

Neo-Shamanism

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Definition

Neoshamanism is a set of discourses and practices involving the integration of indigenous (especially American) shamanic and psychotherapeutic techniques by people from urban, Western contexts. It has emerged, like other New Age modes of spirituality, in opposition to the materialism and positivism of European modernity and presents as central the idea of reconnecting panindigenous ancestral knowledge that people of the West had purportedly forgotten. It results in large measure from the circulation of literature on shamanism, altered states of consciousness (often, but not always, involving the use of psychoactive drugs), and the possibility of generating new psychotherapeutic modalities.

Introduction

From the second half of the twentieth century onward, shamanic knowledge and practices from diverse regions of the world have increasingly generated interest from a nonindigenous, principally North American and European, audience. Indigenous practices associated with healing and spirituality, which we can generally refer to as shamanism, and a diversity of psychotherapeutic techniques are the major sources of inspiration of neoshamanism. It derives specifically from interpretations of the knowledge and practices of Amazonian, Mesoamerican, and North American indigenous groups.

The first English translation of Mircea Eliade's book *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy* in 1964 (first published in 1951) (Eliade 2009) corresponded with the English translation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural anthropology*, and each book is a significant event in the development of neoshamanism. (Lévi-Strauss's) chapter "The effectiveness of symbols" (1963) provided the first theory to explain shamanic practice as a form of psychotherapy, proposing that the shaman uses myths and actions to heal people by way of symbolic communication in a way comparable to psychoanalysis. Eliade, meanwhile, supported Lévi-Strauss's position that the shaman no longer be viewed as a charlatan or as mentally ill (e.g., Devereux 1970), a view that had prevailed until this time, but as having a central integrative role within the community. For this reason, Kocku von Stuckrad defines Eliade "as the major turning point between nineteenth-century intellectual discourse and the popular appropriation of shamanism in the second half of the twentieth century" (Stuckrad 2002, p. 774).

Eliade's comparative study proposed that shamanism was a universal religious practice and not something geographically confined to Siberia, where the term "shaman" derived from the Tungus word

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saman. According to Eliade, one of the characteristics of this primordial religion was the making of a connection with the spirit realm, something that the people of Western civilizations had, over time, lost. The idea that a connection to a spirit realm had been lost, and could possibly be rediscovered, was a source of great fascination in the context of a counterculture North America seeking new spiritual inspiration.

Later, the work of Mircea Eliade received serious criticism from a number of scholars, including Alice Beck Kehoe, who argued that the term “shamanism” should only be used to refer to Siberian cultural practices. Kehoe strongly emphasized the differences that existed between the diverse practices around the world that Eliade associated with shamanism. Kehoe argued that Eliade’s romantic vision of shamanic universality around the vague notion of “ecstasy” amounted to an expression of racism that continued a history of European thought that marginalized non-Western knowledge, which was assumed to be homogeneous (Kehoe 2000).

There is debate relating to the origins and principal characteristics of shamanism. Some emphasize the importance of a few fundamental elements while others emphasize the similarities between different practices.

Independent of debates about the nature of shamanism, neoshamanism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century with a diffusion of interpretations of indigenous shamanic practices into urban Western contexts. This process involved the circulation of literature concerned with spiritual and therapeutic experiences but also a growing interest in plant-based hallucinogenic drugs and transpersonal psychology, among other influences. Perhaps the two most significant literary sources of neoshamanism are the 1968 publication *The teachings of Don Juan* by the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda and the 1980 book *The way of the shaman*, by Michael Harner (1982). From the 1990s on, there is a resurgence in the multidisciplinary interest in consciousness, healing, and alternative forms of spirituality (Atkinson 1992), and increased circulation of ideas relating to indigeneity.

Key Information

Shamanism is predicated on the assumption that meaningful action in the visionary terrain, often conceptualized in terms of spirit communication or altered states of consciousness, will affect behavior in the material domain of waking reality. Anthropology’s “post-modern turn,” involving a greater emphasis on self-reflexivity and new relevance for interpreting the ethnographer’s experiences and not simply their observations, allowed for new insights into shamanism. Znamenski (2007) sees Castaneda as being postmodern in the sense of his emphasis on the social construction of reality and the impossibility of understanding shamanic knowledge by way of a Western epistemology that denies a place for experience. Castaneda radicalized the notion of total participation and explored the use of psychedelic drugs that produce nonordinary states of consciousness, allowing for a problematization of the frontiers between “reality” and “fiction.”

The other milestone commonly referred to as foundational for neoshamanism is Michael Harner’s *The way of the shaman* (1980), a manual where different techniques to achieve what Harner describes as “Shamanic States of Consciousness” are explained. These altered states can be achieved through the use of substances that have been described as “hallucinogenic” (Harner 1973; Furst (2002); Schultes and Hofmann 2000 [1979]), “entheogens” (Ruck et al. 1979; Ott 1996), “power plants” or “plant teachers” (Luna 1984, 1986), or “psychointegrators” (Winkelman 1996) but also through other mechanisms such as dance or drumming, the latter being Harner’s preferred method (Harner 1982).

If Eliade’s work was significantly criticized and seen as somewhat marginal within the academy, its influence was of vital importance to the founding authors of neoshamanism in the West, such as Michael Harner (1982), who developed a psychotherapeutic technique he called “core shamanism.” Eliade,

Castaneda, and Harner each decontextualize and universalize shamanic practice so that it becomes linked to the origin of religion and a mystical union that the West had lost. But Harner's "core shamanism" represented a break with previous works, such as those by Castaneda or Naranjo (1973) that emphasized the use of psychoactive drugs and sorcery more than healing. Harner's work positioned shamanism as a transcultural technology for healing and spiritual development rather than one relating to sorcery and the exploration of consciousness.

Core shamanism is based on shared characteristics and "is an experiential method by which one uses drumming to move into Spirit Reality, contact spirits, and gain assistance from them" (Townsend 2005, p. 4).

Townsend (2005) sees Harner's "core shamanism" as a type of "modern shamanic spirituality" which she distinguishes from "traditional shamanism" and as a subset of what she refers to as "Individualist Religious Movements" which also include neopaganism and other forms of New Age spirituality. While Atkinson sees "neo shamanism" and "urban shamanism" as synonymous (Atkinson 1992, p. 322), Townsend recognizes that some forms of traditional shamanism (e.g., in Nepal and Siberia) are now urban, and defines neoshamanism as

an eclectic collection of beliefs and activities drawn from literature, workshops, and the internet. It is an invented tradition of practices and beliefs based on a constructed metaphorical, romanticized "ideal" shaman concept which often differs considerably from traditional shamans (Townsend 2005, p.:4).

Within neoshamanism references are made to traditional shamanic practices but often as means of legitimizing spiritual practices as ancestral, tribal, or ecological (Znamenski 2007, p. 252). The idea with "core shamanism" is that it can be transplanted to any cultural context and allows the practitioner to develop their own spirituality. This very transposability, however, has led to some indigenous groups accusing neoshamans of "colonialism" (DuBois 2009, p. 277). Harner's organization Foundation for Shamanic Studies has trained "faculty" and "field associates" to be adepts in "core shamanism" which have then been taught to indigenous populations around the world who have purportedly lost their shamanic skills. The Foundation's webpage claims that "The Foundation is actively engaged in preservation work in Nepal, Siberia, China, Central Asia, the Amazon, and elsewhere" (<https://www.shamanism.org/fssinfo/indigenousAssistance.html>).

There are a number of important differences between traditional and neoshamanism. The first relates to how people become shamans. Whereas in indigenous contexts the shaman would either be chosen by the community or may inherit the office (however, in both instances the neophyte would still be required to demonstrate his knowledge and learning), in the case of neoshamanism the decision to take up shamanic training is generally regarded as an individual decision. Or, in the words of Townsend (2005, p. 5), "Core and Neo-shamanism differ from traditional shamanism in their democratization of shamanism. While in most traditional societies few will be shamans, in Core and Neo-shamanism apparently all or many who wish to can become a 'shaman.'" Another major distinction concerns social roles and expectations. Traditional shamanism exists in a context in which there are culturally recognized tutelary spirits and a human community of teachers and clients. The activity of the shaman is guided by these spirits and teachers as he or she mediates the cosmos on behalf of a defined human and spirit community. By contrast, in neoshamanism the scale of action is personal rather than social or cosmic. The shamanic journey, in this instance, involves cultivating oneself rather than maintaining community or cosmic balance. An emphasis on psychotherapy gives neoshamanism a "benevolent spirit" and "happy ending" (Znamenski 2007) very different to the various traditional versions in which the cosmos is fraught and any potential for healing is always tempered by chaos and the potential for malevolence. As Znamenski and DuBois emphasize, in neoshamanic spiritual journeys a discourse of "love" predominates over references to fear or aggression, extremely common elements of mythology and narratives relating to traditional shamanism. A fourth

difference between traditional and neoshamanism emphasized by DuBois relates to the relation between the spirit and material or waking realms. While traditional shamans may conceptualize the “other world” in a variety of ways, there is something of a consensus about the primacy of spirit realm. In the case of neoshamanism, however, materialist explanations coexist with other theories of the cosmos (DuBois 2009, pp. 272–273).

Among the shared characteristics of the heterogeneous field of neoshamanism participants recognize the existence of an accessible nonordinary reality, every bit as real as the ordinary, everyday reality. In this sense, the spirits that inhabit the nonordinary reality are real beings. This results, according to Znamenski, in a teleological situation. The fact that this spirituality has “this worldly focus” explains the key place that environmentalist discourses occupy in neoshamanism, where everything in the world is holistically connected. Related to the environmentalist ethos is the prevalence of a negative feeling toward Western civilization and a reverence for non-Western traditions (Znamenski 2007, p. 255). Practitioners of modern western shamanism tend to possess, according to Znamenski, liberal individualist frames of thought with consciousness of global social problems, especially relating to the environment. These social and ecological crises are often attributed to a spiritual rupture and the solution seen as a “transformation of consciousness.” However, the primacy of the individual in neoshamanism is reflected in the dominant idea that social transformation is only possible after individual transformation of consciousness. Accordingly, it is no longer a matter of trying to change the world but of changing oneself as the precursor to any subsequent social change. Within neoshamanism, God isn’t just with us; he is inside of us (Znamenski 2007).

According to Thomas Dubois (2009), neoshamanism is not an exclusively Western phenomenon but is also present in the postcolonial and post-Soviet worlds. Indeed, like other variations of New Age spirituality, neoshamanism has evolved and grown with the interconnectivity of people, ideas, and capital associated with globalization. Latin America is both a major consumer and producer of neoshamanic ideas and practices. In Latin America, the clearest example of the transnationalization of neoshamanism is the so-called *Camino Rojo* (Red Path), strongly inspired by North American indigenous traditions (especially Lakota) where the “vision quest,” “sweat lodge,” and “sun dance” rituals have been adapted and integrated into a new cosmology. There are, however, numerous neoshamanic trajectories throughout Latin America that draw on eclectic interpretations of local and North American indigenous practices, such as the Eagle and Condor meetings that interpreted Andean prophecies in terms of the spiritual union of Northern and Southern peoples and ideas. Neoshamanic networks are part of larger New Age circuits, where official national histories are often reinterpreted, as is the Mexican case (De La Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2011, 2012). In a context of extensive reappropriation and transnationalization of traditional practices, new forms of spiritual therapies are developed. The book *Roots in movement. Traditional religious practices in translocal contexts* (Argyriadis et al. 2008) explores some of these movements. Other examples of the movements and tensions within neoshamanism have been examined in relation to Colombia (Uribe 2002, 2008; Losonczy and Rubiano 2013).

Shamans and neoshamans from throughout Latin America participate regularly in tours and festivals in North America, Europe, and Australia while people from these latter places seek out shamans for their own healing and spiritual experiences in the cities and forests of Columbia, Venezuela, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay neoshamanic groups are also present (for the Uruguayan case see Apud et al. 2013, for Brazil Labate 2004).

The Amazon has been a major source of neoshamanic inspiration, generating a large amount of spiritual and entheogenic tourism in Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil. In the case of Brazil, neoshamanic trajectories have become institutionalized in new religions drawing on elements of Christian liturgy, nineteenth-century spiritism, and the shamanic use of the psychedelic decoction ayahuasca (e.g., Abreu 1990; Soares 1990; Groisman 1991; MacRae 1992; Labate and Araujo 2009). In the Northwest Amazon,

neoshamanism has not been institutionalized in any formal church setting, but a long history of syncretism between indigenous and mestizo peoples has facilitated its spread from remote to urban settings. The work of Marlene Dobkin de Rios in Iquitos Peru from the late 1960s through to the twenty-first century (1984, 2008; Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill 2008) documents the rising popularity of shamanic tourism. Iquitos and Pucallpa have become home to regular shamanic conferences, workshops, and retreats, where shamanism has become the major tourist attraction and a major employer in the region (Labate 2011; Winkelman 2005). Razam's (2013) "gonzo journalism" book *Aya awakenings: A shamanic odyssey* charts the "gringo trail" of tourists from Australia, Europe, and North America seeking shamanic experiences in the Amazon. Dobkin de Rios's short paper entitled "Mea culpa" (2008) implied that anthropologists were at least partly responsible for the rising global popularity of neoshamanism, driving a soaring demand for the unregulated and sometimes unethical practices of "charlatans" in global nodes of shamanic tourism. While claims of authenticity, ethics, and power relations between tourists and shamans are contested, it is clear that neoshamanism has arrived as a global spiritual practice and business.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Camino Rojo](#)
- ▶ [Nature](#)
- ▶ [New Age and Native Spirituality](#)
- ▶ [Pachamama](#)
- ▶ [Psychoactive Substances](#)
- ▶ [Urban Shamanism](#)

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