

Shamanism – Part 7

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Dangers and Degradations, continued

Spiritual Blackmail

The phenomenon of spiritistic intimidation is common to all categories of occultism. Thus, shamans who are “chosen” by the spirits as “healers” must either submit to the spirits or become ill, or even die.

The person called to be a shaman must learn to shamanize, that is, must take his powerful experiences and find a way to share the power with his people. If he does not shamanize, he will become ill again and may die, for the shaman is called to a certain kind of life, and if he does not lead it properly, his power will turn against him and kill him.¹

In other words, to the spirits, human life is cheap. If their chosen host will not obey their wishes, they will destroy it and find another. Dr. Nandor Fodor discusses a similar condition among mediums. He observes that when a person neglects his mediumistic powers, illness results. Thus “mediumship, if suppressed, will manifest in symptoms of disease.”² He cites the following illustration:

The spasms seized the whole body; even the tongue was affected, blocking the throat and nearly suffocating her. When the patient mentioned that in her youth she tried table tilting, the doctor thought of the possibility that the mediumistic energy might block his patient’s organism. A sitting was tried. The lady fell into trance and afterwards slept well for a few days. When the sleeplessness became worse again the sitting was repeated and the results proved to be so beneficial that the chloral hydrate treatment previously employed was discontinued.³

This woman discovered that, like many shamans, she too had been “called” to her profession, and that unless she gave in to the process, she would suffer immeasurably.

Such spiritistic intimidation is common.⁴ Once the door has been broken down to permit spiritistic influence, whether by heredity, occult transfer, or personal choice, the spirits may aggressively pursue their evil agenda. Whether in mediumism, shamanism, or witchcraft, the person “has been caught by the spirits and must serve the spiritual world.”⁵ The following shamanistic examples, from Swiss psychologist, anthropologist, and ethnologist Holger Ralweit show the true nature of the spirits.

These examples, which come from a chapter having the incredible title, “When Insanity Is a Blessing: The Message of Shamanism,” reveal how dangerous it is to open the doors to the occult, and why those trapped often find it so difficult to escape.⁶

Among the Siberian Tofa, too, shamans become sick before their initiation and are tormented by spirits.... [S]haman Vassily Mikailovic ... could not rise from his bed for a whole year. Only when he agreed to the demands of the spirits did his health improve.⁷

The wife of another shaman recalled the terrible experience of her husband’s call to shamanism. She warns, “He who is seized by the shaman sickness and does not begin to exercise shamanism, must suffer badly. He might lose his mind, he may even have to give up his life. Therefore he is advised, ‘You must take up shamanism so as not to suffer!’ Some even say, ‘I become a shaman only to escape illness.’” Another shaman added, “The man chosen for shamandom is first recognized by the black spirits. The spirits of the dead shamans are called black spirits. They make the chosen one ill and then they force him to become a shaman.”⁸ And a shamaness reports, “Sometimes I say to them, ‘I do not want to go with you.’ Whenever I turn down such an invitation I develop a fever and become very ill.”⁹

Kalweit comments that, in harmony with occult healing generally, the “healer” must suffer the illness of the patient:

Resistance to psychophysical change and a disintegration of the normal structure of existence has always been part and parcel of the transformative process. Because of this, it forms at least a partial aspect of every rite of transformation.... Frequently the shaman enters a patient’s state so thoroughly that he himself experiences the symptoms and pains of the illness.... In the course of their painful existence, many shamans have physically experienced countless illnesses....¹⁰

Either way, the shaman cannot win. If he pursues his spiritistic calling, he suffers. If he does not, he suffers. The shaman who refuses his call in all probability “will be plagued by sickness the rest of his life.”¹¹ Even one’s own family members may be tortured by the spirits as a means of forcing compliance:

Often not only the shaman himself but his whole family are visited by misfortune.... The Koreans talk about a “bridge of people” (*induri*) that comes into being when a member of the family is chosen to be a shaman and another member has to die as a result of this.... A God has “entered into” the shaman and, in return, demands another human life.... But most families are unwilling to have a shaman in their circle, so the *induri* phenomenon occurs quite frequently. According to the investigations made by Cho Hung-Youn, *induri* occurs on average seven or eight times in every twenty cases of shamanic vocation.¹²

In a parallel to life of famous trance medium Edgar Cayce, we read:

The Yakut shaman Tusput, who was critically ill for more than twenty years, could find relief from his suffering only when he conducted a séance during which he fell into a trance. In the end he fully regained his health by this method. However, if he held no séances over a long period of time he once again began to feel unwell, exhausted, and indecisive. In general, the symptoms of an illness

subside when a candidate for shamanism enters a trance.¹³

In the end, because of their power, the spirits will have their way. "In the end I became so ill that I was close to death. So I began to shamanize, and very soon my health improved. Even now I feel unwell and sick whenever I am inactive as a shaman over a longer period of time."¹⁴

Clearly, horrible torments, paralysis, drownings, insanity, extended sickness, being maimed, poisoned, and worse are the shaman's lot.¹⁵ Perhaps this explains why even those sympathetic to the practice may issue warnings. Dr. Jeanne Achterberg writes:

Any current thrust toward romanticizing shamanic medicine or folk medicine in general should be tempered with the knowledge that often the remedies prescribed were clearly wrong and harmful from the standpoint of physical well-being. Jilek-Aall describes birthing procedures dictated by custom in parts of Africa that defy the course of nature. The result is high infant mortality and a high incidence of epilepsy....

The practice of shamanism is always regarded as being fraught with grave risk to the life and well being of the practitioner.... One particularly dangerous aspect of shamanism, "soul raising" is almost always practiced by women....

A long standing debate has existed in anthropological writings on whether shamanism is a shelter for deranged personalities.¹⁶

Psychopathology

The obvious reason for the debate over the shaman's psychological health, as mentioned by Achterberg, is that shamanism usually involves the practitioner in psychotic and schizophrenic-like episodes.¹⁷ But because shamanism is now often interpreted as a form of "higher" spirituality by many psychologists, especially transpersonal psychologists, its accompanying mental states are also being reinterpreted in a benign fashion.

In other words, what was once considered a psychological state of depraved insanity is today considered a spiritual state of higher consciousness!¹⁸ What was once dangerous and feared is now *preferred* as a method of spiritual empowerment and enlightenment.¹⁹ As Achterberg writes, "Newer theories of personality development ... all include the notion that 'normal' [consciousness] is by no means the most evolved possibility."²⁰ The East has indeed come West: temporary insanity as a potentially higher or elevated state of consciousness is a premise of Hindu and Buddhist thinking, more than many people realize.²¹

Of course, not all agree that states of insanity are spiritually desirable. "Among those most frequently cited are Devereux, who steadfastly maintains there is no excuse for not regarding the shamans as neurotic or even psychotic, and Silverman who likens the SSC [Shamanic State of Consciousness] to acute schizophrenia."²²

One of the biggest problems that surrounds ethnopsychiatry, or "transcultural" psychiatry, is the confusion of normal and abnormal states of consciousness. Because states of mental illness are considered "normal" in shamanistic and other

subcultures, and because modern secular psychiatry and anthropology have no absolute standards by which to judge such things, many scholars are concluding that even occult-induced mental illness can be simply part of a continuum along the “normal” range of transpersonal consciousness.

The implications of this are anything but minor. Consider Michael Harner’s first experience with shaman initiation—an experience that resulted in his becoming a shaman. He employed the sacred drug made from ayahuasca plant or “soul vine”:

I could make out large numbers of people with the heads of blue jays and the bodies of humans, not unlike the bird-headed gods of ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. At the same time, some energy-essence began to float from my chest.... Although I believed myself to be an atheist, I was completely certain that I was dying and that the bird-headed people had come to take my soul away....

Starting with my arms and legs, my body slowly began to feel like it was turning to solid concrete. I could not move or speak. Gradually, as the numbness closed in on my chest, toward my heart, I tried to get my mouth to ask for help, to ask the Indians for an antidote. Try as I might, however, I could not marshal my abilities sufficiently to make a word. Simultaneously, my abdomen seemed to be turning to stone, and I had to make a tremendous effort to keep my heart beating.... I was virtually certain that I was about to die.... I was dying and therefore, [it was] “safe” [for me] to receive [new] revelations. These were the secrets reserved for the dying and the dead, I was informed. I could only very dimly perceive the givers of these thoughts: giant reptilian creatures.... I could only vaguely see them in what seemed to be gloomy, dark depth.

Then they projected a visual scene in front of me. First they showed me the planet earth as it was aeons ago.... [They said] they had come to planet earth to escape their enemy.

The creatures then showed me how they had created life on the planet in order to hide within the multitudinous forms and thus disguise their presence.... They were the true masters of humanity and the entire planet, they told me. We humans were but the receptacles and servants of these creatures....

I knew I had only a moment more to live. Strangely, I had no fear of the bird-headed people; they were welcome to have my soul if they could keep it....

[Later] I began to struggle against returning to the ancient ones, who were beginning to feel increasingly alien and possibly evil....

I frantically tried to conjure up a power being to protect me against the alien reptilian creatures.

One appeared before me; and at that moment the Indians forced my mouth open and poured the antidote into me.²³

When native or naive Americans seek out such encounters, on what basis does anyone logically conclude there will never be casualties? Harner himself admits people may go insane, “become seriously ill or even die” from shamanistic experiences.²⁴ The number of people who might never come back from such experiences is unknown, but the risks are certainly not less than those encountered in mind-expanding drugs such as LSD.

It is true that the mental states of what may be termed “shamanic consciousness” and those of schizophrenia and psychosis are not entirely identical. The shaman often has more volition and control during his altered state of consciousness, and it is a “voluntarily” induced insanity similar to that found in the spiritistic Eastern guru traditions.²⁵ Nevertheless, while this state is controlled to some degree by the shaman, it seems to be controlled to a much larger degree by his spirit guides, and certainly it is manipulated by the spirits for their own purposes, whatever these might be. Regardless, the very fact of a debate among ethnopsychiatrists proves that the “state” of insanity and that of shamanistic consciousness are similar enough that they are not easily distinguished. Shamans themselves admit, “There is a fine line between the shaman and the psychotic.”²⁶

The unfortunate result for those who seek shamanistic states of consciousness is only that they will encounter their own demonically manipulated consciousness—and despite the claims of promoters, this is anything but “healthy” or spiritually “evolved.” Because shamanism *requires* spirit possession and because one cannot become a true shaman-healer without it, demon possession is also required. How many shamanistically fascinated Americans realize that?

Notes

¹ John A Sanford, *Healing and Wholeness* (New York: Paulist, 1977), p. 67.

² Nandor Fodor, *An Encyclopedia of Psychic Science* (Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1966), p. 235.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ e.g., John Ankerberg, John Weldon, *The Coming Darkness: Confronting Occult Deception* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), pp. 223-238.

⁵ Stanislav Grof, Christina Grof, eds., *Spiritual Emergency* (Los Angeles, CA: J. P. Tarcher, 1989), p. 97.

⁶ Ankerberg and Weldon, *The Coming Darkness*.

⁷ Grof and Grof, *Spiritual Emergency*, p. 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), pp. 7-66; Alan Morrow, “An Interview with Sun Bear,” *Shaman’s Drum*, Winter 1985, pp. 18, 22

¹⁶ Jeanne Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing: Shamanism and Modern Medicine* (Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1985), pp. 18-20.

¹⁷ See Naomi Steinfeld, “Surviving the Chaos of Something Extraordinary,” *Shaman’s Drum*, Spring 1986, 22-27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 27.

¹⁹ Natasha Frazier, “A Model of Contemporary Shamanism,” *Shaman’s Drum*, Fall 1985), pp. 40-41.

²⁰ Jack Schwarz, *Human Energy Systems: A Way of Good Health Using Our Auric Fields* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 31.

²¹ John Weldon, “Eastern Gurus in a Western Milieu: A Critique from the Perspective of Biblical Revelation,” Ph.D. dissertation (Pacific College of Graduate Studies, Melbourne, Australia, 1988).

²² Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing*, p. 30. Silverman is the author of “Shamanism and Acute Schizo-

- phrenia," *American Anthropologist*, Volume 69, 1967, pp. 21-31, and Devereux is the author of *Basic Problems of Ethnopsychiatry*, University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- ²³ Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1986), pp. 4-6
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 19, 125.
- ²⁵ Weldon, "Eastern Gurus".
- ²⁶ Natasha Frazier, "Shamanic Survival Skills," *Shaman's Drum*, Summer 1985, p. 37.