

The Viewpoint of the Technique:

Managing Time and Crisis Resolution in Eastern Religions and Medicines

Osler McGovern Centre, 13 Norham
Gardens

Thursday 28 - Friday 29 January 2010

Thursday 28 January 2.00pm

**Katherine Swancutt
Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford**

Opening Remarks

2.10pm Piers Vitebsky Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge
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How does technique lead to agency in dialogues between the living and the dead?

I shall examine agency in the technique of dialogues between the living and the dead among the Sora of tribal India, who have arguably the most elaborate form of such communication ever documented.

This is a technique for resolving crisis and managing time. It is a carefully-paced bereavement therapy, in which illness is always caused by a previous victim who suffered the same symptoms and whose emotions are not yet sufficiently resolved (or whom the next victim has not yet ceased to mourn).

I shall focus on techniques of personation (the depersonalisation of the shaman which allows her body to impersonate and envoice the dead), and shall explore how these overall techniques are built upon a multiplicity of constitutive sub-techniques such as trancing, weeping, dancing, and the contrast of prose and verse. These support or enable the direction of dialogue, and each has its own agency, so that the resulting super-agency of the dialogue is reinforced by an ensemble of other techniques.

I interpret dialogue as the ultimate technique of agency because it contains an inherent pluralism which makes it a crucial driver of social dynamics. Rather than the technique I find this a difficult concept), the viewpoints are of living and dead persons, each of whom is required to speak for his or her self and to uphold a contentious position in dialogue against other viewpoints. Ontologically, I speak therefore I am; in terms of agency, I speak therefore I can. Part of the armoury, at least among the otherwise underprivileged dead, is the power to cause illness and thus force the living into dialogue.

The responsive techniques of the living sometimes fail. Interlocutors do not always hear what they want to hear, duplicate rituals can yield contradictory outcomes, and impostors can impersonate the spirits expected. The Sora emphasis on verbal articulacy throws a particular burden on intention and the exercise of judgment. I shall contrast this with the automaticity of some of the supporting techniques (spells, animal sacrifice), and ask: why does Sora culture consistently push the exercise of social relations towards the former? I shall also ask: What kind of awareness allows the directionality of dialogue with each dead person to be managed, over many years and through the mouths of many shamans, towards cosmological resolution and therapeutic release?

Ethnographic background:

Vitebsky, Dialogues with the dead: the discussion of mortality among the Sora of eastern India

Vitebsky, Loving and forgetting in tribal India, JRAI

3.10pm Anne de Sales Laboratoire D'ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative, Nanterre, CNRS

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Control over Time and the Creation of a Transcendental Level in Shamanic Rituals (Nepal)

The whole point of most shamanic rituals is to re-establish control over events that seem out of control: illness, recurrent ill fortune, wild possession of a shaman neophyte before his consecration. I will examine a number of ritual techniques among the Kham-Magar of West

Nepal that aim at (1) imposing time cycles onto the resolution of accidents, (2) creating a specific ritual rhythm through parallelism and (3) establishing the conditions for a possible transcendent level through the controlled use of coincidence and synchronicity.

-- Tea Break 4.10pm --

4.40pm Stéphane Gros Milieux, Sociétés et Cultures en Himalaya, CNRS

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Facial tattooing among Drung women and the transition to womanhood

My presentation will focus on some aspects of female facial tattooing among Drung women in Yunnan (China) through their discourses and descriptions. I will discuss a (now obsolete) practice whereby, through a technique, the body and the person are both the subject and a means of transformation. Facial tattooing is essentially a transition to what is and ought to be a woman. Endowed with metamorphic power, tattooing makes things happen. Gender performativity is associated with the materiality of the body: it is in fact the tattoo that makes a woman. If the tattoo makes a woman, then she can play her role. It is indeed all about alliance, as if for a woman alliance is the basis of her humanity. Yet beyond the mere kin relationship, there are also specific relationships between women; relationships involving fertility which is exchanged, transmitted or, perhaps more accurately, "revealed" and represented by the tattooing. I intend to examine the transition established by the tattoo that is the mark of time and destiny. Female tattooing sustains, marks, or speeds up time which is the physiological time of the transition to nubility. This is critical to fully assign to a woman her destiny, her social role as a perpetuator of life.

[Listen to the podcast here.](#)

5.40pm Katherine Swancutt Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford

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Through the lens of dreams: a technique for bridging the ontological divide between people and spirits

Dreams have long been recognized by anthropologists as one important 'crossroads' where people meet with spirits, the souls of other people, ghosts, animals, and other beings who only

occasionally appear in waking life. Yet the difference between sleeping and 'waking' dreams is not always precise, making it difficult to gauge how dreams might actually facilitate interaction with other beings. This paper considers how dreaming works as a technique in southwest China, allowing shamans and occasionally laypersons to bridge the ontological divide that ordinarily separates them from spirits. Shamans may induce dreams with alcohol, and they certainly always entice spirits to them when drinking, so that their dreams often hinge upon this hazy combination. Some shamans even use their drunken dreams to attract ancestral ghosts to them, although these ghosts may 'dilute' the shaman's volition, having him or her carry out ghostly intentions instead. There is, then, danger in dreams, which requires a skilful handling of both the dreaming technique and the different viewpoints that it affords, so as to ensure that the shaman's own intentions unfold according to plan.

Friday 28 January Chair: Anna Lora-Wainwright

8.30am Elisabeth Hsu Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford
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History in the body: a technique-critical approach to some Yijinjing Qigong practices

Movement flows, and is difficult to break down into discrete entities. Nevertheless, some shamanistic performers (e.g. the Naxi dongba) and some modern dancers have invented scripts that break movement down into separate, repetitively occurring units. The Chinese breathing techniques, which nowadays tend to be practised in the context of qigong, taijiquan and the like, also have a long history of being recorded in visual representations that have broken down movement into different units. Today, qigong is taught and learnt by transmitting units of movement, and often each as a different name. The "technique-critical approach", as advocated in this presentation, is inspired by text-critical approaches to the temporal layering of texts, and investigates movement in such culturally given units.

In my 1999 monograph I spoke of a secretly transmitted qigong body technique as ten precious movements, without identifying its origins. At the time I had already found a booklet on the Yijinjing in the Cambridge libraries which depicted the almost identical movements I had learnt in a Kunming backstreet from a qigong healer, Qiu. Twenty years have passed since, and Qiu is today one of the only ones who continues to practice qigong daily and to attend to patients in a small private clinic. He has since become more aware of his own tradition and its history, as a brief visit in summer 2009 revealed. He now names and explains the origin of his movements, and they are, as he claims, indeed those of the Yijinjing. He clearly associates himself with the Daoist Wudang current, while scholars tend to view the Yijinjing as a meditation technique practised mainly in Buddhist circles. This presentation will use a technique-critical approach to decipher an inherent temporal layering of body techniques in the sequence of movements I learnt, demonstrating that they consist of a collation of techniques from at least two different circles of meditation practice. The presentation furthermore contributes to the "Viewpoint of the Technique" explored in this workshop in that it shows how the person who learns these movements becomes a medium of transmission for them.

9.30am Gry Sagli University of Oslo
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Perceptions and experiences of in contexts in Norway

Drawing on ethnographic data from fieldwork among qigong participants in Norway, I shall focus on the reception of the notion of waiqi ('external qi'). The style of qigong I concentrate on is referred to as Biyun ('azure blue clouds') medical qigong. It is a central viewpoint held by Biyun authorities that the practising of Biyun makes the boundaries between the body and the environment more permeable and allow waiqi to be gathered from the environment. According to these authorities, the purpose of gathering waiqi is to strengthen or heal oneself or to transmit this qi to other persons for healing purposes.

To most new Biyun participants in Norwegian context notions of qi in general, and waiqi in particular, are new and strange. However, as the learning and practising of Biyun progress, qi gradually becomes prominent as a constitutive dimension of the qigong practice. Arguably, the participants– the Biyun subjects - become transformed into entities with the capacity of feeling qi. Moreover, qi – also in a variety of other forms than bodily feelings – gradually comes into being through qigong practice. Qi, in particular when felt as bodily sensations, was by many participants perceived as a reality. There were, however, also some who did not obtain to feel qi. Moreover, there were also some who did not wish to associate themselves with the concept of qi, and in particular they hesitated to involve themselves with the idea of gathering waiqi.

I shall investigate examples of specific body techniques employed in Biyun qigong in order to gather waiqi. With these examples as my point of departure, I shall explore how some Biyun participants in Norway make use of local perceptions of 'nature' and their own experiences from the 'nature' in their meaning-making, their practicing of the Biyun exercises and their experiencing of the 'gathering of waiqi'.

-- Tea Break 10.30am --

11.00am Lim Chee-Han National University of Singapore

Unraveling the demon's knot: Zhineng Qigong's heart-mind methods for treating qigong deviation

Zouhuo rumo (misfiring and entering the realm of demons) or qigong deviation plays a central technical and medical role in the practice of all forms of qigong. Each qigong style has its own way of dealing with qigong malpractice, from administering acupuncture to the use of depressants. In addition to 'physical' remedies, Zhineng Qigong employs a set of 'heart-mind methods' in preventing and treating qigong deviation. As a 'scientific' form of qigong, Zhineng Qigong has integrated classical Chinese thought and modern science to produce a unique cosmology that provides resources for the various techniques used to manage encounters with – the most fundamental constituent of the cosmos. Despite its materiality, is also treated as an omnipresent and non-sentient form of , which when not properly handled by practitioners, leads to qigong deviation. This rather counter-intuitive conception of agency requires a critical re-assessment of the Cartesian epistemological assumptions that go with it. Drawing inspirations from Zhineng Qigong metaphysics and Anne Scott's fusion of actor-network theory and phenomenology, I argue that agency does not necessarily exist as conscious choices enacted through corporeality, but is located between and within the myriad components that constitute the cosmos, i.e. as . Even though Zhineng Qigong acknowledges the 'will-full' nature of , the art also strongly emphasizes the power of the human volition in influencing the courses of events. How then, do Zhineng Qigong practitioners manage the inevitable frictions that arise from the meeting of human and cosmic agents? Drawing parallels between qigong training techniques and Ingold's notion of 'enskilment', I seek to show how (qigong competency or power-skill) is acquired from, reflected in, shapes, and shaped by the 'doings' of everyday life. Qigong enskilment is thus not merely picking up a new skill within a bounded training ground, but a process of that involves the immersion of the self within a relationship with the cosmos. The focus of my talk will be on the various heart-mind methods, which when seen in the context described above, are not unlike techniques of diplomacy.

[Listen to the podcast here.](#)

12.00pm Adam D. Frank Honors College, University of Central Arkansas
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"Yong yi, bu yong li": attaining gong fu among Wu style taijiquan practitioners in Shanghai

Drawing upon fieldwork conducted among Wu style taijiquan practitioners in Shanghai's People's Park in the early 2000s, I focus on the relationship between the principle of yi (mind) and the

acquisition of gong fu (skill) in the martial art-health exercise of taijiquan (supreme ultimate boxing, a name that references the taiji tu, the "diagram of the supreme ultimate," or yin-yang symbol). Yong yi, bu yong li (use mind, not physical strength) is a principle that experienced, often elderly practitioners share with less experienced practitioners: Yet using yi is much more than acquiring a set of bodily techniques: It involves a harmonizing of yin and yang both within the practitioner's body and between the multiple environments in which taijiquan circulates, imbuing each of these environments with mutually constitutive agency. Using as starting points Ingold's notion of the organism as "as a node in a field of relationships" and Latour's argument that humans-objects are best treated as "an exchange of human and non-human properties inside a corporate body," I first address several general questions about the art. What is taijiquan's recent history in China and abroad? Is there a difference between "Chinese" and "American taijiquan"? Is taijiquan qigong? A martial art? I then focus on the role of yi in everyday practice, including empty hand and weapons techniques and the two-person exercise of tuishou (push hands). In referencing yi, experienced practitioners draw attention to the relationship between three ostensibly distinct categories--the subjective "mind" (yi), the objective body (li), and the social world surrounding knowledge transmission. Their goal? Ultimately, to direct the student's attention to the "crisis" of chaotic division (e.g. by throwing the student to the ground) and then erasing the gap between subjective yin (i.e. the student) and objective yang (a "field of relationships" that includes martial techniques, martial arts organizations, imaginative interpretations of taijiquan through film and literature, etc.). Wu style practitioners are thus expected to discard technique in order to realize the continuous field of relationships manifested in the unmitigated union of yin and yang (taiji). To do so successfully opens the door to attainment of gong fu.

Final Discussion 1.00-1.30pm