

# Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication

[Click here](#) to get back to the Agenda overview.

**Datum:** May 18, 2012 -to- May 20, 2012

A three day international conference at the headquarters of the Regional Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences,

Pécs, Hungary

Friday 18- Sunday 20 May 2012

Organised by the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Pécs University, the Folklore Department of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society and the ISFNR Belief Narrative Research Network

This conference will be the ninth in a row of events launched by the Hungarian organisers in 1993 under the heading "concepts of religious ethnology in an interdisciplinary approach". To date this has resulted in eight publications. The primary objective we declared at the outset of the project is still valid today: to approach various concepts of religious ethnology and to survey the latest findings from the angle of folklore studies, anthropology, religious studies, cultural history, psychiatry, literary studies etc.; as well as to create an interdisciplinary discourse to find the solution to our various scientific problems. Participants at the conference will include academics from all parts of Europe to give us an even closer view of current European research areas.

Each of the topics mentioned in the title deserves investigation in its own right; however, at this conference our main aim is to capture the set of connections which exist around these three topics. Thus we need to explore the ties between different notions of the soul, communicational techniques and functions and the spiritual world which is supposed to decode such communication. We would also welcome papers which investigate the role of notions of the soul and the spirit world in the everyday life, religion and mentality of various communities. On the other hand, we would like to explore the narrative traditions surrounding each of our themes: narrative metaphors for notions of the soul and for supernatural communication, their representations in folklore, literature, the arts and academic literature, as well as the ways in which beliefs and narratives are related.

As regards notions of the soul, folklore research has presented a rather simplistic account in the past, insofar as they reduced the topic, at least with regard to Christian Europe, to something like "the Christian duality of body and soul versus the remnants of the mythological legacy of the different peoples". The latter mainly refers to representations of the free soul/shadow soul, alter ego or second body as well as their traces in literature and folklore. E.g. in a Hungarian respect this mainly meant exploring the "shamanistic" legacy of the nation's archaic pre-Christian religion, while in Greek literature and philosophy they were discovering remains of Thracian or Iranian shamanism, etc. Besides this simple pattern, research sometimes came face to face with the more nuanced notions of the soul held by certain non-Christian and even non-European peoples, e.g. the rich ancient Greek literary, philosophical and linguistic heritage or Germanic mediaeval data (or, in the Hungarian context, the varied material of the Ob-Ugric linguistic relatives), which were mainly examined by linguists, literary scholars, researchers of religion, theologians and philosophers (e.g. Erwin Rohde, Jan Bremmer, Hans-Peter Hasenfratz, Régis Boyer, Claude Lecouteux, etc.). It barely occurred to anthropologists studying similar subjects abroad to look around their own neighbourhood.

Research conducted by linguists and historians of religion about notions of the soul, the free soul or the alter ego which breaks away from the body, have attained considerable results in Europe, but rarely if ever have scholars looked into the role of these notions in the everyday religiosity of a community, and in the communication with the supernatural. As regards the exploration of Christian visions, both religious studies and anthropology have made serious advances in the last few decades, particularly as regards investigations into the religious and social role of visions in the Middle Ages and the modern period (pl. Ernst Benz, Peter Dinzelsbacher, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Claude Lecouteux, most recently William Christian, Galia Valtchinova and many others). At the same time, many other forms of communication have remained unexplored, nor do we see clearly regarding the boundaries and interconnections of various systems of communication (e.g. shamanism, spirit possession, Christian visions, mediumism, etc.) with each other and with different notions of the soul.

Therefore we believe that the time has come to gain a somewhat more nuanced picture of the notions of the soul held by the peoples of Europe, in the above indicated context of connections. It would be desirable to form clear ideas about the extent to which the notions of the soul used by various religions and denominations were known, the local interpretations that existed, the special "popular" notions and representations of the soul which might differ from or only partially converge with the former; as well as alternative traditions that have been preserved alongside Christianity and survived in folklore collections, literary and linguistic relics or have merged with Christianity. (Naturally, Christian notions are also far from being homogeneous and have been changing along the constantly shifting ideas and boundaries of monism/dualism/trialism and also in relation to the various eschatological and resurrection dogmas which are in themselves also in constant change. At the same time they have helped sustain popular and non-Christian traditions.) We are not necessarily implying here the existence of a unified and clearly outlined notion of the soul or several, clearly delineated souls with different functions - it is more to do with the (frequently merging) representations of different ideas and notions as they appear in mentality, way of thinking, folklore or literature.

It is this rich and varied array of phenomena that needs to be mapped out for each nation and culture, including their terminology, cultural and social context, linguistic metaphors, visual representations and meaning, with regard to a people or a geographic unit or local society, preferably in the context of the above described connections, meaning the role they play in sacred communication. A few possible points to anchor this vast and varied material may be the following.

## 1. Concepts of the soul

Life soul, selbst, psyché. Life force (vitalstoff) as a body-soul immanently present in the body, the 'inside' (thymos) which is clearly connected to some part of the body (head, brain, heart, liver, kidneys etc.), it resides there and is associated with bodily functions (breathing, breath, blood circulation, sperm). The soul related to some natural element or phenomenon such as the wind blowing (dûse), fog, water. Functions related to various notions/terms for the soul (life force, mental concepts, breathing, movement) etc.

The free soul, external soul, mirror or shadow soul, double (alter ego, double, harm, fylgja etc.) as the seat of life force, as the depository of communication with the supernatural. It is outside the body either constantly or temporarily, it breaks away from the soul in dreams, in a trance etc. Living and dead, bodily and spiritual variants. Their connection with the soul which lives on after death and with mortal spirits. Its formations (human, animal, mirror image, light, foggy figure). It is only observable in certain situations, at certain times, before death; appears only in dreams or visions. An invisible protector, companion (guardian angel), a fate soul which determines destiny or prophecies the future. It is an emotional and intellectual tie with the alter ego of oneself or others (mara/Mahr/mora phenomena). Accompanying, guarding, helping and initiating spirits interpreted as formal variants of the free soul.

Narrative traditions related to notions of the soul, motifs in stories and legends for the free soul, shadow soul, external soul, as well as departure from the body, the soul departing in sleep, narrative metaphors for transformation, metamorphosis, for turning into a soul (flight, invisibility, becoming small, entering through the keyhole, travelling in a small object, walking on the water, turning into an animal etc.).

Special creatures who have a free soul or an alter ego since birth - two-souled creatures, double beings, shapeshifters: werewolves and mara/mora/Mahr/Alp/tidérc beings, vampires, witches and magicians.

## 2. Body and soul - death, life after death, spirits of the dead

Death of an individual: death of the body and/or soul, the bodily and spiritual existence of the dead. Dead body (drying out, turning to dust, whether the soil will or will not admit it). Bodies living on, living dead bodies. Half-living or revived bodies, possessed dead bodies. What (sort of soul) dies along with the body, what survives the body. Souls living on in dead bodies and in bones.

Deathbed - with ancestors and relatives appearing, coming to take the soul. Companions of the soul (angels, saints, demons). The soul at the moment of death, which soul dies. Whether and how it leaves the body, where it goes, what shape it takes (breath, blood, fog, tiny man, tiny angel, naked baby, bee, bird etc.). Linguistic metaphors for the departure of the body. The place where the departing soul resides, its different stages, periods, dates of departure. Gradual death, bodily functions which persist temporarily after death, gradual departure. Transitory places, transitory existence: dead persons with no status who have not found a final place of rest, souls roaming in a liminal existence.

Souls and spirits in the other world, up, down, in heaven, in the underworld, in the woods, on the mountain, on an island, under water. The spirit of the dead in the other world - bodily and spiritual attributes and manifestations. Personal judgement and resurrection, resurrected body and/or soul - the fate of the body and/or soul in the meantime; souls in purgatory. Transition between different other worlds. Last judgement, the final destiny of the soul after resurrection.

Souls remaining in the soil, in the body, in the cemetery (in or around the grave), in the house, with the family; the dead of the family in the house, around the hearth, the soul of the ancestor in the wall, around the hearth, under the doorstep - in an animal form (house snake, talašom etc., 'building sacrifices'). The spirit of the dead person in the likeness, statue, magical object (talisman, stoicheion). Dead people turned into guardian spirits of the family or the individual, 'evil dead' assaulting the family or the community.

Mythical beings fused or merged with the dead: fairies; ill-intentioned dead turned into demons; 'two-souled creatures' - people who have alter egos or living and dead variants (witches, magicians, vampires), demons.

Spiritual beings which are half human or a transition between human and spirit - 'light shadowed ones', 'wind-men' (storm magicians, stuha, zduhač, planetnyk, chmurnik); fairies.

Spirits of the dead or possessing dead who return to the human community, to earth, who appear to humans (in a dream, trance, in an earthly setting as ghosts, in 'a bodily form', individually or in a group), helping or assaulting humans, snatching them to death, hoping that they would influence their otherworldly destiny or demanding offerings. Occasions, time and purpose for returning/appearance; times and places of the dead on earth.

## 3. Supernatural communication - in the context of the body-soul and spirits

General, spontaneous, lay forms and professionals who use certain bodily/spiritual capacities, birth traits (they have a special soul, alter ego or peculiar guardian spirits etc., and communicate with a unique spirit world or other worlds).

Communication with the dead, with spirits of the dead, with demons of storm clouds, 'walking with the fairies' etc. Forms and functions of such communication (assaults by the dead, snatching the living for 'initiation', possession by the dead, poltergeist phenomena). Communication with dead people or spirits who appear in dreams. Communication through alter egos/doubles of the living. Lay and professional communication with the dead, with spirits through a double who had broken away from the person: horizontal, earthly travels of the double. Double beings, creatures with two souls and shapeshifters communicating between the worlds of nature and culture (werewolf), and between the human world and the night world of the dead and demons through their demonic alter egos: mora, Mahr, witch, strigoi, vampire etc. Helping spirits as the unique manifestations of the alter ego.

Techniques of communication. Communication in a trance - inducing a trance, relevant techniques (spontaneous transe, self-suggestion, meditation, objects inducing a trance such as a mirror, water etc). The state of the body and the soul in a transe. Seers and fortune tellers reporting in a transe about their journey into the other world.

Ritual communication, symbolic and trance-inducing rites (fasting, St. Lucy's stool, magic circle, magic wand, walking around the grave of the dead and the 'places of the fairies', beating them with the wand). Ritual invocation of the dead and of fairies, rites for acquiring spirit helpers or invoking the dead.

Spontaneous and professional, ritually induced activity of mediums. The clairvoyant as a medium possessed by the dead. The role of music, dance and turning round in inducing trance; ritual possession by the dead or by fairies (healing societies: rusalia, rusalje, călușari, etc.).

'Journeys' of the free soul - with companions, helping souls or spirits or without; the free soul rises out of the body, elevates itself, looks back and sees the body or the earth; falling in a tunnel, crossing the water in a vehicle, rising with the vapours into a storm cloud; flying in dream to a 'fairy heaven'; turning into an animal and thus joining the demonic werewolf troupe; travelling to a witches' Sabbath on the back of animals, or of objects or metamorphosed into an animal; flying to the fairy other world with a troupe of fairies, making music and dancing etc.

Battles of the soul in dream or trance, against hostile harming spirits, storm souls in storm clouds, against assaulting werewolf demons, between good and bad - healing and harmful - spirits (in a possession trance); night battles (in a dream or trance) against the assaults of the dead or demons.

Narrative tradition, linguistic metaphors and textual representations of trance experiences and soul journeys, of communication through alter egos, of being snatched by the dead and of journeys to the other world, accounts of such experience, motifs in tales, legends and literature; folklore and literary motifs of journeys to the other world; narrative traditions of fairy other worlds and witches' Sabbaths.

---

Papers are welcome without restrictions on methodology or on the time and place of their subject matter as long as they use a theoretical approach in folklore studies, anthropology, cultural history, sociology etc. We also welcome comparative historical or textual philological analyses or presentations of research findings based on archive work or field work either in our outside of Europe, as well as analyses of religious phenomena from the perspective of religious anthropology, history of religion, theology etc. Mere descriptions of material are acceptable only if they considerably enhance our knowledge about a particular field.

The conference will be bilingual (Hungarian and English), and might take place in parallel sections, preferably in alternate time periods. (In such a case foreign participants will be offered optional cultural events or excursions for the duration of Hungarian papers.)

We request applicants to submit applications with an abstract of 10-15 sentences before August 20th 2011 on the form attached. The full text of the papers should be submitted no later than April 30th 2012 in order to leave sufficient time for circulating and printing.

Although publication of the proceedings of our last conference (Magical and Sacred Medical World) in English are still not forthcoming, we are not giving up hope and will do everything for the material of this conference to appear in both languages. While the Hungarian publication seems almost guaranteed, we are making efforts to secure an English version, too.

Costs for participants are presently being calculated, and organisers will do their best to keep costs manageable. (Should we fail to secure sponsorship, costs for three days and three or four nights, including food and accommodation but excluding travel costs, are expected to be around EUR 200.)

The maximum number of papers to be accepted for presentation is 50. Should there be more applicants than this, we will be forced to select among presenters. However, we shall not limit the number of non-presenting participants. We also reserve the right to reject papers for thematic discrepancy or other reasons.

Please, submit applications to the address below (by e-mail or post):

**Éva Pócs**  
professor emeritus  
PTE Néprajz-Kulturális Antropológia Tanszék  
7624 Pécs, Rókus u. 2.  
Hungary  
E-mail: [pocse@chello.hu](mailto:pocse@chello.hu)