A cross-cultural examination of religious skepticism

Religion is a pervasive aspect of daily life, but this does not preclude skepticism about a given aspect of religious practice or religion in general. My research focuses on the issue of religious skepticism and the social factors that affect the expression of skeptical opinions, an area of study that has not received much emphasis in the anthropological literature. The information that has been published tends to either focus on a single culture or omit discussion of the social factors involved in expressions of skepticism. This social dynamic is integral to fully understanding religious behavior and change in religious practice. I define religious skepticism as communicated incredulity or doubt about a supernatural claim, which may be directed at the religious system in general, a particular practitioner, or specific ritual practices. Hypothesis One states that skepticism of a part or the whole of a religious system is universal, or at least nearly universal. Instances of skepticism were found in a statistically significant portion of societies, indicating that skepticism is nearly universal. Hypothesis Two states that social factors will affect the expression of skeptical opinions. The data revealed a correlation between social factors and the articulation of skepticism.