

# Steps to an Ecology of Spirits

## Comparing Feelings of More-than-Human, Immaterial Meshworks?

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“So, do you believe in spirits?” I have been asked this question countless times, by my research partners in the field, but also by students, scholars at conferences, or even during random conversations in bars, regardless of my interlocutors’ background or the context of those encounters.

Since 2006 I have investigated topics more or less related to experiences with spirits: places connected to hell and the afterlife in contemporary Japan, (tourists’) experiences in haunted places in contemporary Kyoto, spirit possession and different forms of exorcism in contemporary Japan, as well as demonic possession and Roman Catholic exorcisms in contemporary Italy and Austria. During this time, I have been actively in touch with experiences, ontological perspectives and worlds in which spirits manifest themselves. Particularly since I started my project on possession, I have listened to possessed people’s stories, talked with exorcists, healers and medical practitioners, taken part in exorcisms, undergone rituals myself and, especially in the case of Roman Catholic exorcisms in Italy, I have participated in rituals as a helper, quite literally fighting against the devil. I guess it is hardly surprising that people ask me about my own beliefs.

Yet, oftentimes, it seems to me that such questions disguise a sort of anxiety, that they point at something more than curiosity about what I actually *believe*; something closer to a search for a deeper meaning, similar to “as a (supposedly) serious researcher, an anthropologist, what is the *truth* about spirits? Do they *really* exist?” In the case of medical practitioners with whom I collaborate, or whom I occasionally met, questions tend to lean towards the line of “what do possessed people *really* have?”

As it often happens when someone is repeatedly asked the same question, I have elaborated a more or less institutionalised answer: I am agnostic. I do not believe or

disbelieve, that is. In the case of medical practitioners, my answer is that possessed people are *really* possessed, to the extent that, as long as they heal through exorcisms, the only possibility is that they were possessed, also because “having been possessed” is part of their healed condition.

As shamelessly cowardly these answers might be, they were very often sufficient to persuade my interlocutors or, maybe, to disappoint them to the point that they preferred not to continue their questioning. Yet, my answers are not simply the result of boredom. They aim at sparing my poor interlocutors a lecture about what their questions imply, starting from centuries of more or less violent establishments of what Foucault called ‘regimes of truth,’ their discursive dimension and power.

Indeed, anthropological research has long focused on discourse analysis, interpreting spirits and related beliefs and practices as reactions to socio-economic change and power relations caused by colonialism, modernization, capitalization or globalization (see Sanders 2008), a trend that has also characterized historical, sociological, and folklore studies research about Japan (e.g. Foster 2009; Ivy 1995) and Italy (e.g. Giordan and Possamai 2017). Research on Japan and Italy has also shown that the *possibilities* of having experiences with spirits revolve not only around historical politics involving discourses of modernization, secularization, and conceptualizations of “superstition” (Josephson-Storm 2017), but also more recent influences of broader ‘popular culture’ and, specifically, American horror films such as *The Exorcist* (De Antoni 2015).

Yet, these interpretations focusing on discourses and politics of spirits have been criticised as “seductive anthropological analytics” (Sanders 2008: 107) that have become standardized, while recent studies point at the necessity to look at more than beliefs, eliciting spirits’ voices in the field (Jensen, Ishii, and Swift 2016). Attempts, indeed, have been made in understanding spirits and their reality as emerging from the body (inter-)acting with things during (ritual) practice (e.g. Ishii 2012; Ochoa 2010), or with non-human actors in specific environments (e.g. De Antoni 2011, 2013). So, for instance, rather than through narratives of social memory (rumours about deaths, suicides, incidents and so on), certain places (in Kyoto or Japan) are perceived as haunted because of the experiences that visitors have. Indeed, most haunted places are dark, colder than outside, very damp and with a light wind blowing. Thus—at times—they actually provide the feeling of being lightly touched by something invisible (see also De Antoni, forthcoming b).

Although to different extents, these studies resonate with the so-called “ontological turn” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), and my own research is not an exception: going beyond ‘beliefs’ in spirits and investigating the experiences through which their realities emerge, is one of its first aims. Consequently, answering the question about my own ‘beliefs’

would simply go against what my research is trying to achieve: firstly, following Andrew Pickering's (2017: 134) suggestion to "take different worlds seriously." Secondly, more than describing and analysing ontologies in which spirits manifest themselves, my aim is investigating *how* such ontologies emerge through practice and perceiving bodies moving-in-the-world or, as I prefer, "feeling with the world" (De Antoni and Dumouchel 2017: 91–98). This is an attempt to grasp the processes through which the "agency of the intangibles" and the "social life of spirits" emerge within and elicit sociality (Espirito-Santo and Blanes 2013: 1–32). I am dealing with the "more-than-human" in this sense, besides the fact that the entities my research collaborators and I deal with, are "more-than-human" also because of their ontological status as demons or devils in Italy, or ghosts or dog-gods (*inugami*) in Japan.

This brings me to some central questions in my research: if one is to grant different ontological statuses to spirit entities, the social life they elicit, and the phenomena—such as apparitions, possession, attachment, or suffering—that they provoke, can they ever be compared cross-culturally? Are anthropologists perennially swamped in fragmented particularisms, living on the edge of essentialization and with no possibility for encounters? And, if comparison is possible while continuing taking the people we study seriously, how?

One possible answer is provided by cognitive approaches, seeing possession as dependent on pan-human bodily and cognitive processes (Cohen 2008), or as a cultural interpretation of dissociative and trauma-related symptoms (e.g. Hecker et al. 2016). Moreover, Cassaniti and Luhrmann (2014)—going beyond cognitivism proper and proposing "a field guide to identify spiritual experiences across traditions and cultures"—suggest "that there are at least three different kinds of phenomena that might be compared: 1. Named phenomena without fixed mental or bodily events. (...) 2. Bodily affordances. (...) 3. Striking anomalous events" (p. 334). Although such approaches present a great deal of possibilities for cross-cultural research, however, they also tend to reduce spirits to bodily/psychological issues, or even to pathologize the entities and, consequently, they are not exactly in line with the idea of taking other worlds seriously.

Moreover, these views barely correspond to my experience. In fact, although I did interview people whose symptoms might be associated to some psychological or psychiatric conditions—such as seeing floating human faces or human shapes—they were a very small minority. The great majority (both in Japan and in Italy), accessed exorcisms as a last resort, in order to be relieved from symptoms such as (chronic) pain or illnesses that could not be solved by biomedicine, or for which even a diagnosis could not be formulated. Therefore, associating their symptoms with psychological or even psychiatric conditions would make them scant justice, to use a euphemism. Furthermore, according to my findings, 'belief' tended to emerge as a consequence of the efficacy of

ritual. The process seems to be more similar to “I had unusual perceptions or reactions during and/or feel better after the exorcism, hence I was (possibly) possessed before,” rather than “I believe that I am possessed, hence the exorcism works.” Consequently, approaches focusing on cognition and meaning making do not seem to be the best way to go, from my perspective.



**Figure 1:** Catholic exorcists-to-be from all over the world attending one of the Lectures given during the X Course on the Ministry of Exorcism and Deliverance Prayers, held every year at the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum (April 14th 2015; photo by the author).

Another possible answer can be inspired by no less than Radiohead’s lead singer Thom Yorke’s lyrics, as also Espirito-Santo and Blanes note (2013: 1). The refrain of the song “[There There](#)” repeatedly suggests that “just ‘cause you feel it, doesn’t mean it’s there.” Espirito-Santo and Blanes thoroughly elaborate against this, reaching the conclusion that an anthropology of intangibles needs to investigate the bodily and social effects that spirit entities produce. Their argument focuses on the understanding of how spirits’ realities emerge through bodily and social effects, i.e. on how spirits *are* (or can be) there (be) “cause you feel it.” On the one hand, though, they do not clarify if this methodology can be applied cross-culturally and, if yes, then how. On the other, they overlook the aspect that spirits not only *are* there—i.e. they emerge thorough feelings and produce effects—but they are *there*, i.e. they emerge and take shape in certain, specific felt environments.

Consequently, as I mentioned above, I focus on bodies “feeling with the world.” I rely on ideas of “somatic modes of attention,” i.e. “culturally *elaborated* attention *to* and *with* the body in the immediacy of an *intersubjective* milieu” (Csordas 1993: 139 emphasis in the original) and analyse spirits and related phenomena as “meshworks” or

entanglement of “lines of life, growth and movement” (Ingold 2011: 64), emerging through practices and “affective correspondences” with the environment (De Antoni 2017). In order to do so, I rely on the approach proposed by Brian Massumi (2002), who sees affects as pre-cognitive, pre-symbolic, pre-linguistic and pre-personal lived ‘intensities’ that constitute the virtual and vital from which realities and subjects may emerge. Emotions, according to him, are ‘captures’ of affect within structures of meaning that, inevitably, cannot give a complete account of affects. Yet, I expand the notion of ‘affect’—which tends to be connected to emotions—to broader bodily and (motor-)sensory perceptions, i.e. “feelings” as modes “of active, perceptual engagement, a way of being literally ‘in touch’ with the world” (Ingold 2000: 23). Therefore, I see determined spirits (the devil or one specific devil, the dog-god, the ghost of a specific person) and their realities as ‘captures’ of complex ‘feelings’ that emerge through and as consequences of certain practices, bodies-feeling-with-the-world, and correspondences with certain humans (exorcists, helpers, family members, etc.) and non-humans (ritual tools that produce specific feelings, sudden cold wind blows in the room, noises, etc., depending on the case).



**Figure 2:** The exorcism performed by the Main Priest (*gōji*) in Kenmi shrine (Tokushima Prefecture), one of my main field sites in Japan (Feb 5th 2016; photo by the author)

Yet, since sometimes spirits manifest themselves as external (e.g. they ‘appear’) and other times as internal (e.g. they ‘possess’), an implication of my approach is also trying to “capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, and, in the midst

of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture” (Csordas 2002: 61). In other words, I see the exteriority or interiority of spirits not as an *a priori*, but as a result of correspondences with the environment (De Antoni, forthcoming a). In so doing, my approach tries to see spirits as emerging and acting *between* the perceiving body and certain environmental affordances (Gibson 1979; see also De Antoni forthcoming b). In all of this, processes of enskilment, “conceived as the embodiment of capacities of awareness and response by environmentally situated agents” (Ingold 2000: 5), play a major role, as it has been argued, for instance, regarding mediumship and voluntary possession (Espirito-Santo 2012).

It seems to me that this is the only way to continue taking my friends affected by spirits seriously, without necessarily producing nearly theological statements about fixed ontological existences of spirits or demons as separated from the social, or falling into the trap of psychologization, symbolism, or ‘beliefs.’ Moreover, I think that these ideas of seeing spirits and related phenomena emerging through practice as “meshworks” of specific bodily feelings and certain environments, together with ideas of discursive possibilities and regimes of truth established along with different modernities, might constitute a fertile ground for comparison. This might not be something I ‘believe’ in. Rather, similarly to my field-friends who are tormented by spirit entities, it is something that I hope will work.

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