

Intermediaries between the physical and spirit worlds, a study of the figure of the medium in an Australian Spiritualist group

INTRODUCING MYSELF

My name is Chalotte Tribouillois, and I am a third year PhD student in anthropology, at the Australian National University, within the College of Asia and the Pacific.

Today, I will present some key aspects of my research, entitled “Intermediaries between the physical and spirit worlds, a study of the figure of the medium in an Australian Spiritualist group”.

OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

I will begin this presentation by contextualizing my project and outlining its objectives.

Then, to address my research in the context of this conference, I would like to explore the figure of the medium as a special type of intermediary. Indeed, mediums do not merely transmit information and message from the deceased to the recipients, but actively collaborate with other spirit entities, such as spirit guides, in this communication process, and can creatively construct a new world, that of spirits.

This presentation will thus focus on three main points:

1. How death is made present within the Spiritualist community, with the case study of the Victorian Spiritualists' Union;
2. How immortality and life after death are portrayed in Spiritualist representations;
3. And how my position as an ethnographer has alternated between apprentice medium and recipient to understand my informants, their cosmology and vulnerabilities.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

While it may be difficult to date precisely the appearance of mediumship in the world, a religious and philosophical movement, influenced by Christians in the early days and New Age ideas, in which the medium is the central figure does have a date of birth: Spiritualism. Born in March 1848 in the State of New York, Spiritualism is a religion that aims to scientifically prove that the human spirit is immortal, and that death is merely a transition from the physical state to the spirit state.

To try to prove this, Spiritualists rely on the ability of mediums, considered to be intermediaries between the physical and spirit worlds, to attempt to communicate with the deceased, provide evidence of their presence and transmit their messages to the recipients. Recipients are people in mourning who want to know whether their deceased loved ones are doing well in the afterlife and to get answers to their questions.

Mediums can give private readings, i.e. a medium face to face with a recipient, or public readings, i.e. a mediumistic demonstration, usually organised during the Sunday ritual, where several recipients can receive a message from their deceased relatives.

Spiritualists meet in associations, the oldest of which being the Victorian Spiritualists' Union, based in Melbourne, where this ethnographic research was carried out in 2024.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After a year of total immersion in the world of mediumship, I am now in the process of writing my thesis, which aims to answer the questions of:

- how agency is distributed between different actors during rituals;
- and how can a ritual enable the construction of a new world?

DEATH MADE PRESENT IN THE SPIRITUALIST COMMUNITY

Australian Spiritualist association began to develop in the 1860s, enabling mediums to practice not only in private circles, but in organizations open to the public. It was in these years that the Victorian Spiritualists' Union (VSU) was founded by healer William Henry Terry and others in Melbourne. With its aim of proving the possibility of communication between mediums and the deceased, the VSU gradually became popular and attracted some of the most famous personalities of the time, including Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, who was its president for several years.

Known as the oldest and most active Spiritualist association in Australia, the VSU is today recognised by the Australian government as a religious institution. It is organised around a president, vice-president, treasurer and secretary, all of whom

recognise Spiritualism as a philosophy, a science and a religion. VSU members meet at two separate sites, North Melbourne and Ringwood East, to attend various events and participate in activities, such as:

- **Sunday service** is a weekly ritual centered on public mediumistic demonstrations, where prayers, meditation, and spirit healing are also offered.
- **Private readings** are given by mediums who wish to put a recipient in contact with their deceased loved ones. There is a charge for these readings, unlike the public demonstrations which only work on a donation basis.
- **Teachings of Spiritualist philosophy** teach members the history of the movement, the different forms of mediumship, and the Seven Principles which form the basis of Spiritualist values.
- Finally, **seminars and workshops** aim to develop participants' psychic and mediumistic skills, e.g. oracles, tarot cards workshops, or spirit art training.

These moments of sharing are places of expression for the Spiritualist community which, with the help of mediums, presents death as a space of potential communication between physical people and the deceased, a moment when time stops to allow social encounters between the two worlds to take place. Death is thus ritualised around activities, beliefs and discussions, giving rise to a system of representation that shapes a new universe in which the dead are said to reside. This after life is called the 'spirit world'

IMMORTALITY AND SPIRIT WORLD

Spiritualists believe that when a person dies, only their physical envelope disappears, while the human spirit endures and continues its journey in the spirit world, which can be accessed by mediums during mediumistic communications.

The deceased are called “people in spirit” by Spiritualists who argue that they remain the same as they were on Earth before their death, but are just located in the spirit world. People in spirit retain their personality and memories from their physical life, can continue to evolve and occupy distinct functions, for instance by becoming spirit guides, and, if they wish, stay in contact with their physical loved ones with the help of a medium. Just as they were social and active agents during their earthly journey, people in spirit can continue to exercise a form of agency.

During a mediumistic reading, they alone are thought to be able to decide to manifest themselves to the medium, a manifestation that is necessary for the ritual to work properly. During communication, they can then choose specifically the information they wish to transmit to the medium, so that it can be easily recognised by their physical loved ones who can validate their identity. People in spirit can thus help the medium to provide solid proof of their presence, ensure that the ritual runs smoothly, and give the recipient a takeaway from the reading, providing them with life advice and reassurance.

The creation of a new universe, the spirit world, by the mediumistic ritual thus gives death a representation and immortality a reason, giving a form of double hope to Spiritualists. The first hope is that death does not stop social relations with loved ones but makes them eternal; the second is that everyone can continue their journey on another plane of existence, even after the death of the physical body, and thus free themselves from the fear of death by becoming immortal.

These representations can then raise some questions about the methodology of this research, in particular:

- *How do we see invisible worlds? How can I see what mediums see?*
- What methodology can we use as anthropologists to gain access to the spirit world as mediums encounter it?

- And how can we analyze such intense emotions as bereavement in an ethical way?

POSITIONALITY AND ALTERNATING ROLES

To understand the Spiritualist representations of life after death, I quickly realized that I could not simply be a neutral observer during my fieldwork, but that my ethnography had to be fully immersive. I then put myself in the skin of the medium and the recipient, alternating my position between being an ethnographer and my own informant.

During 2024, I took part in training sessions to develop my mediumistic abilities, where I trained myself to try to communicate with the deceased by following the instructions of mediums, transmitting information received from people in spirit to recipients who validated or refuted it. Some private readings I gave were considered successful, such as when I was able to describe the physical appearance and personality of the deceased friend of one of the participants. But others were considered failures, when the information given to the recipient didn't make sense to them.

Through these practices of mediumship, I learnt patience; my informants reassured me that the connection with the spirit world can take time. But I have also discovered in depth how mediumship works: the steps involved in accessing the spirit world; the type of information mediums can receive from the deceased; and the unique bond that can be created with recipients, with whom I spend a few minutes during which the vulnerabilities of each person were exposed, those of the recipient –who may be suffering from grief, and mine as an apprentice medium –doing my best to provide them with answers about their deceased loved ones, with fear, even shame, of failing.

It was when I became an apprentice medium that I realized the importance of also understanding what recipients can feel and experience during mediumistic readings. I received 4 private readings from 4 VSU mediums who have established contact with some of my deceased relatives. What I noticed during these face-to-face readings was that, whether the evidence provided by the medium was convincing or not, I did not want this connection with my deceased relative to stop. I experienced a unique type of emotion: a combination of temporary sadness and joy at the same time.

I have theorized this unique feeling as “melancholic pleasure”, an expression coined by Barbara Weisberg who describes the feeling people can experience by enjoying a walk-through cemetery. I demonstrate that the state of grief can both lead to moments of melancholy, remembering deceased loved ones and moments spent with them; and give a form of pleasure, by feeling delighted to receive a privileged contact with deceased relative, which confirmed the social bond people share. Mediumistic communication would thus give rise to contradictory but complementary emotions, where the recipients find in melancholy and sadness a unique form of pleasure and joy, which would leave them wanting more.

By alternating my role as anthropologist, apprentice medium and recipient, I thus understood that researchers need to find the right balance between academic neutrality and giving an account of our humanity, our emotions and that of our informants, especially during difficult periods such as bereavement.

CONCLUSION

By the mediumistic ritual, death is no longer seen as the end of existence but its transformation. It is through the hope of attaining immortality; the hope that the

suffering of losing a loved one is only temporary, and can lead to a form of pleasure when a reunion is made possible by the medium; the hope of being socially supported in mourning; and in the idea that the human condition can transcend the boundaries of the known, that Spiritualists make death a step in their journey, not the end.

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