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Panel How People Change, Engaging the Social and Psychological to
Reimagine Conversion (250 mots)

“Enchanting encounters” with African Gods and Dolphins.

Conversion stories that articulate the social and psychological

Véronique Servais and Arnaud Halloy

INTRODUCTION

According to some authors (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2004)), theories of religious conversion come under two paradigms: the classic/psychological and the contemporary/sociological. While the former sees conversion as a radical and sudden self-transformation, following an emotional turmoil, the latter sees it as a gradual and rational change in which the convert plays an active role. Varied ways of combining both paradigms have been proposed, but they apparently failed to provide really predictive models (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). The work that we present here might be seen as another attempt to articulate the psychological and the sociological approaches of religious conversion. Drawing from the comparison of two apparently very different settings (the learning of possession in an Afro-Brazilian cult and enchanted encounters with wild dolphins at sea) we ended up with the notion of “technology of enchantment”. As we will see, technologies of enchantment are devices that

can connect very intimate and individual uncanny sensations and feelings with cultural expectations. The enchanting technology creates the conditions for enchantment (or conversion), but does not grant it.

Why comparing possession by African gods with “enchanted” encounters with dolphins?

Because, when Arnaud and I talked together about our ethnographies, we were struck by apparent similarities at the level of individual experience AND at the level of the context in which those experiences happened. After a more thorough comparison, we found out that both experiences and situations could be grasped using the concept of “enchantment”. Because it connects the individual with the social/cultural levels, we believe our work can be interesting for the theory of religious conversion, and can in turn benefit from it

By “enchantment”, we mean the suspending of the ordinary way of experiencing the world (in the encounter with a spiritual entity or “extra-sensorial” communication with an animal) characterized by a *revelation-like quality*. Enchantment, as we understand it, is transformative in nature: experiencing it not only transforms the very perception of reality, but also the person him/herself.

We also identified common traits in the situations that enable enchanting experiences, and we called the whole process, following Gell, a “technology of enchantment”.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF ENCHANTMENT

The technology of enchantment creates an “in-between” space of practice (Belin, 2002) neither totally subjective, nor totally material, within which the connection between inner life (imagination, expectations and actual dispositions) and outer situation (a social and

material environment) is made possible. In other words, technologies of enchantment are cultural tools that relate inner life (which they partly contribute to elaborate) and external situations in a specific way.

How does it work?

From the very beginning of the comparison of our respective ethnographic data, it clearly appeared to us that the experience of enchantment, in both cases, responded to a three stages process, each step focusing on a specific dimension of experience. In the first step (“Conditioning the novice”), people learn *about* enchantment; the second stage is the experience of enchantment itself as a **situated experience**; the third one (“social assessment”) corresponds to the social evaluation and narrative construction of the experience. Of course this isn’t a rigid sequence, but it is fine to present it this way for clarity reasons. I’m now going to briefly describe each step and to give some pieces of ethnographic descriptions.

1 Conditioning the novice

The first sage of the technology of enchantment consists in unlocking the imagination and educating the attention (Ingold, 2001).

1.1 Unlocking the imagination: When they start to engage with the world of the “magical dolphin”, the novices read or hear about many stories about dolphins. They learn that dolphins are not “mere” animals: they can miraculously heal people, they save shipwrecked people at sea, they love us, they know who we are since they see through us thanks to their sonar, etc. One also hear about wonderful communication or connection with dolphins: “The experience was one of mutual and unconditional love and trust which perhaps only another

intelligent species like the dolphin can provide". All these stories, myths and personal accounts bring an **ontological uncertainty** about the dolphins: who are they "really"? In the case of possession, the religious imagination of Xangô members is also fed by a whole system of mythological references dealing with the identity, the personality and the relationships among *orixás* and between *orixás* and humans. The ontological status of orixas is similarly blurred.

1.2 Educating the attention: a second kind of learning proves just as essential in organizing expectations and dispositions for enchantment. This is the "education of attention" (Ingold 2001), which teaches novices how to focus their attention and refine their perception towards some features of the enchanted experience. In the case of possession, referential learning is important. The observation of the expert's emotional responses and attitudes towards the possessed enables one to build his/her own (culturally) appropriate response to possession. In the dolphin encounters, educating the attention is mostly realized through meditation sessions and talks prior to the dolphin encounter. Among other things, novices learn how to "keep their heart open" to the dolphin's touch. In both cases, **uncertainty** about the occurrence of the enchanting experience is cultivated. One never knows whether a magical communication with dolphins is going to happen or whether orixas will come.

2. Common traits

As we said above, we observed remarkable similarities between the dolphin experience and religious possession.

2.1.1 Paradoxical work of imagination

In both situations we have identified a "paradoxical" imagination process. It means that the experience is accompanied by **rich** but **uncertain** evocative meaning. For example "*I was in*

the middle of a hunt, extremely light and agile, totally determined to brave the most fierce beasts! And I remember an enormous animal, probably a wild boar, lying on the floor at my feet, streaked with blood. What most of all stroke me was his smell¹. In the dolphin case the imaginary landscape is less luxurious, but imagination is nonetheless called up: *"I felt they were inviting me down and away with them, and maybe if I had not become in danger of losing all feeling through cold I would have been tempted"*². The evocative field is rich but still uncertain due to the ontological uncertainty of the entities people are dealing with.

2.1.2 A bodily experience grounded in uncanny feelings and perceptions

In both dolphin and possession situations, the experience is marked by uncanny feelings and perceptions. In the possession case, most accounts speak of "long and strong shivers", the blood pressure "going up and down," "the need to cry without reason," a sudden change in heart rate and breathing rate, excessive sweating and trembling out of control, etc. In the case of dolphin encounters, people are overwhelmed by very intense (but positive) feelings and emotions: "The water was filled with euphoria and love".

2.1.3. Attentional bias towards interoception

During episodes of possession or during dolphin encounters, the attention is focused to own perceptions (absorption) or mental states. In the dolphin case, people report a very focused attention to both the dolphin and their own feelings or thoughts, as if the dolphin's moves resonated with their own thoughts.

2.1.4. Non-pathological dissociative or hypnotic states

¹ I carried on this olfactive image for weeks after the possession episode, until I realized it was familiar to me. I remembered a night when my father's pickup truck bumped into a wild animal in the Belgian Ardennes forest. I was around 12 or 14 years old at that time. I don't remember exactly the kind of animal it was but I have that strong and precise souvenir of its smell, a smell of a drawn animal lying in its blood.

² Karen Steele, in *Dolphin*, 24, 1991

In possession, amnesia after the episode of possession is frequent and people at the early stage of it often report being observers of what is happening in and with their own body: “I was not dancing; I was danced”. In the dolphin case, it is common for people to hear their own thoughts as if the dolphin was talking to them: “I asked what the meaning of our encounter was, and it was answered to me that I needed to get rid of my fears”. Finally, both dolphin and possession experience share a loss of control over one’s own actions and thoughts, experienced as monitored by someone else (“I was not dancing, I was danced”).

In short, our analysis suggests that both types of experiences share at least four common traits: a prolific religious imagination marked by an ontological uncertainty, uncanny feelings, an attentional focus on inner bodily and mental states, trance-like states and an intentional shift that happens when people give up conscious purposes³. We believe, as we will try to show in a moment, that shared features can also be identified within the situation leading to enchantment experience.

2.2. The situation: common features of the context enabling the enchanted experience to happen

The first step (preparing the novice) and the third one (social assessment, see below) are important, but the **situated experience** is the very place where the connection between mythology and imagination and actual experience is realized, thus creating what Emmanuel Belin calls “a promise of surprise”. You expect something to happen but you are surprised when it happens. We identified three properties of the situation through which such a connection is realized.

³ Cf. G. Bateson, 1972, 434-446

2.2.1 A teleological uncertainty. This property refers to the fact the appearance of the experience of enchantment is never certain. It is never automatic, nor purely contingent. Even religious experts don't know whether the orixas will come, because it doesn't depend on the person's interests or desire, but on the orixa's willingness. But it isn't either totally contingent, as possession doesn't happen anytime, nor anywhere. The same is true for the dolphin experience.

2.2.2. Benevolence In both dolphin and possession, a main feature of the enchanted situation is **benevolence**, not as a moral attitude, but as a relational characteristic of the environment. Many witnesses of the Dolphin experience put forward a particular model of relating where trust and benevolence are primordial. Witnesses' accounts speak of feeling a mix of bewilderment and enchantment when the dolphin looks at them as if looking straight into their souls: "when [the dolphin] looked at my personal anxiety, she was looking at me the way I had never been able to look at myself. But I didn't feel afraid: I trusted her." Others speak of love or pure joy. To top it all, the dolphins also have the habit of synchronizing their swimming or their movements with those of their partners. This opens up the way for a form of kinesthetic and emotional attunement that resembles a very intimate, warm and safe interaction.

2.2.3. A third and central property of the technology of enchantment is that they lay out a specific *sensescape* where *perceptual* and *imaginative* elements are articulated and assembled in a way to create the experiential texture of new *embodied meanings*. (According to Birgit Meyer (2009:39), among others, the process of meaning always involves bodily experiences and emotions.

This sensescape takes in both cases the form of a particular distribution of perceptual saliences in the situation. These perceptual saliences play a crucial role in our framework as they connect the uncanny bodily experience with the imaginative process initiated during the stage 1 of the enchantment process. We have identified two categories of perceptual saliences able to do the job. On the one hand, perceptual attractors, i.e. perceptual saliences endowed with a great evocative potential and strong emotional resonance (Halloy 2012), and on the other hand social affordances (Kauffman and Clément 2007) whose quality is to trigger feelings coordinated with a particular relational mode. Perceptual attractors, as we defend it, would be powerful elicitors of possession due to their highly evocative potential as well as their strong emotional resonance. And when a large diversity of perceptual attractors are manipulated *at the same time* (sacrificial blood + invocation + body posture), as it is the case in most rituals where possession is expected and realized, it would ensue a kind of cognitive and ‘sensory overload’ or emotional saturation.

The sensescape produces the same kind of embodied meanings in the context of Dolphin experience. In order for the dolphin to “talk to me” and for me to understand her, the situation must include a particular distribution of perceptual saliences which connect emotional experiences to evocatory process and imagination. Some are brought into the situation by the dolphin (“smile”, tilt head, eyes, smooth body, synchronization of movements); others are specific to swimming in the open sea (disturbance of the body schema, being alone in open water). (“As they reached me, I was struck by their size and blackness, overwhelmed by their mastery in the water.... The air was alive with activity and love”). An important point is that, in possession as in dolphin encounters, these perceptual saliences cannot be easily processed by the mind. There is some kind of cognitive opacity that prevent a “common sense” reading of what is happening. Despite the preparation of

step one, people cannot easily understand what is happening to them. The ordinary paths of interpretation are blocked. The best reaction for the novices then is to give up control completely and to allow themselves to feel the “non-will”, which means that the novice’s attention is both available, i.e. not guided by intention, and channeled by the sensescape: new perceptual elements are articulated and assembled together to create the experiential texture of new embodied meanings – a process we have called the intentional shift. In short, we hypothesize that perceptual saliences both create some cognitive opacity AND allow the connection of deep feelings with the evocative process, thus creating “new” embodied meanings and an “expected surprise”.

3. Social assessment of the experience

Without some form of social assessment, the possession experience and the dolphin encounter could be “mere” uncanny and distressful experiences. In the case of possession, religious specialists validate (or not) the episode as a true possession. This helps the novice to know and feel more precisely what is “expected” of a true possession. For dolphin people, it might be very difficult to make sense of what happened to them, as it calls for a completely revised image of the dolphin. Some of them write their experience to specialized journals and they often use the literary form of “as if”. Writing a story out of such an experience surely helps them to make sense of it in a positive way.

CONCLUSIONS

Technologies of enchantment connect cognitive, affective, emotional and sensorial properties of the experience with cultural expectations, thus allowing people to experience what is culturally expected.

The technology of enchantment that we have described is a culturally designed environment that allows experiences of enchantment to happen and organize them to a certain point. Enchanting technologies are devices that may connect very intimate and individual uncanny sensations and feelings with cultural expectations. The enchanting technology creates the conditions for enchantment (or conversion), but does not grant it. Uncertainty is indeed one of its essential features.

The first step feeds and unlocks the imagination, and educates the attention, creating expectations and nourishing the imagination. It creates an ontological uncertainty that is important for the enchantment to happen. The second stage is the experience itself. It is made of uncanny/extreme/saturating sensations and feelings, uncertainty, cognitive opacity, a paradoxical evocatory process, interoception and intentional shift. The experience rests on three features of the situation: benevolence, teleological uncertainty and a specific sensescape. The sensescape is made of a configuration of perceptual saliences that are crucial because they evoke strong feelings or emotions and rich evocatory process at the same time. Finally, it is necessary for the novice to get the validation of his/her experience by a larger community. Without such a validation, the experience could appear like a distressful dissociative experience. Our work tries to understand how phenomenon such as trance possession or dolphin encounters might be so dependent on unintentional feelings, thoughts and emotions on the one hand, and still culturally organized on the other.