

Artículo de  
investigación

# Transforming the Shaman: Changing Western Views of Shamanism and Altered States of Consciousness

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## ABSTRACT

This article documents the changes in the Western notions of shamanism, the shamanic healer, and the role of altered states of consciousness (ASC). Before the Age of Enlightenment, the shaman was condemned as daemonic charlatan. From the mid-19th until the mid-20th century, the shaman was generally considered as afflicted with a psychiatric or epileptic condition; a notion based on the misinterpretation of altered states of consciousness in shamanic rituals as psychopathological. The pathology labeling of shamanic healers and their rituals constitutes a eurocentric and positivistic fallacy. The therapeutic ability of shamanic practitioners and the psychotherapeutic efficacy of shamanic healing rituals have now been recognized. Today we witness the revival of shamanic ceremonials in many indigenous populations. We can also observe a popularization of shamanism in post-modern Western society. The apparent transformation of the shaman and shamanism has been determined by significant changes in the Western zeitgeist.

*Keywords:* Shamanism, Altered states of consciousness, Western views, Historical changes.

## RESUMEN

El artículo documenta los cambios de las nociones occidentales acerca del chamanismo y del curandero chamán, y del papel de los estados modificados de conciencia. Antes de la Era de Ilustración, el chamán fue condenado por charlatanismo demoníaco. Desde mediados del siglo XIX hasta mediados del siglo XX, el chamán fue acusado de sufrir de una aflicción psiquiátrica o epiléptica; una noción basada en la mala interpretación de los estados modificados de conciencia en los rituales chamánicos, como estados psicopatológicos. La etiqueta patológica de los curanderos y rituales chamánicos constituye un error eurocéntrico y positivístico; siendo reconocida la habilidad terapéutica de los curanderos y la eficacia psicoterapéutica de los rituales curativos chamánicos. Hoy día somos testigos de un renacimiento de ceremonias chamánicas entre gran número de poblaciones indígenas. Además podemos observar la popularización del chamanismo en la sociedad post-moderna del occidente. La aparente transformación del chamán y del chamanismo es determinada por cambios significativos del "zeitgeist" occidental.

*Palabras clave:* chamanismo, estados modificados de conciencia, nociones occidentales, cambios históricos.

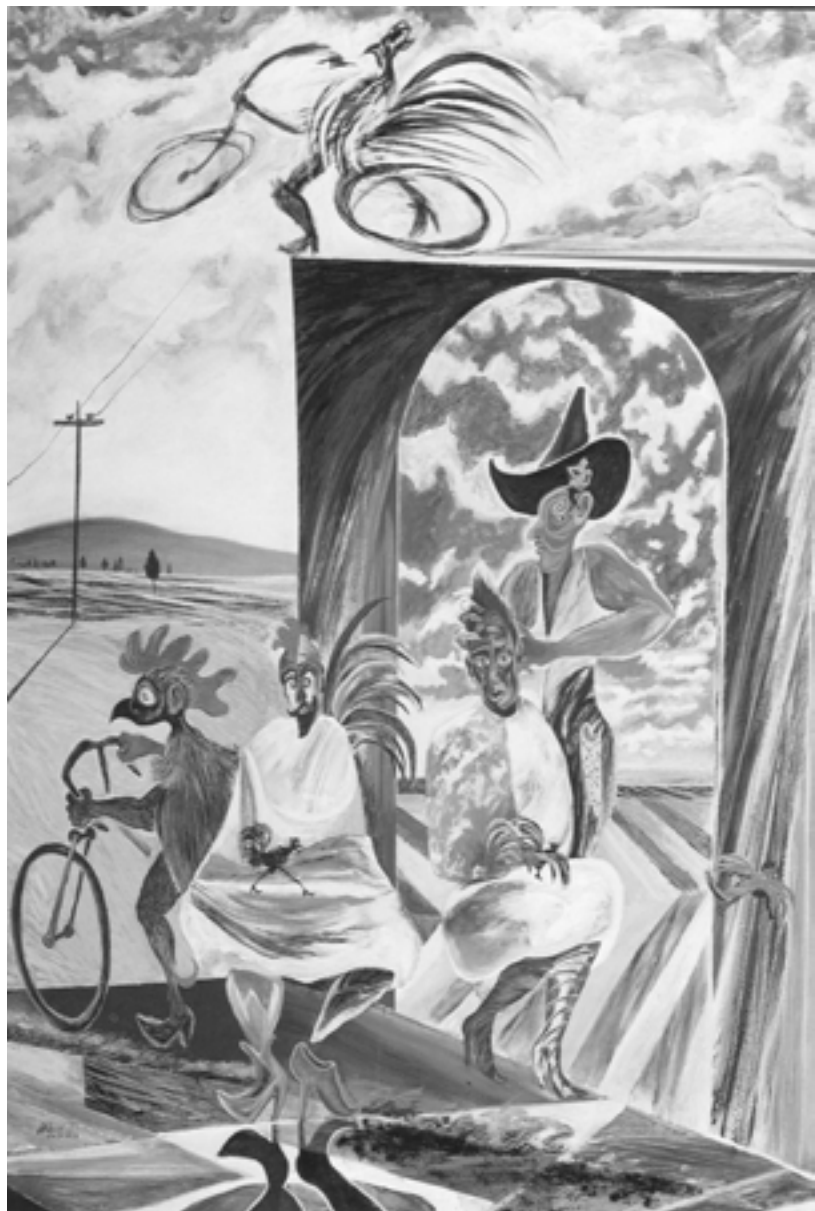
## INTRODUCTION

Although it has become fashionable to call indigenous traditional healers anywhere “shamans”, the present study is confined to genuine shamanism in Eurasia and the western hemisphere. Among the indigenous populations of these continents, the social roles of shamanic practitioners have traditionally been that of healer, spiritual leader, ritualist, soul guide, sacrificer, song reciter, and dramatic performer (1). The term “shaman” is of Northeast-Asian origin: Tungusic and Manchu *saman*, “one who is excited, moved, raised” (2), deriving from the verbal roots of “to dance, jump, shake, to be excited” (3); the original term therefore seems to carry the connotation of ecstatic dancing. Typically, shamans are considered capable of travelling to the Otherworld, the supernatural realm; a dangerous journey in which they are aided by their spirit helpers and powers, in order to retrieve aberrant or abducted souls and restore these to their owners who have been made unwell by such loss. The term for shaman in the Salish Amerindian Halkomelem language derives from “searcher of souls on the course of travel” (4). Hultkrantz (5) emphasizes that both the “soul journey” and the summoning of spirits in trance state are a genuine shamanic experience.

## THE DAEMONIZATION OF THE SHAMAN

The spirit helpers, guardian spirits and other supernatural tutelaries of shamanic practitioners, usually represented in animal form, were in the past viewed by the established Christian churches as entities of infernal provenance, and are still so viewed today by some fundamentalist Protestant groups. The shamans who invariably professed to have powerful supernatural assistants, were therefore subject to clerical condemnation. Until late in the 19th century, this often also meant persecution by government authorities who were using the church to facilitate colonization, subordination and acculturation of aboriginal peoples and who recognized in shamanism an important factor for the survival of indigenous cultures. The Christian image of the shaman as a daemonic figure was reinforced by the common belief held in many aboriginal societies, and by many shamans themselves, that shamanic powers can be used for healing or harming; also by anecdotal and ethnographic reports of death under “magic spell”, i.e., under individual and collective suggestion, a phenomenon variously labeled *voodoo death*, *mort psychosomatique*, or *Vagus-Tod*. At the same time, shamans were often described as clever tricksters and deceivers of naive “primitives”. The spirit helpers of Saami (Lapp) shamans in northern Scandinavia were called “devil’s angels” by Lutheran pastors. A drawing by S.Rheen in 1671 depicts a Saami shaman drumming, together with his devil-figured helpers,

and a picture from J. Schefferus’ work “Lapponia” 1673 shows a Saami shaman’s helping spirit with horns and bat wings. In 17th century Swedish Lapland shaman’s drums were confiscated, possessing and using such drums was forbidden under penalty of death (6). The Russian Orthodox Church in Siberia qualified shamanic spirits as maleficent daemons of lower rank. The Tungus shaman portrayed by N. Witsen in 1672 features beastly claws on his feet; a later Tungus shaman, described by J.G. Gmelin, a German scholar travelling through Siberia 1770-1784 in the service of the Russian Academy of Science, has “devils” as spirit helpers (7). Enforced mass baptism, persecution of shamans and burning of their paraphernalia was sanctioned by the imperial edict of Peter the Great proclaiming “There is only one God in heaven and only one Czar on earth”. However, the persecution of Siberian shamans and outlawing of shamanic séances, which began toward the end of the 17th century in connection with the imposition of orthodox christianity, failed to eradicate shamanism, as many Russians, even czarist officials, turned to shamanic practitioners for the advice and assistance of their supernatural powers (8). In the western



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hemisphere the prevailing attitude of the Catholic church toward Amerindian belief systems during the colonial period is reflected in the statements of De Acosta, a prominent 16th century Jesuit, that the Indios of Hispanic America had lived under the “laws of Satan” while the “ministers of the Daemon” in their diabolic ceremonies used tricks to deceive the ignorants (9). The early Catholic missionaries in the Spanish colonies of the western hemisphere accepted as reality the belief of the Indios that one can change into an animal through shamanic power; they concluded that such power can only be obtained through a pact with the Devil, as stated in the work of the Franciscan scholar De Sahagun (10). The infernal origin of the shamanic guardian spirits of aboriginal Central America was confirmed by Bishop De Herrera in 1530. The tutelaries of the 17th century Iroquois in North America were condemned as daemons in the Jesuit Relations (11). In the late 1800s the guardian spirits of the Salish Indians were still identified by Bishop Durieu of British Columbia as *spiritus familiaris*, low-ranking daemons in animal shape, provided by the Devil. In recent decades the attitude of the Catholic church has changed remarkably. However, some fundamentalist Protestant sects still associate shamanic spirits with the Devil, as do Pentecostal preachers in the Chaco region of South America for whose Amerindian converts the Holy Spirit now takes on the role of a shamanic auxiliary (12).

#### THE PATHOLOGIZATION OF THE SHAMAN

With the decline of ecclesiastic influence in the Western world of the 19th century came a re-definition of shamanism by scientific authors who saw in the shaman no longer a daemonic figure but rather a neuro-psychiatric case. Some even sought the very origin of shamanism in the mentally ill of pre-historic times: in the beginning was lunacy, as it were. According to Radin (13), the “neurotic-epileptoid type” possessed the basic qualification for the shaman in simply organized groups like the Eskimo. With the evolution of society “the non-neurotic shaman had to accept the formulation which owed its origin and its initial development to his neurotic predecessors and colleagues”. It is surprising to the present author who worked as psychiatrist among tribal populations, that the mentally ill have been presented as enjoying a privileged status in “primitive” societies in which neurotic or psychotic symptoms are allegedly rewarded (14,15). The opinion was repeatedly expressed by scientific authors, well-known in their day, that mentally ill individuals occupy the privileged shaman profession, as stated by the eminent American anthropologist Kroeber (16). The diagnostic labels of hysteria, epilepsy, and psychosis, have been used to characterize the behaviour of shamanic practitioners; often the terms “hysterical” and “epileptoid” combined, reminiscent of the 19th century concept of hysteroepilepsy. Hambly (17) advanced the general hypothesis that the shamanic medicine man suffers from “fear neurosis” and “anxiety hysteria” while his garb is the “mummery” relieving his “neurotic temperament”. Gillin (18) made the assertion that he could provide many references regarding epileptic shamans in pre-literate societies. In his Smithsonian report on the shamanism of the “natives” of Siberia, Casanowicz (19) stated that the shaman candidate “usually exhibits psychopathic traits or is subject to epileptic fits”. To

Alekseev (8) the shamans of turkic-speaking peoples of Siberia appear to suffer from a “psychic-nervous illness” with convulsive attacks and loss of consciousness during séances, which at times triggered “nervous-psychic group attacks” in the audience. The label “arctic hysteria” was already in the early 20th century applied to Siberian shamanism by Russian authors; so by Jochelson (20) regarding the shamans of the Koryak and Yukaghir, and by Bogoras (21) regarding the Chukchee shamans. Czaplicka (2) averred that “arctic hysteria lies at the bottom of the shaman’s vocation”; she wrote the Siberian shaman was “nervous and excitable, often to the verge of insanity”. Tungus shamanism was classified as a psychopathological phenomenon related to hysteria and epilepsy (22); the psychical healing of Tungus shamans was associated with hysteria (23). The Eskimo shaman was also assumed to suffer from “arctic hysteria” (17). It was finally left to Ohlmarks (24) to hypothesize that all shamanism originated in the circum-polar cultures as “arctic hysteria” attributable to climatic and nutritional factors of the arctic environment.

In the western hemisphere, Devereux, well-known psychoanalytically oriented anthropologist, was a staunch defender of the general thesis that the shaman is “psychiatrically a genuinely ill person” (25). In his last opus of ethnopsychiatry he again emphasized: “In brief, there is no reason and no excuse for not considering the shaman to be a severe neurotic or even a psychotic” (26). From a rather limited selection of psychoanalytically inclined ethnological sources, Silverman (27) at the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health asserted that there are no significant differences between acute schizophrenics and shamans, both showing “overt similarities” in their behavior and “basic identities” in their cognitive processes.

Concluding the section on psychopathology labeling of shamanic practitioners, it can be stated that for the authors who engaged in this, the “mentally ill” shaman was only the exponent of his “primitive” culture’s pathology. Kroeber (16) left no doubt about this: “Not only the shamans”, he insisted, “are involved in psychopathology, but often also the whole lay public of primitive societies”. However, the classification of shamanic behaviour in terms of Western psychiatric nomenclatures constitutes a double fallacy: (a) *A eurocentric fallacy*, insofar as it tries to interpret descriptive data collected in non-Western cultures by modern Western criteria, ignoring the non-Western folk systems of explanation; (b) *A positivistic fallacy*, insofar as it considers behaviours and concepts which do not fit into the framework of logico-experimental explanatory theories as departure from rational norms due to ignorance and error, under which is subsumed the poor reality testing of psychopathology. Shamanic rituals, however, like other ritual action, cannot be judged by the criteria of positive science, for ritual acts are, above all, “manifestations of sentiments” as Pareto (28) has shown.

#### THE ROLE OF ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN SHAMANISM AND THEIR MISINTERPRETATION

Shamans may enter into “ecstatic” states, i.e., altered states of consciousness (ASC), to communicate with supernatural beings through vision experiences, to summon helping spirits, or to embody supernatural entities for the purpose

of acting with their special powers. Western observers often inferred psychopathology from actions and expressions of shamanic practitioners in such an ASC; of shaman candidates during their initiatory period and of performing shamans during their séances. In the case of the shaman candidate this ASC results either from the involuntary experience of severe stress in a physical, psychological or social crisis situation, or from undergoing stressful ASC-inducing somatic and psychological conditions during the quest for shamanic spirit power. In the case of shamanic séances this ASC is self-induced by the shamanic practitioner on the basis of learning, experience, and through the specific techniques listed below. At the same time the shamanic practitioner can, for therapeutic, religious or social purposes, induce ASC in clients or audience by suggestive influences, varying from indirect suggestion through skillful manipulation of culturally validated symbols to direct hypnotic suggestion, always facilitated by the traditional collective belief in shamanic powers. To enter an ASC is possible due to the physiological capability of the central nervous system to dissociate the mental apparatus of the self into two or more systems of relational experience. From the accounts of shamanic practitioners and initiates it can be deduced that shamanic ASC are associated with selectively focussed attention, heightened suggestibility, various degrees of analgesia, and culturally prescribed behaviour experienced as not under voluntary control and often not remembered due to non-organic amnesia. Other frequent concomitants of such states are an altered time sense, illusional perceptions, body image changes, and intense emotional experiences to which special significance is attached. Such subjective experiences may be interpreted according to the prevailing cultural tradition as an encounter with helping or guardian spirits or other supernatural powers, or as rebirth, revelation, or enlightenment; they are felt to be essentially ineffable and believed in with unshakable conviction. In most traditional non-Western cultures and in historical European cultures, ASC are or were interpreted either as a special state of the individual permitting of close interaction with supernatural entities, in order to receive their messages, perceive them in visions, and acquire power from them; or as a state of possession in which a supernatural entity or power acts through the possessed individual. These two cultural variants of ASC have been designated “trance” and “possession trance”, respectively, by Bourguignon (29) who also mapped the global distribution of these states which differ in terms of cultural definition but not in terms of the underlying neuropsychological process. The induction of such temporary changes of waking consciousness in motivated candidates is facilitated by the experimentally known somatopsychic effects of specific conditions which in shamanic cultures, according to ethnographic reports and according to own observations (30), are either created through arduous spirit quests or through special techniques employed in initiation procedures, to be later again utilized in shamanic ceremonials requiring an ASC. These conditions are: hyperventilation; hypoglycaemia and dehydration; sleep deprivation; sensory deprivation and restricted mobility alternating with hypermotility; pain stimulation; temperature stimulation; and, most importantly, rhythmic acoustic stimulation which, in appropriate frequency, intensity and duration, exerts a direct

dissociating effect on the mental apparatus. In experiments conducted by Neher (31), drumming rhythms in, or close to, the theta frequency range of the electro-encephalogram (4-7cps) were most effective in inducing ASC, variously associated with somatic sensations, auditory illusions and visual imagery. The drum is the shamanic instrument par excellence, and rhythmic drumming is prominent in most shamanic ceremonials. The phenomenon termed “initiatory sickness” by Eliade (32) seemed to support the psychopathology hypothesis which also appeared corroborated by the séance behaviour of practicing shamans. Initiatory sickness and recovery was often experienced and presented by the shamans as a form of death and rebirth; being reborn to the shamanic vocation as a changed person. The archetypal pattern of ritual death and resurrection can be discerned in shamanic initiations of most cultures in which shamanism is, or was, practiced. Personal accounts of this shamanic illness by Siberian and Central Asian shamans repeat the theme of a nearly lethal illness or severe life crisis, culminating in visionary encounters with tutelary spirits. The symptoms of this “initiatory sickness” were often interpreted as “absences of the soul” (3). The so afflicted have been reported to suffer so-called “nervous fits”, attacks of “insanity”, loss of consciousness and “epileptic” convulsions, also experiences of being torn apart or dismembered. Recovery occurred only after accepting the “call” to become a shaman by starting to drum and compose shaman songs, usually under guidance of a senior practitioner. Later-on practicing shamans would, for major ritual performance, re-enter an ASC similar to an attenuated initiatory state. In the past, some aboriginal Siberian peoples used hallucinogen-containing mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria*) in shamanic ceremonials. In Saami (Lapp) shamanism, according to historical Scandinavian sources, dominant themes were the “ecstasy”, i.e., the ASC, of the designated shaman-to-be, and the role of the assistant spirits who first visited him when alone in the woods and whose songs he had to repeat. Thereupon the future shaman behaved for some time “like a madman” and suffered agonizing pains which ended only when he surrendered himself to the spirits, to be initiated into the secrets of the profession. He then learned to “dive”, i.e., to enter an ASC while beating the “magic drum”, journeying to the land of the dead to return a sick client’s soul to its owner (33). To embark on “soul travel”, Saami shamans worked themselves up into an ASC by drumming, dancing, and singing *joikeu*, sometimes until they fell down unconscious (34).

The death-and-rebirth experience through alteration or loss of consciousness was of paramount importance in the formation of Eskimo (Inuit) shamans. The future Eskimo shaman passed through an apparent death and a miraculous return to life which suggested “the acquisition of a new and more powerful soul” (35). A senior shaman could take the life of a potential candidate and give him the life of a shaman (36). Related to the death-and-rebirth theme was the shaman’s ability to see himself as a skeleton, which the Iglulik Eskimo novice had to master by meditative concentration before he could obtain spirit helpers. An accidental near-death experience with fainting due to animal attacks could also qualify a hunter as shaman, with the attacking beast as his shaman spirit (37) The future Caribou Eskimo shaman had to “die a little” in extreme privations, or by

submersion through ice holes, before he was called to life again (38). Shaman novices in North Alaska were pushed down ice holes to become “shining skeletons” attractive to spirits (39). Eskimo shamans sought to attract several helping spirits, mostly appearing to them in animal form. Among Eskimo groups from West Alaska to East Greenland the quest for a tutelary spirit was open to anyone aspiring to become shaman. A young man would wander far into the arctic solitude, sing or cry out for an echo, concentrate on monotonous actions such as rubbing stones, endure hardships, hunger, cold and fear; until finally in a state of altered or lost consciousness he encountered a spirit who might find him worthy of a shaman and become his helper. Although the adept might be devoured by a supernatural animal, he would be spit out again to a new life; or a spirit giant causing him to “die” would bring him back to life as a shaman. Descriptions of shamanic séances throughout the Eskimo regions attest to dramatic happenings in crowded igloos or huts (40,41,42,43,44): Accompanied by rhythmic drumming and chanting, the shaman, tied down with strong thongs, went into “trance” or “autohypnosis”, i.e., into an ASC. Then the audience, under the shaman’s direct and indirect suggestive influence, perceived him flying around or witnessed his transformation into an animal, and heard, saw and felt the spirits and monsters he summoned up. Even scientific observers could sometimes not escape such hypnotic influence.

Among the Tamang of Nepal contemporary shamanesses enter the vocation after an initiatory state associated with bizarre behaviour, experiences of being possessed by a spirit assistant of divine or ancestral provenance, and an urge to use a shaman’s drum. In daily practice, Tamang shamanesses conduct brief curing rites using suggestion and symbolic manipulation. However, when difficult cases require an extended nocturnal ceremony, they induce ASC in themselves and in clients, facilitated through continuous drumming and chanting (45).

Recent information gathered from shamanic practitioners of the Laotian Hmong in professional collaboration with this author (46), indicated that the initiatory “shaman’s illness” of a person chosen by a shaman spirit manifests itself through spells of alteration or loss of consciousness, and/or shaking, convulsions and visions of spirits. The afflicted person may “waste away” until he/she accepts the calling and obtains a “shaman teacher” who will beat the gong-drum and take the candidate on the first “ride” to the Otherworld. In order to negotiate for a troubled client or to retrieve an ill client’s “soul”, i.e., life force, the Hmong shaman “rides on the spirit horse”, i.e., wooden bench, to the Otherworld. Continuously chanting and shouting at malicious spirits, bobbing to the rhythmic beat of the gong-drum, the shaman enters an ASC that ends after many hours when he returns to this world, jumping down to the ground with a last cry and momentarily lying there motionless.

Among North American Indians of the Plains, the Plateau, and the Northwest Coast culture areas, shamanism was associated with the “vision-guardian spirit complex” (11). The spirit quest of shamans-to-be was similar to that of motivated youths in general but lasted longer and required greater effort to obtain powers from several or specific tutelaries in forceful and intensive vision experiences. In the

traditional culture of the Salish of the Pacific Northwest (4), such a quest demanded of the young candidate long periods of solitary roaming and extended vigils in the wilderness or on lonely beaches, fasting with forced vomiting and purgation, swimming and diving in ice cold waters, sometimes also self-scarification, until the desired shaman powers were obtained in visions of the guardian spirit. Since nowadays secret spirit quests in the wild are no longer possible, obtaining guardian spirit power has been incorporated into the initiation process of the revived Salish Spirit Dance which has all the features of a shamanic ceremonial. Initiation to the ceremonial is considered the only cure of “spirit illness”. The “diseased old self” of the male and female initiates is symbolically clubbed to death by the shamanic ritualist before they are for several days confined to a dark cubicle of the ceremonial house. They submit to a strict regime of “sacrifice” and fasting, lying motionless and sweating under heavy blankets, listening to rhythmic drumming and chanting; then they are rushed by the ritualists through bush and icy waters, until they find song and spirit power in a vision encounter with their guardian spirit (“power animal”). “Reborn” to a new rewarding Amerindian existence under the name of an honoured ancestor, they participate in the Spirit Dance every winter season and experience again the initial spirit encounter in an ASC under rhythmic drumming and chanting, to publicly display their guardian spirit power in song and dance. The Sun Dance, also revived in the 1960s as the major religious movement of Amerindian tribes in Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado and Alberta, has the characteristics of a shamanic initiation with “calling” in a visionary dream, ordeal by fasting, thirsting, and pain in the strenuous dance ritual quest for supernatural power, finally received in a spirit vision. Physical analysis of our records of the rhythmic beating of many drums in the Salish Spirit Dance ceremonial, revealed that frequencies in the theta range, which lead to auditory driving responses in the electroencephalogram, were entirely predominant during initiation procedures when ASC were induced in the neophytes. During the Sun Dance ceremonial, drumming frequencies close to those recorded in the Salish Spirit Dance, facilitate the vision experience the dancers are questing for. In the hierarchically organized Amerindian nations of the Northwest coast, the acquisition of shamanic power was integrated in the initiation to a privileged secret society and “possession” by tutelary spirits followed a formalized pattern. Still, the Tsimshian shaman-to-be seeking shamanic power was said to be transported to the verge of death through trance visions in which his spirit-aides appeared to him (47). Among the Kwakiutl, the young man “who desired to learn the ways of the shaman” was led to the “house of the Cannibal Dancer... to which those go who pretend to be sick, who wish to be made shamans”; there he was taught the ways of “the one who faints and who trembles with his body” (48). Initiation to the Cannibal Dancer Society of the Kwakiutl was an elaborate ritual with dramatic performance by the novice who, possessed by his tutelary spirit, demonstrated cannibalistic urges in “holy madness” by motions to bite spectators; he had to be tamed through songs and dances (49). The model of the Kwakiutl Cannibal Dance Society appears to have influenced the presentation of shamans-to-be in other Amerindian nations of British

Columbia; so among the Carrier (Athapascan) whose shamanic medicine-men received the call in a state of “hysteria” through possession by cannibalistic spirits (50), and among the Shuswap (Interior Salish) whose shamans “acted like madmen” when possessed by a cannibal guardian spirit (51). Indigenous populations in Mesoamerica and South America have always been using plants with proven hallucinogenic properties in traditional ceremonials and curing rites (52). Shamanic practitioners have utilized such plants to induce ASC, in themselves to facilitate contact with supernatural entities for ritual performance, divination and curing; and in their clients to enhance the suggestive impact of the shamanic performance, facilitate catharsis and promote a collective experience of positive supernatural intervention. Shamanic use of hallucinogenic plants has been documented for Mexico, Central and South America (53,54,55,56,57,58).

#### THE ACCREDITATION OF THE SHAMAN

The psychopathology hypothesis was most plausibly refuted by Leighton (59): “What in shamanistic behavior may appear hysterical or psychotic to the Western psychiatrist is, to the people concerned, a time-honored ritual through which practitioners heal sick people or divine the future. Hence the ‘symptoms’ of the shaman may in fact be the result of learning and practice”. With regard to the much abused Siberian shaman, Eliade (32) remarked that the “North Asian shaman shows no sign of mental disintegration. His memory and his power of self-control are distinctly above the average”. J.M. Murphy (60) assessed Alaska Eskimo shamans as mentally “exceptionally healthy”. Opler’s (61) field research data on Eastern Apache tribes and also on the Ute and Southern Paiute of Colorado and Utah showed that shamanism could not be correlated with any rates of deviant behavior. Working among the Washo of western Nevada and eastern California, Handelman (62) rejected as highly inadequate any explanation of shamanic practice in terms of neurotic defenses. For the Amerindian cultures of the North Pacific Coast, Drucker (63) contradicted the assumption that shamans were recruited from among the emotionally unstable. Heinze (64) provided information on more than hundred shamans and spirit mediums in Thailand and Malaysia; none of these were mentally ill. A look at the dates of the literature on shamanism reveals that characterizing statements changed in the 19th century from daemonization to psychopathology labeling, which was mostly corrected by the second half of the 20th century and finally gave way to the acknowledgement of the therapeutic skills of shamanic practitioners and medicine men, as expressed by Hoppál (65): “The shaman is rather a psychotherapist than a psychopath”. The present author

identified 95 scientific publications that in recent decades reported effective therapeutic management of neurotic and psychosomatic disorders, reactive depression, and alcohol and drug dependence, through shamanic and other traditional healing practices among non-Western peoples (52). During decades of transcultural psychiatric work, he came to personally know shamanic practitioners described in several publications, viz., shamanic ritualists of the North American Coast Salish (4,66); Amerindian shamanic healers in Ecuador and Peru (67); Tamang shamanesses in Nepal (45); shamans and shamanesses of the Hmong in Southeast Asia (46); and can unequivocally state that there were no signs of an unstable personality or of a psychiatric disorder in these intelligent and capable practitioners.

On the individual and interpersonal level, shamanic practitioners, unlike Western-trained health professionals, combine the confidence-inspiring reputation of a charismatic personality with access to supernatural powers and a culture-congenial understanding of their clients’ belief and value system. Shamanic practitioners, unlike Western-trained health professionals, utilize certain psychotherapeutically effective methods: they perform suggestive ritual acts by skillful manipulation of culturally validated symbolic images and arcane paraphernalia; they conduct rites of sacrifice which appease the supernaturals, alleviate anxiety and relieve guilt feelings; they arouse emotional responses facilitating catharsis and psychodramatic abreaction, and they induce altered states of consciousness that enhance the suggestive effect of curing and provide clients and audience with mystic experiences. On the supra-individual level, shamanic practitioners uphold the cultural heritage and identity of their



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ethnic group. All this may explain the survival of shamanic practices among indigenous peoples in spite of centuries of suppression by governmental and ecclesiastic authorities. However, beyond mere survival we witness a revival of shamanic healing rituals and ceremonialism, especially among North American indigenous populations under Westernizing acculturation pressure. This indigenous renaissance is reflected in the revitalization of traditional ceremonials with important therapeutic aspects, throughout North America (68,69). Examples are the Winter Spirit Dances of the Salish in the Pacific Northwest; the Sun Dance among aboriginal populations of Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and the Dakotas; the Gourd Dance among the Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, which subsequently reached many other tribes in the United States and Canada; the Peyote Cult which spread northward from Mexico and is today a major pan-Amerindian religious ceremonial east of the Rocky Mountains. In response to contemporary social and ideological needs of Amerindian nations, these ceremonials have in essence become *nativistic movements*, “organized attempts on the part of a society’s members to revive selected aspects of its culture in a situation of inequality between the societies in contact” (70). Since the 1970s, a hitherto unheard of phenomenon has appeared in the post-modern Western society: “New Age” shamanism, encouraged by Carlos Castaneda’s semi-fiction. The idealized shaman has become a post-modern psycho-guide for Westerners who have lost both religious traditions and rationalist world view, and who no longer trust in the established clerical and professional institutions. The popularization of shamanism owes much to the anthropologist Michael Harner. He and his disciples have made the teaching of shamanic practices a global enterprise with shamanic workshops and training courses in most Western countries, well attended by the urban middle class.

The revival of shamanic healing and ceremonialism is an aspect of the general renaissance of indigenous cultures. It is no coincidence this occurred in the aftermath of decolonization, accompanied by a profound change of the prevailing Western zeitgeist that has taken place since the end of the 2nd World War: the abandonment of a eurocentric world view and the relinquishing of Western superiority claims in favour of a postulated human equality. This process is associated with an up-grading of the Western image of non-Western cultures and ethnicities, and with a concomitant deflation of the once glorious Western self-image. A rather drastic change in the tenor both of popular and academic literature can be demonstrated in this regard. Who would nowadays expect to hear in the annual address of the President of the prestigious National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C., phrases like these: “In North America the Anglo-Saxon race has dominated, carrying civilization from the Atlantic to the Pacific, expelling and exterminating the aborigines. There has been no mingling of the Anglo-Saxon and Indian races, no backward step, but ever civil, religious and intellectual progress” (71). The palpable change in the occidental evaluation of self and others occurred in the context of the global retreat of Western domination. Not only Western thinking and sentiment, also Western social sciences have been deeply affected by this historical process.

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## Conflicto de interés no declarado

