

Explorations in the Relationship Between the Knower and the Known in Core- Shamanism.



Figure 1

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Abstract

The Enlightenment has given us the intellectual tools and methods of inquiry that have led to an explosion of knowledge, ultimately leading to the great inventions of today. This knowledge, however, came at a cost, often a fatal one. Our methods of knowledge acquisition are characterized by destruction and marginalization. This destruction appears on all levels, from the innocent acts of boring into the ground to extract soil samples or the destruction of context to excavate archaeological artefacts, to the more pernicious dissecting of and testing on animals in the name of the God of utility, or even the outright heinous domination and experimentation on minority groups or marginalized cultures. We are also increasingly distancing ourselves from that which we study, with ever more abstract and complex theories of sub-atomic and quantum worlds, as well as the increasingly untrammelled Artificial Intelligence.

We are desperately in need of wisdom to supplement our knowledge. A more intimate bond with that which we study would surely make us more aware to the moral implications of our actions. Anthropology is a potential candidate to pave our way forward in the world of the Anthropocene. By drawing on different perspectives and questioning the way we engage with the world, it shows us more meaningful ways of engaging with the world.

The Anthropological task of this thesis is to provide a perspective, coming from the practice of Core-Shamanism, in which knowledge and meaning are created not from a distance, but ‘concocted’ in the moment from an intimate encounter between the practitioner and the source of knowledge and meaning. This encounter, despite involving a classification of one’s experience, is nevertheless an embodied act requiring one’s whole being, in a state which blurs the fundamental boundaries of everyday human existence

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Introduction

Despite the plethora of academic books and papers published on the subject, the study of Shamanism still contains many unexplored avenues, especially those avenues which require a direct participation in the practice. The subject is rich with phenomenological and ethnographic accounts of Shamanism around the globe, such as Eliade's (1989) highly influential classic '*Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*'. These etic perspectives have greatly enriched our understanding of Shamanic traditions around the world, however, if we are to turn away from mere intellectual interest and seriously consider the ontological challenges that the people we study pose to us (Ingold, 2018), then it is imperative to make a genuine effort at understanding these different perspectives.

During the latter part of the 20th century something unprecedented happened; Shamanism was 'brought home' by the Anthropologist Michael Harner (1990), who studied Shamanic traditions from around the world, notably the Jivaro in Peru, and who went on to develop his own Shamanic tradition called 'Core-Shamanism'. Core-Shamanism uses the universal features of Shamanism such as the use of the drum to provide an opportunity for 'Westerners' to "reacquire access to their rightful spiritual heritage" (TheFoundationForShamanicStudies). This new practice has given the opportunity to thousands of people to acquire a new perspective on life; a life-enriching perspective that is becoming increasingly appealing in the late-stage capitalist existence, where the ever increasing void of the consumeristic and capitalist lifestyle is leading many to consider new spiritualities and techniques to find new meaning in life (Vitebsky, 1995).

Shamanism has always been concerned with acquiring knowledge and providing guidance in the everyday conduct of human existence (Vitebsky, 1995). This technique provides a very different kind of guidance and knowledge to that which most people in liberal democracies are used to, and our valorisation of the scientific method and rationality can be neglectful of such a practice. Foucault (2014) notes the history of knowledge in 'Western' countries is one of dominating, marginalising and keeping the object of knowledge at a distance. The institutions of our society, e.g. the school, barracks, hospital, etc... are not neutral, and they are all points of the exercise of a particular form of power: *bio-power* (Foucault, 1998). This power invests in life through organization and discipline and has extended to all levels of society (Foucault, 1991). Bio-power and its

strategies are so deeply embedded in our society that they have been naturalized (Foucault, 1991), we feel as if organizing things from the position of the observer is the superior way of understanding and relating with the world. But are there other ways of understanding the world that do not require a distancing from the object of knowledge?

This dissertation argues that Core-Shamanism is a way of attaining knowledge and guidance that, rather than distancing from the object of knowledge in a dichotomous subject/object relationship, brings the known to the proximity of one's existence, born in the crucible of an intimate experience in which the putative boundaries of separation from the object of knowledge are blurred and problematized. It is also an exploration, from an inside perspective, of the dynamics of boundaries within and surrounding Core-Shamanism.

A summary of the chapters

The *methodology* delineates the practice of Core-Shamanism that I engaged with during my fieldwork, as well as defining, where and what the 'field' is and offering some preliminary information on my participant. It also considers the approach that I take throughout my fieldwork, that of participant observation and learning Core-Shamanism from an 'inside' perspective. The methodology concludes with a short discussion about the problems of ethnography and the aim of the dissertation being a document to initiate a conversation into the way we relate with the object of our knowledge. There is also after this some personal background knowledge which relates to how my mindset developed and how I came to be interested in Shamanism.

The Discussion begins with a section named '*Knowledge is Power, And Power is Knowledge*' which notes Foucault's (2014) question on what kind of knowledge would exist in the absence of prohibition and marginalization of the known. This sets the precedence for the whole discussion. Following this is an example of a mystical tradition which acts as a potential answer to Foucault's question, to serve as an example to demonstrate that knowledge in the absence of division and prohibition might be possible, which makes the study of Core-Shamanism in relation to this a viable undertaking. The section follows with a contextualization of the way power is implicated in the pursuit of knowledge and the way in which our knowledge has been produced from Foucauldian and Structuralist perspectives.

This is followed up by a section named '*A Boundary Dissolving Experience*' which explores the Core-Shamanic trance state as experienced by myself in the field and

discusses the extent to which classification plays a role in the experience, the blurring of boundaries within the trance experience, and whether the distinctions between ordinary reality and the trance experience are viable distinctions.

'Intimate Relationships' proceeds and it explores the ways in which my participant relates to certain objects and what she calls 'spirit', and how she blurs the boundaries between trance and everyday life through prolonged practice and other means. It also discusses how the guidance and knowledge that she gets from the Shamanic trance is attained through a distancing and analysis of the object of knowledge, but through coming into close contact to it and building relationship in this realm with teachers who disclose her to this knowledge.

The discussion finishes with *'Getting Closer to The Known'* which begins with an insight I was struck with in the field and follows with a discussion of it in relation to embodiment. The section then explores the classification and understanding of entoptic phenomena and explores the dynamic between the role of classification and embodiment in the creation of meaning in Core-Shamanic practice.

The *conclusion* is split into two sections. The first section is a reflexive summary of the change in my role as the researcher throughout the length of the fieldwork. Additionally, it summarizes the insights that I have acquired through the fieldwork, which ultimately gave rise to the main argument of this dissertation. The second section summarizes the main points made in the discussion and includes a final conclusion on the proximity of the knower to the object of knowledge in Core-Shamanism.

Methodology

The etic and the emic

Throughout history, the study of Shamanism has been conducted through a rich variety of methods, from the etic perspective of Mircea Eliade (1989) who studied shamanism as a scholar of religions, taking a phenomenological approach to map out the macro picture of shamanism using the accounts of others, to the more emic perspective of Michael Harner (1990) who conducted anthropological fieldwork and trained under Shamans himself. These different approaches produce very different kinds of information, and there does exist a certain exclusivity to the access of knowledge that both of these perspectives provide, for there are things that the anthropologist, immersed in the field, knows that the scholar of religion couldn't possibly have come to know from the comparison of sources and hermeneutics, and vice versa for the anthropologists not being able to attain knowledge of the macro picture from his/her specific and particularized perspective.

Scope of the study

As this dissertation is an anthropological inquiry, it is concerned with a particular community or person. The fieldwork I have conducted for this dissertation was done with Mia Hillariet, a local Shaman operating mostly in the Welsh town of Lampeter where she lives. She has over 20 years of experience in the practice of Core-Shamanism and has trained under one of the Faculties for the Foundation For Shamanic Studies, an organization founded by Michael Harner, the anthropologist who developed Core-Shamanism. My field was essentially Mia's office, where she runs shamanic workshops, usually in small groups of a few people, but I've often found myself alone with Mia. I have also on a few occasions journeyed outside of her office, in my room, using a recording of a drumming session that Mia has sent me. It can also be argued that the field also included the trance state itself, especially because of its geographical nature, however, as will be later discussed, the distinction between the 'normal' state and the 'trance' state is difficult to maintain beyond the conceptual reality, which is a topic big enough to be a dissertation thesis itself.

I have conducted my fieldwork sporadically, attending workshops on average twice a month for almost six months. In the field, I have engaged with Core-Shamanism

through participant observation; rather than merely observation, interviewing and gathering data. I have decided to participate in Core-Shamanic workshops and have dedicated myself to learning Core-Shamanism from the inside, from the core of its unfolding reality and not from its appearances, images and words. I have also engaged with Mia on a participatory level, by having many conversations with her, journeying together, letting her guide me through the practice, and soaking up the wisdom that she had to share with me. I situate my fieldwork in the anthropological tradition of deep participation and a mentor-apprentice relationship of the likes of Castaneda (1998) or Stoller (1989).

Core-Shamanism

Having delineated ‘the field’ and discussed the participatory approach of the fieldwork, it’s imperative to delineate the particular practice of Shamanism engaged with in the field. As noted above, Mia is a Shamanic practitioner trained in Core-Shamanism. Core-Shamanism was developed by Michael Harner (1990) in the late 20th century, who conducted fieldwork among the Jivaro of the Amazon, and other communities around the world; Harner (1990) has conducted field research in the form of participant observation in various Shamanic practices around the world. Core-Shamanism is a basic and barebones form of Shamanism which consists of “the universal, near-universal, and common features of shamanism, together with journeys to other worlds, a distinguishing feature of shamanism” (FoundationForShamanicStudies). Core-Shamanism claims not to be “bound to any specific cultural group or perspective” and therefore does not focus on the ceremonial aspect of shamanism, rather, it is based on the classic shamanic techniques such as the use of repetitive drumming to achieve an altered state of consciousness (Ibid.). Despite the apparent ‘universality’ of Core-Shamanism, the creation and development of this practice was aimed at and tailored to people living in capitalist liberal democracies, and it is explicitly stated that Core-Shamanism is intended for “Westerners to reacquire access to their rightful spiritual heritage” (TheFoundationForShamanicStudies). Vitebsky (1995, p.151) argues that ‘western’ industrial culture has begun suffering from a loss of confidence in its historical hegemonies, those of Christianity and the scientific worldview, and that Shamanism, a “non-institutionalized, undogmatic, form of spirituality which offers considerable scope for personal creativity”, is seen as a potential aid for this disillusionment. To sum up, this dissertation pertains to a specific type of Shamanism practiced in the matrix of capitalist liberal democracies. This practice, however, contests the various hegemonic categories of these societies such as consumerism, materialism, extraction of resources, a spiritual void or organized religion. Core-Shamanism is, from its

crucible of creation, a movement which is concerned with the global and political issues of today and is thoroughly intertwined with other movements such as feminism, the New Age, and most crucially, environmentalism.

Engaging with the subject

As noted above, the way in which a subject is approached and engaged with plays a substantial role in the kind of knowledge that will come from it, it is thus advisable to reflect on the way I engaged with the practice and the people in the field. Ingold (2013, p.1-2) argues that we learn through the engagement with the things and people we study, by a process of 'going along'. This kind of learning doesn't provide us with facts about the world, rather, it allows us to be taught by it, thus, life becomes a place of study where we learn from those with who we study (Ibid). Anthropological fieldwork is a prolonged class in which the novice learns to gradually attend to the world in the ways the people, the teacher(s), he/she is studying with do (Ibid). It is imperative to note that what is meant by this, is not that the researcher believes in and shares the people's beliefs, rather, that the researcher is able to see the world from their perspective. What comes from this is that through participant observation I attempted to become acquainted with Mia's perspective of the world. Of course, the fact that I don't know her perspective in other spheres of life, and because of the relatively short time of the study, I am constrained to only know so much about how Mia sees the world, however, by practicing Shamanism and doing fieldwork in her abode, and on her terms, letting her guide me through the process, there is still a lot to learn and the potential to acquire a novel and different perspective.

Participant observation

Participant observation was the primary way in which I engaged with the subject and my participant Mia, and it is through it that I have gained all the insights that are expounded on in this dissertation. Participant observation is often seen as a method of primary and qualitative data collection, however, this is a highly problematic view, because to "convert what we owe to the world into data that we have extracted from it is to expunge knowing from being (Ingold 2013, p.5). Participant observation is a direct and sensuous engagement with our surroundings, it is a way of 'knowing from the inside' (Ibid). Participant observation learns from the world by engagement from the inside, thus, it recognizes that we owe our being to the world we seek to know (Ibid). This means that to know from the inside, we need to deeply engage and correspond with the world and

recognize that we are ‘of’ and not outside ‘it’. The problem with data is that it stipulates that knowledge requires to be reconstructed from the ‘outside’ and after fact, whereas participant observation learns inside and in the moment. Using participant observation in my fieldwork meant that instead of analysing the phenomenon of Shamanism and Mia’s beliefs and practices as a Shaman, I decided to practice and delve into Shamanism myself, learning it *from* Mia, my mentor, and from my personal engagement with it, in other words, from the crucible of life itself (Ingold, 2014). This means that I haven’t acquired analytical information or produced much analytical knowledge from my fieldwork, however, since I am exploring the nature of boundaries and categorisation itself, perhaps taking the approach of experiencing it from the inside will be a better approach than analysing ‘data’. Despite this, analysis will be present in this dissertation and I have referred and resorted to theories on many occasions, however, I did so only when they helped me understand and gain a deeper perspective on the experiences and the interactions that I have had in the field.

Going native

Whilst participant observation has been indispensable in my immersion into Mia’s perspective and the inside knowledge of Core-Shamanism, it is necessary to consider the common issue of ‘going native’, which is a scenario in which the Anthropologist becomes ‘too involved’ with the people he/she studies. The perception on the idea of ‘going native’ has shifted significantly over time. ‘Going native’ used to be criticized for its ability to jeopardize the objectivity of the researcher, however, after postmodern critiques which argued that anthropological fieldwork has an invasive and colonial nature, some scholars encouraged and advocated “the breaking down of traditional barriers that separate the observer from the observed” (Sluka and Robben 2012, p.15, 19). The dichotomy between the researcher and the researched is a highly refuted one in today’s anthropological debates, as seen by Ingold’s (2013) assertion that we are embedded in the world and thus we know from inside the world, and not from outside of it. There does however remain a problem, and the problem appears when participation in the culture reaches a critical point at which the anthropologist relinquishes their professional identity (Sluka and Robben 2012, p.15-16).

The successful performance of fieldwork, and the role of anthropology, can thus be seen, as Ingold (2018, p.25) argues, to “make a conversation of human life itself”, in which we compare enduring ways of thinking to transform all those in the conversation and to learn how to better correspond to our rapidly changing world (Ingold 2013, p.7). The

anthropologist is the one who seeks and initiates these conversations. The aim of this dissertation is thus to initiate and galvanize a conversation about the way we understand that which we attempt to know.

Ethnography?

This dissertation will attempt to stimulate this discussion not through setting up a hypothesis and providing ‘ethnographic’ data to support it, but rather it will draw on the insights and wisdom I have gathered through a prolonged immersion in the field and will communicate a certain perspective. Anthropologists have since the formation of the discipline valorised ethnography as the staple mark of the discipline. Over the past few decades however, some academics have been wary against the overuse and overemphasis of ethnography in Anthropology. Ingold (2013, p.3) distinguishes anthropology from ethnography, a distinction that is, he argues, crucial to the life of anthropology as a discipline, and without which, anthropology loses meaning by collapsing into ethnography. Ingold (Ibid) posits that in anthropology, we learn from the people who we study with and we take what we learn and move forward, whereas in ethnography, we make studies of people and learn about them, whilst looking back at the information to uncover trends and patterns. Therefore, in an anthropological field study, the researcher actively learns how to attend to the world in ways in which the mentors do in the present moment and moves forward with the knowledge learned. Ingold (2014) does admit that ethnography can inform the anthropologist, however, he warns that it shouldn’t collapse into ethnography. Admittedly, I will also draw on what could be considered ‘data’ to support my argument, however the ultimate aim is not to establish any ‘facts’ but to provide a fruitful perspective which will galvanize a discussion on the nature of our relationships with the objects of our knowledge.

The author’s perspective

When reading this dissertation, it’ll be useful for the reader to be cognizant of this information, as this is the personal background behind this piece of work and has had a part to play in shaping it. I’m a 21-year-old male who comes from two different backgrounds; for the first 9 years of my life I grew up in a small town in southern Poland, in relatively poor conditions, but never in poverty. I was exposed and shaped by the standard ubiquitous hegemonic forces that permeated throughout the vast majority of the country, the main one being the Catholic Church. I didn’t grow up in a particularly devout

household, however, I was inside of a deeply religious system. I was unaware and unexposed to anything outside of the confines of Catholicism and assumed that was the way the world was. My first hint of the outside of the world beyond Catholicism occurred in Religious Studies. In school, one would have all their lessons with the same class and quite often be taught all subjects by one teacher. Religious Studies was a deviation from this, as a priest would come in and teach us about God, the bible, and Jesus, our saviour, and by second year of school would prepare us for our holy communion. This happened to all of us, except from one girl who was “of a different faith”, who always left the classroom before the lesson started and came back after it has finished. This puzzling experience was my first taste of the world beyond what I was always taught, and it remains as an important experience in the narrative of my self-development.

At the age of 9 my family immigrated to the UK, to a town in the South of England. Within a few years of being in the UK, our family saw our devoutness to Catholicism erode, and I personally was altogether relinquishing my faith. Being in the UK, I was exposed to things I previously had little idea about, such as science or learning about world religions. The erosion of my Catholicism has opened up a lot of space for other ideas and worldviews to occupy my mind, and because I was a young teenager trying to understand the world for the first time, it was a particularly interesting time to begin to relinquish my previous worldview. In my mid teen years, I had navigated the internet and flirted with a lot of New Age ideas. This phase only lasted a few years, however it fundamentally changed my attitude towards the world, by making me have a more relaxed attitude about the world. More crucially however, it is at this point that I had been exposed to Shamanism, which I have been increasingly more interested in. I was also interested in religious experiences and what they can tell us about the nature of reality and of morality. Studying anthropology shifted my focus more into how religious experiences and the ontologies of other cultures can help us relate with the world in a more meaningful and sustainable way in the age of the Anthropocene, in which our increasingly volatile and precarious predicament calls us to rethink the way we are living in the world.

Discussion

Knowledge Is Power, and Power is Knowledge

The cost of knowledge

In a 1971 interview, Michel Foucault (2014) argues that “the universality of our knowledge has been acquired at the cost of exclusions”, he points to madness and other cultures, which were both suppressed and marginalized first before they were known, as well as sexuality, which through puritanism was also put down until it was known through psychoanalysis. An example of this comes from *Madness and Civilization*, in which Foucault (2001) elucidates the process of rationality and reason distinguishing, discriminating and distancing itself from madness, putting it down, in order to know it from a distance. Foucault (2014) asks what would remain of knowledge if all limits, divisions and prohibitions were taken off; ‘what kind of knowledge would exist in the absence of suppression?’

Mystical traditions have for millennia claimed ‘knowledge’ about the nature of reality through insights that didn’t marginalize the object of knowledge, Taoism is one such tradition. Taoism is a philosophy in which the Tao, which could be understood as the underlying, all pervasive force of life, its qualities often likened to water, isn’t something to be defined and categorized, because it is a constant flow that eludes definition, thus the beginning of the *Tao Te Ching* (1997) states that:

“The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way:

The names that can be named are not unvarying names.”

The Tao can be “felt but not conceived, intuited but not categorized, divined but not explained” in the same way that “air and water cannot be cut or clutched, and their flow ceases when they are enclosed” (Watts, 2017, p.42). The Tao thus escapes the kind of ‘knowledge through marginalisation’ that Foucault (2014) noted, because it cannot be classified; it can only be ‘known’ through mystical insight (Watts, 2017). Taoist knowledge, however, isn’t knowledge in the sense of knowing facts; it is felt with the whole of one’s being, thus embodied knowledge (Csordas, 1994) captures the essence of it more. Perhaps, the word ‘knowledge’ is altogether too problematic. Taoism exemplifies a tradition through which one can understand the world without analysing it or creating

boundaries or hierarchies, and thus sets the precedence for exploring Shamanism, however, before this exploration it is imperative to contextualize the pertinent idea of ‘knowledge’ in relation to the operations of power.

Bio-power

Foucault (1998) argues that since the classical age, the ‘west’ has undergone a transformation in the mechanisms of power. There has been a shift from power exercised through deduction, the right of kings ‘to take life or let live’ or subtract his subjects’ wealth through taxation, to a ‘*bio-power*’ (ibid.), a power “bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (Foucault, 1998, p.136). Bio-power has led to the demographical concerns of increasing the health and fitness of the collective population and making the population more ‘docile’ and easier to manage (Foucault, 1991 and 1998). Because of its positive qualities, bio-power has permeated all levels of society, from the institutions of the hospital, school and prison through to the privacy of the family, and its main strategy of exercise is the technique of *discipline*, which is a meticulous attention to and analysis of details within something to increase its ‘docility’; to make it more manipulatable and utilizable (Foucault, 1991).

Rationality and the method of science have been the indispensable tools to the interests of bio-power (Foucault 2001 and 1991), they analyse, classify, provide a verifiable method of manipulation of components, and yield results. These methods know things from a distance, creating a dichotomy between the knower and the known, a relationship often expressed through domination (Foucault, 2001). Their valorisation is evident when the interests of bio-power are considered, and here the question arises: “is categorization, analysis, quantification and other methods of science and discipline the only viable ways to knowledge? Or are there other ways of knowledge, which the valorisation of science and discipline in our society defined by bio-power, has caused us to miss?”.

Classification and structuralism

Structuralists such as Levi-Strauss (1973) argue that humans communicate with each other and understand the world through representation and symbols and organize it by creating structures. Douglas (2002) argues that “our impressions are schematically determined from the start”; perception is not a passive activity of allowing an organ to take

in a ready-made impression, but a process governed by a pattern-making tendency called *schema*.

“In a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us constructs a stable world in which objects have recognisable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence. In perceiving we are building, taking some cues and rejecting others. The most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up. Ambiguous ones tend to be treated as if they harmonised with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected. If they are accepted, the structure of assumptions has to be modified.” (Douglas, 2002, p.45).

Understanding the world, and by implication knowledge, is a process of constructing coherent patterns. The structuralist conclusion goes thus: because of the way humans are wired to think, knowledge relies on creating structures, and thus necessarily implies boundaries, exclusion marginalisation; our perception is biologically determined to seek out distinctions and create hierarchies of perception.

A Boundary Dissolving Experience

The dissolution of boundaries in Shamanism

At this point I refer back to Shamanism, which is a practice that implicates the crossing of various boundaries and lays claims to special kinds of knowledge, not through analysis but through insights and entities experienced in the state of trance (Harner, 1990). The literature on Shamanism today is elaborate, and there is a plethora of examples which demonstrate the crossing of boundaries in Shamanism, however, a few should be sufficient to demonstrate the point. The malleability of boundaries in Shamanism exists on all levels, the most obvious being the archetypical layout of the Shamanic cosmology, which presents the world in multiple layers, with earth the middle layer, and the lower and upper worlds (Eliade, 1989). In the centre of the Shamanic conception of the cosmos is the *axis mundi*, a threshold structure which links the worlds together in the centre of the world, usually in the form of the world tree, and which the Shaman in his/her journey climbs to ascend or descend to the other worlds (Ibid). The Shaman is thus a mediator between the physical and the divine world (Eliade, 1989), and demonstrates the porosity between these worlds. The Shaman is also a practitioner who, in his/her trance experiences shifts between different ontological states, being able to, for example, assume the perspectives of animals

(Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997). In initiatory experiences, most commonly found in Siberian Shamanism, the Shaman in trance experiences a kind of dismemberment by the spirits, where they tear off his/her flesh, stripping layers of his/her physical being, until only the skeleton is left, and then putting them back together (Eliade, 1989) and (Vitebsky, 1995). This could be seen as a kind of liminal experience, a ritual in which the participant shifts from one social category to another, thus a crossing of boundaries (Van Gennep, 1960). Yet another example of the blurring of boundaries is the overlaying and overlapping of different realities within one world. Among the Sora, a society with strong Shamanic elements, the physical, spiritual and social worlds all exist symbiotically and simultaneously in the same reality; spirits exist in certain spaces such as jungles or rocks in the physical world and are implicated in the social and moral landscape of the Sora (Vitebsky, 1995, p.155).

Although these examples consist of ‘traditional Shamanism’ (Vitebsky, 1995), the same kind of archetypes and experiences, like the cosmology and shifting of ontological states, can also be found in Core-Shamanism (Harner, 1990) and (TheFoundationForShamanicStudies). The next section will expound on the dynamics of boundaries in Core-Shamanism.

The qualities of the experience

The trance state is central to Core-Shamanism, it is where Shamanic belief, knowledge and understanding comes from. My first ‘genuine’ shamanic experience posed the first challenge in my fieldwork. The discrepancy between the trance state in literature on Shamanism such as that of Eliade (1989), Harner (1990), and Vitebsky (1995) and the reality of my experience gave rise to feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty (see appendix i.).

Eliade (1989) was one of the first scholars to comment on the Shamanic trance state, using the term ‘*ecstasy*’ to describe the fundamental technique that all shamans use, a term which refers to a controlled trance. Since the time of Eliade’s (1989) influential book on shamanism, many other scholars have studied the phenomena of Shamanism, in its broadest and its most precise definitions. Harner (1990) is the cardinal scholar to refer to in this regard because he is the creator of Core-Shamanism, thus his concepts and ideas should be easily identifiable in Core-Shamanism. Harner (1990, p.20-21) explicitly states that shamans enter an “altered state of consciousness” at will to “contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality”; he makes a stark distinction between the SSC (Shamanic State

of Consciousness) and OSC (Ordinary State of consciousness). I will be using the terms in their abbreviated forms, as understood by Harner (1990).

My initial Core-Shamanic experiences challenged this simple dichotomy between the SSC and OSC. As noted in the appendix, my experiences were characterized by a blurring and blending of different boundaries. I felt that I was at once experiencing a mental experience of visualisation, but at the same had ephemeral entoptic visions and was still aware of my bodily presence lying down on the floor. Another significant blurring of boundaries was that of free will and what I call 'organic' or 'self-unfolding' action, to avoid the mechanistic connotations of 'determined' or 'automatic'; I found it impossible to ascertain whether I was wilfully visualising my journey or whether it was unfolding by itself, it seemed to be a blend of the two. Time was another aspect that was distorted. For a long time, I was puzzled by why I didn't sense a 'threshold' that, once crossed, transmigrated me to the 'other' state. Because of the historical scholarly dichotomization between the SSC and OSC (Harner, 1990), I was under the impression and expectation that I would tangibly feel myself pass through a threshold and be saliently cognizant of being 'in' the SSC. The reality of my predicament was that the so called 'shamanic state' felt very elusive and light, and, the transition and the hints of this state were extremely subtle, ones which I could have glossed over as just a few of the myriad different subtle perceptions that we have, had I not been in a ritualistic setting with an experienced practitioner, attempting to achieve this state.

Harner (1990,21) Also argues that the SSC includes a learned component, which includes knowledge of the cosmic geography of the non-ordinary reality and the intent and purpose of his/her journeying. Shamanism has historically been distinguished from other forms of trance like possession by scholars like Lewis (1989), who defined shamanism by a degree of control and conscious manipulation. Harner's (1990, p.21) stipulations for the SSC imply that if one were to have a religious experience of a realm commonly experienced by actual shamanic practitioners but didn't have the shamanic knowledge to supplement and understand their experience, then they wouldn't actually be in an SSC. This implication demonstrates that 'the shamanic experience' cannot be extracted from the technique and the practice that its intertwined with.

My previous remark about potentially glossing over my perceptions had I not been in a ritual setting is precisely correct, and it seems that I've been over emphasising the qualia associated with Shamanism and underestimated the technical and practical components of it. My Shamanic experience wasn't 'just' an experience, it was an exercise,

a practice that is mastered through years of experience, with thousands of years of history behind it (TheFoundationForShamanicStudies). In time, I came to realise the complexity of Shamanism as a phenomenon beyond the mere experience of trance and that rather than receiving a service, I was given a charitable opportunity to slowly and steadily delve into and be immersed in someone else's perspective.

The stipulations for the SSC (Harner, 1990) suggest that Core-Shamanism involves classification and construction of experiences. As Harner (1990) notes, the Shaman requires knowledge of the "cosmic geography". Perhaps the reason for my initial ambivalent feeling after the journey (see appendix.) was because I encountered a novel state/reality which I have not yet constructed and classified. Every time I journeyed, I would always visualize myself going through the same threshold and ending up in the same grove in the lower-world forest. I would often visualize novel areas which I haven't yet traversed, however, once mapped out, I could always return to these places, and have never forgotten about them. With the accumulation of my journeying, the Shamanic reality expanded continually, and I felt more comfortable and more certain about the stability of it. We have here then, simultaneously, a gradual expansive mapping of a reality using tools such as the archetypal conceptions of Shamanic cosmology (Harner, 1990), but simultaneously an ambiguous state of consciousness which blurs various fundamental boundaries of everyday existence. These two positions aren't necessarily contradictory, and what could be indicated here is an attempt to classify the 'SSC', mainly by scholars like Harner (1990), but the reality of the situation being that this 'SSC' eludes any thorough classification. Mia has rarely shown interest in categorizing what she experiences in journeys, and what has been instead important to her were the relationships she cultivates with the teachers she experiences and the guidance that they provide for her.

Intimate Relationships

Vibrant matter

One of the first things that struck me whilst looking around Mia's office room was the collection of items on a two-tiered shelf in the corner of the room. The shelf was packed with objects ranging from books relating to spirituality and shamanism, to candles, pebbles, a teddy bear, and other items. I asked Mia about some of these objects and she shared with me stories of their origins. Many of these items were cherished gifts from friends, some were of utilitarian value, like the candle, which she often lit during

drumming workshops. What struck me were the pebbles, peculiar because of their odd positions, one of them was right in the centre on top of a book, in the corner underneath the shelf. Mia told me that “I just felt like the stones wanted to be there, so I put them there. Sometimes I feel like I ought to be in their presence a bit more, so I take them with me wherever I go”. Another object that she elaborated on was the teddy bear, of which she said: “One of my spirit teachers is a bear, so I got this small teddy bear to remind me of my teacher. Sometimes when I’m working at the desk or my mind is clouded or in stress, I can look at the teddy bear and be reminded that what I’m worrying about is small and insignificant, and I can be reminded of what’s really important in life”. Mia reifies her relationship with her ‘teacher’ through having a material representation of him in the form of a teddy bear. This bridges the ontological gap between her and her teacher, providing a more intimate link and relationship, and blurring the boundary between the OSC and the SSC.

Bennett (2010) makes the case for the *vibrancy* of matter and argues that non-human bodies can be viewed as “actants rather than objects”. Here, the difference between humans and non-human bodies is not ignored, however, there is a lack of necessity “to describe these differences in a way that places human at the ontological center of hierarchical apex” (Bennett, 2010, p.11). This is done not by denying the power of humans, but by “presenting these powers as evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality; we are composed of certain vital materials, such as the minerals in our bones and the metal in our blood, that when assembled in certain configurations, increase their power by creating something that is more than the sum of their parts, we are, in other words, “walking, talking minerals” (Bennett, 2010).

Mia states that “Ever since I’ve started practicing shamanism, I’ve developed a sensibility towards different things”, and that this sensibility is something one cultivates and develops over time. This ‘sensibility’ is a kind of intuition and perception into subtle feelings and signs which things can exude, but also a sensitivity to one’s own personal state. On elaborating her story of the origin of the stone, she recollects: – “Sometimes I would be walking outside somewhere and I would notice the stone, which felt very conspicuous, and I would feel an urge to take it with me, so I would go along with this feeling and take the stone with me”. This sensibility allows Mia to be attuned to perceptions that she perhaps would have not been sensitive to before, one could argue that it attunes her to the vitality of certain things that are putatively inert objects devoid of agency in ‘Western’ hegemonic discourse. This problematizes the valorisation of the human in human-object relationships because the human isn’t the sole arbiter of what the human

handles. When I asked her about the particularity of the positions of the stones, Mia explained “that depends really on where the stone wants to be, I don’t really get to decide where it is, sometimes I get a strong feeling that the stone wants to be in a particular place, so I put it into that place, that stone [pointing to a stone on a book] for example wanted to be on top of this book, so I put it on this book and it has stayed there ever since. This animistic relationship (Harvey, 2013) problematizes hegemonic notions and boundaries of personhood as it creates a common interpersonal space in which the human and the non-human can interact and in a personal, proximate and material encounter. Mia’s relationships with some objects is present, however they’re peripheral in relation to her relationship with ‘spirit’, which plays a very important role in her life.

The guiding force of Spirit

One day, after a session of Shamanic journeying, I was sitting on the floor with Mia in her office room and was conversing with her. She shared with me an interesting analogy. “Imagine that this carpet was the whole of humanity, every little individual thread would be a single person” she said, drawing my attention to the ornate carpet. “I’m just a small thread within this big carpet, being guided by higher process [Spirit/spirit teachers], and every little thread is unique and special in its own way, but if we want to change things, we need to work together”. What Mia calls ‘Spirit’, a force which reveals itself in various forms in the journeys (e.g. the spirit teacher), has become with prolonged Shamanic practice a guiding force in Mia’s life. Mia has spent two decades building a trustful relationship with ‘Spirit’ and its many incarnations. Through prolonged experience, Mia’s relationship with Spirit has percolated into everyday life, she can enter a trance state without a drum by simply steadily tapping her collar bone, and sometimes she feels the presence of Spirit even when not in trance. Spirit provides her with guidance and knowledge about the courses of action she can take and what she can learn from taking them. Mia has told me that formulating the right intention for the journey is crucial because ‘time’ doesn’t work in the same way that it does in everyday reality, thus she advises not to ask temporally contingent questions. Also, the teacher can see the bigger pictures of one’s life, therefore they can advise you to do things that might be good for you in the long run, however, they could also be painful in the short term. Therefore, the right intention is to simply seek knowledge on what can be learnt from taking certain courses of action, and then make the judgement yourself.

Due to the length of this study, there isn't sufficient space to delve into the philosophical question of whether what one gains through Shamanic practice can be considered as 'real knowledge'. However, we ought to 'take others seriously' (Ingold, 2018), and considering the decades of experience Mia has in practicing and forming her life around Core-Shamanism, to assume that she hasn't learned from her relationships with entities on journeys would be arrogant. Of course, she will not gather information on most scientific subjects, but she will gain certain personal insights which are discussed throughout this dissertation. Working on this assumption, what is thus gotten at here, is a type of knowledge that one gets not by analysis and marginalisation (Foucault, 2014), but from the inside, by being humble and opening oneself up to interactions with others (Ingold, 2014), by trust in the informer (teacher) and, having an insight into the consequences, by an intuition on whether the course of action will be beneficial to the individual.

Coming Closer to The Known

De-conditioning and embodiment

Before my fieldwork experiences, I saw myself as an open-minded person, always willing to entertain different ideas, untethered to any ideology. Throughout my fieldwork however, this assumption has been continually challenged. This process started after my first 'genuine' Shamanic journey, however there was a particular turning point, a eureka moment, in which I suddenly realized the extent of my conditioning. Mia often advised me on the importance of trust, trust in the spirit teachers and trust in Mia's guidance. She also on occasion pointed out my 'expectations' of the process which led me to be either disappointed or frustrated. I always acknowledged these remarks, however, never gave them serious consideration, until this one moment. This moment occurred during a workshop to which a few first-timers turned up to, when one individual noted his difficulty in assuming a comfortable position and being able to focus on visualizing. Mia responded articulately by saying that "when we first journey, our nervous systems begins to adapt to this state... when we journey, we journey with the whole of our bodies, and it will take time for our bodies to learn to journey, to get used to the drumming, the lying down, and focusing the mind." She added that "we did it [visualizing and 'journeying' in our minds] all the time as children when we grew up", but as our lives went on, we built up "layers of conditions" that made us uncomfortable in certain positions and unable to be focused, thus

hindering our ability to journey. What we have to do then, she said, is to de-condition ourselves and return to that state we were in as children, to be able to clearly visualize and focus on something. This happens simply overtime through practice, Mia has had to herself journey every day for months in her early stages to get comfortable with the state.

Suddenly I was hit with a deep sense of realisation, I saw with clarity how I've had these "layers of conditioning" which certainly compromised my experience of Shamanism and made it harder to relate with what I was doing and experiencing. I realised my subconscious scientifico-rational bias made me sceptical of my experiences, not because I didn't think what I experienced was worthwhile, precisely the opposite, because I cared about Shamanism to the point of romanticization, and I wanted an experience which challenged the established reductionist-materialist model of reality. Mia made me realize that I was resisting the real goodness that Core-Shamanism has to offer because I didn't open myself up to it.

To gain a deeper understanding of this deconditioning process, we can approach it through the paradigm embodiment, which, as an approach, treats the body as "the existential ground of culture and self" and analyses phenomena related to the body from the perspective of the body-person, characterized by the term 'being-in-the-world' (Csordas, 1994). Embodiment distinguishes itself from representational analyses, such as the structuralist analyses of Douglas (2002) or the analyses of power dynamics by Foucault (1991,1998,2001); wherein representational analyses treat the body as a site on and in which cultural, political and biological processes play themselves out *on*, embodiment is the recognition and utilization of the fact that the body is also the source *from* which culture emanates (Csordas, 1994). This adds agency and sentience to body-related analysis, something that representational analyses, which negate individual agency and consider the body as a passive receiver of higher processes, miss (Ibid.). In summation, in representation, the body is an *object* of knowledge, whereas in embodiment, the body is the *source* from which knowledge is attained, thus, embodiment provides an opportunity for the Anthropology "not merely about the body, but from the body" (Csordas, 1994, xi).

The embodiment approach (Csordas, 1994) shines a light on Mia's explanation and my subsequent realisation. Core-Shamanism is very much an embodied practice that one learns with the whole of their body and, as Mia has pointed out, with the whole of their nervous system, thus, the whole of their being. The message of this interaction but also the interaction itself are a prime example of Ingold's (2014) argument that we cannot disentangle "knowing from being". What this means is that knowledge is birthed not from an objective observer who is somehow severed from that which he/she is engaging with,

but from us as subjects who are inside of the world, in other words, “knowledge grows from the crucible of lives lived with others” (Ingold, 2014). Through engaging with Mia in a shared space, I’ve gotten insights on my personal, subconscious blockages and biases, as well as gaining a richer understanding of Core-Shamanism. This knowledge ultimately changed the way I engaged with Core-Shamanism, ever since the turning point realisation I have felt more comfortable during journeys and have also been more attentive to the subtleties of my engagement with the practice. Embodiment stimulates these kinds of insights because it encourages one to learn *from* the body, and not to analyse bodies and subjects from an outside perspective. Had I been analysing what Mia was saying in the moment, instead of simply being attentive to what she was saying, I would have likely missed this brilliant insight. This highlights the importance of taking others seriously (Ingold, 2018) and what Anthropology can gain from simply being attentive to and listening to those who they engage with in the field.

Another example of embodied learning comes from a different workshop, in which Mia taught me a Tai Chi exercise called Wakame. Mia taught this to me as an exercise I could use to prepare myself (mind and body) and get into the right mindset to journey more effectively. Wakame is a Japanese term which translates to ‘seaweed’, and the idea of this exercise is simply to find a comfortable space to stand in, and then simply stand, with knees slightly bent, relax the body and gently sway in whichever direction your body takes you, as if you were a piece of seaweed. Through the paradigm of embodiment (Csordas, 1994), one can note that the aim of this exercise is literally to embody a piece of seaweed, not for any symbolic meaning, but simply for the body to create in itself, or shift into, a calmer state which is more attentive and sensitive to changes in the body and consciousness.

Mapping meaning

Having established the holistic nature in which Core-Shamanism is practiced, it is now germane to discuss the creation of meaning in Core-Shamanic journeys, which is perhaps one of its most important aspects, after all, the purpose of Core-Shamanism is to heal individuals and re-kindle their spirituality (Harner, 1990). Mia has always been clear about the lack of a common interpretative scheme and the heterogeneity of the forms the answers to our questions come in, she said that “answers don’t always come in the form of words, sometimes you ask a question, and the landscape might change, and you might see a vision of a flower, and it’s always going to be very personal, and only you may know

what the answer means”. For an outsider, this might sound dubious, but throughout my journeying I have experienced recurring patterns and scenes, such as that of a red rose or a deer. My current personal interpretation, is that these recurrent images which I experience with increased proximity, intimacy and clarity, relate to my subconscious or unconscious mental processes.

Watts’ (2017) explanation of mapping meaning with the I Ching provides a good comparative case which can be applied to understanding shamanic journeying. Zen painters in the 13th century used an interesting technique of creating paintings, they splattered vague forms of paint and water onto the canvas, and then finished the paintings with a few focused strokes of the brush to give form to the formlessness, creating identifiable landscapes and objects (Watts, 2017, p.29-30). Watts (2017, p.30) observes that the painters “would contemplate the mess until they could project the shapes and outlines of landscapes” and would with a few touches “bring it out for all to see”.

Whilst Watts (2017, p.30) argues that the I Ching follows this technique of “forms to be contemplated empty-mindedly until the hidden meaning reveals itself, in accordance with one’s own unconscious tendencies”, a case can certainly be made that this method also applies to the mapping of meaning in Shamanic journeys. During my journeys, I would commonly experience very ephemeral and ethereal entoptic visions, like those of the roses and the deer’s head noted above. Usually these visions emerged in a nebulous nature, they consisted of bright colours with outlines that were identifiable yet didn’t seem to solidly constitute any object; the resemblance between the actual visions and objects was tentative. This was however the moment at which they arose. What happened within a few seconds of these visions was a delineation and interpretation, where I would ‘interpret’ the vision. As that was done, the visions transformed from their nebulous and vague nature into something more concrete and identifiable, and after this the visions became integrated into my journey, which perceptually exists not underneath my eyelids but rather in the field of the imagination. I would like to refer back to the moment in my third journey where I saw a vague vision (see appendix.), then interpreted it as a deer’s head, and then integrated that vision into the journey that I was having, at which point I was looking at a whole deer, from the top of the hill.

At this point, it is necessary to note a caveat, which pertains to the role of the ‘will’ in this equation; although I describe the demarcating and interpreting of the visions as me ‘doing it’, the reality of the act is that it was effortless and felt almost instinctive, like it happened of its own accord, and it is difficult to pinpoint whether I was doing it, or

whether *it* was forming by itself; the introduction of an ego only problematizes the understanding of this phenomenon. Another example of delineating entoptic visions comes from another journey I have had, in which I saw a vague vision of a man. I identified this vision as a statue of a man, which reminded me of the magnificent golden statue of Johann Strauss standing behind the Kursalon Hübner in Vienna, that I saw the summer before. I then visualized an archway around the statue, much like the original, but I also pictured it on top of a tower of a Romanesque style church. Once again, the raw qualia of the vision were interpreted and then integrated, or ‘bled’ into, the context of the journey, a different mental space. The parallels between my experience and Watts’ (2017) explanation of the I Ching are obvious: Like the Zen painters of the 13th century, I ‘empty-mindedly’ contemplated formlessness and ‘drew around’ to give form and meaning to the apparently formless visions. In this sense, I certainly have found meaning in my experiences, and perhaps I have not so much found but realized that the meaning was not a static command or insight, but a lively process which unfolds in the moment of its creation; ‘meaning’ is not a ‘thing’ or an ‘idea’ to be dispensed around and implanted in people’s minds, but an active process of interaction between the many layers of one’s mind, implicating their whole being, and the apparent formlessness of the world.

Despite the ready-made common archetypes of the cosmology, the categories of spirit animals and teachers, Core-Shamanism is a practice based on the democratization of meaning. As noted above, Mia states that only the person will truly know the meaning of their own journeys. What follows from this is that it is up to the practitioner, if he/she chooses to take Core-Shamanism seriously, to create meaning on their journeys. Thus, Core-Shamanism could be seen as a kind of quest to find personal meaning and give form to formlessness, as well as to build an intimate relationship with spirit, or, depending on one’s interpretation, to integrate the unconscious mental processes into the conscious, a process called ‘individuation’ in Jungian psychology (Jung, 1944). It is a practice of bringing the unconscious to the fore of one’s consciousness, and ‘knowing’ it through becoming familiar and intimate with it.

The dynamic and nature of meaning creation

It remains to be answered whether this meaning creation is a process of categorization (Levi-Strauss, 1973) and (Douglas, 2002), or whether it is an unbounding and embodied process. As I have argued earlier in accordance to Watts’ (2017) explanation of meaning mapping, I ‘empty-mindedly’ contemplated the forms to give them meaning.

Moreover, the state of this contemplation blurred the boundary between cause and effect, for it seemed neither the notions of ‘will’ or ‘instinct’ accurately grasped what happened. ‘I’ didn’t really form it, and ‘it’ didn’t form itself, it was closer to an unusual blending of the two, a state of consciousness in which the subject/object relationship is very precarious. It is evident that the forms were categorized, given a structure, and understood in terms of what I was already familiar with, however, it is also true, if not more, that I was in an embodied state which implicated the whole of my being and which was characterized by a blurring of various boundaries such as those of subject/object, physical/entoptic/mental, temporal and spatial (see appendix.). What could thus be said about the interpretation of meaning is that it’s understood through a degree of categorization, however, this categorization is an embodied process which requires not a cerebral effort of free will, but the whole of one’s being and a blending of will with organic, self-unfolding action. Although categorizing and delineating boundaries is involved, some fundamental boundaries, like that cause and effect, are erased, therefore knowledge gained from interpretation in Core-Shamanism is not one of marginalization and distancing as Foucault (2014) mentioned. It is a spontaneous, quasi-organic unfolding which brings that which it’s trying to understand closer to it, creating a more intimate and personal link, rather than distancing itself from the object of knowledge.

Summary and Conclusion

Reflections on fieldwork

My role as the researcher has changed throughout the length of the fieldwork. Initially, I saw myself with the task of researching the nature of boundaries in relation to Core-Shamanism. In the beginning, I had a dichotomous approach of analysing what I experienced and what Mia said as the researcher, but as early as my first experience (see appendix.), this dichotomy was being challenged. My over-analytical mindset was preventing me from truly embracing Core-Shamanism, which some Anthropologists, especially in the past, consider unproblematic, as getting too involved with the people I study would compromise my position as the Anthropologist (Robben and Sluka, 2012). Doing fieldwork made me realise that this approach is anachronistic, of course the Anthropologist cannot fully 'go native', however, a deep immersion is necessary to get any insight into the perspectives of the people studied; had I not participated in Shamanic workshops, then I would not be writing this particular dissertation and would not have learnt the things I did. This immersion happens naturally over time if one does not resist it. As trust built up between me and Mia, she gave me sneak peeks into her perspective on the world and made many suggestions as to Shamanic related activities and things I should explore. I also realised the gravity of Mauss' (1969) insight about the importance of gift exchange in human conduct, and I have myself gifted a small jar of honey that came from my uncle's beehives in Poland, to give my thanks to Mia for letting me into her space and to explore her perspective.

Once I opened myself up to Core-Shamanism, I started to learn and discover many things about myself and my role as the Anthropologist, which is what this dissertation ultimately became about. The first insight was that an attentiveness to smaller details can bring to the surface information about relationships which would otherwise be missed, the example was me noticing the peculiar placements of the stones on the shelf. When I asked Mia about these humble stones, she disclosed to me a relationship that I would have otherwise missed. Another insight that I got was the realisation of the extent of my conditions, as mentioned earlier in this discussion. When I was struck with this insight, it completely changed the dynamic of my relationship, I realised that the scepticism and analytical mindset that was implicated with what I thought I was supposed to be as a researcher has been blocking from getting a clearer picture of what Core-Shamanism is about. It also exposed the more personal narratives of being open minded that I told myself

about, as problematic. I realised that I have been conditioned to reject these kinds of practices, which led me to question what exactly I was doing in the field. This also signified the importance of taking others seriously (Ingold, 2018). The most crucial insight that meaning is not a static meme that one subscribes to but a lively and constant process that one is constantly engaged with. The penultimate take-away from my fieldwork was the intimacy with the object of knowledge, which became the cardinal argument of this dissertation.

Boundary dissolving experiences and relationships

The discussion established that the nature of the SSC eludes any thorough organization. The SSC is a state/technique which does involve a set of basic categories to be navigated in, however beyond that, thorough categorizations of the state are useful only for scholars or newbies rather than practitioners with at least some experience. As Harner (1990) himself points out, Shamans know when they are talking about things related to Shamanism as opposed to ordinary reality, and thus do not make any explicit distinctions. The state of consciousness that I experienced in the field was one which problematizes the ways in which we classify experience itself, it blurred the boundaries between physical/entoptic/mental and distorted space and time. Mia herself only made such distinctions when teaching me in the early stages. What was more important for her was to have a more intimate and trustful connection with spirit and other persons/'energies' such as people in her life or the pebbles in her office. Her relationship with 'spirit' blurred overtime as it became more integrated into her daily life. Spirit is a major source of guidance and knowledge in Mia's life, and thus it can be said that Core-Shamanism, instead of marginalizing, classifying, and knowing things from a distance (Foucault, 2014), knows things through intimacy, by being closer to the object of knowledge and becoming entangled with it, rather than keeping a distance and knowing it as an 'objective' observer.

Embodiment and meaning

The discussion also explored the extent to which classification is involved in the process of understanding and interpreting what one experiences in the journey. The organization of entoptic phenomena into recognizable shapes and their integration into the mental space of the journey shows that there is certainly a degree of classification involved in the process of understanding the experiences of the journey. Overall however, Core-Shamanism is a technique that requires one to adapt and practice with the whole of their

being, it is an embodied learning that, as mentioned above, blurs and problematizes certain boundaries and concepts which elude classification. If this proves anything, then it is that classification doesn't necessarily have to occur in this dichotomous and hierarchical context that Foucault (2014) was alluding to and doesn't necessarily create a distance between the knower and the object of knowledge. Perhaps it is because Core-Shamanism isn't governed by the same dynamics of power that many of our institutions are (Foucault, 1998), and uses discipline in a different way to said institutions, that it creates a different, more intimate and holistic knowledge relationship.

Conclusion

To conclude, Core-Shamanism challenges the ontological divide between the observer and the object of knowledge. In Core-Shamanism, the knower builds relationships and becomes more intimate with that which he/she encounters on his/her journeys, whether they are understood as spirit teachers or unconscious processes. Instead of a distancing from the object of knowledge, the knower in Core-shamanism gains proximity to the object of knowledge, the practitioner becomes entangled and implicated with the entities/processes that can give him/her guidance, knowledge and insights into circumstances in their lives and their own personal inner states. Core-Shamanism thus invites us to the possibility that there is much to learn about the world if we open ourselves to it and build more intimate and proximate relationships with that which we want to know about. Finally, it's a testament to the insight that knowledge comes "from the crucible of life lived with others" (Ingold, 2018).

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Appendix

This appendix is a short memoir of my first moments ‘in the field’ and describes my first few attempts at journeying, as well as my first ‘genuine’ journey, and the feelings that I experienced throughout the process. It also contains a few images that aim to give the reader a sense of the kind of environment that I experienced in the trance states.

On the cusp of the extraordinary

After a short walk from my apartment, I finally arrive at the door of Mia Hillariet’s house. Feelings of anticipation, excitement and curiosity permeate my being, but also, a serene and focused state of confidence, as if I was preparing myself mentally for an acting that required these kinds of qualities; getting ‘into the zone’ as some may call it.

The door opens, it’s Mia, a shamanic practitioner with over two decades of experience in the practice, a person I’ve heard many good things about and one who I’ve been meaning to meet for some time. We greeted each other and she invited me into her office, the room in which she runs the shamanic drumming workshops. As I walk into the office room, I get an appreciation for just how homely the room is; despite being an office, a place of ‘work’, the room was filled with colourful carpets, pillows and blankets there was a couch in the corner and a huge plant ascending all the way to the ceiling in the other, this was certainly not an office I was acquainted with.

After exchanging a brief and gregarious conversation, we sat down and the interaction took on a slightly more ‘serious’, but equally friendly quality. “So, what do you know about shamanism?” asked Mia. She wanted to know the extent of my knowledge on the topic to ascertain how much introducing I actually need. We discussed Mircea Eliade, Michael Harner, the basic shamanic concepts such as the archetypical shamanic worldview or what the role of the psychopomp is. Mia was quite impressed with my knowledge on the topic, a recognition that is always flattering, especially by a person of experience, nevertheless an expression that probably stroked my ego a little bit too much coming into my first shamanic experience.

Stranded in a sea of ambiguity

Once the conversation was finished, it was time to begin. I was asked by Mia to take a sheepskin to lie on, a blanket and a pillow, and then to pick a comfortable place to lie in on the floor. I picked up the items and positioned myself in what I thought was the most comfortable position. Despite my usual fidgety tendencies, the excitement I was feeling nullified any sense of initial restlessness, I was ready for action. Mia shut the blinds, lit a candle on the shelf, and started the monotonous drumming. My aim was very simple; to travel to the lower world and find a teacher, I have been repeating this aim constantly, almost like a mantra, which is what Mia recommended, I HAD to have a clear intent. I am lying with my eyes closed, trying to visualize a familiar scene with a tree. I see my childhood backyard and my neighbours willow tree; I try to imagine myself going into it and through the roots down to the ground deep below. For some reason I can't quite do this, my visualizing faculties are letting me down, I can picture the scene and everything around me, but when it comes to going through roots, my mind seems to become discombobulated by the very idea of moving through roots, I just cannot comprehend what this would look or feel like. I keep taking a step back and seeing myself outside of the tree and then trying to picture myself going through its roots, but to no avail. At this point I have a salient feeling that something is wrong, but I pull through. I went back to square one, repeat intent, imagine a scene, this time, it was a tree on the campus of my university, another familiar place. I visualize myself not going straight through the roots, but instead going into a hole in front of the tree. I was now in a small, dark chamber. There was a shaft like corridor running diagonally downwards, a root ran along the ceiling of this shaft. I grabbed the root and slid down as if it was a zip line, however I ended up in another narrow chamber, and this time I felt like I couldn't muster up the imaginative courage to get me through to wherever I would end up next. I repeatedly retraced my steps back and tried different avenues in the winding mazes of my mind, but always arriving at a cul-de-sac; I simply couldn't 'breakthrough' to the 'other' world. The drumming pattern suddenly changed; it was the call back. I was supposed to make my way back from where ever I ventured to, but I felt like I didn't really go anywhere to begin with, my 'journey' was that of a constant failure and retrial. Mia assured me that it is often the case that it takes a few attempts before the first journey. I took these words as gospel and simply assumed I wasn't quite getting it yet.

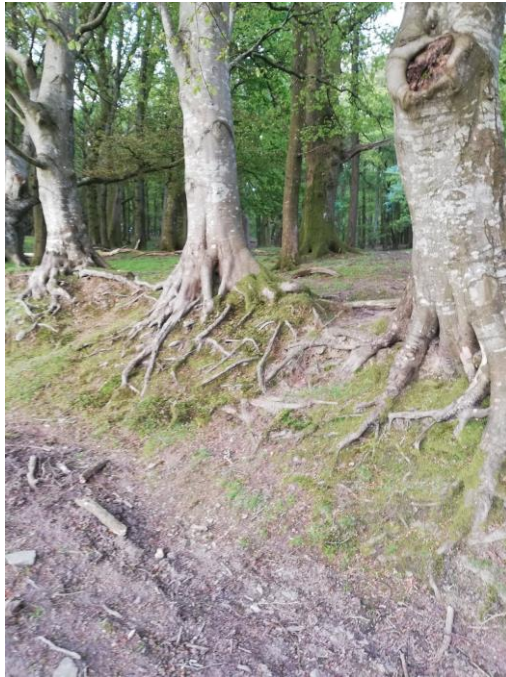


Figure 3



Figure 2

Figure 2 depicts a tree familiar to me that I visualized in the trance state to descend to the lower world. Figure 3 depicts a set of trees with clearly visible and protruding roots, one of the techniques of descending down to the lower world is to visualize oneself going down the roots of a tree, these kinds of roots are ideal candidates as they are clearly visible and easy to visualize. Personally, I ultimately found my visualizing capabilities reach their limit when trying to descend down the roots of the familiar tree, and instead had to opt for a different tree with a hollow inside and a ladder leading to the lower-world. My inability to descend down the tree in figure 1 caused much frustration due to my continued failed attempts every time I retraced my steps and tried again.

‘Doing it right’

My second attempt was more or less the same as my first experience; inability to get anywhere, to pass through the ‘threshold’. After my second attempt the feelings of disappointment started to catch up to me, however, the idea that there was always a chance to try again gave me solace. We agreed that I would try one last time, for as they say: “third time lucky!”. I got back into a comfortable position, closed my eyes, and the monotonous drumming started once again. This time I imagined myself in a familiar virtual space. I visualized a huge tree, with large, heavy, almost unrelenting, wooden doors. I dragged them open and squeezed in. Inside there were 2 ladders, one going up the tree and one going down, because I was going to the lower world, I chose to go down. Looking back on the way the experience unfolded, it was at this decisive moment that my attitude/approach, and I suppose, ‘technique’, shifted. The perception that I initially had of being ‘on the cusp of the extraordinary’ was one which was quickly being challenged; I wasn’t going to get what I thought I would be getting, and what Core-Shamanism is, is definitely not what I thought it was. I chose to ‘simply imagine’ the lower world, as opposed to awaiting a world to unfold before me, I suppose that I thoroughly underestimated the role mental will and intention had in the practice, and I didn’t at that point understand at all the relational dynamics between intention, will, and the state of consciousness that the person is in in Core-Shamanism. Having made this shift, I imagined going down the long ladder for quite some time, surrounded by walls made of soil, until I finally managed to reach the bottom, at which point I visualized an emerging world around me, a world that was very much like a dense deciduous forest. I arrived in a clearing in the forest, also in the clearing was an elf figure. Since my aim was to ‘find a teacher’, I asked her whether she was my ‘teacher’. After asking this question, a peculiar sense of affirmation struck me; “yes!” seemed to be the answer. I then asked the question again just to make sure, there was a constant alternating between ‘yes’ and ‘no’, but at the end of it, I definitely had a feeling of a resounding ‘yes’. This was a rather odd feeling, and simple hermeneutics of this account might lead one to believe that I merely ‘imagined’ it, however I had an odd sense in which there was a bit more to this ‘yes’ rather than a mere consciously-willed figment of the imagination. Since I’ve already achieved what I set out to do, I asked the teacher “What should I do now?”, and she answered pointing up at a hill in the distance “go up onto that hill and meet me there”. I trudged nimbly up the hill to find the elf already there. I didn’t have much interaction with her at this point, but instead I had a quite interesting aesthetic, and seemingly strongly symbolic experience. The colloquial phrase of “being in a million places at once” is very pertinent here because I feel like I was

in three identifiable and distinctive fields of experience, which were interacting with each other to a certain extent. Although the normal extent of this feeling was mitigated, I still felt like an embodied being; I could still feel my body and wasn't completely dissociated from it. I was also immersed in this 'imaginary' world of visualization and symbolic meaning. However, at the same time, I was also aware of the qualia unfolding underneath my closed eyelids. On this hill top, I saw a faint entoptic vision of what seemed to look like a deer's head, this vision lasted only for several seconds, and then a curious thing happened. By minutely transforming the head, and visualizing the body, I constructed a whole deer from this vague entoptic vision, it was as if what was underneath my eyelids was transposed into the space of pure imagination, and once in this space, it was integrated into the context of the deer in the forest. Now in the space of imagination, the deer ran towards me and then jumped, its antlers set on fire, and it glided gracefully over me in slow motion. After this I saw another faint entoptic vision, this time of several dark red roses stretching out laterally and connected by the thorny stigmata. My time on the hill has come to an end as I felt a calling to go in a certain direction. I went down the steep hill and headed in one specific direction, towards a small but torrential stream swiftly flowing at a steep gradient. The forest that I trekked through was teeming with life, there were lots of rabbits and deer moving around, and the density of the canopy blocked out most of the light, creating an ethereal atmosphere. Once I got to the stream, I saw, standing on the other side of the stream, my teacher elf once again, this time it was for the last time as she told me to take a sip from the stream, and after I had done that she disappeared. The call-back drum pattern conveniently begun, and I made my way back. I immediately tried to describe the experience to Mia, to the best of my ability. It was evident to me that this third attempt was certainly more fruitful than the two that preceded it, however, my perception and experience of Core-shamanism would forever change after Mia's response to my description; with a big, vicarious smile on her face, she simply responded "Well, it sounds to me like you've just had a shamanic journey!"

Figures 4 and 5 depict areas of the Olwen woods outside of Lampeter, an area that I commonly visit. These areas ultimately informed and moulded my experience of the lower-world, however, these images are only similes, as in my trance experiences the forests of the lower-world had many animals in it and had a darker, more mystical atmosphere to them.



Figure 4



Figure 5