

Spirits and Social Agency: A Critical Review of Studies from Africa

Authors : Sanaa Riaz

Abstract : Spirits occupy a world that simultaneously dwells between the divine and the earthly binary while speaking to all forces of nature, marginality, and extremity in between. This paper examines the conceptualizations, interactions with, and experience of spiritual beings in relation to the concept of self and social agency, defined as a continuum of cooperation leaving those involved with an enhanced or diminished perception of self-agency. To do justice to the diverse mythological and popular interpretations of spirit entities, ethnographic examples from Africa, in particular, will be used. An examination of the nature and role of spirits in Africa allows one to understand the ways in which colonial influences brought by Catholicism and Islam added to the pre-colonial repertoire and syncretic imaginations of spirits. A comprehensive framework to analyze spirits requires situating them as a cognitive configuration of humans to communicate with other humans and forces of nature to receive knowledge about the normative in social roles, conduct, and action. Understanding spirits also requires a rethinking of the concept of self as not one encapsulated in the individual but one representing positionalities in collective negotiations, adversity, and alliances. To use the postmodern understanding of identity as a far from a coherent collection of selves fluidly moving between and dialoguing with gravitational and contradictory social forces, benevolent and maleficent spirit forces represent how people make sense of their origin, physiological and ecological changes, subsistence, and political environment and social relations. A discussion on spirits requires examining the rituals and mediational forces and their performance that allow participants to tackle adversity, voicelessness and continue to work safely and morally for the collective good. Moreover, it is important to see the conceptualization of spirits in unison with sorcery and spirit possession, central to voodoo practices, also because they speak volumes about the experiences of slavery and marginalization. This paper has two motives: It presents a critical literature review of ethnographic accounts of spirit entities in African spiritual experiences to examine the ways in which spirits become mediums through which the self is conceptualized and asserted. Second, the paper highlights the ways in which spirits become a medium to represent political and sociocultural ambiguities and desires along a spectrum of social agencies, including joint agency, vicarious agency, and interfered agency.

Keywords : spirits, social agency, self, ethnographic case studies

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