

## Negotiating Transcendence

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## NEGOTIATING TRANSCENDENCE

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This volume on negotiating transcendence grapples with the issue of control of experience in the contested areas of ecstatic religion and shamanism. It also examines and challenges assumptions that these experiences are derived from superstitious or popular religious beliefs, that are inferior to experiences had in official religions. In fact, many modern western individuals often perceive so-called popular religious beliefs as superior to official religious ones, and eschew these beliefs and their practices in favour of New Age spirituality and neo-shamanism and their paths to transcendent knowledge (Heelas 1996; von Stuckrad 2002). This quest for transcendent knowledge has often been portrayed as a desire to return to a more primitive spiritual understanding of the world (Needham 1985; Kehoe 1990). While this may be true for some people, the new self-understanding(s) that the authors discuss in this issue is not a primitive or primeval knowledge that is found in one place and transmitted from one deity. It is rather about the pluralism of ecstatic experiences and the ways in which they provide new understanding(s).

In this issue the authors examine ways in which ecstasies, both religious and secular, have expressed and negotiated their own experiences as spirit mediums, shamans, dancers, lovers, and healers. These experiences may all be called ecstatic in reference to the manner in which a person becomes other than who she or he is in everyday life in religious and secular contexts. Some patterns emerge when we compare accounts about ecstatic experience in different religious contexts. For instance, American Protestants of the early eighteenth<sup>th</sup>

century consistently described their religious experiences with narratives about how they had been filled with the Spirit (Taves 1999: 3). In the dances of !Kung Bushmen, dancers explained that they tried to boil what was called *num* or spiritual energy to cause the spirit named *kia* to be immanent (Katz 1982: 46). When the *kia* was immanent people often trembled. Taiwanese *lingji* practice meditation and dance in order to move the spirit within them (*lingdong*) and once they reach this state they also begin to tremble (Marshall 2002). The early American Protestant, the !Kung Bushman, and the Taiwanese *lingji* use specific language to express different experiences in which they become filled by Spirit, boil spiritual energy, and move the spirit. These individuals might all be categorized as ecstasies who share an experience of ecstasy and become transformed by spirits in their various forms.

Even though the term “ecstatic” is useful to understand similarities among religious traditions it has been subject to criticism, which needs to be discussed. Roberte Hamayon summarizes the problems one encounters when invoking terms such as “ecstasy” and “shaman” to describe an individual who is not traditionally a Siberian shaman (1998). Today, the term “shaman” is used almost universally and without precision to refer to anyone who enters trance or experiences ecstasy or an altered state of consciousness, heals, or becomes possessed. When I asked my third-year undergraduate class in the course *Ecstatic Religions in World Traditions* to answer the question “What is a shaman?”, the answers revealed that today, in the West at least, a shaman can be defined as almost anyone who performs a spiritual role in any contemporary society. Students answered that a shaman was predominately male, a priest, a liaison with the spirit world, a bringer or ender of rain, a healer, someone who communicates with the spirits, someone who leads the community in the performance of rituals and ceremonies, a medium who has a greater degree of personal spirituality, someone who can enter trance, cure plagues, can be good or bad, a guide in a tribal, cultural or intellectual community, a mystic often associated with North American, South American, and Siberian religious traditions, a magician, and a diviner. No two people in the class defined a shaman in the same way.

However, when I asked the students to explain the experience of a shaman, everyone said that a shaman was someone who entered trance. As the student responses to the question “What is a shaman?” revealed, at some point in his or her life every person could be perceived as

acting like a shaman. Unfortunately, however, the term “shaman” has become the preferred nomenclature in many disciplines to identify those individuals who might otherwise be called mediums or healers. Moreover, alternative terms to describe mediums and individuals acting like shamans, such as “ecstatic functionary” (Paper 1996; Marshall 2000), are not without their own problems in the classroom. Students who hear these words often mistake their meaning as related to sex or the drug called Ecstasy. They are always more comfortable with the word “shaman,” even if its meaning is broadly defined and understood. For this reason, I often use Åke Hultkranz’s definition of a shaman to help students understand the manner in which a shaman experiences ecstasy and behaves within a religious and social context (1974: 34).

How does one refer to those who are not traditional Siberian shamans and yet have ecstatic or transcendent experiences? Should they be called neo-shamans to reflect the influences of New Age beliefs on the practice (Hamayon 1998)? Or should they be referred to as modern western shamans to convey neo-pagan influences and the shamanism of urban individuals in the West and in Europe (von Stuckrad 2002: 774; Høst 2001)? If individuals are experiencing a kind of shamanism in cyberspace or at a Rave, should they then be called technoshamans (Rushkoff 1994)? Some people object to using any term that includes the word “shaman” and prefer the word “medium.” However, even the meaning of the term “medium” is contested (Donovan 2000; Lewis 1978; Rouget 1985). Others, myself included, prefer the word “ecstatic” to describe experiences that are similar in some respects to the experiences of shamans (see Eliade 1951; Hultkranz 1974; Lewis 1978; Paper 1996; Marshall 2000). Writers in the area of religious experience need to avoid, on the one hand, making essentialist, Western and culturally imperializing statements about religious experiences (Taussig 1991; Hutton 2001). On the other hand, writers need to be able to use words like *ecstatic*, *shaman*, and *medium* to offer an adequate frame of reference for comparative analysis. One must carefully negotiate terms by clearly defining them, but realize in the end that all words have histories.

My interest in assembling this volume stems from my study of Taiwanese religious experience and more particularly the experiences of variously named shamans, neo-shamans, spirit mediums, healers and ritual performers. These ecstatic experiences and their transcendent nature temporarily bring together the body and the mind, the spiritual

and the rational, and the collective and the individual (Sangren 1991)<sup>1</sup>. To illustrate these negotiations in the Taiwanese context, let me recount a recent personal fieldwork experience on Taiwan<sup>2</sup>.

I was studying the religious practices of the *lingji* or diviners of the spirit on Taiwan, who used burping, singing and dancing to move the spirit within them. In discussions with predominantly female *lingji*, I noticed that they often mentioned how they established relationships with different deities through self-cultivation, in which they purified their bodies and minds to the extent where the *ling*, defined as magical power or efficacy (Sangren 1993), of a spirit would fill them and then inspire them to create dances and songs. The practice consisted of a static stage of sitting meditation and a later more dynamic stage in which one worked with others to create mimes, dances and songs. But there was nothing normative about these two stages of the practice. Individuals responded differently in each stage of the practice, depending on their cultivation levels. The deities who inspired people to dance were seldom the same and the performances, both in terms of dance and song, were always changing.

One practice session that I observed took place quite unexpectedly in an ice cream parlour. Five *lingji* had taken me out for ice cream to discuss the fundamentals of *lingji* practice. I was excited to have the opportunity to learn about *lingji* practice, and I had expected that one or all of them would explain to me what it meant to be a *lingji*. Instead, they showed me what it meant to be a *lingji* by teaching me how to negotiate transcendence. When everyone was finished eating, the plates, glasses, cups and saucers became the props used in this homework session. Everyone became silent as Liu, the senior *lingji*, who had been practicing for over ten years and who had reached a high level of self-cultivation, suddenly took a glass full of water and emptied it. Then she put the glass into a coffee cup that was also empty. Xiao, a *lingji* who had been practicing for three years, immediately took an empty coffee cup and put it on a saucer. Then she took another saucer and put it on top of the coffee cup. Joyce, another *lingji* who had been practicing for three years, then took the glass and cup and moved them on top of the

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1. These experiences are unlike those of the Christian mystic who unifies with God.
  2. This research was funded by a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

saucer, coffee cup and saucer combination. Xiao added water from another glass to the structure. Eventually everyone at the table was moving water out of glasses to the cups and adding to an emerging tower of plates, glasses, cups and saucers. Then the glasses were being moved from the stack down to the top of the table to form the shape of a cross. Next, the *lingji* women took turns in moving the saucers and cups to transfer the water from container to container.

Later I was told that the moving of water was meant to represent how the exercise moved *qi* and *ling* from one person to the next and from one material to the next. Each person offered her own contribution to the movement of water (or *ling* and *qi*), and we all became united in our participation in this exercise. As this exercise ended another began. Then Liu put her thumb and middle fingers together, bowed to everyone at the table, and then began walking her fingers across the table, stopping in front of the person across from her to allow that person to continue the finger dancing. Throughout this exercise everyone was focused and serious. I was invited to join in when Liu's fingers eventually stopped in front of me, grabbing my baby fingers and pressing on them with great force. As she pressed against my baby fingers, I remembered what she had said about the electric charge she felt coursing through her when the spirit moved her to perform. I did a simple little finger dance letting the mood strike me ending by pointing to Liu. This continued for another half an hour (Marshall 2002).

How do we define what the *lingji* does within a Chinese context? The practice does not fit into any of the traditional or official categories of Chinese religions: they are not Buddhists, Daoists, Confucians or even New Age — a term often misused to describe new religious developments or movements — (Melton 2003). In interviews *lingji* are also careful to distinguish themselves from others who enter trance, such as spirit mediums (*jitong*), and Daoist ritual masters. They are also not “traditional” shamans in the Siberian sense or neo-shamans. Who *lingji* are is defined by what they do, which is moving the spirit.

This act of moving the spirit was described vaguely in all of my interviews with *lingji*. This leads me to wonder: if *lingji* do not use precise terminology for what they do, would it not be an act of cultural imperialism if I reduced what they said so that it was more precise? What I mean by saying this is that there may be no precise way to accurately articulate the experiences of those such as the *lingji* who

become filled with the spirit. In the end I decided to rely on the words of the *lingji* and my own participant- observation experiences to ensure that their own perceptions and beliefs were accurately expressed (Agar 1980: 104).

All of these *lingji* defined themselves using the term “*ling*” — sometimes defining themselves as *lingji* (diviners of the spirit), other times as *lingmei* (spirit mediums), and still other times as *lingxiu* (cultivators of the spirit). I am able to define these individuals as “ecstatics” and “transformed” (based on what they related to me in interviews) because of the commonality of *ling* in both stages of the practice. Regardless of whether they were negotiating transcendence statically in meditation or actively in dance (Fischer 1971), they were to some extent being filled with *ling*. As the *ling* filled these individuals they began to burp and tremble — the *ling* is often said to have an electric or magnetic charge (Nickerson 2001: 194). But the transcendence was not limited to just one person and ultimately it became a collective experience (Sangren 1991). The *ling* was contagious and others near those who were meditating were drawn into the performance, inspired by the spirit, joining dances that were already taking place, adding to them and improvising.

*Lingji* practice requires that a *lingji* enter into a kind of trance in which he or she becomes moved by the spirit both in meditation and in dance. I consider both stages of the practice to be experiences of ecstasy because during both stages an individual becomes filled with *ling*. As many of the authors in the issue discuss, the ecstatic is not an involuntary participator in the process controlled by some unknown force or power. Rather, the ecstatic is negotiating his or her unique experience, using it as a goal, defining the experience for himself or herself, and cultivating purity and morality. These negotiations determine the quality of transcendence. In the modern context, negotiating this experience of ecstasy is a spiritual journey in which one attempts to trigger that momentary sense of unity with a deity or with the absolute.

In this issue, authors have been asked to probe the subject of negotiating transcendence, and in particular how these negotiations take place in disparate ecstatic contexts such as dance, religion, theatre, and love (Turner 1990: 13). The approaches these authors use vary for each discipline but what remains constant in each of these papers is the effort made to place the voice of the experiencer at the forefront of the

discourse. Often these “voices” are the only sources of information about groups and individuals for which there is no canon or pre-existing body of scholarship (Sutcliffe 2000: 6). While the voice of the researcher, theorist, or practitioner has a place in these discussions, it remains as the one who places the other into context and who seeks to clarify and elaborate on the claims already made by the one who is experiencing. Although these negotiations take place in dissimilar contexts, they show the importance of transcendence (or transcendences, to imply the plurality of experiences). These negotiations create new understanding(s) — a type of ideal knowledge — once considered to be the exclusive domain of the traditional shaman, that, like the experience itself, is extraordinary and comes from another “world”, whether that world be religious or simply other.

Ecstatics as shamans, spirit mediums, lovers, artists and dancers are conduits providing connections between the ordinary mundane state of existence and extraordinary ones. They help remind us of the human potential for change and transformation. We often come to view these ecstatics through the prism of our own positionality, life experiences, expectations, and fields of study (Tweed 2002). The authors in this volume explore the various ways in which transformation occurs. As Alice Ormiston explains, for Hegel this conduit is the experience of love and union with the absolute. Brenda Cantelo demonstrates how for a dancer it is movement that imparts the self-understanding of the animus and transformation. As Philip Clart and Brigitte Baptandier discuss in Taiwanese and Southern Chinese contexts, the conduit is one between the god and spirit medium mediated by morality and self-cultivation, respectively. Often, ecstatics model harmony, sacrificing themselves for the needs of the community or family in mind. In Lisa Kuly’s work we see shamans position themselves in the centre and be re-positioned on the margins once the ritual has ended, returning once more to the ordinary. All of these writers have tried in their papers to subdue their own negotiations and consider how each ecstatic defines her or his experience of transcendence.

In Roberte Hamayon’s “Faire des bonds fait-il voler l’âme? De l’acte rituel en Sibérie chamaniste” we have an article that offers a synopsis of the different ways that scholars negotiate understandings of the experience of the Siberian shaman. In particular Hamayon provides a good overview and interpretation of the terms used in this issue: negotiation, transcendence, ecstasy and trance. This is followed by the



author's discussion of the idea that Siberian ritual is characterized by play and games.

Alice Ormiston's article "Hegel on Negotiating Transcendence" discusses the alienation of a secular, goal-oriented, modern western consciousness that is divorced from the spiritual wholeness of body and mind. Here Ormiston explains with acute detail, the impact the separation of sacred and secular has on the modern western individual in de-spiritualizing our everyday existence. To Ormiston "[e]xperiencing the divine thus becomes deeply problematic for modern individuals." Developing Hegel's idea of love and ethical life, Ormiston explores Hegel's contributions to contemporary discussions about transcendent experience and ecstasy.

Brenda Cantelo in "Art as a Way of Knowledge" writes in the voices of both scholar and dancer to lead the reader through an exploration of a Jungian inspired dance. In this piece, Cantelo is negotiating her own negotiations of transcendence, drawing on visceral, bodily, spiritual and intellectual understandings of the dance. For Cantelo, these complex negotiations become a process of self-understanding in which she comes to be aware of the Jungian imagery that culminates in a sense of wholeness. Cantelo writes: "recognizing these images is part of the process of self-understanding, which according to Jung ultimately shifts the personality to a higher and more wholesome level of functioning."

Brigitte Bapandier's "Façonner la divinité en soi. À la recherche d'un lieu d'énonciation" explores the manner in which identity is fashioned by female mediums called *xiangu* in Fujian, China. The paper examines mediumship from the perspective of apprenticeship, destiny and the possessing deity. Here, Bapandier discusses how the future *xiangu* eventually accepts her karmic destiny and embarks on a mystic mission of elaboration of the self. This mission becomes a kind of goal that leads her to serve others. The fashioning is a sort of negotiation of transcendence that takes place over a period of asceticism and apprenticeship leading to trance, understood as a metonymic expression of the self-biography.

In "Moral Mediums: Spirit-Writing and the Cultural Construction of Chinese Spirit-Mediumship," Philip Clart addresses spirit-mediumship as a contested cultural field in Chinese popular religion. Drawing on his own field research, primary texts such as morality books, and studies of spirit-mediumship across the Chinese cultural sphere, he demonstrates

the existence of different and sometimes competing interpretations of mediumship. In particular, he describes the views held among Taiwanese spirit-writing cults (“phoenix halls”), where mediumship is governed by the rules of a moral universe. Since the gods are moral forces, so the medium possessed by them must be a person whose moral cultivation renders him or her akin to the gods. Morality becomes the precondition and basis of transcendence, and the union of deity and medium is thus seen as occurring between two entities that are essentially alike.

Lisa Kuly in “Locating Transcendence in Japanese *Minzoku Geinô*: Yamabushi and Miko Kagura” presents an historical discussion of *minzoku geinô* (folk performing arts) in Japanese society, highlighting the creative manner in which ecstasies as the female shamans called *miko* negotiated their social and religious positions. Kuly alludes to the religious empowerment of these individuals whose liminal status enables them to act as healers and exorcists, moving from margin to centre during a ritual.

From play in Siberian ritual to dance in Manitoba, negotiations of transcendence take place everywhere, often in unexpected places, creating networks of understanding, and rich stores of personal narratives about the range of ecstatic experiences in modern western society.

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