



# Anthropology of the WEIRD

Ethnographic Fieldwork and Anomalous Experience

by *Jack Hunter*

**I**mmersing oneself in another culture is always going to be a strange experience, and most anthropologists will be expecting to encounter different ways of thinking about the world when they first embark on their fieldwork. What they do not necessarily expect, however, is to start *experiencing* the world around them differently; to begin seeing and feeling things that, from the perspective of western science, simply cannot be possible. We might class such experiences, therefore, as “anomalous” because they do not sit comfortably with our rational scientific view of the world, but that is not to say such experiences are considered anomalous by the ethnographer’s host culture. Indeed while such experiences may not be particularly common or widespread amongst the population of the host culture, they may yet have a

place, and significant meaning, within that culture's broader worldview. In other cultures, therefore, experiences such as telepathic communication between two individuals, predicting the future in dreams, seeing the dead reanimate, witnessing an apparition, communicating with spirits through entranced mediums, or being afflicted by witchcraft (amongst others) may be considered entirely possible. Many highly respected anthropologists, in conducting ethnographic fieldwork amongst other cultures, have gone several steps beyond appreciating different modes of thinking about the world and have crossed the threshold into alternate ways of experiencing it. E.B. Tylor, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Bruce T. Grindal and Edith Turner all crossed this threshold during their fieldwork, and all interpreted and presented their experiences in different ways. Through examining the ways in which these ethnographers documented their experiences, and how their personal worldviews accommodated such unusual phenomena, it is possible to gain an insight into both changing academic attitudes towards the anomalous and the mysterious nature of the paranormal itself.

### RAPS, TRANCES AND VICTORIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) is widely regarded as the founding father of the anthropological discipline, and is also held up as the epitome of the so-called "armchair anthropologist." Tylor preferred to carry out his research in the comfort of his library rather than in the field amongst the people he wrote about. It is a little known fact, however, that he did conduct a form of ethnographic fieldwork in 1872 with some of the most prominent mediums of the Spiritualist movement, which had spread rapidly across America and Europe since its advent in New York State in 1848. Tylor was intrigued, as indeed were many of the Victorian intellectual community,<sup>1</sup> by the radical claims of the Spiritualists to be able to demonstrate the continued existence

of human personality after death. Belief in spiritual beings was to become the central theme of Tylor's highly respected anthropological theory for the origin of religion, and it has been suggested that his ideas developed in parallel with his researches into the Spiritualist movement.<sup>2</sup> Tylor saw Spiritualism as a modern remnant, what he termed a 'survival,' of primitive animist beliefs and as such was keen to gain firsthand personal experience of the movement: to observe animism in action. Naturally Tylor entered into his fieldwork as a sceptic convinced that Spiritualist mediums possessed at best a "deluded belief" in the efficacy of their performances or, at worst, a malicious desire to con unsuspecting individuals with deliberate acts of fraud. Tylor's personal field notes from the time, however, reveal a much more ambiguous state of affairs. Indeed, although Tylor did detect evidence of deliberate fraud in the performances of some of the mediums he observed, with others (most notably the famous mediums Daniel Dunglas Home, the Reverend Stainton Moses and Kate Fox), Tylor had some rather unusual experiences which challenged his initial suppositions. After a seance with Home Tylor wrote that he had "failed to make out how either raps, table-levitation, or accordian-playing were produced," with Stainton Moses he described how "[h]is trance seemed real," and concluded that his experience with Kate Fox was "very curious, and her feats are puzzling to me," noting that her phenomena "deserve further looking into." Tylor's experiences with these mediums forced him to admit, in his own words, "a prima facie case on evidence" for the abilities of certain mediums and to state that he could not deny the possibility "that there may be a psychic force causing raps, movements, levitations, etc."<sup>3</sup> Regardless of his



Daniel Dunglas Home Levitating

experiences with the Spiritualists, and his inability to account for them in any normal terms, Tylor did not see it fit, or even at all necessary, to publish these observations in his public writings on animism. Tylor's experiences, it could be argued, seemed to imply that such experiences were not by any stretch of the imagination limited to the so-called "primitives," but could in-fact be had by anyone, including members of the Victorian intelligentsia. In the face of ridicule from the scientific community, as later happened in the case of the chemist Sir William Crookes when he published his findings in support of D.D. Home's mediumship in 1874, Tylor opted to keep his anomalous experiences to himself.

#### ANOMALOUS LIGHTS AMONG THE AZANDE

By the beginning of the twentieth century anthropological methods had made several advances since Tylor's day. Armchair anthropology was out of fashion, and good ethnographic research, after developments put in place by Dr. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), required the ethnographer to engage with the society under study in as intimate a way as possible. This is what is now called "participant observation"; the central pillar of contemporary ethnographic theory and practice. In 1926 Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) was employed by the colonial British government to learn more about the beliefs and life-ways of the Azande in Sudan. In order to do this Evans-Pritchard lived amongst the Azande, semi-permanently, for four consecutive years and participated, to the best of his abilities, in the everyday life of the village he lived in. Through this process of intimate interaction with the Azande people Evans-Pritchard came to an appreciation of fundamental differences in the cosmological and metaphysical systems of the colonial English and the Azande, particularly concerning the way in which the Azande attributed causality to occurrences.<sup>4</sup> Evans-

Pritchard discovered that witchcraft, in the Azande world-view, was an ever present force used to explain unfortunate and unusual occurrences. Furthermore, the anthropologist learned that the Azande world-view was by no means an irrational one, in fact he concluded, quite radically at the time, that Azande beliefs were logical and that belief in witchcraft was not incompatible with a rational appreciation of nature. Evans-Pritchard's anomalous experience occurred within this cultural context late one night while writing up field-notes in his hut. He writes:

About midnight, before retiring, I took a spear and went for my usual nocturnal stroll. I was walking in the garden at the back of the hut, amongst banana trees, when I noticed a bright light passing at the back of my servant's hut towards the homestead of a man called Tupoi. As this seemed worth investigation I followed its passage until a grass screen obscured the view. I ran quickly through my hut to the other side in order to see where the light was going to, but did not regain sight of it. I knew that only one man, a member of my household, had a lamp that might have given off so bright a light, but next morning he told me that he had neither been out late at night nor had he used his lamp. There did not lack ready informants to tell me that what I had seen was witchcraft. Shortly afterwards, on the same morning, an old relative of Tupoi and an inmate of his household died. This fully explained the light I had seen. I never discovered the real origin, which was probably a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas.<sup>5</sup>

To the Azande, then, the phenomenon witnessed by the anthropologist that night was clearly of supernatural origin; it was witchcraft-substance, a mysterious substance believed to reside inside the body of witches, externalized and sent on a murderous errand. However,

despite the conviction of his informants that what he had seen was disembodied witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard suggests that it was “probably a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate.” This “explaining away” of the experience entirely ignored the Azande interpretation of the phenomenon, though Evans-Pritchard clearly understood the significance of such experiences within the Zande world-view. It is interesting to note at this point that in 1944 Evans-Pritchard became a convert to Roman Catholicism, and it has been suggested that his fieldwork experiences with African religious systems motivated this dramatic shift in perspective.<sup>6,7</sup> It could be argued, therefore, that Evans-Pritchard’s conversion to the Catholic faith was a means to reconcile his personal world-view with his experiences in the field. Such a transformation, combined with a willingness to publish his experience publicly, represents a distinct departure from E.B. Tylor’s complete suppression of his own anomalous fieldwork experiences seventy years earlier.

#### THE DANCING DEAD IN SISALA DEATH DIVINATION

Bruce T. Grindal’s anomalous, or in his own terms “altered, or supernatural” experience occurred amongst the Sisala people of Ghana in October 1967.<sup>8</sup> Following the ominously close deaths of two members of the same village it was deduced that the resultant funeral would be a “hot” event “involving ritual danger, or *bomo*”. Grindal’s ethnographic account of this incident included several days leading up to the funeral in which the author’s daily routine was significantly disrupted, so that by the time of the funeral, and the “death divination” that accompanied it, he was physically and mentally exhausted. His description of the event is so rich in detail that it seems only fair to present it in its entirety, rather than attempt to summarize the experience and reduce its complexity:

As I watched them I became intensely aware of their back-and-forth motion. I began to see the *goka* and the corpse tied together in the undulating rhythms of the singing, the beating of the iron hoes, and the movement of feet and bodies. Then I saw the corpse jolt and occasionally pulsate, in a counterpoint to the motions of the *goka*. At first I thought that my mind was playing tricks with my eyes, so I cannot say when the experience first occurred; but it began with moments of anticipation and terror, as though I knew something unthinkable was about to happen. The anticipation left me breathless, gasping for air. In the pit of my stomach I felt a jolting and tightening sensation, which corresponded to moments of heightened visual awareness. What I saw in those moments was outside the realm of normal perception. From both the corpse and *goka* came flashes of light so fleeting that I cannot say exactly where they originated. The hand of the *goka* would beat down the iron hoe, the spit would fly from his mouth, and suddenly the flashes of light flew like sparks from a fire. Then I felt my body become rigid. My jaws tightened and at the base of my skull I felt a jolt as though my head had been snapped off my spinal column. A terrible and beautiful sight burst upon me. Stretching from the amazingly delicate fingers and mouths of the *goka*, strands of fibrous light played upon the head, fingers, and toes of the dead man. The corpse, shaken by spasms, then rose to its feet, spinning and dancing in a frenzy. As I watched, convulsions in the pit of my stomach tied not only my eyes but also my whole being into this vortex of power. It seemed that the very floor and walls of the compound had come to life, radiating light and power, drawing the dancers in one direction and then another. Then a most wonderful thing happened. The talking drums on the roof of the dead man’s house began to glow with a light so strong that it drew the dancers to the rooftop. The corpse picked up the drumsticks and began to play.<sup>9</sup>

Such an intense experience as this could hardly have been ignored, and Grindal's determination to document and publish it in such vivid detail, and in accordance with the Sisala's own interpretation of the events, is clearly evidential of a shift in anthropological acceptance of anomalous occurrences. In concluding his discussion of this unusual experience Grindal confirmed that it definitely happened as described, and that others present at the time saw the same things that he did. Grindal used this experience as a gateway towards understanding Sisala culture, through sharing this experience he had essentially become one with the people he was studying. Nevertheless, and perhaps unsurprisingly, this experience was quite enough for Grindal who noted in his write-up that he was happy with it being a once in a lifetime experience. He felt no further compulsion to go in search of similar experiences, preferring to look back on it philosophically from the comfort of his office.

### DRAWING OUT THE IHAMBA SPIRIT

Edith Turner's unusual fieldwork experience with the Ndembu in Zambia is perhaps the most widely discussed ethnographic encounter with the paranormal. Turner was a participant in the *Ihamba* healing ceremony, a long and intense ritual during which the ritual doctor (Singleton) attempted to remove the malignant *Ihamba* spirit from an afflicted patient (Meru). At the culmination of this particular ceremony Turner saw with her own eyes an unusual, almost ectoplasmic, mass being extracted from the patient's back:

And just then, through my tears, the central figure swayed deeply: all leaned forward, this was indeed going to be it. I realised along with them that the barriers were breaking -- just as I let go in tears. Something that wanted to be born was now going to be born. Then a certain palpable social integument broke and something

calved along with me. I felt the spiritual motion, a tangible feeling of breakthrough going through the whole group. Then Meru fell -- the spirit event first and the action afterward...Quite an interval of struggle elapsed while I clapped like one possessed, crouching beside Bill amid a lot of urgent talk, while Singleton pressed Meru's back, guiding and leading out the tooth -- Meru's face in a grin of tranced passion, her back quivering rapidly. Suddenly Meru raised her arm, stretched it in liberation, and I saw with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh of her back. This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, a deep gray opaque thing emerging as a sphere. I was amazed -- delighted. I still laugh with glee at the realisation of having seen it, the *ihamba*, and so big! We were all just one in triumph. The gray thing was actually out there, visible, and you could see Singleton's hands working and scrabbling on the back- and then the thing was there no more. Singleton had it in his pouch, pressing it in with his other hand as well. The receiving can was ready; he transferred whatever it was into the can and capped the castor oil leaf and bark lid over it. It was done.<sup>10</sup>

For Edith Turner this experience was of such a significant magnitude that it called the traditional methodologies and theoretical positions of anthropology into question. She realised that for decades anthropologists had been completely ignoring the claims of their informants to the existence of spirits, she writes: "again and again anthropologists witness spirit rituals, and again and again some indigenous exegete tries to explain that spirits are present...and the anthropologist proceeds to interpret them differently".<sup>11</sup> Turner's solution to this problem was to cast aside the strictures of "positivists' denial," as she termed it, and to ultimately learn to "see what the Natives see." This approach goes beyond anthropology's traditional position of maintaining an "objective" distance between the ethnographer and the society they study, and plunges headfirst into

a completely new way of interpreting and experiencing the world. Moreover, Turner's personal perspective on spirit beliefs was radically altered by this experience, prompting her to move in the direction of considering spirits as ontologically real entities.

### TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE WEIRD

What, if any, conclusions can be drawn from this collection of anecdotal reports?

One of the most significant insights, I believe, is that these types of experience can be had by anyone so long as they participate in the relevant cultures and ritual situations. This, I feel, is a fundamental aspect of the paranormal in general: it requires our participation in the moment, whether spontaneously or within a ritualized context, in order to be experienced. E.B. Tylor left the comfort of his study to conduct fieldwork in Spiritualist seances and in so doing experienced phenomena for which he could find no explanation; Evans-Pritchard was fully immersed in Azande culture and belief when he encountered disembodied witchcraft in the African bush; Bruce Grindal's encounter with the numinous occurred in the midst of a traditional Sisala death divination after several days worth of disrupted daily routine, and Edith Turner's "breakthrough moment" erupted when she finally let go of her emotions and fully participated in the *Ihamba* ceremony. These illuminating insights into the nature of the paranormal are precisely the reason that I believe ethnographic methodologies should be used to supplement parapsychology's laboratory based experiments. The ethnographic approach lends itself to a greater appreciation of the wider context in which paranormal phenomena occur: it demonstrates the significant role of culture both in terms of the way in which such phenomena manifest and the way they are interpreted by those who experience them. The element of participation allows the researcher to experience firsthand

the phenomena they are investigating and reveals the significance of alternate states of consciousness and emotional engagement in experiences of the paranormal. These anecdotes also demonstrate a gradual shift in the way that anthropologists have dealt with anomalous experiences in the field. The move towards a greater reflexivity on behalf of the ethnographer has led to an emphasis on the anthropology of experience, which in turn has prompted certain anthropologists to consider the ontology of the anomalous phenomena they witness in the field. Further ethnographic research in this direction may reveal yet more fascinating insights into the nature and experience of the paranormal.

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