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Questing the Spirits: Three Stories¹

CHRISTOPHER R. HUTSON

I'm not crazy," he said. I was in my office at Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina, when the director of admissions came to my door. "Dr. Hutson, this man would like to talk to you." I stood up to shake his hand, and that was when he first said, "I'm not crazy." He was about twenty-one or twenty-two, a young man who had lost his swagger, wanting to project certainty and yet so uncertain of what to do or ask. Only one thing he knew for sure, and he wanted me to know it: "I'm not crazy."

"Okay," I said, "What's your name?"

"Danny." No last name, just Danny.

Danny had been wandering through Salisbury in search of spiritual guidance. He was not a member of any particular church, but he had a problem that called for some churchly intervention, so he was going from church to church looking for an open door. He stumbled into the First United Methodist Church, which, with its Georgian colonial architecture and tall steeple, projected churchiness to heavy-laden souls. And the door was open. Inside, an associate pastor heard Danny's story and suggested that he might find help at the seminary. So Danny wandered into the office of our director of admissions, who received him warmly and brought him to my office. "This man would like to talk to you," she said. I accepted his disclaimer regarding his mental state, shook his hand, and asked him to sit.

Danny, it turned out, was a soldier home from Iraq. It was 2005, and the war had been going on for two years at that point. Danny had done his time and was back home, but things were not going well—and the problem, he said, was "this rock." He was holding what appeared to be a rock (on later inspection, a fragment of mud brick), wrapped in a paper towel. As he unwrapped the paper towel, he explained, "This rock is haunted." I began to think the Methodist associate pastor had the right idea to refer Danny to professionals with greater expertise. In fact, I tried the same move, asking whether he had visited our local VA hospital, which happened to be the regional treatment center for PTSD. "No," he protested, "that's a psych hospital, and I'm NOT crazy."

"Okay," I said, "tell me about the rock." The words tumbled out: the rock was haunted, there was a demon in it, ever since he came back from Iraq it had been ruining his life, he had started drinking, he couldn't hold a job, his wife left him, he needed to get rid of this rock, there was a demon.

"Where did you get the rock?" It was a souvenir. He had been stationed in Babylon, and he brought it back as a souvenir, but now he realized there was a demon in it, and he needed to send it back to Babylon.

"Tell me about what happened in Babylon." Danny said that he was one of only four American soldiers who were left, along with a detachment of Canadians, to guard the ruins of Babylon as the army advanced further north. The soldiers had commandeered a building, which they turned into a secure base by shuttering the windows and sandbagging their rooftop lookout post.

1. This is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered in response to Stuart Love's "Spirit Aggression in the Gospel According to Luke," presented at the Christian Scholars' Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, in June 2013.

One day, after visiting a little bazaar near the ruins, Danny was returning to base when he noticed the Canadian soldiers on the roof pointing excitedly down the road behind him. Danny whirled to see someone running up the road toward him—friend or foe? He was holding something—a grenade? Danny fired.

It turned out to be a boy about ten years old. As he died, his parents came running up, wailing. They said Danny had made a purchase from their booth for which they had not had correct change. They had sent their son to bring Danny his change, because they thought the Americans would see that he was not a threat. He was just a boy!

That night Danny lay in his bunk, in a locked and shuttered room. Suddenly, he awoke, aware that someone was in the room. He was terrified. Who was it? How did he get in? The room was locked. It was not *someone* but *something*. It was evil. It was NOT a nightmare. He was awake. The thing departed, but it returned night after night to haunt him in his bunk in Babylon.

And then Danny came home, relieved at first to be away from the spectre of that terrible place. But his troubles did not stay behind in Babylon. Back in North Carolina, he was still haunted by a demon that interfered with every aspect of his life. He figured out that he had brought the demon home with him in this rock. If he could just return the rock to Babylon, he would be okay. Could I help him?

In 1999 I was teaching an introduction to the sociology of religion at Hood Seminary. I do not recall how it came up, but I have a vivid memory of one discussion. A student named Samar Ghandour was a recent immigrant from Liberia, having fled the civil war in his home country. Ghandour told us how, in the village where he was living, a banana tree protected the villagers against evildoers and everyone was afraid of the banana tree. He stumped the class. In response to our very Westernized questions, he insisted that there really was a spirit in the banana tree and that it really did protect the village. What I needed at the time was a frame of reference for a conversation about spirit possession.

I thought of Samar Ghandour when I read Stuart Love's study, so I contacted him (now the pastor of a Baptist church) for a refresher on the tale of the banana tree. He sent me this fuller version:

The city of Brewerville, Montserrado County, previously a place of the Dehn Gola people and later occupied by the Americo-Liberians, is eight miles outside the Liberian capital Monrovia. The area is about three miles after the St. Paul River, on the Virginia side or the left bank.

Being the children of a new family in the community, my siblings and I were cautioned to behave ourselves through stories told to us of the banana orchard and cotton tree located on the right side of Geda A.M.E. Church, facing Brisbane Road. According to the stories, the orchard hosted the spirits of the living elders of the city. Though they existed physically among the people, they were spiritually members of a society not open to everyone, particularly strangers. A person could only join if he was a member's son and "inherited" membership status from his father; daughters could not inherit because women were not allowed to join.

The society was primarily a community protection force and the traditional enforcers of the customs of the people of that community. In case of an external invasion, the orchard would dispatch a single banana tree, physically mobile or walking, talking and running to defend the community. The invaders would be destroyed or defeated but there would be no individual to charge or arrest, since a banana tree cannot normally attack a person, or it could not be proven in a court of law that a banana tree attacked and killed an individual. Consequently, many people were afraid to carry out any crime against the Brewerville community.

Otherwise, the single banana tree, possessed by the spirit of the elders, could be dispatched against a member of the community if there was a desecration, sacrilege, or violation of high customs. It provided a sense of law and order without police assistance mostly. Depending on the violation, you could be summoned to pay a fine, perform some traditional rites and rituals, and/or be killed. Other times, your family could be fined heavily and if your father was a member of the society, he was required to remain silent if your death was required. A father's loyalty was to the community and not to his individual family.

Ghandour went on to tell about a similar spirit phenomenon in the village where he was born, in the interior of Liberia.

In Gorton, Nimba County, my place of birth, there is a story about a family defense force that existed under the Yah River. This defense force consisted of the ancestors and the existing members' spirits dwelling in the alligators of Yah River. They were mainly defenders of the Gwain family or the people from *Gblah Gbain* (or *Gblah* Quarter) or any of their relatives from other quarters.

My mother explained that several times when they visited the farm on the banks of the river, she would hear the *Lulu Gonn* ("Alligator Man" in Mano) singing from the river but there would be no physical appearance. She explained that her father, Oldman Glayluo, was a member of the Lulu Gonn society. Though he would be present with them on the farm, he was spiritually present with the society as they sang in the river. As a matter of fact, he was a part of the singing team.

The singing had two purposes. First, it provided confidence to the people they were protecting so they could live a normal life and fear nothing. It provided assurance that there was protection, a family army that was reliable and ready to provide full, decisive defense for its people. Secondly, the singing was not heard only by the members of the protected people; it sounded out to others who were not in the protected clan as a warning and deterrent.

Many people knew of the Lulu Gonn society and the *Gblah Gbain* and its readiness for war. Many stories are told of their military prowess and victories. An individual, a group or an entire village could be attacked if there was an offense against a member of the Gwain Family or *Gblah Gbain*. An offense could be theft, mistreatment of their daughter given to you in marriage, destruction of their farm, cattle raiding, women raiding, violation of their customs, or anything else that they deem offensive.

As with the banana orchard society, one can only become a member through an inheritance from his father. However, the Lulu Gonn differs from the banana orchard society in that the father does not appoint a son or decide which sons should come and join. A son is not invited; rather, he is possessed by the Lulu Gonn spirit, and he becomes a member immediately. No one knows the orientation process but membership is not hidden. In fact, when one is possessed by the Lulu Gonn spirit, it is manifested on his skin. The skin is pale and always appears whitish as though it is fading. It is believed that the pale skin is due to the member spending so much time in the water, dwelling in the alligator body in the Yah River, even though the man's physical body still exists in the town.

Ghandour gives us a nice, anthropological description. Notice, in particular, that he says the alligator spirit *possesses* a man, who then becomes a member of the society. In a private communication, he elaborated: "The NT concept of the spirit, especially the Holy Spirit, is not far from the African concept. The emphasis is always on possession. . . . The person's action is always based on the spirit possessing and indwelling the person, so that the action is really the spirit's."²

That sounds like the spirit aggression language that Love is describing. I find very helpful Love's cataloguing of the dynamic vocabulary that Luke uses to describe the Spirit's activities, and I can see how this would resonate both with a Dinka view of the world that Leinhardt describes and with the worldview of the *Gblah* people that Ghandour describes. Also, the banana orchard and the alligators both make sense in terms of Evans-Pritchard's theory that *spirits* and *divinities* are "refractions of social reality," a view that stands over and against an older anthropology that spoke of *manism* and *animism*.³

In contrast with Ghandour, Love focuses primarily on spirit possession of individuals, not on spirit societies. On spirit possession of individuals, I find Leinhardt helpful as he attempts to "'translate' the cosmology of the

2. Facebook message (May 24, 2013).

3. Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa*, trans., M.R. Green (New York: Verso, 1993), 57, citing E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 106ff.

Dinka into modern language, and to make the divinities they believe in comprehensible as characteristic expression of their experience of the world.”⁴ I must admit that I find Leinhardt’s terminology of *passiones* somewhat opaque. But what I think he is saying is that the Dinka use a term like *spirit* to describe what Westerners might call *affect*. That is, when a person or event or phenomenon has an effect on me, my Western mind is inclined to focus on my subjective experience—what is going on in *my* head. But the Dinka perspective focuses on whatever it is that radiates from that person or phenomenon or event to *strike* me in a certain way.

A study by Ute Luig sheds light on the phenomenon.⁵ Luig traces two kinds of diviners who represent social constructs among the Zambezi people. These are the *mizimu*, who represent the spirits of ancestral lineage, and the *basangu*, who represent communal spirits that mediate social conflict in a given locality. The power of the *basangu* mediums is only as strong as the public acknowledgment of them. But Luig describes a third type of spirit, the *masabe*, which afflicts an individual with illness. According to Luig, “the *masabe* healers are judged informally by their success in healing which involves a complex therapy, including herbal treatment, counseling of patients and family and performances of rituals. This complex therapy is oriented towards the socialization of spirits into the world of humans and the gradual familiarization of humans with the spirit world.”⁶ Healing comes when a person learns to control the *spirit*—that is, to understand the new social reality that the spirit represents.

In 1958, the Kariba dam was finished and the Gwembe valley was flooded, which led to the dislocation of many people. Luig correlates that social disruption with a noticeable demise in the *basangu* spirits (tied to place) and the *mizimu* spirits (tied to ancestry and place) and a rise in *masabe* spirits, as displaced individuals were affected by social upheavals caused by colonial politics, technology and migration. They began to encounter new spirits that often affected them with illness. When we lay aside the notion of animism and pay attention to the names of the new spirits, we can see that what they meant by *masabe* (spirit) is close to what we might mean by *affect*. You might not notice such a thing, when the spirit is named *silue* (leopard) or *madada* (duck). But what if the new spirit is named *matobela injani* (followers of the railroad engine)? Or *mapolis* (police) or *maregimenti* (soldiers)? Or *pumpi* (pump) or *guitar*?

Luig’s study offers another good example of Evans-Pritchard’s theory about spirits as “refractions of social reality.” It strikes me that the spirit *maregimenti* in Zambezi culture might shed light on a spirit named *legion* in Gerasa (Luke 8).

I have been describing spirits in West Africa (Liberia) and in Southern Africa (Zambia). These limited descriptions suggest that the spirit world in Africa is complex, and we need more studies like those of Love and Anderson in order to examine how other ways of thinking about spirit possession can also shed light on aspects of the NT.

But what’s a minister to do? In 1999 I had no frame of reference for thinking about the spirit in a banana tree. But here is an interesting point. Although Ghandour had insisted back then that the banana tree spirit was real, when he sent me this story in 2013, he prefaced it with, “There are two stories I remember that were told but I believe them to be myths promoting the legendary status of the ancestors of the community... but I am now speaking from my Evangelical Conservative Christian perspective.” Alas, just as I am trying to learn how to talk about African spirits, Ghandour has become westernized on me, and I suppose that my inability to process his story in 1999 contributed to that in some part.

In 2005, Danny presented an immediate, pastoral need that I could not dismiss. I had to help, so I did two things. First, I asked a faculty colleague to join me in a little, impromptu exorcism. We prayed for the demon that was haunting Danny to return to the rock and stay there. I told Danny to leave the rock with me. Second, since Danny absolutely refused to visit the VA hospital, I urged him to find some Vietnam veterans and tell

4. Ibid., *Red Fez*, 58-60, drawing from Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 151ff.

5. Ute Luig, “Constructing Local Worlds: Spirit Possession in the Gwembe Valley, Zambia,” in *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa*, ed. Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 124–141.

6. Ibid., 129–130.

them his story. They would understand. I also invited Danny to return, but he never did. I can only hope that at least one of my actions was effective.

In 2014, I was in a Sunday school class in Abilene, Texas, reading through 2 Kings. A motif in the Elisha cycle is the ability of the prophet to see the spiritual forces that are arrayed in the world like chariots of fire (2 Kgs 2:9–12; 6:15–17). As an educated Westerner, I have a tendency to appreciate studies like those of Ute Luig, who translates spirit language into secular categories. But I also see in the Elisha stories a suggestion that the spirits are visible to those who can see them. I do not understand all the stories I hear or read about spirit possession. But I value studies like those of Stuart Love and Matt Anderson in this issue. I suspect that if we pay more attention to what people in other cultures are saying about spirits, we might understand some of the Bible stories better, and we might well become better pastors.

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