

GHOSTS AND LIMINALITY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

by George P. Hansen

Ghosts are odd. Are they alive? Or are they dead? Are they fact? Or are they fiction? Are they natural? or supernatural? hallucinations? or real?

These questions are not new. They've been asked for thousands of years, yet they remain unresolved. Ghosts are inherently ambiguous. So how can we understand them?

Anthropologists' concept of liminality may help because it addresses phenomena that are ambiguous and paradoxical. The word liminal comes from *limen*, meaning threshold, and liminality refers to the condition of being *betwixt and between*. This concept is not well known, and it's likely to be foreign to nearly all persons involved with parapsychology or ghost research. Nevertheless, this anthropological theory has innumerable implications for paranormal fields.¹

Liminality applies to change, transition, and transformation-- conditions that are conducive to psi phenomena. For instance, poltergeist effects tend to occur around someone in puberty. A person at that stage in life is neither a child nor an adult, but rather is betwixt and between those roles. Death is another transition, and people are more likely to experience psychic phenomena near the death of someone they know than during more normal periods. Every culture has rituals surrounding death; it is a major rite of passage. In fact, analyses of rites of passage led to the concept of liminality.

Ancient peoples recognized, and respected, the reality of ghosts, and they had a deeper understanding of them than we do now. Those peoples used rituals to summon and channel supernatural power, but they also knew that the power was dangerous, and they had taboos surrounding it. We can benefit by studying their ways of thought.

Anthropologists report that in earlier cultures, novices in ritual initiations were frequently likened to "ghosts, gods, or ancestors."² But how in the world are ghosts like initiates? That just doesn't seem logical to us. But the connection has

proven to be illuminating, and other societies' ideas will help us understand ghosts.

Classification, Boundaries, and Binary Oppositions

Structural anthropologists have shown that so-called "primitive" cultures often classified things in terms of binary oppositions. The Figure below shows some of the major binary oppositions recognized by many societies.

LIFE	GOD	HEAVEN	MALE	HUMAN
<i>Ghosts</i>		<i>Angels</i>		<i>Bigfoot</i>
	<i>Mystics</i>		<i>Berdache</i>	
<i>Mediums</i>				<i>Werewolf</i>
		<i>UFOs</i>		
<i>Spirits</i>				<i>Vampire</i>
<i>NDEs</i>				
DEATH	HUMAN	EARTH	FEMALE	BEAST

Figure -- Major Binary Oppositions of Earlier Cultures
(Items in italics are liminal persons or phenomena)

Usually one element in an opposition has greater power, prestige, or privilege. Those in the top line have the higher status. But it's the area betwixt and between the binary oppositions that's especially interesting. It's a region of ambiguity and uncertainty. It's also a realm of taboo, and for earlier cultures, contact with that domain sometimes required protective rituals.

Notice that all of the betwixt-and-between items in the Figure are paranormal or supernatural phenomena, or are persons associated with such phenomena.

Spirits, ghosts, and near-death experiences (NDEs) challenge the all-too-simple distinction between life and death. Mediums serve as mediators between the living and the dead.

Mystics strive to unite with god; thus they blur the boundary between the human and the divine. They engage in extended periods of prayer and meditation, and mystics have produced some of the most dramatic paranormal phenomena ever reported (e.g., levitation, miraculous healings, multiplication of food).

Berdache were persons in American Indian tribes who took the role of the opposite sex. Many of them became shamans, but even those who didn't were looked upon as having supernatural power.

Angels and UFOs travel between the heavens and the earth. Angels relay religious messages, and UFO occupants sometimes do too. Bigfoot lies between human and beast, and so do vampires and werewolves. Some North American Indian tribes knew that Bigfoot was not an ordinary animal. If a member of the tribe wanted to pursue such a creature, the individual had to be ritually purified.³ There was a contagious, unclean aspect to encountering Bigfoot.

Paranormal phenomena have a betwixt-and-between aspect; as such, they are liminal occurrences, and they display the properties associated with liminality. Liminal persons, phenomena, and events tend to blur boundaries, upset classification schemes, and foster ambivalence and ambiguity. Such conditions are dangerous, but they can also be a source of supernatural power.

Relevance for Ghost Research

Ghost research faces peculiar problems:

- For thousands of years ghosts have been reported, discussed, and denied. Today the debates over their existence are as heated as ever. They show no sign of being resolved.
- Movies such as *The Sixth Sense*, *Ghost*, and *Ghostbusters* have been immensely popular. Each has taken in hundreds of millions of dollars in box office receipts. In contrast, the average support for serious ghost research published in refereed, scientific, English-language journals is probably less than \$10,000 annually, and it may be less than half that amount.
- No scientific institutions (with offices, buildings, paid staff) are devoted to investigating the reality of ghosts. There are virtually no university courses on ghost research, and there is no credible academic textbook on the topic.

Those who try to investigate the phenomena are likely to be housewives, police officers, or college students working on their own nickel, with no support from any institution.

- Active ghost research groups rarely last for more than a few years. Such organizations frequently fractionate and dissolve, leaving behind feelings of bitterness and disappointment.
- Conferences devoted to ghosts often include presentations on UFOs, Bigfoot, aliens, and channelers. The boundaries between these topics are blurred.
- Many people will speak of their ghost experiences, but often only in hushed tones, and maybe only to close friends. They perceive a stigma associated with the phenomena.

The above facts are well known to ghost researchers, but they rarely, if ever, are incorporated into theories of ghosts. Yet any comprehensive theory must explain these difficulties and peculiarities. Liminality theory directly addresses the matters, and it is founded on understandings of earlier cultures, which respected the reality of ghosts.

Liminal phenomena are typically transient, ephemeral, and have an affinity for chaos, transition, and instability. They are also usually viewed as slightly disreputable. Ghosts themselves are transient; their manifestations are unpredictable. They are neither solid nor stable. The question of their reality is perennially in dispute.

Marginality is a type of liminality, and ghost research is viewed as exceedingly marginal, even laughable, by the scientific establishment.

Anti-structure is a synonym of liminality in anthropological theory. The word reflects the transitory, unstable nature of ghost research groups. Direct attempts to engage the phenomena have side effects; they lead to instability.

Strong manifestations of liminality tend to destabilize established social orders--including bureaucratic institutions of government, business, academe, and religion. Such institutions unconsciously avoid contact with liminal occurrences.

Liminal phenomena tend to blur together. Some suggest that ghosts are telepathic hallucinations. Others ask if spirits exist, or whether some spirit phenomena are a function of other psychic abilities (e.g., clairvoyant powers of mediums). Professional parapsychologists are still undecided whether there is any real difference between ESP and psychokinesis. These issues of "blurred categories" have been argued for over a century in psychical research.

Liminal phenomena are frequently presented in popular works of fiction, but with fiction, a reader need not seriously consider reality issues. Readers can indulge their fascination but remain distant from direct encounter with phenomena.

Earlier cultures understood that liminal conditions and persons were dangerous; there were stigmas and taboos associated with them. Approaching otherworldly powers was not done casually. Ritual protection was required. Today such notions are considered to be "superstitious." Such attitudes serve to further marginalize the phenomena and thus reinforce their liminality.

Supplementary Comments

Like most discussions of liminality, the one here has been condensed. The full scope of the theory cannot be presented briefly. The concept is abstract, and my discussion has risked giving readers a too-limited impression. So I should say a few words about its range of application.

The concept was initially explained by Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) and later advanced by Victor Turner (1920-1983) and then by his student Barbara Babcock (1943-). Van Gennep's formulation of liminality covered matters such as initiations, vision quests, retreats into deserts by hermits, travelers, strangers, sacred contexts, and territorial passage. Turner expanded it to include: "subjugated autochthones, small nations, court jesters, holy mendicants, good Samaritans, millenarian movements, 'dharma bums,'...and monastic orders."⁴ It has since been applied to literary theory, analysis of film, theories of postmodernity, and aspects of the Internet.

Such a jumble may seem bizarre, but comparative methods of anthropology do throw light on things that seem completely unrelated. Those methods are not restricted by linear cause-effect thinking, which predominates in most sciences. They

provide a more expansive vision for understanding ghosts, suggest new ways to think about them, and open up relevant literatures that most scientists have ignored.⁵

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ENDNOTES

1. The concept of liminality has been developed in folklore, religious studies, literary criticism, counseling psychology, performance studies, and other fields. The notion has proven effective in understanding shamanism, religious ritual, and the trickster figure of mythology. Readers with an anthropological background may recognize some of the synonyms and near-synonyms for liminality, which include: anti-structure, interstitiality, communitas, betwixt and between. Marginality and outsiderhood are types of liminality.

There are a few commentators who have understood the relevance of liminality to the paranormal. Stanley Krippner, an expert on dreams and a pioneer in dream telepathy (and an eminent authority in humanistic and transpersonal psychology), has recently published several papers that discuss liminality: *Conflicting Perspectives on Shamans and Shamanism: Points and Counterpoints* (*American Psychologist*, 2002, Vol. 57, No. 11, pp. 962-977. Available at: http://www.stanleykrippner.com/papers/conflicting_perspectives.htm); *Dancing With the Trickster: Notes for a Transpersonal Autobiography* (*International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 2002, Vol. 21, pp. 1-18. Available at: <http://www.stanleykrippner.com/papers/autobiogood.htm>); *Trance and the Trickster: Hypnosis as a Liminal Phenomenon* (*Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 2005, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 97-118. Available at: http://www.stanleykrippner.com/papers/trance_trickster.htm).

Barbara Weisberg made use of the concept in her book *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (2004. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco).

David Taylor and Peter Rogerson briefly mentioned the idea of liminality in relation to haunted houses. See Taylor's essay: *Spaces of Transition: New Light on the Haunted House* (Available

at: <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/spaces.htm> [First published in *At the Edge*, No. 10, 1998]). See Rogerson's essay: *And the Dogs Began to Howl* (*Magonia*, No. 27, September 1987, pp. 7-10). Rogerson also applied the concept to UFOs in his article: *Taken to the Limits* (*Magonia*, No. 23, July 1986, pp. 3-12).

The now-inactive online journal *Liminalspace* (published 2000-2003) carried a number of articles relevant to the paranormal. Back issues can be downloaded at: <http://www.liminalspace.co.uk/download%20liminal%20space.htm>.

2. Turner, 1982, p. 27.

3. Buckley, 1980, p. 155.

4. Turner, 1969, p. 125.

5. Readers wanting more discussion of these topics may wish to peruse my book's Introduction, which is online at: <http://www.tricksterbook.com/Intro.htm>

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