

Mediumship as Glocalized Phenomena: Reflections on a Journey into the Study of Mediumship in Brazil

Bettina E. Schmidt

Introduction

Mediumship has been reported from societies across the globe and is regarded by mediums as a global skill, not restricted by tradition, social, or ethnic background or biology, such as the gender of the mediums (Bourguignon 1976). However, there is a tendency among outsiders to regard mediumship as a female skill restricted by biology. But this perception of mediumship is misleading. Even the impression of a predominance of women in possession trance cults (Bourguignon 1983, 414) is not confirmed by recent research. Studies have shown that mediumship rituals are not limited to the powerless, and the simple equation “women equals possession trance” is not justified by the data we have at hand (e.g. Sered 1994, Keller 2002). I will use the debate on gender distribution among mediums of different Brazilian communities as the background for a wider reflection on the diversity of scales that are used by the communities to interpret, explain, and teach mediumship.

I have worked on mediumship religions since 1990. My research focus was initially on *espiritismo* and African-derived religions in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean diaspora in New York, though I expanded it later when I moved my research area to Brazil and now include also forms of Charismatic Christianity. As a cultural anthropologist, my focus was always on the ethnographic context of mediumship practice. As Csordas points out in a discussion of different types of evidence, ethnographic evidence is not juridical evidence, but it is “marshaled in order to identify cultural patterns and social arrangements, and ethnological evidence in order to identify regularities across cultures” (2004, 474).

B. E. Schmidt (✉)

Institute of Education and Humanities, University of Wales Trinity Saint David,
Carmarthen, UK

e-mail: b.schmidt@uwtsd.ac.uk

Consequently, my previous research focused on these cultural patterns with regard to mediumship.

However, the discussions in Cologne on skill and scales with regard to mediumship inspired me to revisit my previous understanding of mediumship. I will focus here on the research I conducted in Brazil in 2010 and that is presented in more detail in my book *Spirits and Trance in Brazil* (Schmidt, 2016a). While I am not presenting new ethnographic insights, I will reflect on the ethnographic data in a different framework, i.e., the tension between local scales and global skill. I will argue that while Brazilian mediums regard mediumship as a global skill, our focus as anthropologists is on the diversity of local scales. Reflecting on my interviews with Brazilian mediums, I will present here their interpretations of the practice side by side, without presenting one as more important than the other. My aim is to show the diversity of local ontologies and of the ways the communities teach and develop the mediumship skill. I will show that most but not all communities regard mediumship as a skill everyone has, but often keeps underdeveloped. These communities therefore put in place various ways to develop the skills, whether it is with (secular) teaching or with (religious) initiation. The overarching understanding among Brazilian mediums is that humans have the ability, but need instruction in what to do with it and how to develop it. But before I come to the discussion of local scales and global skill, I reflect on my previous position in mediumship studies. That will explain my starting point in the discussion of scales and skill before I then move on to an overview of different scales with regard to mediumship and gender, and finally, in the third section, to the interconnectedness of skill and scales in my discussion of “glocalisation” and mediumship as a skill with local scales.

Reflecting on Mediumship and Other Forms of Non-Ordinary Experiences

For an anthropologist, the study of mediumship presents a methodological challenge. Anthropologists usually look at mediumship as a performative event that takes place in rituals. While anthropological definitions of spirit possession and mediumship acknowledge the importance of accepting “what people believe”, they indirectly indicate that these beliefs might be wrong, misguided, or even sign of mental problem, but that we should accept them nonetheless.

To be honest, this was also my approach during my early research projects among Caribbean religions. While I have been studying traditions with mediumistic elements for three decades now, I avoided really engaging with what people believe. I felt enchanted by the drumming, the movements, and the colours, but kept my distance because I could not accept the presence of the spirits and deities. Despite my obvious fascination with possession rituals in Vodou and other religions, when studying Puerto Rican Spiritism and African-derived Caribbean religions, I focused on identity, ethnicity, migration, gender, and other issues. With my Brazilian research, however, I wanted to go further and learn what goes on

when people say they incorporate an *orixá* (an African deity) or a spirit, communicate with the spirits of the deceased, or hear the voice of God. I wanted to find out which skills are needed and how they are developed.

The problem with the study of these non-ordinary experiences is that they take place internally, similar to other forms of religious or spiritual experience. Consequently, they are usually described as private and unavailable “for empirical (that is, sensory) confirmation”, even when accounts of these experiences become public (McCutcheon 2012, 8). For the theologian Rudolf Otto, the internal experience was the key to understanding religion. Otto insisted that religious experience is unique among forms of experiences and feelings and that we need specific tools to understand it. Otto even disqualified from its study those scholars who never had such an experience (see Otto 1917). However, his position is at odds with the academic need to explain and analyse all aspects of human experience and actions in an objective, scientific way.

I regard the psychologist William James and the debate about his work (e.g. the contributions of Ann Taves) as more helpful for the study of religious experience. James, than Otto, was a key figure in the early study of religious experience. However, as a physician he approached the field from a different angle, despite some overlaps. His primary aim was to present the importance of personal experiences, even more than any such theological dimension as doctrinal or institutional aspects of religions (James 1902). James argued that it depends on the pre-existing belief system whether specific elements (e.g. seeing a light in a near-death experience) are regarded as important and will be narrated, or will be regarded as unimportant and soon forgotten. Aspects that do not conform to the pre-existing belief system of the person experiencing it will be neglected in narratives about it. Following James, Taves insists that these experiences should not be regarded as symptoms of mental weakness or an expression of false religion, but as skills. Taves acknowledges that non-ordinary experiences are outside our own (academic and secular) world. She even writes, “There is no way to study ‘religious experience’ as such scientifically simply because what constitutes ‘religion’ is highly contested” (Taves 2005, 43). But this does not mean that we must stop looking for ways how to study mediumship within an academic framework.

Taves challenges scholars who overlook people’s own interpretation of what they experience. Instead of disregarding the explanations given by the people having experiences, Taves urges scholars to include them. In her own study of Anglo-American Protestants and ex-Protestants (1999), Taves therefore presents a third position, in addition to people who experience something and scholars who study them. She argues that people experiencing these acts do not live in isolation. They are very aware of the scientific discourses and debates around these kinds of experiences. The third position, which she calls “the mediating tradition”, are people who believe “that the way in which they accessed religion was scientific rather than simply a matter of faith” (1999, 349).

My own research in Brazil confirms this point. I also found that my interviewees were indeed very knowledgeable about the academic field and engaged with the academic debates. To exclude their explanation from my study would have

been ethnocentric and biased towards one side of the debate. I conducted interviews with people practising a range of different traditions, mainly the African-derived Brazilian religions Candomblé and Umbanda, as well as Spiritism/Kardecism and Charismatic Christianity (mainly Neo-Pentecostalism), and attended ceremonies in various communities. One of the first outcomes of my conversations was the controversy around the term. I had to learn that spirit possession and trance are terms not accepted by most practitioners; even the term mediumship is not always welcome. Hence, like Taves, I argue that we need to go a step further and accept, for instance, that Spiritists see mediumship as a communication technique and not a religious practice and that Charismatic Christians reject the application of any of these terms to their experience with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, this openness of the term mediumship only exacerbates the problem with the study instead of solving it, as it highlights the different scales used by practitioners. Even my attempt to link anthropology with the study of religious experience (see Schmidt 2016a) does not fully offer a way around the problem of scale, as my chapter shows.

The Diversity of Local Scales: A Polyphonic Approach to Mediumship and Gender

Andrew Chesnut estimates that 15–20% of Brazilians (app. 30 million) regularly practise Umbanda or one of the other African-derived Brazilian religions (Chesnut 2003, 106–107) with mediumship. He even states that half of all Brazilians have visited a centre of one of these traditions at least once in their lifetime. One of the core attractions is the offer of healing, and most of these sporadic visitors come during a personal crisis. While the traditions differ, for instance in which spiritual entity, rituals, and set of beliefs and practices are involved, one common feature is the communication between human beings and spiritual beings. The medium is the person who facilitates the communication. This can happen in various ways, for instance, by automatic writing, which means that a spirit leads the arm of the medium when writing. Another way is to speak through the medium's body, hence taking possession of the body of a medium and speaking through this person. Chesnut even highlights the similarity between these mediumistic traditions and Charismatic Christianity, for instance their offer of healing as the main attraction. However, members of Charismatic Churches reject this link and refer to possession only with regard to demonic possession. I nonetheless decided to include the experience of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and spiritual healing via exorcism within Charismatic Christianity in my study of mediumship experiences. While I acknowledge the difference between the experiences, I see a similarity on an analytical level and argue that the experience of the Holy Spirit and demonic possession should be analysed in the same way as mediumship in African-derived religions and Spiritism. And here the concept of local scales is useful, as it highlights the diversity, not just of the experience, but also of the local understanding of whether the skill is “given” (i.e., by God) or “learnt”. A common feature is

that speaking in tongues, the embodiment of an *orixá* in a ritual, and communication with spirits are cherished experiences within the distinct communities. But while the experience of the Holy Spirit is seen as a gift from God, mediums within Spiritist centres have to learn how to communicate with the spirits, and members of African-derived religious communities have to become initiated into the tradition and learn how to handle the *orixás*. Hence, while on an analytical level the skill is similar, on an ethnographic level, the scales and the approach to the skill development are different.

A way to highlight the diversity of local scales without presenting one as correct or better than the other is to present the ethnographic diversity within a polyphonic framework. Polyphony allows the presence of different scales without presenting one as dominant.

The concept of polyphony is linked to the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin and his interpretation of the works of Fyodor M. Dostoevsky and François Rabelais. While Rabelais lived during the Renaissance, “the only period in the history of European literature which marked the end of a church language and a linguistic transformation” (Bakhtin 1968, 465), Dostoevsky lived through the “traumatic impact of capitalism upon Russian traditionalism in the early nineteenth century”, described by Bakhtin as “a kind of historical borderzone of conflicting views” (Morris 1994, 15). The common aspect of the two is the transgression, the crossing of borderlines. For Bakhtin, the existence of a frontier between two languages or two worldviews not only implies the simple coexistence of two languages, it also indicates their growing awareness of each other and their ability to see each other “through the eyes of the other” (Bakhtin 1968, 471).

Bakhtin saw in Dostoevsky’s work a perfect example of a new innovative narrative style that he called “polyphony”. With this term, Bakhtin focuses our attention on a certain style, the “acute awareness of the multivoicedness of all discourse” (Morris 1994, 14). It permits Dostoevsky to penetrate to the deepest layers of people and human relationships. Hence, polyphony is not the mere presentation of specific languages styles, social dialects, and so on; what matters is the dialogic relationship. Polyphony indicates that the different voices interact on equal terms.

Applied to mediumship, polyphony highlights the multifacetedness of explanations and scales. I decided here to focus on gender distribution among mediums and the (assumed) predominance of women as a way to showcase the equality of different scales. I was interested in gender distribution early on. When I began my research on mediumship religions in 1989, I had in mind the classic ethnographic study of Ruth Landes, *City of Women* (1947). My intention was to find out whether her research could be applied to Puerto Rico; however, I soon learnt that it was not so easy. Nearly everyone I spoke with involved in either Puerto Rican Spiritism or the Cuban Orisha religion (also called Santería) denied any gender bias in favour of women. A quite common answer was that the spirits and deities do not make any difference between men and women, that only the individual ability is important. I decided to adjust my research topic and focused on identity formation (Schmidt 1995).

When my research took me to Brazil, however, I again asked my interviewees what they thought about the gender preconception about the African-derived Brazilian traditions. During these conversations, I noticed a strong resistance against this sometimes quite stereotypical description of a *mãe de santos* (priestess). Some interviewees even referred directly to Landes and explained how she got it wrong. Instead, they echoed an openness of mediumship to all genders like what I had already encountered in my previous research in Puerto Rico. While during my research in the USA I had noticed a predominance of women in African-derived Caribbean religions, none of these religions favoured one gender exclusively. Instead, I noticed that mediumship rituals enabled Caribbean women (but not only women) to express themselves in a hostile environment such as the USA (Schmidt 2000, 2002).

A similar feature came to light in my interviews in Brazil. My interviewees, among them mediums in different traditions, both men and women, vehemently stressed the importance of skill rather than biology. They rejected the perception that women were more religious than men. Though one of the attractions of vernacular traditions is that women and socially marginalised people may take on authoritative roles, the argument I heard most often was that men were not excluded from the role of medium. And when I participated in rituals and meetings, I saw men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, working side by side as mediums, embodying an *orixá* or speaking in tongues. However, each community had different scales for interpreting mediumship activities as well as different ways to teach the development of the skill, which has implication for the gender distribution within their communities.

For instance, in Candomblé, ritual responsibilities are often gender-specific, but also divided according to the grade of involvement and the stage of initiation. Several positions in a *terreiro* (i.e. Candomblé community) are therefore both gender-specific and in line with the grade of initiation. Washing dishes is what every newcomer has to do, male and female. I also worked in the kitchen washing dishes when I was invited to stay in a *terreiro*. The same applies when preparing food for participants. However, preparing ceremonial food for the *orixás* is different: this is regarded as a female role. And the ritual sacrifice of animals is regarded as a male role in most communities. Drumming in rituals is also usually a male role, but I also saw women drumming, though usually in smaller, more intimate rituals. Ritual assistants to the priest and priestess, however, are not gender-specific, but based only on the grade of initiation. These assistants are responsible to see that everyone present at the ceremonies follows the *fundamentos* (esoteric code of ritual practice) and *obrigações* (obligations) (Hayes 2010: 109), and I saw male and female assistants during the rituals. While in some *terreiros* that I visited the number of priestesses and female mediums indeed exceeded the number of male priests, there were also *terreiros* with a different gender stratification. And even in *terreiros* with more female mediums than male, I was told that this was just a chance feature of this community, and that both men and women can become mediums.

In Umbanda *terreiros*, women outnumber men on all levels, from clients to members and leaders. However, even in Umbanda, gender distribution varies in each *terreiro* and no one is excluded from mediumship activities. While Hayes notes that in the highly bureaucratic institutions within Umbanda, men predominate at the upper levels of the hierarchy (2010, 115), this kind of Umbanda does not represent the majority of Umbanda *terreiros*, where women outnumber men. Hayes's observation is nonetheless important, as these Umbanda institutions are influential for the wider image of Umbanda. Most studies, for instance, refer to Zélio de Moraes as the founder of Umbanda, though his influence is debated (e.g. by Brown 1986). Also, in most overviews of the history of Umbanda, it is presented from a male perspective, which gives the impression that men dominated the history of Umbanda, "at least as it has been preserved in the records of the religion's more institutionalized forms" (Hayes 2010, 114). This observation can also be applied to the *Faculdade de Teologia Umbandista* in São Paulo, which was founded by a male priest, though it has several women among its teachers and administrators. Even among its students, men seem to dominate, though I do not have access to any official figures and can only report what I observed when visiting some classes.

Nonetheless, when we look at the ordinary Umbanda *terreiros*, female leadership is visible. During my research in São Paulo, I even encountered one *terreiro* with solely female mediums (though men were present as drummers and among clients). When I asked the *mãe de santo* for the reason, she described her house as atypical and explained that the *terreiro* of the priest who initiated her had also *filhos de santo* (male members). His *terreiro* is much larger than hers, and she likes it that her house is a house of women (referring here to Landes's book with which she was very familiar). She even said that she would refer a man to the *terreiro* of her *pai de santo* (priest) for initiation (interview with mãe I. in São Paulo on 16 March 2010). For another *mãe de santo* in Umbanda, mãe M., it was more a question of space. Her *terreiro* was much larger than the one of mãe I. (about one hundred in comparison to thirty-six in the other *terreiro*), and though the majority of members were also female, she had also several male members (interview with mãe M. in São Paulo on 22 March 2010).

Speaking about gender distribution, one interviewee, who is *pai de santo* of an Umbanda *terreiro* but also *filho de santo* in Candomblé and even initiated into a Yoruba cult, referred to a hostile attitude toward homosexuality resulting from the Catholic influence in Umbanda. However, he stressed that this attitude was changing, similar to the on-going changes in Brazilian society's attitude towards homosexuality. For pai R., the gender distribution was "a reflection of society on religion and not religion on society" (interview with pai R. in São Paulo on 14 April 2010). However, he insisted that the less-welcoming attitude towards homosexuality in Umbanda did not mean that men (homosexual and heterosexual) were excluded from the role as medium.

The ethnographic insights differ from academic literature's depiction of gender distribution in Umbanda. Several scholars highlight that women dominate Umbanda practice, in particular the mediumship activities (e.g., Lerch 1982). One

possible explanation might be the gender distribution among the active participants: female participants outnumbered males by a ratio of three to one (Chesnut 1997, 69, referring to the research by Leacock/Leacock in Belem). It might be that some of the researchers took the sheer presence of so many female participants as a sign of women's predominance, though the presence at rituals does not suggest the non-existence of male mediums. As mentioned, all interviewees insisted that everyone could become a medium; hence it is not a question of biology but of training and initiation. Most Umbanda *terreiros* have a training programme for mediums teaching how to control the spirits. During rituals, mediums also have an assistant who translates the message of the spirits to the clients. This is necessary, as spirits often speak in vernacular Portuguese (e.g. the *preto velhos*) and their message can be rather cryptic.

An even stronger stance towards the need to develop mediumship skill via training is noticeable in Kardecist centres, where men and women can become mediums but have to undergo formal training. Important are the *faculdades*, the mediumship abilities that are in every human being, though in different forms and strengths. According to Kardec's teaching, every human being has some kind of mediumship abilities, such as seeing, hearing, or sensing, though usually hidden and underdeveloped. Only after the right training, which can last for many weeks or months, will a medium be able to see or hear a spirit or convey its communication via automatic writing. Some might even be able to incorporate a spirit, though this requires extensive training, as the medium has to learn how to control it. While spirits can contact human beings whenever they want, humans have to learn to understand their form of communication. Hence, without the right training, mediumship abilities can remain undeveloped and even cause problems. For instance, when spirits try to communicate but the person does not understand what is going on, it can be interpreted as a problem, even as illness.

Interestingly, the training alone is not enough to become a medium, as at the end of a course, the trainees need to get the approval of the spirits. One interviewee mentioned that at the end of her course she had to undertake a test. Throughout the course, the teachers in the Kardecist centre were always very positive about her abilities and praised her. However, when she took the test and asked the spirits to confirm, the reply was negative. She retook the test, but with the same outcome. She was therefore unable to work as a medium in the centre, though no one understood why. Some weeks later, her husband was transferred to a different country and she and their children went with him. This was interpreted by the mediums in the centre as the reason the spirits denied their approval, as they already knew that she would leave Brazil. Newly trained mediums still require the supervision of experienced mediums acting as mentors. When she moved to a different country, it would have been difficult or even impossible for her to find an adequate community. But without a support network, she might have developed problems with her *faculdades*. The spirits therefore decided that she should not start working as a medium and also not develop her mediumship abilities further.

This story puts a different spin on the courses offered by Kardecist centres across Brazil. Reading Kardec's books, the focus is always on learning, reading,

and training. However, these courses are just part of the development of mediumship skill. A few of my interviewees even mentioned that their mediumship abilities started without any training. One said that she incorporated a spirit of a medical doctor for the first time as a young woman and helped her mother during an illness, without any knowledge of the underlying philosophy and teaching. Though she studied Kardec's book afterwards and is now co-president of a small Spiritist centre that focuses on healing and also trains new mediums, she insists that her abilities are given, not learnt.

The focus on given skill instead of learnt technique is at the core of the Charismatic Christian Churches. With regard to gender, they represent an interesting contradiction. Most Charismatic Churches have male leadership, but the membership has a 2–1 ratio between women and men, similar to that in Umbanda and other African-derived religions (Chesnut 2003, 108). In Pentecostal Churches, the core ritual is baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, which is open to the whole congregation; hence one can see here male and female members side by side. Among Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Brazil, however, demonology has become increasingly popular, deviating from more mainstream Pentecostal Churches.

And here we can see a visible predominance of women as targets of liberation ceremonies and deliverance from evil spirits. Women seem to be the main—sometimes even the exclusive—vehicle of the evil spirits targeted in these exorcism rituals. Silva Pimentel explains the focus on women with a conservative gender division. The main role of women is to be housewives and mothers and to take care of their families, including spiritual care (Pimentel 2005, 116). It is therefore their duties as mothers to keep evil away from their families, even if this means that they need to call the demons that have caused the problems and allow them to incorporate in their bodies. This is because only a spirit incorporated in a human body can be permanently expelled (i.e. exorcised) by the (male) pastor with the support of the whole congregation (Pimentel 2005, 121).

These deliverance rituals are offered on a weekly basis and are seen as central to the preservation of morality and values, because salvation can be achieved only by reversing the demonic affliction first. The Holy Spirit will enter a person only if the body is cleansed of all demonic afflictions. In this sense, women are essential instruments, despite male leadership of the Churches. But their skill to become a vessel for the demons that bother the family is linked to biology (being a mother) and not learnt, while leadership and becoming a pastor involve learning. But despite its popularity, the deliverance ritual is secondary to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal theology teaches that the Holy Spirit continues to work by the manifestation of *charismata* such as healing. And here the main vehicles are the male pastors.

To conclude this section on the diversity of local scales, I decided to focus on gender distribution to highlight the local diversity of mediumship and related experiences. In Candomblé and Umbanda, mediumship is linked to religious training. Even if a first encounter with the *orixás* is possible without training, it is seen as a call to become initiated. Roles and responsibilities are linked to the grade of

initiation; gender is secondary. Here, mediumship is a skill open to everyone; but when someone has it, they are encouraged to develop it by going through initiation rituals, which includes teaching and learning not just the songs and rituals, but also body postures. Kardecists also regard mediumship as a skill everyone has, though usually undeveloped. To become a medium, one needs to develop the skills in specific classes that end with a test to prove one's skill. However, spirits have the final word and can reject someone despite proper training.

My third example referred to Neo-Pentecostal Churches in which the shift towards the doctrine of demonology has led to a predominance of women incorporating demons to protect their families. However, while a necessary vehicle, salvation can come only with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is regarded as God's gift and not a human skill to be developed. While this example does not fit smoothly into the categories of skill and scale, it highlights the understanding that a skill might be global and not restricted by gender or other factors, but still restricted to some due to the link to divine grace.

The Interconnectedness of Local Scales and Global Skill: Mediumship as "Glocal"

I now shift to the interconnectedness of local scales and global skills by introducing the concept of "glocal" as a conceptual frame. The term "glocalising" highlights the link between the local and the global, between ethnographic setting and macro-level. Like a farmer having to adapt universal techniques to the local land, we also need to adapt ideas to the ethnographic context. I argue that while mediumship is a global skill that can be developed, the scale against which its meaning is interpreted and assessed by practitioners depends on the local context. By identifying diverse scales, it is possible to present mediumship as a universal ability, in reach for everyone who wants to develop the skill.

The importance of diverse understanding is a feature of cultural anthropology, though more often used to describe different cultures and not the same practice, such as mediumship. In an earlier work (Schmidt 2016b), I used the term "provincializing experience" to stress that there is no one correct meaning of mediumship and related experiences, but a plurality of ideas. Here, I followed Michael Lambek (2008), who introduced the term "provincializing" as a way to embrace locally specific features of a universal concept such as God. According to Lambek, perceiving God as a deictic deity would give way to provincializing God. However, I recently realised that provincializing mediumship neglects the macroscopic framework and ignores, for instance, that mediumship is regarded as a feature of all cultures across the world. As I outlined above, each religious community uses a different scale to interpret and teach mediumship. Gender distribution in these communities even demonstrates that a scale is fluid and can change over time. While male members were previously reluctant to development their mediumship skills and withdrew to other roles within the community, they are now more willing to become mediums as the social stigmata against mediumship has shifted.

And here I see the value of the concept “glocalise” introduced by Roland Robertson. It points to the interconnectedness between the universal and the particular and represents the increasingly complex relationship between the local and the global (1992, 173–164). Robertson highlights the messiness of glocalisation and refers to Clifford Geertz and his argument that we live in a world that is “one of the gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences. [...] The There’s and the Here’s [are], much less insulate, much less well-defined, much less spectacularly contrastive” (quoted in Robertson 1992, 180, referring to Geertz 1988, 148). Glocalisation is awkward, messy, complex, never neat nor simple. Instead, it embraces mixtures and diversity. As the Columbian anthropologist Sol Bonilla Montoya (2003) argues, we should stop creating “coherent images in order to domesticate cultures”, which she sees reflected in the way how museums and galleries represent cultures (2003, 108). This does not give an accurate presentation of our world, which is full of contradictory attitudes and contradictory perceptions.

Applied to mediumship, this idea shows that even contradictory interpretations of mediumship contribute to our understanding of the experience. The changes within Brazilian society during the 20th century meant that mediumship itself changed, as well as the debate about it. At the same time, local interpretations of mediumship diverge. I do not see the different interpretations as mutually exclusive. Instead, I argue that the different readings reflect the diversity of local traditions and the social changes in Brazil. In this sense, I follow Lambek’s concept of “provincialising” mediumship and highlight the diversity of local scales of mediumship, even if they contradict each other.

But my research also highlighted the wider understanding of mediumship as skill, whether a skill all humans have, a God-given ability, or a learnt technique of communication. In combination with gender and the question whether mediumship is a female faculty, the comparison has shown that mediumship is not a female occupation, but open to all genders. Nevertheless, several of my interviewees felt the need to justify their involvement, as they did not perceive themselves as members of a socially marginalised group. To a certain degree, this need to justify their practice might have been influenced by the stigmatised perception of homosexuality in conservative Brazilian society. But it also showed engagement with academic studies, as several interviewees spoke about “the American who had written about Candomblé in Bahia” and “got it wrong”. This critical engagement also reflects the highly sophisticated debate among practitioners. The growing social diversification of the communities supports an impressive intellectualization of the membership. Not only do numerous practitioners pursue further training (e.g. in the *Faculdade de Teologia Umbandista* in São Paulo) and higher education degrees, but the number of publications, conference papers, and lectures by members of the priesthood and other members in Brazil is greater than in any other country. This engagement with academic studies as well as with the general perception of their practice shows the interrelatedness of people experiencing and explaining. Brazilian mediums are not only engaged with the studies of their practice, they also have their own voice, their agency, in expressing their position.

This diversity of voices had an impact on my research from the beginning, as I had problems finding the right term when speaking with mediums. While rejection of the label “spirit possession” is widespread (see Johnson’s defence of the term for academic purposes, 2011) and was expected, some communities rejected even more neutral terms such as incorporation and mediumship. As Taves states, academic labels carry with them “presuppositions and associations that may be at odds with, and thus distort, the experience of our historical subjects” (1999, 8). Interestingly I had to find out that one of the presuppositions some practitioners reject is the “religious” or even “spiritual” connotation. For instance, I interviewed the founder and president of a Spiritist hospital in Florianópolis specialising in spiritual surgeries, among other treatments (see Schmidt 2022). He described the work in his hospital strictly as complementary medicine that has nothing to do with the incorporation of spirits. His hospital treats around 2000 patients weekly, most of them with spiritual therapies (based on figures in 2010). It also offers classes teaching mediums how to develop their skills and lectures for the wider public. The hospital has a growing clientele and presents itself as a secular institution like other hospitals. For him, mediumship is a “communication technique” and not a matter of faith, similar to Taves’s comment in her study of Anglo-American Protestants and ex-Protestants mentioned earlier (1999, 349). Their scale for mediumship is therefore entirely secular, while academics label it as non-ordinary experience and characterise it as religious.

In addition to rejecting terms due to their religious connotation, other traditions have a more theological explanation why the academic labels are incorrect. For instance, Candomblé priests and priestesses quite frequently told me that the spiritual entities, the *orixás*, were too powerful for a human body to incorporate. They described the *orixás* as forces of nature, like a thunderstorm or a hurricane. *Orixás* are therefore perceived as entities without a firm boundary, as pure energy. It would be consequently impossible to become incorporated or even possessed by them. Here, the scale is theological and based on the divine nature of the deities. However, like Spiritists, these priests and priestesses also speak about development of mediumship skills. Recently I noticed that offers of workshops, classes, and other training session have increased in several African-derived religious communities. In addition to specific classes for new members, they offer classes on nutrition, wellbeing, African culture, and sometimes even the Yoruba language that are open to the public (for a fee).

And, finally, Charismatic Christians reject the terms incorporation and possession because body and soul are regarded as a unit that cannot be controlled by an outside entity such as a spirit. However, demonology has changed traditional Pentecostal theology and influences many Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Brazil. They describe “demonic possession” as “paralysing the will and distracting the conscience by a play of fantasy, or, in other words, by the demon” (Oliva 1995, 99–100). Hence, any attempts to regard speaking in tongues or the baptism by the Holy Ghost under the category of mediumship are firmly rejected. However, the increasing presence of demonology in Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Churches led their members to use the term “possession” with regard to demons. Hence,

it has a negative connotation and is seen as the cause of illnesses and problems. Consequently, it is not regarded as a skill to be developed and cherished. While mediumship has an empowering connotation, we see that in these churches “possession” is seen as something to be treated by “depossession”. Their scale is therefore entirely religious with a subsequent rejection of the term “skills” for the development of the mediumship abilities.

However, mediumship is not only practiced with a diversity of scales used by different communities. As Erika Bourguignon writes, mediumship is also a universal human capacity that is “culturally modulated” (Bourguignon 2004, 558), or, as I argue, culturally and socially modulated (Schmidt 2016a). While Bourguignon sees the role of possession and trance as instruments of social change (1973, 338), I emphasise that the meaning of mediumship must adapt to structural factors of a society. Any change in socio-economic inequality, gender discrimination, and political oppression resonates in the interpretation of religious belonging and practice. At the same time, new developments in academia, new methods and approaches, and new theories also have an impact. Lewis warned us against following new fashions and that “if we are not careful, the voices of those we seek to report are in danger of being silenced as we pursue our own ethnocentric preoccupations” (Lewis 2003, xii). However, by approaching mediumship as “glocalised” practice, we acknowledge that mediumship is a global skill that has culturally diverse scales.

Conclusion

I started my chapter with a reflection on the diversity of local scales and argued for acknowledging ethnographic diversity. Without presenting one perspective on mediumship as dominant, I argued that there is no right nor wrong, just a multiplicity of local scales, depending on religious, historical, social, and cultural context. I also commented on how a lack of awareness of this diversity of scales led to misunderstanding and even misrepresentation of mediumship in the academic debate. I highlighted the impact of changing social and cultural conditions on local scales of mediumship. For instance, while during the military dictatorship Brazilian men might have been reluctant to be seen as working as a medium, the changed political situation has led to an openness towards mediumship that has enabled people to openly associate with it who might have been reluctant just decades ago. I also pointed out many mediums’ engagement with the academic debate and their knowledge of academic literature. This interconnectedness between local and global led me to the concept of glocalisation, which I then linked to the Cologne debate on skill and scale. While acknowledging local diversity, the term “glocal” points towards embeddedness in a global context and consequently highlights mediumship as a global skill. I encountered a sometimes highly sophisticated debate among members who are knowledgeable about global developments and who put forward an approach to mediumship as global. But instead of simply applying new trends to the diverse ethnographic context of Brazilian mediumship, the term glocalisation points towards a more complex interaction. In line

with the maxim “think globally, act locally” (Robertson 1992, 172), glocalisation of mediumship acknowledges local scales of mediumship as global skill. I see mediumship with its worldwide expansion as a perfect example of glocalisation. Mediumship allows us an approach to lived cultures and reflects what matters to people. R.R. Marett, the British anthropologist, wrote more than 100 years ago, “I have not sought to explain so much as to describe... how it “feels”—to live in such a wonder-world” (Marett 1909, xxiii, xxviii, quoted by Bengtson 1979, 650). Glocalising mediumship shows what is important to mediums—and to a certain degree how it feels—but also offers a way to explain its practice in the wider academic context. And this is what we can learn from a study of mediumship and other forms of non-ordinary experiences.

References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1968. *Rabelais and his World*. Cambridge/London: MIT Press.
- Bengtson, Dale R. 1979. “R. R. Marrett and the Study of Religion”. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (4): 645–659.
- Bourguignon, Erica. 1973. An assessment of some comparisons and implications. In Erica Bourguignon (ed.), *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change*, 321–39. Columbus: Ohio University Press.
- Bourguignon, Erica. 1976. *Possession*. San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp.
- Bourguignon, Erica. 2004. “Suffering and Healing, Subordination and Power: Women and Possession Practice”. *Ethos* 32 (4): 557–74.
- Bourguignon, Erica, Anna Bellisari, and Susan McCabe. 1983. “Women, Possession Trance Cults, and the Extended Nutrient-Deficiency Hypothesis”. *American Anthropologist* 85 (2): 413–14.
- Brown, Diana. 1986. *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
- Chesnut, Andrew R. 1997. *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Chesnut, Andrew R. 2003. *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Csordas, Thomas J. 2004. “Evidence of and for what?”, *Anthropological Theory* 4 (4): 473–480.
- Hayes, Kelly E. 2010. Serving the Spirits, Healing the Person: Women in Afro-Brazilian Religions. In Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, Darnise C. Martin, and Oyeronke Olademo (eds.), *Women and New and Africana Religions*, 101–122. Santa Barbara: Greenwood.
- James, William. 2008 (1902). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature* (Reprint). Rockwill: Arc Manor.
- Johnson, Paul. 2011. “An Atlantic Genealogy of ‘Spirit Possession’”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53 (2): 393–425.
- Keller, Mary. 2002. *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, & Spirit Possession*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Lambek, Michael. 2008. Provincializing God? Provocations from an Anthropology of Religion. In Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, 120–138. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Landes, Ruth. 1947. *The City of Women*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lerch, Patricia. 1982. “An Explanation for the Predominance of Women in the Umbanda Cults of Porto Alegre, Brazil”. *Urban Anthropology* 11 (2): 237–61.
- Lewis, Ioan M. 2003 [1971]. *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

- McCutcheon, Russel T. 2012. Introduction. In Carl Martin and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Religious Experience: A Reader*, 1–16. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Montoya, Sol. 2003. “Disonancias rituales: Curupira y la ambigüedad”. *Indiana* 19/20: 99–109.
- Morris, Pam 1994. Introduction. In Pam Morris (ed.), *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, 1–24. London: Edward Arbold.
- Oliva, Margarida M. C. 1995. *Ação Diabólica e Exorcismo: Na Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, MPhil thesis, São Paulo: PUC.
- Otto, Rudolf. 1987 (1917). *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*. Munich: Beck. [Published in English under the title *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936].
- Pimentel, Fernanda da Silva. 2005. *Quando Psiquê se liberta de Demônio—um estudo sobre a relação entre exorcismo e cura psíquica em mulheres na Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, Mphil thesis, São Paulo: PUC.
- Robertson, Robert. 1992. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage.
- Schmidt, Bettina E. 2022. “Incorporation does not exist”: The Brazilian rejection of the term “possession” and why it exists nonetheless. In: Éva Pócs and András Zempléni (eds.), *Spirit Possession: European Contributions to Comparative Studies*, 75–92. New York/Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Schmidt, Bettina E. 1995. *Von Geistern, Orichas und den Puertoricanern: zur Verbindung von Religion und Ethnizität*. Marburg: Curupira.
- Schmidt, Bettina E. 2000. Religious Concepts in the Process of Migration: Puerto Rican Female Spiritists in the USA. In Jacqueline Knörr and Birgit Meier (eds.), *Women and Migration: Anthropological Perspectives*, 119–132. New York/Frankfurt: Campus/St. Martin.
- Schmidt, Bettina E. 2002. “Mambos, Mothers and Madrinhas in New York City: Religion as a Means of Empowerment for Women from the Caribbean”. *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and its Diaspora* 5 (1): 75–104.
- Schmidt, Bettina E. 2016a. *Spirit and Trance in Brazil: Anthropology of Religious Experiences*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Schmidt, Bettina E. 2016b. Provincializing Religious Experience: Methodological Challenges to the Study of Religious Experiences; A Brazilian Case Study. In: Bettina E. Schmidt (ed.), *The Study of Religious Experience: Approaches and Methodologies*, 88–101. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Sered, Susan S. 1994. *Priestess, Mothers, Sacred Sisters: Religions Dominated by Women*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taves, Ann. 2005. “Experience”. *Rever: Revista de Estudos da Religião* 4, 43–52.
- Taves, Ann. 1999. *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

