Shamanism and the Internet

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In searching for articles about shamanism on the Internet, it soon becomes evident that links attached to the subject are largely connected to keywords such as *pagans, paganism, wicca, magick, newage, techno, psychedelics, drugs, rave, ecstasy*, etc. Readers can also come across prophetic writings similar to the following:

> The shaman seers of the Fourth World generally agree that those who tenaciously cling to the past will fall into mass insanity. The serpent power of the Aquarian Age is upon us. The Kundalini of Gaia is about to awaken. No one can avoid being affected. Most human beings may go out of their minds; others will go beyond mind. (John Hogue. *Neuroshaman.* http://www.reocities.com/researchtriangle/5657/)

He or she might also read announcements like the following:

> "Shamanic ecstasy is the *real* "Old Time Religion," of which modern churches are but pallid evocations. Shamanic, vision-ary ecstasy, the *mysterium tremendum*, the *unio mystica*, the eternally delightful experience of the universe as energy, is a *sine qua non* of religion, it is what religion is for! There is no need for faith, it is the ecstatic experience itself that gives one faith in the intrinsic unity and integrity of the universe, in ourselves as integral parts of the whole; that reveals to us the sublime majesty of our universe, and the fluctuant, scintillant, alchemical miracle that is quotidian consciousness. Any religion that requires faith and gives none, that defends against religious experiences, that promulgates the bizarre superstition that humankind is in some way separate, divorced

from the rest of creation, that heals not the gaping wound between Body and Soul, but would tear them asunder… is no religion at all!" (Jonathan Ott. http://deoxy.org/shaman.htm)

THE CLASSIFICATION OF SHAMANIC WEBSITES

Having browsed through hundreds of webpages, I realised that all sites connected to shamanism can be divided into five ideological groups.

1. Neoshamanic sites, particularly those based on the writings by Michael Harner.

2. Compilatory sites, deriving from the Neopaganist and *wicca* strive for harmony and balance.

3. Sites introducing some past or preserved tradition.

4. Sites advocating mainly ecstatic experience.

5. Sites guided by the "That's great stuff!" mentality.

As to the contents the sites could be divided in four major groups.

1. Homepages of Shamanic Centres.

Michael Harner's **'Foundation for Shamanic Studies'** (http://www.shamanism.org/)

Jonathan Horwitz's **'Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies'** (http://www.shamanism.dk/)

'FoxFire Institute of Shamanic Studies' – School of Experiential Shamanism and Advanced Healing Arts (http://www.foxfireinstitute.com/)

'Buryat Shamanism' (http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/8226/shamanism.html – lost with the closing of geocities.com)

These sites provide articles on shamanism, schedules of practical courses, advice for practitioners, chat groups, etc. Foxfire, among other things, has an online store for shamanic supplies and a request form for being included in a prayer circle and for a distant healing session .

2. Homepages of Shaman Healers and Healing

'HealingBear' (http://members.xoom.com/HealingBear/shaman.html – no longer available)
'Dancing Bear' – Shamanic Practices and Healing (http://www.dancing-bear.com/shaman.htm)
'Shamanic and Family Therapy' (http://www.aracnet.com/~lochness/ – no longer available)
Don Pedro's **'Shamanistic Healing Energies'** (http://www.prgone.com/bus/dpedro/dpedro.html – no longer available)

The above sites mostly contain articles that introduce or propagate the healing (of body and soul, primarily) through different compilations, which is called shamanism (on rare occasions also through actual shamanic tradition). Some pages even offer an online healing service. Schizophrenia & Shamanism (http://www.tightrope.demon.co.uk/skzindex.htm#menu – no longer available) aims to make sense of schizophrenic hallucinations from the perspective of shamanic experience and offers the patient an alternative outlook to his/her formerly diagnosed psychotic experience.

3. Websites Offering Personal Views, Experience and Perceptions.

'A Shamanic Path' (http://www-personal.umich.edu/~airyn/shamanic/ – no longer available)
'Magna' Nordic Chants (http://www.algonet.se/~moon/magna.htm – no longer available)
'Medicine Lodge' (http://members.tripod.com/~Medicine_Lodge/medicinelodge.htm)

On these sites participants of shamanic workshops and other practitioners of shamanism share their experience and visions. A larger number of similar writings however can be found on the sites of chat groups of different shamanic centres.

4. Websites Containing Mostly Links.

'Castaneda and New Age Shamanism' (http://www.hist.unt.edu/09w-ar7l.htm – no longer available)
'Ayahuasca' (http://www.deoxy.org/shaman.htm)

These pages often present a wide variety of very different links of the editor's choice in random order. Links to the use of psychotropic substances and New Age material seem to be unavoidable.

(RELIGIOUS) HISTORICAL DIGRESSION

From the religious historical aspect it is virtually impossible to differentiate between Shamanism on the Web and Neopaganist and witchcraft (*wicca*) practices spread via the Internet. The following discussion attempts to point out some probable reasons to explain why various religious persuasions are currently so popular.

1. Disillusioned in science

After the huge leap in scientific and technological progress in the early 20th century and into the 1960s (antibiotics and organ transplantation, the application of transistor, landing on the Moon and the application of nuclear energy, to mention just a few achievements) faith in the omnipotence of the scientific-technical revolution faded in the 1970s. Humankind was faced with the fact that for the time being interstellar distances would remain unscalable, various diseases still incurable, and inexhaustible sources of energy a mere fantasy. At the same time hypotheses about the dark matter of the universe and the black hole theories inspired grandiose fantasies about short-circuiting space or travelling and communivating through hyperspace. Unable to launch a real space expansion, people set out to conjecture it in their minds. The realisation that science has remained powerless in solving several problems gave rise to numerous secret practices. Religious ideas inundated not only the sphere of science fiction but also that of science.

2. The happy savage – a new human ideal

The definition of the future human ideal underwent considerable transformation. While some early 20th century thinkers with pagan conceptions envisioned a human spirit free from all societal barriers, whose actions are beyond all human standards, a powerful teacher (Zoroaster, for example), whose hatred for everything bourgeois could release destructive forces in order to renew mankind through death and suffering, then the post-war world weary of ravages yearned for a new myth. This was found in an ancient concept recognised in onr form or another in different cultures, in which humans used to exist in harmony with nature and the human race. They revered the elemental forces and exerted their own influence on it by practising different rites. Perhaps it was not just the ravages of war people had to suffer, but also the concept of the so-called happy savage, revived by anthropologists-ethnographers, that affected this new way of thinking. The latter definitely influenced the subsequent formation of the Hippie Movement, which was a form of social protest.

3. The powerful progress of countercultures

During the same years when the first gigantic computers exchanged the first bits of information, social protest reached its height in the countercultural movement. The world had seen it all before, like so many other recurrent tendencies in the history of humanity. Even early Christianity might be regarded, in a way, as a counterculture to the ancient world that was dying. The aspirations of the whole generation were voiced as a belated manifest by the rock group Pink Floyd in their album *The Wall*:

We don't need no education
We don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teachers leave them kids alone
Hey! Teachers! Leave them kids alone!
All in all it's just another brick in the wall.
All in all you're just another brick in the wall.

The hope was to break through the wall generally known as western civilisation, built by previous generations. Perhaps it was also predisposed to this due to the thriving popularity of Afro-American music, which spoke of a totally different worldview. Be as it may, the countercultural movement differed from all the previous ones in that all events were rapidly broadcast to millions of people. The younger generation with its as yet underdeveloped worldview, who realised that the message was addressed to them directly rather than to their parents, was most vulnerable to its influence.

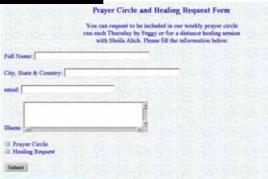## 4. A wish to expand the mind

People soon understood that only a few could live out the slogan *all you need is love* longer than the tumultuous years of youth. Those, who had no intention to die young, turned in their search for new ways and new meaning in their lives to the East and into their inner selves. They discovered things that had always existed, but had never gained much popularity except in smaller circles, like meditation, for example. Protesting and using drugs for a mere kick was substituted with "expanding the mind". In 1968 John Lilly, who had become famous for his experiments in isolation tank and the study of dolphin's brain, published his work "Programming and Metaprogramming the Human Biocomputer", which was guided by the principle that humans are essentially a biological computer, which uses innate and acquired programs. The ability to take in new information and to develop ideas beyond these innate programs depends on our capacity for "metaprogramming" or learning to learn. Lilly argues that by altering the brain's normal operations with psychotropic substances (in this case LSD) or freeing it of daily routine, the range of human thought can be increased beyond all previous expectations. Other ideological excuses were found to justify the use of drugs. One of them was the use of hallucinogenic plants practised by wise men and shamans in different cultures with the purpose of seeking answers from the supernatural realm. The vegetalistas[1] of the Amazonian people and the users of *peyotli*, a plant used by Mexican Indians, became the focus of
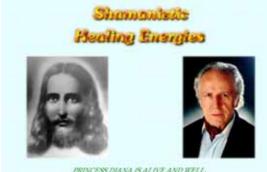
[1] Shamans, whose practice is based on belief in the spirits of hallucinogenic plants

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http://www.foxfireinstitute.com/ healingrequest.html (no longer active)

http://www.prgone.com/bus/ dpedro/dpedro.html (no longer active)

http://www.deoxy.org/ shaman.htm

attention. Then the world discovered hallucinogenic mushrooms. In 1975 brothers Terence and Dennis McKenna published their work "The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens and the *I Ching*". A year later it was followed by "Psilocybin: Magic Mushroom Grower's Guide". Both works were based on the folk medicine and shamanist practices of the Amazon people.

5. Symbiosis of secret wisdom and science

Many followers of alternative culture saw works on cultural anthropology and religious history as an invaluable body of thought, which in the search for one's own roots (and the roots of one's spirituality) led to secret, condemned or censured religions and magic practices. Witchcraft and occult practices were at their peak. The general trend in the late 1960s and the early 1970s was thus esoteric religions as opposed to mass culture.

The time was ripe for a symbiosis of secret wisdom and science. Anthropology, dominated by authorities who had primarily in the past century achieved fame for themselves with the study of exotic cultures, was along with medicine the first casualty. The motto of many of the new generation of anthropologists seemed to be that the supernatural world did exist, it had to be experienced and that knowledge shared with the whole of humanity. Since in many cultures only a few chosen ones could communicate with spirits, anthropologists began to look for all kinds of wise men, witches and shamans. As many leading anthropologists came from North America, the search focused on the southern part of the New World. All those scientists, who succeeded in finding themselves a spiritual teacher, sank one by one into the world of spirits.

THE GENESIS OF NEOSHAMANISM

As far as the genesis of Neoshamanism is concerned we should emphasise the following:

In the years 1961 and 1964 the father of today's Neoshamanism, anthropologist Michael Harner, studied shaman practices among the Indians in the Upper Amazon, and then worked out his methods of shamanic practices and healing in the United States. At the beginning of the 1970s he began to teach his meth-

ods to a small group; and in 1979, as interest grew, he founded the Centre for Shamanic Studies in Norwalk, Connecticut. In 1980 he published his work "The Way of the Shaman", which soon became a handbook of shamanic studies. In 1968 Carlos Castaneda published his first book in the series of the teachings of Don Juan, entitled "The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge". And even though many have regarded Juan Matus as a purely fictional character, Castaneda's books have had a tremendous impact on forming the worldview of a whole generation. In 1977 Felicitas D. Goodman, professor of anthropology at Dension University, Ohio, brought together the first group of students that wanted to "expand their minds" in a state of trance. Since the phenomenon of F. Goodman is an illustrative example of how a scientist can turn into a sage, we will discuss this case in more detail.

FROM A SCIENTIST TO A SAGE

In 1965 F. Goodman, a Hungarian-born philologist, who had just turned 51, entered the University of Ohio, where she attended a course in anthropology taught by Erika Bourguignon. Under her guidance Goodman began to study the phenomenon of "speaking in tongues", greatly revered by the Pentecostal Church, and came to the conclusion that glossolalia, which occurs in a hypnotic trance, is not dependent on the mother tongue of the individual who "speaks in tongues". In 1976 at the meeting of the Ohio Academy of Science F. Goodman delivered a presentation, where she argued that

> The trance experience itself is vacuous. If no belief system is proffered, it will remain vacuous. It is a neurophysiological event that receives content only from signals present in the respective culture. (Goodman 1990: 17)

Perhaps due to the fact that her study was unable to attract wider attention, or due to her critical age and problems in her personal life she soon began to attribute special meaning to many extraneous things, considering them prophetic signs from the invisible world. Contemplating on the factors that affect the essence of hypnotic trance she concluded that one of these factors

is the bodily posture the experience of the trance has assumed before entering the trance state. In 1977 she conducted an experiment to prove her point, and encouraged interested students to participate in it. In its initial stages the process might have been considered a scientific experiment: she worked with each test subject individually. Using rhythmical rattle to influence them in a variety of assigned positions, she asked them to speak of their experience after the test. The results of the experiment revealed that bodily posture does have an effect on the hypnotic experience, but since F. Goodman was unable to find any scientific method for analysing the results (even the most precise instruments failed to register any posture-related differences in the physiology of people in a state of trance; Goodman 1990: 25), her interpretation favoured the supernatural approach, i.e. regarding posture-related trance experiences as messages from these religious authorities of different times and cultures, whose characteristic postures were used. Scientific experiment was gradually transformed into a ritual, its participants into a congregation who declared their adherence to their new religion and who continued to discuss the matter even outside the 15 minute sessions and ensuing discussion time. The scientist in F. Goodman noted:

> There was another aspect of the group trance experience emerging that I also had seen evolve in the Apostolic congregations that I knew from my fieldwork. The shared trance shapes a ring around the community, keeping the members in and closing others out. (Goodman 1990: 45).

Regardless of that she continued her workshops.

> The participants in both Europe and this country [the US – A. L.] represent pretty much the same groups. For many of them, what they are learning in the workshops is simply yet another step on the path to finding out more about themselves. "Esoteric tourists", as one of my friends calls them, are a characteristic feature of our waning century. (Ibid.: 51.)

Over a period of ten years (1977–1987) 890 people attended Goodman's lectures, 227 of them more than once (ibid.: 226).

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Even though Goodman did not directly propagate Shamanism, her workshops have had a tremendous impact on the formation of Neoshamanism. The second largest television station in Germany, for example, televised an extensive introduction to Goodman's experiment involving a trance session followed by the sharing of the experience (ibid.: 43 ff).

Congregation and the acknowledgement of faith are the key words to use in speaking about the effect of the Internet on different persuasions. But before we come to that, we should ask is there anything in the international computer network as such that might inspire people to mythologise it.

CYBERSPACE AND SHADOW REALM

Though a large part of the population abandoned their belief in the scientific and technological revolution, progress in technology has not stopped. Having failed in its attempt to control time and space or create inexhaustable sources of inexpensive energy, people directed a large part of their intellectual abilities (in part with a militaristic goal) to the sphere of telecommunication and information technology. Thus, in the final decade of the previous century the very computers, that science fiction writers some 20 years ago considered as some far-fetched future fantasy, came into daily use.

We might argue that the Internet reached many people before they were ready to comprehend it. The average person's notion about the technology of transmitting information sees the Internet as a real global network with a cognitive aspect, so that browsing through different Web sites people truly are connected with different parts of the world. This is not far from the idea that the Internet is an electronic world, which exists parallel with the real perceivable world. Mark Pesce (one of the inventors of VRML) has said:

> One of the philosophical arguments I was making at that point was that there is no fundamental difference between the virtual world and the shadow realm, in other words, the dreamtime. And what I wanted to do was to say, "Okay, if the god is in the shadow, he can also be in the dreamtime of cyberspace." And so the ritual was constructed around wel-

coming the god into cyberspace, because that was the time for entering. (Mark Pesce interviewed by Gordy Slack, Oct 28, 1997, http://www.hyperreal.org/~mpesce/ctnsinterview.html).

True, chatrooms and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) enable anyone to lead an altogether different life in cyberspace, experience travels similar to shamanic trips, where the traveller can communicate with other virtual creatures, whose prototypes have been borrowed from science fiction novels. Science fiction authors, in their turn, have often borrowed their characters from mythology.

There is yet another factor favouring mythologisation of the web. Since the Web is often depicted as a certain space (cyberspace), and the orientation in any space is based on attaching different values (significance) to different parts of that space, their different relation with percipients, we have reason to believe that the same applies to the Internet. In fact, many computer gurus have said the same:

Without the sacred there is no differentiation in space. If we are about to enter cyberspace, the first thing we have to do is plant the divine in it. (Mark Pesce, Ibid.).

Like the real world, cyberspace should include good and evil, pleasant and scary, commonplace and sacred sites. Comparing page headings of some Shamanist sites (which often contain words like *lodge, cave, way, path*), it appears that these are presented as ritual sites or travel routes. The Internet can also be inhabited by deities or supernatural forces. All that needs to be done is announce that some web site is the homepage of a deity or source of some supernatural force. Just like Kashpirovsky, who claimed he could heal people via television, or a Neoshaman from South America, who has declared that his homepage has a healing effect (Don Pedro's **'Shamanistic Healing Energies'** – http://www.prgone.com/bus/dpedro/dpedro.html, where he among other things displays numerous letters to confirm this effect; the site is unfortunately no longer available online), why cannot there also be people, who achieve their fame, say, as cyber prophets of some deities.

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THE INTERNET AND MINORITIES

Of course, it isn't just that the Internet *per se*, which is intangible and somewhat elusive, is inherently connected to the sphere of supernatural. The huge preonderance of various sects and minorities is rather caused by the accessibility of the Internet and its democratic nature in the sense that everyone is welcome to propagate his order (naturally, if it does not directly instigate people to kill or overthrow governments). Mostly those, who for one reason or another have not been able to express themselves in the printed press or media, have made use of this opportunity. Before the advent of the Internet, selling one's ideas in words, image and sound used to be a privilege of only the few. Only now people are beginning to realise that as the amount of available information is increased, the number of those who avail themselves of the information decreases.

Furthermore, the Internet is anonymous enough and quite freely allows active users to use any code name or image they wish. Not everyone feels comfortable to confess their faith or make complaints in front of a wider audience, but then they have enough courage to write something like this:

I am a single young man who has a great love for all beings, but lately I have been letting my anger get the best of me when dealing with other people. I know that mountain lion is my animal totem but lately I've felt abandoned by him. I used to dream of being a great white lion with blue eyes and he would help me with bad dreams or when dealing with people that I deem as bad I would use his silence as a form of control. There were times that I would hear him yell in the back of my mind or he would talk using my voice. I really came to rely on him alot but lately he doesn't even call and I don't know what to do. He was a control for my rage and anger... (Posted by Ron on January 22, 1999, Foundation for Shamanistic Studies. Interactive Message Forum http://www.shamanism.org/messageforum.html – no longer available)

Even the codenames that shamanistic authors have chosen for themselves say a lot about them, such as: *Aerig Meginlu, Evi WhyteHawke, Aufsteigender Adler, WindStalker, little fawn, anita-owl-woman, HeartBringer, Stephen Speaking Wheat, windflower, Lightening Woman, Sage Healing Wolf, Joseph Bearwalker Wilson, Pale Horse* (all names are cited in their original form). Each of these names indicates that its user has assumed a certain role in the Internet. A cursory survey leaves an impression that such names are used by advisors rather than those who seek guidance. The latter tend to use first names:

> hi there, i am looking for a shamanic healing to retieve my lost souls. I live in Santa Cruz California and I am in need of this ASAP.[2] If you are a shamanic healer or know of someone who can do this, in central or northern coast of california, please contact me ASAP. Thank you for your help! (Posted by Victoria on February 22, 1999. Foundation for Shamanistic Studies. Interactive Message Forum http://www.shamanism.org/messageforum.html – no longer available)

Many of those who seek guidance seem to be people who believe that a Shaman or sage can truly help them. Most of them seem to have been involved in some Neopagan movement. Still, we cannot rule out the possibility that people write and advertise with the purpose of attracting attention or establishing new contacts.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS – FOR WHOM?

Superficial analysis indicates that narratives, where people describe their Shamanistic experiences, are very similar. Moreover, texts concerning other trance experiences also share similarities. When recipient-narrators have not developed an approach for interpreting their experiences they tend to focus on their emotions. We have for example the following account describing hypnotic trance recorded during the scientific phase of F. Goodman's experiment, when without any previous information

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[2]) as soon as possible

the test subject was asked to assume the pose of one of the rock paintings in the Lascaux Cave:

> Anita: "The hand position seemed to indicate polarity to me, and I began to experience that more and more as I went into trance. The left hand that pointed down and was pushing away was getting warm, the right one was cold. This seemed to develop a flow of energy that became circular. The energy wrapped me into a cocoon, and for a while I was floating in this very nice, golden cocoon." (Goodman 1990: 23).

Now, for comparison, an account of a recipient during a workshop nine years later:

> Isi: "I was afraid because I was feeling so light, and that I would lose touch with the ground. But by that time it had already happened, and I was in the sky. I saw on the ground below me the shadow of a big bird, and when I moved, the shadow moved too, so I knew that I was that bird. I kept somersaulting backward through the clouds, and saw behind them lots of peacocks, spreading their tail feathers. I kept going higher and higher, I couldn't stop. Finally I arrived at a star, it was really a door, and there was a bright light behind it. I went through the door and saw a sculpture, but it had no head. There was a lot of light around; people were dancing, and they all seemed very happy." (Goodman 1990: 73)

While the experience of the uninformed test subject, who tells the researcher of her experience tête-à-tête, involves a flow of energy, then the member of a trance circle sees a journey consisting of certain mythological elements. The narration of the latter must have been affected by the experiencer's expectations as well as by the accounts of other members of the circle. In order to assess this influence we need to understand how people handle their experiences. Discussing the importance of signs in human psychological development, the Russian psychologist L. Vygotski wrote:

In the course of direct perception and passing on the perceived form a child, without using speech, grasps and memorises the whole impression (a spot of colour, the main characteristics of form, etc.), irrespective of the level of accuracy or complexity. As the child begins to use speech its perception becomes separated from the imminent impression; new centres established by words and connections between different points and these centres are formed in the visual field; perception ceases to be "the slave of the visual field" and regardless of the accuracy and perfection of the solution, the child receives and passes on a impression deformed by words. (Vygotski 1984: 18)

The use of speech reshapes the child's behaviour, and also the attention, which "transforms from passive registrant to the performer of active choices and intellectual reminiscence" (Ibid.: 37). Vygotski treats speech as one of the symbolic stimuli, which organise human behaviour, namely the sign systems. Signs play an important role in memorisation process:

Operation with memory involves the presence of certain external signs, which participate in the process. The subject does not solve the task by directly mobilising his natural abilities, but exercises certain external manipulations, organising himself through organising things by creating artificial stimuli, which differently from others have an after effect: these are not addressed to other people but to the subject himself, thus enabling him to perform memorisation. (Ibid.: 61–62)

Of course, in addition to the actual external signs (like knots, labels, etc.) people also use words in memorising things. Returning to our discussion we can conclude: signs have an important role in memorising even complex experiences or impressions. That is why people need to attach significance to everything experienced. I believe that rendering unusual or new experiences meaningful is the same exercise of "symbolic stimuli", without which any wilful activity would be impossible. In order to attach meaning to and memorise a new experience, it has to be associated with an already established experience by means of signs. First the new experience has to be translated into the

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same sign system that all the other experiences are in, i.e. the visual, auditory, etc. details of experiences must be defined within the framework of the system. In the case of complex visions or other experiences there are two ways to do this: the experience has to be reproduced in speech or in the mind (both processes are similar, but the latter lacks the feedback characteristic of narration). The feedback that follows narration functions as a certain control mechanism: the final evaluation of the experience, its values on the scales of normal/abnormal and ordinary/unusual depend on the reaction of the audience. The narrator certainly attempts to influence the audience's disposition towards his own evaluation of the experience, therefore narration can never be objective. Rather it serves the narrator's interests. Among other things, the response of the audience also determines the narrator's position within any given social group.

INTERNET INTEREST GROUP – A VIRTUAL CONGREGATION?

To conclude from the above discussion we might argue that people who narrate their trance experiences and soul travels are fulfilling two goals: they attribute a significance to the experience which is acceptable to the group, and by doing that hope to secure a desired position within the group. By the way, the same applies to traditional shamans.

The people, who advocate their religious convictions and share their religious experience on the Internet, might be viewed as a type of congregation, which as it organises its members' spiritual life must, like any other congregation, see to it that its teachings are right, but also the need to minister to the chaste religious experiences of members of the congregation. It must provide support and advice to the believer, but, if necessary, also reproach and punishment. Those, who work towards becoming religious leaders share wise words and blessings, while reproach like the following is very rare:

There is also a tendency today to project some kind of aura around a shaman and pretend that he or she is some embodiement of peace and serenity, living totally in harmony with Spirit, doing good for everyone, (and for free of course),

and naturally being a wonderful magical healer. This tendency is making many Westerners the laughing stock of real shamanic practitioners throughout the world. In the preface to "Shaman: An Illustrated Guide" by anthropologist Piers Vitebsky is a quote that I find highly amusing, as well as highly reflecting of reality. "A shaman from Nepal met a Westerner who remarked how good it must be to live in harmony with the cosmos. The shaman replied, "The main part of my job is killing witches and sorcerers."" (Joseph Bearwalker Wilson. "So you wannabe a shaman, huh?" Bearwalker's Shamanic Teachings and Techniques http://www.metista.com/shamanism/part1.html – no longer available online)

New members join this virtual congregation by confessing their faith. Confessing is a personal acount for the purpose of establishing and strengthening the ties between believer and congregation. The believers declare their adherence to a certain doctrine in front of the whole congregation, and admit that the teachings have an acceptable religious effect on them. As to shamanism the Internet contains narratives like the following:

"I put in the tape, on the first side. I immediately liked the sound of the drums, and felt a shift, perhaps nots so much in consciousness, but …hmmm…well, in body, in mind? Something. So I laid down, put my arm over my eyes, and began to visualize my hole in the ground. I sort of imagined myself turning into the possum and going into my tree trunk. After a few attempts, this worked, and I started going down. All the while, tho, I'm still pretty darn aware of my physical body. The path down is all twisty and turny, and roots and dirt and stone. and I keep getting looped back to the beginning, I just can't hold the image, especially since I have no idea where I'm going. I pictured it sort of at a diagonal down. Anyhow, the path just kept going on forever, so I decided to try Harner's crystal tunnel approach, which worked for a few minutes… [---] By this time, the tape had ended, so out of curiosity, I flipped it over. as soon as this side started, I felt really good about it. This time, I imagined approaching the possum, and picking it up, petting it and whatnot, then slowly shape-shifting into it. I saw myself walking towards the tree trunk, sniffing

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the leaves, hearing them crunch under my little feet, etc. sniffing the moss around the opening and then going inside. I just sort of sat there for a minute, waiting, because I wasn't sure whether I was going to go up or down, then the floor fell out from underneath me, and I started plummeting down. I turned back into myself and released the possum back up. I fell for a long time, sort of turning in the air, not afraid, just falling. I landed in a swift-running stream which went for a short ways, then dropped me off this huge waterfall. I fell through the waterfall for a long time also, and landed in a calm clear greeny-blue pool of water. When I tried to surface, I couldn't really look around. I remembered in Harner's book it was important to remember your steps, so I thought I'd retrace. So I went back up the waterful, becoming a salmon as I did so (I had salmon for dinner last night), and I felt my strong little salmon body pushing up thru the waterfall in leaps an bounds." (http://www-personal.umich.edu/~airyn/shamanic/journeys/first_journey.html – no longer available online)

Such narrators often leave some details of their account for the congregation (i.e. religious leaders) to interpret. By doing that they imply that they are ready to bend their beliefs to conform to the principles of the group.

"Anyhow.. I have a question for you. Yesterday i did a journey to the upper world to meet a teacher and receive information that she saw i needed and was ready to have. It was a long journey, full of delight, flight, and awe. I ended up sitting at the foot of the Goddess's throne, my teacher, with my head on her knee. She indicated to me that i was to relax, a lesson i am trying to integrate into my being. As i sat there, deep relaxation and comfort permeated all of me. I began to feel sleepy (?) and lose my focus. The drum return sounded and i DID NOT WANT TO RETURN! Big time. [---] My question has to do with this drowsiness and fuzzy focus in the journey. Has anyone experienced this? Should one guard against this; is it at all "dangerous" ? I have certainly never experienced this pull to stay in the spirit world as strongly as that." (Posted

Similar texts can be found very frequently on the Internet. Comparing such texts with the travel descriptions of shamans in North-Eurasian traditional cultures, we can point out the following:

1. Except for the accounts describing initiation visions, the descriptions of traditional shamanic journeys pay little attention to the circumstances at the beginning of the journey. This is understandable, since the journey takes place within the frames of shamanic ritual. At the same time the reason why the shaman undertakes the journey is always discussed. Usually it involves some community member's request to help someone.

Neoshamanistic narratives appear to describe initiation visions. These stories include detailed accounts about the situation at the beginning of the journey and describe different ways to go into trance. The journey often has no other purpose than improving one's own spiritual balance.

2. In the Siberian shamanism much attention is paid to the helping spirits of the shamans who usually appear in large numbers. At the beginning of the ritual the shaman summons all necessary helping spirits, consults them and only then begins his journey. The future shaman can visit the abode of his helping spirits only in his initiation visions, an experienced shaman can visit these places while searching for new helping spirits.

According to Neoshamanistic narratives a person must travel to the realm of supernatural before he can meet any of his spiritual assistants. The number of assistants is usually small, most often only one.

3. Shamans either describe the path to the underworld or the higher spheres in great detail or pay almost no attention to it and start their account from the moment when the shaman (i.e. his soul) encounters the first inhabitants of the supernatural realm. The path to the netherworld goes through natural landscape, crossing rivers (and seas) or mountains; the abodes of spirits, whom the shaman visits or secretly passes through, mark the different stages of the journey. The places the shaman visits

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are often densely inhabited with spirits, whereas his description of spirits is based on both the tradition of his cultural group as well as his family traditions and personal fantasy.

In Neoshamanistic accounts the description of the path to the supernatural world is mostly based on established literary patterns. The path does not proceed in nature, but through a passage, tunnel, etc. Places rather than inhabitants mark the different stages of journey. The Neoshamanistic visionary world is generally very sparsely inhabited. Any larger number of inhabitants are regarded as anonymous (either people, birds, etc.), and have no specific meaning for the traveller. Supernatural beings, whom the traveller encounters on his way, are either representatives of animal kingdom or characters from different Neopagan traditions or world religions.

There is another distinctive difference between traditional shamanic journeys and Neoshamanistic practices: during the traditional Siberian shamanic journey the shaman describes and reproduces his journey and actions to the audience both in words and movements as the journey goes on. This involves continuous interpretation/rendition of visions and constant controlling of feedback and one's emotions, therefore shaman's trance cannot be unvaryingly deep, but has to fluctuate enabling immediate interpretation of even the most intense experiences.

Neoshamanistic practices, on the other hand, are mainly based on the shamanistic traditions of the New World (*vegetalistas,* the medicine men, etc.). Compared to the Siberian shamanism these are less concerned with rituals and tend to focus on the ensuing description of the trance experience.

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