



Conference Report

Transforming Spirit Bodies: Changing Materialities and Embodied Dependencies

September 29-30, 2022

*Research Group "Marking Power: Embodied Dependencies, Haptic Regimes and Body Modification",
University of Bonn*

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How are power relations, social hierarchies, and asymmetrical dependencies contested and negotiated in moments of bodily transformation? What role, for example, do body-marking practices play in defining and negotiating boundaries between humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, persons and nonpersons, and intrinsic or extrinsic agency? How do humans and human bodies become ancestors, spirits, and/or ghosts; how do they embody humans, and how do they (re-)create relations of dependency? These were some of the key questions addressed and discussed during the conference “Transforming Spirit Bodies: Changing Materialities and Embodied Dependencies,” funded by the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and organized by Sinah Kloß, Lena Muders and Taynã Tagliati (Research Group “[Marking Power: Embodied Dependencies, Haptic Regimes and Body Modification](#)”). The conference took place on September 29-30, 2022 at the University Forum of the University of Bonn, Germany.

The international conference contributed to better understanding the embodied experiences of asymmetrical dependencies among humans and spirits, and the sensory experiences of interdependence that are negotiated in their interactions. Its interdisciplinary approach created a space for dialogue and discussion on how the histories, performances, and representations of embodied dependencies are negotiated via spirit bodies. During the two days of the conference, nineteen participants discussed and analyzed how bodies visualize, materialize, and performatively (re-)create power relations and asymmetrical dependencies that humans and nonhumans experience in their everyday lives.

The highlight of the conference was the keynote lecture by LUIZ COSTA (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) on “Kanamari Shamanism and Relations of Dependency across Generations”. Luiz Costa



Sinah Kloß (Bonn, Germany) opens the conference on September 29, 2022 and welcomes the presenters and audience.

critically engaged with the history of familiarization across two generations of Kanamari shamans from Brazilian Amazonia. He pointed out the ways in which spirits may exist within and without shamanic bodies, how they affect the shaman’s capacity to produce effects on the world, and that relations of dependency between shaman and spirit are inseparable from other social relations of dependence and subordination.



André Demarchi (Tocantins, Brazil) presents his contribution on body marking practices among Jê peoples.

Other conference participants approached the topic in four dimensions: Religion & Healing; History & Memory; Ecology & Shared World; Production & Objects.

In **Panel I**, MARCELO MOURA MELLO (Federal University of Bahia, Brazil) analyzed ritual practices designed to incorporate and repudiate non-human powers into the bodily

essences of Hindu devotees of the goddess Kali in Guyana. He further illustrated how colonial power relations continue to (re-)produce asymmetrical dependencies as human bodies may be affected by spirits of the colonial era. JULITA OESANTY OETOJO (University of Bonn, Germany) examined power relations represented and reproduced by the weaving of *ikat* textiles in traditional rituals in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. She discussed how *ikat* imagery and materiality embody and become part of people's spiritual lives. ANDRÉ DEMARCHI (Federal University of Tocantins, Brazil) compared practices of body painting among different Jê peoples. These body paintings have therapeutic, prophylactic and even protective dimensions, and may transform people—mostly women—with knowledge of these practices into experts of healing.

Panel II focused on embodied history and memories in geographically diverse contexts. There were three presentations, from Australian literature studies, social and cultural anthropology, and the sociology of religion respectively. First, TINA HELBIG (University of Göttingen, Germany) analyzed the representation of Australian Indigenous knowledge systems in Indigenous literature, highlighting the reciprocal relationship and interdependence of 'Country,' ancestors and humans. Ancestor spirits created and are embodied in Country. YAEL BEN HORIN (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) discussed the embodiment of trauma in contemporary Israel. Through an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach, she examined the transgenerational relationship of living descendants and deceased loved ones, illustrating how the experiences and traumas of the deceased are stored in the bodies of the living descendants. LUIS BASTIDAS MENESES (University of Bayreuth, Germany) focused on the anonymous bodies of victims of the paramilitary conflicts in Colombia's Magdalena Medio region. He

explained that the anonymous graves of the so-called NN (*ningún nombre*, “nameless”) in local cemeteries are being adopted by living persons, who pray for the dead souls and thus may shorten the soul’s time in purgatory, hoping that the nameless soul will in exchange work miracles for their foster family.

Panel III addressed the topics of ecology and the shared world in spatially and culturally diverse contexts. It included presentations of research conducted in Singapore, Suriname and Bolivia, all pertaining to the disciplinary field of Social Anthropology. STUART STRANGE (Yale-NUS College, Singapore) addressed the relationship between humans and animals focusing on spiritual mediumship and incorporation of animal-like deities in Suriname and Singapore. He explored the ways in which interspecies ritual interaction shapes the relationality and interiority of alter minds. ROGÉRIO BRITTES W. PIRES (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil) discussed shared vulnerabilities and their complex relation to kinship organization among the Saamaka Maroons in Suriname. He described two kinds of avenging spirits who may come for the living, *kunu* and *neseiki*, and how being vulnerable to such spirits binds people, thus generating social groups. MILTON EYZAGUIRRE MORALES (Museo Nacional de Etnografía y Folklore, Bolivia) analyzed the Andean cosmovision and practices towards the dead and death. He showed that entities – such as air, earth, rocks, mountains – and species – such as animals, humans and plants – possess *ajayu* (soul). The dead also have a soul, and for this reason only specialists can ritually treat a dead body, for they are the only ones capable of establishing a connection to the soul.

Panel IV highlighted the role of (religious) bodies and objects from archaeological and anthropological perspectives in discussing the theme of the conference. CRISTIANA BARRETO (Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, Belém, Brazil) and MARCONY ALVES (Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, University of São Paulo, Brazil) focused on the representation of bodies as an ancient practice in the Amazon. Applying archaeological theories and methods, they analyzed bodily representations found on ancient figurines and ceramics, and also addressed the materiality of these representations. AGUSTINA ALTMAN (ICA- Universidad de Buenos Aires) and ALEJANDRO MARTÍN LÓPEZ (CONICET; ICA- Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina) discussed how the Moqoit people in the Gran Chaco, Argentina, have been influenced by Jesuit missions and evangelical churches of various denominations since the eighteenth century. Moqoit interpretations of the body have been transformed in the context of the Christian endeavour to ‘civilize’ indigenous people, illustrating the asymmetrical dependencies between missionaries and indigenous groups.

The organizers plan the publication of conference contributions in the BCDSS book series “Beyond Slavery and Freedom”.

A detailed conference reader can be found at: https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/program-events/conference-brochure_transforming-spirit-bodies.pdf



Taynä Tagliati, Lena Muders, Sinah Kloß and Sofia Buitrago on the second day of the conference.