



Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



Special Issue Fieldwork in Religion: Bodily Experience and Ethnographic Knowledge edited by Emily Pierini and Alberto Groisman

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This Special Issue examines the construction of *ethnographic knowledge* in researching among participants of religious and spiritual groups through the lenses of bodily experience.

Articles discuss the methodological implications of engaging the scholarly body in the field and the ways in which to convey these experiences through ethnography, by addressing the empirical, ethical, epistemological, relational, political and analytical implications of this significant aspect of fieldwork.

Authors are particularly concerned with religious and spiritual groups whose practices imply the use of techniques, resources, plants, substances and other strategies used in religious contexts to modify the states of consciousness.

They ask specifically how does the researcher's experience in researching among these groups inform the production of ethnographic knowledge? In which way does it redefine our analytical categories, and even the way we approach the experiences of participants in these groups? Up to which extent do our interlocutors expect us to know about their experiences and practices?

Assessing critically their own experiences and their implications, they raise issues associated with contemporary debates around concepts of 'knowledge' and 'belief', 'body', 'self' and 'personhood', 'health' and 'illness' in religious contexts.

Table of Contents

Introduction. Fieldwork in Religion: Bodily Experience and Ethnographic Knowledge

Emily Pierini and Alberto Groisman.....1

Full Participation and Ethnographic Reflexivity. An Afro-Brazilian Case Study

Arnaud Halloy.....7

Embodied Encounters: Ethnographic Knowledge, Emotions and Senses in the Vale do Amanhecer's Spirit Mediumship

Emily Pierini.....25

Daime Religions, Mediumship and Religious Agency: Health and the Fluency of Social Relations

Alberto Groisman.....50

Studying the Body in Rastafari Rituals: Spirituality, Embodiment and Ethnographic Knowledge

Anna Waldstein.....71

Spirits, Spies and Lies in Havana: Unwitting and Paranoid Entanglements between the Ethnographer and the Field

Diana Espirito Santo.....87

Immersion in Experiencing the Sacred: Insights into the Ethnography of Religion

Stefania Palmisano.....105

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Introduction. Fieldwork in Religion: Bodily Experience and Ethnographic Knowledge

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The study of religious experience challenges researchers to think through the ways of approaching people's lifeworlds and innerscapes especially when dealing with other intangible worlds and selves involved in their spiritual practices. Before expecting others to be aware of, disclose and articulate their worlds, this challenge demands the development of ethnographic skills that include an awareness of the researcher's own experiences, bodies, and selves, while immersed in other people's ways of life and in the process of knowing in the field.

Knowledge and ethnography have been articulated as categories in a fundamental way to demarcate the constitution and trajectory of anthropology as a field of study. Although authors such as Tim Ingold have stated that ethnography is not synonymous of anthropology (Ingold 2006), it is undeniable that the ethnographic inspiration guides the work of anthropologists. Rather than just being a 'method' or a particular way of presenting data, it is possible to see ethnography as a *dispositive* (Foucault 1979) shaping thoroughly anthropological work from research design to the ways of narrating the 'empirical' experience. 'Empirical' as broadly understood: not only what we do while 'being there' (Geertz 1988), but also in the sense of seeking while 'being here' to evoke elements selected from a whole research experience and convert them in a text. And it is considering ethnography as a dispositive that involves not only the 'intellectual' activity of the scholar, but also the researcher as person and agent, that we proposed the organisation of a debate around the 'bodily experience,'—which could also be called 'embodied experience'—of researching in the field of religion. This consideration implies a methodological, ethical and epistemological appeal to transcend the rationalist and intellectualist notion that our 'passage' in the field is just about disembodied techniques of 'data collection.' This appeal has found a fertile ground in the discussions raised from the session 'Bodily Dimension, Experience, and Ethnographic Research' that we have organised at the 33rd Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion on 'Sensing Religion' (Université

Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) in 2015; a discussion which was then extended to other colleagues laying the foundation for this Volume.

This Special Issue examines the construction of *ethnographic knowledge* in researching among participants of religious and spiritual groups through the lenses of bodily experience. Whilst the scholarly epistemology around issues of reflexivity, positionality, participant observation and sensory ethnography is becoming more popular in different fields, when it comes to religious and spiritual experience the question seems to enter an insidious territory challenging established categories and positions. Most likely this field is still affected by the legacy of a 19th and early 20th centuries' scholarly activism that consisted in the attempt to remove any traces of 'religious' behaviour from the scholars' activities and paradigms, resulting paradoxically in the consolidation of some dogmas, such as the criteria of 'neutrality', 'distancing' and 'objectivity.' Within this attempt to separate the 'religious' from the 'scientific', it seems that the experiences of researchers in the broadest sense, including laboratory experiments, only become legitimate if the results were presented in a depersonalised form in the writing of scientific texts. Other relevant aspects of the reflection upon and systematisation of the research activity were either suppressed or relegated to the anecdotal, such as: the relationship between the researcher and his/her collaborators, their coexistence and dialogue, and significantly, intuition and other forms of insight. However, researchers in the fields of anthropology and sociology have considered these 'other' aspects of their engagement in the field—often involving spiritual experiences and practices—as a valuable tool for field research, opening up new avenues for ethnographic insight, implying different dimensions to reflect about. Articles in this Issue discuss the methodological implications of engaging the 'scholarly body' in the field and the ways in which to convey these experiences through ethnography, by addressing the empirical, ethical, epistemological, relational, political and analytical implications of this significant aspect of fieldwork.

Earlier edited collections in the field of anthropology have tackled a variety of 'extraordinary experiences' in the field and their transformative outcome for both the researchers and their research agendas, including the attempt to treat their interlocutors' claims seriously (Young and Goulet 1994; Goulet and Granville-Miller 2007). Moreover, anthropologists such as José Jorge Carvalho (1992) and Rita Laura Segato (1993) raised the importance of thinking about the experience of the field as initiatory, and of avoiding the reification of religious experience in rationalising categories that ultimately disqualify these experiences and disregard the perspectives of those who experience them.

This Issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* is particularly concerned with religious and spiritual groups whose practices imply the use of techniques, resources, plants, substances and other strategies used in religious contexts to modify the states of consciousness. We ask specifically how does the researcher's experience of researching among these groups inform the production of ethnographic knowledge? In which way does it redefine our analytical categories, and even the way we approach—particularly in terms of epistemological implications—the experiences of participants in these groups?

In practices in which knowledge is accessed by means of the body, ethnographers should tackle their own bodiliness in the process of knowing in the field, exploring concepts through the cultivation of cognitive and bodily skills, as Pierini notes in this Volume. The common thread unfolding across these contributions is that concepts such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’, ‘body’, ‘self’ and ‘personhood’, ‘health’ and ‘illness’ arise from the felt immediacy of the field. Questioning their own experiences and their implications, authors raise issues that are associated with contemporary debates, such as putting under scrutiny the concept of belief.

The concept of ‘belief’ is undermined by an empirical and embodied knowledge. Emily Pierini considers ‘belief’ as a ‘territory of contested categories’ often leading to reductive and pathologising approaches, thus, she proposes to reframe cognition within the body shifting the analytical stance from belief to experience, understanding the practice of spirit mediumship as ‘a way of knowing’. ‘Concepts of “belief”’, argues Diana Espirito Santo, ‘crystallise notions of extra-human agency as epiphenomena of the mental processes of “believers”’ whereas knowing is the context of belief. Arnaud Halloy describes Afro-Brazilian Candomblé as ‘a religion of “experience”, a “phenomenopraxis” to some extent, constructed on an experiential expertise’.

A clear implication of these problematisations is the evocation of the notion of ‘being affected’ by lived experience. Moving along the legacy of Jeanne Favret-Saada, authors in this issue reflect upon the methodological implications of ‘being affected’ (1980, 1990). They have participated in and engaged themselves to different extent—cognitively, emotionally, or bodily—with the practices of the people with whom they were researching.

Anna Waldstein, cultivating her body among Rastafari in the UK through clothing, growing hair, meditating, and paying attention to embodiment, came to experience through heightened sensory awareness the *Ini*, namely the underlining the force that connects self and other. The intersubjective dimension of the self is therefore accessed through the researcher’s sensory experience challenging Cartesian ontologies.

Pierini, re-educated her perception in learning semi-conscious trance whilst researching on mediumistic experience in the Brazilian Vale do Amanhecer, and by sharing her experience with her interlocutors allowed for a notion of a ‘multidimensional’ and ‘extended’ self to emerge, which extends beyond the body to connect with spirits, and beyond space and time through different past lives. She argues that these notions of the body and the self grounded in experience informed conceptualisations of trance and she stresses their relevance for the mediums’ spiritual and therapeutic trajectories.

Alberto Groisman analyses his experiences of interaction with spiritual beings incorporated by mediums whilst conducting research on ayahuasca and mental health in a Daime religion in Brazil. Rather than approaching these experiences as anecdotes from the field he stresses their centrality in the participants’ lives, as well as in the relationships between researcher and spiritual entities. On one occasion he realised he had not asked the permission of the spirit of a *preta velha* Vó Nadir to display images of her incorporation in a ceremony, in a scientific event paper. Thus, he evokes his participation in these religious events as crucial to grasp the intersubjective nature of spiritual healing and therapy in Daime religions, marked by an intense relation with

spiritual beings, which calls to rethink Western concepts and approaches to mediumship and mental health.

Authors reject the idea that ethnographic participation implies 'going native', they rather assess issues of ethnographic objectivity and examine the reliability of the data gathered through their approaches, focussing upon the methodological rigor demanded in the stage of analysis and writing up. Waldstein notes that participation 'does not preclude later reflection on such experiences from an anthropological point of view.'

Holley intends that an objectifying distance should not translate as 'cold indifference' towards one's affects or interlocutors in the field, rather it may be employed to address rigorously the ethnographic knowledge produced by the ethnographer's full participation. Reflecting upon his experiences of being possessed in the Afro-Brazilian *Xangô*, he urges the need to cultivate epistemological attitude and skills for 'empathic resonance' and 'introspective expertise' through techniques of self-observation, and identifies a three-fold strategy of reflexivity that may account for the 'scientific' nature of the paper.

Pierini questions the assumption of 'going native', especially within a religious group. She proposes an analysis discerning where relevant local categories from Western scholarly epistemologies and considering how they are produced in terms of experience; an analysis which comprises the reflexive attention to the ethnographer's bodily experience 'as a way of becoming skilled in local ways of knowing and communicating, producing common grounds of interaction in the field'.

Whilst proximity and participation may facilitate access to certain kinds of knowledge and events, it may suddenly interdict others or even determine a transformation in the relations with interlocutors. In contexts where knowledge defines social positions we may ask up to which extent do our interlocutors expect us to know about their experiences and practices?

Stefania Palmisano presents an analysis of her interrupted process of conversion into Reconstruction in Prayer, a Catholic movement in Northern Italy, occurred during her fieldwork in that community. Whilst in the process of engaging herself with practices such as meditation, yoga, dancing, and embracing their ascetic way of living and eating, she eventually got caught into the 'paradox of intimacy', whereby initial enhanced trust gained through 'participant immersion' in the field turned into restricted access to information as researcher. She reflects into the methodological, ethical and personal dilemmas she had to face as ethnographer undertaking 'participant immersion'. Nevertheless Palmisano argues in favour of her participatory approach, which on the one hand facilitated the understanding of peculiar processes that make the movement attractive for such a broad public; and on the other helped overcoming the 'observational perturbation' caused by the presence of a researcher in the group and to grasp what people actually do besides the discourses they construct around their practices.

Diana Espirito Santo while researching among Cuban Espiritistas was accused by a close interlocutor of being a spy of the Cuban Government. Analysing the suspicion and mistrust through the economy of knowing of Afro-Cuban religions, Espirito Santo tackles reflexively her proximity and eventually understands the *field* as configured

through the relationships and the processes of knowing in which the ethnographer is embedded 'emotionally, sensually, spiritually' both with tangible and intangible selves. In addressing reflexively the sudden overturning of their position in the field, both Palmisano and Espirito Santo managed to illuminate relational processes and knowledge construction both in these religious groups and in ethnography.

The contributions in this Special Issue are the result of initiatives and processes of exploration of and reflection on fieldwork experience. They imply a sense of commitment to a perspective that each elaborated work has methodological, ethical, epistemological and political implications. And that an ethnographic text should be inscribed by self-reflexivity, along with a serious and symmetric consideration of what people—who are also active participants in a 'project of knowing'—think and do. This includes the experiences and relationships that researchers establish along their empirical and analytical trajectories. In this sense, ethnography is a 'balance' or an ascertainment, a direct or indirect narrative of the events experienced with others, or of processes triggered in the intimacy of the researcher and/or with his/her interlocutors, or of their trajectories. This reflection—as some of the authors maintain—does not intend the participatory experiences discussed in this Special Issue as a prescribed condition of ethnography. In fact, as Halloy suggests, it may not be recommended in certain contexts where religious knowledge may not be entirely disclosed to non-initiated, unprepared individuals or to specific groups of population.

Our aim is to raise questions that may contribute to the contemporary debates on religious experience and the bodily and affective dimensions involved in ethnographic research. In doing so, not only will the contributions in this Special Issue impact upon the reflection on ethnographic knowledge production in different fields, but they may also call us to broadly consider the status and flow of the relationships established in our work, so that we may increasingly be able to dialogue with those 'others' in many ways who constitute the *raison d'être* of our ethnographic research: a) the 'other' selves in the field with whom we engage in a project of knowing during the experience of the ethnographic encounter; b) our own 'otherness', in the sense that the theoretical task also includes the empirical research upon our experience of becoming in the field, which as Goldman suggests—drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari (1980)—does not rest upon imitation or identification with the native point of view, but 'is a movement by which a subject leaves her own condition through a relation of affections that she can establish with another condition' (Goldman 2003: 464); c) and the 'other' scholars with whom we engage to ground our theoretical reflections. In sum, the works collected in this Special Issue contribute to reflect and debate on the process and the experience of living and thinking the various forms of relationships and frontiers we found as researchers in the contemporary world.

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