

# PRIMITIVE VERSUS CIVILIZED GHOSTS

HERBERT JOSEPH SPINDEN

*Peabody Museum, Harvard University*

**A**N ANTHROPOLOGIST comes face to face with ghosts and other psychic appearances in every kind and degree of human culture. He finds credence given to life after death, among both savage and civilized men, but the ghost is vastly more important and powerful among savage peoples than among cultured ones. The savage ghost exhibits a higher order of intelligence than does his civilized brother, and the record clearly shows that ghosts deteriorate as men progress. The anthropologist finds different patterns of belief as regards ghosts among different social groups, and these conventional beliefs offset and neutralize each other. Since none of them rest upon a basis of real truth and logical demonstration, the scientist is not permitted to play favorites. He comes out of the limbo with the impression that haunted houses are an acquired taste.

Many startling statements of shamans or medicine men are honestly made. These nature priests constantly experiment with the machinery of their bodies and go into trances and hypnotic states through fasting, vigils, water-gazing, and other means of achieving exhaustion. Epilepsy is a fatal gift and complete intoxication is a divine condition, or at least a divinitory one. Shamans attempt to reach the gates of the unknown by breaking down the barriers of logic, and by destroying the inhibitions and safeguards of common experience. But their methods of approach are prescribed by custom, and the evidence indicates that shamans are carefully predisposed to receive exactly the impressions they do receive. They wish a thing to happen and that thing happens with such trimmings,—maudlin and grotesque,—as naturally go with the edge of delirium.

Sometimes these shamanistic methods of beating down the logical protections are so nicely perfected that they will work on the average man. Nez Percé boys and girls at the plastic and imaginative age of puberty keep lonely vigils on mountain tops until something which is to be their guardian spirit comes to them, gives them a name, and teaches them a song. The watch

may be kept up for five days and rarely is negative in results. The supernatural being, an animal or a bird, or the spirit of a tree or stone, or the personification of a cloud or planet, comes close to the exhausted supplicant. He gives this supplicant a dream name, which is generally descriptive of the guardian spirit, and teaches him a dream song which may be meaningless mumble. One person named Eye-necklace was so called because his guardian spirit was a coyote wearing a necklace made from the eyes of other animals. Now the guardian spirit type of religion is widely distributed in America among the Indians. Thousands of cases of visions are obtainable from natives who have had supernatural, or perhaps we should say sub-normal, experiences of a religious nature.

At what point in natural history does soul, or will, or directive intelligence, become sufficiently a god-out-of-the-machine to survive death, and how long does it survive? Do the ghosts of dodos and dinosaurs wander about the shadowy kingdom of Banquo? A rose in her dewy fragrance might imagine she adorns the world, but to give her a soul and a personality is to commit what literary critics call the pathetic fallacy. But is it not equally pathetic to claim that Julius Caesar directs the policies of Mussolini or that the spirit of Juarez fled from the poor crumpled body of Madero, as shots rang out in a Mexican courtyard? The hand of the statesman drops, but humanity and intelligence survive. The average civilized man regards his inexplicable soul, his something that works behind the veil, as everlastingly himself, even though his body dies. Perhaps this something which seems divine is merely a perishable spark tossed up into the air from an inextinguishable fire.

All tribes accept the here and want to keep it. For the hereafter some imagine beds of asphodel and other country delights; some chose to live in golden cities; some look forward to hopeless wandering among sand dunes; and others climb the Road of Ghosts, which is the milky way, and people the outer dark with specks of light. But among some tribes, dispossessed souls hang about their old haunts. Some ghosts die. The Eskimos believe the spiritual essence of a recently dead person enters into the new-born child and wisely directs its actions and prompts its utterances. As the child's own will grows stronger the intruding

will grows weaker and gradually fades out of all being. Eskimo children are not punished, because the hand that strikes baby may hurt grandfather. Our set of ghost beliefs takes no account of this interesting structure.

The vampire cult, entering from the mystical East, swept like a devastating mental plague across Europe in the eighteenth century. Rosy bodies lay in mouldering coffins while their unquiet souls went out on wicked forays. Witches among our Southwest Indians bring disease to the villages and must be drawn to their destruction by witch-nip, a plant they cannot resist. In New Zealand the children who have been cheated of their span of life prey upon adults and spread disease among them. An epidemic ceases when the particular blade of grass housing some malicious elf is pulled up by a patient shaman. The Caribs send their souls to the invisible through potent drink and mumble the wisdom of the diaphanous gods in drunken stupor. Tut-ankh-a-men's body, preserved in gums and wrapped in gold, awaits the return of his bird-like soul to last year's nest. Saints, through the pages of history, ride white horses on the field of battle and fight for their favored nation. From this one sees that ghosts are relative concepts; they have no quality of the absolute which might be expected from disembodied intelligence.

Today we cherish a sentimental regard for ghosts. Shades of lovers walk in the gloaming instead of pursuing their rivals with long knives and evil intent as among the Greeks. Our departed friends tap on the wall, although why wall-tapping has its present vogue among ghostly visitants no one seems to know. Perhaps it comes from the suggestion of the Morse code; if so, when will the hovering spirits who listen in on worldly affairs learn to broadcast in a recoverable wave length? This seems frivolous, but the point is that ghosts follow the changing fashions. Natural law, which might be explained as cosmic intelligence, is absolute and inviolate.

A case showing how relative the question of ghosts may be was brought to my attention at Bocay, a Mosquito Indian village in the very heart of Central America, by a woman *sukia* named Rosa. When a Mosquito Indian dies, his ghost, or *insigni*, must be caught and induced to live in a spirit lodge set

like a dove-cote over the grave. Some months after death there is a final ceremony, a farewell service in which drunkenness figures, after which the ghost departs for *Misriyapti*, Mother-of-all, a personified hereafter and heretofore. The body is buried immediately after death, and the catching of the soul in the house of the dead person may be delayed for several days. In olden days the soul used to take refuge in all the animals and other property of the dead person, which had to be killed or broken to drive it out. Now the mosquito netting over the bed is so good a ghost trap that the wholesale destruction is no longer necessary.

Rosa, the *sukia*, was then handling a strange case. It seems a young woman had died shortly before the expected birth of a child, and the ghost of this woman had appealed in a dream to Rosa to remain at home until the child was born. So Rosa had postponed the catching of this gravid ghost, with the result that the dead woman appeared a second time after two weeks and announced that her child had now been born and she was ready to depart. I was invited to attend the ghost-catching that night. There was feasting and drinking, then a shot was fired to announce that the *insigni* of the young mother, and presumably that of her child, had been induced to enter a calabash and was securely bottled up.

Is there a scientific method whereby the existence of the spiritual can be tested? Science mostly compiles measurements in terms of time and space and kind, and the eternally disembodied is beyond its technique. Of course the manifestations of light, of changes in temperature, of sounds, of the much mooted ectoplasm, are really inadmissible of evidence of spirituality because they are material. Moreover they are often cheating. Force originates in the relations of matter and is never capricious. To be sure, science discovers approximations rather than exact identities, but on a plotted field of recorded facts it lays down truth in ideal curves. Are the present hodge-podges of psychic phenomena capable of such treatment? Probably not.

Man through many centuries has created for himself a realm of the mind,—an ego-centric universe. He accepts his fellow man in the same mould as himself, and primitive man accepts even the animals, the trees, and the winds in the same fashion.

In the growth of society the minds of individuals coalesce into group minds, and develop patterns of thought which are comparable to the conventional forms of art. Among these is the naïve conclusion that mind or soul, or whatever the name may be, is too good to die with the body. Levy-Bruhl points out that savage mentality is distinguished by a kind of pre-logic which is impervious to contradiction, and depends on mystical categories. Does not the belief in ghosts also depend on mystical categories? Is it not also impervious to contradictions?

## CARTE BLANCHE

T. MORRIS LONGSTRETH

*I sang a song of gladness;  
It caused the gods to smile.*

*I sang a song of sorrow;  
They listened for a while.*

*And then I sang a song of love;  
They moved uneasily.*

*I sang a song of very truth;  
They left the sky to me.*