

DISKUS

The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions (www.basr.ac.uk)
ISSN: 0967-8948

DISKUS 17.2 (2015), 38-53

Spirit Mediumship in Brazil: The Controversy about Semi-Conscious Mediums

Bettina E. Schmidt
University of Wales Trinity Saint David
b.schmidt@uwtsd.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on spirit mediumship in Brazil. The term mediumship refers to the communication between humans the spirit world which is the core of Spiritism. In anthropological literature it is often categorised as altered states of consciousness, however, people experiencing it reject these categorizations. This article presents excerpts from interviews with Brazilian spiritists in order to illustrate the different ways people explain mediumship to an outsider, an anthropologist from Europe. The article then discusses their interpretation within the wider academic discourse surrounding this kind of experience. The intention is that Brazilian Spiritism and the wider discourse surrounding mediumship will serve as a case study to present the complexity of this form of religious experience.

* * *

The core of Spiritism is the communication between humans and the spirit world, usually described as mediumship. Mediums are sometimes called “telegraphs”, with Spiritism becoming known as “an immense metaphysical telephone” (Rodríguez Vázquez, 1994). However, mediumship is not just a mechanical process, but involves a relatively long training period of the medium’s special abilities because of “mystical powers which require training, practice and time” (Michtom, 1980, p. 168). Uncontrolled experiences in the form of dreams, seizures, hallucinations and precognitions are often interpreted by spiritists as undeveloped mediumship abilities that need to be controlled in order to become less “bizarre and troublesome” (Michtom, 1980, p. 184).

Mediumship belongs to the category of involuntary experiences that entails an alteration of consciousness. Scholars and people having the experience have found a range of ways to label and to classify it, depending on the academic discipline, the historical era, and the cultural and religious context of the participant in the discussion. In anthropological literature it is often categorised

under the labels of 'altered states of consciousness', 'trance' and/or 'spirit possession', while psychiatrists define it as 'dissociation' or 'multiple personality disorder' (Klass, 2003). Mediums themselves, however, tend to reject these categorisations as false stigmatisations and offer very different explanations and terminologies, often, but not always, in religious terms, as I discovered during my research in Brazil in 2010.

The main purpose of my research project was the investigation of a certain type of religious experience, which is categorised in the academic literature as spirit possession (Schmidt, forthcoming). I observed ceremonies in various Afro-Brazilian religious communities and spiritist centres and interviewed devotees about their experience of being possessed by an African deity or a spirit. During my interviews I noticed how problematic the term *posseção* (possession in Portuguese) has become in Brazil, and not only for reasons attributed to the "Holy War" by some neo-Pentecostal Churches against this practice (Engler, 2011; Schmidt, 2014). It was not surprising, therefore, that spiritists insisted that they were not possessed when they received messages from the spirits. However, the distinction between the religious experience of devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions and of spiritists is much deeper than the struggle for social acceptance; it is at the heart of the discursive interpretation of the experience among spiritists, despite the fact that the existence of many combinations between Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions makes it difficult, if not impossible, to separate the traditions. This dilemma is strengthened by the way people move between different houses and traditions because they take elements with them when they join another community.

This article focuses on the understanding of spiritist mediumship. I will include excerpts from my interviews with spiritists (translated from Portuguese into English) in order to illustrate the different ways people explain mediumship to an outsider, an anthropologist from Europe. I will then discuss their interpretation within the wider academic discourse about this kind of experience. My intention is to use Brazilian Spiritism and the wider discourse about mediumship as a case study to present the complexity of this form of religious experience. But first I need to discuss the wider methodological implications.

Labelling experiences of the supernatural, such as mediumship, confronts us with complex methodological problems, as Ann Taves (1999) explains. Her study of Anglo-American Protestants and ex-Protestants addresses the difficult interplay between experiencing religion and explaining experience. The naming of something not only positions us and our research "in relation to contemporary disciplines, it also positions us as scholars in relation to our historical subjects" (1999, p.8). She continues that "each of these terms carries with it presuppositions and associations that may be at odds with, and thus distort, the experience of our historical subjects". Many of the labels used by academics of different disciplines (and in different historical periods) to describe and categorize means of communication between the human and the spiritual worlds are challenged by the actors themselves as they "obscure the subjective experience of the native actor" (Taves, 1999, p. 9). Taves' solution is "to move away from single terms to more extended descriptive

statements that identify common features” and are acceptable across disciplines and by the subjects themselves (1999, p. 8). In this respect, she walks a different path to many scholars in the study of religions who often regard experiencing religion and explaining experiences as “antithetical” (Taves, 1999, p. 6), all in an attempt to promote a study of religion that is “free of hidden theological agendas” (Strenski, 1993, p. 3). Taves criticises their dualistic view and argues in favour of a threefold typology. Instead of developing theories based on the dichotomy between natural and supernatural or between secular and religious, Taves includes a third position, which she calls “the mediating tradition” (1999, p. 348). Referring to William James as the “quintessential theorist of the mediating tradition”, Taves notes that “the mediators believed that the way in which they accessed religion was scientific rather than simply a matter of faith and that the character of their methods legitimated the religious reality of that which they discovered as a result of their method” (1999, p. 349). As a result of the threefold typology, Taves defines the experiences she investigated as “abilities or capacities that can be discouraged or cultivated”. While in the West the controlling aspect of this ability has been stressed, in other cultures the ability “has been cultivated in service of complex group interactions” (1999, p. 357, pointing to African cultures). Hence, seemingly involuntary acts that include uncontrolled bodily movements, spontaneous vocalizations, unusual sensory experiences, and alterations of consciousness and/or memory (1999, p. 3) should not be regarded as symptoms of mental weakness or an expression of false religion, but should be understood in terms of skill development.¹ Taves urges us to follow James’s interest in the interplay between theories of religion and living religion. Even though theories are “the farthest removed and the most fragmented”, they inform the “making and unmaking of experience at the level of narrative in varied and complicated ways” (1999, p. 361), since people experiencing these involuntary acts do not live in isolation from the surrounding discourses. This is also the case in Brazil where the boundary between the scholars who explain experiences, and the people who experience them, is blurred. Not only are the members of the latter group intimately aware of the academic research conducted in Brazil, but some of them even enter higher education programmes in order to be able to better express their experiences. Similar to Taves’ study of North American experiences, I cannot make a fine distinction between “ordinary people” who only experience religion and the elite who only explain experience (1999, p. 4). Theoretical explanations of experiences are developed by both groups in Brazil and their members interact and influence each other on a daily basis. The experience itself is embedded in the cultural context of its time and is consequently shaped by it.

Spiritist Mediums in Brazil

¹ Taves (1999, pp. 357-358) points out that while unskilled performances are often seen as a threat to the community, and can lead to exorcism, the initiation can transform individuals into skilled performers.

The focus of this article is on the kardecist form of Brazilian Spiritism.² For the purpose of clarity I will ignore the mergers of Kardecism with other Brazilian traditions, despite their colourful presence in Brazil. The term Kardecism is derived from the name of Allan Kardec, a French school teacher originally named Leon Hypolite Denizard Rivail (1804-1869), who, under his spiritist alias Allan Kardec, published various books and magazines with messages and teachings from the spirit world. Shortly after their publication in mid-19th century France, his ideas reached Brazil where they immediately won many followers. In Brazil, as well as in other parts of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial world,³ Spiritism became seen as an alternative spirituality that lacked the negative images of Afro-Brazilian religions. While the practice of Afro-Brazilian religions was legally restricted until the 1970s (Maggie, 1985), Kardecism met less opposition and was – legally at least – acceptable. Kardecists believe that everyone is born with mediumship abilities, that is, the ability to receive messages from the spirit world, the Afterlife. However, these abilities often remain undiscovered or underdeveloped. Therefore, every kardecist centre focuses on the training of these mediumship abilities. People with developed mediumship abilities are usually referred to as mediums. The most common mediumship abilities are feeling the presence of spirits, seeing them or hearing them. Some mediums have a premonition of something that will happen or has happened. The most famous Brazilian medium, however, Chico Xavier (1910-2002), received messages from the spirit world via automatic writing (*psicografia*): His arm and hand would move a pen across the paper, but he was unable to control it; he could not stop it nor influence the content of the message. In this way he wrote over 400 books with messages from the spirits from the Afterlife during his lifetime (da Silva, 2006). Another aspect of mediumship abilities is the temporal embodiment of a discarnate spirit in a human body, in order to enable this spirit to deliver a message to the world of the living by speaking (*psicofonia*). In most kardecist centres this particular mediumship ability is considered very rare, since it requires an extremely able and highly developed medium.

Each of the abilities has to be used to help the living and the dead (the spirits), whether it is by delivering a message from the dead to the living or by healing. This was the core of Kardec's teachings as he developed his ideas not only in relation to Christianity, but also Hinduism, drawing on the idea of reincarnation. He taught that in order to be reincarnated on a higher level, humans and spirits had to help others. Although the idea of reincarnation is less developed in Brazil, doing good is regarded as the foundation of Brazilian Kardecism, its central aim. A kardecist with 18 years of experience told me that "Spiritism gives us the condition of freedom, it gives us the notion that everything is possible, to be free, not bound by anything, no dogma, not a slave to anyone, I am free but I have responsibility for myself and the other brothers" (K., on 17 April 2010).⁴ In order to work as mediums and help

² For a history of Spiritism in Brazil, see Hess 1991.

³ At the same time, Kardec's teachings also made an impact in the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, particularly Puerto Rico (see Schmidt 2009 for a discussion of Puerto Rican Spiritism).

⁴ I will use initials to protect the identity of the interviewees. All excerpts are from (semi-structured and/or open-ended) interviews that I conducted in Brazil in 2010. In

others, mediums have to live according to a rigid set of rules: they must behave in a morally upright and non-aggressive manner, and they must abstain from drugs that might affect the consciousness, including alcohol. The understanding of mediumship as a responsibility with moral obligations was frequently repeated during my interviews. Connected to this perspective is the idea that kardecists should work for free, that kardecists should not charge for helping people. One medium was very adamant about this and criticized other communities for making a profit out of the needs of others, or asking members to buy expensive dresses and ornaments, sometimes costing as much as a person's rent for a year. But she also indicated that charity – and having little ornaments – can become a problem:

When people asked, “Do you charge?”, we answer: “We cannot charge for charity and grace.” People reply “Oh, no? But without charges it has no strength.” Then they go away and seek another place that charges for help. ... It is very common for people to come here and want to pay for healing, to pay in order to get well. But this is not a profit-making cult, so here we do not charge anyone for anything. We live in such a way that the group maintains the house. We even pay for the house, water, electricity, drinking cups and all the household expenses, including toilet paper, but we have never seen anything lacking, because this open house is a personal project of the group. (C., on 17 April 2010)

With a similar passion C. also argued against any offerings to the spiritual world because it would strengthen the attachment of the spirit to the earth and materiality.

We believe that those who are making an income are still very attached to earthly matters. As incarnated spirits, we eat, drink, and have physiological needs, but the disembodied do not. So what's the point of communities saying, as they often do, that a spirit is going to benefit from the energies of those foods? A spirit would need to consume them. But a spirit that is disconnected from the world is in a different spiritual condition and will have no needs. So to say that this is for the spirit is rubbish. What is good for us when we are embodied, does not justify the use of any of this [in the Afterlife]. (C., on 17 April 2010)

Unconscious, Semi-conscious or Conscious? A Typology of Spiritist Mediums

The practice of mediumship is difficult to characterize. A medium is described as someone who receives messages from the spiritual world. A novice “knows little about his spiritual protectors. His trance is awkward, often violent and uncontrolled. Gradually he or she develops – he sees his guide, and learns to express himself through a particular trance specialisation” (Michtom, 1980, p. 192). In her assessment of Puerto Rican spiritists, Michtom distinguishes

the translation I try to preserve the oral character of the interviews, while also making them accessible to readers.

between unconscious mediums who receive messages spontaneously and involuntarily, conscious or voluntary mediums who are experts in summoning spirits and influencing them, and semi-conscious mediums who combine the two forms. With regard to semi-conscious mediums, Michtom summarises that “the communication is involuntary, yet the very moment they communicate, they become aware of the message” (1980, p. 192), thereby connecting the medium’s degree of consciousness to the development of mediumship ability. Brazilian spiritists, however, have a different interpretation.

As I mentioned in the beginning, spiritists reject – often quite vehemently – the terms incorporation or spirit possession to describe this form of communication, even though they are widely used.⁵ One medium who received messages via *psicografia* was adamant that “incorporation does not exist” (J., on 5 May 2010). J. was the founder and director of a very large spiritual hospital that offered treatment in various forms. Everyone who worked in the hospital and offered treatments was a medium with a range of different abilities, but J. insisted that no one incorporated a spirit. Comparing his clinic with other centres in Brazil he described his centre as unique.

People [in other centres] are too involved, sometimes the spirits require more attention than the patient. So we do not have this kind of work The mediums here are trained to develop themselves intellectually. We develop spiritually through intellectual education, and that is not done by receiving spirits. It is not allowed because much of the practice of receiving spirits is mechanical, it is more mental, pathological than strictly religious. (J., on 5 May 2010)

He explained that the different forms of communication with the spirits are not part of the therapies, but a means of communication for highly developed mediums. Nevertheless, he insisted that:

We do not use incorporation since it is better to learn by listening, reading a good book, learning to pray, meditating People think that they are progressing when they receive spirits, but this is not true. Since a medium loses time getting a spirit, he cannot develop. Nobody came to this world to receive the spirit of another. We came here to receive our spirit, and what is our spirit? It is our truth, our obligations, the ethics that we must learn to live together. Usually people do not want to learn; they come here only to receive a spirit. They have certain questions, they are talking about a future life, or a past life, but no one can say anything because nobody knows, and so things are passed away and we will lose time. So we decided that we would do it differently.(...)

⁵ Michtom, on the other hand, frequently uses the term possession or possession trance to describe mediumship among Puerto Rican spiritists. Her research was conducted in New York City among a community that has incorporated elements from the Afro-Cuban Orisha religion (=Santería), hence it represents a type of mixed (or Africanized) Puerto Rican Spiritism, similar to Umbanda in Brazil.

We do not believe in the spirit that speaks. The spirits do not reveal anything about a person. They have no such right because there is free will, they cannot say “go and do this and do that.” The most they can do is to direct a doctor to the proper diagnosis and help us (= the mediums) to make a good speech so that people feel obligated to take the medication, and have the power to modify, change, and improve their habits, and be happy. None of this happens during incorporation. (J., on 5 May 2010)

J. sometimes used the word “merger” to explain his resistance against incorporation as a practice for mediums working with patients in his clinic. According to him, incorporation would obscure the boundary between the human being and the spirit, and the medium would lose his or her freedom of will. Mediumship for J. was a means of communication, but not in an overpowering way. Interestingly he referred to truth, thereby indicating the possibility of a false conjecture. Despite its therapeutic frame of reference his discourse ultimately carried a religious assumption of a true and a false way.

A similar attitude, albeit not so outspoken against incorporation, was apparent in my conversations with A., a medium and co-founder of a small centre in São Paulo that offers various treatments, including consultations with the spirit of Dr Marsec. When I asked him what would happen if a negative spirit approached a medium, he insisted that a medium could prevent it from happening. To become a medium means to develop one’s spiritual abilities. A trained medium was able to identify the approaching spirits via vibration.

Because inside an evil spirit the essence is bad. He will not have to leave anything good in you, no healthy feeling. So, he can be smart, insightful, can speak well, ... can be distracting, the spirit can even make people believe that he [she] is in fact a good spirit, but I always say this: It is important to analyse what occurs later. If you have a healthy sense of well being, peace, joy, tranquillity, it certainly was a good spirit. Now, if you have an uncomfortable feeling, of malaise, sadness, melancholy, or other such bad feelings, than the spirit is not what he said he was. (A., on 30 March 2010)

Thus, similar to J., he emphasised the ability of the mediums. A. explained that mediumship was a responsibility, and that most mediums are fully aware of this.

Mediumship does not leave everything up to the spirit, he (=the medium) is not exempt from responsibility when he is unconscious. A medium would not be very honest, if he said “Oh but I have nothing to do with it, I do not know what happens or how it happens.” In the case of a conscious medium, he knows absolutely for sure what happened. And if something happened to fail, he cooperated. So we understand that mediumship is the same path. And in cases of semi-consciousness, we believe that in certain situations or at some point the medium needs to lose the rule of reason. For example, during spiritual healing, you will sometimes make a speech, or give more

precise guidance for the medium that is still learning, and it can be very difficult to distinguish between the medium and his spirit. (A., on 30 March 2010)

In a very similar way, K. also insisted that the mediumship ability comes with responsibility:

Yes, mediums are (usually) conscious. There are conscious and unconscious mediums. During most of these jobs we have to be conscious. We cannot work with unconscious mediums, who do not know what they are doing. We know that the words are ours, but everything is intuited by the spirits, because the spirit world helps us on that road. Now, there are moments that require unconscious mediums, but for this kind of work one needs mediums who know what they are doing, and can resist the spirits and say no when they have to say no. Often the spirit has a load that is too heavy for us, and if we are not the masters of ourselves, and cannot say "No, not in that way, you have to keep quiet, have to remain conscious, you will remain calm, because I do not accept you. You are not here to curse, nor to offend anyone, nor wish evil upon anyone." And we are aware of ourselves; we are directing this spirit in order to get a good resolution. Moreover, in order to improve, and become more trustworthy, we cannot let them do whatever they want to do. We have to have control and know what is going on. (K. on 17 April 2010)

He argues that mediums are usually aware of the presence of the spirits when incorporating them, for it is the obligation of the medium to ensure that no harm is done. Nonetheless, as my interview was conducted in a centre that was co-founded by a medium who claims to be unconscious during her spirit work, he acknowledges the existence of unconscious mediums, but only if they are experienced.

C. described to me her experiences with the spirit of Dr Marsec during which she is fully unconscious. The first time he came was when her mother became seriously ill.

I can say I am fully adapted now, but at first it was very difficult because I felt as if I had almost fainted because I was totally unconscious. You do not know if you stood, if you fell, nor anything that happened, unless someone tells you.

In the beginning there was a mixture of fright and surprise. In my first contact with Dr. Marsec I was 18 years old, my mother had a seizure and she was bedridden. I woke up very early to go to work and when I said goodbye to her at five in the morning she could not move in bed, she only moaned in pain. I told her "Mom, I'll say a prayer because I need to go to work, I'll say a prayer for you to calm down, and then I'm going to work." When I started praying, my senses were gone, the Doctor came for the first time, and when I came back to myself, she was sitting up in bed and had no pain. As she was telling me, I was

very scared. Someone had entered my body, and taken control of me. I was angry, happy to see her well, but very upset, thinking that it is not right. Then, with time, I began to understand that it was not someone coming into my body, but a psychic power, a kind of instinct. (...)

I gradually learnt that my psychic power was not equal to the great majority of mediums, who are conscious or semi-conscious. So in the beginning everything was very difficult, because sometimes when I returned I was off balance, sometimes I had the impression that I was missing my legs and I would fall. Not any longer; today I think that training and extensive work with these brothers has given me a physical strength and knowledge. (...) But I always needed someone to hold me so that I was OK Bettina, it was a shock, I've never suffered from fainting, nothing like that before. (C., on 17 April 2010)

All mediums make similar statements about the responsibility of mediums for their actions. They have to remain aware of everything they say and do, even if they cannot control it (e.g., in the case of automatic writing). However, in order to acknowledge the impact of the spirits and their influence on behaviour, mediums have started to use the term semi-conscious as a descriptor of the kind of consciousness a medium develops during these activities. The term semi-conscious refers to a theoretical explanation of the experience generated at grassroots level, by people experiencing it, who are simultaneously challenging the various theoretical explanations of academics. In order to emphasise the value of their explanation, J. points to his theological background (he started training in a seminary but left), A. to his knowledge about other religions (mainly Afro-Brazilian traditions), K. to his experience at his secular work place (he works as a social worker with drug addicts, HIV+ patients and others), and C. to God as true religion. Their common description of the experience – being aware of what is going on and being responsible, even though someone else is moving the arm or inspiring the speech – hints towards a naturalistic explanation or, to use Taves' terminology, a religious naturalism (1999, p. 166).⁶ All interviewees blur the boundary between religion and science by referring to empiricism instead of god, charity instead of offering, responsibility instead of devotion, training and education instead of divine inspiration and commitment. In the end, though, their discourses were religious in orientation.

The Academic Rejection of Semi-Consciousness

The term “semi-consciousness” creates a fundamental problem from a scientific perspective; one should either be aware of one's surroundings or not, hence one should either be conscious or unconscious. Arguing from a psychopathological perspective, “loss of consciousness” refers to dissociation, or more precisely, dissociation is understood by psychopathologists to imply a loss of consciousness (Klass 2003, pp. 79-80). As Klass points out, however, this leads to the question of what consciousness is. Moreover, it also raises

⁶ Taves refers here to the North American form of Spiritualism, which is slightly different from Kardecism and the Latin American form of Spiritism.

the question of how to distinguish between “normal” and “altered” consciousness.

Vincent Crapanzano defines altered states of consciousness (ASC) as “any mental state subjectively recognized or objectively observed as a significant deviation from ‘normal’ waking consciousness” (2005, p. 8688). He continues by outlining examples of ASC such as “sleep, dreaming, hypnosis, brainwashing, mental absorption, meditation, and various mystical experiences” and characterizes these states:

by disturbances in concentration, attention, judgment, and memory; by archaic modes of thought; by perceptual distortions, including those of space, time, and body; by an increased evaluation of subjective experiences, a sense of the ineffable, feelings of rejuvenation, loss of a sense of control, and hypersuggestibility. (2005, p. 8688)

Crapanzano regards trance as the ASC associated with spirit possession, although he acknowledges that possession can also happen in “nontrance states” (2005, p. 8689). Possessed people move in and out, some moments they are lucid, in others “consciousness appears to have surrendered to the possessing spirit”, and in other moments people can be described to be in “complete unconsciousness”. Crapanzano’s description of doubling of consciousness as a state “whereby one of the two (or more) consciousnesses looks on passively at what is happening and is quite capable of remembering” while at other incidents “consciousness is submerged, and the actor loses all awareness and memory of the spectacle” (2005, p. 8689), resembles the accounts of semi-consciousness above. Though he does not use the term semi-consciousness, his description of doubling of consciousness refers to remembering what is going on, but having no control.

However, while some scholars confirm a blurred area between these two states, conscious and unconscious, and describe diverse and very complex altered states of consciousness, other scholars reject the notion of semi-consciousness because of its vagueness. Mary Keller, for instance, writes that “the possessed person is not a conscious individual but rather has a blotted consciousness and has become an instrument for the will of an alien power” (2005, p. 8694). In order to highlight the complexity of the experience, she positions it in terms of agency: “a complex model of human agency is evoked by the notion that the human will and consciousness have been overcome, and that the human body has become receptive to the intervening agency of the possessing spirit” (2005, p. 8695). Nonetheless, despite its analytical vagueness, anthropologists have used the term semi-consciousness in ethnographic observations, to describe something that that they were observing that is otherwise difficult to classify. One example is Alfred Métraux, who studied Vodou in Haiti during the 1940s. His report of spirit possession incidents contains the typical characteristics of behaviour that we might find in any incident of so-called spirit possession:

People possessed start by giving an impression of having lost control of their motor system. Shaken by spasmodic convulsions, they pitch

forward, as though projected by a spring, turn frantically round and round, stiffen and stay still with body bent forward, sway, stagger, save themselves, again lose balance, only to fall finally in a *state of semi-consciousness*. Sometimes such attacks are sudden, sometimes they are heralded by preliminary signs: a vacant or anguished expression, mild trembling, panting breath or drops of sweat on the brow; the face becomes tense or suffering. (Métraux, 1972, pp. 120-1, formatting added)

His description reveals a lack of clarity in his use of the term semi-consciousness despite his rich ethnographic material.⁷ However, the term semi-consciousness was included in the publication by his translator (in the French edition Métraux used the term *semi-pâmoison*, half-fainted). Nonetheless, despite this translation problem, Métraux's description highlights how difficult it is to put into words what we observe, and even more difficult or even impossible to analyse the data. Métraux, like many other ethnographers, describes what he sees, the physical movements, the change of personality - and that the person seems to be half-fainted, nearly unconscious. But the observable data tell us little about the internal processes to which the term consciousness refers (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, p. 10). Métraux's description reflects his inability to categorize the behaviour of the possessed *vodouisants* (Vodou practitioners) in scientific terms, but it also shows the fascination he felt while observing these rituals. On the whole, Métraux was not particularly interested in making analytical distinctions between the different forms of rituals he observed; his focus was on the connection to the *Iwa* (Vodou deity) and the emic explanations of the possession, and not on the somewhat artificial distinction between entertainment and efficacy.⁸ Most *vodouisants* I encountered (see e.g., Schmidt, 2008) would probably support his approach, although they would describe their state during possession rituals as "unconscious" rather than semi-conscious (or "semi-pâmoison"). This is because the Vodou spirit is regarded as the one in control during the possession; the possessed medium has no control and is not held responsible for their actions.

Nonetheless, the ethnographical focus on describing what we observe ultimately ignores the internal processes. For an ethnographer such as Métraux the only other source to explain internal processes would be subjective accounts of people's experiences, something which scholars often regard as unreliable, tainted by the personal agenda of the possessed. Even the validity of information given to us in interviews by people after their

⁷ During his initial visits in Haiti in 1944 and 1947, he mentioned ceremonies in Port-au-Prince, Croix-des-Bouquets and Jacmelet, while his research from 1948 to 1950 was located in Marbial, south of Port-au-Prince. Although he pointed towards differences between Vodou practices in the North of Haiti (e.g., in Mirebalais where Herskovits worked) and in Port-au-Prince and the southern part where his research focussed, he does not elaborate upon this in his monograph. He even emphasises his familiarity with all kinds of Vodou because of travelling to the northern part with a colleague, Dr Simpson (Métraux 1998, p. 15).

⁸ See Anderson 1982 for a more detailed distinction between different kinds of Vodou rituals based on a degree of authenticity and "act of possession".

experience is impossible to take at face value. From an emic perspective one could argue that people should not remember anything that had happened during possession, and we should not expect any reasonable accounts of people who experience possession, since they were dissociated from themselves at the time. However, this is different in the case of semi-conscious mediums.

These mediums claim to have no control over their body movements, but they can remember what has taken place. From an analytical perspective, this would make them unique – and impossible to position. Mediums argue that they are in control of the spirits but – at the same time – that the spirits, religiously defined entities, control the communication. However, control is the crucial aspect that is used by Ioan M. Lewis (1971) and others afterwards as the backbone for his sociology of ecstasy. Lewis argues that spirit possession and shamanism are related social phenomena, but while possessed priests have little or no control during the possession, shamans practise controlled possession and are in control over the spirits (2003, p. 57). Referring to Raymond Firth, Lewis defines a shaman as a “master of spirits” and elaborates that it implies that the inspired priest (=the shaman) “incarnates spirits, becoming possessed voluntarily in controlled circumstances” (Lewis 2003, p. 49 with reference to Firth 1959, p. 141). He declares further that all shamans are mediums, but not all mediums are necessarily shamans:

People who regularly experience possession by a particular spirit may be said to act as medium for that divinity. Some, but not all such mediums are likely to graduate in time to become controllers of spirits, and once they ‘master’ these powers in a controlling fashion they are properly shamans. (2003, p. 50)

In this sense a spiritist medium could be regarded as a shaman⁹ because a medium has to learn to control the spirits during the extensive training programme for potential mediums offered in all centres. However, the relationship is more complex, as medium A. explained: “during 364 days they [the spirits] submit to our needs and our rules, our values, one day we submit ourselves to the values of them....We understand this as a very beneficial exchange” (A., on 30 March 2010). He regards the mediumship experience as a way to encourage spirits to support human beings (i.e. the mediums), which would indicate that the mediums are in control. Being in control during the communication also hints at the reason why every centre focuses much of their activities on the teaching of mediums to learn how to control the experience. Nonetheless, the term semi-consciousness highlights at the same time that the medium does not have any control over his/her body in the moment when a spirit takes over the human body (or part of it, for instance, an arm and hand in the case of automatic writing) to communicate a message to the human world. Hence, this would mean - in Lewis’s typology - that a medium is not a shaman but a possessed priest. Though the spirits respond

⁹ This is also the argument of David Gordon Wilson who follows mainly Mircea Eliade’s concept of trance in his interpretation of Scottish Spiritualism (see Wilson 2010).

to a call for help made by the mediums of a centre, and therefore submit to the human needs, the spirits “master” the mediums during the communication, they are in control. Bringing both perspectives together would indicate that mediums can sometimes be regarded as shamans, but not always, and not every medium. In the end, the positioning of spiritist mediums in the academic debate remains contested.

A Concluding Support of the Concept of Semi-Consciousness

This leads me to my final point – my plea for the analytical significance of the term semi-consciousness. From a purely descriptive perspective, the term semi-consciousness is used, and not only by ethnographers, to indicate a blurred, intermediary state with vague or little analytical significance. Scholars have applied it to the state between sleep and awakening, or the state of a patient coming out of a coma, or the state of someone behaving in a “strange”, untypical way, such as the person in the excerpt of Métraux’s monograph quoted above. In Métraux’s case it was used as a signifier for the state between normal and altered consciousness, for the moment when the human consciousness submits to another consciousness, and the human being “nearly faints”. However, in the case of the Brazilian spiritists, semi-consciousness means something very different. It describes somebody who seems to be controlled by a different personality than his/her own, but is at the same time aware of the multiple personalities within his/her body. In this sense, the term semi-consciousness shifts from a vague descriptor to a precise signifier. I argue that, when we apply the spiritist explanation of semi-conscious mediums, the term receives an analytical value and might even help us to broaden our understanding of consciousness. However, this means that we need to re-examine the problematic nature of terms such as spirit possession or any other form of involuntary experiences and overcome its negative connotations. Thus, I follow Keller who argues that, if we regard consciousness as the source of an individual agency, then any impact on it, whether it leaves a medium unconscious (Keller’s case studies) or semi-conscious (my case study) would be regarded as negative, as “a troubling event” (Keller, 2002, p. 4). However, as my interviews indicate (which is also in line with Keller’s critique of spirit possession studies), spiritists regard mediumship as fulfilling, as source of creativity, and as empowering, and not as a threat that needs to be exorcised. But how can we analyse “the agency of a body whose consciousness is muted and whose volatility attracts attention?” (Keller, 2002, p. 8). Keller’s solution is the concept of “instrumental agency”. She argues that possessed people exercise a paradoxical authority born out of the perception that they no longer exist as autonomous agents but receive, nonetheless, power as instrumental agencies. At this point I depart from Keller since I am interested in the cognitive side of the experience, the body/mind borderline, and in a reassessment of consciousness / semi-consciousness. The philosopher Ralph Ellis locates semi-consciousness in a range of different degrees of consciousness:

From the completely conscious processes of which we are fully aware, to the semi-conscious thinking we do as we ‘feel’ our way through a heated argument or navigate while driving a car, to the completely non-

conscious processes of which we are not even capable in principle of becoming conscious, there is no sharp dividing line, but a gradual continuum. (1995, p. 19)

He argues against the postmodern rejection of consciousness and stresses that we should perceive consciousness as an *enacting of* rather than as a passive reaction to physical events (Ellis, 1997). Though I do not want to enter the philosophical debate on consciousness – in the end, I am an anthropologist – I want to highlight one point of Ellis’s argumentation, that is, the notion of non-passivity of consciousness, which confirms the concept of semi-conscious mediums. Going back to Taves’ study of involuntary experience in America and the interplay between theory and practice outlined above, I argue that we should not disregard the theoretical contribution of spiritist mediums to the debate. Taves writes that “we tend to assume that such theorizing is more objective or dispassionate in secular universities where it is formally disconnected from the practice of religion within particular traditions” (1999, p. 352). But, as she continues, “we should not be lulled into thinking the latter situation is less complex or less likely to impose its presuppositions on particular forms of religion in practice”. Spiritists speak about mediumship on a theoretical level by discussing in a complex manner the variations of consciousness, the differences between conscious, unconscious and semi-conscious mediums, and the implications for the spiritist worldview. In a struggle against the negative stigma of spirit possession, spiritists are looking for new discursive categories for their practice of mediumship. One important signifier is the state of consciousness of the mediums. In order to connect the perspective of being aware of the message (conscious) with communicating a message from the spirits (unconscious), mediums use the term semi-conscious. It has, therefore, little to do with the vague use of the term in ethnographical literature, but highlights the need of a discursive category that combines human responsibility over the actions of the body with the presence of another individuality in that same body. Thus, semi-consciousness echoes Ellis’s argument for an active consciousness that is not only passively responding to the outside world, but actively engaged with it. It is exactly this point that the mediums want to make: although mediumship appears to be a mechanical practice, it is not. Mediums are fully involved in it and during their training become familiar with the responsibilities that mediumship carries. Semi-consciousness embraces these different aspects. In this sense, it has religious overtones, just as the other contributions to the debate also do (see Taves, 1999, p. 352). However, it still contributes to our understanding of the experiences, regardless of whether we define them as religious or involuntary.

Bibliography

- Anderson, M. (1982). ‘Authentic Voodoo is synthetic’. *The Drama Review*, vol. 26, no 2, pp. 89-110.
- Crapanzano, V. (2005). ‘Spirit Possession: An overview’, in Jones, L. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion, second edition*, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, pp. 8687-8694.

- Ellis, R. (1997). 'Consciousness After Postmodernism', *After Post-Modernism Conference*. Spring Valley: The Focusing Institute. [online] http://www.focusing.org/apm_papers/ellis1.html (Accessed 7 December 2011).
- Ellis, R.D. (1995). *Questioning Consciousness: The Interplay of Imagery, Cognition, and Emotion in the Human Brain*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Engler, S. (2011). 'Other Religions as Social problem: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and Afro-Brazilian Traditions', in Hjelm, T. (ed.), *Religion and Social Problems*. New York: Routledge, pp. 213-224.
- Firth, R. (1959). 'Problem and Assumption in an Anthropological Study of Religion'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 89, no. 2, pp. 129-148.
- Hess, D. J. (1991). *Spirits and Scientists: Ideology, Spiritism, and Brazilian Culture*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Huskinson, L. and B.E. Schmidt. (2010). 'Introduction', in Schmidt, B.E. and Huskinson, L. (eds.), *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Continuum Advances in Religious Studies series). London: Continuum, pp.1-15.
- James, W. (2008). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*. Reprint. Rockwill: Arc Manor.
- Keller, M. (2005). 'Spirit Possession: Women and Possession', in Jones, L. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion, second edition*, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, pp. 8694-8699.
- Keller, M. (2002). *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, & Spirit Possession*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Klass, M. (2003). *Mind over Mind: The Anthropology and Psychology of Spirit Possession*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield publishers.
- Lewis, I.M. (2003). *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Maggie, Y. (1985). 'O medo do feitico - verdades e mentiras sobre a repressao as religioes mediunicas'. *Religiao e Sociedade*, vol. 13, no 1, pp. 72-86.
- Métraux, A. (1972). *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. H. Charteris. New Schocken Books; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Métraux, A. (1998). *Le Vaudou haïtien, preface de Michel Leiris*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Michtom, M. (1980). 'Becoming a Medium: The Role of Trance in Puerto Rican Spiritism as an Avenue to Mazeway Resynthesis', PhD thesis, New York University.
- Rodríguez Vázquez, E. (1994). 'El espiritismo en Puerto Rico es una inmensa telefónica metafísica', *III. International Symposium Afroamérica y su Cultura Religiosa*, Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico.
- Schmidt, B. E. (forthcoming) *Spirit and Trance in Brazil: Anthropology of Religious Experiences*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Schmidt, B.E. (2014). 'Mediumship in Brazil: The Holy War against Spirits and African Gods', in Luke, D. and Hunter, J. (eds.), *Talking With the Spirits: Ethnographies from Between the Worlds*. Brisbane: Daily Grail, pp. 206-227.

- Schmidt, B.E. (2009). 'Meeting the Spirits: Espiritismo as Source for Identity, Healing and Creativity'. *Fieldwork in Religion*, vol. 3, no 2, pp. 178–195.
- Schmidt, B.E. (2008). *Caribbean Diaspora in the USA: Diversity of Caribbean Religions in New York City*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Silva, R.M. da. (2006). 'Chico Xavier: um bem simbólico nacional? Uma análise sobre a construção de imaginário espírita uberabense', in Isaia, A.C. (ed.), *Orixás e Espíritos: o debate interdisciplinar na pesquisa contemporânea*. Uberlândia: EDUFU, pp. 241-261.
- Strenski, I. (1993). *Religion in Relation: Method, Application and Moral Location*. Basingstoke: MacMillan Press.
- Taves, A. (1999). *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, D. G. (2010). 'Waking the Entranced: Reassessing Spiritualist Mediumship through a Comparison of Spiritualist and Shamanic Spirit Possession Practices', in Schmidt, B.E. and Huskinson, L. (eds.), *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Continuum, pp. 186-204.