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The Trouble with Spirit Possession: How to research religious experiences

Abstract:

Religious experience is a vague category that is used to describe and categorise experiences of very different types. Quite often people experiencing it do not categorize their experience as religious but prefer terms such as spiritual or even normal. They fear that labelling it as 'religious' experience would discriminate their experience as a kind of 'abnormal' activity. This was also the case in my research about spirit possession and trance in Brazil. Spirit possession belongs to a range of religious experiences that can be observed all over the world. It usually takes place in public rituals where participants behave in a way that is interpreted as being possessed by spirits. Outsiders often perceive it as negative and spirit possession is seen as a kind of "demonic possession" that puts people in danger. However, people experiencing it often describe what they experience with positive terms. It seems to empower them and to enrich their life. Often spirit possession is even regarded by the community as technique, means of communication between the world of spirits and the world of humans with the person embodying the spirit described as "medium" that enables the communication.

The lecture is based on my fieldwork among different Brazilian religious communities in São Paulo. With participant observations and the collection of subjective narratives via open-ended interviews I gained insight into Brazilian possession religions from the adepts' point of view. However, it confronted me with two complex issues of (1) how to include their ideas into the academic discourse without falling into non-academic, religiously motivated and unscientific explanations; and (2) how to avoid offending practitioners when one is not sharing their beliefs. In my lecture I will discuss the problems of researching experiences that challenges scientific measurements. I will argue that it is not relevant to question whether the spirits, the deities, or God exist. Important is how the relationship between human and non-human beings is maintained. The lecture will show that focusing on the practical dimension of religious experience (hence, on what devotees do) will help us to avoid the trap of well defined (and limited) academic categories.

