

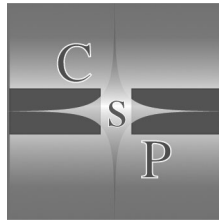
# Cosmologies of Suffering



Cosmologies of Suffering  
Post-communist Transformation, Sacral  
Communication, and Healing

Edited by

Agita Lūse and Imre Lázár



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Cosmologies of Suffering: Post-communist Transformation, Sacral Communication, and Healing,  
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## EDITOR'S PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

The history of this book can be traced back to a meeting of the Medical Anthropology at Home network in September 2003 in Perugia, Italy, where both editors of the present volume first met. An idea was then born to jointly announce a workshop for the 8<sup>th</sup> biennial of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) to be held in Vienna a year later. The original call for papers was entitled 'Healing and sacral communication in the context of cosmologies of suffering in societies in transition'. In spite of the rather long and somewhat clumsy title, the response rate was good and the actual workshop turned into a focussed, intellectually stimulating and fruitful discussion. The range of topics discussed in the seven papers presented at the workshop<sup>2</sup> was broad but some common themes emerged.<sup>3</sup> Among them was the paradoxical permanence of 'transition' in the so-called post-communist countries, the accompanying persistence of social suffering and the structural conditions that give rise to such misery. A final theme focussed on the resources that people mobilize to cope with suffering and trauma. It was noted that ways of coping manifest a shared stance towards agency. This stance is common to sufferers from diverse post-communist regions, such as ethnically divided Croatia, politically and economically unstable Zimbabwe, relatively more peaceful countries such as Hungary, Latvia, and Poland, and, finally, Tuva, religiously still unique among other Siberian territories once colonized by Russia. Workshop participants noted that agency in these diverse settings involved relinquishing reliance on one's self and turning towards a power higher than the self, whether this is conceptualized through the lens of transcendence, religion, or cosmology. Hence the continuing centrality of the concept of sacral communication retained in the title of this volume despite its changing directions.

One change concerns the term 'transition' that we as editors decided to substitute by a more neutral term and one that has been widely used in anthropology, namely, transformation. Hann, Humphrey and Verdery have noted that some academic disciplines have promoted their 'transitology' paradigms not merely to explain the changes in the post-Soviet realm but also to make them happen in a particular way (Hann et al 2002). The concept of transition has strong associations with the scenario elaborated within neo-liberal economics: in the framework of this discipline, the

transition was expected to proceed as a lineal process, as if both its start and end points were fixed, namely, the countries that had emerged from state socialism were to catch up with Western capitalist development (Timm 2002: 51).

Concerning the original term ‘post-socialist societies’, we have opted for two alternative adjectives to denote the societies discussed in this volume, namely, the broader term ‘post-communist’ (that also allowed us to include a paper on Zimbabwe) and the relatively more specific term ‘post-state-socialist’ (that implies that the former regime can only be called socialism in the sense of state imposed policies rather than socialism as a political system). Such a choice has been dictated by a rather widespread sense of unease about the adjective ‘socialist’ being used to describe countries which were ruled, almost exclusively, by *communist* parties pursuing monopolistic politics in all spheres of life, and which was estranged from social democratic principles (as they have been followed, for instance, by several consecutive governments in the Nordic countries).<sup>4</sup>

Not all the conference presenters are included in this volume. Some were committed to publish elsewhere. However, as the conference themes came into sharper focus we decided to include other non-participating scholars in this volume. As a result, both the theoretical and geographical scope of the volume could be expanded.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the volume participants – Imre Lázár, Galina Lindquist, Agita Lūse, and Alexander Rödlach became the founding members of the Sacral Communication and Healing Network established in 2005 and accepted by the EASA as one of its official networks in February 2007. Outstanding scholars like Thomas J. Csordas, Iain Edgar, Geoffrey Samuel and András Zempléni who also are the founding members represent a wide range of anthropological traditions around a common focus. This form of scientific collaboration was inspired by some recent interdisciplinary fora like the workshop on “Spirituality in Economy” in Szeged in 2001, the “Healing and sacral communication in the context of cosmologies of suffering in societies in transition” workshop of 8<sup>th</sup> Biennial of EASA in Vienna in 2004, and the Budapest-Balaton Summer School on “Sacral communication and healing” in 2005. The latter forum offers a regular occasion for reviewing the progress of interdisciplinary efforts in exploring the dynamics and diverse nature of the recent revival of spiritual discourses in contemporary healing, medical and religious practices.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Agita Lüse's editorial work on this volume was largely supported by a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Award Reference: PTA-026-27-1038) for which she would like to express her gratitude.

<sup>2</sup> Papers by the following contributors were presented at the workshop (in alphabetic order): Dorota Hall, Imre Lázár, Galina Lindquist, Agita Lüse, Alexander Rödlach, Michaela Schäuble, Marcellina Spannraft and Csaba Vass.

<sup>3</sup> We base this characterization of the central themes discussed at the workshop on the concluding summary that Galina Lingquist kindly agreed to draw.

<sup>4</sup> A number of social scientists writing on the ex-Soviet block countries have used the term 'post-communist': Buchowski (1997), Stukuls Eglitis (2002), Hohnen (2003), etc.

<sup>5</sup> Among authors who, for various reasons could not present their studies at the workshop in 2003 but have nevertheless contributed papers here are the following: Tatiana Barchunova, Vilmos Keszeg, Barbara Potrata, and Tomasz Rakowski. At a later stage, László Kürti kindly agreed to write a Foreword.

## FOREWORD

LÁSZLÓ KÜRTI

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed tremendous political upheavals resulting in human tragedy and suffering on an enormous scale that was not envisaged during the 1980s. By the end of the decade, and the beginning of the following, every year was truly an *annus mirabilis* comparable to those of 1918 and 1945. Regimes collapsed, apartheid came to an end in South Africa, and Europe started slowly to become a political economic entity, more unified than ever before. Euphoria soon turned sour, however, for what took place at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s has baffled scholars and politicians alike. Wars, famine, the AIDS pandemic, civil wars, and terrorism on a global scale have been with us since the collapse of regimes both right and left. This edited volume is concerned with two fundamental concepts in anthropology – suffering and cosmology – and the way they relate to conflicts and reconstruction of social relations as well as processes of human thought and feelings. By focussing on specific ethnographic settings like a miners' community, peasant villages, institutions and nation-states in a number of post-communist countries, authors investigate what these reveal about cognitive complexes such as feelings and emotions through which individuals and groups manage to articulate their innermost thoughts, utterances and actions. All contributors in this volume critically analyze these settings by documenting the differences and similarities in culturally constructed and rationalised complexes of suffering and cosmology in societies that have experienced enormous transformations. More specifically, all chapters reveal the culturally meaningful interconnectedness of emotions and religiosity with local as well as national (even international) politics, and the way in which these relations are forming among community members themselves and *vis-à-vis* their states and the outside world. In an early study on religion and sacrality, one of the first great scholars of religious studies, William Robertson Smith, wrote that religion does not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society. These chapters offer plentiful examples that Smith's pioneering statement has not lost its edge. If this is the case, as I believe it

to be, than this study of alternative and intimate religious spheres of human existence and their fundamental connectedness to suffering and bodily experiences is more than welcome today.

Up until now, anthropologists have been discussing urban and rural processes with particular attention paid to international and national political and economic relations. We find that individuals and communities undergo incredible transformations as a result of swift politico-economic change; while some are experiencing brutal uprising or civil wars, others do manage to rise above bloody conflicts via more peaceful negotiations and public protests. All these have, one must admit, been well documented earlier in attempts to prove Barrington Moore<sup>1</sup> correct: that there is more unity of humanity in misery than in happiness. However, very little attention has been made to individual and collective emotional sides and specific physical suffering experienced in the midst of all these transformations. Much literature on emotion has emerged recently that describes individual and group suffering as a direct result of war, famine, disease and terrorism. The dissolution of the Soviet bloc, and especially the wars that followed the break-up of the socialist states, have created plenty of books and scholarly analyses. Detailed studies have documented how the monolithic Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia came to an end, and how new nation-states emerged on their ruins. Some of these works are excellent, others are less satisfactory. In the latter category are those that pay attention only to political acts and their international connections but little, or nothing to the psychological and the individual emotive aspects. Very few have attempted, moreover, to juxtapose individual and collective suffering and psycho-somatic experiences, on the one hand, and religious world-views and supernatural thoughts, on the other, even though many have realised the winds of change blowing across the region. Yet in spite of the new emphasis on the rise of religious cults, alternative belief systems, healing rites and medical practices, analyses tend to treat the emotional and supernatural as marginal and of less serious concern in contemporary societal ways of life. More often than not, students of religions deal with social movements as strictly speaking religious movements that have to be proved, either pro or con, as positive phenomena. Historians compare them as a mere conglomerate of events fitted in a much larger scheme of historical process significant and interesting as they are either because they are similar or, on the contrary, different from earlier events. Sociologists and political scientists view them as social or socio-psychological facts, or institutional, party or civil political movements about power struggle respectively. At the same time, anthropologists tend

to describe them as strictly speaking socio-cultural movements, perhaps connected to political or economical processes and little else. This divide is a spectacle of staged melodrama within the social sciences and humanities, one in which the winner – no matter how much sleight of hands is used - should take all whereas all other players are in fact losers. It is high time now to redress this imbalance by scrutinizing the more inner and emotional experiences of the individual as well as the communal experiences that would offer better understandings of human thoughts and actions. Since social facts are products of human interaction and the latter is connected to thoughts, feelings and emotions of individuals, the challenge facing all students of cultures is to make this connection legible, visible and meaningful.

Since 1990, a brand new wave of religiosity and sacrality has been sweeping across the Eurasian continent as communities formerly under the watchful eyes of the state now have embarked upon finding their new selves. Previously banned or subjugated churches have suddenly arisen out of their Sleeping Beauty state, semi-secret civil groups openly have begun to preach their messages, and religious practitioners, previously silenced by the state or the dogmatic church, have practiced their craft anew. Disenfranchised miners and New Age believers in Poland, peasants in the Transylvanian part of Romania, psychosomatic patients in a Hungarian mental health institution, AIDS sufferers in Zimbabwe, post-Soviet shamanic and New Age practitioners in Siberia and Slovenia are introduced in order to reveal the diverse cultural experiences of groups and individuals coping with the results of war, loss of family members, stress, unemployment, civil strife, and personal traumas.

This is the reason why this book uses suffering and cosmology in tandem with sacral communication, a term that subverts the very concept of monolithic rationality devised since the Enlightenment to deal with the duality of the sacred and the profane. As the editors of this volume specifically propose in the Introduction, “The term sacral communication denotes the communicative effort to mobilize transcendental resources to gain back the control over the personal reality transformed by enormous supranational economic and political forces.” With the proviso that it is always necessary to look at the social and political circumstances within which individuals constantly interact, the concept of sacral communication provides a useful way to discern more information about what humans think and feel before they communicate and interact. This sphere of the “irrational”, the sensual and the individual psycho-somatic experiences does not yield easy explanations or tangible facts gathered at the flip of the moment by hard-hat fieldwork apprentices. On the contrary, by dealing

with various social conflicts together with the bodily and extrasensory experiences, these chapters may explain what others who are bent on the objective realities of fieldwork experiences and the observable local phenomenon at hand cannot. In a way, by juxtaposing social and political movements with the individual sacred and religious experiences, this book is an ample testimony of what Arthur Maurice Hocart once wrote, that: “proof does not consist in seeing: it consists in providing so complete an explanation of the disjointed evidence of our senses that no better alternative can be thought of. Some day an alternative may be found: but in the meantime our hypothesis, if it is any good, will have helped us to further conquests: that is all that really matters.”

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### Note

<sup>1</sup> Moore, B., Jr. 1972. *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery and Upon Certain Proposals to Eliminate Them*. Boston: Beacon Press.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### IMRE LÁZÁR AND AGITA LŪSE

Through investigating the relationship between suffering and cosmologies, papers in this volume seek to analyse smaller and larger social entities, such as those based on a common ethnic origin, religious affiliation or occupation, as well as those formed by shared health concerns and beliefs, and also practices of dealing with loss, misery or illness. Some of the groups or communities introduced in the volume hold world-views that may indeed appear incommensurable, in the sense of being based upon radically different metaphysical ideas. At the same time, we contend that taken together these social entities characterise a type of society, namely those societies emerging from the social and political upheaval accompanying the so-called post-socialist transition in the former Soviet-bloc countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, the volume as a whole aims to create a better understanding of a social world where incommensurability of world-views is not just a logical or epistemological exercise, but a matter of daily practice, and as such can also bring about a great deal of suffering.

\* \* \*

In this Introduction we attempt to analyse and synthesise the key themes brought forward by the individual papers. To begin with, we clarify the central concepts and concept clusters addressed by the volume contributors, such as individual and social suffering, cosmology, world-view and religion, and sacral communication and healing, and assess their multi-faceted relationships. Secondly, we extend our analysis by setting the topics and concepts proposed in this volume in a broader anthropological frame of reference and examining them from the vantage point of recent debates on multiplicity of cosmologies and diverse

understandings of key cosmological categories, such as ‘nature’, ‘culture’, ‘supernature’, and ‘spirit’. Thirdly, we hint at the ways in which papers in this volume complement earlier anthropological studies that have explored the link between cosmology and healing. Furthermore, we introduce individual chapters, grouping them into three thematic categories: ‘Rediscovered cosmologies’, ‘Broadening the cosmological frame’ and ‘Invocation of myth in distress’. Thereafter we return to the conceptual debates and discuss the volume contributors’ ethnographic studies from the perspective of the following epistemological distinctions: between the naturalistic and personalistic mode of thought, between causality and participation, between anthropological and biomedical knowledge, and between cultural constructivism and relativism. In the last two sections but one of the Introduction we outline the essential features of the interconnection between changing cosmologies and social suffering in the rapidly transforming post-communist societies that fall within the temporal (and loosely also the geographical) scope of this volume. We conclude the Introduction by establishing a link between the studies presented in this volume and paradigm shifts in contemporary culture: from a dualistic and positivistic picture of the world towards recognition of cosmological interconnectedness and from an individualistic and naturalistic notion of the human being towards greater recognition of the spiritual, ‘supra-natural’ dimension of human life.

### **The constellation of the key concepts**

Cosmology and suffering are anthropological categories tainted with a hidden claim to reflect on the universal and the essential beneath them. Local cosmologies, myths, rites, and healing practices share the intent to render the chaotic into an ordered whole through exploring or representing the universal laws governing this whole. In the humanities, the term cosmology has at times been used synonymously with the term world-view (cf. Galling et al. 1962).<sup>1</sup> Cosmology in a particular society, region or historical period may be imbued with religious content, and in anthropology the term has on many occasions been used interchangeably with the term religion. Thus, according to Leach (1976), all religions have wrestled with a central human concern, the annihilation of the individual self, and have denied death in their doctrines. Viewed in this perspective, cosmology appears as a religiously inspired theorising about the relationship between ‘this world’ and ‘other world’, between mortal beings and the omnipotent gods, while religious (and ritual) practice is concerned with mediating between the two. Overing (1987), drawing on

Feyerabend, has warned us to treat such generalising terms as religion, shamanism and myth with caution. Two world-views, Overing argues, may be based upon totally different universal premises; therefore anthropological concepts – that likewise are informed by a world-view – do not give us magical access into another life-world. Dealing with incommensurability, anthropologists need to suspend their assumptions and beliefs and approach the central terms of their discipline creatively. Instead of labelling something as religious or magic, they may need to examine a community or group's ontology, epistemology or workings of power (ibid: 84). We would suggest that ideas about cosmos, chaos, and suffering as well as about their relationship (as reflected in cosmologies, theodicies, and nosologies) can also prove crucial for understanding social entities, as well as their widespread practices and statements about the world (cf. Ådahl 2007: 52). Like Overing, we consider the term cosmology as culturally less specific, disciplinarily less rigid and for that matter more open to semantic experimentation than the term religion.

Geertz drew our attention to the link between cosmology and suffering when he distinguished three areas where human beings feel threatened by chaos: at the limits of their analytic capabilities, at the limits of their endurance and at the limits of their moral insight (Geertz 1993: 100). When a complex of culturally transmitted beliefs and theories (embedded in common sense, science, philosophical speculation, myth) meant to help the members of a particular society orient themselves in the world and explain things repeatedly fails, Geertz noted, individuals in that society tend to experience a deep disquiet. What appears as odd, strange and uncanny needs to be accounted for: human beings find it very hard to tolerate their failure to comprehend something. The problem of suffering, according to Geertz, is another challenge to the meaningfulness of a certain pattern of life: it threatens to dissolve a particular order of things into a 'chaos of thingless names and nameless things' (ibid: 103).

People find it easier to endure suffering if they manage to construe it as meaningful. One of the ways to do this is to view suffering as an abnormality within a nosological system.<sup>2</sup> Shweder (1991) introduced the concept causal ontology to refer to such an interpretation. The term causal ontology in this context signifies the events and processes that are going on in a separate and logically different order of reality (moral, astrophysical, interpersonal, socio-political, biomedical, or psychological) and are thought to cause the experience of suffering (ibid: 315). Shweder has also postulated that a causal ontology invoked by a society or a group plays a part in causing the suffering it explains (ibid: 322).<sup>3</sup> Since every cosmology inevitably implies a certain ontology or ethnotheory of being,

what Shweder has argued about causal ontologies applies also to the ethnotheories about the order in the universe.

Thus there is a two-directional movement between suffering and cosmology. Deep, unaccounted and intolerable suffering may challenge certain cosmological assertions. On the other hand, no cosmological frame of reference can last indefinitely: sooner or later it is destined to go through a period of crisis that is resolved in either its modification or demise. As Goody has remarked, cosmological knowledge is not something to be grasped in fixed, textual terms (as structuralists have at times attempted): its transmission is a generative process that may involve loss as well as increment (Goody 1987: xi). The more drastic such a transformation is the more disquiet and suffering it can cause.

According to Das and Kleinman (2000), in the contemporary world suffering often is brought about by abrupt removal of the accessing of established context as well as by incessant creation of new contexts, a process in which violence and subjectivity implicate each other. This is certainly true for such forms of social suffering as cultural bereavement, or a collective loss of control that often manifests itself in psychosomatic problems, bodily symptoms and processes. Radical social and political transformation usually implies swapping the old symbolic context for a new one, substituting the old pantheons, meaning structures and the frames and content of public celebrations. This is why cosmology and suffering implicate each other when individuals or groups respond to challenges of a novel environment. In such circumstances, people tend to look for alternative cosmologies outside the circle of the hegemonic mainstream. Taking into account that the past may play a constituting role in both the present and the future through perpetuation of deeply-rooted cosmologies and beliefs regarding the presence of ancestors, spirits and supernatural protectors (Howell 1996), it is not surprising, that those who have lost control over their personal or collective fate may seek empowerment in revitalization or reinvention of indigenous cosmologies or in adoption of new ones. Mastery of reasoning about misfortune, submission and defeat through the revitalisation of myths and renewal or reinvention of (healing) rituals may empower those who have lost control of their lives. The social and political transformations that ensued from the collapse of Soviet communist modernism have brought about new forms of helplessness and social suffering. Novel ways of coping and empowerment have been sought that can be characterised as post-modernist: they have manifested themselves in the revival of shamanism, religious renaissance and the outburst of hermetic and esoteric tradition under the brand-name New Age.

Sacral communication in the subtitle of this book refers to the semiotics and communicative acts transgressing the borders of disenchanting zones of post-Enlightenment social reality. We use the term sacral communication to denote the communicative effort to mobilise transcendental resources to gain back control over the personal reality transformed by enormous supranational economic and political forces. The scenes of this agency include consulting rooms, churches, community halls, and almost all forums of local public life. The volume contributors' reports from alternative healers' consulting rooms and from a psychosomatic outpatient department illuminate an understanding of the word 'cosmology' that complements its more conventional, religious-metaphysical meaning, namely they pay attention to the relationship between the part and the whole (the key concern of the holism of the psychosomatic approach), as well as that between microcosm and macrocosm. Forms of suffering of diverse origin may converge into similar bodily consequences: in the final analysis, the vast array of the forms of bodily distress that can manifest themselves in various body-parts is to be accounted for not by specific pathogenic agents, biochemical aberrancies or hormonal deficiencies, but by the human being's encounter with meaninglessness and chaos as an existential situation. Such an encounter affects the individual as an integrated whole: not just as a physical body, governed by the laws of nature, but also as a mindful, meaning-seeking, soulful, and spiritual – either inspired or dispirited – somebody. In most medical systems of the world, healing (in the broadest sense of the word) is understood as restoration of an organism to health through ordering parts into a harmonious whole. A number of healing practices share with the rituals of the diagnostic process the same intention: to counter chaos in the human being's life-world through appealing to forces of cosmos and to deal with feelings of entrapment and loss of control through creating (discerning) meaning in the experience of suffering.

The extended framework of participant observation has helped the contributors to this volume explore in what ways the macrocosm and the microcosm relate to each other in the supernatural contexts of suffering and in healing of both psyche and soma. Shamanistic rituals, alternative therapies, esoteric explanatory models, and spiritual healing as cosmologically-laden themes of medical anthropology prompt us to extend our scope towards ontology and metaphysics on the one hand, and towards the etic understanding<sup>4</sup> of universal features of bodily processes of suffering on the other. These considerations induce us to transgress the particularist and social functionalist limitations of analysis. Our intent has

been to unfold the hidden cosmological assumptions and covert mythical worlds implied in different practices of healing.

### **Nature and cosmology in singular and plural**

A distinctive feature of Western monotheistic religions, and for that matter of Judeo-Christian cosmology, has been to draw a clear boundary between the sensible world and its ultrahuman reality, between the body and the spirit, and between nature and subjectivity (Taylor 1989, Sahlins 1996, Littlewood 2001). This ontological distinction has been reinforced by Western philosophy: up to the Enlightenment period, European philosophers repudiated the classical pantheistic notion of the divine nature of the universe. From Augustine through Leibnitz, the world, including the creature, was created *ex nihilo* and nothing divine was in it, as Sahlins has noted in his review of Western cosmology (Sahlins 1996). Augustine saw nature as pure materiality, without redeeming spiritual value: created out of nothing and in contrast to the perfect nature of God, man for Augustine was an imperfect creature of lack and need, a corruptible being (ibid: 397). Gradually, however, the moral emphasis in the Western concept of human nature shifted: from original evil in Augustine, human imperfection and neediness became simply 'natural' in Hobbes and the reason for society itself in Adam Smith. Individual want and self-interest came to be seen as the fundamental bonds of society (ibid: 398). The latter view still seems to dominate today, especially in the neoliberal discourse that has come to shape human life-worlds and self-understanding not only in Western, but also, increasingly, in non-Western societies.

In a seminal paper, De Castro (2006 [1998]) examines a possibility of a redefinition of the classical categories 'nature', 'culture' and 'supernature'. Earlier Descola (1992) distinguished three modes of objectifying nature: totemism, animism and naturalism. In animism the categories that structure social life ensure continuity between nature and culture in that they organise the relations between humans and other species, attributing to the last mentioned human dispositions and social characteristics. Naturalism that dominates in Western cosmologies, on the contrary, presupposes an ontological duality between nature as a domain of necessity and culture as a domain of spontaneity (De Castro 2006: 554). Taking up this thread of argument, De Castro notes that Western cosmologies can be characterised as 'multiculturalist' in that they are founded on the assumed unity of nature and the plurality of cultures, the first derived from the objective universality of body and substance, the

second generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning. These features distinguish Western cosmologies, for example, from the Amerindian world-view that assumes a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity and therefore epitomises 'multinaturalism'.

In Western naturalist ontology, according to De Castro, the nature/society interface is natural: humans are organisms like the rest, body-objects in interaction with other bodies and forces and ruled by the necessary laws of natural sciences. From such a perspective, de Castro argues, social relations, i.e. relations established contractually and/or embedded in an institution, can only exist in human society. Hence, the unstable status of the social world in Western culture: approaches to it have oscillated between a naturalistic monism (as, for instance, in 'sociobiology') and an ontological dualism of nature and culture. The latter, in turn, reinforces the referential character of the concept 'nature'. Culture, on the other hand, has in modern thought taken the place of Spirit, as demonstrated by the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*.

Thus, on the one hand, Western cosmology, as De Castro notes drawing on Ingold's work (1994, 1996), postulates a physical continuity between humans and natural species rendering both of them objects for sciences. The body in Western cosmology is the major integrator in that a universal biochemical substrate links humans to the rest of the living world. The Western notion of Spirit or mind, on the other hand, accounts for a metaphysical discontinuity between humans and animals and makes humans an object for the humanities. Spirit is a great differentiator: it raises humans above the natural world and makes each culture and individual unique before the others. At the same time, such an understanding of Spirit, according to De Castro, constantly exposes Western cosmology to solipsism: given the potentially absolute singularity of minds, there always is a threat of not recognising ourselves in our 'own kind' (De Castro 2006: 561). Amerindian cosmology, in contrast, postulates a metaphysical continuity between the beings of the cosmos: while the body differentiates, the spirit or soul integrates (ibid: 559).

The essays in this volume may be viewed as a challenge to the solipsism inherent in Western cosmology. They chart the ways in which people mobilise resources of communication with 'supernature' while dealing with suffering in geographical areas where, for a shorter or longer time, the dominant Western cosmological notions and modernist assumptions about human nature have intertwined and interpenetrated with non-Western modes of thought and practice. The volume brings together analyses of the classical cosmological notions 'nature',

‘supernature’ and ‘spirit’ in hugely diverse socio-cultural contexts, such as Christian churches in a low-income area of a Zimbabwean city, participants in shamanic rites in the post-Soviet Tuva in the south-east of Siberia, former miners in a depressed industrial town in south-west Poland, an ethnically and religiously divided town in Croatia, a largely Roman Catholic dominated area of rural Romania, faith-based healing communities in a Siberian metropolis, and alternative and complementary healing practitioners and their clients in Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. In each of these contexts, there is a specific understanding of the cosmological configuration of nature, ‘supernature’, body, and spirit, but the overall tendency documented by the contributors to the volume is a challenge to naturalism and an emphasis on continuity between the embodied and spiritual modes of existence.

### **World-views, faith traditions and healing**

Cosmological ideas about the natural and the supernatural are often perpetuated by religious traditions, which, in turn, shape the techniques and rituals aimed at countering illness and misfortune. Although Western religions have radically distinguished the body from the spirit, healing in the West, too, has been an image shared both by the restoration of the body to health and the deliverance of a wounded spirit (Littlewood 2001:1). Whether the emphasis is on the former or the latter, healing is inevitably based on cosmological and redemptive assumptions (ibid). In the ethnographic studies presented in this book, cosmological concepts are implied in all the religious and healing beliefs and bodily practices recorded by the contributors, be it the ritual of talking to the soul of the deceased among Tuvans in Siberia, the Catholic procession of Sveti Bono in post-war Vukovar in Croatia, repentance and use of ancestral medicines among Christian AIDS sufferers in Zimbabwe, the cross-religious magical attempts to handle a misfortune falling to a family in Transylvania, or even Polish ex-miners’ mourning over the lost stability of their world.

As Geertz pointed out, there are few if any religious traditions which would deny the proposition that life hurts. From the religious perspective, he noted, the problem is ‘not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of other’s agony something bearable’ (Geertz 1993: 104). Religion, Geertz astutely argued, responds to the threat of chaos and meaninglessness not simply by elaborating an analytic conception of reality: it also anchors the power of our symbolic resources for expressing our feelings (moods, sentiments, passions) in a conception

of the inherent tone and temper of that reality (ibid: 104). This proposition is well worth remembering: when people endeavour to position themselves meaningfully vis-à-vis their reality employing thereby religious and cosmological symbols, the construction of meaning depends as much on emotions as on analytic reason. Geertz illustrated his argument discussing the symbolism of Navaho curing rites – ‘sings’, which he viewed as an attempt to deal with human suffering – by ‘placing it [suffering] in a meaningful context, providing a mode of action through which it can be expressed, being expressed understood, and being understood, endured’ (ibid: 105). The sustaining effect of this rite rests on its ability to give sufferers a vocabulary in terms of which to reflect on the nature of their distress and relate it to a wider context.

In medical anthropology in general, spirituality has been more often related to illness rather than to disease, to healing rather than to cure. The link between cosmology and healing was initially proposed in structuralist anthropology, Lévi-Strauss’s (1963) famous discussion of a Cuna pregnancy chant being a classic example. The structural approach postulates a correspondence between a cosmological structure and its symbolism on the one hand and the mental and emotional states of the sufferer on the other. It is the inherent power of this correspondence that is attributed therapeutic efficacy (Csordas and Kleinman 1990: 19). Although the existence of such a homology has often been demonstrated, the question of its efficacy has nonetheless long remained unresolved. Csordas and Kleinman (ibid) summarise a common criticism of the structural approach, namely that its adepts have placed too much emphasis on the data generated through observing rituals and interviewing ritual specialists and have ignored the meanings that those treated have derived from their experience. Although therapeutic efficacy has not been a direct concern of this volume, viewed in the context of anthropological debates on healing most of the papers included here earn merit by introducing the perspectives and subjective meanings of sufferers (patients, supplicants, adepts, or ordinary storytellers), and as well as those of ritual specialists and alternative health practitioners. Let us now introduce the chapters of the volume.

### **Rediscovered cosmologies**

Three contributions to this volume are concerned with cosmologies that largely remained marginal during the state socialism period, partly because of being censored, partly because of being overshadowed by a hegemonic ideology, but that have been revived, reinvigorated or

‘reinvented’ in the post-communist period. The process of mobilising alternative world-views and symbolic systems in order to deal with existential dilemmas to overcome a positivistic view of the human body and find new ways of coping with illness or to make sense of incoherent experiences of misfortune is discussed in papers by Lindquist, Barchunova and Keszeg.

Lindquist analyses a shamanic death ritual as a way in which universal existential dilemmas are addressed and orders of meaning constructed. Seeing off *sunezin*, or the soul of the deceased, is a ritual that Lindquist has witnessed in Tuva in south-east Siberia. Her analysis of the ethnographic material reveals several historical layers of Tuvans’ cosmological belief, as well as various facets of their practices of sacral communication.

According to the tradition, taking leave of the deceased is to occur on the seventh day after death and is to be presided over by a shaman. The shaman’s task is to ensure that the soul of the deceased can depart to the other world and leave the living behind in peace. If the ritual fails, the *sunezin* may linger on and eventually join evil spirits who bring misfortune, or else restless, wandering spirits who pursue their loved ones with their concerns. Many Tuvans are said to have observed this ritual, even if without a shaman talking to the *sunezin*, throughout the Soviet period. After perestroika, shamans, having reappeared as a profession, were again invited to stage a living presence of the departed and to listen to his/her final wishes and instructions. Lindquist argues that it is the communication with the *sunezin* mediated by the shaman that grants the living an opportunity to address fundamental existential dilemmas or aporias. Lindquist defines aporias as contradictions arising out of seemingly conflicting approaches to ordering things, and discusses Tuvan death rituals as embodied local philosophies geared to solving aporias.

The first aporia concerns the inevitability of death as a natural sequel of life which human beings are expected to accept. On the level of community on the other hand, death must be staged as both an unnatural and antisocial event to be averted at all costs. Addressing this aporia, death rituals posit the social above the biological. The second aporia concerns the ambivalent nature of the realm of beyond that is seen as continuous with the world of the living but also negating it. Although the two worlds are imagined as parts of the same cosmos, there is a need to separate the ordered and controllable part from its antipode that fascinates but also induces terror if it proves uncontrollable. The wall between the two realms is marked as a liminal space and guarded by a liminal figure, a medium able to give the departed a voice and agency to participate in the life of the

living but also expected to control the forces of the beyond. The third aporia refers to the contradiction between two human inclinations: to mourn over the deceased on the one hand and to limit socially the intensity of sorrow and mend the rift that death left on the body social on the other. To address this aporia, death rituals aim to create (or recreate) social bonds, both between the deceased and the living and among the living, through gift exchange.

Barchunova examines the relationship between the attitudes to human body, health and illness in today's Russia and some metaphysical ideas circulated, in particular, among members of various faith-based communities of practice (a concept that the author has adapted from Lave and Wenger 1991). Barchunova argues that alternative forms of religious practice, especially the esoteric practices, have significantly inspired the recent reassessment of health and changed the patterns of coping with illness. Her discussion is based on a number of in-depth interviews with people pursuing a spiritual quest through various religious affiliations (she calls them nomadic believers) in the Siberian metropolis Novosibirsk that is also Barchunova's hometown.

Questioning a number of other studies on the religious situation in twentieth-century Russia, Barchunova contends that there is a certain continuity between the country's 'spiritual condition' before the 1990s and thereafter. As several authors have suggested, for some time the communist ideology had usurped the cultural space of religion. Even though by the 1960s scepticism had encroached upon the communist belief system, its progressivism and belief in science as a means towards progress and development persisted. The media glorified the power of science, pictured scientists as omnipotent and praised their work as a disinterested service to Truth. Barchunova argues that the Novosibirsk Academic Centre that was created in the 1960s and was famous throughout the Soviet Union can be regarded as a project of Soviet Enlightenment (this concept is close to that of communist modernism that Lázár employs in this volume).

The scientific mind, however, came to criticise the dominant ideology and look for alternative philosophies. As a result, a range of alternative belief systems gained popularity in Novosibirsk, such as those derived from theosophy and N. Roerich's teachings. Questioning official Soviet medicine's positivist attitudes towards the human body and looking for alternative forms of treatment (cf. Lindquist 2006), patients, in turn, familiarised themselves with world-views that entailed a holistic, integrative concept of the relationship between body and soul as well as

nature and humanity. These philosophies appealed to individual agency and spiritual development.

When a market of health-care programmes emerged in the 1990s, many health-care entrepreneurs, drawing on widely shared symbolic resources, framed their offers as based on both academic knowledge and the healing properties of nature. Barchunova argues, however, that the post-Soviet commercialisation of health-care services and the consumerist ideologies have not completely undermined individual agency and creativity in pursuits of a healthy life. Creativity especially transpires in the activities of faith-based communities through which people endeavour to harmonise flesh and soul. The belief in societal progress in the meantime, however, has transformed into a belief in individual progress.

Keszeg discusses narratives of a family's misfortune recorded during his field study in a Hungarian-speaking area in Transylvania, Romania, in 2003. According to three family members, the misfortune had a threefold manifestation: as a series of illnesses, as the rapid dying of animals on their farm and as financial deterioration. Prior to their misfortunes, family members had led quite ordinary lives and distanced themselves from magical beliefs. By 2002, however, they began losing control of their lives as their former life strategies and thought patterns proved inefficient.

In their attempts to make sense of their experience of affliction, the family first drew on folk wisdom concerning cases of vitiation, a tradition that since 1989 had been significantly reinvigorated by the Romanian mass media. Consequently, the family's initial attempt to give meaning to their incoherent experiences was to turn to a Greek Catholic priest, who diagnosed the family's troubles as resulting from a Roma woman's curse, and gave instructions on how to neutralise the vitiation. A year later, when the family's observance of the priest's instructions had proved futile, it worked out a different interpretation of its suffering and attributed the curse to a dead relative whom it had failed to care for.

Keszeg argues that when an interpretation is developed in a conversation, i.e. in a co-ordinated regulation of meanings, it can transfigure a world, because narrative functions as a screenplay for further action. Adopting Boudon's (1979) concept of the functional system, Keszeg argues that the family worked out not only two interpretations of their misfortune, but also two systems of roles prescribed to its members. As a unit, they adopted the role of a cursed family. From the perspective of ethnopsychiatry, the concerned family's collective 'disorder' appears as lasting, atypical states of mind. These, Keszeg remarks, were accompanied by unusual but synchronised and shared body states.

Keszeg concludes that the behaviour of the family in question cannot be properly understood through analysing merely the social institutions and belief systems of their culture. Human beings' relation to a tradition or a belief system, he emphasises, depends on personal participation and for that matter we may add, on a dialectic relationship between narrative schemas, bodily techniques and shared states of mind. In this sense, Keszeg's analysis complements Tambiah's (1990) distinguishing of 'causality' and 'participation' as two basic ways to engage with reality in that the story of vitiation demonstrates well in what ways 'participation' can modify a life-world.

### **Broadening the cosmological frame**

Like Keszeg, Potrata, too, argues that it is not always beliefs that guide practice: it may be a commitment to certain ways of thinking and acting. Beliefs can emerge as a result of trying to make sense of certain practices. Potrata discusses the ways in which New Agers in the Slovenia of the post-communist period have fostered an ethos of individualism,<sup>5</sup> and for that matter have affirmed the new social context. It seems noteworthy in this context that from the mid-1990s on, New Age healing techniques in Slovenia have become less intrusive and the therapist has come to play a less prominent role. For instance, hypnosis has been discarded as a regression therapy method because nowadays clients are expected to be maximally aware of the healing process and maximally involved in it. Therapists also have come to respect their clients' accounts of regression more and do not compare these accounts with their own visions, as they used to do. Nor do they subject their clients' regression memories to moral judgment. Such a change suggests that an increasing emphasis is placed on individual autonomy, responsibility and self-reliance. A human being has also come to be more often seen as an active, goal-setting agent rather than as a passive recipient of limited opportunities allotted by fate. For instance, for the New Agers in Slovenia horoscopes, tarot cards and palmistry are most often used as tools for exploring one's personhood, abilities and potential, rather than as means for divination.<sup>6</sup>

Potrata demonstrates, however, that among Slovenian New Agers the project of discovering each person's potential has been significantly shaped by endeavours to come to terms with the moral and political dilemmas that Slovenians faced during the twentieth century. The New Agers with whom Potrata conducted her field research often derive their present difficulties from Slovenians' experiences during the two world

wars. The souls of war victims sometimes linger in a limbo and cause problems for the living. The practice of regression that is in the centre of Potrata's analysis in this volume offers New Agers an opportunity to explore the past collective suffering and some atrocities performed by their predecessors and draw a line under them, so that the dead no longer interfere with the daily lives of the living.

The New Age adherents' beliefs and practices are also in the centre of attention in Hall's paper on metaphorical aspects of three healing techniques: Reiki, Sudharshan Kryia (a breathing technique) and Bretharian fasts. Hall conducted a number of field studies with alternative health practitioners in Poland from the mid-1990s on. Drawing on their explanatory models, Hall outlines the basic features of the New Age cosmology. According to the holistic world-view of the New Age proponents, there is dichotomy neither between God and creation, nor between the spiritual and the material: 'the sacral reality is inscribed in the realm of nature'. Within such a cosmological framework, previously multidimensional constructs such as punishment and salvation are reduced to the bodily dimension of experience. Compared with Slovenian New Agers practising regression, Polish alternative health practitioners appear much less concerned with their clients' health problems being rooted in the traumatic experiences, moral dilemmas or collective guilt of past generations. It is body purification (not coming to terms with traumas or sins accumulated in previous lives) that is seen as a way to spiritual awareness and salvation. To achieve this, the body is to be cleansed of anxieties and stresses, as well as of 'blockages' that are recognisable by specific sensations in particular parts of the body. 'Blockages' are attributed to incorrect mental patterns and may, in turn, cause diseases or failures.

Hall considers the New Age healing practices in the context of broader tendencies of contemporary Western culture within which the body has become a "focal point for constructing the personal identity". Individuals are held responsible for their bodily condition. Moreover, nowadays it does not suffice to preserve health: individuals are also expected to infinitely deepen, correct and improve their health. Accordingly, the seeking of healing has become imperative. The New Age adherents interpret the healing process from the vantage point of palpable experience rather than in terms of abstract theoretical constructs. Hall emphasises that the whole New Age cosmology is underpinned by individual experience anchored in the body. Some central notions of Judeo-Christian cosmology, e.g. those of sin and divine punishment, are disapproved of. For New Agers, the sacred can only manifest itself in