

The Reawakening of Shamanism in the West¹

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The scope of this paper is to briefly survey the emergence of modern shamanism in the West. My context for this consideration is principally the United States and Canada. Developments in other Western countries such as Austria, Germany, Switzerland, England, and Australia, for example, are understood to generally parallel those in the U.S. In fact, the emergence of shamanism in these countries has been stimulated by that in America.² My consideration explicitly excludes the surviving shamanisms of Native North Americans except insofar as some neo-shamanic practitioners borrow (some would say, expropriate) shamanic heritage from these peoples. My main thrust in this paper will be to describe and provide interpretive context for emergent Western shamanism.

Since native European systems of shamanism are extinct or nearly so among Euro-Americans, the recent appearance of shamanism among them is not so much a reawakening as a rediscovery, or reintroduction. However, since Europeans had shamanic cultures at one time, and since shamanic remnants remain in their folk culture, including their forms of Christianity, the present title seems justified.

The problem at hand is to offer an insight into the late 20th Century reappearance of shamanism in the West that shows that it is indeed the genuine article and that it is a natural, even predictable development in democratic post-industrial societies like those of the United States and Canada.

Background

Shamanism can be seen as a fundamentally spiritual approach to real-life problem solving informed by an animistic philosophy that is practiced by individuals for the benefit of their group(s). These individuals systematically utilize a technique or combination of techniques to alter consciousness in such a way that they reliably access *nonordinary reality*. This reality--as experienced--is the abode of conscious beings with whom these individuals (shamans) interact. Interaction with these "spirits" is a defining attribute of shamanic practice. Human-spirit interaction results in the transferral of knowledge and/or power (uncanny abilities) from the spirit to the human to be used by the latter for healing of various kinds. The nonmaterial basis of this experience is in sharp contrast to the materialist, empirical paradigmatic posture of American Culture. This may explain the appeal of shamanism to individuals in this cultural milieu who are seeking an alternative paradigm more suited to the vagaries of everyday life or who are looking for a way to at least broaden the conventional cultural paradigm.



Photo by Gene Rosen

America has a long history of interest in spiritualism. For example, Ellwood and Partin³ have described the plethora of spiritual innovations that have swept America throughout its history. While only briefly mentioning neo-shamanic developments, they focus on more organized, group, spiritual approaches such as Anthroposophy and Transcendental Meditation. But, they do show, through myriad examples, the

deep-seated spiritual quest that is characteristic of the American cultural scene, and by so doing provide context for recent interests in shamanism.

Townsend⁴ is more to the point in specifically addressing neo-shamanism as a part of America's "modern mystical movement." She sees it as a specific direction among many that have recently emerged, specifically in the decades following the 1950s. She contends, echoing a point made by Harner,⁵ that shamanism has often existed alongside other spiritual traditions and that this is no less true for the West. The importance of this observation is that it shows that shamanism can fit naturally alongside other spiritual and/or religious traditions, emergent or traditional, not necessarily competing with them, but operating as an adjunct system. This, of course, does not mean that shamanism and other, specifically religious, systems always coexist without conflict. Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism can, and have been, hostile to shamanism, depending on the sect, time, and place of contact between these systems.

While specifically considering the reawakening of shamanism, Townsend includes in her focus other examples of "New Age" spiritualism, seeing in them certain shamanic elements that show (in hindsight) a consistency of American interest in shamanic practices. As part of this general spiritual quest by Americans, shamanism seems to Townsend⁶ to be immediately rooted in the sociocultural unrest of the 1960s, a point also emphasized by Noel.⁷

More specifically, a significant catalyst is seen by both writers to have been the work of Carlos Castaneda,⁸ particularly his first book resulting from his doctoral dissertation. Although Castaneda's work is controversial in scholarly circles,⁹ his impact on students and other young people of the 1970s who were seeking alternatives to institutional and vicarious spiritual approaches and who accepted his work less critically, was profound. Asking who, in an introductory class of anthropology students, was familiar with Castaneda and his work during the 1970s and 1980s always resulted in a large number of raised hands. During the years immediately following Castaneda's first volumes, there were rumored to have been many young Americans searching the Sonoran Desert of Mexico for Don Juan and other teachers of native North American mysticism.

While *we* see shamanic overtones in Castaneda's work, it is important to note that he described his Sonoran mentors as "men of knowledge" and as "sorcerers" in his catalytic early volumes. This pluralism of terminology may reflect or even derive from the Western penchant to loosely apply labels to spiritual practitioners with great imprecision. It is important, too, to note that Castaneda's first book resonated with seekers after spiritual knowledge and experience who sought this knowledge and experience in psychoactive substances, and who were on a quest for direct, personal, and profound spiritual teaching.

Perhaps the most significant event in terms of this present consideration of the emergence and context of neo-shamanism in the West is the 1980 publication by Michael Harner of his landmark manual of shamanic methodology, *The Way of the Shaman*. In it he precisely articulated a synthesis of shamanic methodology he termed *core shamanism*, a distillation of common themes of shamanic practice having global or near-global distribution, illuminated by his own ethnographic experience in South America among the Conibo and Shuar (Jívaro). This *core* of shamanic methodology was presented by Harner as the bare essentials of shamanic practice, stripped of traditional, regional, and cultural specifics. This volume, experiential workshops in core shamanism, and the creation of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies by Harner, have significantly affected the growth of shamanism in the West, as well as having repercussions worldwide.

In an unpublished manuscript, Conton¹⁰ expanding on recent work by Townsend,¹¹ applies the latter's finer distinction concerning emergent Western shamanism: that between neo-shamanism and core shamanism. The former is described as a "hodgepodge collage of shamanistic and non-shamanic spiritual forms," and the latter as a "conservative" approach involving a "strict shamanic discipline".¹² It is within the neo-shamanic approach of Americans that appropriation of shamanic heritage from Native Americans and others is done, mixing what it has borrowed. In this regard it is consistent with other New Age spiritualism.¹³

We thus see an America of the post-1950s that is ripe for shamanic and other spiritual change, a culture already rich in such innovation. It is to a description and interpretation of the resulting Western shamanism that I now turn.

Western Shamanism

Western practitioners of shamanism are of three types, falling into two main categories:

1. Those who follow one specific indigenous (or pseudo-indigenous) form of shamanism. They are sometimes disparagingly called "wannabes." A useful term for them might be "followers."
2. Those who practice a revised form of shamanism. Townsend's¹⁴ neo-shamanists and core shamanists are of this type. These people might be termed "pioneers," with neo-shamanists further identified as "eclectic," while core shamanists could be seen as "conservative."

Followers look to the traditions of other groups to find their spirituality. They are uncomfortable with, or even alienated from, conventional spiritual alternatives provided by their own culture and seek instead an approach divorced from this culture. They typically romanticize their adopted system, overstating its positive attributes while ignoring negative aspects. They often focus on overt symbols of their adopted group such as ritual, costume, and language. They may fall victim to distortions of the native system they are emulating such as adopted Pan-Indian elements that had no place in a particular Native American group's traditional culture. They may accept a guru who to them represents *bona fide* expertise in the adopted system, and who is thus authentic. This person also will usually be charismatic. Through enacting ritual, making pilgrimages, or even living communally, these people become members of a group and are authenticated by that membership and the group's activities.

Eclectic pioneers typically appropriate elements from several shamanic traditions as well as some invented or reinvented by their contemporaries.¹⁵ They may also take specific ritual, objects, or beliefs from non-shamanic sources. This approach, which lacks a specific shamanic or cultural integrity, is consistent with other New Age homogenizing where specific content is an expression of what works for individuals, according to their personal experience with various spiritual systems. As Conton¹⁶ and Townsend¹⁷ point out, consistent themes of what I call eclectic pioneer shamanic practice are an earth-centered spiritual philosophy with strong ecological overtones, an idealization of past cultures and societies, an idealization of simpler societies who are revisited as noble savages, and an apocalyptic faith. I also have seen in many of these people an overarching belief in a progressive evolution of the universe and its inhabitants framed in developmental language.

Conservative pioneers are coterminous with the practitioners of core shamanism and are, one way or another, practitioners of Michael Harner's distillation of universal or near-universal shamanic methods. The specific intent of this approach is to practice a methodology which is the common property—by heritage—of all humans. The original inventions of elements of this common heritage are lost in the mists

of time, but are certainly tens of thousands of years old. As such, they cannot be attributed to any specific living group and thus become the property of all living people.

Core shamanism emphasizes the *shamanic journey*, an excursion into nonordinary reality by an individual or group of individuals facilitated by monotonous drumming. The excursion is purely a consciousness experience. The destination(s) of the journey is/are the conventional Lower, Middle, and Upper Worlds. Individuals are taught to journey in a weekend workshop, focused on methodology. Each participant has as a goal in initial journeys the meeting of at least one of their own existing *power animals* and *spirit teachers*. These become the indispensable resources of each person for further shamanic work. Participants are taught that shamanism is designed for healing, both of self and others. Ritual is conspicuously underplayed except for those implicit in the methods taught in the workshop such as power animal retrievals, etc. The consistent thrust of teaching is for participants to rely on their own spiritual resources. This reliance includes specific healing methods and rituals that are taught by spirits and often replicate ethnographically reported methods and ritual of which the person receiving the teaching is unaware. The “tradition” in core shamanism is methodology. This has the effect of freeing up practitioners from culturally specific restrictions that, while appropriate in their culture of origin, are seen as unnecessary in the contemporary American setting. Other traditions are expected to emerge in the course of time as practitioners explore and communities emerge.

The Foundation for Shamanic Studies is the vehicle for training and other work in core shamanism. Advanced workshops are offered through the auspices of the Foundation which give concentrated training in specific methodologies such as soul-retrieval, extraction healing, divination training, working with the spirits of nature, working with death and its consequences, etc. The rationale behind using the workshop format, in addition to its being structurally salient in modern American society, is that the modern world and its destructive forces work at high speed, so disseminating training in shamanic healing needs also to be fast and efficient.¹⁸

Core shamanism workshops in the United States and Canada are attended primarily by Euro-Americans, with a small number of Native Americans and Hispanics. Very few Blacks attend, which is also true for other ethnic groups. Females significantly predominate over males. Because workshops are fee-based, they recruit mostly from those with discretionary money although Native Americans receive partial scholarship rebates. The predominant age group represented in workshops is from the late twenties to the late fifties. Participants are typically well-educated.¹⁹

No claim is made by the Foundation that workshops make laymen into shamans. The Foundation’s position is that this can only be the result of community recognition and is ultimately based on demonstrated, consistently successful healing work. Other than certification for Harner Method Shamanic Counselors, there is no form of credentialing by the Foundation except to note who has successfully taken the first, or “Basic” workshop, which qualifies a person to take advanced work.

While most Foundation workshops are weekend affairs, some are longer training courses, stretching to as long as three years. These longer workshops become significant community builders among shamanic practitioners. The networks that emerge from all workshops, particularly the longer ones, create a unique situation for shamanic practitioners.²⁰

Workshops are also taught outside the auspices of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. They follow the particular format and content of the teacher. In these workshops, the goals are variable, again according to the teacher. For example, they may follow the theme of a recently published book and be taught by its author. They often employ special buzzwords such as “warrior” and “medicine wheel” in their titles,

terms with powerful emotional “hooks” that attract clients to the workshop. Pilgrimages, like workshops, are offered to eclectic practitioners. These are typically led by the guru of a particular approach to special “power” or sacred places such as Machu Picchu.

Pioneer practitioners of both the core and eclectic forms of Western shamanism, according to Townsend,²¹ constitute a “cognitive minority” that is maintained, not by group membership, but by attendance at workshops, going on pilgrimages, and more significantly perhaps, by utilizing published materials and sophisticated telecommunications technology such as the Internet. In this they are similar to New Age devotees. Web pages and chat rooms provide material, contact, and virtual opportunities to *be* shamanic. The growth of these resources has been truly astronomical. Books, popular and academic, appear each year on shamanism, which are devoured by seekers. Conferences relating to shamanism are also available as sources of information and as rejuvenating opportunities. Published materials focusing mainly on Western shamanism include three main periodicals: *Shaman’s Drum Magazine*, *Shamanism*, and *Shamanic Applications Review*.

Although the Foundation for Shamanic Studies fosters no official group, a volunteer telephone directory used for networking is maintained and published once a year as a part of the Resource Guide issue of *Shamanism*. The Foundation encourages the growth of “drumming circles,” relatively informal groups of practitioners who meet more or less regularly to journey and work together shamanically. Personal discovery and exploration, mutual support, self-healing, and client work are the basis of drumming group attendance. Most practitioners are solitary, however.

It is difficult to know how many trained people continue to practice and what the level of practice is of those who continue. In the core shamanism tradition, the sense I have is that the majority of trainees fall away from practice. Some continue on, taking advanced workshops and training courses, eventually exhausting the resources of the Foundation. A small number continue, year after year, in drumming circles and some practice shamanic healing in private practice settings. Of those, we hear that some have remarkable careers and are judged by their clients as genuine shamans or shamanic practitioners (the term usually preferred in the West).

This pattern is no different from what one would find in any society where shamans occur. Some individuals achieve modest success doing healing work and are recognized for this by a small local group. These persons are described as “family shamans” or by some similar term of restricted scope. Others attain recognition over a wider area and among a more diverse community, while a small number are known regionally as great shamans. It would seem that Western shamans are being subjected to the same winnowing process as traditional shamans living in tribal settings have been for millennia.

Interpretations

In the foregoing material we find that America at the beginning of the 21st Century remains a fertile seed bed for spiritual/religious innovation and that one form of this has been a steady emergence of shamanic spirituality, growing particularly out of the revolutionary foment of the 1960s. The current interest in shamanism worldwide cannot be unrelated to this American phenomenon. Of course, other factors such as the Soviet collapse and the emerging Chinese open economy are involved, as are doubtless other factors. But, worldwide scholarly and other interest in shamanism has burgeoned at roughly the same time as the Western reawakening of shamanism and this can hardly be a coincidence. What might account for this American phenomenon that may be rubbing off on the rest of the world?

Harner, in the preface to the Third Edition (tenth anniversary edition of *The Way of the Shaman*), considers some reasons why this renaissance is underway. Harner²² finds that:

1. The Age of Faith has been replaced by the Age of Science wherein individuals no longer are as willing to accept spiritual dogma and insist instead on firsthand experience as a teacher of important truths. This is an impact of the experimental method.
2. Scientific experimentation involving observations made under the influence of LSD could be understood from a shamanic perspective.
3. Near-death experiences, made more common by medical science, turned out to be personal experiments that challenged existing understandings of reality and the existence of spirits, which were clarified from a shamanic point-of-view.
4. Shamanic methods involving journeying with the drum are safe and effective.
5. Shamanic methods work quickly and fit well into the fast-paced lifestyle of modern life.
6. Holistic health approaches have rediscovered ancient shamanic methods and their effectiveness and now incorporate them into practice.
7. We are rediscovering spiritual ecology, which requires that we again connect with our planet and its other inhabitants in order to maintain our survival.

To this list I would add several observations. Our concern for our damaged environment has largely come from our new “priests:” the physical scientists, who have been warning about global warming, pollution of air and water, declining resources such as petroleum, loss of ozone, and such for decades. However, these priests carry no sacred authority to underwrite their warnings. In fact, they have purposely distanced themselves from the sacred and have taken refuge in the secular and objective aspects of reality. Scientists’ conclusions are only as good as their latest observations, a point easily and frequently exploited by politicians. Scientists command no moral authority. In the United States they have little political power at present. Shamanism, designed as it is around an animistic philosophy, can provide a sacred charter for the ecological imperatives we recognize. Underwriting ecology from this deep, heartfelt perspective provides the moral basis for supporting sound ecological practice and feeds back to validate shamanism.

There is an interesting love/hate relationship Euro-Americans feel toward Native Americans. This may reflect a collective guilt over the genocide carried out by Europeans against the original inhabitants of the New World. On the hate side of this relationship is the discrimination Native Americans experience on a daily basis. On the love side is the romanticization of Native Americans as “noble savages,” a part of which is the assumption that they were careful stewards of the environment, were close to nature, and were happier as a result. There is also the knowledge in the public mind that the natural condition of the North American continent was pristine beauty, and that Europeans “raped” and in some cases made it squalid. Embracing shamanism, connected as it is in the minds of Euro-Americans to Native Americans and the beauty of Nature, may be resulting in a romantic interest in shamanism. It is certainly true that many Foundation workshop participants wrongly assume that what they will be taught is Native American based.

American culture²³ is designed around a theme of *rugged individualism*. There are several facets to this theme. One is that individuals are supposed to be independent agents and be more or less self-sufficient problem solvers. The individual who is able to successfully problem-solve is judged by peers as competent, an extraordinarily valued attribute which is reflected in positive self-esteem. Shamanism can

provide spiritual tools to aid an individual in realizing this theme. Power animals and spirit teachers are personal resources that can be used to augment ordinary reality resources for problem solving. An interesting aspect of this is that a major difference between American males and females, and one that spawned a series of self-help books,²⁴ finds males as the primary problem-solvers who are driven to do so by the basic dynamics of their personality structures. This should result in males taking advantage of every opportunity to enhance their problem-solving skills, including taking training in workshops in shamanism. Since the overwhelming majority of Foundation workshop participants are female, another factor must be operating. What may account for this is the discovery by Lewis²⁵ that women are typically innovators in religion. When this is coupled with American feminists' struggle to become more male-like in behavior, it may in part explain the larger numbers of women taking shamanic workshops.

An orientation toward *high technology* is also thematic in American culture. It is one of the cornerstones of American success in business, in extending life through medicine, in warfare, and in creating and maintaining a materialist lifestyle. However, technology is seen as cold and mechanical by many Americans. It is even intimidating for many. It is seen as lacking a soul (except for HAL in the movie *2001*, who presents the audience with an ironic contrast). As technology has gained ever-increasing domination of day-to-day life in America, there has developed a sense of longing for a more soulful lifestyle, frequently expressed by people, and reflected in the media. Shamanism provides soulful, mystical life experience on a daily basis through journeying to connect with ancestors, teachers, power animals, and other beings, and by doing other shamanic work, such as healing. American interest in learning shamanic methods, and about shamanism in general, is a powerful way for them to fulfill this craving. Another benefit is that journeying provides a refuge from the isolation many Americans feel from living in a mass society with its many fleeting, impersonal social contacts. Nonordinary reality helpers allow individuals to know they are never alone.²⁶

A major driving force in American society and culture is *the bottom line*, a business metaphor for profit, or what a person gets as a return for effort. There is some tantalizing evidence that shamanic healing is beginning to pay dividends in the sense that it is making cost differences in the delivery of health care.²⁷ Americans and other Westerners are choosing shamanic treatments (as well as other, non-allopathic ones) at an increasing pace. This is a reflection of decreasing satisfaction with allopathic medicine's dehumanizing objectification of illness and treatment modalities as well as an increasing interest in shamanism itself. It will also drive more interest in the future if data support a reduction in costs to providers such as insurance companies.

Courses covering shamanism are popular at universities. The one I taught at North Dakota State University (covering small-scale religions from an anthropological perspective) was offered at the senior/graduate level and consistently filled to capacity. The main reason students gave for taking the course was to learn about shamanism.

No cultural theme is more important to Americans than that of *personal freedom*—democracy at the level of the individual. Harner,²⁸ while addressing participants at a recent workshop, described shamanism as a “democratic” spiritual approach. He specifically spoke to the point that shamans are significantly independent of each other, each following his or her own spiritual path without the oversight of a central authority. For Western shamans trained by the Foundation, a corollary of the journey technique is that each person's journey experience is “perfect for the journeyer.” What this means is that shamans trained by the Foundation are encouraged to work in their own way with their own spiritual resources and to have the courage to make sense of their own shamanic experiences. This democratic aspect of Western shamanism is certainly contributing substantially to its popularity among Americans, specifically, and Westerners generally.

Another aspect of American culture is the *implicit line*, the favored metaphor for many aspects of human experience. For example, life is considered a line in this culture, as are time, cause and effect, reason, and many other things. The consequence of life being a line is that the individual gets little existential support. Death is a supreme challenge to life-as-line, for it breaks the line and thus the individual's continuity in life. A circle, metaphor for the eternal and symbol of continuity and connection, is heavily utilized in Western shamanism. The emphasis on this metaphor provides a cognitively appealing alternative to the line and may explain some of the commitment to shamanism by Americans and other Westerners.

Finally, individuals in America and other Western societies with materialist cultures have the same life experiences as humans in other times and places. In addition to the near-death experience recognized by Harner (above) as a factor in the revival of shamanism in the West, other experiences are common which have no materialist explanation except for the unsatisfying one of "coincidence." Dreams sometimes provide prescient information or are vivid and recurring (big dreams), prayers are sometimes answered, and individuals experience clairvoyance, clairaudience, and visions. While some easily dismiss these experiences (for example, astronomer Carl Sagan and engineer-science fiction writer Arthur Clark), many are not able to and even come to doubt their own sanity. They may live for years in fear as a consequence. These individuals, after taking the Basic workshop in core shamanism, are relieved to learn that their experiences are common and can be used beneficially. For these people, shamanism is a loving embrace that channels their natural abilities and spontaneous experiences into purposeful and powerful life skills and resources for others in their community. If they are able to deliver predictably the healing sought by their fellows and maintain their own balance and power, they are recognized as shamans as such individuals have been for millennia.

Notes

1. This paper was originally presented in Seoul, Korea at a UNESCO conference in 1998. The thrust of this conference was to earmark shamanism as human cultural heritage worthy of preservation.
2. Townsend 1997.
3. Ellwood and Partin 1988.
4. Townsend 1988.
5. Harner 1980.
6. Townsend 1988.
7. Noel 1997.
8. Castaneda 1968.
9. See de Mille 1976; 1990 and Noel 1976; 1997.
10. Conton 1998.
11. Townsend 1998.
12. Conton 1998; Townsend 1998.
13. For a complete discussion of the distinctions between neo and core shamanism, and the eclectic nature of syncretism in the former, see Townsend 1998.
14. Townsend 1998.
15. See Townsend 1998.
16. Conton 1998.
17. Townsend 1988; 1998.
18. Harner 1986.
19. See also Townsend 1998.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Harner 1990: xi-xiii.

23. See also Arensberg and Niehoff 1971.
24. See Gray 1992.
25. Lewis 1989.
26. See Harner 1996.
27. See Eshowsky 1998.
28. Harner 1998.

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