

1 Gods, Spirits, and History

A Theoretical Perspective

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When one compares spirit-related phenomena, interesting similarities and variations—explainable in terms of social structure, local history, missionization, and so forth—are evident. We suggest that not only similarities and variations in the form and status of spirits, but even their latter-day attenuation or efflorescence, can be better understood by comparing the roles they play with those of gods. To facilitate analysis, we offer a set of propositions contrasting the implications of gods and spirits for social structure, personhood, personal experience and morality. Before exploring this comparative framework, however, a discussion of terminology is necessary to minimize confusion.

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

We find it useful to contrast “spirits” and “gods,” while, at the same time, postulating a continuum of culturally defined spiritual entities ranging from well-defined, socially encompassing beings at one pole, to socially marginal, fleeting presences at the other. If we were to arrange spiritual beings along this continuum, the distribution would result in a clustering toward the former pole of entities to which we ordinarily apply the label “gods,” while those we ordinarily label “spirits” would cluster toward the latter pole. This is not to say that every locally defined spiritual being can be neatly categorized as one or the other. Indeed, as several essays in this volume make clear, some beings defy categorization; on certain occasions what we take to be godlike qualities are attributed to

them, and on other occasions their attributes are unmistakably spiritlike. Even the loftiest god can take on spiritlike qualities for some people on some occasions, while the most obscure of spirits can, on occasion, be idiosyncratically worshiped as a god. In some religions special classes of gods, such as the dangerous deities of Hinduism, display characteristics otherwise associated with spirits or demons (Levy 1990).

There are also many strange beings—giants, gnomes, fairies, phoenixes and the like—that fit uneasily into such a continuum because they have qualities we associate with neither gods nor spirits. They are on the fringes of the ordinary, at the edges of an uncanny zone, but unlike other strange creatures such as the orangutan cannot be captured, caged, and made, after a fashion, banal. As a general category, ghosts also present an attributional problem. The ghosts of powerful ancestors often attain the ritual potency of high gods, while the ghosts of disvalued people may roam only the darkest, most obscure corners of the social world.

In these domains, bounded solely by the limits of imagination, varieties of local terminology would seem wide open to cultural invention. Yet it is this relative freedom from contextual constraints (say, in comparison with fishing techniques and the universal reinvention of hooks, nets, and poisons) that makes the transcultural similarities that do come to our attention—the navigability of this realm to outsiders—particularly interesting.

In common parlance, the English terms “gods” and “spirits” are normally understood to distinguish different types of spiritual beings, with the term “spiritual” implying nonmateriality. The idea that gods and spirits are nonmaterial is supported by Cartesian dualism, but it is far from universally accepted. Robert Lowie’s observation many years ago remains definitive:

By common agreement spiritual represents the opposite of material existence. The difficulty is that if we insist on the notion of completely incorporeal being there are probably no examples to be found on primitive levels. . . . Nevertheless, some of these [examples given] belong to a *different order of existence* from that of men, beasts, and rocks. They are not, indeed, immaterial, but they are certainly less grossly material than the bodies of ordinary physical objects; and it is this subtler mode of corporeal existence that may be called “spiritual” in an ethnological sense. (Lowie 1970:99-100, emphasis added)

In most, perhaps all, communities, various categories of phenomena are distinguished from common sense reality and are associated with an extraordinary realm of uncanny mind-bearing beings. These beings’ powers, logical status, and relation to space and time are different from those of humans in the ordinary social world. We assume, in contrast to the assertions of, for example, Levy-Bruhl (1931), that people everywhere distinguish the natural from the extra-natural, although the relations, boundaries, and ontological status of the two worlds may differ from place to place.

Returning to the problem of transcultural conceptualizations, the danger of ethnocentric bias in consideration of spiritual beings is by no means confined to the concept "spiritual." Anthropologists have also argued against the cross-cultural use of concepts such as "supernatural" (Hallowell 1960, Saler 1977), "witchcraft" and "sorcery" (Crick 1979, Fisiy and Geschiere 1991), and even "belief" (Needham 1972). Usually the argument attacks a particular term rather than the phenomenon it was meant to denote. Hallowell, for instance, suggested that "other-than-human" be substituted for "supernatural," while Van Baal (1985) offered the cumbersome phrase "referring to a non-empirical reality" as an alternative. Fisiy and Geschiere (1991) would replace "witchcraft" and "sorcery" with "occult powers." The concepts of "deity" and "god" have been less troublesome to anthropologists, in part, perhaps, because they are less pejorative—less pejorative because the West has continued to retain a place, however distant, for its gods.

Given that none of the neologisms for supernatural seems appropriate, we adopt the term "numinous," following Rudolph Otto (1923), as an adjective to describe places and events that generate perceptions of potentially sacred, or at least spooky, beings, and to describe a realm more or less separated from the natural or ordinary. We further suggest the term "numinal" to refer to the various kinds of beings associated with numinous places and experiences¹—the beings we have awkwardly been calling "spiritual beings." Numinous beings and human beings, however, do not generally exist in two absolute, discrete realms, but move between realms of experience: spirits enter the human world in possession; shamans enter the spirit world in trance and dream.

Within the general category of numinals we postulate a continuum anchored by ideal types in Weber's sense—that is, heuristic devices, never fully actualized empirically, but acting as points of reference and orienting guidelines against which observations can be compared. For convenience, one end of the continuum can be labeled "godlike" and the English term "god" used in reference to the corresponding ideal type; the other end can be labeled "spiritlike" and the English term "spirit" used to designate an opposing type.

To intermediate types are attributed more complex characters. They may roam free at times, perhaps at the margins of the domesticated world, but may also invade the human world in possession; they may be actively drawn into the moral order through rituals or other priestcraft in which they are temporarily bound and made use of when circumstances demand. The boundaries between spirits and gods blur when beings initially conceived of as unbound are increasingly constrained by concrete representations (such as sculptures, masks, medicine bundles), and by ritual and prayer. Indeed, spirits can be transformed into "gods" in such instances.² Likewise, gods freed from social-moral constraints, as when a priesthood crumbles, can become very spiritlike in character. These ideal types thus not only call attention to salient features of the inhabitants of numinous realms and the phenomena clustered

around them. They also provide an interpretive approach to deviations from the characteristics of those types.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GODS AND SPIRITS

We now present some propositions about the structural, psychological, experiential and moral aspects of numinous realms and their inhabitants in the hope of suggesting dimensions along which numinal beings tend to vary, of stimulating comparison, and of inviting productive disagreements.³

Structure. Gods are the foci of more elaborated social institutions than spirits. The attendants and mediators of gods, always necessary, are high-status "priests." The attendants and mediators of spirits, required only on special occasions, are people of low status, often socially suspect or ambivalently viewed.

Gods are related to and mark clear-cut divisions of space and time. They have territories, calendrical festivals, and often, fixed homes in shrines or temples. Spirits are more fluid, and are related to and mark emergent, contingent, unexpected occasions. Being more fixed in time, space and nature, gods can be bounded and conveniently contextualized. Their proper places and times can be clearly demarcated as belonging to the realm of the sacred. In contrast, spirits lack social boundedness, and are thus uncanny; they are difficult to bind and fix.

Although spirits in their free forms are dangerous to people and have the potential to enter, possess, and contaminate human beings, like the diseases with which they overlap conceptually, they can be bound through acts of power. They can be forced to enter into magic circles, shamans, material objects and masks. These bindings make it possible for humans to control spirits' power. While their power is often said to be used by those who control them for selfish and evil ends, it can also be put to community use. When spirits are successfully bound, new types of entities become possible; they can even be transformed into gods. A bound spirit, put to community use, therefore has to be distinguished from a free, or unbound, spirit.

The binding of a spirit is often done through the agency of a medium, shaman, or spirit doctor. This may be for the purpose of overcoming trouble caused by a spirit. Such control moves spirits closer to the clearly formulated and controlled arenas of cultural interpretation. Spirits may also be called upon to perform specific services for good or evil. They may drift into sharper socio-cultural focus by providing omens or other socially relevant information. Where mediumship is institutionalized, spirits may be experienced in well-defined cultural frames, since mediums' roles may be central to a social system. Thus Tikopia mediums, differentiated from priests, were prominent figures "during certain religious rites of a public and very sacred kind" (Firth 1970: 263). They also performed on occasions such as the completion of major projects, the loss of a person at sea, and during grave illness or other crises (Firth 1967, 1970).

Personhood. Gods are conceived as being more like social persons, usually idealized ones. Their appearance is often canonically standardized, and they inhabit a humanlike world of social relations with humans and other gods. They are central to the cultural order and exist in times, spaces and causal chains closer to common sense reality. Gods can be manipulated through interpersonal moral techniques such as praise, supplication and gift giving—just as high-status humans can be. Spirits are vague forces; their appearances are difficult to discriminate. They are only minimally persons, closer to the kind of person exemplified in the dreamer or madman. They exist at the margins of the human order in a dreamlike world of shifting categories, vague motivations, and amorphous relations with other beings.⁴ Spirits are either avoided or manipulated through devices of direct “magical” power. The relation between gods and spirits is representative of the relations between the center and the margins of the social order and has much to say about these relations.

We may note here that members of communities of gods making up pantheons often are thought to have humanlike familial relations and moral relations of friendship, competition and antagonism. Domains of spirits are often, perhaps usually, classified by features other than those of humanlike social relations—features having to do with appearance, power, and the ability to transform themselves into a number of forms.

Insofar as they operate in the realm of humans, gods act—usually in legendary time—in relation to heroes, seers, and saints.⁵ Spirits are, in contrast, often experienced by people without much power or status, who are locally perceived as being weak; or they may be experienced by stronger people in marginal places or states (in the forest or bush, in the twilight or dark, entering or waking from sleep), and notably more often by women. They not only trouble, but at times assist, the “weak.”

Experience. Gods and spirits have different ontological status and do different kinds of social, cognitive and psychodynamic work. Gods generally represent forces of social order but are characteristically more distant from sensual experience. Their acceptance is more likely to be grounded in doctrine or “faith.” Spirits, while they can be made use of for social order, more often represent and give form to poorly socialized psychological and social processes. They are more directly experienced; people know they exist through the sensory warrant of their own experience or from accounts by people like themselves. Beliefs based on doctrinal authority and faith have different vulnerabilities than beliefs based on personal experience; hence gods and spirits are differentially affected by historical change. Local gods ordinarily disappear long before local spirits. Since Christianity does not provide a well-defined frame for experiencing spirits, it collapses them into a Christian demonic realm, which is much vaguer than spirits’ traditional classification. So when old religions go (and with them former gods), spirits become even more unbounded, chaotic and shadowy.

Gods' distance from sensory experience, and their particularistic relation to specific communities or to segments of a community, means that they are known through the exercise of faith. In consequence, local gods, and the community-bounded forms of faith that create and sustain them, can be used to mark a particular population as a community of faith against outsiders who have different faiths. The way these commitments of faith are achieved in the course of education and ritual is an important part of socialization and social order. The social reconstruction of gods from generation to generation is therefore of a different kind than the social reconstruction of spirits.⁶ In contrast, spirits are experienced in similar forms throughout wide areas, and do not serve to create or sustain the local social distinction of a community from other communities. Belief or involvement with particular spirits may, however, differentiate social and psychological cohorts within a community.

Morality. Gods and spirits have contrapuntal relations to the moral order. Being more personlike in conception and nature, gods are central to representing, responding to and sanctioning a community's moral order through socially adequate rewards and punishment. Spirits are vague and fleeting; they are often conceived as dangerous flesh-eaters or destructively seductive incubi or succubi. They represent the contents and logics of worlds of desire, dream, and fantasy—worlds in which morality is tangential at best—existing at the periphery of the work-a-day moral world of common sense. Spirits are related, typically, to people's bodies; gods, to people's consciences and to moral personhood.

Spirits are extra-moral, or, if they represent an antiworld in which community morality is irrelevant and thus negated, they are "evil." They function in relation to social control by representing the dangers of leaving the social domain, of passing beyond its boundaries.⁷ Horrified by their encounters with "evil spirits," people retreat to the often tedious safety of the social and moral arena. Whatever it is that generates the cultural and personal presence of spirits, and whatever cognitive and expressive forces form them, they support social order in a quite different way than gods—by vividly representing the dangers of its absence.

In their free form spirits are threats to order and frequently must be purged so that order may be re-established; gods, in contrast, induce order and continually reaffirm it. Gods therefore can be used in various ways to protect against spirits. They can exorcise and control spirits, or at least aid in the struggle against them. They provide a cultural frame for dealing with spirits and make socially controllable some of the spirits' attributes.

In sum, spirits are different kinds of mental and social objects from gods. They are generated everywhere that people experience numinous phenomena at the boundaries of familiar structures in the social world. They persist until something happens to dissolve them. We will return to their dissolution after some reflections on possession.

SPIRIT POSSESSION

The existence of a cultural domain of spirits allows dissociated psychological states to be recognized as possession. Possession, in turn, is one of the experiences that makes spirits experientially real.

We use the concept "full possession" to distinguish it from visionary experiences related to possession that do not do the work of possession in the communities we know. In the latter, people may encounter a spirit close up, see it, touch it, be touched by it. These experiences are much more common than the entrance of a spirit into the body as possession,⁸ and are more likely than full possession to happen to men. Such visionary encounters are often experienced as assaults on the victim's body's surface, usually in states between waking and sleeping. Victims are unable to move. The spirit presses on their chest and makes breathing difficult; it may assault them sexually. Following a struggle, victims typically resume control of their muscles, often claiming afterward that if they had not done so they would have been destroyed. We might call this something like proto-possession; it supports doctrines and understandings of spirits and of full possession, but is not the same thing.

The free actions of spirits are frequently conceived as the ultimate cause of possession (see Gordon, Chapter 3), the spirits being the loci of power and will. But many cultures add a theory of witchcraft, whereby witches control the spirits (who sometimes possess the witch, but in cooperation with her will) and can induce them to harm and possess others. Unless they are primarily conceived as healers, possessed individuals who seek their own possession are most likely defined negatively—as dangerous, powerful persons, who parody divinity. Even successful healers are often viewed with suspicion and ambivalence.

We do not find the concept "altered state of consciousness," as used for example by Bourguignon (1973), adequate as a central idea for understanding possession. Certainly full possession seems to be associated with an "altered state of consciousness," which is necessary for shifting among internalized selves, but the concept applies to many phenomena other than possession (e.g., drug effects, out of body experiences, depersonalization). On the other hand the concept is not applicable to many forms of behavior that are generally considered closely related to possession, including signs of its potential onset such as involuntary motions and glossolalia. Furthermore, altered states of consciousness and dissolved boundaries of self are sought in many communities in meditation and quests for mystic experience, undertakings where entering into a possessed state would be considered a dangerous failure. "Altered states of consciousness" do not in themselves entail the personlike goal orientations and intentionality necessary for possession. The mobilization of such goal-directed states, which are necessarily ego-alien, seems to be a central feature of possession. Thus an "altered state of consciousness" is neither centrally defining nor distinctive.

Full possession behavior is highly skillful. It requires a mastery of role

playing and of subtle, specialized kinds of communally significant communication. It is wrong to interpret it as "pathology," incompetence or breakdown in the same sense as schizophrenic psychosis or senility. Possessed individuals operate as competent persons in the moral realm in established webs of communication. They are essentially thought of and act as though they contain and exhibit a possessing person⁹ who is radically different and discontinuous from the possessed person. Both persons are mind-bearing actors, with communicative competence, intentions, and all the characteristics of selfhood. (This kind of multiself behavior was called "dissociation" by psychiatrists at the turn of the twentieth century.) The idea of possession as a skillful communicative act implies an audience in a relatively integrated community for its full flourishing. It is a culturally crafted coping behavior that is useful because it is understood and responded to helpfully. It changes its function and eventually its form in disintegrating communities on the one hand, and complex modern ones on the other.

Full possession uses conventionalized frames—traditional communal forms that limit and provide interpretations—although it may play upon or reinvent these forms. Conventionalized frames are used to express realities that are rarely or never revealed in everyday life. The use of a mode of expression that is dramatic, bounded, extraordinary and based on a kind of role playing gives possession illuminating relations to theater and dramatic performances (see Mageo, Chapter 2; Hollan, Chapter 10). We may also note other resemblances: the need for an audience, the intelligibility of what is being expressed to that audience, and the special moral privileges of the actors while they are within their special, non-ordinary sphere, as well as the lack of any blame for what they have done on stage when they move off stage into the ordinary world.

When a body is taken over in full possession the inhabited self is transformed and the body becomes the identified place where two or more fully formed selves contend—selves with their own voices, intentions and different kinds of social skills. In such instances the socially suppressed can be expressed (as it is in different situations in other sociocultural forms such as art, women's poetry, rituals of reversal, carnival, and so on).

Nevertheless possession is not voluntary acting or pretending. It certainly must not be perceived as such by the audience, nor in all probability by the possessed person, if it is to do its psychosocial work. Although culturally formed, it is not the type of cultural act that most people can do willfully, nor the type of performance that some people can do at all. Only certain kinds of people, in special sociocultural and historical contexts, can do it, or alternatively put, allow it to happen to them. In all these respects possession is a different kind of social and psychological game than acting.

The person transformed by possession is a locus of power. This power is different from that of a witch. In the voice of her possessing spirit the possessed

person has power to reveal socially suppressed material, and is a source of gnosis—revealed knowledge immediately recognizable to everyone as being intuitively true, but coming from beyond the overtly tolerable, discussible and, often, thinkable knowledge of family or culture. Possession therefore is a means by which new, and usually unwelcome, information threatens to enter cultural systems. Spirits in general are associated with hidden meanings because they represent suppressed modes of knowing.

Reports from throughout the world (Lewis 1971, Wilson 1967, Bourguignon 1973), and data from the communities discussed in this volume indicate that women are far more likely than men to be possessed. This raises questions not only about the possible reasons for gender differences, but also about the differentiating characteristics of those men who become possessed (where possession is primarily expressed by women), and about those communities in which the gender difference does not exist or is reversed. Some suggest that women's greater susceptibility to possession is related to their lack of access to other sources of power, including traditional activities central to the worship and manipulations of gods. Spirit possession provides women with a privileged and mystified opportunity (the "vulnerable" woman, only possessed by the strong spirit and not in control of it) to make potent, spirit-backed claims and demands (e.g., Lewis 1971, Wilson 1967), and to tell some uncomfortable truths.

Two conditions are necessary for full possession to flourish: people who are psychologically disposed to dissociation, and a cultural environment that makes conventional use of possession episodes. Change in either of these conditions alters the prevalence and meaning of possession. In late nineteenth century Western society, for example, coordination between these two conditions broke down as a result of changes in cultural interpretations; personal behavior that might once have been shaped into and defined as possession came to be redefined as moral weakness, malingering, or psychological or neurological disease (e.g., "Grand Hysteria"). The identification of possessed women as witches rather than as legitimate vehicles of suppressed messages (as in seventeenth century Europe and eighteenth century America) might be thought of as an intermediate move in the delegitimization of possession.

A change in social conditions also modifies what types of cultural messages are suppressed, and this in turn may alter the form and content of possession. In pre-Christian Samoa, for example, direct commerce with spirits usually occurred in the form of mediumship undertaken by high-status priests, chiefs, and chiefs' sisters. In Christian Samoa, spirits take over the bodies of low status persons, usually girls. Missionization also generated a repression of female sexual expressiveness, which was condoned in certain pre-Christian contexts. Consequently the content of possession episodes in Christian Samoa often concerns female sexual expressiveness (Mageo, Chapter 2).

SPIRITS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Why do spirits flourish in certain spaces, times and populations and diminish or disappear in others? If it is true that spirits are particularly dependent on experience then it follows that they are much more sensitive than gods to changes in conditions that generate relevant experiences. It is not just changes in cultural doctrines that affect the presence or absence of spirits.

In various places (for example in Levy's studies in Tahiti, Nepal, and the Tuamotos [Levy 1984]), people say that spirits leave places that are brightly lighted during the night. The more experience that takes place in well-lighted settings and in the built-up areas that progressively replace nearby wilderness, the less room there is for spirits. The poorly-lighted night and the socially uncolonized spaces (bush, forest, wilderness) around communities are perfect settings for uncanny experiences (Levy 1973:151ff.). The sensations produced by these experiences are closely related to what Otto (1923) called "numinous feelings," feelings that are taken as a direct experiential warrant, a direct perception of the realm of the "holy." They seem to be generated in situations where it is difficult to make "those categorizations that help anchor us in 'commonsense' reality," where the familiar and dependable schemas of time, space, size, cause and logic hold. Situations where these schemas seem not to hold are intrinsically uncanny (Levy 1973:151ff.). Thus the transformation of numinous places into banal ones through lighting, and rebuilding—leading to the disappearance of "empty" or "alien" environments—may make a profound difference (see Howard, Chapter 6).

Modern naturalistic systems of explanation and control transform, cognitively and experientially, other phenomena that once seemed uncanny—for example the peculiar skin disease, the dream, the dissociated state. The classical evolutionists believed that "primitives" use of mystic systems of explanation had something to do with a lack of differentiation of realms in the primitive mind, a problem that was presumably overcome with progress to civilization (e.g., Tylor 1871). But even in the West (and in communities affected by it) there has been an historical shift toward naturalistic explanation—what Max Weber termed "the disenchantment of the world."¹⁰ When communities find themselves disenchanted, spirits depart. Possession changes its forms and may disappear altogether. In the normative "enlightened" modern situation, even in the rare corners where the uncanny may be encountered, its *validity* as a knowledge-yielding experience is now discounted. It becomes a fascinating illusion, or a cover story for supermarket check-out magazines. Experience, doctrine, and epistemology have all shifted. As we pass beyond the modern, all this may shift again.¹¹

Spirits, gods and possession flourish within a certain range of social and psychological conditions. Many of their classical attributes occur in conditions of relative equilibrium within fairly stable communities. In times of change, particularly in highly stressful times, insofar as they are still useful, their

characteristics and uses change. Multiple variables operate in preindustrial societies, some favoring the demise of spirits, others working to increase their salience. Processes of modernization, including higher levels of formal education, urbanization, mechanization and electrification have indeed led, as Weber said, to "driving the magic from things."

In some places (e.g., Rotuma, see Chapter 6) these processes have contributed to a noticeable decline in the social presence of spirits; at the very least there is less talk about them. In other places spirits not only remain viable, they flourish in the face of these same processes. We propose that spirit experiences ought to increase during times of social stress and disorder, and that spirits should thrive among the disenfranchised or marginalized as long as contextual, doctrinal and epistemological features that make spirits possible still hold. As for possession, it is not just the "shared repressed" generated by a particular community order that spirits talk about; they also bring into the public domain widely shared if poorly understood moral, social, personal and interpersonal problems that are generated by social change, and that threaten or overload traditional values and structures. Their voices may be cathartic and/or provide nuclei for new forms. Thus in contemporary Pacific societies new stresses seem to have given spirits new and altered life.

Spirits, however, having had an essential role in the ongoing life of traditional Pacific communities, having survived the attacks and redefinitions of Missionary Christianity, having changed their nature and flourished in conditions of anxiety-producing social change, are now beginning to disappear in some locations, due to modernization and integration into more cosmopolitan sociocultural systems.

GODS, SPIRITS, AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

We have argued that gods are clear models for social order, while spirits are vague expressions and representations of socially marginal states, although they can be put to useful social work. It may be that in centralized and hierarchically ordered groups gods have special prominence, or at least special characteristics, and that spirits may be more prominent where local autonomy and a more mobile and shifting order prevail. While this proposition receives considerable support from the ends of the spectrum (contemporary nation-states on the one hand, hunting and gathering groups on the other)—a fact made much of by the nineteenth century evolutionists—the data are more problematic, and more interesting, in "middle-range" societies such as those dealt with in this volume.

In the kinds of societies considered here, gods and spirits co-exist, though they may be given differential emphasis in different places and in different times. In early-contact Polynesia, for example, the stratified societies of Hawai'i, Tahiti and Tonga had well-defined categories of high gods who were sacrificed to, worshiped and propitiated. In these societies, the emphasis was on

the power of the major deities.¹² In Polynesian societies without hierarchy and central authority—where local autonomy was pronounced—the role of gods was less central and spirits appear to have had a greater presence.

Yet size and complexity of polity are not definitive. As Durkheim showed, social cohesion is also important. Gods thrive within well-defined moral orders, where sentiment supports the moral authority of leaders. Spirits flourish where moral authority is tenuous—where subgroup allegiance overwhelms commitment to a higher order. The contrast between Samoa and Tikopia is instructive.

Despite its well-developed political system, old Samoan society was organized around autonomous villages rather than a central authority. Even within villages orators have long manipulated skillfully and subtly the relative ranking of titles, elevating the status of some titles and denigrating others. Every Samoan family is convinced vocally or discretely (depending on context) of the importance of its ancestry and claims to position. Competition for status precluded common acceptance of established hierarchy for any length of time, a condition inimical to the public worship of a limited pantheon of high gods and favoring the proliferation of spirits. When the missionary John Williams arrived on the scene, he was told by other Polynesians that the Samoans were “godless” (1842:142; see also G. Turner 1984:17); however, he reported more beliefs about spirits in Samoa “than in any other islands” (1842:143; see also Pritchard 1866:106; Wilkes 1845 II:76-77, 131, 133).

In contrast to Samoa, Tikopia was a far smaller polity, but it enjoyed a much greater degree of cohesion. The social hierarchy was well established and accepted at the time of European intrusion, and the moral authority of chiefs was unquestioned. As described in Raymond Firth’s peerless accounts (1940, 1970), Tikopian concepts covered a wide range of spirit beings, many of whom “were the object of such specific worship that they may be appropriately termed gods” (Firth 1970:20). Firth characterized the religion of Tikopia as “polytheistic” insofar as it admitted the worship of many gods, all of them local. Only the members of the category he labeled common spirits (*atua vare*) were unbounded. Common spirits lacked “precise identification and incorporation in any coherent scheme of spirit worship,” and “responsibility for a whole range of accidental and untoward occurrences affecting human beings” was attributed to them (Firth 1970:69-70). Ghosts, or “spirits of the dead,” were regarded as leading a relatively ordered existence, and the spirits of former chiefs were ritually invoked on occasion (Firth 1970:74-75). Thus on Tikopia some spirits were regularly transformed into gods, while in Samoa they remained to a considerable degree unbounded.

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY

The coming of Christianity had dramatic effects on Pacific societies. It radically altered the cultural frameworks for numinals, selectively overthrowing or demoting the gods, replacing a rich diversity of conceptualization with an

undifferentiated residual and negative category of "devils" or "demons" (Mageo, Chapter 2; Howard, Chapter 6). Whatever godlike qualities some numinals may have had were threatened, if not eliminated, by Christian prohibitions on worshiping or propitiating them. Yet as long as they were not considered gods—as long as their godlike qualities were minimized—Christianity allowed them a place in the company of spirits. Missionaries themselves often believed with considerable anxiety in local spirits, used them to explain the fallen state of the people, preached against them and exorcised them. They placed spirits under the hegemonic definition and control of Christianity, and in so doing gave them a powerful place within colonial (and postcolonial) religious domains. This has produced parallel belief systems in many Pacific cultures that exist in dialectical relationship to one another. In some instances the resultant heterodoxy has served to subvert Western cultural dominance.

SELFHOOD, MIND, AND THE NUMINOUS

Some ethnographers have argued that traditional Pacific societies, in contrast with modern Western ones, emphasize what has been called a situation-centered, rather than person-centered, selfhood (Shore 1982; Howard 1982; Watson-Gegeo and White 1990). It must be emphasized that these terms refer to comparative differences between any two particular societies rather than absolute differences. Thus Levy (1973, 1989, 1990) found Tahitian village discourse and action relating to self to be more person-centered than Nepalese Newar discourse and action. Perhaps these different cultural emphases on qualities of self correspond to differing emphases on a continuum ranging from a monotheistic god to an undifferentiated plenitude of spirits.

Restricted pantheons, and particularly monotheism, may be related to the ideology and structural realities of more unified, person-centered selves, especially insofar as deities are sources of identification and are the moral "others" against which one measures oneself. A diffusion of deities, and even more radically an emphasis on the diffusion of subself fragments represented by spirits, may be more closely associated with situation-centered selves and, perhaps, fragmented selves. The imagery of Bateson and Mead's Bali (1942)—where creaturelike disembodied body parts freely roam the cremation grounds—is, in conjunction with their discussion of Balinese selves, provocative here.

Other interesting aspects of self and mind may have some regular relation to local numinous worlds. We can ask which variables affect the intellectual acceptance of doctrines that take uncanny experience as direct evidence for the existence of numinals, and which variables affect the generation of numinous experiences, or in the case of gods, the emotional experiences on which deeply felt (as opposed to conventional) faith might be based.

The acceptance of numinous doctrine is, in part, a matter of local epistemologies—the general ways in which experience is held to be the warrant

of true knowledge. The rejection of spirit doctrine and the radical thinning of meaning, if not quite rejection, of deities, seems related to a more general suspicion of experiences known now to be generated in the fear- and desire-driven parts of the mind. This is the internal component of the "disenchantment of the world," thought to be particularly characteristic of "modernity." One may speculate as to the conditions under which such an epistemological shift might be affecting the vicissitudes of spirits and gods in the new Pacific.

The *interpretation* of uncanny experience is one cultural variable, the prevalence of that *experience itself* is another. We have noted changes in community forms that have diminished the conditions for those experiences. But are there psychological variables that affect their likelihood? Levy (1973:151 ff; 225, n.6), noted village Tahitians' great susceptibility to frightening numinous sensations when alone in sensorially obscure places and the fact that the presence of another person, even a small child, was usually sufficient to protect against them. He speculated that a relative lack of isolation from others in childhood is instrumental in the formation of selves that were comparatively sensitive to feelings of uncanny strangeness when alone, and thus to the experience of spirits (see also Mageo 1989a:187-190). It may be that social and historical conditions that generate more person-centered selves encourage childhood experiences of separation, loneliness and individuation. Once childhood anxieties are mastered, these experiences make adult sensitivity to the uncanny less likely.

LOCAL MEANINGS AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

We have treated numinals and possession as a complex family of human phenomena affected by and formed in fields of historical, communal, contextual, and personal forces. We have not tried to propose any core, essential explanations, but have probed for features of comparative interest. Documenting local uses, meanings and constructions has been left to the ethnographic chapters that follow.

Many contemporary scholars argue for confining the treatment of these phenomena to particular communities. They often dismiss the transcultural usefulness of terms like "spirits" and "possession," finding in them various dangers: the imposition of our own biased values and conceptions; the meaning-destroying intellectual game of searching for essentialistic and reductionist explanations; and the submerging of local cultural inventions into abstract schema. Michael Lambek provides us with a useful example of someone who argues for a focus on particularistic phenomena, but at the same time, accepting as he does possession as a category of analysis, avoids making particular local situations radically incomparable with others.

In a recent review of the literature on trance and possession, Lambek (1989) argues for an approach to possession that treats it as a culture-constructing performance, rather than reductively. He observes that most of the interpretations he reviewed suffer from a largely unexamined acceptance

of the naturalist paradigm that, he writes, has dominated Western discourse. He advocates "recolonizing the terrain for culture." Possession can enter into virtually all areas of life: illness and therapy, interpersonal relations, private experience, marriage, the articulation of family boundaries and continuity between the generations, worldview, divination, social thought, morality, political process, conflict resolution, myth, fantasy, and fun. It cannot, therefore, he argues, be explained in simple terms. In fact, its very penetration into so many areas of life and the diversity of its functions and expressions suggest that students of these phenomena should turn away from causal, etiological explanations toward an examination of possession's structure, organization, reproduction, and meaning.

Possession, Lambek argues, is as social a phenomenon as marriage, and contemporary anthropologists would not think of explaining marriage institutions in terms of underlying motives or account for individual marriages in terms of physiological or psychological functions. "In many of its manifestations," he argues, "possession violates our own cultural distinctions and deeply held assumptions concerning the 'natural' difference between such pairs of opposites as self and other, seriousness and comedy, reality and illusion, and, perhaps most critically, art and life. Because possession transcends these oppositions, our models must, too." (Lambek 1989:52-3)

In an earlier work analyzing trance in Mayotte, an island in the Mozambique channel between Madagascar and Tanzania, Lambek (1981) viewed possession as "text." This led him to look for types of constraints, grammars of production and interpretation, modes of representation, and avenues of creativity. Reflecting on this approach in his review article he observed that:

Possession occurs in the context of a tradition of possession. It is formed by specific genres, rhetorical devices, images, and metaphors, as well as by a confrontation with a specific historical and social experience. Like poetry, or the art of the diarist, possession is a means of symbolically articulating experience. Most of the time it makes use of an essentially public code. Like various forms of Western art, it can be self-reflexive; it is superbly suited to handle paradox. Like much mythology possession accepts ambiguity [T]here is a creative tension in Mayotte possession between the syntagmatic dimension (the emergence of order from chaos) and the paradigmatic dimension (the opposition between orderly human and chaotic spirit worlds). Frequently possession is a kind of serious parody of orthodox religion, social convention, or the accepted language of power relations. Possession may even be self-parodic.¹³ (Lambek 1989:53-54)

Despite its advantages, Lambek notes, focusing on the product rather than the process of production makes the text model too static; it also tends to unduly limit and reify the subject of analysis. He therefore advocates using a discourse model because "it directs us to look beyond the immediacy of specific, highly

formal events (performances) to broader, more pervasive processes and discrete or formal occasions" (1989:56).

Commenting on the advantages of discourse analysis for understanding possession, he writes:

As a particular kind of system of communication, possession establishes channels, senders, receivers, and information. It constructs new things to think and talk about and new ways to do so, new forms of experience. Possession can "thicken," i.e., add new levels of meaning to, social relationships and allows for "privileged discourse" providing a certain quality of social space in which therapy is implemented. Possession demands both reflexivity and the engagement of onlookers, but it is neither injurious nor therapeutic per se. Not intrinsically functional, possession is simply a discursive practice. Here we move beyond the dominance of the external, collective models for possession behavior in order to account for its open-endedness, the unexpected outcome, the continuing conversation. The discourse operates in the personal, interpersonal, and public domains, constructing a multiplicity of ongoing, overlapping, emergent "objects." More than an idiom for the articulation of personal experience, possession provides means and procedures that contribute to an ongoing, historically located process constituting the self and subjectivity. (Lambek 1989:56)

This emphasis on how possession (and other aspects of numinous phenomena) is constituted, reproduced and enacted, and the wide field of cultural events and forms into which it is interwoven in particular places, complement our comparative focus. Lambek accepts the cross-cultural usefulness (or even reality) of the phenomenon he calls possession and acknowledges that it has, across cultures, some interesting features, such as its tendency to transcend Western oppositions. Possession thus becomes a tool for probing the organization of life in a community (along with disease, sexuality, moral controls, exchange, and infinity). Insofar as possession (or spirits, gods, the numinous, etc.) is useful for understanding aspects of a particular community, then the problem flips over again and we are led to ask why this should be so. We are then constrained to look beyond the particular culture, text, or practice in a never-ending dialogue between the particular and the universal.

NOTES

- 1 The Kantian "noumenal," a homophonic but quite different term which characterizes a world not perceivable through the senses (in contrast with the Kantian "phenomenological" world), has been proposed by Roger Keesing (1982:7) as a useful designator of the "spiritual" world. Since it is not the unperceivability of this world that is at issue, but the peculiarity of the phenomena that are perceived, we find this usage inappropriate.
- 2 The significance of formal representation was implicit in early scholarship on the origins of religion. Thus for Tylor (1871), who saw religious beginnings in

representations played a minimal role in this scenario. For Durkheim (1965), however, the origins of religion were social, expressed in totemic representations of the tribe. Tylor's approach led to a focus on spirits in "primitive" cultures, Durkheim's to a focus on gods.

- 3 These claims are based on the papers and discussions presented in the ASAO conference sessions on which this volume is based, on Levy's, Mageo's, and Howard's work in Polynesia, and on Levy's comparative studies in Nepal (1990). In Nepal the numinous realm of a Hindu city is elaborated in ways that are informatively different from those of small Oceanic communities.
- 4 Ghosts are uncanny persons in dissolution from their previous this-worldly social and logical categories, and their nature is generally closer to spirits than to gods. The presence of ghosts means that the spirit realm has two kinds of beings—those that were never alive, and those that were once alive.
- 5 When saints or gods themselves encounter spirits it is often as a "temptation," or a significant test, something to be overcome through strength.
- 6 Mageo (1991) suggests that spirits are often constructed from the disordered fragments of social life and thought that are left out of education, established ritual, and socialization—fragments that intrude upon experience in a peculiar way because of this neglect. As such they are often a pastiche of cultural elements and cultural codes rather than integrated entities.
- 7 Levy (1985) has developed this idea in relation to the idea of "horror" and the Dracula story.
- 8 The spirit can enter the body as illness, but this introduces the related question of local taxonomies of illness and raises issues that are peripheral to our interests.
- 9 The spirit typically becomes more personlike when it possesses someone, unless the behavior is simply inchoate ecstatic behavior.
- 10 According to Donald MacRae (1986:86), the phrase that Weber took from Schiller that is usually translated the "disenchantment of the world" is more accurately translated (in a way very relevant to this chapter) as "driving the magic from things."
- 11 The recent proliferation of marginal cults and "New Age" ideology suggests a renewed receptivity on the part of some contemporaries to a re-enchanted universe.
- 12 The tendency toward spiritual specialization "reached its high point in Hawaii, where a god existed as a counterpart for every form of social specialization. In the Stratified [Polynesian] societies, a concept of deistic hierarchy corresponding quite closely to political hierarchy seems to have replaced the dualism ["good" deities versus "bad" ones] of [the other] societies. The emphasis was on the power of the major deities and upon the theme of specialization. Malevolent spirits, while prominent, were simply a class among many" (Goldman 1970:560).
- 13 Perhaps this is why comedy is expressed through the metaphor of possession in many Pacific cultures (Hereniko 1991).