

Assessment Component 1 – Catherine Lewis

MA Ecology and Spirituality

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Q: Using examples to be found in the literature and personal experience to illustrate your argument, discuss the following proposition:

“We are all indigenous to place and ancestors.”

Introduction

To explore the parameters of indigeneity an enquiry into the term ‘indigenous’ is necessary. This essay will therefore consider what defines the term indigenous and how groups identify as indigenous. In this essay, I seek to open a European centred dialogue from my personal perspective of indigeneity to place and ancestors and thus argue that the understanding of what it means to be indigenous needs to be re-examined. I seek to engage with the study of shamanism, particularly in the Celtic context, and identify how it symbolises a yearning for indigeneity that suggests the communities with which I am familiar position themselves as inherently indigenous to place and ancestors.

As the word ‘indigenous’ relates to such a complex and diverse group globally, the United Nations has not adopted a definition. The international framework to protect indigenous cultures set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, clarifies that indigenous communities live intuitively with the natural environment in their ancestral lands, possessing traditional ecological knowledge and natural resource management techniques that have been preserved for centuries. Estimates suggest that indigenous groups make up 5% of the world’s population, retaining approximately 4000 ancient languages (UNRIC 2017). Scholars define indigenous practices as those shared by communities with a common heritage over thousands of years but who may now be an ethnic minority having been displaced or colonised by settlers (Cunningham and Stanley 2003). Indicators also suggest that indigenous societies experience a disproportionate amount of discrimination and poverty (UNRIC 2017). Geographically, indigenous peoples falling under the UN’s understanding are spread across approximately seventy countries but not all states accept that they have indigenous peoples, thus avoiding a definition of this term at the UN and maintaining a broad understanding has offered a policy that aims to protect all groups (Sanders 1994).

Conquest, geographical boundary setting, enforced formal education systems and other globalisation mechanisms have impacted indigenous groups bringing new health problems, interrupting the dissemination of customs, suppressing the unique characteristics and beliefs of these groups and imposing new lifestyles onto ancient ways. Many indigenous communities have been dispossessed or their lands have been accessed for resource withdrawal; polluting waters, destroying forests and mining lands that are sacred to indigenous communities. The work of bodies

such as the UN and non-governmental organisations such as Survival International plays a vital role in protecting these members of the human family, not only to maintain the diversity of the human race but also to defend the eco-systems these groups intimately understand. However, for the purposes of this essay I would like to assert that being indigenous to place and ancestors is not unique to oppressed groups fitting the commonly described categories outlined thus far. In locations where the memory of colonialism is still fresh, it is possible to demarcate between communities who have an historical tie to a territory and descend from populations who inhabited this terrain before the arrival of Europeans. However, this dualistic deduction is not straightforward if we consider Europe and the setting of my experience. In considering the aspects of being indigenous such as culture, tradition, language and historical ties to territory, Europeans can certainly fulfil these categories and yet most European communities are not considered indigenous.

The word indigenous is derived from the Latin word 'indigena' which means native. Although Europeans may be native to their lands it is perhaps the urbanisation of European society that prevents them from living indigenous lives. In describing non-indigenous peoples, the author Brian Davey, asserts that this group has no particular relationship with the land or any other part of their local eco-system. Even in Europe he claims the indigenous environments have mostly disappeared and thus Europeans cannot identify as indigenous. With western society's focus on economic growth and the historical backdrop of the land enclosures, he concludes that the modern European mind-set fundamentally contradicts our understanding of indigenous (Davey 2015).

Europe has very few groups self-identifying as indigenous; there are the Sami in Scandinavia and the Basques in Northern Spain with a handful of other groups in Eastern Europe. Obtaining indigenous status administratively is a complicated task and threatens regional governing bodies as it offers a certain level of autonomy to the ethnic group. For example communities who have been subject to internal colonisation such as the Scottish crofters, have received political opposition when campaigning to identify themselves as the UK's first group to receive indigenous status. Nonetheless, with so much rich heritage and lineages reaching back for millennia it is possible to imagine that many Europeans see themselves as indigenous to their part of the continent despite not fitting into the internationally accepted guidelines on indigenous peoples. Folk culture is woven into European life in a myriad of ways; many stories, dances, costumes, national holidays, idioms and customs stem from ancient, pre-Christian indigenous traditions. In particular when considering Britain, many people are unaware of the ancient connections related to May Bank holiday, Morris dancing, Easter or Halloween and we remain mystified by the stone circles and Neolithic monuments found in these lands but we celebrate and acknowledge them nonetheless. It is my belief that we are all indigenous to place and culture even if we are unaware of it and critically I will explore how this sense of indigeneity is experiencing a resurgence.

Indigeneity is distinguished by a belief in animism and an understanding that humans are an integral part of the eco-system (Macy 2003: 112). Since the 1960s there have been spirituality movements in the West inspiring lifestyles and customs that have much in common with traditions from recognised indigenous communities. The rise of antimodernist ideals during the twentieth century has drawn many to non-western religions, in particular Buddhism and Native Americana. The western environmental movement impacted this spiritual evolution further, inspiring new earth-based philosophies and the emergence of neo-shamanism (Znamenski 2007). Re-connecting so called non-indigenous peoples with their environment and pre-Christian traditions; neo-shamanism has offered

a pagan alternative to seekers who do not want to look to traditions from other cultures. Neo-shamanic proponents have been described as 'spiritual colonisers' (Znamenski 2007: xii) who deviate from the broader role of an indigenous shaman by promoting shamanism as a form of therapy (Abram 1997: 21). Conversely, the history of Western esotericism confirms that there is a body of perennial ancient wisdom indigenous to Europe that elucidates recurring themes throughout time, which fit well with indigenous spiritual patterns worldwide (Znamenski 2007). Despite the legitimacy of neo-shamanism being disputed, it has entered the mainstream and signifies a deep sense of the indigenous human spirit reappearing in the West.

The Western Esoteric tradition is well established in Europe distinct from organised monotheistic religions and secular rationalism; it comprises a range of related movements that have influenced art, philosophy and popular culture. Occultism, paganism and the New Age movement have permeated European life over the centuries but within the confines of our understanding of indigeneity these traditions do not demonstrate that we are all indigenous to place and ancestors. In neo-shamanism however, all aspects of indigenous practice are evident; ritual, animism, ancient knowledge, ancestral worship and healing ceremony. Druidry is a significant branch of this movement, representing a nature spirituality originating in the British Isles that is inherently shamanic and experiencing a renaissance (Carr-Gomm 2001). My experience is with the Celtic modality of neo shamanism and I think that the increase in Celtic shamanic and druidic offerings in the West indicates the growing desire for thousands of westerners to become rooted in an indigenous perspective within their own lands. Celtic shamanism is a contested term in itself and to explore its impact on our understanding of indigeneity it is first necessary to outline how the term shamanism sits within western thought.

The word shaman was first introduced into European thought in the late seventeenth century. It is a word from the Tungus tribes of Siberia and describes a phenomenon that has inspired anthropologists and scholars of comparative religions for a number of centuries. The study of shamanism collates spiritual customs from around the world that demonstrate comparisons with the original shamanic practices discovered in Siberia. Such a diverse study has led to a broad understanding and some confusion as to the structure of shamanism but it is generally thought to be a practice that denotes spiritual and healing powers, altered states of consciousness and the ability to negotiate the spirit world (Hutton 2007). In 1951 Mircea Eliade published a study of shamanism that propelled the concept into the mainstream, declaring it as the original human religion (Eliade 1951). Eliade's premise was that spiritual philosophies reoccur throughout time in various guises but share 'a series of archetypes' (Eliade 1964: xvii).

There is much scepticism in current academic scholarship regarding the Eliadean conclusions that universal patterns can be found amongst spiritual practitioners globally and organised under the category of shamanism. Postmodern thinking avoids broad cross-cultural generalisations and critics cast doubt on the credibility and facts of Eliade's research. Nevertheless his studies have had a profound impact on many anthropologists and scholars in the religious fields. One such individual is Michael Harner who is described as the founding father of neo-shamanism. Harner has created a formula entitled 'Core Shamanism' described as a healing system for westerners to apply to their daily lives. The essence of Harner's neo-shamanism is an integration of non-Western symbology with familiar psychological terminology; as one practitioner describes a 'spiritual technology' (Znamenski 2007). Dr Alberto Villoldo also represents an important figure in modern shamanism having spent a

significant time with what he calls 'Earth Keepers' (Villoldo nd.) from South America. His Four Winds Society training has been described as the 'Harvard of neo-shamanism' (Villoldo nd.) and its popularity again highlights the yearning for indigenous experiences in the west.

Some foundational promulgators of Celtic shamanism in Ireland have grounded their work by training with Harner or Viloldo and expanded on these methods to design a form of shamanism that fits into the Celtic perspective for example John Cantwell and Karen Ward of Slí an Chroí (2009). Others using the term Celtic shaman have drawn directly from their ancestral healing traditions commonly found in Ireland, where belief in the Otherworld or fairy realm is a way of life and these practitioners, such as Joe Mullally (2018) alternate between the use of shaman and traditional healer. Like many indigenous languages, Gaelic is in decline and its use within the Celtic shamanic world demonstrates indigenous sentiment. For example the use of Gaelic alternatives to the title shaman are adopted by certain practitioners such as Seabhean meaning, she who crosses the path between the worlds, Bean Feasa, woman of knowing or Fear Feasa, wise man. Amantha Murphy started describing herself as a Seabhan five years ago having used the term shaman and healer for many years and feels using a Gaelic term for her role resonates authentically with her approach (2018).

Celtic shamanism merges both shamanism and the broad spectrum of Celtic beliefs understood to have flourished in Europe since at least 500BC until Roman Times (Bellingham 2003). There are noticeable shamanic qualities in Celtic myths and their deities, replete with shapeshifting, trance like states, journeys to the Otherworld, magical powers, death, rebirth and healing (Cowan 1993: 27). Shamanism traditionally pays tribute to the four cardinal directions and the elements in order to show respect for the sources of life on earth. According to Tom Cowan, in his study Shamanism and the Celtic Spirit, this is also evident in surviving Celtic poetry, traditional Irish blessings and native invocations, expressing the 'notion of the ensouled universe, of nature entwined with the human psyche' (Cowan 1993: 106) Celtic shamans offer various explanations of the origins of their practice, usually mentioning that shamanism is humankind's most primal religion and that evidence of it has been found in Europe for at least 20,000 years (Cowan 1993: 11). The fact that Celtic shamanism is a new modality and that the oral tradition of the Celts prevents us from understanding their spirituality with certainty, does not dissuade practitioners. Instead with a mixture of scholarly enquiry (Matthews 1994), a belief in the connection with native lands and the adoption of some multicultural shamanic techniques, this style of shamanism is flourishing.

Despite the implicit nature of the land as sacred evident in shamanism, neo-shamanism is often practised in urban environments and this modern interpretation of shamanism is criticised as being disingenuous due to its lack of connection with nature (Znamenski 2007: 251). Yet, author of Urban Shaman, Serge Kalili King, asserts that this cosmopolitan version of shamanism is a natural descendant of traditional shamanism and that healing can happen in any environment (1990). Shamanic scholar Dr Jürgen Kremer claims that each of us has indigenous roots and ancestors with shamanic traditions. It is challenging for humans to discover their potential and gifts living in non-indigenous environments as we may have lost our community, traditions and connection with nature. Western society thrives on individualism which can leave people bereft of soul enriching experiences. Kremer affirms that 'appropriate contemporary practice of shamanism for people ensconced in the eurocentered paradigm is the recovery of their indigenous roots.' (Kremer 1999)

Bringing ritual to the process of transformation and bridging the gap between the sacred and the secular can thus be done in the wild or in the city and indigeneity can be felt in both places too. There is a delicate balance between honouring indigenous practices while using them in western settings and the subject of appropriation is always in question. When Jung noticed the extent to which Native Americana was merging with the American psyche in the 1930s, he concluded that over time it was a natural process for colonialists to absorb the spiritual potency of the land they occupy (Znamenski 2007: 53). Historian Carlo Ginzburg, surmised that the ecstatic traditions of witchcraft with its magic, dancing, shapeshifting, and spiritual flights has obvious parallels with shamanism. These indigenous practices were banished in Europe and demonised by the Christian church, separating western society further from its indigenous roots (Znamenski 2007: 185). This split does not however render us non-indigenous.

In his study, 'Shamans – Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination', Ronald Hutton describes shamanism as having an indubitably defining role in western thought within the complex interchange of 'developed world and indigenous peoples; between science and magic; between established and charismatic religion; and between institutional and 'alternative' medicine' (2007: viii). In conclusion I argue that we are human and all indigenous to this earth, to the places in which we live whether they are adopted or part of an ancient heritage. We are all indigenous to the ancestors we embody whether we remember them in our conscious minds or not. The resurgence of shamanism in the West and its offshoots, demonstrate a clear desire to heal and explore our indigenous nature, suggesting that indeed we are all indigenous to place and ancestors.

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