INTERVIEW WITH TANYA LUHRMANN

Professor Tanya Luhrmann visited Finland in September 2016 as the keynote speaker of the conference 'Wild or Domesticated: Uncanny in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives to Mind' organized by the Academy of Finland Project 'Mind and Other'. As one of the founders of the anthropology of mind, Professor Luhrmann has made a remarkable contribution to the creation of this significant field of research. In addition to her contribution to anthropological theory, she has opened several avenues for interdisciplinary collaboration with philosophy, theology and, currently, with cognitive science.

Professor Luhrmann is the Watkins University Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University. Focusing her research work on the edge of experience and at the cultural borderlines of what is considered real and true, she has worked in several fields: among homeless psychotic women and with people who hear voices or have unusual sensory experiences, as well as on modern psychiatry. She uses a combination of ethnographic and experimental methods to understand the mind, the phenomenology of experience, and the way they are shaped by cross-cultural ideas about intersubjectivity, persons, and science.

Marja-Liisa Honkasalo had a unique opportunity to conduct an interview with Professor Luhrmann during her stay in Finland, which we publish here. During the interview Professor Luhrmann discussed themes and unique interests that have informed her research career.

Marja-Liisa Honkasalo (M-LH): You started your studies at Harvard with Stanley Tambiah. What kind of impact did mythology and the history of ideas have on your way of thinking when becoming an anthropologist? What other discussions—important to you—took place at Harvard in the early 1980s?

Tanya Marie Luhrmann (TML): I actually started out in college as a philosophy major, not as a mythology major. Then I became more interested in the social world and in the way that these social interactions were in effect stepping in and shaping what people thought and experienced, and I became convinced that stories and mythology were more powerful than rational analysis for many people.

Stanley Tambiah was one of my influential teachers. He taught a course called 'Magic, Science and Religion'. Some of the thinkers we read in the class argued that magic was the domain of pre-scientific people. Yet somewhere around this time I came across a book in the local Harvard bookstore that taught you how to be a witch. It had very specific—and very magical—spells, like one for getting money by wrapping a dime in green cloth, I think, and burying it in the backyard at a certain time, in a certain way, and so on. I was quite fascinated by that. This was pretty good evidence that at least some people in a sophisticated modern society were actively involved in magical thinking.

I went off to graduate school in England, clutching this book that told you how to be a witch, thinking: how do I make sense of this, how many people are actually involved, how do they get to the point where they were kind

of thinking about magic and wanting to use magic in their lives? The idea of learning was pretty salient to me from the start because this book was a manual that taught you how to be a witch. The book presumed that the reader didn't think magically before choosing to make this commitment to a certain way of living in the world. It clearly was a 'how to' guide. So right from the beginning I was fascinated by the sense that you could in effect learn your way into this very particular way of thinking that many scholars had imagined as not being part of modernity.

I was also reading Albert Lord. He was still alive then. His idea was that when you told stories, you had an implicit structure to your story—at least certain stories—that you had a kind of sense of the plot. The plot would guide the way that people would tell their own individual version of some story like the Iliad, but there would be a kind of a structure that people would hold in mind, an overall structure. There were also small structures, word phrases. I was struck by the way that stories seem to sort out peoples' lives through them in particular ways. Bruno Bettelheim meanwhile was arguing, in this book that many people were reading, that fairytales really helped people to cope—helped kids, and also helped adults—to deal with fear and aggression and sadness and other powerful emotions.

So I came to the study of magic with the idea that the categories of magical thinking could be socially shaped and psychologically powerful—whether or not they were cognitively different from everyday ways of thinking. That is, while some scholars were arguing about whether magic was a different kind of cognitive process—which you could say that Tambiah thought—I was primed to look at it as a practice that changed human experience.

I was fascinated with mythology. I thought that these more mythological, fantasy, and cultural ideas are organized in the way people thought, ways that were more powerful than they imagined. I was reading Propp as well, and was up to my eyeballs in Levi-Strauss. I was very attracted by structuralism and post-structuralism, and in the ways that your implicit expectations would crystallize the way you orientated yourself to the world.

M-LH: The fundamental theme of your work, ever since *Persuasions of the Witches' Craft* (1989), could be labelled 'ways of knowing'. Interestingly, since that early work you have studied this from the margins, not from the 'center of knowledge'. This methodology has run through your work up until the most recent comparative research on what you call 'sensory overrides', the hearing of voices in different cultures. Can you tell us about the route that your thoughts and ideas have taken?

TML: By the time I arrived from graduate school, the questions that I was asking were resonant with what we now call the rationality debate. I went off to fieldwork with the central question of the rationality debate : how can reasonable people believe apparently unreasonable beliefs? Those were the days just as cognitive science was emerging, and it is hard to remember now, how much cognitive science changed the terms of that debate. In the rationality debate, people still more or less treated beliefs as simple propositions that guided their knowledge and action. Cognitive science told us that people did not 'believe' in that way. I have always been interested in the basic ways that the world becomes real for people, and I have always thought that the best way to see this was by looking at the more perplexing pieces of human behavior.

Let me go back to magic. Magic seems to be different from so-called rational thought. Magical practices seem to violate other expectations about how the world works. The spirits are invisible. How do you learn to feel them, to recognize them and have confidence in them? I read a lot of Jan Elster, the Norwegian philosopher, who told many different kinds of stories about being rational and irrational, and I spent a lot of time talking with Pascal Boyer (we were at Cambridge together) and Geoffrey Lloyd.

In the subculture I was describing—the world of modern magic—there was the idea that there is this supernatural force in the world and that you can organize it with your mind and direct it in particular ways. To do magic, people would join a group: they would become witches or kabbalists or initiates of the western mysteries. They would immerse themselves in reading books, and do these practices. It was pretty clear that by the time they were comfortable in the group, they had lots of complicated ideas about whether the magic was real, but they were also more worried about who had brought the chicken for the after dinner feast than whether the magic would work. I called what I saw in their process of becoming comfortable with magic 'interpretative drift'. In the book, I argued that belief was not best understood as a propositional claim, as if you held a sentence in your mind that would organize your judgements. It seemed pretty clear to me that that wasn't what I saw.

Instead, when I sat down to explain how people became comfortable with magic, I saw three structures of knowledge and understanding. First, people acquired a set of organized patterns of interpretation that were quite specific and localized. They learned about astrology and kabbalah and tarot. They acquired what you could call specific 'packets'

of interpretations that they used to make sense of their experience. These packets helped them to interpret events in a way consonant with magical ideas. For example, I remember one day somebody did a ritual about the sea. She decided that the ritual really worked—because after the fact, people had a lot of emotions and people around her were crying. It was the goddess of the sea. She was able to interpret the ritual as working because she had acquired a packet of ideas about what the sea represented and how the sea should affect people, and she was able to say: I did the ritual that was about the sea and it really worked because people were crying and very emotional all week. But that was only part of what people who became magicians learned.

Second, I saw that practitioners were doing particular practices, and it was clear to me that there was a story about the way these practices changed experience and that was very important. Oddly, I was reading Habermas, and I decided that Habermas made sense of what I was seeing because he had this model of knowing, and interacting and doing. But in any event: I saw that people said that if you were going to practice magic, if you were going to experience the magic, you had to practice. They said that practice was hard and some people were better than others, and when people practiced, they would change. In other words, becoming comfortable with magic wasn't just a matter of interpretation. People actually *felt* the magical power. They sometimes saw things other people didn't see and they sometimes heard things other people didn't hear, although seeing was really more dominant.

This captured my attention, mind you, because those experiences started to happen to me. I remember going pretty early to a ritual event in which we were led in what was sometimes called a path working: the leader would tell a story and you would try to see the

story in your mind's eye. You were meant to see and feel and hear and to use all your senses to engage with this in your mind's eye. I remember being part of that group, really intently trying to follow this story with great inner attention. I felt very different after that ritual. That is, it somehow felt that what I had imagined was more real than mere imagination. That was striking to me. What was happening to make this experience so seemingly real? Another thing that happened pretty early on was that I went for a run. During the run I reenacted in my mind's eye a recent ritual practice. For me this was a very vivid experience. I felt the magic moving through me; I felt differently in my body. I did not assume that the magic was there in some external, ontological way, but I did have a powerful bodily experience of the magic. Practitioners had always told me that you shouldn't wear your watch to a ritual because your watch will stop. On that particular day, as I was reliving the ritual in my mind's eye, my watch stopped. I remember running back and being so excited. I wrote down two things in my fieldnotes. One of them was, 'Wow, maybe this stuff works!' The other was, this is the kind of experience people have that leads them to believe in magic. That led me to realize just how powerful these magical practices were. I began to explore them and indeed, you could argue that the core of these practices—inner sense cultivation—was at the heart of most religious practices around the world.

Third thing, I saw was that beyond the knowledge a magician had to acquire, and the practices magicians used to change their bodily experience, magicians had to sort out a way to come to terms with these conflicting ideas they had about the world. Some of the magicians were software engineers; some were scientists. They needed a philosophical system or an identity to manage what they took to be different sets of commitments.

M-LH: This seems to be a kind of narrative that runs through your work. For the reader, your recent book, *When God Talks Back,* is much about returning to the same theme after 20 years, with a different kind of expertise and experience. What about your second book?

TL: My second book, on Parsi Zoroastrians, began as an attempt to tackle theological contradiction. *The Good Parsi* ended up being much more about self-critique, and anthropological self-critique, but it began as a study of theology. Zoroastrianism offered a logical solution to the theological problem of theodicy. The original Zoroastrian text involves a God who exists in the universe and has created the world to trap evil in the world and to destroy it when humans choose between good and evil. That was the original dualism. There were a lot of Zoroastrians who had rejected this original dualism and had a much more Protestantized understanding of good and evil. There were also many Zoroastrian Christian scientists, and Christian scientists basically didn't really believe in evil. That's what I went off to study.

In the end, however, I was more struck by the intense self-critique I saw in the community. This was a time when I also thought that anthropologists were so self-critical we were in danger of losing the field altogether, and so I wrote about why the community was so self-critical and what it could teach us about anthropology.

M-LH: Throughout your work, your questions have been directed to the problem of mind. Your book *Of Two Minds* came out in 2000 and addressed the western conceptualization

of mind within American psychiatry. What made this shift to professional knowledge and knowledge practices happen?

TML: After my book on Parsis I was planning to do something about homelessness. When I arrived in Bombay it was pretty hard not to notice the number of people on the street. They are not homeless in the American sense, because they have homes, they have chunks of pavement, but I became quite interested in what homelessness would be about. And because homelessness is associated with mental illness in the United States, I decided to attend lectures to young psychiatrists, which the UCSD department made possible for anthropologists. I was also interested in psychiatry by that point and I thought I could do something by writing about psychiatry. I became intrigued by those lectures, and by what I saw as the two cultures in psychiatry. That led me to write that book *Of Two Minds*.

When I went to Chicago in 2000, one of my colleagues said: 'You know, you have written this book about psychiatrists, why not to write a book about their patients?' He drove me to Uptown, which was a three block square area that had the densest concentration of persons with psychotic disorder in the entire state of Illinois, outside of the jails. I spent a lot of time on the street, talking to people; at the same time I was also spending a lot of time in an evangelical church. I began to see in this evangelical world the same story that I saw in in the magical world, that there was a way through which God became real to people, and that that realness was pretty important. So, it was in the early 2000s when I was doing these two projects simultaneously. It was kind of intense.

I have always been fascinated by the edges of psychological experience. I had an insight when I was reading Jon Krakauer's book *Into*

the Wild. It's clear that some people, like Jon Krakauer, sort of test themselves by doing physical things that are out on the edge of human survival that I don't do. I drive slowly and carefully and I don't climb mountains. Jon Krakauer has a story about walking across an ice field and putting curtain rods out of the back of his backpack in case he slips through a crack in the ice. His idea was that the curtain rods would catch the edge of the crack, and keep him from dying. That's not me. But I am very fascinated by the edges of mental experiences. I think that is a William Jamesian impulse. I think of something that's kind of pretty salient to me and I like trying to figure out what those experiences are like.

In psychiatry or in religion you see that clearly: you just know that people are having an experience that is profoundly different from your own. There is this famous phrase in clinical work—that people should listen without memory or desire. Of course you can't do that. But you can aspire to that, and that is what I try to do in my ethnography.

I was quite fascinated by these unusual spiritual experiences. I noticed that in this church where I was doing fieldwork, people said the same thing they had said in the magical world. They said that if you want to know God, you had to practice; that practice is hard; that some people are better than others; and that the ones who are better and practice will change. I noticed that people who had practiced had these odd, supernatural experiences. I had one myself in the magical world when I was immersed in practice. I was very engaged in learning to be a magician and reading the books, and going to these classes and going to these groups. I was reading this book on Arthurian England, and I woke up early one morning and saw six druids by the window. I mean, as I would now describe that experience, I would describe

it as a hypnopompic experience: an event on the cusp of sleep. From a bodily perspective I was dreaming while also being awake—but it was the kind of event people in this world described. For years I didn't know how to study those kinds of events. I didn't know how to think about them.

I remember talking to my mentor when I was an assistant professor. When I said I was really interested in these experiences, he was dismissive. This is a weird thing to study, he said. Then I started to hang out with psychiatrists. I learned about dissociation and hypnosis. The real piece of luck came when I went to an inter-disciplinary group at Chicago. They were mostly doctors and psychologists who were thinking about religion, people who did a very different kind of work, and I gave a presentation on my ethnography, saying that I had noticed that both proclivity and practice influence spiritual experience. The group basically said that I had anecdotes, not data.

I decided to prove that the ethnographic observations were really true. I started to give my Christians questionnaires. One of the questionnaires, the Tellegen absorption scale, really seemed to pick something up. People who score highly on that scale are more likely to report these odd sensory experiences. Then I ran an experimental randomizing over a hundred Christians into imagination-rich prayer practice and lectures on the Gospels. It turned out that both the absorption scale, and the prayer practice, were related to the likelihood of reporting vivid spiritual experiences—including hearing God's voice, as if hearing with the ears. This persuaded me that there was something about the way people paid attention to mental events that changed their mental experience. I began to pay more attention to how people imagined mental events themselves—the way they imagined the mind.

To understand this more deeply, I pay attention both to the way people who are religious experience invisible others, and the way people with psychosis experience invisible others. I have no doubt that there are important differences between these kinds of people. But they both share the challenge of making sense of unusual events. Those who want to know God often seek those experiences; those with psychosis have them thrust upon them. But in both cases, people are choosing what to attend to and what to ignore. In both cases, I think, those experiences are shaped by the way they think about minds and mental events.

Reading outside of anthropology has really helped me. A few year ago I taught a course called 'Anthropology and the Extraordinary'. We read phenomenology, and Alister Hardy's *The Spiritual Nature of Man,* and accounts of unusual experiences. It was then that I read James Gibson, and increasingly, I find his work to be helpful.

What Gibson really does is to invite you to pay attention to the environment as a relationship. For me it was quite useful to think of the mind as a kind of environment. It's quite striking to me that when people are talking about spiritual events they are often talking about their minds. When they are identifying the point at which God speaks, they are often attending to some thought-like event that lead them to make the judgment that it is not just themselves but some other supernatural force who is speaking. They say that their thought is really God because of some phenomenological feature of the thought—it is spontaneous, or loud, or different in some way than other thoughts. It is as if the thought is in a landscape of other thoughts, and something about the way the person relates to the landscape of thought leads them to pick out one specific thought as evidence that God is present. It also seems that

the judgment may shape the experience of the thought—that it becomes more vivid and feels more external. There is a story to tell about the relationship between a person and how they imagine environment of their mind, and how their understanding alters that environment, and the environment alters their understanding.

I don't make a judgement about whether God really has spoken. I look for the shape of the experience people judge as evidence of the event.

M-LH: But I think that what is extra in Gibson is that he also thinks of the environment as active, as something that affords. There is a kind of inter-subjectivity in a mutual sense. It's something that the environment gives back to you for your perception, and it's possible to understand the human mind in a different way, as being in interaction. Is that how you think?

TML: Yes. I mean I think that's in part where the experience of the supernatural comes from. That when these thoughts become part of the environment, you start to attend to them; they are more actively part of your environment, they capture your attention, and people act and behave and experience differently. There is a relationship between the person and the environment of what we call their mind. I mean, that's partly what the 'Mind and the Other' project is about, isn't it?

M-LH: What is your position in the many discussions about materiality? How about post-secular studies? Where are you in the midst of all these?

TML: I think that I can see myself as being part of the discussion on materiality but I think of it more as anthropology of the mind. There are lots of people who are part of

that discussion. You are obviously part of that discussion. There are people I would think are part of that discussion, like Webb Keane; others are more psychologically focused. There are many different approaches. I mean that's how I would define the domain of both psychiatric anthropology and the anthropology of religion, particularly the work of Joel Robbins. All of them are asking about the way that certain mental attitudes or mental experiences become salient and alive and present. So I'm interested in religion, and not just modern religion. I think there is a story about how God becomes real in many faiths. But I think it's also true that there is a specific kind of post-1960 spirituality, in America and the West, and that's different from the kind of spirituality that you find in other parts of the world that have never been particularly secular. I also see myself as part of the ontology discussion, but many of the scholars we call ontologists are more interested in making a political claim. They are not themselves interested in the experience of faith. They are not particularly interested in what that feels like and what that means and how that could be experienced. They are making a claim about how the anthropologists should interpret people in other worlds. And yet you might argue that the ontology debate has brought religion into the mainstream in anthropology.

The other school that my work is related to but different from is evolutionary psychology or the cognitive science of religion. That school argues that the fundamental idea of God is a byproduct of the way our minds have evolved. These scholars include Pascal Boyer, Justin Barrett, and Stewart Guthrie, many people. They argue that when people think quickly and intuitively and automatically they generate a lot of ideas that are consistent with the idea of a supernatural other; they ascribe more agency to the world. I think that that's true; I also think

that it is hard for people to sustain faith in an invisible other when they are thinking carefully and deliberatively. That hard work is what I am trying to understand.

M-LH: Only a few anthropologists have taken the societal impacts of research and research results as seriously as you have done. You communicate with your informants online via your website, and you give interviews to the media. Is this something that should be taken into account in our discussions and, for example, in teaching students?

TML: I think of myself as a writer as much as an anthropologist. I also value scholarship and finding things out and doing more quantitative research. It is fun to be read. I try to write in a way that makes that possible.

I think that many anthropologists are eager to reach out these days. But there is this tension in the discipline—Jim Ferguson talks about the magic language of anthropology—in that the discipline privileges writing that is obscure. That kind of writing suggests that you need to be an insider to figure out what's being written.

I think popular writing is actually very important for our field, but I wouldn't expect a piece for the *New York Times* to count for scholarly promotion. *When God Talks Back* is what's called a crossover book—it is both a scholarly book and a book that can be read more widely, and that I would expect to count. I think that there is a general sense once you are tenured, you can write in more varied ways.

M-LH: Several anthropologists claim that there is no general anthropology any more but, rather, subfields of inquiry. In addition, there are new emerging interdisciplinary fields. Some anthropologists emphasize the conflicting role of interdisciplinarity in this development.

What do you think about the importance of interdisciplinarity to anthropology; is it blessing or curse? You were already writing about the future of anthropology in *The Good Parsi*. What do you think about anthropology today? And what do you think its future holds?

TML: I think we need to go back to being comparative and to making more generalizable claims. I think we are losing the sense of cultural diversity because there is no longer such surprise from cultural difference. Many people travel so much; many parts of the world have already been described ethnographically. But cultural difference is still crucially important and if anthropologists demonstrate that one can learn from cultural diversity, I think the discipline will survive. I do think that anthropology is a remarkable discipline. Its unique method is ethnography. If people don't do ethnography, and if they don't do it in a way that anyone can read, or they don't do it in a way that produces knowledge, I think the field will be in trouble.

One of the advantages of interdisciplinarity is it forces the scholar to talk to another field. If you can't talk to another field, it's not clear that you have knowledge to offer. I think for a field to remain viable in the university today, it has to contribute to new knowledge. When scholarly work is evaluated in a university, it is often evaluated by people in other fields. If those people can't figure out what the scholar is doing, it can be a risk for the scholar. If it's not clear what value anthropology is adding to the world, it can be hard to make an argument for hiring more anthropologists. In fact, I think that ethnography is of an enormous benefit and people do learn an enormous amount. I think it's tremendously valuable and arguably now more valuable than ever before. But anthropologists need to continue to make that clear.

M-LH: Several anthropologists have made a career by shaping an academic 'school' of thought or a method around themselves. Will a Luhrmannian school exist within academia?

TML: I love that idea. I don't know, we will see!

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