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Neo-shamanism and Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

Journeys bring power and love back into you. —Rumi

This book is about the ancient technology of shamanism and its potential application in contemporary life as a means of enhancing wellbeing by integrating mind, body and spirit, and strengthening one's connection to nature, the sacred and the self. It examines traditional shamanism and Neo-shamanism in order to differentiate the two practices which are simultaneously similar and different. It details a research study undertaken in 2017 which examined the practices, beliefs and lifeworlds of some contemporary Neo-shamanic practitioners in order to serve as a basis for understanding how Neo-shamanism functions in contemporary Western culture. The book allows these practitioners to describe their lifeworlds through their own recorded journeys and responses to deeply personal interview questions. It explores the potential value that the ancient technology of the shamanic journey might have as part of a controlled phenomenological qualitative research protocol for consciousness studies, and how it might benefit self-exploration as part of a supervised multi-modal wellness curriculum or therapy. Further, there is a discussion about the possible pitfalls present in contemporary Neo-shamanic practice, including the effects of cultural dissonance and spiritual bypassing. Finally the book engages in exploring the way in which Neo-shamanic practices might act as a viable adjunct to standard clinical therapeutic practice.

Neo-shamanism and Mental Health is an examination and discussion of contemporary Neo-shamanic practice and the mental health benefits that might be derived from its application to the mental health field. It is based on peer-reviewed literature, the results of a 2017 research project investigating the lifeworlds of six American Neo-shamanic practitioners, and my own observations as a student, teacher, and practitioner of Neo-shamanism for nearly three decades. Chapter 1 explores and discusses the similarities and differences between traditional and/or indigenous shamanism and contemporary Western Neo-shamanism. Chapter 2 is an overview of the method and results of the 2017 research project and protocol, including reproduction of the research instruments. Chapter 3 focuses on the lifeworlds of the 2017 participants, each of which offers an intimate and detailed glimpse into rich alternative worldviews and individual expanded consciousness. Chapter 4 outlines the multi-modal teaching template for shamanic journey-based self-discovery that I have used in classes and workshops with excellent results, and which has the potential to be equally beneficial as part of a therapeutic setting when deemed appropriate. Chapter 5 delves into the psychological pitfalls of cultural dissonance, dysfunctional identity, and spiritual bypassing that might befall ill-trained, undisciplined, and unsupervised Neo-shamanic practitioners, especially those lacking the requisite self-knowledge and awareness. Chapter 6 discusses how the shamanic journey technology could be applied as a tool to gather phenomenological data as an aid to consciousness studies as part of a controlled and replicable laboratory research protocol. Chapter 7 is an overview of the conclusions derived from the preceding chapters, as well as presenting possible avenues of further inquiry. It also examines the potential benefits of using Neo-shamanic practice as an adjunct to standard therapeutic practices. Anomalous findings discovered through such research might hold the potential to instigate a paradigm shift away from our sensory-cognitive based concept of reality and toward expanded models of consciousness and accepted reality constructs.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

There are some specific terms used repeatedly throughout this book. Below is a Glossary of the most frequently used terms to facilitate clear communication and understanding of the material.

Altered State of Consciousness (ASC): The term “altered state of consciousness” refers to any psychological state different from normal waking consciousness. Although dreaming is an altered state of consciousness, the ASCs under discussion here are those in which the individual retains liminal awareness and the ability to perceive phenomena usually imperceptible while in the normal waking state (Rock & Krippner, 2007; VandenBos, 2015).

Anomalous Experience: Refers to any experience or set of experiences that fall outside of the parameters and explanations of rational, sensory-based material cognition and societal reality constructs. These include out-of-body experiences, mystical experiences, shamanic journeys, and interactions with anomalous phenomena (VandenBos, 2015).

Dasein: *Dasein* is the term used by Martin Heidegger to describe a way of being manifested as human that enables us to inquire into the mysteries of being, and the manner in which they might perceive and exist in the world (VandenBos, 2015). *Dasein* also incorporates the process of one’s “becoming” (p. 282).

Lifeworld: This term was used by Moustakas (1994a, 1994b) to describe the filters of personal history, emotional context, and memories through which individuals frame, perceive, evaluate and respond to the outside world. It is the same concept that Harrow (2002) referred to as the “inscape” of the individual (p. 72).

Magic: Magic is intent-motivated and result-focused ancient practices and systems of rituals and activities utilizing energy to modify or manifest something in the material world (VandenBos, 2015). It has been described as an ineffable force through which things manifest, and our minds perceive concepts and phenomena belonging to the realms of spirit (Bouse, 2017; James, 1902). Magic has survived into contemporary times as an “underground esoteric tradition” (VandenBos, 2015, p. 617), and has enjoyed a resurgence in some practices associated with the New Age Movement and Neo-paganism.

Mysticism: On the one hand, mysticism is a worldview through which an individual might attain wisdom, inspiration, and revelation by means other than those of rational thought and sensory-based cognitive experience and perception. On the other hand, it is also a means through which one might connect with the “divine” (VandenBos, 2015, p. 683) in a religious context. The definition refers to states of intense, deep, and/or entranced meditations, contemplations, and ecstasies recounted in the accounts and sacred writings of global religious and spiritual traditions over time.

Neo-shamanism: Neo-shamanism is the term used for the practice of some of the ancient technologies of traditional and indigenous cultures that facilitate interaction with the spirit world for healing, divination, and sacred intervention on behalf of the community and its members by contemporary Western practitioners (Wallis, 2003). In contrast to traditional shamans who were part of magic-based, Earth-centered cultural worldviews, Neo-shamans lack such a supportive cultural matrix (Bouse, 2017). Neo-shamans frequently study shamanic techniques, e.g., journeying at will through, organizations and teaching practitioners, whereas shamans in traditional and indigenous societies are called into service by the spirit world through heredity, mystical experiences, life-threatening illness, mental crisis or near-death experience, and are trained by shamans within their communities (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1982).

New Age: Nelson (2009) defined the New Age Movement as an emerging spirituality focused on the cultivation of the so-called inner spirit of an individual as a means of ameliorating the dissonance in one's life. Nelson explained that New Age followers believe they can connect with their so-called inner being through personal, spiritual means in order to expand their consciousness, and live more fulfilling, spiritually oriented lives.

New Religious Movement (NRM): Nelson (2009) defined a New Religious Movement as a group of individuals with common religious beliefs, which beliefs are anomalous to the beliefs embraced by the conventional organized religions of the world. Nelson further explained that some of these New Religious Movements represented a reorganization and resurgence of ancient religious beliefs and practices such as contemporary Neo-paganism and Druidism (Wallis, 2003; York, 2002).

Paranormal: Paranormal is an adjective describing the anomalous nature of activities, occurrences, observations, and manifestations that present in material reality but originate from outside of it (Colman, 2009). Similarly, VandenBos (2015) defined paranormal as being the alleged transfer of information or phenomena inexplicable by known scientific models and paradigms.

Paganism: York (2002) provided a concise definition of Paganism as an ancient system of varied religious beliefs including magic, animism, and pantheism practices by indigenous peoples and ancient tribes, including those of Europe. According to York (2002) and Wallis (2003), Neo-paganism consists of a network of loosely connected

beliefs emerging from a reconstruction of alleged practices and beliefs ascribed to ancient Pagans by contemporary practitioners.

Religion: The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (VandenBos, 2015) defines religion as a system of beliefs focused on the worship of an omnipresent deity or deities. These beliefs are expressed in standardized forms and protocols of ritual, practice and prayer. The teachings and traditions of religion are communicated through holy texts generated by sanctioned founders, philosophers, and authorities. An established religion endorses a set of moral codes backed by divine authority, and it determines which shrines, texts, and individuals are considered sacred.

Shaman: “Shaman” is the designation used to describe a spiritual or religious leader from an indigenous culture who uses “allegedly supernatural or magical powers” (VandenBos, 2015) in order to heal others and perform other sacred duties on behalf of the community through interaction with the spirit world and invocation of the powers of nature. A shaman emerges and functions in a supporting cultural matrix of beliefs and traditions and is recognized by the community as a religious or spiritual leader (Rock & Krippner, 2011).

Spirituality: The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (VandenBos, 2015) defines spirituality as a belief system containing an implied “concern for God and a sensitivity to religious experience” (p. 1019), whether or not that sensitivity is expressed in any formal religious doctrine. Nelson (2009) expanded this definition of spirituality to include analysis and discussion of the movement of spirituality away from organized religion and towards individual seeking through religious eclecticism, including New Age spiritualities.

The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (VandenBos, 2015) is a reliable reference for standard definition of terms within the parameters of current psychological practice. It is therefore an excellent initial resource for the definition of any terms within this book that require further clarification.

At its core *Neo-shamanism and Mental Health* is a book about the shamanic journey as an ancient mind and consciousness expanding technology that might have some surprising benefits in today’s mental health context. All that is required of the reader is to keep an open mind to the possibility that we might not comprehend the totality of consciousness, and that even science has explicatory limitations.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. —Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5 (Orgel & Braunmuller, 2002, p. 1357)

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CHAPTER 1

Contemporary Application of an Ancient Technique

Abstract This chapter examines traditional shamanism and Neo-shamanism, citing their similarities and differences. It describes the technology and process of the shamanic journey and examines its apparent ability to integrate normal waking consciousness and the executive brain with the unconscious and the limbic system. The chapter includes precautions regarding using this ancient technology without the proper instruction and/or supervision and group environment and discusses Neo-shamanism as a cultural phenomena that is anomalous to both our current cultural paradigm and academic inquiry.

Keywords Neo-shamanism · Shamanism · Shamanic journey · Cultural dissonance

*You have no need to travel anywhere – journey within yourself.
Enter a mine of rubies and bathe in the splendor of your own light. —Rumi*

The terms “shaman” and “shamanism” have come into fairly common usage over the past several decades. Shamans and their mysterious practices have been incorporated into popular culture and awareness through avenues as diverse as the academic diligence of anthropologists such as

Michael Harner and Mircea Eliade to rock ‘n’ roll icons such as Jim Morrison. But what exactly is shamanism? What is the nature of its practices? The idea of the shaman invokes a mystical image of an archaic and primitive (albeit powerful) sorcerer who employs an amalgam of magic, medicine, and supernatural capabilities to gain knowledge, manipulate the material world, perform miracles and healings, or exact revenge. But does the practice of shamanism potentially have any use or significance to contemporary Western societies? This small book strives to explore the phenomenon of shamanism and postulate its potential benefits if applied to our contemporary lives. The starting point of this discussion is to examine shamanism and its contemporary non-traditional counterpart Neo-shamanism in order to derive a workable definition and understanding of the terms and practices to be examined and discussed.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TERMS “SHAMAN” AND “SHAMANISM?”

Shamanism is an archaic, cross-cultural spiritual technology and practice that has survived encroaching civilization, colonialism, persecution, and genocide by virtue of its preservation by remote, isolated societies (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1982; Winkelman, 2010). Interest and awareness of shamanism emerged during the late twentieth century in the contemporary West as an alternative spirituality and healing protocol as part of the New Age movement. Its popularization was enhanced by the work of anthropologist Michael Harner through his book *The Way of the Shaman* (1982) and subsequent instructional workshops, which introduced shamanism and the shamanic journey technique to eager audiences desiring spiritual alternatives to the dominant Western religious traditions. These contemporary Western practitioners came to be designated as Neo-shamans. For Neo-shamans, the application of shamanic technique and the interpretation of the accompanying phenomena are defined by the personal meaning-making lenses and cultural matrices of individual practitioners who are not members of a culture or society that includes such practices and phenomena in its dominant paradigm. It is this lack of supporting cultural framework for shamanic practice, dissonance of cultural worldview, and absence of culturally accepted interpretative models from which to derive meaning from anomalous phenomena that differentiate contemporary Neo-shamans from shamans of the ancient past or those currently active in traditional societies.

WHAT IS TRADITIONAL SHAMANISM?

Shamanism is a practice and mastery of a set of spiritual technologies which originated from archaic and indigenous cultures as a means of interacting with non-linear, ineffable powers for the purpose of benefitting the community and its members (Rock & Krippner, 2011). Such cultures are characterized by their embrace of a worldview that is animistic, pantheistic, Earth-and-nature-centered, and magic-based. It is a system of belief and *Dasein* rooted in belief in the immanent nature of divinity and the presence of the sacred in all things (Eliade, 1964; Rock & Krippner, 2011; Winkelman, 2004, 2009, 2010; Winkelman & Baker, 2010; York, 2002, 2005b). Shamanism emerged from the need of ancient peoples to create a means by which the power of divinity, as expressed in nature, might be invoked and used for the benefit of the tribe(s) for healing, divination, location of food, and protection (Campbell, 1959; Eliade, 1964; McClenon, 2011; Sala, 2014; Sarasola, 2015; Sidky, 2010; Winkelman, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2011b; Winkelman & Baker, 2010). Shamanism is a global phenomenon that has appeared throughout human history, and always with elements of the anomalous, the mythic, magic, and the transpersonal consistently present albeit with the meaning of the phenomena being subject to culturally specific interpretations (Herbert, 2011; Hunt, 2010; Malan, 2016; St. John, 2011).

The technologies used by shamans enable them to enter altered states of consciousness in order to perceive variant phenomenological patterns at will for the specific purpose of interceding with the spirit world for the benefit of the community (Krippner, 2000; Rock & Krippner, 2011; Winkelman, 2004, 2013a, 2013b). Reaching the required altered state frequently requires the use of drugs, dreams, sleep, food and sensory deprivation, and/or drumming so that the divine phenomena might be perceived (Rock & Krippner, 2007b). Through this means, the power of divinity expressed in the natural world might be invoked, approached, and solicited to effect healing, find food, divine, protect, help the dead to depart, and the newly born to enter this life with purpose and identity (Campbell, 1959; Eliade, 1964; McClenon, 2011; Sala, 2014; Sarasola, 2015; Sidky, 2010). The shaman was the tribe's liaison to the spirit world, a skilled technician who possessed the ability to traverse the material boundaries of time and space to interact with nature spirits, animal spirits, ancestors, spirit teachers, and the deceased to enlist their aid and advice for the tribe and its members, as well as do battle with malefic entities including enemy shamans and their

spirit allies (Rock & Krippner, 2011; Winkelman, 2009, 2010, 2013b). Specifically induced and willed entry into an altered state of consciousness are central characteristics of shamanic practice because it is the altered state of consciousness which enables the shaman to perceive phenomena not ordinarily perceived through the process of physical sensory stimulation and subsequent cognition (Rock & Krippner, 2007b).

Shamanism is characterized by the central figure of the shaman. This is a man or a woman who has the ability to enter an altered state of consciousness at will and for a specific purpose in order to traverse time and space to perceive and confront the mythic, anomalous, magical, and transpersonal world of the divine for the benefit of the tribe or community (Rock & Krippner, 2007b; Winkelman, 2013a, 2013b). Thus, the shaman was at once physician, magician, counselor, and protector of the tribe who battled the forces threatening the community's safety and survival (Eliade, 1964; Rock & Krippner, 2011). Our current understanding of traditional shamans and shamanic practice comes predominantly through the discipline of anthropology. Scholars such as Harner and Winkelman took their academic skills into the field (sometimes at no small risk) to live among contemporary shamanic tribes in South America and Asia in order to observe the culture and the work of the shamans within it. Harner (1982) described his experiences with the Jivaro of Ecuador and the Conibo of Peru. He reported being taken on an initiatory expedition into the jungle by Conibo shamans and given Ayahuasca, which gave rise to a profound spiritual journey and near-death experience during which he was able to perceive a world far beyond that of matter. Harner's experience is consistent with research results and observations of other anthropologists like Winkelman and Eliade, gleaned from different shamanic cultures, specifically that they:

- are identified as being shamans by the tribe through experiencing of a near-death experience, serious illness, psychotic break, or receiving a waking vision or dream.
- receive training from the tribal shamans so that they can perform healing, divination, psychopomp work, and feats of *psi* such as telekinesis, distance viewing, and use of ESP.
- undergo some sort of initiation as a shaman under the direction of the tribal shaman and elders.
- frequently maintain their mundane position in the tribal society, e.g., farmer and hunter despite being recognized as one of the tribal shamans.

- frequently perceive anomalous phenomena simultaneously with physical phenomena when not in a deliberately induced altered state of consciousness.
- are dedicated to providing service to the tribe at the specific request of the tribe and its members.
- are intimately and continually connected to the world of nature and spirit.

The ancient shamans were the original psychonauts, and their descendants continue to operate traditionally within indigenous societies today.

While the technologies of shamanism and the perception of anomalous phenomena during the periods of expanded, non-waking consciousness (referred to as the shamanic journey) are cross-culturally consistent (Winkelman, 2013b), the interpretation of those phenomena varies widely based on the culture and society in which the shamanic practice is occurring. Encounters with non-material phenomena are not exclusive to shamanic societies and practice. Reports of human interactions with anomalous, spiritually based phenomena, and perceptions appear within the frameworks of contemporary world religious literatures. Ezekiel's vision of the wheel, Paul's vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, and the Marian apparitions that reportedly occurred at Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, and Medjugore (Geels, 2011; Zimdars-Schwartz, 1991) are examples of perception of other-worldly phenomena recorded in the Christian tradition and interpreted within its framework of beliefs. These records of encounters with anomalous phenomena frequently report a shift of consciousness away from the mundane on the part of the perceiver. Paul's seizure and blindness, Ezekiel's visionary state (Harrelson, 2003), and the reported shifting of perception and presence of anomalous phenomena such as a spinning sun and the smell of roses described by witnesses of some of the Marian apparitions (Zimdars-Schwartz, 1991) all describe a shift away from ordinary waking consciousness into some kind of altered, hypnotic state. The deviation between the parameters and matrices of religious belief of the perceiver and those embraced by the perceiver's cultural-societal matrix frequently determine the difference between a visionary experience and a psychotic episode (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Lukoff, 2011; Zimdars-Schwartz, 1991).