
Divination, Possession, and Witchcraft: Studying Religious Expressions as a Christian

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As an anthropologist who is also a Christian I regularly engage with people who have religious expressions and spiritual interests that differ from my own. I have witnessed divination, sacrifices, and possession, and researched witchcraft. In principle, I do not wish to get personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God, especially if it entails participating in their worship or seeking their favor. Since I found little help in the available literature, I needed to develop my own position. Taking a reflexive and experiential stance, I draw on my background, the people I engage with, and my experience of doing fieldwork. While both anthropologists and missionaries have often viewed religions other than Christianity reductively, I propose that we take people seriously by adopting an empathic attitude. This works well with an ontological, relational, and collaborative approach to anthropology that focuses on studying with people.

The drums play their fast and enticing rhythm. Women, men, and children gather under the shelter in front of the Vodun shrine. The priest has moved his Vodun out onto a small table and sits in front of it. Others join in anticipation, now making up a small crowd of over thirty. As the morning progresses and the sweltering heat builds, the priest finally starts the proceedings with divination. The two halves of a kola nut fall favorably and the sacrificed chicken dies in a good position. Things are well, the ceremony can begin. Suddenly, a woman jerks violently and falls into the arms of another woman. She is led into the room of the Vodun behind the priest and reemerges after a while, now quietly moving to the rhythm of the drums, her face without expression, her eyes closed. A few other women and a couple of men follow. One of the men who is taken by the Vodun holds a knife and tries to cut his left arm, but it does not harm him. People enjoy the event and are pleased with the Vodun and how it manifests itself among them. (Anecdote based on observing a Vodun ceremony, southern Togo, October 1995.)

I attended the event described above in October 1995 at a Vodun or “voodoo” shrine in a village near the city of Lomé, Togo. Events like these that feature possession are part of everyday life in this part of the world, and many anthropologists find them particularly

interesting (see, e.g., Boddy 1994; Montgomery 2017; Rosenthal 1998). Judy Rosenthal, for example, recalls: “I was seduced by all I saw and heard and I wanted very much to merge into the trance state with the spirit hosts” (1998, 7). I, too, was keen to learn more about other people’s religious expressions, but I attended the event with apprehension. Indeed, I felt uneasy from the start. The flurry of different and strange activities felt overwhelming. What was going on? Could I be possessed as well? What had I got myself into? As the ceremony progressed, my unease grew into anxiety. I came close to walking off. Instead, I prayed and stayed to the end.

This event proved significant for me as a Christian and an aspiring anthropologist. I spent some time in Lomé before starting my first research project in the Republic of Benin for my master’s degree (Merz 1998), and I wanted to try out my newly learned research skills. With the help of a local acquaintance, I contacted two Vodun priests in villages outside the city, learned about them and their work and was invited to attend one of their regular ceremonies the following week.

Attending the Vodun ceremony was not only important for me professionally, since it prepared me for future research, but equally central to me personally, since this was the first time I had witnessed a non-Christian ceremony. I realized I had to address

my anxiety about other people's religious expressions, as well as doubts about their validity, but I found little help in the anthropological and missiological literature that I had knowledge of and access to at the time.

In this article, I reflect as an anthropologist who identifies as a Christian on my encounters with people who have religious expressions and spiritual interests that differ from mine. Since I have not always been satisfied with either secular or religious perspectives on other people (Merz and Merz 2017), I am presenting my own approach about how I engage with my counterparts. I started to formulate it during my studies in anthropology in the early 1990s, used it for the first time during my fieldwork in 1995-1996, and have refined it since. I do not wish to present a normative argument, but rather share my experience of doing anthropological fieldwork and reflect on it from today's perspective. In order to do so, I draw on the literature I find directly relevant, whether it comes from anthropology, missiology, comparative religion, or psychology. I hope that others might find my reflections interesting and helpful.

From the perspective of my Christian faith, I have experienced the one we call God, the origin of everyone and everything, and I seek to follow Jesus Christ. As I reflect on how I, as a human and an anthropologist, should relate to other people, I find most of my inspiration in the Bible: Genesis starts with humans being created in God's image, which provides the basis for assuming the unity of humankind in its full diversity, both in Christian theology and anthropology (Larsen and King 2018). The Gospels are about Jesus—God who became human—whose life and teaching focused on people as social and relational beings (J. Merz 2021a). For me, Jesus' advice is crucial: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6, 31).¹ In other words, he called us to be empathic in relating to others, whether friend or foe; that is to strive to understand the feelings of others and engage with them with respect and love.

Based on this, I seek to relate to other people empathically, regardless of who they are, what their background is, or where they come from. This means that I endeavor to be open to anyone irrespective of their spiritual interests or religious practices, but I choose not to get directly and personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God, such as spirits or demons.

I have organized this article into three parts. In the first part, I address the challenges I experience as a Christian doing fieldwork with people of other religious expressions and spiritual interests. I start with epistemological questions about the existence of the devil and demons, since this has often been the framework in which missionaries and other Christians have sought to understand other people's religions. I then discuss the emotions of uneasiness, anxiety, and doubt I felt during the Vodun ceremony. Did I experience a case of what Christians sometimes call spiritual oppression? I acknowledge that there is a link between spiritual experiences and emotions, and see them as part of doing fieldwork and experiencing new and unfamiliar practices and ways of life. Reflecting on such issues leads me to formulate my position towards people who have other religious expressions and spiritual interests.

In part two, I situate my experience and position of doing fieldwork within current anthropology by discussing its theoretical and methodological bases. Anthropologists and missionaries have often dealt with studying religion and other spiritual phenomena, including witchcraft, from an epistemological perspective of beliefs. Some anthropologists have also taken a more experiential approach, often by arguing for the need to take the people we study seriously without being reductive. This leads me to advocate for a relational approach to anthropology that builds on the current trend of studying human experience and action, often from an ontological perspective (Knauff 2024). This includes considering our emotions as we engage with other people, nonhuman entities, and the world around us. By using what I call empathic and critical reflexivity, I seek to understand other people and take them seriously, while also remaining critical and analytical. I conclude this part by claiming that anthropology is a collaborative effort in which we need to "study *with* people" (Ingold 2017, 23, emphasis in original).

In the third and final part, I move from theory to practice. Having presented my approach to anthropology, I then exemplify how it has worked out for me in past fieldwork, when I was collaborating with Jonas Gnammi, a local pastor and veterinary technician. Fieldwork is always messy and I find that sticking to my position and approach does not always work out as I would like. As I get relationally entangled with people

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of other religious expressions and spiritual interests, I often find myself pulled into witnessing activities I might not naturally be inclined to observe. Having had a trusted local person to collaborate with, who was also a Christian, often helped me to navigate difficult situations.

Part 1: My Position

In this part, I explain my position as an anthropologist who is also a Christian towards studying religious expressions other than my own. Taking a reflexive and experiential stance, I draw on my background, the people I engage with, and my experience of doing fieldwork.

On the Devil and Demons

I grew up in the Swiss Reformed Church, where the devil, demons, and other spirits were hardly talked about, and—at least so far—I had never knowingly experienced them directly. Over the years, however, I have met many people, who attest to the devil's and demons' existence and interference in their lives. Their experiences often concerned religious expressions other than Christian ones. This raises questions around the devil's and demons' existence.

In 1992, before I started my university studies, I did a six-month internship in Ghana, West Africa, with a faith-based NGO that focused on linguistic research, literacy, and Bible translation. Most of the people I got to know during this time were Christians who attended churches that had been founded by missionaries. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them, felt privileged to share a few months of my life with them, and relished in exploring other ways of being human and Christian.

At that time, the rise in Pentecostalism in West Africa was already underway (de Surgy 2001; Gifford 2004; Meyer 1992, 1995) and rumors of the devil and demons circulated, for example through Emmanuel Eni's *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness* (1991 [1987]). Within this framework, local religious expressions came to be reinterpreted as demonic. While I struggled to identify with such a perspective, I realized that my lack of understanding resulted from what Paul G. Hiebert calls "the excluded middle" (1982) and asked myself: "What if they are right and I am wrong?"

Other expatriate fellow-workers, as well as a few missionaries I got to know while in Ghana, shared

rumors of missionaries and anthropologists who had allegedly become involved in what my acquaintances considered demonic activities. They usually advised me to be careful about people of other spiritual orientations and to stay away from their activities and ceremonies, such as the ones I described in my opening anecdote (see also Kimmel 2019, 8-9).

On my return to Switzerland, I wanted to further explore other people's ideas and perspectives and so I started my studies in anthropology. Alongside this, I also read some of the Christian literature available in the early 1990s on demons, territorial spirits, and spiritual warfare (e.g. Wagner 1991; Warner 1991), but found such ideas questionable and flawed (Priest, Campbell, and Mullen 1995). Most of these writers approached the topic from a Pentecostal perspective, which tend towards dualistic ideas about God and the devil. While this corresponded neither with my experience of God nor with my understanding of biblical texts, neither could I ignore the views of people I got to know in Ghana.

I found in M. Scott Peck (1983), a psychiatrist who identifies as a Christian, a more nuanced and scholarly perspective, with which I could more easily connect. Discussing the question of human evil, he found a few instances of suspected possession by the devil, which he treated successfully by exorcism. This challenged me to accept that demons *do* exist, but Peck also opined that they manifest themselves considerably less often than implied in the Pentecostal literature on the topic.

As I studied anthropology, I also became interested in the religious practices and expressions that Christians in Ghana and elsewhere now often considered demonic. What were they really about? What would the practitioners themselves say about them? By then, it was clear to me that I could not—and would not—consider *everything* I observed as demonic. Rather, in line with anthropological principles, I need to be open to other people, their lives, thoughts, and practices (see, e.g., Stoller and Olkes 1987; Turner 1994; Wilson 1994).

This raises the often-neglected question of whether anthropologists expose themselves to psychological and spiritual risks when doing fieldwork. How far would I be happy to get involved with different people, especially when they have different spiritual orientations to me?

It was fairly clear to me that I did not wish to get personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God especially those

that involved participating in their worship or seeking their favor. This meant that I would not have accepted becoming a *sorko* praise-singer and healer in Niger like Paul Stoller (1984) or getting initiated as a *nganga* healer, following the example of Éric de Rosny (1981, 1992), a Catholic priest in Cameroon. Neither would I have accepted the invitation that Edith Turner (1994) received to act as one of the doctors in a local healing ritual in Zambia, nor would I have pushed into a funeral compound against the will of an elder in Ghana as Bruce T. Grindal (1983) did. All these people ended up with unanticipated spiritual experiences.

Doing fieldwork may be unpredictable, but I think that who we are—including our perspective, disposition, and spiritual orientation—significantly contributes to how we experience people and the world around us (Hiebert 2008). This, in turn, affects not only how we engage in doing research but also what we experience. As a Christian, I believe that keeping focused on God, both in attitude and prayer, reduces the likelihood of me confronting what other anthropologists have experienced when they took an active role in spiritual and religious activities: Stoller’s “repelling the force of a sorcerer” (1984, 110), Turner seeing a “spirit form” (1994, 88), or Grindal’s witnessing “the ancestors dance” (1983, 75).

I decided that I would be happy to approach various people and engage with them regardless of their specific spiritual orientations, including Vodou priests in southern Togo, but I would not ask them for services such as divination or performing sacrifices or other rituals for me, nor would I go against people’s wishes or challenge them about their spirituality or religious preferences. I do accept that there is more to the world than meets the eye, but I resist a simplistic and reductive view of demons often found among Pentecostals. Rather, I maintain that various nonhuman entities, such as angels, demons, and other spirits, have a similar status to humans in creation, and can be both good and evil, as well as anything in between (see also Lee 2025, 180-181). Basically, however, I do not wish to become relationally entangled with entities other than God, nor to get indebted to them.

As Christians, engaging with people of other spiritual orientations raises complex questions both about oneself and others (see, e.g., Kimmel 2019; Lee 2025). Dealing with them can easily lead to uneasiness, anxiety, and fear, or a sense of spiritual danger, which results from “the recognition that spiritual forces foreign to one’s tradition are both ontologically real

and existentially (as well as soteriologically) threatening” (Lee 2025, 174-175). At the same time, as Christians, we seek to retain our spiritual integrity, which Michael Rynkiewicz describes “like walking a tightrope and fearing that one might fall off toward ethnocentrism on the right or liberalism on the left” (2011, 134). This is also what I experienced when I attended the Vodou ceremony in 1995 (see opening anecdote). Not only did it leave me with many deep impressions but also questions to reflect on, including how I should interpret the emotions of uneasiness and anxiety I felt during the event.

Reflecting on Emotions

Emotions are foundational for who we are and how we think, live, and relate to others (see, e.g., Barrett 2017; Lutz and White 1986; Mesquita 2022). They also come to play in fieldwork, which is often messy and which many anthropologists typically experience as “physically, emotionally and existentially exhausting” (Nabhan-Warren 2022, 27) to the extent that “it can push us to the brink” (Nabhan-Warren 2022, 27).

Emotions have often been ignored or left at the margins of anthropological fieldwork. They need, however, to be seen as central to learning and understanding (Beatty 2014; Davies 2010; Hammerley and Atkinson 2019, 93-99; Lutz and White 1986; Wikan 1991). More specifically, Joanna Cook (2010) finds that anxiety and doubt are inherently part of fieldwork. Consequently, we need recognize them as part of doing fieldwork, deal with them and respond to them.

As it was the first time that I witnessed the phenomenon of possession during the Vodou ceremony I attended in 1995, it is not surprising, that I experienced uneasiness and anxiety. My feelings were real, but where did they come from and what did they mean?

I knew from other Christians from Europe and America that they can sense what they call “spiritual oppression,”—an awareness of the presence and influence of evil spiritual powers—for example when they venture into places like mosques, Hindu or Buddhist temples, or witness unfamiliar religious activities. In the past, I had never experienced specific emotions when visiting mosques or temples. Attending a Vodou ceremony, however, led me into uncharted territory. Did I experience the spiritual oppression that other Christians talked about? Had I put myself into a

situation of spiritual danger by exposing myself to demonic activity? Or did I simply react to a situation with which I was not familiar and which I struggled to make sense of?

It was clear to me that I experienced a prime instance of what I came to call—together with Sharon Merz—the ontological penumbra, which we understand as “an ambiguous and plural space in which we engage with various counterparts, both human and nonhuman” (Merz and Merz 2017, 1). It is the locus of anthropological research where our emotions, both positive and negative, can make us question our very being in light of the lives of others.

Following the Vodou ceremony, I could not find easy answers to my emotions, but my experience prepared me for my subsequent research in northwestern Benin, where I ended up working with different owners of Tigare and Nkunde shrines (see below), which are related to the Vodou shrines I had encountered in southern Togo (Merz 1998). By then, I had learned more about them, the ceremonies they hosted, and the people who participated in them. I attended further ceremonies and each time, I found that I could handle my emotions better. While I soon reached the point where I no longer felt anxious, my general uneasiness about attending such ceremonies continues.

When it came to attending other events of religious practice in northwestern Benin, I felt better prepared thanks to the writings of Hugo Huber (1968, 1973, 1979), an anthropologist and Catholic priest. During my fieldwork, I often observed people pouring libations and sacrificing to the ancestors, stone shrines, and other entities. People pronounce prayers and petitions to these entities and, depending on the purpose, they use water, millet beer, and sometimes animals. I learned that people do not worship these entities; rather, they address *Uwienu*, the creator God who had withdrawn from humanity. Since people can no longer relate to him directly, they now rely on ancestors and stone shrines, whom they consider closer to *Uwienu*, to act as mediators on their behalf.

Such ceremonies involving sacrifices were different from the Vodou ceremony I attended as there was no drumming, dancing, or possession. Yet, many local Christians condemn these activities as demonic, just as they condemn the Tigare and Nkunde shrines and their ceremonies. Why, then, do local sacrifices not evoke uneasiness for me while the Vodou, Tigare, and Nkunde ceremonies do?

It is well documented that anthropologists often start fieldwork “with insufficient knowledge and become . . . witness to mysterious events that cannot be comprehended” (Willerslev and Suhr 2018, 68). Cook (2010, 246) recognizes that anthropologists commit themselves to experiencing new and unfamiliar practices and ways of life, which typically leads to anxiety. Nutsa Batiashvili, Katie Rose Hejmanek, and Stéphanie Larchanché define anxiety “by excess of meaning, rather than by uncertain or unreal threats” (2025, 778). Accordingly, I find that most of my emotional reaction stems from encountering and dealing with what lies outside my sphere of experience and what I consider strange. During the Vodou ceremony, for example, I found my senses overstimulated, while I failed to interpret what was happening. This hampered my ability to make sense of what I experienced.

While I see a clear link between spiritual and religious experience and emotions (Luhman 2012), I cannot accept emotions as a general case of feeling what others call “spiritual oppression.” I find that life is far too complex and I cannot reduce all religious practices and spiritual phenomena that I fail to explain from my Christian perspective as manifestations of the devil or demons. I cannot be indifferent when I face other people’s religious practices and spiritual activities, but I want to resist judging them through *my* understanding of Christianity.

Whatever emotions are, they are primarily shaped by our environment and the relationships we engage in, but they are also biographical and experienced personally. This makes them difficult to recognize and address in general anthropological terms (Beatty 2014). Yet, emotions underpin the way we think (Barrett 2017; Mesquita 2022; Wikan 1991). This inevitably leads to different feelings and emotions towards religious practices and spiritual phenomena and thus to different views about them. People who would not refer to themselves as spiritual or religious, and have a tendency to rationalize or reduce spiritual or religious phenomena, still have emotions about them. When it comes to Christians, liberal ones are more inclined to explain spiritual phenomena through psychology, while Pentecostals tend to see demons, but all of them still have emotions. The diversity of people’s perspectives leads to different emotional reactions (see, e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991; Mesquita 2022; Mesquita and Frijda 1992).

Whatever our perspective is, we must be open to the views and opinions of others, while not neglecting

our convictions and commitments either. Resulting complexities, incongruities, and contradictions often evoke emotions. I found that dealing with them reflexively is the best way to learn more about what it is to be human, both in general terms and specifically as a Christian.

This is where I return to anthropology. As an academic discipline, it has a history that starts with anthropologists dealing mainly with epistemological questions of truth and reality, similarly to how I questioned the existence of the devil and demons discussed above. Today, many anthropologists study human experience and action, often from a more ontological and relational perspective. Moving from a structural to a relational approach opens anthropology up to consider emotions as part of relations with other people, nonhuman entities, and the world around us (Batiashvili, Hejtmánek, and Larchanché 2025, 778; Beatty 2014, 550; Davies 2010, 23).

This means that, as anthropologists, we are called to pay attention to who we *are* in relation to others and to reflect on our engagement with our counterparts, which includes feelings and emotions. With all this in mind, I now unpack some theory and methodology.

Part 2: Theory and Methodology

In this part, I discuss how anthropologists and missionaries have viewed religions other than Christianity, often reductively. Against this, I propose that we need to take people seriously by adopting an empathic attitude. This leads to an ontological and relational approach that focuses on studying *with* people.

The Epistemological Basis of Anthropology

At least since Bronisław Malinowski, the goal of anthropology has been “to grasp the native’s point of view” (1922, 25). This was mainly what attracted me to the discipline. How this should be achieved, however, changed over time and depended on the perspectives of anthropologists. In the early days, most anthropologists worked with the premise that a scientific and secular approach was the only valid way to understand other people.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937), for example, could masterfully explain how Zande witchcraft worked rationally as a mechanism for explaining misfortune. At the same time, however, he claimed that witchcraft “is imaginary and a man cannot possibly be a witch”

(1937, 119). Reducing religious practices and spiritual phenomena to social functions, however, meant that anthropologists failed to grasp the native’s point of view, since they placed and valued *their* perspectives above the ones of the people they studied: “‘We’ (scientists, Westerners) have knowledge, ‘they’ (lay people, ‘primitives’) have beliefs” (Salazar 2015, 3).

Scholars of religion equally subscribed to a scientific framework and struggled with dealing with religion and religious expressions of other people. The problem is that the concept of religion stems from post-Reformation Europe, which prioritized belief and stressed textual authority following the model of Protestant Christianity (Asad 1993). As scholars studied African and other local religions, they usually found that these lacked Scriptures, dogmas and doctrines. This meant that African and local religions could not easily be compared with text-based religions. For Irving Hexham (2011, 31-45), it is clear that the notion of religion had been biased from the start. This further reinforced the idea that African and other local religions were “primitive” and “superstitious,” even though anthropologists tended to legitimize them rationally.

This negative view of other religions also influenced Christian missionaries, who were part of the modern mission movement that started at the end of the 19th century. In many places, they introduced Christianity as a religion that included not only dogmas, doctrines, and creeds, but also corresponding rules of how to live and behave. Christianity was thus introduced as an alternative way of life.

When it comes to local religious practices and other spiritual phenomena, missionaries typically viewed them either as the work of the devil or as superstitions that would disappear in light of the new faith. This did, of course, not happen. Rather, local religious expressions and other spiritual phenomena, such as witchcraft, often came to be diabolized and demonized (Meyer 1992, 1999; Merz 2008).

Today, I find that most missionaries and Christian NGO workers from America and Europe I have met over the years support the idea of contextualizing the biblical message (see, e.g., Hesselgrave and Rommen 2000), but they still struggle to deal with what many would call the supernatural or spiritual realm. I see a continuing trend that whatever they cannot understand through *their* Christian perspective and *their* understanding of the biblical message, they tend to treat reductively, either with doubt akin to secular

anthropologists, or through a demonizing stance (see also Lee 2015; Priest, Campbell, and Mullen 1995).

Accordingly, ancestors are either doubted or seen as demons that pretend to be ancestors, while phenomena like totemism and shapeshifting (S. Merz 2021) are either deemed fantastic or the effects of demonic manifestations. When it comes to witchcraft, most American and European Christians I have met find it hard, and sometimes impossible, to consider the possibility that witchcraft, whatever it may be in each local setting, might be anything other than evil. The life story of David, a self-declared “witch in the Holy Spirit” (Merz 2008), often presents them with a significant challenge. Declaring all witchcraft as evil means, at least in some settings, that a crucial part of how people “experience spirituality is lost to the demonized form of witchcraft . . . and dealing with it in a Christian way becomes part of deliverance and spiritual warfare that is detached from the morality, and in a sense the spirituality, of humanity” (Merz 2008, 215).

Hexham (2011, 58-59) concludes that African and other religions continue to challenge mainstream theory, especially when it draws on Enlightenment thought, as they are lived and experienced by real people. Since such religions are primarily rooted in practice and experience, explaining them solely in rational terms as a form of belief thus misses the point. It leads to a reductive understanding of religion that its practitioners would not easily recognize.

Taking People Seriously

Anthropology’s scientific and secular approach meant that significant parts of human practice and experience were ignored and excluded. This included feelings and emotions during fieldwork, and how anthropologists become entangled with the people they researched. This continued until the 1970s (Knauft 2024, 86). Accordingly, Laura Bohannon preferred to publish her fieldwork experience under a pseudonym and presented it as a fictional novel (Bowen 1954).

Following this idea of the ethnographic novel, Paul Stoller, described his experiences of becoming a Songhai *sorko*, a praise-singer and healer or sorcerer (Stoller and Olkes 1987). As he became increasingly involved in his apprenticeship, one night he heard footsteps on the roof and felt a presence in his house. He then found that his legs were paralyzed, which he could only resolve by reciting incantations he had

learned for moments of fear like these (Stoller 1984, 99; Stoller and Olkes 1987, 148). He recognized: “Before my paralysis, I *knew* there were scientific explanations of Songhay sorcery. After[wards,] my unwavering faith in science vanished” (Stoller and Olkes 1987, 153, emphasis in original).

Similarly to Turner’s (1994) experience of seeing a spirit, Stoller’s field experience led him to conclude: “As anthropologists we must respect the people among whom we work. . . . For me, respect means accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous. I took my teachers seriously” (Stoller and Olkes 1987, 229; see also Willerslev and Suhr 2018; Wilson 1994).

The question of the reality of religious experience and spiritual phenomena should neither be denied, ignored, nor treated reductively. Accordingly, Peter Geschiere (1997, 19-22) revisited the question of the reality of witchcraft. By drawing on de Rosny’s experience of real witches (1992, 112-113), Geschiere accepts that if people *believe* in witchcraft, then at least some will seek to use it. He concedes that “one has to at least start by accepting them [witchcraft beliefs and practices] at face value” (1997, 281 n. 12). This blurs the line between reality (knowledge) and fantasy (belief) (Geschiere 1997, 21), thus shifting the question of what is real from abstract Enlightenment thought towards experience and practice, thereby also doubting the validity of the religious-secular divide (Merz and Merz 2017).

In a similar line, Martin A. Mills (2013) revisits Evans-Pritchard’s rationality argument and maintains that witchcraft, at least from a Zande perspective, is not about metaphysics or its rational existence, but rather a question of human action, personhood, and character. In other words, it is about “the temperamental capacity of individuals to maintain the morally appropriate boundaries of human interaction” (Mills 2013, 25). This, however, requires us to abandon the view of the person according to an Enlightenment model of the rational individual, which remained the implicit norm in anthropology until the 1980s (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Strathern 1988).

Relations, Ontology, and Empathy

By drawing on her fieldwork in Melanesia, Marilyn Strathern finds that “persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them” (1988, 13). This leads her to propose the *dividual*, a notion that

collapses the distinction between individuals and society. The significance of this move is that the structures and concepts that anthropologists devised as part of their theories, including society, culture, and religion, are now articulated as relations that are part of people. With this development, the structure of earlier anthropology, that sought to establish what is real and true, is reconceptualized and expressed by and through relations.

Essential for understanding Strathern (1988) is the differentiation between relationships and relations. While the former express how people live together and relate to each other in an everyday sense, relations are more abstract and significant at an anthropological and analytic level. Relations are not only about how people relate to others and the world around them; they are also what explains and constitutes people and their engagement with the world. For Strathern (2020), relations stem from the logic of anthropology that links different ideas together in order to make sense of them. They are thus “at once one of anthropology’s central tools of inquiry and a prime target of anthropological knowledge” (Strathern 2020, 2). This means that we can use relations not only to think about and understand people, but also to engage with them: “Relations . . . are what we do, not what we study” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 120). In this sense, “anthropology is all about . . . relations” (Strathern 2020, 1).

Strathern is mainly concerned with epistemology and thus with the production of anthropological knowledge. Her stance on relations, however, is not only significant for explaining how people and the world they live in work, but also what people *are* and what the world *is*. This shifts her attention to also addressing ontological questions of what it is to *be*, to *exist*.

It is not a surprise, then, that Strathern’s work has been central to the recent ontological turn in anthropology (see, e.g., Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Turska and Ludwig 2023). Ontological anthropology, as a whole, has been described as a diverse and controversial experiment to reflexively reshape anthropology by refocusing it on the question of difference (Bessire and Bond 2014). Today, it brings together a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches (see, e.g., Cipolla 2019; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). I am particularly interested in the British variety (see, e.g., Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Scott 2013), since it is more relational

than structural and thus aligns better with Strathern’s work on relations (Cipolla 2019, 624).

In its basic approach, ontological anthropology is “a methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 5; see also Turska and Ludwig 2023, 5-9). In doing so, it extends “the investigation and theorization of diverse experiences [to also include the] understandings of the nature of being itself” (Scott 2013, 859). Questions of ontology thus contribute to and complement existing anthropology, thereby allowing anthropologists to also ask what it is for people to exist and how they experience the world around them. This means that religious practices, as well as other spiritual phenomena, need to be taken seriously and at face value, which brings us full circle, back to Malinowski’s aim “to grasp the native’s point of view” (1922, 25) and to Stoller’s conclusion that “we must respect the people among whom we work” (Stoller and Olkes 1987, 229).

While up to recently anthropologists mainly used their research findings for descriptive purposes, often using reductive frameworks, anthropologists who have an interest in ontology stress that ethnographic materials should equally contribute to formulating anthropological theory (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Meneses 2021; Merz 2017; J. Merz 2021b). Theory can then emerge from the ideas of other people, as for example recognizing the importance of feelings for thought and knowledge (Wikan 1991) or establishing the notion of the *dividual* and by extension relations (Strathern 1988, 2020). To help us achieve this kind of engagement, Martin Holbraad and Morten A. Pedersen suggest that we ask the following question: “How do I enable my ethnographic material to reveal itself to me by allowing it to dictate its own terms of engagement, so to speak, guiding or compelling me to see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there?” (2017, 5).

As anthropologists, whether we have spiritual interests or not, we are called to personally and reflexively engage with other people. We need to stop pretending that we ever could be independent and objective observers and analysts of other people and their religious experiences. Rather, we are drawn into relationships with the people we engage with and thus enter relations that entangle us in their lives, also emotionally (Knauff 2024). This raises the question of empathy.

Andrew Beatty (2005, 21; see also Miller 2024, 147) identifies empathy as underpinning Malinowski's call for grasping "the native's point of view" (1922, 25). Empathy is relational and experiential in that it is part of how we perceive others and relate to them, both in terms of similarity and difference (Mezzenzana and Peluso 2023; Throop 2023). It is about "assessing what another person is thinking, feeling, or doing . . . and . . . includes both emotional and cognitive aspects" (Hollan 2012, 71). In a nutshell, through empathy, "we can come to feel what it is like to be the other" (Mezzenzana and Peluso 2023, 2).

We exercise empathy in our daily lives, especially when we relate to others, but we can also learn to be more intentional about it, notably by being curious about other people (Hollan 2023, 102; Mezzenzana and Peluso 2023, 13). This does not mean that we need to discard or relativize our own views, interests, and commitments (Throop 2023, 28), but we need to be aware of the risk of projecting our own emotions onto others (Mesquita 2022, 194-199). Accordingly, anthropologists have recently used empathy for situations in which they have an ambivalent or distant relationship with their counterparts. Examples include studying Pentecostalism as an agnostic (Mossière 2007), researching extremism (Miller 2024, 149-150) and the military, which anthropologists often disapprove of (Mohr, Sørensen, and Weisdorf 2021), or engaging with nonhumans, such as animals (S. Merz 2021; Mezzenzana 2023).

We are our own instrument of research, knowing, and relating (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 18); our own perspective on faith and spirituality matters and must be part of the equation (Howell 2007; Meneses 2021; Merz and Merz 2017; Willerslev and Suhr 2018). Having a faith commitment or spiritual interests can be beneficial in exercising empathy towards people of other religious expressions, but they also pose a challenge, for example due to the uneasiness and anxiety we may feel. The important thing is to deal with emotions reflexively with the aim of turning them into an opportunity for learning and understanding.

As anthropologists, then, we need to position ourselves empathically in relation to our counterparts. Not only do I want to be open to people and take them seriously, I also seek to feel what it might be to live their lives and to empathize with their experiences, even though I do not necessarily wish to have the same experiences as they have.

Empathy is never perfect (Hollan 2023) and in order to move from empathy to understanding, we

need to draw on reflexivity (Throop 2023, 28). By using both empathy and critical reflexivity, I wish to understand other people as much as I can by taking them seriously while remaining critical and analytical in my thinking. This helps me to learn about people's different perspectives and become aware not only of differences, but also similarities, especially in relation to my counterparts. The relational and empathic nature of doing fieldwork means that I become vulnerable, since I not only gain new insights and understanding of others, but these also influence and affect my own views and who I understand myself to be.

I take empathic and critical reflexivity as part of the methodological and theoretical foundation of doing anthropology, especially when we engage with people of different religious expressions and spiritual interests. As much as we appreciate our own perspectives, we should equally seek to value other people's perspectives, even if they may be different, contradictory, and incongruous. In doing so, Eloise Meneses states that we should "neither dismiss nor adopt other perspectives, but rather entertain them as *possible* in order to consider their full consequences" (2021, 484, emphasis in original).

Being an anthropologist, then, is an essentially relational and collaborative activity, even if we have not always recognized it (Lassiter 2005, 16). This means that as anthropologists, we do not actually *study* people. Rather, in the words of Tim Ingold, we "study *with* people" (2017, 23, emphasis in original).

Part 3: Practice

How do my theoretical and methodological propositions work out in practice? I would like to illustrate this from my own experience of doing fieldwork in the Republic of Benin in 1995-1996, which followed on from my experience of attending the Vodun ceremony in southern Togo.

Studying with People in Touga

In November 1995, I moved to Touga, a village near the town of Coby in northwestern Benin, one of the most rural parts of the country. One of the only people I could effectively communicate with in French was Jonas Gnammi, who had himself moved to the village with his family the previous year. Jonas had been recruited by the then new missionary

organization *Ministère International de Jésus* to oversee the first ever church in Touga.

Jonas was not new to Christian work. As a child, he stayed with an American missionary of the Assemblies of God in Cobly and attended their primary school. Feeling the call to become a pastor, he then graduated from their Bible school in nearby Natitingou in 1964.

The *Église Évangélique des Assemblées de Dieu*, as the denomination is known in Benin today, was founded by an American missionary who moved to the area from neighboring Burkina Faso in 1946 (Cornevin 1981, 453-454). The Assemblies of God have their origin in a Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles, in 1906. Their missionaries, as well as their locally trained pastors, paid attention to the devil and demons. Converts were required to renounce all “pagan” practices, notably by destroying shrines, before being allowed to attend church. Christians then had to follow strict rules including abstaining from visiting diviners, performing sacrifices, polygamy, and consuming alcoholic beverages. They were discouraged from associating with so-called “pagans” and were instructed to refrain from attending their activities, including sacrifices and funerals (Laurent 2003).

As a newly qualified pastor, Jonas worked in several churches in northwestern and southern Benin and gained further experience from living in neighboring Togo and Ghana. In 1977, he experienced problems and left his ministry. After several jobs, Jonas entered public service as the secretary for the prefecture in Natitingou in 1980. Four years later, he trained as a veterinary technician and worked in this capacity until 1991, when he was made redundant when the government reduced public services. He then worked as a veterinary technician privately until *Ministère International de Jésus* recruited him in 1994.

Jonas not only became my main interpreter and assistant, but also a friend and father. He was gentle, humble, and diligent, and it was a pleasure to work with him. Thanks to his varied work experience, he had developed good people skills and an empathic attitude. Retrospectively, I prefer to think of him also as a collaborator, since he contributed significantly to my research.

I loved learning more about the different religious practices of the people of Touga, both non-Christian and Christian. I attended the church that Jonas was overseeing and the congregation quickly accepted me, which I first noticed when they started to invite me to

pray for the sick and afflicted. I soon found that most people attended the church to find relief from the threats of witchcraft. Since starting to attend church and to pray before going to sleep, several members of the small congregation claimed that they had calmer nights. This was an indication that people felt less affected by the witches’ nightly activities. It soon transpired that this was maybe their biggest pre-occupation at the time.

Apart from the church, I also benefitted from the other relationships that Jonas had established in the village. I learned how people dealt with ancestors and stone shrines, and I observed various activities and sacrifices.

Many people in the village had become skeptical, sometimes even disillusioned, about their ancestors and stone shrines, as their petitions and sacrifices did not always yield the desired results. Some people explained that stone shrines and ancestors were corrupt and that they kept sacrifices for themselves instead of passing them on to God. While a couple of men I got to know decided to stop engaging in all religious practices and appeared happy with their decision, many looked for alternatives, either in the new church or by visiting other shrines in other villages.

A Case of Burned Yams

One day in January 1995, the storage shelter, where the chief of Touga kept his newly harvested yams, burned down. This was a huge blow to him and Jonas tried to comfort him, even though he did not attend the church. The chief went to several diviners in the village, but was not satisfied with their verdict about what had caused the fire. He remained restless and then decided to go further afield to seek out a diviner he considered more powerful than the local ones. I asked him if Jonas and I could join him. He agreed.

A week later, we set off early in the morning on our bikes to a village some 15 miles away, the chief carrying a chicken on his handlebars. The diviner he wanted to see proved to be the owner of a type of shrine called Tigare that did not exist in or near Touga at the time. Jonas had met the owner before, but did not know that he had acquired a shrine. It turned out that Tigare, as well as its relative Nkunde, were shrines similar to the one I had visited in southern Togo, but that originated in southern Ghana (Debrunner 1961). Migrant laborers sometimes acquired them in Ghana

and started to bring them back to their villages in the 1950s. While their owners claimed to specialize in fighting the negative effects of witchcraft, many local people were initially skeptical about these new shrines. In due time, however, the shrines' reputation improved, and they experienced a wave of popularity in the 1990s (Merz 1998).

After the chief handed over the chicken and paid a fee, we were asked to enter the house of the shrine. The owner divined together with the chief, a process that remains largely meaningless to those not involved in it. Then, the owner sacrificed the chicken and performed further rituals. The chief seemed pleased with the result. Before leaving, the owner's wife provided us with a meal that included the sacrificed chicken and we returned to Touga before nightfall.

We learned later from the chief that an enemy had cursed him through a sacrifice to a stone shrine in the hope that the chief's whole house would burn down with his family in it. His ancestors averted the curse, but a witch had benefitted from the situation and caused a whirlwind to set fire to the yams.

I felt ambivalent about my first visit to a Tigare shrine and have to admit that I did not particularly like the owner. I experienced his behavior as erratic and weird and Jonas said that he had always been like this. On a more positive note, I was excited by the visit, since it opened up a whole new dimension to my research that I had not anticipated. In order to better understand the people's preoccupation with the threats of witchcraft, I now felt that I needed to also research Tigare and Nkunde shrines. This meant I needed to extend my research beyond Touga, which presented me with new challenges.

Studying with Tigare and Nkunde Owners

Jonas proved to be excellent at finding and relating to Tigare and Nkunde owners. When we encountered difficulties gaining access and relating to them, he patiently and competently dealt with the situation, usually to my satisfaction. I found that Jonas was known in the Cibly area, and he seemed to be appreciated and respected by most people we met.

Jonas' Pentecostal background was evident as he used dualistic notions when talking about God and the devil, for example. His behavior, however, was more empathic and pragmatic. He maintained positive relationships with many non-Christians, such as the chief of Touga. When new Christians continued to seek medical treatment from local healers, continued

to visit diviners, and engaged with their ancestors and different shrines, I never saw him condemning them or intervening. Raising the question with him, he told me that he would give advice to people concerned, but that it would be up to them to decide for themselves what they should do.

As I started to include Tigare and Nkunde shrines more actively in my research, I discussed with Jonas how we as Christians should go about it. By then, I had learned enough about him to be sure of his Christian sincerity and commitment. While I tried to follow my position of researching with people of other spiritual interests outlined above, I also came to rely on Jonas' knowledge and intuition of what he considered appropriate Christian behavior and what he thought would be acceptable for our research.

Before we set off to visit an owner, we prayed for guidance and protection. Whenever we contacted an owner for the first time, Jonas explained that we were Christians who did not come to consult, divine, or seek treatment, but rather to talk to them and learn more about their work. We found that the owners were generally friendly and respectful toward us. Jonas knew that it was not uncommon for Christians to seek out Tigare and Nkunde, typically when prayer and treatment at the local dispensary had failed.

Several of the Tigare owners we met identified as Roman Catholic Christians and said that they attended mass. Such owners did not consider their shrines to be in conflict with Christianity since both were about God, but others distinguished between their shrines and the churches. The latter was the most prominent position among Christians, especially Protestants. Jonas recognized that many Christians would not approve of our visits, but we accepted this as part of the risk of doing this kind of research.

While our approach generally worked well, I quickly realized that my research position was easier to articulate than to practice. Although most Tigare and Nkunde owners accepted our position, they wanted to divine if Tigare or Nkunde was happy about our visit, which usually proved to be the case. Sometimes, the owners also wanted to divine for me and Jonas, and we could not always persuade them that we thought this was unnecessary. Situations like these made me feel uncomfortable, since I was not sure how I would handle the result. In one case, Jonas agreed that the diviner was right in describing an old situation that had remained unresolved for many years. Another time, however, a divination for my benefit predicted a future event that never occurred.

Part of the owners' divination sometimes included sacrificing a chicken, which they provided, and then had it prepared for us to eat. While I felt alright about this, local Christians debated the question of whether Christians should eat sacrificial meat. Jonas felt that it would be better for us to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to Tigare or Nkunde. He then started to inform the owners that, as Christians, we could not eat sacrificial meat. This never seemed to be an issue, since the owners themselves follow dietary restrictions. When they decided to feed us, they killed another chicken especially for us.

Some of the Tigare and Nkunde owners invited us to attend ceremonies during which the shrines' adherents would be possessed in a similar way to the ceremony I described in the opening anecdote. We accepted in a few cases, especially when we felt that we had established a good rapport with the owner in question. I was glad that I already had the experience of attending the Vodun ceremony in southern Togo and that I had Jonas by my side.

Fieldwork is always messy. I found that maintaining my position of not getting personally and relationally entangled with entities other than God, whether spirit, demon, or other, worked reasonably well most of the time. There were occasions, however, when I felt pushed to compromise to some extent. For example, I was not keen to have people divine for me, but since I did not ask or pay for it, I accepted for the sake of maintaining good relationships. In retrospect, I think this was important and worth it.

Working together with Jonas helped me further to think through my understanding, position, and approach to studying with people of different religious expressions as outlined in part one. Jonas took people seriously and accepted that the devil, demons, and other nonhuman entities do exist and interact with people. Since Jonas was secure in his faith, however, he always remained calm and composed. I especially found his empathic and pragmatic stance towards all people refreshing and inspiring.

I had started my fieldwork wanting to understand why people in Touga began to attend their first ever church when prior attempts to bring Christianity to the village had failed. It became clear to me that I could not achieve my aim without learning more generally about the religious and spiritual situation of the village and the wider area, including established religious expressions and other spiritual phenomena, such as witchcraft. This meant that I also needed to work with the owners of Tigare and Nkunde shrines. In seeking

to study Christianity, I ended up spending most of my time learning about other forms of religious expression.

Conclusion

Doing fieldwork is often messy and comes with doubt and anxiety. This is especially the case for anthropologists with spiritual interests or faith commitments, who encounter people of other religious expressions. Questions about the appropriateness of engaging with them, how to go about it, and the spiritual risks involved can easily arise. If anthropologists are serious about their work and research, they have to deal with such issues.

When I started studying anthropology in the early 1990s, it was hard to find relevant anthropological and missiological literature that addresses such issues. Consequently, I needed to think about them largely by myself as I prepared for my first period of fieldwork. I was clear that as a Christian, I do not wish to get personally involved in religious or spiritual activities that concern other entities than God. This is my preference and I found that it generally worked well during my fieldwork, when I was able to further refine my position by working with Jonas Gnammi, my main interpreter, assistant, and collaborator.

My perspective on Christianity and spiritual matters inevitably contributes to shaping my specific position and approach to anthropology, which may not be representative of other Christians. Each anthropologist will have to reflect on their own position, what they consider appropriate to do and with whom they want to engage. Current approaches to anthropology seem especially promising to anthropologists who are Christians or have other faith commitments. Not only do such approaches focus on people, their experience and action, and seek to take them seriously, I also find them helpful when dealing with religious expressions and practices—both the ones of the people with whom anthropologists study and their own.

As an anthropologist, I seek to position myself in relation to my counterparts by practicing what I call empathic and critical reflexivity. This means that I want to be open to people, take them seriously, and experience how they live, act, and relate to each other, even though I do not necessarily wish to have the same experiences as they have. At the same time, I seek to understand people as much as I can by remaining reflexive, critical, and analytical. This helps me to learn about people's different perspectives as well as my

own. Since fieldwork is relational and empathic, I also become vulnerable. This means that my experiences of studying with people influence and affect my own views and who I understand myself to be.

As an anthropologist I find that engaging with people who have different religious expressions and spiritual interests is inevitable and essential. It is not only a potential goal of research in itself, but also crucial when interested in other topics, including Christianity. I hope that sharing my reflections on my experiences of doing fieldwork as a Christian may stimulate others in their own reflections.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect or represent those of SIL Global and Moorlands College, UK, with which I am affiliated.

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