

reflective ways to employ unseen agency—conceptually flexible precisely because it cannot be observed—to account for otherwise unknown phenomena associated with illness, behavioral changes, disability, and the many different ways we perceive agency to inhabit and influence the world around us. Across societies and across time, some patterns are discernible that demonstrate the anchoring of these phenomena in humanity’s intuitive reasoning. The number, nature, and function of these entities is, of course, largely a product of social factors and counterintuitive properties that still require much further study (Boyer 2003; Chudek et al. 2018).

A particularly relevant phenomenon related to these unseen loci of agency is the conceptualization of deceased loved ones. It takes time for the loss of a loved one to be incorporated into the mind’s mediation of our experience of the world, and the smells, sights, and objects that were associated with the presence of loved ones can continue to trigger our minds to the sense of their presence.¹⁹ Photographs and objects created by or strongly associated with the loved one can be particularly powerful presencing media, and are frequently employed intentionally for that purpose (Hallam and Hockey 2001, 129–54; Christensen and Sandvik 2014; Kjærsgaard and Venbrux 2016). This is not mere memory, but the mind projecting the sensation of presence that it produced when that individual was present. Even in thoroughly secularized societies, people regularly speak with the dead, and the gravestone in particular can play a central role in facilitating these discussions. In this view, it can be “animated as the body of a person in that it is washed, cared for, gazed at, dressed with flowers, offered drinks, and surrounded by household and garden ornaments” (Hallam and Hockey 2001, 151; cf. Christensen and Sandvik 2014). It can even be addressed in the second person as the deceased person. The widespread use of gravestones to index or house the unseen agency of deceased loved ones, and particularly kin, is a byproduct of our intuitive reasoning about the loci of agency of deceased persons.²⁰

PERSONHOOD IN FIRST MILLENNIUM BCE SOUTHWEST ASIA

These patterns were also common in the conceptualization of the person from first millennium BCE Southwest Asia, and as in today’s societies, the partibility and independence of the unobservable loci of agency are most clearly represented in

and Howard 1996), Niger (Rasmussen 1995), Laos (Holt 2009, 15–75), the Northern Philippines (Mikkelsen 2016), and many others.

¹⁹ This sense that the dead are present has been demonstrated to be present even among those who explicitly reject the reality of ghosts and spirits. See Bering, McLeod, and Shackelford 2005; Bering 2006; Barrett 2011, 104; Walter 2017, 20–22.

²⁰ To my knowledge, gravestones as indices for the agency of the deceased has not been extensively studied by cognitive scientists. There is some discussion in the context of conceptual blend theory in Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 204–10.