Neo-Shamanism: The Deeper Value of Rituals

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CSTP-4021 (Shamanistic Psychology)

July 10, 2016

Author Note

No subjects were required for the purposes of this literature review. Subsequently no ethical concerns were raised or needed to be addressed in the completion of this article.
Neo-Shamanism: The Deeper Value of Rituals

Introduction

As many traditional world religions continue to fall out of popularity and religious fundamentalism of various forms dominates the media, the modern spiritual seeker looking for alternatives can find a plethora of options before her. Among these many options is a relatively new spiritual practice known as neo-shamanism that borrows from traditional or indigenous shamanism. For many in the west including this author, awareness of and interest in shamanism and neo-shamanism began with the writings of Carlos Castaneda in the 1960’s.

With the myriad of options available in the west, what unique or “deeper” value might neo-shamanism provide the western spiritual seeker which may not be available in other practices? In order to answer this question, this essay will begin with an overview of some of the history behind indigenous or “ethnic” shamanism (Harner, 2009), as well as the development of neo-shamanism in the west. I will then present evidence for the value of reintroducing ritual into our lives for practical reasons like decreasing health-risk factors and increasing social cohesion. But more importantly I will present evidence and argue for, the unique and deeper values which neo-shamanic rituals may offer through connecting us on an experiential level with ancient mythological roots; reinforcing our connection with and reverence for the natural world; as well as the potential to connect to a higher consciousness or Self, which may contribute to uncovering a higher meaning from our lives.
The Roots of Neo-Shamanism

Although this essay does not intend to go into depth with regards to the history of shamanism, a bit of background is necessary in order to put into perspective the practices of the neo-shaman in western cultures and the various “core” practices which are shared by both the historical or indigenous shaman and the neo-shaman.

We get the term *shaman* from the Russian explorers of eastern Siberia around the second half of the seventeenth century, who likely heard it used among the Tungus tribes of the area (Laufer, 1917). The meaning of the word from the Tungus people is “one who is excited, moved, raised” and the term “shaman” has been used by anthropologists to refer to indigenous and “specific groups of healers in diverse cultures who have sometimes been called medicine men, witch doctors, sorcerers, wizards, magicians or seers” (Walsh, 2007. loc. 287)

In most of the indigenous cultures, rather than choosing to become the spiritual and in some cases political figure of the community, the shaman was typically initiated in some manner. The initiation processes would range from a psychotic break, illness, near-death experience or some other form of mystical experience which compels them to serve their community as spiritual healer and teacher. A member of the community would go through some form of “initiatory crisis leading to the acquisition of the shamanic position through illness or call from the spirits” (Dobkin de Rios & Winkleman, 1989. p.3).

Early anthropological studies of indigenous shamanic practices tended to portray the shaman as possessed, uncivilized, mentally ill and *primitive*. These early studies contributed to a reluctance in the West to accept shamanic traditions and perceiving shamans as nothing more than “noble savages” (Luhrmann, 2012). Even as recent as 50 or 60 years ago, it would have been considered unusual, even absurd for a Westerner to call themselves a shaman, due to its perceived link to *primitive* societies (Whisker, 2013).
NEO-SHAMANISM

The writings of Carlos Castaneda, beginning in the late 60’s with *The Teachings of Don Juan*, helped to reshape western perceptions of the shaman and increased interest in modern shamanism, particularly drawing attention to the transformational power behind the use of entheogens and trance (Luhrmann, 2012). However, even the vast (now considered fictional) writing of Carlos Castaneda still presented the role of shaman, and the idea of enlightenment, as something permitted only to a select few.

In 1980, Michael Harner’s book *The Way of the Shaman* (1980) introduced us to the idea of Core Shamanism which are the common or universal principles which he identified across the shamanic traditions practiced across diverse indigenous cultures around the world. Through Harner’s work, the world finally had an almost sectarian or at least “cultureless” approach to the core ideas behind many of the world’s shamanic traditions. An approach which could be adapted, integrated and taught to western spiritual seekers looking for awakening, “soul healing” or a form of spiritual practice which respected ancient traditions and put one in accord with the natural world (Harrell, 2011). Hence, neo-shamanism was born and with the influence of Harner’s Core Shamanism, attitudes in the west began to shift from perceiving these practices as only being accessible and relevant to indigenous cultures and a select few, to the recognition that these practices “spoke in one way or another to universal elements of the human condition”, and were accessible to anyone (Whisker, 2013, p. 359).

What then are the basic principles or practices which Harner identifies as Core Shamanism and which are thought to be common or universal across all the shamanic traditions? Although Harner does not appear to clearly list all of the practices contained in Core Shamanism, we can deduce the following principles from his writing, which may form the core principles and practices used across most indigenous shamanic traditions as well as the neo-shamanic practices of the west.
NEO-SHAMANISM

The Existence of Other Worlds/Realities

Both the indigenous shaman and the neo-shaman operate under the assumption that they possess a form of knowledge or wisdom through interactions with spirit entities in other worlds, or realities, which is not ordinarily available to the other members of the community (Krippner, 2002). The implied principle here is “that there are two realities and that the perception of each depends upon one’s state of consciousness” (Harner, 1999, p. 1) and each type of reality has its own set of knowledge and relevance. Harner (1999) refers to the altered or “shamanic state of consciousness” (SSC) as “nonordinary reality” (NOR), a term also used by Castaneda (1972). Three worlds are thought to exist and accessed while in these states of nonordinary reality. The Upper World is where the teachers and healers are found; the Middle World is the world of everyday life and consciousness; while the Lower World is where the power animals and nature spirits exist.

Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) Utilized to Travel to Other Worlds/Realities

Psychedelic drugs are used to enter an altered state of consciousness and to access states of nonordinary reality in around 10% of the indigenous shamanic traditions. A practice known as Shamanic Journeying. The remaining 90% utilize various sonic driving methods such as drumming, rattles or chanting, along with fasting, ritual dancing and extremes of temperature through the use of sweat lodges (Harner, 1999).

Existence of Spirits

The purpose of entering these different worlds (Upper and Lower) through altered states of consciousness and nonordinary reality is to interact with spirit helpers for guidance, empowerment, teaching and healing. The Upper Worlds are where the spirit teachers and spirit helpers are consulted. In the Lower Worlds, these spirit helpers take on the form of power animals.
NEO-SHAMANISM

Up to this point I have covered some of the basic history of how attitudes towards indigenous or “ethnic” shamanism (Harner, 2009) evolved to the point where various core shamanic practices (Harner, 1980) have been identified and then adapted for a westernized version of shamanism known as neo-shamanism (Whisker, 2013). However, the question naturally arises as to what are the differences between the indigenous shaman and the urban or neo-shaman? Given that even among the indigenous or “ethnic shamans” (Harner, 2009) there is a wide variety of shamanic practices and initiation methods, as well as conflicting perspectives in the anthropological literature on how to define shamanism (Krippner, 2002), a clear distinction may be difficult. Dobkin de Rios & Winkelman propose that the term shaman be reserved for those practitioners in indigenous hunter/gatherer communities where they “…utilize trance states and engage in healing and divination” (1989). For the purposes of this essay, and borrowing from Dobkin de Rios & Winkelman (1989), I will reserve the term shaman for those spiritual healers or teachers who originate from an indigenous hunter/gather community, and where they inherited their knowledge through their family or community. Or, were indoctrinated or called into the role of shaman following a psychotic break, illness, near-death experience or some other form of mystical experience which compelled them to serve their community as spiritual healer and teacher, through the practice of shamanism. I will use the terms neo-shaman, urban shaman or shamanic practitioner for someone coming from a non-indigenous hunter/gather community and who adopts, and teaches, the core shamanic principles described by Michael Harner (1980), for the benefit of their community.

This brings us to the heart of this essay. Although there are many valuable spiritual teachings and transpersonal or psychological benefits which the urban shaman and the practice of neo-shamanism bring to the communities and individuals, I would now like to argue for the specific value of the rituals which these neo-shamanic practices bring to the west.
Neo-Shamanism and the Deeper Value of Rituals

Wikipedia defines a ritual as “…a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and performed according to set sequence. Rituals may be prescribed by the traditions of a community, including a religious community” (“Ritual”, 2016a). With such a broad definition it is not surprising that we find rituals of one form or another have been part of our religious, community and even personal practices, at least as far back as our earliest known fossil records. Whether it’s burying our dead, giving thanks to nature, God or the gods, eating a meal, getting married, celebrating the start of a new year, initiation rites and even going out to dance on a Friday night, we all engage in ritualistic behavior of some form. Rituals of one form or another appear to be a universal and fundamental component of most societies and “the social act basic to humanity” (as cited in Watson-Jones, 2016).

For many of these rituals – eating a meal, deep breaths before an interview or going out dancing – the role or value they play in our lives would seem to be practical. Meeting a bodily and survival need (eating), serving a social function (getting married), reducing stress or anxiety (deep breaths before an interview) or just for pleasure and entertainment (dancing).

Beyond their pragmatic, social or entertainment value, many of these simple and often taken-for-granted rituals in our lives appear to have health benefits as well. Studies have shown that individuals who participate in religious or spiritual practices have reduced smoking and drinking rates, lower mortality rates, as well as higher rates of participation in activities which reduce known health risk factors (Idler, 2008). It also appears that one does not even have to believe in the value of participating in a ritual since they also “… appear to benefit people who claim not to believe that rituals work” (Norton & Gino, 2013). But are there other, possibly deeper, benefits which can be realized through participation specifically in the rituals which the urban shaman and neo-shamanism bring to the west?
NEO-SHAMANISM

Deeper Value of Neo-Shamanic Rituals

Both the indigenous shaman and the neo-shaman of the west, engage in various rituals as part of their healing practices. One of the many gifts which the neo-shaman brings to our western spiritual seeker is a means to rediscover and re-engage with ritual (Marohn, 2003). Some of the core rituals include Calling the Directions, Journeying, Soul-Retrieval, Psycho-Pomping and Smudging of negative energy from individuals, the community or a sacred space. These practices are intended to show respect to the spirits or nature, gather wisdom, engaged with spirits of the Upper and Lower Worlds, assist with retrieving lost or damaged spiritual powers, healing the soul, guiding the soul’s journey after death or to perform cleansing of spirits from an environment. Along with the personal health benefits, spiritual wisdom, healing and cleansing these rituals offer, they also play a much deeper role by reconnecting us to the mythological roots of our culture, our relationship to nature and ultimately, our sense of self and meaning.

Reconnecting with Myth

One of the ways that neo-shamanism and rituals provide us with deeper value, even meaning, is through their “enactment of a myth” (Campbell, 1991). It is common to hear the term “myth” used as a synonym for something not being true, a falsehood or a delusion. That is not the meaning of “myth” intended here. Myths are sacred stories, not a false-story or a lie. But rather a “living reality” (Malinowski, 1964) and the enactment either of a sacred event of the past or intended to represent a sacred relationship (expressing gratitude, giving thanks) or sacred plane of existence or consciousness (Satori, Awakening, Unity, Brahman, Nirvana etc).

Myths, and the rituals which enact them, are the metaphorical stories we tell which put us in touch with the penultimate, or ineffable “truths” of our existence. A spiritual ritual, through the enactment of a myth “…pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told” (Campbell, 1991, p. 163). Myths connect us with the sacred, while the enactment of a myth
NEO-SHAMANISM

through ritual provides us with that bridge between the sacred and the profane – the connection between ordinary and non-ordinary reality. These rituals also help us to derive meaning in life and offer us a break from our often mundane lives by providing us with “sacred time” as a respite from the stress of our daily lives (Idler, 2008). Rituals, and the underlying mythology behind them are “…a vital ingredient of human civilization; not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom” (Malinowski, 1954, p. 177).

The loss of rituals and their corresponding mythologies, can have a deep impact on a society and culture. In many countries of the world, indigenous cultures and societies have been displaced along with many of their traditions, spiritual practices, rituals and mythologies. Speaking from first-hand and personal experience, Michelle Kenworthy remarked that “I can see in indigenous Aboriginal culture in Australia what has happened to their people who have clearly been removed from their country and their traditional ways of life” (Kenworthy, 2016). In the United States over a period of less than 100 years the Buffalo - a sacred symbol of many of the rituals and mythology, as well as a food source, for the North American Indian - were almost completely wiped out. The wide-spread massacre of Buffalo was not only the destruction of a food-source, this was a “sacramental violation” (Campbell, 1991, p. 78) which had a devastating effect on the North American Indian. Removing a culture’s connection to their traditional ways of life, their sacred rituals, stories and mythologies “…is the best way to break a people and take away their power” (Schmitz, S., as cited in Kenworthy, 2016).

It has also been argued that some of the problems we face in western society today, may also be rooted in the loss of ritual and mythological stories. The renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell was once asked about the impact which the loss of rituals and mythology has on society and the youth of today. His response was “[i]f you want to see what happens to a society
NEO-SHAMANISM

when it loses its rituals, just open the New York Times” (Campbell, 1991, p.8). Citing the West African spiritual writer Malidoma Somé from her book *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community*, Steven Schmitz affirms a relationship between troubled youth and a lack of ritual in their lives. “Where ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown-ups are bewildered. The future is dim” (Schmitz, 2016). Somé goes on to say that “[t]he abandonment of ritual can be devastating. From the spiritual view, ritual is inevitable and necessary if one is to live. To say that ritual is needed in the industrialized world is an understatement…” (as cited in Marohn, 2003, p. 182).

*Reinforcing the Sacredness of Nature*

Another import role and deeper meaning which neo-shamanic rituals provide the western spiritual seeker, is to remind of us of our intimate and fundamental connection to nature, as well as reinforcing a relationship based on respect, even reverence. The practice of calling the directions, engaging with power animals and the many rituals of the hunt associated with indigenous cultures all stem from a perspective of respect and a reverence for nature. Through participation in neo-shamanic rituals which reinforce a respectful relationship with nature, we de-objectify nature. We stop treating nature as an “it” and begin to relate to the natural world through a divine respect which changes the way we think about the natural world. “You can address anything as a ‘thou’, and you can feel the change in your psychology as you do it. The ego that sees a ‘thou’ is not the same ego that sees an ‘it’” (Campbell, 1991. pp. 78-79).

*Meaning and Self*

Many of us seek out a spiritual path in order to discover a sense of meaning or purpose in life. Or, to connect with some aspect of a “higher consciousness” or to find clues to the “… spiritual potentialities of the human life” (Campbell, 1991, p. 5). Participation in neo-shamanic rituals can also help to “… bring about the appropriate physical and mental conditions which will
allow an individual a union with a heightened state of consciousness” (Holub, n.d. p. 9) and where there is an experience of union with what may be the “Higher Self or Real Self” (Holub, n.d. p. 10). These rituals and their accompanying myths “…often serve as a connection to the “primeval, greater, and more relevant reality, by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined…” (Malinowski, 1954. p. 178). By participating in a ritual, and the enactment of the underlying mythology, we directly experience “…spiritualities [which] both make the divine real and allow the divine to be imagined as real in a way that is different from the material reality of tables and chairs.” (Luhrmann, 2012. p. 149.).

Discussion

The western spiritual-seeker is greeted with a bewildering array of options to choose from with a wide range of practices, perspectives, mythologies and beliefs. At one end we have the monotheistic and institutionalized traditions of Christianity, Judaism or Islam. At the other end are the many non-theistic traditions of the East such as Buddhism, Hinduism or Taoism. And somewhere in between are the all the new-age spiritual traditions of which there are far too many to list.

Shamanism, and its westernized version known as neo-shamanism, are derived from and have their roots in, some of our “…most ancient traditions, spanning perhaps tens of thousands of years” (Walsh, 2007, p. 17). Like the indigenous shaman’s of the past as well as today, the neo-shaman utilizes a wide range of rituals which are designed to provide soul healing, cleansing, wisdom and guidance. On a practical level, simply participating in a ritual has many cumulative health and social benefits (Idler, 2008). But beyond the practical value of individual healing, cleansing or the social and health benefits, participating in neo-shamanic rituals reconnects us to the mythological roots of our human psychology, reinforces a reverence and respect for nature as well as contributing to the awareness of a deeper meaning in the person’s
NEO-SHAMANISM

These rituals also segment our days into periods of the ordinary or the profane, and periods of connecting with the sacred or transcendent aspects of life. Something the French sociologist Emile Durkheim called “sacred time”.

We need to keep the connection to and the teachings of, indigenous shamanism alive since this is where the authentic and rich historical traditions of shamanism remain. We have much to learn about how best to integrate the core ideas around shamanism into our westernized neo-shamanic practices and there is much that the social and behavioral sciences can still learn about these traditions (Krippner, 2002).

“And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw: for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being” (Neihardt & Black Elk, 2004).

“As the ancient shaman walked between worlds - so can the urban shaman bring a sense of connectivity between: nature versus humans while merging old sacredness to new traditions” (Zuckerman, 2015).
References


Neo-shamanism


NEO-SHAMANISM


