

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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# Aesthetics of Spirits

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### INTRODUCTION: FROM ANIMISM TO INTERMEDIATE BEINGS

Spirits, ghosts, angels, demons, revenants, etc. are categorized by scholars as intermediate beings, *Zwischenwesen* (Lang 2001), which may be malevolent, benevolent, capricious, or morally ambivalent. According to an evolutionary perspective, the “belief in spiritual beings” was considered by Edward B. Tylor to be the origin of religion. His influential term “animism” referred to the belief that both creatures and inanimate objects have souls and that the human soul can separate from its body during dreams and after death. Over time, animism as an analytical concept declined in importance, but it continued to be used as a general descriptive, though superficial, term for “primitive,” “indigenous,” and “tribal” religions (Bowie 2006: 13). In recent years, however, animism has attracted new academic interest because it “concerns the nature of human-being and the nature of our world,” as Graham Harvey put it (2013: 1). The ambitious theoretical concept of a New Animism promoted by Philippe Descola, Nurit Bird-Rose, Tim Ingold, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among others, demands a relational ontology that allows for rethinking the relation between humans and nonhumans. The growing interest in animism or animistic worldviews coincides with a “spectral turn” in the humanities that was set in motion by Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994). Derrida was fascinated by the logic of haunting and the essential feature of the specter as being simultaneously present and absent. Ghosts and uncanniness became a fashionable trope in literary studies and the social sciences (Blanco and Peeren 2013). The academic fascination with ghosts and spirits coincides with a pop-cultural fascination with the subject, mainly observable in literature, movies, and TV series (Blanco and Peeren 2010; Bräunlein and Lauser 2016).

The presence of ghosts and spirits in the imaginary repertory of Western cultural theory and everyday culture has consequences for the topic of this essay—the study of the aesthetics of spirits. From the nineteenth century to the present, ghosts and spirits have been deployed in a multitude of arguments in cultural, social, psychological, and cognitive theories. They have been associated, for example, with the universal fear of death and the origin of religion, pre-animistic, magico-religious concepts of impersonal power (Max Weber), a certain developmental stage of adolescents (Jean Piaget), the return of the repressed (Sigmund Freud), non-anthropocentric ontologies (New Animism), the uncanny presence of the absent (Jacques Derrida), an intuitive mind–body dualism (Paul Bloom), religion as a systematized form of anthropomorphism (Stewart Guthrie), the human capacity of hyperactive agency-detection (Justin Barret), or supernatural agents as full-access strategic agents (Pascal Boyer). Such theoretical arguments have effects on models

and concepts of how humans perceive, sense, and imagine supernatural agents. Furthermore, they also transmit ontological statements on the nature of spiritual and human beings. Such scholarly theories can be described as “semiotic ideologies” as elaborated by Webb Keane, in so far as they contain tacit assumptions about words and things, humans and agency. They function as a “reflection upon, and an attempt to organize, people’s experiences of the materiality of semiotic form” (Keane 2007: 21).

## THE FORMATION OF GHOSTLY EXPERIENCES

Ontological statements and instructions of ghostly experiences are also transmitted by Western pop-cultural, vernacular knowledge of what spirits and ghosts are and what they look like. This folk knowledge has been heavily influenced by romantic and gothic literature as well as by spiritualism, the ritualized and entertaining communication with the dead. Although religious studies and sociocultural anthropology have provided abundant material on how spirits and ghosts are conceptualized at various times and in different cultures, Western folk knowledge on spirits and ghosts has both had a clear impact on the scholarly discourse on this subject and been formative through the global mediascape.

The folk concepts and scholarly concepts that reflect upon and organize experience also facilitate that experience. Thus, in the words of Peter Antes, “we experience very deeply what we have learnt” (Antes 2002: 341). Culturally specific discourses on spirits, ghosts, and the aesthetics of spirits are inseparable. Therefore, if we want to learn something about the aesthetics of spirits and ghosts, we have to study culturally specific concepts of such beings, social structures, interpretive communities, and religious authorities such as trance-media, shamans, or theologians. Ghosts and spirits come into existence because of ascriptions, communication, and experience. Thus, in the same way that Ann Taves proposes the term “experiences deemed religious” instead of “religious experience” (2009: 18, 57), it makes sense to use phrases such as “encounters deemed ghostly” or “apparitions deemed spectral.” These social-scientific assertions are based on a model of humans as social beings and makers of symbols. They stand in contrast with evolutionary and cognitive approaches, which are based on models of humans as intelligent apes. While the latter seek to explain *why* human beings perceive ghosts and spirits, the former seek to understand *how* human beings perceive ghosts and communicate with spiritual beings. Both sides contribute to the aesthetics of spirits. This is why the discussion that follows pays attention to such models.

### *Ghosts and Spirits as Side Effects of the Evolutionary Process*

Most approaches within the cognitive science of religion, which explores the natural foundations of religion (Barrett 2000), conceive of human beings, Armin W. Geertz proposes, as

intelligent apes that are highly emotional, easily spooked, very superstitious, extremely sensitive to social norms and virtual realities, and equipped with nervous systems that are vulnerable to influence from conspecifics and their symbolic worlds. These traits are prerequisites for religious behaviour.

—2013: 19

The whole sensorium of this intelligent ape, being both predator and prey since its origin (Barrett 2005), developed out of its struggle for survival. Additionally, and for the

same reason, skills for communicating with other members of the species developed. Viewed within a Darwinian cognitive account, spiritual beings are byproducts of our natural history as intelligent apes. Spirits are animated by our psyche because of “our need to discover any agents in an uncertain environment,” as Stewart Guthrie states, concluding that “animism is basic to religion, if not sufficient for it” (2013: 357). Further, he states that the agency of invisible supernatural agents is produced by intuitive folk-psychology consisting of five aspects: body–mind dualism, priority of mind, teleology, unconsciousness, and low threshold for perceiving.

Such theories, which explain the widespread, cross-cultural tendency to postulate the existence of anomalous or counterintuitive agents are, according to Ann Taves, cognitive and affective in nature (Taves 2009: 43). For example, one cognitive theory argues “that human beings ascribe counterintuitive agent-related properties to objects because they have a basic tendency to overattribute agency, particularly in situations of ambiguity” (ibid.). This tendency has evolutionary adaptive value according to the principle that it is better to be safe than sorry. That is, from an evolutionary point of view it is better to assume that rustling leaves indicate an unseen predator than to assume that it is just the wind and possibly get eaten as a result. Another cognitive theory explains the widespread conception of bodiless agents such as ghosts, spirits, fairies, or demons through an intuitive and commonsense dualism which separates bodies and persons. These cognitive characteristics predispose human beings to postulate counterintuitive agents (Taves 2009: 44). Affective theories (e.g., Kirkpatrick 2012) explain such cognitive dispositions as grounded in “affective dynamics, including attachment processes, kinship relations, and hierarchical relations of dominance and subordination that are common to most primates” (ibid.).

Such broad statements are plausible and there is hardly a counter-argument to be found. We learn something about ontological categories processed by the human brain and about why so-called “counterintuitive beings” are generally “good to think.” However, such statements tend towards overgeneralization and reductive simplification. It is therefore important also to consider theories that account for culturally specific modes of conceiving of and experiencing spirits and ghosts.

### *How Humans Connect with Invisible, (Mostly) Intangible Spirits*

Approaches of the cognitive science of religion are not interested in actor-centric perspectives and diversity. For the exploration of multiple aestheticscapes the socio-cultural anthropological approach seems therefore to be more appropriate. When we study “intangible” phenomena such as spirits and spirit encounters, it seems to be more productive and valid “to begin from the premises of their influence, extension, or multiplication in the world than from substantive ontological predefinitions” (Espírito Santo and Blanes 2014: 7). Spirits produce effects by their repeated “coming into presence” (Lambek 2010: 17ff.). However, their presence is paradoxical “since any kind of spiritual contact, however abstract and conceptual, required at the same time a worldly/material instantiation, thus rendering the theoretically immaterialisable, material” (Espirito Santo and Tassi 2013: 1).

Ancestor shrines, images, offerings, animals, objects, relics, incense sticks, candles, flowers, etc. refer to the material side of spiritual contact. A routinization of spiritual contact takes place in rituals, and through participation in such rituals people learn from childhood on how to discern the presence of spirits. In this ritual pedagogy of spiritual encounters, the material, the sensual, and the social merge. The reason why spirits

generally do not cause cognitive dissonance but are easily understood as “natural” is because “they are largely consistent with the category of ‘person’ but lack bodies (the property of physicality). Given that spirits are often presumed to be like persons in most other regards, the content of spirit concepts is readily transmitted” (Cohen 2007: 16).

In this essay, I understand the aesthetics of spirits as effects of communication, sensory activities, bodily mediation, and imagination (see Traut and Wilke 2015b). I am guided by the ambition to better understand the “interplay between sensory, cognitive and socio-cultural aspects of world construction, and the role of religion within this dynamic” (Grieser and Johnston 2017b: 2). To this end, I will present three case studies. All are based on ethnographic fieldwork, and all tell us something meaningful about the “aisthesis” of spirits in a local culture and demonstrate the usefulness of the anthropology of the body, senses, and emotions. Furthermore, they make clear how important specific epistemologies of supernatural encounters are for the aesthetics of spirits.

## CASE STUDIES

### “Soul Encounters” in a Bornean Village

During her fieldwork in a Bidayuh village in Sarawak, Malaysia, Liana Chua came across an emotion that English speakers would characterize as having “a knot in the stomach.” There is no specific Bidayuh term for this emotion. In such cases informants press their fist against their diaphragm and, when asked about their feelings, explain that they feel *susah*, that is distressed or sad, or that they cannot tolerate what is going on (*tān*). Such gestures were frequently observable in the context of death and offered the anthropologist insights in the unseen world of ghosts and spirits. In her paper “Soul Encounters” (2011), Chua describes and analyzes the somatic modes through which ghosts, spirits, and other unseen beings are apprehended as felt experiences. Chua recognizes a local epistemology of supernatural encounters “that associates vision with normality and its suspension with both sensory and social liminality” (2011: 1). During mortuary rituals, ghosts and spirits are present in certain behavior rules, in the conversations of bereaved people and in their emotions. The souls of recently deceased people are able to smell and are drawn to young children and even the unborn, whom they make ill or cause to lose their souls. Therefore, children are not allowed to attend such events. The atmosphere of funerals, thoroughly convivial affairs, usually resemble parties. However, it changes suddenly from hilarity to despair when the coffin is taken to the graveyard and the nails are hammered into the lid. As Chua observed on the occasion of an old lady’s funeral, in the very moment of the final farewell, the deceased’s children began sobbing and crying plaintively. A distant relative of the deceased looked at the anthropologists with moist eyes and murmured: “‘You can bear [*tān*] this,’ [. . .] clenching her fist to her diaphragm. ‘I can’t; this is susah’” (Chua 2011: 3). After the final nails were hammered, the faces of the lady’s daughters were

streaked with tears and contorted with what seemed to be a desperate, almost animalistic grief. Their cries were joined by a crescendo of howls and sobs from the younger children, who looked terrified and bewildered. A wave of intense something—fear, sadness, despair?—spread palpably across the crowd. [. . .] As the coffin disappeared through the doorway, the weeping daughters collapsed into the arms of relatives and neighbors.

—Chua 2011: 3

After the emotional climax and the lowering of the coffin into the ground, the crowd started smiling and chatting “as if nothing had happened” (ibid.: 4). Before the crowd dispersed, it was obligatory for everyone to wash faces, arms, and legs with water in which flowers floated. This procedure had the necessary effect of cooling down the intensity of the burial and it prevented, the people supposed, the dead person’s spirit from following them into their houses. “The relief I felt on both counts was indescribable,” the anthropologist notes (ibid.).

In her analysis of this specific “clenched-fist” or “knot-in-the-stomach-feeling” that occurred at every Bidayuh funeral, Chua had to realize that this feeling could encompass many things, “ranging from worry for the bereaved and wistfulness about the past to the fear of ghosts. This was borne out by my own experiences, which, entailing that same physiological sensation, would lurch from confusion to sadness to pure alarm in the space of a few minutes” (ibid.). Chua refuses to reduce the clenched-fist sensation to an outward expression of grief and emphasizes that the salience of this sensation does not lie “in its specificity but in its indeterminacy, that is, in its capacity to subsume different responses within a single recognizable feeling” (ibid.: 4–5). The meaning of physiological sensations but also the ability to produce such sensations are culture-specific. This plain and simple insight is well illustrated in Chua’s case study.

The existence of invisible beings is taken for granted among the Bidayuh. Ancestors, local water and jungle spirits, guardian spirits of the mountains and rivers, ghostly animals, and tree- or rock-dwelling demons are distant features of village life, except in the event of death. Although people occasionally encounter those entities, only few have actually seen those beings or the souls of deceased people. Seeing ghosts is dangerous and frightening. The shock of the confrontation, expressed in the clenched-fist gesture, causes sickness. A particular feverish illness called *tāru*—literally fear—is associated with ghost encounters. While ordinary human beings cannot see ghosts, their presence can be experienced through the ears and the nose and as material vestiges. For John, a Bidayuh Catholic prayer leader, these interactions are reasonable because “humans have two ways of seeing things: through their eyes and through their soul. The latter, he said, can perceive things that humans ordinarily cannot see with their eyes” (ibid.: 6). Once, when he had to retrieve the decomposing body of a young man who had died in a motorcycle accident, he was overwhelmed by the smell of the corpse. He could not get rid of it for two weeks and always felt ill and upset. He attributed this state “to his soul having encountered something invisible. ‘Even if our eyes don’t notice anything,’ he explained, ‘our soul does’” (ibid.).

Interaction between humans and invisible beings happens at the level of the soul. As Chua concludes,

what their souls may see, humans can detect only through non-visual means, such as olfactory, tactile, auditory, corporeal, or emotive occurrences. The association, moreover, works in both ways. Invisible spirit presences may cause altered sensory state, but shifting sensory states—such as reduced visibility—also increase the possibility of encountering such presences.

—ibid.

From her observations and the information provided by her interlocutors, Liana Chua derives a peculiarly Bidayuh epistemology of supernatural encounters in which the senses are deeply implicated. Ocular-centrism prevails in the safe everyday life where visible things are encountered. Ghosts and spirits are not abnormal but considered to be

invisible. But when things go wrong and cracks in normality occur, a chance encounter may happen that leads to a jungle demon accidentally becoming visible. This causes shock and illness.

In this way, vision—eye(-level) sight—acts as boundary marker between normal and uncanny occurrences and situations. Moving on to the unseen, somatic plane on which human—spirit interactions take place, however, the distinction between thought, sensation, and emotion become increasingly blurred.

—*ibid.*: 7

This becomes accessible through the Bidayuh concept of a human person, which combines the cognizant soul (*simangi*), breath or spirit (*roh*), life force or vitality (*ashüng*), thought or reason (*akar*), physical bodies (*pürüng*), emotion of feeling (*yang*), and sensation (*nyam*). The Bidayuh describe these components as distinct, but they are actually constantly interacting. A shift in one affects all others, and this is

especially common when the soul, the most important and enveloping of these components, is disturbed. People whose souls encounter spirits often feel unwell, distressed, and “hot” (*pāras*) all at once—a state associated with instability, danger, and illness that can be remedied with “cooling” (*madud*) mechanisms, such as the flower water offered to attendee at a burial.

—*ibid.*

Soul encounters, Chua states,

engage every part of the human being, manifesting themselves as simultaneously corporeal, cognitive, and affective states. In the absence of vision, such somatic states serve as humans’ chief means of apprehending what is otherwise invisible, ambiguous, and intangible. At these points, the body becomes the living, breathing index of a tutelary presence: rather than standing for that entity, it is actually consubstantial with it, becoming the material trace of a person’s encounter with a spirit.

—*ibid.*

Finally, Chua answers the question of what spirits are:

spirits are not simply disembodied ideas or entities floating beyond the human plane; instead, they are better thought of as tangible, embodied, felt experiences that are instantiated in human bodies. Put differently, it is both in and as these non-visual jumbles of corporeality and emotion that souls, ghosts, spirits, and other invisible beings become real and relevant to Bidayuhs [. . .].

—*ibid.*

### *Rituals, Possessing Spirits, and Bodily Transformation*

The next case study refers thematically to the phenomenon of possession, theoretically to ritual, performance, and aesthetics, and regionally to Zanzibar. The ethnographic study conducted by Kjersti Larsen demonstrates the value of ritual and performance theory for the aesthetic of spirits. And it illustrates the methodological value of participant observation for that purpose, acknowledging “the importance of embodied knowledge, lived experience, and intersubjectivity” (Larsen 2014: 26).

Possession makes invisible beings visible and gives them physical appearance. Unlike incidental encounters with spirits and ghosts, spirit possession is structured by means of ritual and performance. Larsen studied various rituals in Zanzibar over several years. In her paper “Possessing Spirits and Bodily Transformation” (2014), she focuses on so-called *ngoma ya sheitani* rituals and starts with the common distinction between “the one embodied and the one embodying; between humans and spirits” and she maintains

that when Zanzibari women and men embody spirits, their bodies become, for a period of time, those of the spirits. Still, the spirits’ identities are never totally confused with those of the persons whose bodies they indwell. Moreover, the spirits are understood as not interfering with the persons’ mind or identity—although the relationship between them is acknowledged [. . .]. Spirits and humans are seen as different beings despite the fact that both do, temporarily, share a body in the human world.

—Larsen 2014: 17

*Ngoma ya sheitani* rituals are means to welcome, interact with, and please spirits. *Ngoma ya kibuki* rituals welcome especially Christian spirits from Madagascar, *masheitani* or *majinni*. Establishing a good relationship with the spirits will generally pay off and ensure prosperity and contentment in life (Larsen 2014: 17). The rituals take place in and around the house of the ritual leader. Other participants are of different age groups and genders, “members of the ritual group [. . .], relatives and friends of the one holding the ritual, women and men embodying spirits of the given kind, and people of the neighborhood, who often bring their children along with them. In this sense, the ritual and the ritual group—humans and spirits alike—attract an audience” (ibid.). Significant ritual artifacts are incense, scepters with silver ornamentation, silver bracelets, a bucket with healing water, incense jars, plates with Maria Theresia coins, limestone, honey, bottles of imported brandy, tobacco, and betel nut. Music and rhythm are made by rattles, accordion, electric piano, and clapping. In recent years, cassettes and CDs with Malagasy music and songs are increasingly being used.

The ritual space is constructed through the singing of participants as well as interactions between humans and spirits that confirm the presence of the latter. The acts of censuring of the attendees, smearing of a water–limestone mixture on people’s heads and chests, and drinking of the spirits’ special herbal infusion are all regarded as protection from illness. Material objects and sensual media such as textiles, food, words, sound, incense, and colors mark the ritual space. Following Edward Schieffelin (1993), Larsen maintains that people take the reality of spirits for granted less because of what they believe is happening than “how what they believe is brought to life in a continually recreated ritual space” (Larsen 2014: 20).

The arrival of a spirit is signaled by a person shivering, jumping, and having restless legs. Since the spirit enters the body through the feet, the legs are rubbed with brandy to facilitate the process.

When a spirit has eventually arrived on the head (*kichwani*), the spirit’s specially prepared water is sprinkled onto the head and only then is calmness regained. The spirit, not the person, is then said to inhabit the body. The spirit is materializing in the human world through the human body.

—Larsen 2014: 18

In her analysis, Larsen underlines the character of this ritual as a special kind of social action which provides space for extraordinary relationships and experiences: “the ritual

makes possible the material presence of spirits and interactions between humans and spirits, as well as human experiences related to ‘becoming’ spirits” (ibid.: 20). This potentiality of the ritual, and its effects, are based on basic assumptions and understandings within which the performance is embedded, as Strathern and Stewart assert in their embodiment theory (2008: 69, quoted by Larsen 2014: 20). Additionally, the capacities of mimesis, aesthetic and bodily enactment, are realized in such rituals and performative acts. In Zanzibari society it is assumed that “the body is experienced as temporarily transformable and as a potential seat of different persona. Thus, the question of the authenticity of spirits as such or the potential simulation of human beings is, in this society, not a problem in itself” (Larsen 2014: 20). Since Zanzibaris observe possession rituals from their childhood on, they learn gradually “about the various kinds of spirits: their appearance, movements, habits, behavior, likes and dislikes” (ibid.: 24).

In the Zanzibaris’ understanding, spirits are able to experience sensuously, and humans respond to the spirits’ senses:

sight through colors and jewelry; flavor, by serving and consuming food and drink; sound, through the use of certain sorts of instruments, music, and songs; and smell, through the use of incense and perfume. Smell, sight, taste, and sound involve aesthetics, and aesthetics carry the potential for crossing barriers and invoking transformations.

—ibid.: 20

The appearance of spirits in the ritual should be understood

in terms of awareness of knowing grounded in a particular experiential, social, and cultural life-world. [. . .] Meanings assigned to aesthetic representations are not intrinsic, but depend on the meanings that are assigned to or associated with various bodily movements and facial expressions in different socio-cultural contexts [. . .] Embodying spirits implies a process of knowing and reflection.

—ibid.: 24

### *Audible Spirits and Graspable Ghosts*

The last example comes from my own fieldwork in the Philippines, which I undertook together with my wife Andrea in the late 1980s among an Alangan-Magyan community in the mountains of Mindoro Island (Bräunlein and Lauser 1993). According to these swidden agriculturalists, the world is inhabited not only by humans and animals but also by various non-human beings that are either malevolent or benevolent. Benevolent spirits are important for the local healers—*balaonan*. The characteristic attribute of a healer is his ability to gain spirit helpers—*kumuruan*. There is neither formal training nor a period of apprenticeship. Preconditions for becoming a healer are a mature personality, moral integrity, and the strong will to establish contact with such spirits. First contact happens in dreams, which prompt the future healer to chant for the spirits. Initially, he has to chant on eight consecutive nights to lure them. In that time period, during his dreams, he has to face challenges and temptations. Beautiful ladies will appear and demand sexual intercourse, or scenarios of a blaze or terrifying beasts will frighten him. In such cases he has to withstand his sexual desire and must not run away from danger. After eight days and nights, having gracefully overcome these challenges, he can start to acquire *kamuruan*. The appropriate technique to call spirits and communicate with them is continuous chanting at night—*agbalaonan*. During the chanting, the *balaonan* sits in a crouched position and sways his upper body back and forth. This body movement “phrases” the



melody line and sets the rhythm. The combination of singing and a swaying body is a common experience to every Mangyan; all newborns and infants are comforted in the hammock and by lullabies of their mother or siblings.

In his chants the *balaonan* narrates his journey to certain mountains, rivers, and waterfalls, where he visits the spirits there and invites them to accompany him. His swaying—moving without moving—imitates this journey. When the invitation of the *balaonan* is accepted and spirits arrive, the character of the chant transforms. The *balaonan*'s voice changes and becomes the voice of the spirits. Now, he sings with two or more voices—the narration becomes a dialog. Sound and intonation are highly individual and are determined by the relationship between healer and his helpers. The *balaonan* is not in trance or possessed: he always keeps control of his ego consciousness and is able to interrupt the chanting at any time to ask for betel nuts or rebuke noisy pigs under the stilt house. Spirit helpers are needed to search for an abducted soul, the most common cause of sickness. The courageous and cunning *kamuruan* set out to rescue the soul from the hideout in which the evil spirit, *bukaw*, has imprisoned it.

Almost every night, one or two *balaonan* were chanting in the village, each session lasting between forty-five minutes and five hours. The dialog between healer and his spirits are carried out in an esoteric language and are incomprehensible to the villagers. Nevertheless, numerous spirits are present in the nighttime village, perceived by everyone's ears through the healers' voices.

With the exception of the healer's perception during dreams, humans cannot see or feel the spirits. By contrast, a special category of non-human beings is sometimes visible and even tangible: the undead—*kablag*. The first time we heard this word was on our veranda while chatting with children. For them, talking about the undead was associated with hushed voices, goosebumps, and shudders of fear. Soon we learnt that the *kablag* were the most terrifying beings in the world of the Mangyan and that everyone was afraid of their ambushes. It is the destiny of every dead person to become a *kablag* after death, unless the living render it immobile by fettering the corpse or prevent the corpse from becoming a *kablag* by using holy water, since the Catholic missionaries strongly recommend this magical device. The decomposition of a corpse is understood to be a transformative process through which the human body inevitably becomes a *kablag*—a living corpse which seeks out the living in order to bite and kill them. Surprisingly, the realm of the dead is anything but horrible; on the contrary, it is characterized by affluence, and hunger is unknown. It is loneliness and separation from its family that the *kablag* finds unbearable, and thus its aggressive behavior is driven by the desire to be reunited with spouse and children. *Kablag* are described as human-like but monstrous, half rotten and without eyes, smelling like burning car tires. Many horror stories describe encounters between men and *kablag* as *physical* encounters. Whenever I doubted the physicality of the *kablag* and dematerialized them as dream figures, projections of fears, oral traditions, or discourses, my interlocutors stubbornly insisted on the materiality of the undead. One interlocutor recommended that I visit the cinema in the provincial town of Calapan. "Watch a zombie movie," he explained, "and you will understand what the real *kablag* are." Another informant showed me huge scars on his left upper arm and asserted that they had resulted from a terrifying fight with a *kablag* that he had luckily survived.

An anthropologist living among people who are convinced of the concrete and deadly reality of returning undead faces a particular hermeneutical problem. After all, the anthropologist knows that there cannot be such undead beings, and even if s/he avoids

constructing hierarchies of knowledge (see Borrelli and Grieser, Chapter 4, this volume) or opposing magical thinking and a scientific worldview, it is impossible to avoid aporias (see Bräunlein 1996). The certainty that the dead do not bite is an irreducible one.

The example of the *kablag* on Mindoro Island thus demonstrates a clash of ontologies. It points to the limits of both our epistemology and analytical tools in our attempts to translate the experienced reality of ghosts and spirits into our academic universe.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay, the aesthetics of spirits were unfolded as effects of communication, sensory activities, bodily mediation, and imagination. Evolutionary and cognitive approaches to religion explain why the conception of bodiless agents such as ghosts and spirits is widespread, why animism is basic to religion, why the human sensorium perceives spiritual beings, and why spirits are “good to think.” Such explanations are helpful for understanding the aesthetics of spirits in a very general sense. However, to explore aesthetic complexities within the multifaceted spiritscapes around the globe, anthropological approaches to studying the body, the senses, and emotion are more productive. This was demonstrated by three ethnographic case studies that illustrated three different modes of spirit “aesthesis”: through bodily affects such as the “knot-in-stomach” sensation (among the Bidayuh, Borneo), through performative events such as rituals of possession (in Zanzibar), and through the singing of a spirit-medium or through direct, physical encounters with the undead (among the Alangan-Mangyan, Philippines). The case studies also illustrate the diverse ways that spirits are ontologically conceptualized and sensed: as being visible through the medium’s possessed body, being invisible but real through somatic affects, or even being physically present in encounters with the living dead.

## RECOMMENDED READING

- Barley, Norton (2009), *Songs for the Spirits: Music and Mediums in Modern Vietnam*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press. Exploration of the aesthetics of Vietnamese mediumship and an impressive depiction of the transformative power of the musicscape for the ritual evocation of the spirit world, which is essential for mediums, the audience, and the invited spirits, by an ethnomusicologist and filmmaker.
- Kramer, Fritz W. (1993), *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa*, London: Verso. Starting from the question of how colonial Europeans were represented in ritual art, drama, and masquerades and inspired by Erich Auerbach’s mimesis theory and Godfrey Lienhardt’s concept of “*passiones*,” Kramer teaches us a great deal about the aesthetics of spirits through research on visual perception, experience, and the mimetic capacities of the human being.
- Traut, Lucia and Annette Wilke, eds. (2015a), *Religion-Imagination-Ästhetik: Vorstellung und Sinneswelten in Religion und Kultur*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht. Includes several instructive and stimulating contributions on the topic of spirit perception and communication.