Belief in Ghosts in Post-War England

Project examined, by qualitative investigation, the actual content and mechanics of ghost beliefs in Britain today. Through questionnaire, personal interview, and email correspondence, the beliefs and experiences of 227 people were assessed, and considered against historical and international analogous material. The research began with some basic questions: who believes; what do they believe; how do they narrate their stories; and how do they understand this in the context of other beliefs? This research found a broad social spread of ghost belief. The circulation of ghost narratives takes place within social groups defined in part by their seriousness about the discussion. This does not preclude jokes, disagreements or the discrediting of specific events, so long as the discussion considers ghosts attentively and seriously. Informants brought a sophisticated range of influences to bear on narratives and their interpretation, including some scientific knowledge and understanding. Informants discussed a broad range of phenomena within a consideration of ‘ghosts’: there is no easy correlation of a narrator’s interpretation and the kind of manifestation being described. Some accounts were related as polished stories, but this did not impact directly on their belief content. The interrelationship between oral narrative and artistic representation highlights the shaping and exchange of stories to accommodate belief content. This ability to adjust between apparently different registers of discussion also illustrates how ghost beliefs fit the structures of other, more institutional, belief systems held by informants. A key finding, considering sociological discussions of secularisation and historiographical associations of heterodox beliefs with political radicalism, is that personal folk beliefs are slower developing and more conservative than institutional forms, which respond more quickly to socio-economic changes. Immediate institutional responses to changed conditions may not, therefore, correlate directly with a corresponding change in ghost belief.
Belief in ghosts in post-war England. This project examined, by qualitative investigation, the actual content and mechanics of ghost beliefs in Britain today. Through questionnaire, personal interview, and email correspondence, the beliefs and experiences of 227 people were assessed, and considered against historical and international analogous material. The research began with some basic questions: who believes; what do they believe; how do they narrate their stories; and how do they understand this in the context of other beliefs? This research found a broad social spread of ghost belief. The circulation There is widespread belief in ghosts in English-speaking cultures, where ghosts are manifestations of the spirits of the dead. The beliefs may date back to animism or ancestor worship before Christianization. The concept is a perennial theme in the literature and arts of English-speaking countries. The English word ghost continues Old English gást, from a hypothetical Common Germanic *gaistaz. It is common to West Germanic, but lacking in North and East Germanic (the equivalent word in Gothic is ahma).