



Societas Magica Newsletter

Issue 29

Fall 2013

Objects as Demonic Subjects in Spiritual Warfare Handbooks

Sean McCloud

University of North Carolina
Charlotte

In a co-authored manual on removing demons from one's house and possessions, the minister Chuck Pierce recounts a purchase he made during a trip to New Orleans. As he walked down the street, something compelled him to stop in front of one particular shop. "In the window," he writes, "was a beautiful ceramic cat with riveting blue eyes."¹ Describing that he "seemed drawn to it," Pierce entered the store, which was "filled with oddities, many of which were used in voodoo rituals."² Despite this, Pierce's full attention was on the ceramic cat, which he purchased, took home, and placed next to his fireplace. At some point later, he notes, God began revealing to him various "objects in my home that were linked with demonic forces."³ Walking past his fireplace, he looked at the ceramic cat and "immediately discerned that witchcraft was linked to it."⁴ Pierce promptly took the cat statue and ritually destroyed it by passing it through fire and then smashing it.⁵

Pierce and his tale belong to a group within American Evangelicalism known as the "Third Wave." The "Third Wave" is a term coined by former Fuller Theological Seminary Professor C. Peter Wagner in several articles and books he wrote from the early to late 1980s.⁶ The name described what he and some of his colleagues viewed as a new evangelical movement of the Holy Spirit—the latest in an historical succession with two previous "waves," the birth of Pentecostalism at the turn of the twentieth century and the charismatic movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.⁷ The Third Wave consists of multiple institutional structures that are well-funded and expansive in their geographical, cultural, and political reach. These include the U.S. Strategic Prayer Network, The Sentinel Group, The New Apostolic Reformation, Spiritual Warfare Network, Justice at the Gate, Christian Harvest International, the U.S. Prayer Center, Glory of Zion International Ministries, Generals International, Global Harvest Ministries, and the Wagner Leadership Institute.

Spiritual Warfare cont'd

To properly combat the Devil and his minions, Third Wave practitioners have produced numerous spiritual warfare handbooks. These “how-to” battle guides teach methods for interceding in the supernatural war being waged on earth. Spiritual warfare manuals are focused on sanctifying one’s home and assume that possessions contain a plethora of demon-inhabited objects. Two works in this genre are Eddie and Alice Smith’s *Spiritual Housecleaning* and Chuck Pierce and Rebecca Systema Wagner’s *Protecting Your Home from Spiritual Darkness*.⁸ The Smiths assert that “demonic spirits seem to crave a material presence,” while practitioner Chuck Pierce writes that “there is often an invisible spiritual force behind a visible object.”⁹ But the theme of possessed possessions is not relegated to just these specialty handbooks. In other works on spiritual warfare, the intercessor Cindy Jacobs warns readers of the demonic dangers that can accompany antique furniture and Harold Caballeros cautions his audience to be wary of purchasing

statues while on missionary work in foreign lands.¹⁰

In the academic study of religion, and as aptly critiqued by the material religion scholar Amy Whitehead, “religious objects are largely relegated to being symbolic and representational instead of tangible, sensual, or embodied forms of religious expression.”¹¹ But material objects—as Whitehead and others have noted—are not just *reflections* of cultural values; they embody values in and of themselves.¹² And they don’t just symbolize agency; at times—at least from the perspective of spiritual warfare’s practitioners—they act as agents. “Many of us are suffering today,” the Smiths suggest, “because we have sometimes willfully, and sometimes ignorantly, invited possessions and behaviors into our homes that defile the atmosphere and give the devil the right to affect our lives and the lives of our children.”¹³ In Third Wave literature, demonic desires for materiality lead to objects becoming possessed. When this occurs, material objects become demonic subjects that act in the human world. But it

isn’t just the cravings of evil spirits that foment such possessions. Human desires, family histories, and even the nature of a material object itself can lead to demonic habitation.

Throughout spiritual warfare manuals, the objects connected to an individual’s extramarital affairs, pornography addictions, drug use, or occult practices house demons. Objects can also be of natures that make them already possessed by evil spirits. While the Smiths suggest that “most objects in the world are neither good nor evil in and of themselves,” both they and Chuck Pierce provide lengthy lists of forbidden ones.¹⁴ These include “occult” materials such as Ouija boards and amulets, statues depicting divine figures from other religions such as Buddha or Greek deities, objects garnered from groups such as the Masons, Roman Catholic rosaries and crucifixes, popular culture items such as *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Masters of the Universe* toys and games, and even “evil depictions of creatures such as lions, dogs, dragons or cats (or any

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Notes and Queries

Dissertation Abstract

Alexander K. Smith
École pratique des hautes études (5^{ième} section), Paris

PhD thesis, "*lDe'u 'phrul*, the manifestation of knowledge: ethnophilological studies in the field of Tibetan divination with particular emphasis upon a common form of Bön lithomancy"

My research topic is the field of Tibetan divination, which is a vast and still largely unexplored area of research. Despite the existence of a number of studies on the subject of Tibetan divination,¹ the prevalence and diversity of divinatory practices

in the Tibetan cultural sphere is still grossly underrepresented. In my proposed doctoral project I intend to explore several comparative aspects of divination at large; however, due to the breadth of the topic at hand, I have chosen to limit the focus of my thesis to a study of divinatory practices in the Tibetan Bön tradition.

The term Bön has historically been used to indicate a plurality of concepts, the disambiguation of which would require a thorough and lengthy explanation. To speak very generally, however, Bön is perhaps best described as a heterodox branch of Tibetan Buddhism that, according to Bön historical narratives, lays claim to a legacy that long predates the origins

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Spiritual Warfare cont'd

other creature made with demonic distortions).”¹⁵

In addition to statues, non-Evangelical religious objects, jewelry, and toys associated with the occult, spiritual warfare manuals assert that books can often be demonic abodes. In these tales, the texts, illustrations, and subjects that books contain can invite demonic habitation. The Smiths relate one story of a family plagued by the presence of “spiritual entities roaming through their house at night.”¹⁶ Upon investigating, the Smiths were informed through God-given discernment that something evil resided in the attic. Climbing through a garage ceiling entrance, the Smiths “discovered a large cardboard box filled with Stephen King novels” that had been left by the previous owners.¹⁷ When the books were removed, the spirits disappeared. In another recollection, the Smiths tell about a haunting in their own Houston home. At times the corner of their family room would be visited by an evil presence that was sometimes accompanied by a strange odor. One night, after again sensing the resident evil, the Smiths examined the objects in afflicted corner. On the fireplace mantle sat what they described as an “elegant” and “beautifully bound” six volume set of books they had inherited from a deceased aunt. Having never before opened the books, the Smiths were shocked to find “pages filled with lithographs of ghosts, gargoyles and graveyards with spirits ascending from the tombstones.”¹⁸ “After repenting to the Lord for allowing these books into our home,” they write, “we spoke aloud, breaking any contracts with demons that were using the books as an access point into our home.”¹⁹ After this ritual, the books were discarded. The evil presence and its accompanying stench never reappeared.

As one might expect, compact discs containing hard rock and metal can house demons. In one story, Chuck Pierce relates the time when his son bought the soundtrack to one of the Godzilla films. Hearing his son play a song from it which Pierce considered “terrible,” he tried discussing the lyrics with his son. When this conversation failed to convince the boy to get rid of the CD, Pierce prayed to God to “reveal the truth” behind it. “A few nights later he was visited by an evil, tangible presence,” Pierce writes of his son’s experience, “the force was the same color as that on the soundtrack . . . he immediately confessed his sin to his mother and me and destroyed the CD.”²⁰ The destruction of the compact disc was an act of deliverance, which is the focus of spiritual warfare. It can be performed on people, places, objects, and even regions or entire countries. The exorcism of demons from things frequently requires the destruction of those objects. Books, records, jewelry, statues, and clothing are burnt, smashed, and thrown away as final ritual actions following prayers of repentance for the sins that tied demons to the objects

Spiritual warfare manuals—filled with demons, idioms of warfare, and assurances of an imminent end-time—may seem far removed from what many religion scholars view as the “American mainline” of religious practice. And the majority of Americans might not share the view that objects and places can be possessed. But in significant ways, these manuals register larger cultural trends. First, material possessions are an integral part of contemporary everyday life and identity. As the material culture scholar Daniel Miller notes, “people sediment possessions, lay them down as foundations, material walls mortared with memory . . .”²¹ And in the present

post-industrial era (when consumer capitalism has become the primary driver of the U.S. economy), the objects and accoutrements we possess and desire play an increasingly significant role in our attempts to establish for ourselves a stable “self,” a unique personality to portray and display. The late modern notion of self, partly fomented by what Colin Campbell described as the co-emergence of “romanticism and the consumer ethic,” appears (even when material, historical, and social realities suggest otherwise) to be less ascribed by one’s work and family and to be more of a flexible “project of the self.”²²

Second, while many Americans are possessed by their possessions, they also seem susceptible to other types of possession. In addition to consumer goods, ghosts, demons, and other spirits are consuming some Americans’ time, haunting their houses, and invading their bodies. Polls suggest that an increasing number of between one-third and a half of all Americans are either certain or think it probable that ghosts exist.²³ An even larger percentage (68%), “completely” or “mostly” agree that angels and demons are active in the world.²⁴ In some ways, we all live in a ghost-hunting reality television show now. Programs such as *Possessed Possessions*, *The Haunted Collector*, and *My Ghost Story on Caught on Tape* feature haunted objects. In terms of motifs and story lines, ghost reality television and spiritual warfare are deeply intertwined; they feed from each other in ways that make academic parsing for thematic origins difficult. Perhaps it doesn’t look like an Episcopalian church service or Methodist coffee hour, but the movement registers some prominent trends and themes within

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Dissertation abstract cont'd

of Indian Buddhism. For a number of reasons, Bön has traditionally been treated with dismissiveness by the followers of other Tibetan sects, who have frequently decried the Bönpos (followers of Bön) as “outsiders” (*phyi pa*), “heretics” (*mu stegs pa*), or worse. Furthermore, as the earliest Western information on Bön was derived from Tibetan Buddhist sources, early academic perceptions of Bön culture were often similarly dismissive.

Rather than survey all of the extant forms of Bön divination, my thesis will focus upon a particular type of lithomancy (pebble-divination) practiced by Tibetan Bönpos. This form of divination, which is known as “Manifestation of Knowledge” (*lde'u 'phrul*), possesses an entirely unstudied textual tradition that, gauging from the earliest available sources, originates in the eleventh century. Considering the non-ecumenical and regionally specific nature of most Tibetan divinatory literature, when seen from a diachronic perspective, texts outlining the performance of “Manifestation of Knowledge” display a surprising degree of homogeneity and internal consistency. As such, I propose that a philological analysis of this genre will provide a previously unattainable degree of clarity with regard to the evolution and dissemination of divinatory practices, symbolism, and mythology throughout the Bön tradition.

In addition to fieldwork conducted in Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Tibet, my discussion of Bön divination will be supplemented by the translation of a number of previously unstudied lithomantic manuscripts. Chiefly, I will focus upon the *sMra seng 'phrul gyi rdel mo mngon shes rno gsal gyi sgron me*, an 11th century “treasure text” (*gter ma*) attributed to the Bön “treasure revealer” (*gter ston*) Khro tshang ‘brug lha. This work will then be read against several later commentaries on the subject

of lithomancy. Foremost among these will be the *Ma sangs 'phrul gyi rdel mo mngon shes rno gsal gyi sgron me* (a 19th century redaction of the 11th century manuscript) and the *sMra seng rdel mo gsal ba'i me long*, written by the 18th century ecumenicist and historian Kun grol grags pa.

The goal of my translation project is three-fold. First, I hope to preserve a number of the primary texts characteristic of the Bön lithomantic genre, as well as several of the most influential commentaries written on the subject of divination. Second, I will conduct a philological study of the materials at hand. As divination texts often contain misspellings and a large number of regionally specific terms, I will also construct an *apparatus criticus* based on various witnesses of the 11th century manuscript (where available) that will enable non-specialists to approach and critically study the genre. Third, I will undertake a study of the symbolism and mythology commonly evoked in Bön lithomantic literature. In doing so, I will argue that Bönpo divination forms a sub-discipline quite separate from that of Tibetan Buddhist (*chos pa*) divination; one which sheds a great deal of light on the complex religious and political environments in which the earliest Tibetan divination manuscripts were produced.

In my conclusion I will address the issue of textual exogeneity and authorial intention vs. the contemporary usage of divination manuals. Though my doctoral fieldwork is somewhat limited in its scope, I hope to contribute to the growing body of literature on the ritual/textual interface expressed in many Tibetan Buddhist and Bönpo rites.

(Thesis to be published in 2015 by the École pratique des hautes études)

Endnotes

¹ See for example: Brandon Dotson, “Divination and Law in the Tibetan Empire: the Role of Dice in the

Legislations of Loans, Interests, Martial Law and Troop Conscription,” in Matthew T. Kapstein and Brandon Dotson, eds., *Contributions to the Cultural History of Early Tibet* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 3-77; Ariane Macdonald, “Une lecture des Pelliot tibétain 1268, 1287, 1038, 1047, et 1290: Essai sur la formation et l’emploi des mythes politiques dans la religion royale de Sroñ bcan sgam po,” in *Études Tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1971), 190-391; Eric Mortensen, “Raven Augury from Tibet to Alaska,” in Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton, eds., *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, & Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 421-438; Charles Ramble, “Rule by Play in Southern Mustang,” in C. Ramble and M. Brauen, eds., *Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya* (Zurich: Volker-kundemuseum der Universität Zurich, 1993), 287-301; Charles Ramble, “Les astres et le destin: astrologie et divination en asie oriental,” in *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, 35 (2013), 199-232; Alexander K Smith, “Remarks Concerning the Methodology and Symbolism of Bon Pebble Divination,” in *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines*, vol. 42 (2011), 1-15; Frederick W Thomas, *Ancient Folk-Literature from North-Eastern Tibet* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957).

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Spiritual Warfare cont'd contemporary American culture.

Endnotes

¹ Chuck D. Pierce and Rebecca Wagner Systema, *Protecting Your Home From Spiritual Darkness* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2004), 61.

² Pierce and Systema 2004, 61

³ Pierce and Systema 2004, 42.

⁴ Pierce and Systema 2004, 42.

⁵ Pierce and Systema 2004, 42.

⁶ See, for example, C. Peter Wagner, "The Third Wave," *Christian Life* (September 1984), np; and C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1988).

⁷ George Marsden discusses the controversy of Wagner's and Wimber's course in his history, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 292-298. See also a record of the discussions, Wagner essays, and the "MC510-Signs, Wonders, and Church Growth" course materials in *Signs and Wonders Today*, compiled by the editors of *Christian Life* magazine (Wheaton: Christian Life Magazine, 1983).

⁸ Eddie Smith and Alice Smith. *Spiritual House Cleaning: Protect Your Home and Family From Spiritual Pollution* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003); and Chuck D. Pierce and Rebecca Wagner Systema,

Protecting your Home from Spiritual Darkness (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2004).

⁹ Eddie and Alice Smith 2003, 44; Pierce and Systema 2004, 20.

¹⁰ Cindy Jacobs, *Deliver Us from Evil: Putting a Stop to the Occultic Influence Invading your Home and Community* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 198; and Harold Caballeros, *Victorious Warfare: Discovering your Rightful Place in God's Kingdom* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 82-83.

¹¹ Amy Whitehead, "The Goddess and the Virgin: Materiality in Western Europe," *The Pomegranate* 10:2 (2008): 164.

¹² In addition to Whitehead, see Nicole Boivin, "Grasping the Elusive and Unknowable: Material Culture in Ritual Practice," *Material Religion* 5:3 (2009), 266-287; and Peter Pels, "The Modern Fear of Matter: Reflections on the Protestantism of Victorian Science," *Material Religion* 4:3 (2008), 264-283.

¹³ Eddie and Alice Smith 2003, 10.

¹⁴ Eddie and Alice Smith 2003, 25.

¹⁵ Pierce and Systema 2004, 33.

Regarding rosary beads and crucifixes, see Eddie and Alice Smith, 49-52.

¹⁶ Eddie and Alice Smith 2003, 62.

¹⁷ Eddie and Alice Smith 2003, 63.

¹⁸ Eddie and Alice Smith 2003, 30.

¹⁹ Eddie and Alice Smith 2003, 30-31.

²⁰ Pierce and Systema 2004, 80. In the same volume, Chuck Pierce tells a very similar story about a Magic 8 Ball toy.

When his other son buys the toy, Pierce tells him it is evil, but isn't believed. Pierce then prays that his son "Isaac would see the demonic force behind the object" and in a few days Isaac does and the family ritually destroys the toy together. Pierce and Systema 2004, 80-81.

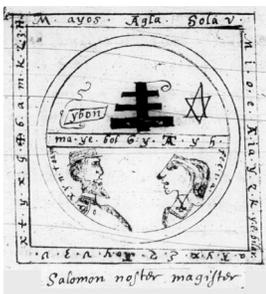
²¹ Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 91.

²² Colin Campbell, "Romanticism and the Consumer Ethic: Intimations of a Weber-Style Thesis," *Sociological Analysis* 44:4 (Winter 1983): 279-295.

²³ For the poll suggesting 32%, see Linda Lyons, "One-Third of Americans Believe Dearly May not Have Departed," *Gallup* (12 July 2005). <http://www.gallup.com/poll/17275/one-third-americans-believe-dearly-may-departed.aspx>. Accessed 8/4/13. For two examples suggesting that the number is closer to half, see Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and Joseph O. Baker, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 44; and Sean Alfano, "Poll: The Majority Believe in Ghosts," *CBS News Online* (11 February 2009): <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/29/opinion/polls/main994766.shtml>. Accessed 8/4/13.

²⁴ See the 2007 Pew "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," <http://pewresearch.org/databank/dailynumber/?NumberID=885>. Accessed 8/4/13.

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Please contact David Porreca: dporreca@uwaterloo.ca

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