

The phenomenology of mediumship

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The Phenomenology of Mediumship

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1. The argument

- Practising as a medium requires a two-fold authentication: between mediums and their client, and between mediums and their own experience. The latter requirement leads mediums to perform actions that generate in themselves the directly felt sensation of simultaneously *acting* and being *acted upon*.
- ‘Trance’ – which seems not to be a unitary altered state of consciousness – labels the kind of performance that mediums must actively perform in order to convince themselves that some other agency is acting on (or through) them.
- In a mediumistic performance, only *partial* dissociation is of any use ritually. Complete dissociation or spontaneous dissociation – in which the medium no longer performs appropriately – are of no ritual use, and measures are usually taken to ensure that they do not occur.

2. Mediums are initially reluctant

- The work is hard, and it takes time and effort, all for (usually) very little normal reward.
 - Temiars have a term (*halaa? kemloop* ‘concealed adept’) for people who are adept at mediumship but do not wish this to be generally known, as they do not want to be dragged into public mediumistic performance.
- Frequently, the medium him- or herself is not valued as such, since it is the possessing spirit that is valued, and the medium is just an empty vessel.
- Public pressure usually pushes them into to the job.
- Thus, mediums have a need to *feel* – literally so! – that what they are doing possesses authenticity.

3. The validation of mediums’ authenticity

- This involves both external and internal validation.
- External validation:
 - Mediums frequently become such both by ritual transference of spirit-power and by being the kin-descendent of a medium. Either of these factors alone is insufficient.

- Mediums – especially new ones – must put on shows of transcendental power: piercings, hot coal, acrobatics, grossly altered behaviour. (Established mediums need less and less of this, and may even show no apparent sign whatsoever of ‘trance’-like behaviour.

4. Internal validation

- In some ways, this is the more interesting side of the picture:
 - Mediums would hardly proceed in their practices unless they could somehow overcome their self-doubt.
 - This they do by *actively* putting themselves physiologically – which amounts to ‘psychologically’ – into a state in which they simultaneously feel *acted upon*.
- In many mediumistic traditions, initial intimations of authenticity depend on the public validation-through-discussion of the medium’s lucid dreamings (dreams in which one *knows* one is dreaming) and therefore that one is both the producer and the experiencer of the dream.
 - There is a small amount of evidence that lucid-dreaming ability can be ‘trained’ through positive encouragement. (I have had only two lucid dreams in my life, and they both occurred shortly after I had visited Stephen LaBerge’s lucid-dreaming laboratory at Stanford University.)
 - It is quite likely that lucid dreaming is related to the more common experience known in Malay as *tertindeh*: becoming conscious after sleep but not yet able to move one’s limbs.
- More usually, the generation of the feeling of that one is simultaneously acting and being acted upon is produced deliberately through the ritual of the medium’s own performance.
- While this is also a feature of religious action more generally (as when ordinary people pray or wave joss-sticks, etc.), it is especially crucial of mediumship. Mediums’ performances are public, not private, and carried on with other people who (unlike in a congregation) are *not* themselves performing in this way but are nevertheless dependent on the medium.

5. Mediumship as a performance

- By referring to mediumship as a ‘performance’
 - I am saying that the medium must remain sufficiently in control of what he is doing, if he is to act in the appropriate manner. If the medium ends up fully dissociated, that is either a religious emergency or an unfortunate accident.
 - I am identifying ‘trance’ as a particular type of performance, rather than as a single neurologically definable state of consciousness. ‘Trance’ labels one of the particular patterns that the medium must model his performance on.

- I am *not* saying that mediums' actions are therefore necessarily 'fake' in any way. When outside observers ask whether the medium is 'really' in trance, they are therefore rather missing the point.
- The methods by which the mediums generate the necessary feelings in themselves involve performing acts of *ritual stereotypy*, in which the very repetitiveness of the stimulus generates a sense that something else other than the performer's own conscious control is at work.
- The necessary stimuli may externally supplied (as in drumming, etc.) or internally generated (as in bodily movements).

6. Some forms of ritual stereotypy in mediumship

- Externally supplied
 - Flashing lights
 - Drumming and other loud noises
- Internally generated
 - Body-juddering [illustrate this]
 - Sitting on swings
 - Hyperventilation (through heavy breathing of leaf-switches or in mediumistic 'suckings')
 - Dancing with repetitive movements
 - Reciting mantras, spells, and other stereotyped text, especially when these are in non-normal language.

7. Some related activities

- Several other activities, not usually considered to be 'mediumship', deserve mention here, as they too are aimed at generating the feeling that some spirit-agency is acting upon the performer.
 - Christian 'speaking in tongues'. This, as the onomatopoeic term glossolalia denotes, involves letting the tongue flap rhythmically, so that it modulates what is otherwise more ordinary speech. But this is interpreted by its practitioners as a special language spoken by the possessing Holy Spirit.
 - Sufic Muslim *dzikir* chanting and dervishes' whirling, which is interpreted as an immanent experience of an otherwise all-too transcendental God.
 - The rocking back and fore in prayer by Orthodox Jews and Sufi Muslims
 - Hindu *kavadi*-carrying, accompanied by consciousness-battering drumming and chanting.
 - A *kavadi*-carrying student of mine made it clear to the class that 'it hurt like hell'. Perhaps the introduced Police ban on

loud accompanying percussion didn't sufficiently help him to partially dissociate.

8. The terminology of mediumship

- Mediumistic 'trance' performance is typically labelled 'forgetting' (Temiar *wəl*, Malay *lupa*) of one's self (*hup*, *diri*). This implies the entry of another subjectivity into the medium's body or immediate environment.
- Mediums also frequently question observers after the event about what they did when they were in 'trance'. This implies that they wish to seem as if they had truly forgotten what happened.

9. An illustration

- The following passage from my PhD thesis (*Temiar Religion* 1967) pulls some of this together.

Becoming a shaman

Although it is not possible to become a shaman without experiencing personally the dream revelations of a spirit-guide, two courses may be followed by the shaman-to-be. He may rely entirely on his own dream revelations, becoming a shaman after singing openly for the first time the new song lyric taught to him by his spirit-guide. Such a shaman is known as *halaa' rii'*, 'self-adept'. But since shamanic adeptness carries with it much responsibility – to avoid the misleading 'deception' of false dream characters, and to ensure the full compliance of those involved in a shamanic cure – many men prefer to keep to themselves the fact that they have had spirit-guide dreams. Others may then guess that they have become adept but they will not mention the knowledge in their presence and push them into revealing themselves. Such persons are known as *halaa' kemloop*, 'concealed adepts'.

It is clear that the shaman's calling is taken very seriously among the Temiars. It is certainly not restricted, as in many other cultures, to persons who are in some way socially inadequate. Part of the fear of revealing oneself lies in the realisation that in actually practising publicly as a shaman a form of positive feedback may set in whereby the initially spontaneous dreamings become so frequent and rich that the shaman is swamped by more spirit-guides than he can cope with. His dreamings may become such that they begin to people the natural world around him with spirits of all kinds – the process by which a 'great' shaman comes into being. The essential spontaneity of dreaming poses this ever-present threat, and most men prefer to behave very modestly in relation to their one or two spirit-guides rather than risk leading themselves into a situation too overwhelming for their own small personalities.

Some men, however, far from remaining apprehensive of the spontaneity with which dream characters enter their lives, positively take measures to bring new spirit-guides into their lives by taking instruction from an established shaman. The importance of this instruction lies not so much in the details of ritual behaviour as in the fact that the shaman actually works to instil his spirit-guides into his pupil, and this he does by the process of *pərenlɔb* described earlier. The established shaman carries out ritual blowings on his pupil's head and chest over a period of time, usually while in trance at séances.

The pupil learns his teacher's songs – the melodies and lyrics are distinctive – and eventually carries on with his methods after his death. In this way, much Temiar ritual and music is recognised to have precisely defined sources. But, as ever, it is essential for the pupil himself to have been visited in his dreams by the spirit-guide that his teacher is passing on to him.

Although the Temiars always give encouragement to the budding shaman, his rise in public authority (which is of a classically charismatic kind: see Weber) is marked by an increase in the ritual activities that his fellows feel moved to allow him to perform.