefs, curing practices, and considerations of gender and cultural innovation), we seek to cast light on the relation of individual experience to cultural production.

Third, we consider spirits from the perspectives of colonialism and dawning modernity. Western colonists often assumed Christianity would simply displace its predecessors, monotheism being a logical development beyond the polytheistic religions of the colonized. Yet missionaries frequently oscillated between enthusiasm about their successes at conversion and despair at how quickly Christianity was reinvented, turned to local ends, and made to live beside older "superstitions." Local peoples blended Christianity with older beliefs and values and with the spiritual beings that represented them.

Christianity brought with it notions of the person and the state: the person as an autonomous subject with abstract, transportable, and putatively universal ethics, and the state as an overarching political unit, to which Christianity lent its imprimatur. Although Christianity acquired a central place in the culture and lives of Pacific islanders, in the context of missionization spirits came to represent what was local and "traditional" amid the often overwhelming encroachment of foreign ideas, including proselytizing, totalizing religions. Thus,

throughout the Pacific spirit possession is named after the culture: in Samoa, possession and related events are "Samoan sickness"; in Tonga they are "Tongan sickness"; in Fiji, "Fijian sickness"; and so forth. Ailments that have no spirit associations are merely generic, subject to remedies of generic modernity; they do not speak of the enduring verities of local culture.

We have historicized spirit possession, conceiving it as a system of communication that responds to changing local needs and restraints. Whereas other studies have portrayed Christianity in opposition to possession beliefs and practices, the essays in this volume document ways in which contextually rich, local forms of missionization have led to the development of new types of spirit possession. The ethnographies demonstrate that spirit possession is intimately tied to relations of power, sometimes lending legitimacy to established authority, at other times presenting a means for resisting it.

Although spirits came to symbolize much of what was unique to cultural identity, they embodied their respective cultural traditions in imagined and transfigured forms. As Thomas (1992) has shown, parts of cultures often became metonyms for cultural continuity; in the process, specific segments of reconfigured historical experience came to stand for "tradition." We suggest that spirits—pagan and pre-Christian, irredeemable and recalcitrant—represent such emblems of cultural identity. For this reason, the cultural creativity associated with spirits is key to understanding contemporary feelings about, and definitions of, cultural identity.

In the cultures investigated in this volume, spirits became a crystal ball for the historical imagination: people not only reimagined themselves and their traditions within the ever-shifting contours of spirit discourse, but they used spirit discourse to think about the foreign and to dispute or integrate it selectively (see particularly Mageo, chapter 2; Besnier, chapter 4; Akin, chapter 7; and Whitehouse, chapter 8). In these imaginings, "natives" were not reaffirming a new version of the enlightenment distinction between prerational folk religion and more rational high religions. Quite the contrary: in the cultures we investigate, spirit discourses can be seen as commentaries on how change has been culturally accommodated. The literature on cultural reinvention often seems to imply that cultural borrowing is a naive process; many of the essays in this volume indicate that, on the contrary, cultural borrowing and subsequent cultural reinventions are often highly self-conscious and reflective. All cultures reimagine their identities and histories (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983); where spirits survive, they are an important medium for this reimagining process. The process is, moreover, a means by which people effect historical readjustments of cultural values. In bringing fresh scholarly attention to spirits, we hope to shed light on these cultural-historical processes.

Geographic Scope: Limitations and Advantages

The fact that the case studies in this volume are limited to the Pacific basin (see

map) has certain advantages to offset the obvious disadvantage of limited geographical scope. To gain satisfactory worldwide coverage would require a series of volumes and would constitute a long-term, much more extensive project. A comprehensive, worldwide comparison would further be confounded by introducing massive differences in ecological and historical variables, potentially obscuring important commonalities. The Pacific basin offers, in contrast, sufficient similarities in ecology (islands) and history (European colonization, Christian proselytization, modernization) to allow a sharper focus on social and cultural factors. Differences between islands in ecology and history (volcanic islands versus atolls, missionization by various Christian denominations, degrees of urbanization, etc.) enable us to take advantage of the laboratory-like conditions, to which numerous scholars allude, that Pacific islands present. We therefore believe that the transformational processes illuminated in the ethnographic chapters, when refracted against the theoretical propositions articulated in chapter 1 and Lambek's concluding reflections, provide a template for developing a more comprehensive framework for understanding spirit phenomena as an important facet of religious experience.

Overview

Chapter 1 presents a theoretical framework that rests on a distinction between godlike and spiritlike attributes, with gods representing the moral order while spirits are encountered at its periphery. Our concern is less with defining gods and spirits as distinct conceptual entities than in setting out dimensions of a continuum along which notions of such beings, and spirits in particular, move. Levy, Mageo, and Howard argue that gods are associated with formal structures of society, whereas spirits are more personally experiential. When historical change radically alters a society's formal structures, traditional gods may disappear or take on spiritlike attributes, while spirits linger and reflect the changing qualities of personal experience. Hence an analysis of spirit-related beliefs, historically contextualized, can be revealing of moral and psychological change.

In the first ethnographic chapter, Jeannette Marie Mageo explores the ways in which Samoan spirits have changed from precontact times to the present, using cultural history to reflect on the concept of hegemony. In old Samoa, godlike beings embodied the salient values of social order, associated with a hegemonic discourse of respect and hierarchy; spiritlike beings represented a seemingly counter-hegemonic discourse that expressed resistance to these values. This discourse was expressed in entertainment routines, presided over by spirits. These routines, however, patterned refractory behavior in a manner that contributed to, rather than undermined, social stability and thus probably subverted resistance to cultural hegemony.

The most important of these spirit-affiliated entertainments was a night dance called *pōula*. Because of its obscene character and the leading role taken by young women, the *pōula* was banned by Christian missionaries. Through an

in-depth analysis of the *pōula*, Mageo demonstrates that, rather than merely cease, the *pōula* splintered into parts. One part developed into a form of spirit possession resembling pre-Christian forms of spirit contact described in the early literature, but with telling differences. In pre-Christian Samoa, possession was intentionally entered into by mediums for the purpose of obtaining advice from ancestors and tutelary spirits and was mediated by either males or females; the new form of possession was involuntary and was experienced mainly by young women. In this novel form, young women's resistance to social morality could be played out—and subverted—in the guise of victimization by spirits. The new form of possession also became a medium for thinking about and mediating culture change. New theatrical and dance forms also descended from the splintering of the *pōula*. While the new dance form came to emblemize a Christianized version of tradition, the new theatrical forms, like possession, were identified with spirits and became mediums for mediating social change.

Tamar Gordon offers a cultural analysis of Tongan spirit possession, aiming to illuminate its place in the social body as an experiential bridge to tradition. As an overt contravention of dominant values and practices, spirit possession in Tonga is a radically marginalized event, one that constructs a bracket of "otherness" around individuals. Following Bourdieu, Gordon argues that practices like possession, which apparently fall outside the social ecology of control, belong to the same "habitus": dispositions that orient people's perceptions and practices in more or less patterned ways without strictly determining them. She sees the outcomes of particular practices like possession as a product of the relationship between habitus and contexts within which individuals exercise agency. The strategies employed by possessed Tongans, embedded and legitimated within the logical structures of possession, call attention to, and in some instances transform, the conditions that precipitated their episodes. By instigating a hegemonic discourse encompassing social, emotional, and historical contradictions, spirit possession in Tonga authorizes public dialogue about problematic structural relationships including social identities, divergent ideologies, gender, emotion and personhood.

In his chapter on Nukulaelae, an atoll in Tuvalu, Niko Besnier investigates ambiguities constitutive of spirit discourse. Since spirits do not readily reveal themselves, much of what is known about them on the atoll is from narratives of encounters that take place in foreign lands. While the spirit world is underdetermined in Nukulaelae experience, it is overdetermined in Nukulaelae discourse—spirits play a central role in everyday talk, in cultural models, in many social processes, and most generally, in the negotiation of truth. Besnier demonstrates that Nukulaelae discourse about spirits is heteroglossic, consisting of a multiplicity of competing and sometimes mutually incompatible voices, and he argues that coherence-seeking cultural explanations are not well equipped to deal with conflictual meanings in a people's accounts and actions. Rather than seeking a resolution to contradictions presented by talk about spirits, Besnier argues, one

should seek an understanding of the contradictions themselves, and of how these contradictions reflect other aspects of society and culture.

Richard Feinberg's chapter begins with a discussion of spirit types distinguished and defined by the people of Anuta. These range from the generally spiritlike to the very godlike ghosts of deceased chiefs, and a variety of beings occupying intermediate positions. Yet, with the exception of the Christian God, all Anutan spiritual beings combine to some degree both spiritlike and godlike features. Anutan accounts of possession and spirit mediumship point to permeable boundaries between humans and spirits as well as self and other, and to an associative model of the person. Feinberg explores continuities and changes following the Anutans' conversion to Christianity: in discourse about spiritual beings, in the moral role assigned to spiritual beings, in the maintenance of social order and in newly invented numinals who combine elements of pre-Christian spirits and Christianity. He also explores the relativism that permeates Anutans' understanding of the spiritual realm, which helps explain their willingness to accept Christianity while maintaining a belief in the existence of pre-Christian entities.

The relationship between discourse and belief is the focus of Alan Howard's chapter concerning the island of Rotuma. He begins with the observation that talk about spirits has significantly diminished over the thirty years in which he has conducted research on the island, raising some interesting questions: What conditions have led to the change in discourse? What does the change imply about Rotuman beliefs? Are Rotuman spirits headed for cultural oblivion? Howard describes historical changes since his initial visit and suggests that they resulted in a disenchantment of the Rotuman worldview. Electrification, motor vehicles, formal education and exposure to cosmopolitan influences all may have contributed to a decline in the cultural salience of spirits. He then addresses the question of whether diminished talk about spirits signifies a shift from belief to disbelief, reflecting on the multiple dimensions of belief and the difficulty of assessing belief from the content of talk alone. At issue are the ways in which worldviews are constructed, how knowledge systems function in various cultural contexts, and the interrelationships between beliefs, emotions, thinking and social action. Howard assesses a number of possibilities that might account for diminished talk about spirits and what they suggest about the relationship between belief, discourse, and other forms of cultural representation.

David Akin's chapter focuses on Kwaio (Solomon Islands) beliefs about *buru*, foreign spirits who either are purchased abroad for their special powers or have emigrated to Kwaio on their own. *Buru* are contrasted with ancestral spirits who are at the core of Kwaio communities. For Kwaio, ancestral spirits personify a sense of place and associated virtues of stability, continuity, and permanence, all crucial to community strength and identity. *Buru*, in contrast, are foreign, roving and asocial, and thus lack the very qualities most valued in, and exemplified by, ancestral spirits. Correspondingly, Kwaio beliefs about *buru* are

unsystematic, inconsistent and hazy compared to beliefs about ancestors. Akin argues that Kwaio beliefs about *buru* reveal a fundamental cultural relativism because imported spirits that wreak havoc in Kwaio are conceived as benevolent in their places of origin. More importantly, *buru* are a metaphor for dangerous outside ways, and the tragic results of their acquisition warn against the careless importation of foreign things. According to Akin this reflects a central theme permeating modern Kwaio religious, educational and political affairs—that the most serious threat to Kwaio culture comes not from foreign incursions, but from the adoption of alien ways by the Kwaio people themselves.

Writing about another Melanesian society, Harvey Whitehouse explores the ways spirits are experienced in Dadul, a village in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Since the early 1970s, almost everybody in Dadul has been a member of the Pomio Kivung, a large, centralized religious movement. Ideas about spirits in Dadul are profoundly affected by Pomio Kivung doctrine, which focuses extensively on relations with ancestors. The way these relations are conceptualized is steeped in Christian thinking, resulting from a long history of missionization in the region. The central thesis of this chapter is that in Dadul one can distinguish three basic types of spirits and spirit experience, each of which has a distinct set of psychological and political ramifications. First, Whitehouse examines experiences with spirits known as *sega*. Nowadays perceived as amoral spiritual agencies with no direct bearing on religious thought, *sega* are vaguely associated with forgotten initiation rituals, dances, and magic—cultural practices that were largely eliminated in the early phases of missionization. He shows that the cognitive experience of *sega* is impoverished, not merely by the loss of indigenous cosmology, but because the metaphors involved in ritualized interactions with *sega* lack the poignant and revelatory character of contemporary religious ritual in Dadul. Second, Whitehouse examines the experience of spirits (primarily ancestors) in the context of verbalized doctrine and routinized ritual in the Pomio Kivung. This experience is dominated by an elaborate, coherent, and logically integrated body of doctrine. In this context, ideas about spirits are codified in language, primarily the repetitive sermons of local orators. Third, Whitehouse describes the experience of spirits in a temporary splinter group that broke away from the mainstream Pomio Kivung movement in 1988. Splinter-group activities were concerned with the cultivation of sensually and emotionally arousing experiences of ancestors through collective rituals, some of which were markedly traumatic. Whitehouse argues that the experience of spirits is related to styles of codification, cultural transmission, and political association, and cannot therefore be reduced to a set of statements about local "beliefs."

The chapter jointly authored by Francis Hezel and Jay Dobbin focuses on the changed nature of spirit possession in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia. Following Mageo's analysis of Samoan possession, Hezel and Dobbin argue that while spirit possession occurring today in Chuuk is similar in form to possession described in the early literature, it shows some significant differences. As in

Samoa, possession incidents in Chuuk described in the early literature were intentional, aimed at obtaining important information from ancestors, and mediated by males or females; those recorded today are involuntary, occur largely at times of family stress, and involve mostly women as hosts. Chuukese today attribute many kinds of misfortune to the influence of spirits, ranging from injuries that Westerners see as the product of accidents to suicide attempts. People frequently speak of seeing ghosts and occasionally of being "bitten" by ghosts, and within the framework of Chuukese Christianity today, possession is associated with Satan and the forces of evil. Possession is considered dangerous because it represents an upheaval of the established social order. Possessed women defy the canons that govern social conduct in Chuuk: women flaunt their sexuality in the presence of male relatives; they voice publicly what ought to go unspoken; they flail, verbally and often physically, at those to whom they are expected to show respectful restraint. Hezel and Dobbin argue that in contemporary Chuuk, spirits do different kinds of work than they did previously. They make visitations in order to adjudicate family conflicts by allowing individuals to express themselves in ways that would normally be considered impolite and improper. They also provoke a temporary inversion of status relationships in Chuukese families. In contrast, God plays a more important role in the community at large, and may be called on to control spirit activities, or evoked to drive out possessing spirits.

In the final ethnographic chapter, Douglas Hollan surveys cultural and experiential aspects of spirit beliefs among the Toraja of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Toraja behavioral environment is densely populated with spiritual beings of traditional, Christian and Islamic origin. For most villagers, the question is not: Which of these spiritual beings actually exist and which do not? Rather it is Which of these beings—at any given moment—has the power to influence one's fate and fortune, and so should be acknowledged and perhaps propitiated? Hollan examines beliefs about, and experiences with, two of the most important and personally salient types of Toraja spirit beings—ancestral souls (*nene'*) and gods/spirits (*deata*). *Nene'* are clearly defined, personlike beings who are thought to take a direct interest in human affairs, while *deata* are amorphous beings whose actions and intentions are less predictable and less human-like. Hollan argues that the integration and complementarity between these two groups of spiritual beings, and the cultural and psychological work they perform, is consonant with a local social order that combines hierarchical and egalitarian characteristics, and with a broader pan-Indonesian culture that places a high value on balance in everyday life. In contrast to the declining significance of *deata*, Hollan concludes that *nene'* remain of central importance in the lives of Toraja individuals, Christian and non-Christian alike. This is in part because Church officials have accepted such beliefs as an aspect of traditional "custom" rather than as a remnant of traditional religion. But it is also because *nene'* beliefs and associated rituals continue to serve important social and psychological functions, including the maintenance of collective and personal conscience

and the gratification of desires for continued parental support and advice. Also, unlike *deata* beliefs, which are experientially validated through the execution of costly and relatively infrequent rituals, *nene'* beliefs are reinforced each time a villager dreams about a deceased relative. Thus, while Christianity has tended to undermine the personal saliency of some traditional spirit beliefs, it has accommodated itself to, if not reinforced, that of others.

In the concluding chapter, Michael Lambek brings to bear his considerable experience studying spirit and possession phenomena. Reviewing the content of the ethnographic chapters, he draws attention to a number of key issues in the comparative study of religion: the inherent ambiguity of many types of religious experiences, the permeability of religious domains, the significance of hegemony and resistance in possession and related experience, the incommensurability of religious concepts, the heteroglossic nature of spirit communication, the relationship between forms of codification and the shape of religious experience. He concludes by pointing out that religion's fundamental nature cannot be grasped by structural synchronic analysis alone, that "the qualities and force of beliefs and discourses can only be revealed in their shifting employment."

If we were to summarize succinctly the central finding of our combined exploration, it is that religious experience cannot be reduced to simple, well-defined propositions regarding belief or faith. Nor can any theory of religion prove satisfactory if it ignores spirits in favor of gods. By supplying a vehicle for expression not offered by gods, spirits provide a necessary complement; they give to humankind mechanisms for coping with darker, unorganized thoughts, feelings and sensations. In doing so, they contribute to the realization of our humanness in ways that have not been fully appreciated.

Books on religion are inevitably controversial because most people, scholars included, hold strong views on the subject. In the contemporary world opinions are more varied than ever and paradigms are increasingly difficult to pin down. We make no pretense of presenting a paradigm; the various contributors were free to follow their own predilictions and to decide what approach best illuminated their case study. In our opinion, the diversity of theoretical perspectives enriches, rather than detracts from the volume. As editors we encouraged it, within the parameters discussed above. From prepublication critiques we anticipate that the theoretical chapter and Lambek's epilogue will prove most controversial. That is as it should be, for they both aim at generalization, although from quite different points of view. If the reader comes away provoked to criticize, to question and to rethink the role of spiritual beings in society and/or personal experience, we will have achieved our goal.