

## EXTRAORDINARY CLAIMS IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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There is extraordinary diversity among the world's cultures, and yet in spite of the great variety of languages, beliefs, religious practices, and moral systems, every culture reports exceptional experiences. These range from mystical experiences, to extraordinary cognitive abilities, to paranormal functioning. For instance, 97% of cultures believe in some form of out-of-body experience (Shiels 1978), 74% believe in spirit possession (Bouguignon 1976), and all cultures report some form of hex death (Halifax-Grof 1974).

In the two non-EuroAmerican cultures I have worked in, the Australian Aboriginal culture and the Balinese culture, claims for extraordinary phenomena abound. Is it possible, for instance, for an Aboriginal clever man to produce an ethereal rope out of his body and climb up into the sky, or for that individual to extract illnesses in the form of stones from a patient's body? Or, I have seen in Bali men and women go into trance as part of a ritual, and as they are possessed, they turn sharp knives on themselves, writhing on the ground sometimes, but they do not hurt themselves. Can people walk on hot coals (Taylor 2000), and even stand in a fire? What are we to make of these extraordinary claims? And how can we investigate them? Do the western categories of true and false apply in our assessment? Should we try to understand these phenomena within the worldviews of the indigenous peoples, or is it sufficient that we investigate them within our western scientific methodologies?<sup>1</sup>

I will also focus my discussion on the two cultures I have worked in and am most familiar with, the Australian Aboriginal culture and the Balinese Culture, as we begin our discussion of the social and developmental context of exceptional experiences.

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE

claims for exceptional experience occur in all cultures, but these claims don't seem to be evenly distributed across cultures. At least, some people have believe that the variety of truly extraordinary claims for exceptional experiences arise mostly from pre-technological societies, feats such as extraordinary healings, levitation, flying through the air, and many more. And not only is the claim that these sorts of things happen, but they happen with regularity.

These stories are found so often that it is easy to come to the conclusion that extraordinary experiences are altogether ordinary in these cultures; I want to call this view the Golden Age view. The argument usually proceeds that in these pre-technological, traditional societies, where technology is not available to provide alternative means of communication, paranormal ability is normal and used virtually on a daily basis. So, if we want to find the real phenomena, we have to leave EuroAmerican culture and travel back in time, as it were, to a Golden Age, when the "Noble Savages" communed with each other and the gods.

Even in western culture we can see this argument. Researchers bemoan the lack of great mediums, for instance, like D. D. Home, or Leonora Piper, or perhaps even Palladino. The founders of the Society for Psychical Research had great material to work with, this view asserts, but today we just seem to have the ordinary person off the street and no superstars.

It is easy to find support for this view, as one finds extraordinary claims or the paranormal in traditional societies. For instance, the anthropologist, A. P. Elkin (1945/1980), in his classic book on Australian Aboriginal shamans, or "clever men," or "men of high degree," as he called them, certainly provides us with incredible descriptions of the extraordinary claims the Aborigines make. For instance, hex death was not an unusual occurrence in traditional

Aboriginal society. This could be done by the clever man concentrating his thoughts upon the victim, visualizing him and mentally transmitting to him thoughts of illness or death, or of visualizing having a “bone” inside of him. Or, traditionally, the *kadaitcha* men would point a bone at a victim, and chant special slogans.

On the other hand, clever men could heal, sometimes chanting words of power, or they would rub the body and suck the illness out of it. Spirit familiars were at his disposal and could be used to go throughout the body to diagnose the illness, and the clever man also had quartz and other stones with magical powers at his disposal to aid in the cure. Spirit familiars were also used to gather information from the environment and bring it back in clairvoyant fashion, or staring into a quartz crystal was also used. Being a culture close to nature, natural objects were often used as signs, such as the sighting of a plover bird would indicate death. More unusual abilities were claimed by other clever men, such as walking on fire, or using a magical cord which comes out of their bodies, to travel to the tops of the trees or to the sky. And clever men could take the form of a small whirling wind and travel great distances quickly.

However, extraordinary these claims are, even greater ones are made in the best selling book, *Mutant Message Down Under*, by Marlo Morgan (1991). The author, an American who supposedly was working in Australia at the time, claims that she was commandeered by a group of Aborigines and led on a four-month journey across the continent, on a walkabout. The purpose of the journey was to show her Aboriginal sacred life, so she could be the medium of its propagation in the west. She called these the Real People, and surely she must have been impressed with them as she described their wondrous abilities. For instance, the Real People did not have to talk, since the use of telepathy was so widespread, and because they used telepathy, they never told a lie, “not even a small fabrication, not a partial truth” (p. 15). Morgan tells of a

man who fell down a gorge, sustaining a severe compound fracture. Chanting and moving his hands over the leg and finally touching it, the healer set the bone and fixes the torn skin so that the next day the hunter was able to get up and walk on the long journey with the rest of the people, without even a limp.

Morgan describes extraordinarily high purposes based on love and a sense of unity with One Consciousness as part of this worldview. Is this, indeed, the Golden Age? What are we to make of these claims? Can we say that these claims are real?

It must be stressed that the book, *The Mutant Message Down Under*, is a hoax. Concerned Australian Aborigines produced a document (Eggington ND) refuting the claims of the book. Not only would it be strictly against Aboriginal religious law to reveal sacred/secret knowledge of this kind to a woman, but the people she describes have only marginal similarity to any Australian Aboriginal practices. They would more nearly describe Native American traditions than Australian Aboriginal ones. And, finally, when a delegation of Australian Aborigines came to the United States, Marlo Morgan admitted that she never went on such a journey. *The Mutant Message Down Under* is in that genre of New Age books like *The Medicine Woman* (Andrews 1981), started by the Carlos Casteneda books (1968), which at best (in Casteneda's case) serve the function of introducing us to traditional spirituality, and at worst are simply produced for monetary gain, but they cannot be taken as accurate representations of the exceptional experiences of non-EuroAmerican peoples.

In addition to ethnographic and pseudo-ethnographic reports, there have been controlled studies in traditional societies. What does our experimental evidence tells us? On the positive side, the subject who achieved the most significant score in any published test of ESP is an Australian aboriginal woman by the name of Lizzie Williams in card experiments with the Roses

(and most of their positive results were due to her) (Rose, L. & R. 1951);(Rose, R. 1952; Rose, R. 1955; Rose, R. 1956). Robert Boshier (1974) tells about his field test of a South African *sangoma*, who was able to locate a skin of a gemsbok that Boshier had hidden on the grounds of a museum of man and science in Johannesburg. Experiments by Laubscher (1938) and Foster (1943) in South Africa and in Canada with the Plains Indians had success with empirical studies. However, Robert Van de Castle (1970, 1974) found only marginal success with Cuna Indian students on San Blas Islands, east of Panama, and Dorothy Pope (1953) found no ESP in a test in New Guinea. It seems as if experimental tests among traditional peoples yields no more consistent or better results than among American college students.

It is easy for us to think of those traditional societies as a people who, uncomplicated by our technology, have a more direct insight into reality and who perform extraordinary feats. Hesiod (1983) in the eighth century B.C.E. described the passing of Greeks from the Golden Age descending on down through a Silver Age and a Bronze Age and to the present Age of Iron, where we “waste away with toil and pain” ( p. 71). The book of *Genesis* brought to the western mind the idea of a once Golden Age with Noble Savages from which we have fallen. But, should we accept the idea that these traditional societies offer us better examples of exceptional human functioning than in contemporary EuroAmerican culture?

My conclusion is a bit complicated. On the one hand, I see no reason why we should believe that pre-technological societies are an extraordinary source of parapsychological functioning; they are simply people, not Noble Savages. Our research gives little support to the view that most extraordinary claims made for psychic functioning in these cultures are accurate. On the other hand, I believe these cultures can be rich sources of information and insight. As EuroAmerican culture has focused on a technology of the physical world, these cultures have

often focused on a technology of the inner world, of developing systems that depend upon consciousness and the subtle aspects of consciousness. Yogi control over the muscles in the body (Green 1977) is a vivid reminder that extraordinary functioning can occur based on internal technology, so it is well worth our time to investigate these cultures and to see what they can teach us, and I do believe that they can teach us a lot, as I have found in my research.

However, we continually need to remind ourselves that we are dealing with other cultures who have importantly different worldviews. Not only must we be prepared to separate the legitimate claims from the blatantly false ones, as we did in Marlo Morgan's case, but we need to understand exceptional functioning within the cultural context. While we must always bring a western sense of truth and objectivity, we should not believe that our western assumptions are universal, nor should we think that a western understanding of these phenomena are entirely accurate or fair. From the outset, let me say that I believe that it is legitimate to apply western science, western methodologies, and western assumptions to investigating extraordinary phenomena in other cultures; I have done this myself, and I think that it brings knowledge and understanding. What I want to emphasize, however, is that a simple reduction of these phenomena to western categories and methodologies is inadequate. We need to try to understand these phenomena in their own cultural context in order to have a greater insight into what is really going on.

After this rather long introductory section, perhaps I can refocus on the topic of this second session, the social and developmental context of exceptional experiences. I want to consider two important factors that seem to be necessary in order for exceptional experiences to be easily developed and maintained in a culture, or, in other words, for them to be acculturated. The two aspects of acculturating exceptional experiences that seem to me fundamental are: 1)

having an appropriate worldview, and 2) developing mechanisms for reproducing exceptional experiences and behaviors. Exceptional experiences have occurred in all cultures in all times, even contemporary technological ones, so having a *specific* worldview is obviously not a *sine qua non* for exceptional experiences to occur. However, there are some worldviews in which exceptional experiences make more sense, in which they are even considered not paranormal or abnormal, but as normal. And, conversely, there are worldviews in which exceptional experiences don't make sense, in which they are paranormal, in which they are confusing exceptions in an otherwise orderly universe. So, first, let me discuss two opposing worldviews and what they imply about the normality of exceptional experiences. After this discussion, in which I will begin focusing on the Balinese culture as an example, I will turn to the next question, discussing ways to develop and encourage exceptional experiences. Again, I will focus on Balinese culture and give examples from it.

### **Worldviews: Atomistic v. Relational**

In this section, I want to examine parapsychological experiences, but I think my analysis could be widened, with more complexity, to encompass a number of other exceptional experiences. If parapsychological experiences are paranormal, that implies that they are set apart from the normal, and even from the expected. The problem is not that they simply occur irregularly (as may be the case with other exceptional experiences, such as extraordinary creativity) but that they do not fit into our understanding of the normal. In some sense, they are conceptual danglers, unable to be fit into our expectations of the way the world should work.

What forms the basis of our ordinary understanding of how the world should work?

Since the scientific revolution in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, atomism has formed a key underpinning of this worldview. One can argue that the fundamental metaphysical change of the scientific revolution was the movement from an Aristotelean teleological worldview to an atomistic one, propounded in the ancient world by Democritus and Lucretius.

What does atomism say? I think that there are three basic tenets of atomism. These are:

- 1) The fundamental building blocks of the world are individual, independent, indivisible atoms. Ultimately, reality is composed of these atomic bits. In fact, atomism became a general theory about the nature of reality, a way of understanding any realm of the world, so that in the psychological realm, one was able to talk about psychological atoms, or mental bits; even in the political realm, one could conceive of political atoms, the rugged individualists of John Locke's State of Nature.
- 2) The individual atoms are separated by a void or a vacuum. The function of the void is to stress the separation and independence of the atomic units. There is a distance between atoms that cannot be overcome. The only way one atom can affect another atom is to bump into the other one in a billiard ball fashion. In other words, the only effect that one can have on the other is a direct effect; there is no action at a distance.
- 3) The final aspect of atomism explains that the function of science is to produce laws of how the atoms bump into one another and form larger units (molecules, gross physical objects). In other words, the laws of science are really the laws of the association taking place among the atoms. Since there is no action at a distance, these laws describe how one atom bumps into the other or connects up with the other to produce an event in the world.

The problems for parapsychology should be obvious from this account (Edge 1985). Both extrasensory perception and psychokinesis are thought to be actions at a distance, which are not allowed in atomism. For instance, what makes telepathy so improbable to normal science is that there does not seem to be an intervening medium for information to get from one person to another person. After all, we are concerned here with extra-sensory perception, that is, the fact that ESP doesn't seem to work in a normal sensory fashion. We don't use our five senses, where we could discern an intervening medium, like sound waves. On the other hand, the ability for me to affect an object in the world is not a problem for normal science. My papers can rise off of the podium if I reach down and pick them up; the problem occurs when my papers rise off of the podium and no one is picking them up, nor is there any wind, nor any other direct influence on them. Likewise, there is no problem about my knowing the contents of my own mind, but there is a problem of knowing the contents of your mind, since your mind is conceived of as a different atom separated from my mind by a void.

Contrast atomism with another approach, one that I call a relational approach (Edge 1994), in which the stress is on connectedness. There are a variety of relational worldviews, from the mystical experience which seems to want to relate everything in a Oneness, to contemporary environmental systems theory, to totemistic approaches (like the one held by Australian aborigines). What runs through all of them is the idea that the world needs to be viewed as fundamentally connected; what is most revealing about the world is its connectedness, not its separation. One metaphor that is sometimes used, although it has its limitation, is that of the organism. What is most essential about a finger, for instance, is not its separateness, its in-itselfness, but that a finger is part of a structure that makes up a hand. Although a finger can be laid out on an anatomical table and studied in itself, a more robust and fuller understanding calls

for us to consider it in its connectedness. Or, think of ecology, where environments are mutually dependent and interactive.

If the atomistic nature of the world virtually defines parapsychological phenomena out of existence, it seems intuitive that a relational view, which stresses connectedness, seems able to incorporate something like ESP. I would like to talk about the island of Bali as an example of a relational culture. Bali is one of some 13,500 islands in the archipelago that makes up Indonesia, lying just east of Java. Bali is a small island, with some 3 million inhabitants. Lying only 8° below the equator, it has a lush environment, with daily temperatures around 88°-90° year round, but the year is divided between a rainy season and a dry season. Traditionally, Bali has been supported by an agricultural economy, with wet rice farming providing not only a staple for the people, but also incredible vistas.

The Balinese worldview is described in their religion, which is called Bali Hinduism, and it has four sources. The most obvious one is traditional Hinduism, which was nurtured in and filtered through Java. The second source is animism, commonly defined as the view that there are souls in everything. I will return to this idea later in trying to understand exceptional experiences in Bali from another perspective. The third source is Tantric Buddhism, and the final one is what the Balinese call *adat*, which means local custom.

As a way to demonstrate a relational worldview, let me talk about the three worlds of Bali. According to Bali Hinduism, there is an upper world, the world of the gods, the world of the generative forces. On the other hand, there exists the lower world, the world of the demons, or the degenerative forces. When these two worlds are held in balance, in a dynamic equilibrium, it produces the third world, the world as we know it, the physical world. As a

result, much effort and attention (and many offerings) in Bali are given to continue the balance between the upper and lower worlds, to make sure that the gods and the demons are satisfied. For instance, some one hundred or more small offerings were laid out daily in the family compound where I usually stay in central Bali, but also larger offerings are made for all sorts of ceremonies, and one can hardly drive very long in Bali without running into a procession of people carrying offerings, or at least seeing individual women taking their offerings to the local temple. Even cockfights are seen as an offering, as a blood sacrifice, since demons are satiated by blood.

As opposed to a Newtonian idea of absolute space, where space is best described in a coordinate system like latitude and longitude, the Balinese idea of space is relative and contexted. North to them is in the direction of the sacred mountain, Genung Agung, and has the implication of height and sacredness. If one is in north Bali, north for them is what we call south geographically, so direction is relational. (See Addendum for a fuller discussion of space.)

Likewise, their notion of subject and object, or inner and outer, is not dichotomized. There is no dualistic separation of inner and outer, but rather the two are intimately related. If you are walking down a hill and slip and fall, we would say that we are physically unbalanced, which caused the fall, but we would not think that this fact indicates anything about one's inner life. For the Balinese, the outer is simply a reflection of the inner, and vice versa; if one slips and falls, it is because something is out of balance in the internal world, as well as the external.

Let me discuss one more aspect of the relational worldview of Bali, that of the central idea of the self. As opposed to the idea of an atomistic self, which is independent, fixed and enduring<sup>ii</sup>, the Balinese self is relational and contexted. Instead of being defined as independent of

relationships, it is defined in terms of relationships, especially the social relationships one has, like being a member of a particular *banjar* (village), and a particular temple, and a particular rice growing organization (Lansing, 1983). The individual is defined and particularized by those special relationships one is in. Both Geertz (1973, p. 388-9) and Lansing (1974, p. 56) point out that even the gods in Bali are defined in the same way; Siwa in one temple does not have the same personality and characteristics as he does in another temple several miles away since the gods are defined by the particular contexted relationship they are in. So, both persons and gods in Bali are defined relationally, not as they are in themselves, but by the relationship or context.

Within the relational worldview in Bali, exceptional experiences seem to be commonplace in Bali. Controlled experiments have not been administered in Bali, but according to my research, 75% of the population believe in the existence of ESP (60% of them being certain that it exists), while only 6% don't think that it exists (19% are uncertain).

I would like to focus, however, on other exceptional experiences, because what is most interesting to me in Bali is the common occurrence of trance possession. First, there are a number of people in Bali whom we would call mediums, and they serve an important role in the culture. Not only are they sought out for advice, as well as an explanation why, for instance, there is illness in the family or other bad luck has befallen the family, but my own theory is that they serve an important function in mediating and bringing together the three worlds of Bali (Edge 1993). But more unusual are the trance possession ceremonies in temples all over Bali. Whenever there is an important *odalan*, a ceremony celebrating the annual anniversary of the temple, the priest will go into trance, being possessed, in order for the appropriate divinity to speak through the priest to say whether the ceremony was correct, or something was done poorly or left out, or whether there exist further responsibilities to be carried out. However, depending

on the ceremony, other people besides the priest may go into trance, being possessed by gods or demons. Quite often, the persons entranced display quite unusual behavior, from trying to stab themselves, to killing animals by severing their heads when they bite through the necks. The former behavior is usually displayed in the context of the classical *colongarang*, which displays in graphic fashion the conflict between evil, represented by the witch *rangda*, and the forces of good, represented by the *barong*. The followers of the forces of good try to attack *rangda*, but she forces them to turn the knives onto themselves, and they place the point of the knife on their breast, or sometimes their head or their face, as they writhe and often fall on the ground in a fit, but the forces of good protect them so that they do not hurt themselves.

I mentioned earlier that the Balinese are concerned about balancing the upper world and the lower world, and they make offerings to both forces. The offering most enjoyed by the degenerative forces are blood sacrifices. These can be in the form of a chicken sacrificed at the beginning of a ceremony, but more dramatic examples occur, also. For instance, there is one ceremony which I witnessed in the mountains of Bali in which members of the congregation go into trance, possessed by demonic forces. Temple priests hold up baby chicks, which are grabbed by these entranced persons, and they proceed to bite off their heads, and chew and swallow the heads.

Another exceptional experience that is commonplace in Bali is what we would call a paranormal healing. There are a wide variety of healers in Bali (Thong, Carpenter et al. 1993). Some of them follow the traditional system propounded in the *Lontars*, the closest thing that might be called the Balinese scriptures (Weck 1937/1986), while others feel that they have been given special powers, or they use objects in their healing which they believe have special power.

These healers can practice either white magic or black magic, and their methods are quite diverse.

### **Reproduction of Exceptional Experiences**

Exceptional experiences occur in all cultures; the question is not whether they exist in a culture, but how often they exist and whether or not there are cultural practices that increase the likelihood of their occurring. Cultures which value exceptional experiences will find ways to reproduce them, to integrate them and make them an ongoing part of the culture. In a culture like Bali, where exceptional experiences occur with such regularity, we would expect there to be specific cultural practices that encourage them. Not only is there a worldview which gives central place to exceptional experiences, but there need to be mechanisms that encourage them.

In an article exploring cultural differences, especially contrasting Japanese and American cultures, Markus, Mullally & Kitayama (1997) introduced a term that is useful, “selfways.” They point out that the self is “a social phenomenon” (p. 14), and that “the self is realized through participation in cultural practices” (p. 13).<sup>iii</sup> The idea is that people in culture routinely behave in certain ways, or the language encourages certain kinds of behaviors or attitudes, and these point beyond themselves as specific behaviors; they, rather, develop a particular selfway, a way of being in the world. As an example, Markus et al point out that individualism is encouraged in the United States by encouraging children to grow up and be independent by giving each child a separate room, and by certain advertisements, for instance the one by Burger King that says, “Have it your way, right away.” Such practices not only reflect individualism, but they encourage individualism. These are practices that reproduce the idea of individualism

and individualistic behavior. These practices are the ways that the culture insures that individualism will reproduce itself.

Likewise, the Balinese culture supports their own particular selfways. I want to quickly examine several of the cultural practices that exist in Bali to reproduce exceptional experience, focusing on trance. The first thing that should be noticed is that the context for trance experiences are routinized; they are constant and ongoing. If you leave aside mediumship, most trance possession takes place in temple ceremonies. With something like 20,000 temples in Bali, excluding the hundreds of thousands of family temples (Lansing 1983), major ceremonies take place all the time in Bali and with astounding regularity in any community, as there are at least three major temples in even the smallest Balinese village. Each of these temples has a major “anniversary,” an *odalan*, usually based on the lunar calendar, every 210 days. But there are a myriad other occasions for smaller ceremonies, and children participate wholly in these, coming dressed in their temple outfits, just like adults, and participating from early childhood in praying in the temple. To me it was almost a shock to see children so young being acculturated by praying and making offerings in the temple; but they are also with their parents watching the trance, no matter how late at night. In late December, as I was doing research in Bali, I finally left at 2:00 a.m. from a ceremony that was still ongoing, and even the youngest kids were there and watching.

Further, there are trance club organizations for young people who take care of the special sacred masks, who help in trance ceremonies, and who often themselves go into trance (Eiseman, 1989), so the expectation of trance is acculturated in social organization.

A final practice I will mention is the *wayan kulit* shadow puppet theater. The shadows become representations of a transcendent world, and the experience is a participation in that transcendent world. The children particularly love the shadows flickering across the screen, and the *dalang* (special priest for the *wayang*) narrates the story humorously and applies it to Balinese life, bringing together the invisible and visible worlds, as happens in a trance possession.

I hope that I have shown, through using Balinese examples, that exceptional experiences need two factors to reproduce themselves: a worldview in which exceptional experiences are given a place (in a sense, not thought of as exceptional. Even if they don't happen routinely), and cultural practices, which encourage these experiences to be reproduced. I would now like to turn to the topic of how we as Westerners should try to understand these exceptional experiences found in nonEuroAmerican cultures, focusing on animism.

### **A RELATIONAL INTERPRETATION OF EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE**

One of the problems we face in understanding exceptional experiences, particularly in non-EuroAmerican culture, is how we should understand them, and typically we understand them from our own cultural constructs. We assume that other people think like we do, but given that their description of the world is so different from ours, we wonder if that could be true. Since its inception, anthropology has wrestled with this problem, trying to understand, for instance, animism, which we gloss as a view which asserts that souls or spirits are in all objects. Given that this view is so contrary to our understanding of the world, we wonder whether these cultures really do see the world that way, and whether these so-called “primitives” think in a primitive

way, so different from us. I would like to investigate this question by examining the idea of animism, which is important in Bali, as I have indicated that it is one of the four sources of the Balinese worldview. Based on a new interpretation of animism, I will try to offer a reinterpretation of what may be occurring in paranormal healing, a case of exceptional experience.

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1831-1917), who is taken to be the founder of modern anthropology, wrestled with the question of animism and how to understand it. From our perspective in this session, concerned with exceptional experiences, it is interesting that Tylor took an interest in the spiritualist movement, and he tried to explain animism based on his understanding of spiritualism; indeed, he considered using the term “spiritualism,” rather than “animism,” to describe this “savage” view. Spiritualism thought of there being a soul which animated life and which was a kind of “ghost-soul,” capable of leaving the body after death and reentering a body in trance possession. However, Tylor was a convinced 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific rationalist, and just as he thought séance phenomena to be delusional, he also thought that animism was delusional. He thought that much as undeveloped children had trouble differentiating animate from inanimate objects, so these “primitives” could not make that distinction, even as adults, and their thinking that souls inhabited inanimate objects, therefore, was primitive, and childlike.

I want to rely on Bird-David’s (1999) reinterpretation of animism, but I will take it in a different direction and apply it differently; however, I am much indebted to her insights. Although she doesn’t talk about atomism, she wants to emphasize a relational worldview in understanding animism. Remember that atomism asserts that reality is ultimately composed of independent units existing in a void, so that the separateness of these substantial units is

emphasized. Even when combining with other atoms, the individual atoms retain their own nature, although emergent properties may result from the combination. Atoms are the building blocks in this view of the world. According to atomism, just as spiritualists think of a mind (or soul) as an independent, mental atom that can leave the body at death and can possess another body, so animism is usually thought to refer to inanimate objects also possessing a primitive form of a mental atom.

Juxtapose this view to a relational view, one which I described before, in which the basic unit is not the individual, but it is the relationship. Bird-David uses a term taken from Strathern (1988) in calling the elements that participate in the relationship “dividuals,” rather than the individuals of atomism. This term, or something similar to it, has the merit of pointing out, first, that one cannot understand a dividual except in relationship, and, secondly, that individuals are not lost in a relationship, but they are poles or termini in the relationship. Bird-David believes that the term “dividual” serves to objectify the sharing relationship, and it puts a focus on the priority of social engagement. She says, “When I dividuate her I am conscious of how she relates with me. This is not to say that I am conscious of the relationship with her “in itself,” as a thing. Rather, I am conscious of the *relatedness* with my interlocutor, *as I engage with her*, attentive to what she does in relation to what I do, to how she talks and listens to me as I talk and listen to her, to what happens simultaneously and mutually to me, to her, to *us* (Bird-Davis, 1999, p. 72). Just as we have special relations with people, sensing the concreteness and connection in that relationship, we can also relate in that same way with other parts of the environment. In this view, there are dividual personalities in engagement, responding to others, who in turn reciprocally respond, and we are engaged in a continually changing relationship. Bird-David says that when we talk about a soul, we are designating a mutually shared

relationship, and we are not making a mental representation or talking about a mental atom that is out there. Rather, we are gesturing toward a sharing relationship. In animism, I can have a sharing experience in an array of relationships that are not constricted by those we call human relationships; it does not point to an atomic dualistic (subject/object) relationship. Rather, I simply expect mutual respect and response from an animated dividual.

Using this understanding of animism, can we reinterpret our understanding of exceptional experience? I take as an example of paranormal healing an extraction of the object which by our western standards is mooted to be a case of sleight-of-hand. Don't misunderstand me; an investigation based on our standards of whether or not sleight-of-hand is involved is quite legitimate and insightful; I simply do not want to stop there, assuming that both we and the indigenous people are living in the same world and are understanding the event in the same way. Reichbart (1978) has acknowledged that many traditional societies incorporate sleight-of-hand techniques in their rituals. But he also points out that the same healers who use these techniques, when they become ill and although they have access to western medicine, will go to another traditional healer where the same techniques are used. So, something else may be going on here besides simple sleight-of-hand.

Previously, I (Edge, Morris et al. 1986) have given a possible explanation of this phenomenon based on the importance of belief, that the slight of hand increases belief in the patient, which sets the stage for healing, and something like that may be happening. But another way of looking at the phenomenon can incorporate the insights we gain from a relational worldview. The healer may be setting up a special and mutual relationship not only with the patient, but with the illness, not thinking of it as the "other" that must be attacked, that must be conquered, or that must be killed, not an object that the subject must eliminate. Rather, an

interactive relationship of mutually expected responses may be occurring. Rather than thinking of healing as an act of a subject on an object, like hitting a nail with a hammer, perhaps we need to think of healing as taking place in a system.

Certain attributes can be better thought of as belonging to systems rather than (merely) to subjects. For instance, friendship exists between two persons, and it is not a result merely of the attributes of the two friends. Two people can be thought of as caring persons individually, but the relationship that results may not produce a healthy, caring relationship (because the two personalities don't "match"--two highly caring persons may, for instance, create a co-dependent relationship rather than a healthy one). Conversely, two personalities that seem mismatched may form a relationship, a system, that is energized beyond what is found in either person and perhaps transforming and healing the system. I'm merely gesturing towards a new way of thinking of the healing process that is consistent with the reinterpretation of animism. In other words, it may be the relationship that heals, not a subject exerting a force over an object. Perhaps this is more understandable in a culture like Bali, which sees illness as a product of being out of balance and healing as a process of becoming balanced. In healing there is nothing "other" that needs to be fought, but rather one must assume a relationship with it and let the relationship come into balance in that relatedness. The extraction of the object may simply be an external exemplification or manifestation of the righting of the relationship, of bringing something out of balance back into balance. It is a visible response to an invisible relationship.

I do not want to say that this interpretation is the correct one, even if we become convinced that something like this seems to be happening in Balinese culture. My point is, rather, that we ought to appreciate a multiplicity of explanations, ones which incorporate cultural sensitivity. Where I think we go wrong is in assuming that there is one correct interpretation; this approach

assumes a kind of essentialism that many philosophers have been suspicious of for decades. I am not opposed, for instance, at all to scientific explanations, which are taken to be trans-cultural; indeed, I believe that they are the best kind that we have going in most contexts. However, I am opposed to the hegemony of any perspective. I am just as opposed to saying we ought to accept the indigenous explanation as the “real” explanation. But this brings up another topic that I cannot pursue here. What I think is important is that we should not assume that our western perspective is the only one or necessarily the right one in all contexts; just as there is pluralism of cultures, just as nature has offered up a variety of legitimate ways of living in the world, so we need to respect these different ways, especially in dealing with those phenomena which we call, from our western perspective, exceptional experiences.

#### ADDENDUM

If we look at the ordinary conception of space in the west, we understand it in the Newtonian sense; we simply have not been able to incorporate in our ordinary thinking Einsteinean notions of the space/time continuum. In the ordinary world, Newton seems to reign and space is conceived as absolute and as objective. The way to understand space in this view is to map a kind of coordinate system on it as we do with latitude and longitude. In this view, every point of space is neutral, that is, it is just like every other point of space. The difference is that one point in space is located at a different coordinate from another, and it can be described absolutely as lying at a particular coordinate, as we would locate Bali between 8 and 9 degrees latitude and around 115 degrees longitude. Using these coordinates, we have defined it absolutely in spatial terms. Insofar as we would ascribe other qualities to space, for instance by saying this is a beautiful place, what we really think we are doing is not describing space but our own subjective

attitudes about a particular location; space itself is objective and has no such subjective qualities. Likewise, north is north and south is south, and both have their particular absolute directions.

To the Balinese (Lansing 1983), the upper world is up; in this sense it is a classical ouranian (Wheelwright 1960) religion. Therefore, mountains are important as places for the gods, and particularly the highest mountain, *Gunung Agung*, where the Mother Temple has been built. Conversely, the lower world is in the nether regions and since the holy mountain is in the center of East Bali and from that the land slopes down into the sea, the home of the demons is toward the sea. The Balinese relational world takes this idea and applies it in several ways. Just as reality can be conceived of as having three worlds—the upper world, the middle world, and the lower world—so physically Bali has these three worlds—the sacred mountains, mainland Bali, and the demonic sea. But any object is thought of in this way, so that a head is considered most sacred while the feet are considered the least sacred. In Bali, it is inappropriate to pat a kid on the head; and for the first three months, a baby's feet are not allowed to touch the ground, since the reincarnated soul in the baby is still so close to the divine that it should not be brought into contact with that less sacred world. Architecturally, the top part of a building corresponds to the upper world, while it also has columns, representing the middle world, and the columns rest on a base, its feet.

Another way they talk about space is to refer to the Sacred Mountain as north, since a majority of the population live in south Bali, the Sacred Mountain lies in the direction that we would call north. But north to them means toward the Sacred Mountain, so that if one were in North Bali, north would literally be south by our reckoning. What is important about the direction is not its relationship to a magnetic field, or where it is in a coordinate system, but its

direction toward the sacred. The fact that North is sacred is more to the point than any absolute direction.

They incorporate this notion of living in space in a third way. Not only is north on the island of Bali sacred, but the direction has sacredness wherever you live on Bali. For instance, not only villages are aligned in an axis toward the holy mountain, but also family compounds are. If one were blindfolded and taken anywhere in Bali and plunked down, one could immediately know Balinese directions because of the orientation of the compound. Each family compound has a family temple that is in the most sacred position: the north (actually, the northeast), while the living quarters are in the middle, and in the southwestern corner is the kitchen and pig sty. Space to the Balinese, therefore, is not a matter of placement on a coordinate system, but more a matter of sacred direction, and they apply this notion to all spatial concepts. There is no absolute point of space in Bali, but Bali is necessarily defined in terms of its relatedness and spiritual orientation, which is precisely how one ought to live one's life. If someone gives you directions in Bali, they might not tell you to turn left or right, but they may tell you to turn east or north, since all Balinese at all times must be aware of this sacred spatial orientation.

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<sup>i</sup> I am going to focus my talk on extraordinary experiences in non-EuroAmerican cultures. We often talk about Western cultures and Eastern cultures, or Western culture vs. non-Western culture, and this approach gives us a handy reference, but it is also a bit dangerous. Not only am I referring to the problems of colonialism and the danger of indigenous cultures being defined and even accepting the definition of Other (Said 1978), but also this contrast is problematic. There are a variety of cultures in the West with respect to the importance of fundamental ideas. For instance, individualism seems to be a fundamental ideology in America, and it is also important in, say Germany, but there are also collectivist tendencies there where, as happened to me many years ago, a person feels free to tell you explicitly that one is not participating properly in the culture if you jaywalk or if you cross the street against the light (Triandis 1995). And when you go to cultures where extended families are important in southern Europe, for instance, or in South America, one has strong non-individualist values.

And, yet, if we think it is hard to generalize about cultures in the West, just think about the variety of cultures in Africa, in Asia, or simply think about the extraordinary variety of cultures in the country of Indonesia. The difference is overwhelming!

What am I to do in light of the richness of cultures? With your patience and understanding, I hope that you will allow me at times to generalize about EuroAmerican culture and non-EuroAmerican culture, knowing that life is much more varied and interesting than what I ever could talk about. But, sometimes generalizations are helpful in getting us to focus, and surely painting in broad strokes can still produce a valuable work.

<sup>ii</sup> Clifford Geertz (1983) expresses it the following way: “The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures” (p. 59).

<sup>iii</sup> In turn, “practices” are defined by Miller and Goodnow (1995) as “actions that are repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations, meaning, or significance that go beyond the immediate goals of the action” (p. 7).