

While material media like statues, stelai, or plaques expand the communicability and the perseverance of concepts of unseen agency, there are limits, as those concepts will not resonate equally with all members of a social group. To increase their relevance and circulation within larger social groups, the concepts must “transcend the dimension of the singular observer and break our intuitive pre-assumptions” (Bertolotti and Magnani 2010, 253). That is, transmission must also take place on a level that is not under the control of individual perspectives and impulses; social pressures are needed to incentivize individuals to support and share a concept that may not resonate with them intuitively (cf. Stagnaro and Rand 2021). Kinship is frequently the most fundamental and powerful framework for prosociality (cf. Crespi 2021), but as populations grew and diversified beyond the boundaries of kinship, anonymity increased, and people were more and more likely to interact with and need to rely on people they did not know (Tuzin 2001; de Waal 2008; Richerson et al. 2016). At this point, additional frameworks were needed for mitigating competition and increasing cooperation and social cohesion.⁸⁹

Scholars have identified a rough typology of unseen agency that runs from concepts of spirits, ghosts, and other types of agents that are less concerned about human affairs and less likely to intervene in them, all the way to spirits, ghosts, and other types of agents that are very concerned about human affairs and very likely to intervene in them. They have also observed that the types of deities closer to the former end of the spectrum are predominant within smaller subsistence-based societies that often lack in technologies and access to resources, while those concentrated on the latter end of the spectrum tend to predominate within moderately complex large-scale societies that tend to be more rich in technologies and access to resources.⁹⁰ Significantly, however, after societies grow beyond a certain point in complexity and size, the prominence of those deities begins to drop off slightly (Kay et al. 2010).

Synthesizing these data, Ara Norenzayan and several other scholars contend across multiple publications that deities concerned with the “morality” of the societies with which they have relationships—so-called moralizing deities—

⁸⁹ Technological advances are one example of a partial solution. As an example, commerce in smaller communities was governed by public agreements witnessed by individuals who knew both parties, whereas the development of writing could facilitate the documentation of more private transactions between more or less anonymous people. See Aufrecht 1997, 123–24; Sanders 2010, 114–20; Routledge 1997. For a reconstruction of this process based on urbanization and rapidly expanding economic institutions, see Collard 2013.

⁹⁰ This is not to say ghosts and spirits are not a common part of large and complex urban societies, only that they tend not to be the predominant agents on the broader social level (Roes and Raymond 2003; Sanderson and Roberts 2008, 454–56; Norenzayan 2013, 126–30).