

‘Shamanism’ as an Artifact of Colonialism

Over recent decades, the Western-imagination has given rise to a reification of traditional healing practices self-described as neo-shamanism. Cultivated as a largely white demographic, practitioners have flocked to the movement from the many far-reaches of modernity, often finding in it an opportunity to engage that which has laid beyond the socio-cultural boundaries of their own personal religious and non-religious upbringings. The possibility of Neo-shamanism relies on the premise that there is (1) an underlying universal ‘Shamanism’ from which to draw its knowledge, that (2) the universality of this shamanism allows it to be sculpted to the preference of each individual without fear of appropriation, and so is therefore (3) the right of any individual to be a neo-Shaman, no matter their lineage, as ‘Shamanic’ knowledge belongs to the collective of humanity and not to any cultural lineage in particular (Johnson 2013). Due to this criteria, Neo-Shamanism is critically invested in substantiating Shamanism as a clear and classifiable practice by which to hold a discourse. The aim of this paper is not to dissuade the neo-Shaman from cultivating their spiritual practice, but rather to illuminate the aesthetic and political problems that are inherent to Neo-Shamanism’s dependency on universalization of traditions around the world, which I believe must be critically examined if one is to honestly proceed in any substantial discourse (Collinson 1985).¹

When examining why it is that movements form the ways that they do, it is helpful to inquire into what it is that the creator-culture has been lacking and desirous of, as the basis for the formation of something new. It is this cultural context, or absence thereof, that describes the nature of the movement. When examining the particular development of European and Euro-American society, one can begin to understand why neo-Shamanism has come to form as it has today, and what purpose it has come to serve. The history of the term ‘Shamanism’ began

¹ My use of the word ‘aesthetic’ can best be understood in Diane Collinson’s essay: *Ethics and Aesthetics are One* (1985).

at the end of the eighteenth Century, when German explorers encountered tribes of the Manchu-Tungus language in Siberia (Flaherty 1992). The Tungus term 'saman', used to describe various medicine men of that specific tradition (of which there was nuanced difference and technique), was then morphed into the German noun 'schaman', which was then morphed into its current form, 'shaman', ubiquitously and casually applied to all forms of spirit-healers and medicine people from all cultures all around the world.

The reality that 'Shaman' has become our common descriptor accurately exposes the cultural story that gave rise to it. That we continue to use it today, in the same way that it was used throughout the 19th and 20th century, and eventually defined in Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* in 1964, shows how little the discourse has evolved (1964). Despite its seemingly harmless pursuit, I propose that the term 'Shamanism' is a predominantly Western concept unconsciously enacted as a tool of white supremacy, in the sense that it universalizes indigenous knowledge systems to the point where they are more readily made available to the consumption of the colonizing force, and renders nuanced traditions into positions of service to a separate and external centralized society (Smith 2012). One possible reason for the historically-static nature of the term 'Shamanism' could then be that its primary function is not actually to explore different healing modalities of various traditions, but rather to homogenize them into a understandable and therefore consumable form, which relies on an idea of stasis over dimensionality. As David Holmberg writes:

Although a rich ethnographic literature is subsumed under the term shamanism, shamanism remains intractable as an object of general study, in part because disparate practices have been disassociated from larger cultural contexts and linked to universal motivations . . . [The] reconstruction of shamanism as an isolate appears as an anthropological illusion . . . historically comparable to totemism, the reality of which lies as much in anthropological conceptualizing as in ethnographic reality

(1989)

In this sense, shamanism can be seen as an abstraction rather than as a practice. The word itself is inextricably bound to the Western image of what the 'indigenous person' ought to be, and so in this sense is founded upon ". . . the broader cultural preoccupation with the primordial and transgressive. . ." (Thomas & Humphrey 1994). This leads us to the next function of Shamanism, which is to provide the Westerner with the comforting illusion that despite all that's been done — the genocides, the colonies, the erasures, the crusades — still, the native people made it out okay, and are now going to gently guide us back home to the place where we were always meant to be, and this whole 'empire thing' was just a big anthropological-hiccup. Alice Kehoe describes this phenomenon as the ". . . venerable European tradition of primitivism . . . comes down to a myth that far away the long ago still exists. There in the wild places, noble savages preserve the true spirituality cast out of our cities" (1996). While it may appear benign to some folks, I offer that the notion of the 'noble savage' is the final stage of cultural-erasure, in that it paints over the real lived-experience of those indigenous populations who remain with an imagined and fetishized projection that adheres to the needs of the colonizer, and is in fact, impossible. In reference to the perception of Native American cultures, Lisa Aldred describes how it ". . . not only masks the social oppression of real Indian peoples but also perpetuates it" (2000). It allows for those in seats of power to remain ignorant of the conditions through which their own sense of innocence would be made suspect and vulnerable to question. Furthermore, the consecration of the 'noble savage' into popular belief halts the potential for any semblance of reparation to take place, in that it suspends reality into a state of stasis, based upon a fantasy that impoverished traditions remain unbroken. "In fact this nostalgia about the past and hopeful idealism about the future seems to be a common theme of modernity. This approach echoes what Renato Rosaldo called imperialist nostalgia, the sort of nostalgia that conquerors feel about

the conquered. . .” which, as Lisa Aldred would add “. . .assumes a pose of innocent yearning thus concealing its complicity with often brutal domination” (Fotiou 2016; Aldred 2000).

It may be worth saying at this point that most people of European descent do not necessarily identify with the word ‘conqueror’. Quite possibly, the word conjures images of Napoleon, or Genghis Khan, or Cortez, rather than the reflective image of a casually dressed, modestly-mannered, appropriately-liberal white citizen on their way to the office. Sure, they drive a car and they know that the petrol-industry is ‘bad’, so probably they feel some guilt for that, but gosh, a conqueror? That seems a little flamboyant. Meanwhile, if they live where I do just north of the San Francisco Bay in California, then maybe they’re commuting along Sir Francis Drake Blvd., aware as they want to be of what story the street names tell, enjoying the beautiful Marin County scenery, aware as they want to be of if Marin was a baptized Miwok chief, or just a nice name (Goerke 2007).

In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that most people who identify as neo-Shamans would also fall on the more liberal side of the political spectrum—though I am open to meeting far-right conservative neo-Shamans. I would also imagine that most neo-Shamans would be somewhat put-off if I told them I thought their spiritual practice was a tool of white supremacy. In terms of productive bridge-work, there should probably be laid some foundation of relationship before dropping that term into the mix. As stated earlier, my aim is not to condemn neo-shamanic practitioners to a place of eternal wrongdoing, but is rather to offer that the narrative by which it locates itself is fundamentally wrought with self-reflective dead-ends, and ultimately perpetuates a power dynamic at odds with what I believe is the basic good intention of the practitioners. The dynamic is contingent upon one foundation of whiteness, where the conqueror/well-meaning white citizen has the social luxury of taking what they want without being held accountable to the repercussions (DiAngelo 2018).

Nevertheless, not all neo-Shamans are unwilling to examine the context by which they've come to identify themselves as neo-Shamans, and the spectrum of practitioners' capacity for self-reflection ranges far and wide (Wallis 2003). As well, the discourse among scholars has long recognized the problematic nature of universalizing diverse traditions under the term Shamanism, and has since come to prefer the plural form: Shamanisms, which though perhaps a step in the right direction, still fails to address the underlying problem of an insistence upon sweeping gestures to describe innumerable diverse healing traditions under one umbrella term for the sake of Western comprehension and analysis (Atkinson 1992). And indeed, there are a series of common rebuttals given by the neo-Shaman to justify their claim to Shamanism; the most well-worn reason being the insistence that there is in fact a common spiritual truth that Shamans from various traditions universally access no matter their specific culture, and so given its culturally unspecific nature, 'Shamanism' may therefore be accessed by anyone who should seek it. Propped-up by the popular romantic narrative of Eliade and Hultkrantz, Shamanism remains up-for-grabs, removed from time and place, ". . . at once mysticism, magic, and 'religion' . . . one of the archaic techniques of ecstasy" (Eliade 1964; Kehoe 1996).

However, in the view of Andrea Smith (a controversial figure in her own right), "[This represents a] new version of Manifest Destiny, with the belief that white people are entitled to possess . . . any spiritual practice that happens to catch their fancy" (2005). The American Indian Movement also refuses the claim to universality, stating that "[T]he attempted theft of Indian ceremonies is a direct attack and theft from Indian people themselves", while the National Congress of American Indians has gone so far to even issue ". . . a declaration of war against 'wannabees,' hucksters, cultists, commercial profiteers, and self-styled New Age shamans" (Aldred 2000; Churchill 1992).

I believe the impacts of neo-Shamanism can best be understood by its influence on traditional cultures, rather than through its application by white practitioners. It is made manifest by the reality of colonized peoples' participation in the capitalist economy that they have been made subject to—a notion that tends to cause a great deal discomfort among Westerners, in that it challenges the nostalgic imperialist's basic needs that indigenous people live removed from the global economy, still hunt their own food, make their own medicine, and trade their handcrafts for the supplies they need to survive in the wild. Contrary to hopeful imaginings, Evgenia Fotiou's research into Ayahuasca Shamanism in Peru would show that “. . .indigenous men are often employed in extractive economies that not only destroy the environment on which they depend, but also remove the men employed this way from their communities for months at a time” (2016). While the extractive economies that Western countries are built upon cause great discomfort for Westerners, the acknowledgement that the work itself is being done by the native people of that land is often left unspoken, for the fundamental principle that “. . .commercialization creates uneasiness if done by indigenous peoples” (Fotiou 2016).

On the other hand, those who do want to perform their traditional healing practices as a means of making a living must then enter into the 'shamanic-marketplace' which is built upon the image of the romanticised noble-savage as its icon. This creates a reward-system where the native person who most convincingly assumes the character that is deemed 'authentic', will in turn receive acknowledgment and success. As observed astutely in *Post Colonial Studies: The*

Key Concepts:

The problem with such claims to cultural authenticity is that they often become entangled in an essentialist cultural position in which fixed practices become iconized as authentically indigenous and others are excluded as hybridized or contaminated. This has as its corollary the danger of ignoring the possibility that cultures may develop and change as their conditions change

(Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2013)

In this sense, conforming to stereotypes becomes the only financially viable route for Indigenous peoples to perform their healing practices (Fotiou 2016). Meanwhile, the very real and everyday healers, dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, potentially smoking cigarettes, making rude jokes and laughing too loud, are deemed false. This reward system of prescribed-authenticity is perhaps most overtly implemented by Core-Shamanism and its founder, “. . . [the] pioneer of contemporary Shamanism,” Michael Harner, who’s Foundation for Shamanic Studies literally “. . . awards monetary contributions to those they designate ‘Living Treasures of Shamanism’” (The Foundation for Shamanic Studies n.d.; Wallis 2003). Though the intention is ‘good’ in its desire to support Shamans around the world to continue their practice, it assumes of itself the authority to determine who is and who is not an authentic Shaman worth funding. This centralization of whiteness as the power to decide which Indigenous people are valuable is a clear display of the ways in which imperialism has carried over into modern spirituality, and hides under the guise of charitable acts. It unknowingly initiates a ‘spiritual olympics’, where those who can best display their shamanic prowess, and especially those who are most willing to make available their traditional knowledge to core-shamanism, will be rewarded with applause and cash-prize.

The essential identifier of Core and neo-Shamanism as divergent from earlier forms of trance and healing is their focus on personal development and growth, rather than on the health of the village or communal body. Contrary to its original function, Paul Johnson would propose that “Neo-Shamanisms are . . . expressions of the ‘disembeddedness of radical modernity,’” in that the practice itself has become increasingly about the individual (1995). The website of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies is steeped in phrases like ‘improve your life’, and seeks clientele with the guarantee that those who pay enrollment “. . . can discover their own hidden

spiritual resources, transform their lives, and learn how to help others” (The Foundation for Shamanic Studies n.d.). The personal intentionality of neo-Shamanism accurately reflects the individualized and self-interested focus of the culture that has born it, and in this sense loses the fundamental context of community that its traditional counterpart is dependent upon. Johnson goes on to describe that:

Its stated intention to preserve traditional forms of shamanism is obscured by its creation of a new, distinct form—a form which, while it claims universal, non-contingent status, clearly relies on its own proper context, namely that of radical modernity and the discourse of mobility and individual agency.

(1995)

However disorienting it is, the reality of radical modernity is upon us, and so in the context that we find ourselves, how do we respond? What I hope to show in this paper is that what should seem the simple act of trying to make sense of ourselves through spiritual practice is in itself not so simple, given the history of violence that lays just under our feet. Once one opens to the greater narrative that colonization portrays, modernity becomes terrifyingly adorned in pitfalls which, to the truth-seeker, requires constant discernment and literacy around the complexity of where knowledge comes from, whose it really is, and how it got to be where it is now. My response to the movement of neo-Shamanism would be a push for more creativity in how we go about spiritual practice, and that the homogenizing quick-fix of universalizing the world’s immense and diverse peoples into commonality is only bound to generate loss. It is my greatest hope that those born into modernity (myself included) may find profound and honest ways of cultivating relationship with the spiritual. However, one first must recognize and illuminate the tragic irony that while people are spending thousands of dollars, travelling thousands of miles “. . .to have ‘authentic’ shamanic experiences and to connect to ancient spiritual traditions while healing themselves. . .indigenous activists are fighting to defend their territories and their way of life and many of them are murdered for doing so” (Fotiou 2016;

Dearden 2015). What if that energy and resource instead went to supporting the leadership and vitality of these native communities? What if instead of, or at least in addition to travelling to the retreat center, we also travelled to the frontline? Perhaps through these actions of practiced solidarity with the traditions that we learn from, another kind of spirituality can emerge; one rooted in what is essentially human, where mutuality exists at the center of exchange.

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