

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation will aim to explore how the practice of shamanism, and in particular, neo-shamanic practice in Wales interacts with the various types of boundaries, including physical, social, mental, metaphysical, and ontological. The assumption is that shamanism does indeed blur boundaries, however it might equally be true that it may reinforce others, which is something that ought to be assessed in detail. The real question however is, how and in what ways, does shamanic practice and being a shaman challenge various boundaries set on the individual by their culture. Boundaries are different in every society, what is reasonable and safe in one society might be deemed dangerous and unreasonable in another. Also a shaman who has been brought up in a society in which shamanism is ingrained in the culture will interact with boundaries differently than someone (in this case the participants that I will study) who was introduced to shamanism in a culture in which it is a new and underground phenomenon. The boundaries and the way neo-shamanic practitioners interact with them will thus be very localised and specific, however it is hoped that this study will elucidate the nature of what it means to cross a boundary and the impact it has on the individuals and those around him/her.

Status of fieldwork

I have spent several hours' worth (approximately 7-8 hours) conducting fieldwork with my participant Mia Hillariet, a female shamanic practitioner in Lampeter who runs drumming workshops, and who also performs shamanic healing on occasions. Throughout this time I have engaged in many conversations with Mia pertaining to the topics of the various objects in her office room (in which the shamanism is performed), some relating to shamanism and others not, her general life journey as a shamanic practitioner, some of her personal journeys and their implications, and various ecological ideas. A theme which continuously manifests in our conversations or is tacitly implied is a general concern about life and the proper, ethical way to live it. I am also considering increasing the number of participants within the study, depending on whether I want to work with my current participant in more depth or whether I'm willing to sacrifice the depth for a more varied qualitative outlook. Another option that I am also considering is simply interviewing people who do not consider themselves shamans but who have journeyed before and are willing to share their insights and impressions.

Methodology

The chief strategy of conducting the ethnography will be through participant observation. Participant observation is the act of actively participating in the activities of the participants that the anthropologist is working with. Malinowski was one of the first anthropologists to argue for the significance of a first-hand, empirically based ethnography which studies the participants, their culture and social milieu, from an inside perspective. Malinowski (2014, pp.24) argued that one of the cardinal aims of ethnography was to “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world”. He argued (ibid) that not studying “the hold which life has” on a person misses the “greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man”. Despite Malinowski’s work being inescapably influenced by the intellectual climate of his time, where the white man was always at the forefront, his insights on conducting fieldwork persevere to this day, which is why this research aims to explore how living and practicing shamanism affects not just my participant(s), but to a certain limited extent also me personally. Having conversations with my participant will likely be the way in which I gather most of the ethnographic data, as often the best way to understand someone is to let them tell you. As mentioned above, I am also considering interviewing people who have journeyed, however that might again be realised in a form of conversation rather than a formal interview, on the other hand, there is always a middle-ground, a semi-formal interview, in which I come into the conversation with the participant with certain questions that I would like answered, however the I will try to stay with the flow of the conversation. I will likely try the semi-formal interview first, and see whether I need more or less formality, or whether the semi-formal structure is the most fruitful. Throughout my fieldwork I have also journeyed in Mia’s workshops myself, thus auto-ethnography will be another technique used to record and analyse data. Since neo-shamanic journey experiences are seen as quite personal, studying it through my own experiences ought to reveal things that I otherwise maybe would have not known about.

Literature and theory

When undertaking any sort of research on shamanic practice, it is almost imperative to refer to the scholarly classics of this domain, one such important work is Mircea Eliades’ *‘Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy’*. This book is a comprehensive study of shamanism, focused on Siberia, but includes a plethora of examples from ethnic groups from most continents. One of the most significant and salient points in the work is that Eliade (1989) defines shamanism as a technique of ecstasy, and although he traces the word shaman to the Evenk word *‘saman’*, (implying that strictly

speaking it relates only to the ecstatic magico-religious practitioners of the Evenk), he extends the definition to include other ecstatic practitioners outside of the Evenk because of the cross-cultural similarity between the practices and the state of ecstasy. This book is a useful starting point for delineating and understanding the definitions and practices involved with shamanism.

Another scholarly work that is of great utility for this research is the work of Michael Harner, the founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies and one of the key figures in introducing shamanism into North America and Europe. Michael Harner's work is crucial to this research because he has created a practice called 'core shamanism' which takes the core elements of shamanic practices from ethnic groups around the world and combines them into a single 'shamanism' which is taught across the world to people in societies in which shamanic practices are alien (FoundationForShamanicStudies.org, 2017). Harner's book (1990) *'The Way of the Shaman'* is especially important because it is an introduction to and a guide to core-shamanism, which has to a very large extent shaped the way people in Wales, and in fact my participant (who owns and has read the book mentioned above), practice and feel about shamanism.

The crucial theoretical foundation in this research will be that of Mary Douglas's theories about and analysis of concepts such as pollution, human and societal boundaries and margins, and the way in which the human mind organises and constructs a coherent world through what is known as a 'schema'. Douglas (2002, pp.45-46) notes that our perception is determined schematically, and is governed by a pattern-making tendency; from a "chaos of shifting impressions" (ibid) we select stimuli which interests us, over time creating a conservative bias. Once a strong enough pattern is built up, anomalies (stimuli which do not fit the individual's schematic pattern) will manifest and become pronounced, creating boundaries between known reality and unknown reality, between safe reality and potentially dangerous reality, between comforting reality and uncomfortable reality. Douglas (2002) argues that society works in much the same way, it has a structure which is based on a certain set of assumptions, and which has boundaries which can be reified in physical reality. The margins of society can often be quite potent, and transgressing them can be seen as an act of danger, or irrationality (ibid). It is important to note that shamans have quite often been interpreted as psychotic or dangerous, and there have been attempts to wipe them out because of this in history (Vitebsky, 1995).

Piers Vitebsky's *"The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul, Trance, Ecstasy and Healing from Siberia to the Amazon"* is another book referred to in this research, it is a detailed account of the various aspects of shamanism cross-culturally, including neo-shamanism. The book also contains a lot of information about the ways in which shamanism crosses various boundaries, e.g. shamanism serves as an

experiential basis for an animistic worldview which can dissolve the boundaries between the spiritual, social and physical landscapes by offering a view of the world in which people have interactions and relationships with spirits which occupy physical space (hills, forest, river). In such a world view the physical world is not divided from the social and the spiritual, those boundaries are blurred, allowing for an integrated and holistic world.

References

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