

# A Critical Overview of the Psychiatric Approaches to Shamanism

*Philippe Mitrani*<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

As Kennedy has shown (1973: 1149), the question of whether the shaman is a disturbed individual (neurotic, psychotic, or schizophrenic) or is on the contrary a gifted, balanced and perfectly well-adjusted person, constitutes one of the oldest of all anthropological debates. Indeed R. Hamayon and L. Delaby (1977: 8) have pointed out that "the tendency to attribute a pathological source to shamanism, and to reduce its manifestations to the manipulation of epileptic and psychotic episodes" appeared simultaneously with the publication of the first studies on the subject, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Slavic authors in particular, most notably Bogoras (1910) and Czaplicka (1914), were anxious to establish a connection between shamanism and "Arctic hysteria." Ohlmarks (1939), developing this theory, distinguished between Arctic and sub-Arctic shamanism in order to identify the degree of psychopathology in each shaman. Struck by the frequency of these types of phenomena in the Arctic regions, the authors believed that they had discovered their cause in race, heredity, and climate.

These researchers asserted that the ultimate source of this population's various illnesses (which were now to be classed as either Arctic hysteria or, similar to it, the shamanic trance<sup>2</sup>) was the way

1. Philippe Mitrani was still relatively young when he died, in 1983. We would like to thank the Société d'Ethnographie for permitting us to reprint this article, which was published in *L'Ethnographie*, no. 87–88, 1982 (special issue: *Voyages Chamaniques Deux*), but is now out of print. The editors of *Diogenes* consider it to be the best overview on the subject extant in French.

2. Under the imprecise rubric of Arctic hysteria, the authors tended to group together two disparate forms of behaviors: *mānārik*, or frenetic activity, and *ōmūrāk*, which is characterized by echolalia or echopraxia, and whose symptoms are quite close to what is present in *latah*. For a more detailed examination of this question, see the excellent analysis in É. Lot-Falck, 1970.

excessive cold, long nights, desert solitude, and a lack of vitamins affected the nervous system.

Although Arctic hysteria (also known under the vernacular term *piboktoq*) was quickly judged, along with comparable disorders, to be a "specific syndrome"<sup>3</sup> and made the special province of social psychiatry, this was not the case everywhere; especially in the United States, the study of shamanism was implicitly divided among various areas of specialization.

While the attention of ethnologists was above all focused on (and even limited to) a description of the institutional and socio-cultural aspects of shamanism, the investigations of psychiatrists and psychologists, drawn more to the study of comparative mental disorders between cultures and in the relationship between socio-cultural factors and emotional disorders, were concentrated especially on the personality and behavior of the shaman. This division of interest, whether or not it involved a conscious call to interdisciplinary investigation, resulted in a multiplication of points of view and often produced totally contradictory interpretations of shamanism. An examination of the abundant literature on the subject is quite instructive in this regard. Sometimes the shaman is studied strictly as an individual; in such cases he is found to be either "abnormal" and/or "deviant," or on the contrary as an individual well integrated in his socio-cultural milieu. From the point of view of its social role, shamanism is seen as either a niche for disturbed individuals or as a culturally necessary function even when the shaman is ineffective as a healer. Sometimes the two aspects are combined: the shaman is disturbed but useful. Sometimes he is studied from the point of view of the techniques he uses; for some he is a charlatan, for others a keen and intuitive psychologist. Finally, the shaman has been studied psychoanalytically; this approach has allowed (and still allows) for some of the most subtle (and, in some cases, doubtful) interpretations of the entire shamanic puzzle, whether it be from the point of view of the individual himself, his personality, his role and function or the nature of his therapeutic services. Summing up some of the literature, Hippler (1976) states that, generally speaking, the interpretations of shamanism can be reduced to four basic modes: as a method of resolving interpersonal conflicts, as a role that allows deviant personalities to find a place in their societies, as a system of medical treatments leading, with the help of the group, to the readjustment of the individual, and finally as a perfectly creative and

well-adjusted way of living. The attempts at characterizing the shaman along psychiatric lines have resulted in the same classificatory excesses as are to be found in the "specific syndromes." A few examples will suffice to illustrate the problem.

According to Wallace (1966), the future shaman is a person who is often suffering from various mental and physical ailments caused by a profound identity crisis. Thanks to the assistance of the community, the initiatory ritual resolves this crisis, without which the shaman could not avoid being definitively engulfed by schizophrenia. Seen in this light, ritual possession takes on aspects of a ritual of salvation since it allows a latently ill person to establish some kind of mental balance through the adoption of several personalities. Other authors, such as Ackerknecht (1943), Nadel (1965), Gillin (1948), Boyer (1961-1962-1964), and Sasaki (1969),<sup>4</sup> tend to see the shaman as a neurotic rather than as a psychotic personality; he is believed to be suffering for the most part from hysteria (proof of this is his ability to control his dissociated state, i.e., the trance); also, he plays an important role in his society and is distinguished from the rest of those designated as "insane."

Silverman (1967), basing his ideas on a distinction between two forms of schizophrenia – an idea first introduced by Chapman and Baxter (1963), who distinguished between "process" schizophrenia, which is long, evolving, ever worsening, and manifests itself quite early in life; and "reactional" schizophrenia, which involves excellent adaptability to the group and appears suddenly although late in life, with a rapid resolution – believes the shaman to be a paranoid schizophrenic. According to this author, shamanism is a process of incomplete resolution although it does offer a "solution" to the extent that the problem is allowed to follow its course in a supportive atmosphere and results in the reintegration of the indi-

3. Under the heading of "specific syndromes," "exotic syndromes" and "specific illnesses" are grouped a gamut of behavioral disorders found exclusively in certain geographical regions, such as the *piboktoq* in Canada, Greenland, and Siberia; the North American *windigo*; the *latah* of Java and Japan; and the *amok* of Malaysia and Indonesia, etc.

4. Some of these authors have administered projective tests, such as the Rorschach, in their study of the shaman's personality. Gillin in Guatemala, Lantis among the Eskimos, Boyer with Apaches on reservations, and Sasaki among Japanese "shamans" in a state of possession, all used the Rorschach; Fabrega and Silver administered the Holtzman test to twenty Zinacantan shamans in southern Mexico. When not ambiguous the results were contradictory. Moreover, it must be emphasized that all the groups tested were among the "dominated," i.e., groups subject to one degree or another of cultural change.

vidual personality in society. For his part Devereux (1970), a champion of the idea of "absolute normality," rejects the notion of a relative equilibrium tied to a sociocultural context; he believes that the shaman suffers from an illness capable of "remission" but not cure because the shaman is without access to the root of his conflicts. We will later have cause to return to this author's interpretation.

All of these interpretations, none of which is supported by ethnologists, raise a fundamental question: on what facts are they based? The disparity of points of view on shamanism is itself subject to several explanations. Either the single term shamanism is asked to encompass so many disparate phenomena that authors writing on the subject cannot be assured of speaking of the same thing; or on the contrary, in spite of all the variations in detail the word shaman does encompass a fundamentally identical phenomenon, but because of irreducible differences in approach between ethnologists and ethno-psychiatrists, their results are necessarily contradictory. Both types of explanation may be true. As to the term shaman: it is well known that its use has been extended from its birthplace among the central-Asian Tungus people to all of Siberia and thence to the Americas, Africa, India, China, and Southeast Asia; it designates very generally all those healer-sorcerers reputed to be able to enter into contact with or be possessed by spirits in the course of a "trance"; they live in societies whose populations are relatively "undeveloped" and are bearers of an oral tradition. In spite of warnings from the likes of Ackerknecht (1943),<sup>5</sup> the shaman has often been equated with all sorts of religious guides; with miracle-workers, *curanderos*, marabouts, sorcerers, bone-setters and all others who are grouped under the general class of "folk healers" or "non-western therapists" and who are defined in opposition to the western model of therapy as well as to the Judeo-Christian model of religious faith (Hippler 1976).

We believe this approach entails numerous methodological drawbacks. For one, it dilutes the idea of the shaman and artificially adds to it the notion of a prototype "archaic healer."<sup>6</sup> Secondly,

5. "The mentality of medicine men found throughout the world, whose practices are conditioned by their respective cultural models, can hardly be qualified by any general term, and least of all by the term shaman, a cured madman..." op. cit: 53. Although, as we have already mentioned, Ackerknecht thinks of the shaman as a "neurotic" personality, he nevertheless considers it to be expected that within his own society the shaman is perceived to be fully normal, that is to say well-adjusted.

6. Weston LaBarre, in an article which in other respects is quite brilliant (1979: 7-11), sees the shaman as the ancestor of the priest, the physician, the artist, the

it mixes up the doctrinal levels that underlie the actions of each "practitioner" by reducing the diversity of sociological and symbolic references that define the practice in each case; also, when confronted with a society in which shamanism coexists with other systems of belief, this approach tends to lump them all together and amalgamates all forms of relation to "the sacred" into one, by likening shamanism and possession through hasty generalizations about systems of "primitive thought." In this way, individuals of totally different social position, education, and behavior find themselves indiscriminately grouped under a collective rubric, the sole end of which is comparatist speculations.

The disagreement between ethnologists and ethno-psychiatrists could be summarized by saying that the latter judge the former to be too close to their object to take a critical view of it (the forest hiding the trees), while the former judge the latter to be too distant from it to discern and restore the overall object to its full context (and this alone, say the anthropologists, is what gives it a specific meaning); in this case it's the trees hiding the forest. In an attempt to resolve this antinomy, an appeal is sometimes made to interdisciplinarity, which is presented as the only means of safeguarding the overall meaning because it can elucidate generalities on the basis of compared facts. It must, however, be admitted that the anticipated results have, as of now, not been seen. In this enterprise the ethnologist, who can play the role of partner or himself wear two hats, is most often reduced to the role of provider of facts that are interpreted by the ethno-psychiatrist. The most profound source of divergence between the two is probably the fact that the approach of the ethnologist is necessarily holistic, integrating and totalizing – that is, an attempt to uncover a meaning that is only perceptible within its overall context or in comparison with a neighboring context – while the ethno-psychiatrist, on the other hand, relies from the start on a set of generalizations and reductions based on hypotheses or theories that furnish – its content depending on the era or school – an intelligible outline of the reality described.

While not pretending either to be able to decide the question or exhaust the subject, it does seem possible to carry out a critical

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performer and the magician. He is the embodiment of a kind of Ur-religion, a bearer of an archaic spirituality and the prototype for the founders of religions and religious sects, whether it be in Ancient Greece, in India, or in the Assyro-Babylonian or Celtic civilizations.

examination of some of the ethnographic data and theoretical positions that form the basis of the above-mentioned authors' various attempts at approaching the question of the shaman from a psychopathological point of view.

## **II. Ethnographic Foundations of the Psychiatric Approaches**

We can begin by affirming – without fear of being accused of playing fast and loose with the facts – that most of the ethnographic data forming the basis for judgments on the subject of the shaman's personality comes from societies that are either somewhat acculturated or are in the process of an extremely rapid cultural transformation. To speak only of those regions in which the presence of shamanism is certain, such as Siberia and the two Americas: It can be said that Siberia was well into the process of cultural change at the time of the first investigations; the next region of study was North America; and in our time even the most isolated backwaters of South America have been reached. If the same causes produce the same effects, then it is likely that in all these regions the very nature of shamanism underwent an analogous process of transformation; as the inquiries were extended to new societies, the first observations were thus confirmed. And it was precisely on the basis of observations of cultural change that many of these authors began insisting on the peripheral role played by the shaman in relation to other members of his or her societal group.

From this point of view the shaman was often described as a marginal individual, with an extremely unstable personality; he was seen as poorly adjusted and inclined to mysticism, someone who might find in shamanic duties a solution to his personal conflicts. This interpretation admits of so many counter-examples that, beyond the factual context sketched above, one cannot help but wonder if it ever corresponded to reality. Indeed, to take but one example – that of South America where, in spite of many changes, shamanism continues to have a vigorous existence among numerous traditional ethnic groups – the image of the shaman is virtually the exact opposite of the one depicted above. Far from being a marginalized individual, the shaman in most cases appears to be perfectly integrated into the group, for the very reason that he is called upon to act in its name; in the rituals he performs he becomes an embodiment of the entire community's values, of its thought and

knowledge. Another decisive proof in this regard is the fact that the beliefs and techniques employed by the shaman play an integral role in the socio-cultural assumptions of the entire group. In general these assumptions can be divided into two categories; the first comprises elements of objective knowledge, such as myths, incantations, genealogies, rules of kinship, chants and, when called for, the extremely important fields of ethno-botany and ethno-zoology. The second category is a result of various forms of mystical experience, induced or set off by tobacco or hallucinogens. As in other rituals, both the form and content of this experience are channeled into cultural patterns that the experienced shaman must ultimately transmit to a neophyte shaman and whose quality will ultimately be judged by the group. In addition, it should be noted that not everyone is called to be a shaman, and not all those who aspire to be one succeed. Apprenticeship requires extraordinary efforts, including fasting, isolation, sexual abstinence, and resistance to the effects of psychotropic substances. The intellectual effort required is undoubtedly even greater, since a large quantity of information must be memorized and a mastery of various techniques – far more difficult than the literature devoted to the subject might suggest – must be acquired. Finally, a good shaman must possess the qualities of imagination and inventiveness, since he is required not only to continue reflecting on and practicing his knowledge all his life but must also be capable of improvising chants and making a personal contribution to the legacy of the collective “liturgy.” The practice of the experienced shaman combines all these skills and additionally demands that he be permanently available to participate in various activities of daily life that cannot be carried out without him: these include medical treatments, advice, preparations for the hunt, and various rituals and invocations.

The situation, however, is often quite different in societies in a process of transformation; these societies are subject to a form of cultural change that is sometimes brutal. In such cases the choice of who becomes shaman may indeed appear to be the result of the actions of those individuals who most profoundly feel the effects of this change; in addition, the change may appear to be a response to the social and psychological unease affecting the entire community. In this case the adoption of the shaman’s role, which can be actualized with varying degrees of success, is sought after and justified as a defense against uncontrollable events. Nadel’s study (1949), which Lévi-Strauss quotes in a celebrated text (1950: 22) in

order to exemplify the role played by shamanism vis-à-vis the psychopathological tendencies mentioned above, well illustrates, I believe, this kind of problem. Indeed if "under the influence of contacts with civilization, the frequency of neuroses and psychoses tends to grow in groups without shamanism, while in the others it is shamanism itself that develops, but without a corresponding growth of mental problems," then shamanism proves itself in fact to be a prophylactic against madness.

In other words, if shamanism is capable of channeling the pathology or tensions that weigh on individuals at the heart of the group, it is because it furnishes those who feel this tension with an escape hatch; without it, in a society without shamans, the same factors accentuate the disarray of individuals and increase their troubles. In both cases the determining factor in the overall process is the disorganizing role played by the situation of change. The loss of traditional values and, together with it, the loss of the psychological references that are associated with these values, produce a state of confusion that cannot be accounted for by mere psychology. Indeed the growth of the number of shamans is intimately linked to a return to "shamanism" as a general theory and explanation of life in the face of a situation in which traditional landmarks for interpreting the world no longer apply. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the increase in the number of individuals striving to be shamans is as much a result of a nostalgic desire to recapture the system that underpinned it as it is a result of the high value placed on the shaman's role by "disturbed" individuals.

A second observation that can be made about the psychopathological approach to the ethnographic data is that in most cases the analysis of shamanic practice is focused on only a single moment, that of initiation into the vocation of shaman. Indeed there is a tendency to consider this moment as representative of the entire phenomenon of shamanism because it embodies an identity crisis – attributed either to its pathological origin or its mystical character – believed by the researchers to be intimately tied to shamanism's source. It will have been noted already that the psychopathological characterization of shamanism relies on this assumption.

Even if we admit that the moment of initiation of the future shaman can be defined as an "identity crisis" or a change of "personality" or simply a change of status, the same cannot be said for the practice of an experienced shaman. Indeed in this case the psychological crisis supposedly expressed by the trance no longer



applies because it has been resolved by the shaman precisely through his initiation. As Eliade has said, the shaman is not simply a sick man; he is a sick man who has succeeded in curing himself. This interpretation – which may be a debatable one – is rejected at every turn by authors who approach the shaman from a psychoanalytical point of view. Lacking “access to the root of his conflicts,” as Devereux has put it, conflicts that this author defines as the source of the shaman’s vocation, the shaman is, at best, in a state of remission. He remains sick. In this regard the trance and contact with the supernatural world are but further testimony of the permanence of his problems, although assuring him of continual self-therapy.

Before returning to the question of the psychoanalytic point of view, let us examine more closely the notion of the trance, since it is a key to the psychiatric interpretation of shamanism.

For the majority of American authors, the trance belongs to the general category of “altered states of consciousness”<sup>7</sup>; it is therefore defined as a form of dissociation, although the symptoms used to describe it are more often associated with descriptions of possession or hysteria. Still, among the authors who support the idea that shamanism is a form of possession there are some, like Reinhard, who take the trouble to consult the ethnographic data; these authors acknowledge that the shamanic trance can be distinguished from the trance of possession by the fact that in the first case the supposed contact with the spirit world takes place voluntarily and is controlled, while in the other it is involuntary and endured.

In addition, there are numerous cases in which the trance is either simulated or practically absent during the shamanic rite that “marks” contact with the supernatural world. Let us once more take our example from societies inhabiting the Amazonian lowlands, such as the Tukano group of western Colombia or the Matziguenga of the Peruvian foothills: if we define trance in the terms used to describe possession or hysteria, i.e., dissociation, amnesia, agitation, and mediumism in the strict sense, then “trance” is absent from the rituals of these groups. This assertion can be confirmed in a great number of other societies in the region.

7. Although Erika Bourguignon is one of the authors advocating the use of the term “altered states of consciousness” to encompass certain phenomena (including the trance), she emphasizes that these “states” need not necessarily be thought of as dissociative (1976: 48).

This is why the term "trance" is used by many authors as a synonym for "rapture" [*extase*], which they apply to the shamanic voyage and to the communication with the spirit world that is established through it.

The likening of shamanism to possession (often found in comparatist works – such as Lewis (1971) – where the facts are little heeded) is dubious not only from the point of view of the distinctive nature of the shamanic trance, but equally from the distinctive nature of the relation with the spirits that occurs in possession. In possession, as it has been seen and studied in Africa and in Haitian voodoo, or in mediumism, the spirit is believed to substitute its will for the subject's and to act in his place; the same phenomenon is never observed in shamanism where, even in extreme cases (which are often wrongly interpreted), the spirit is at most believed to speak in place of the shaman. As Métraux (1968: 92) has already commented, this is more "a conversation between a host and his guests" than it is possession. For his part, Bastide (1972: 82) emphasizes that the shaman is not "possessed," since the spirits always remain "outside" of him. Even in those cases where ethnologists speak of the incorporation of the spirits by the shaman, particularly during the initiation of apprentice shamans (Butt 1962: 27; Chaumeil 1982: 87), the spirits (who are generally transmitted by means of hallucinogenic substances) neither replace the shaman's will nor act in his place; rather they confer special powers that allow him, when necessary, to become a spirit himself.

There is little point in continuing here our investigation of the definition of shamanism in relation to possession or the legitimacy (or lack of) that may result from the general use of the term. It does, however, remain that the pure and simple identification of shamanism with possession (which is often found in cross-cultural psychiatry) can lead to obvious confusion. Along these lines Langness (1976) proposes the use of the term "hysterical psychoses" to designate the collection of exotic disorders currently grouped under the rubric "specific syndromes," such as *latah*, *amok*, *windigo*, and *umu*. He then tries to liken them to possession by pointing out that they have in common a transitory character, a predictable and stereotyped form, and both appear among a limited segment of the population.

According to this author, the difference between these two types of disorders is that hysterical psychoses are endured while possessions are sought or induced, either by hallucinogens, fasting,

dance, or chant. Thus the disorders that Langness calls hysterical psychoses include not only the specific syndromes but also what ethnologists generally call possession; he, however, uses this term to designate what ethnologists call shamanism. Since possession and shamanism form a single group for him, Langness advocates that they both be considered on the functional level as hysterical psychoses; yet, while shamanism is institutionalized and considered normal by cultures that practice it, possession is not and therefore occupies an ambiguous position, somewhere between complete psychosis (incomprehensible to all) and the "unusual" séances of the shaman, which are comprehensible to all. According to the author, the underlying causes of the two phenomena are identical, since both embody universal human responses to tensions and anxiety.

Beyond the fact that the need for a new nosological label such as "hysterical psychoses" is highly debatable, there is something highly distressing about an explanation concocted in indifference to the ethnographic data; it testifies to the level of sterile speculation that is sometimes engendered by this type of debate. Far from having escaped the classificatory fever of the nineteenth century (which had the merit and excuse of being a discovery), some of today's researchers plunge into it so enthusiastically that they think it exempts them from having to deal with the facts. The psychoanalytic approach, which is based in part on the kind of data we've just brought to light, is well illustrated by Hippler's interpretation, which we consider to be representative of this method.

### III. The Psychoanalytical Interpretation

Hippler, using examples taken from Eskimo culture, believes he has found the key to integrating the various points of view relative to shamanism within a single perspective; this key is the shaman's talent for channeling unconscious needs. Whether it be oral, phallic, or anal needs, the shaman's actions are a reflection of the type of need that is dominant within the group in which he lives.

In addition, along with Boyer (1974),<sup>8</sup> Hippler makes a distinction between two categories of shamans: the true and the false. He believes that the former "are not only not seriously disturbed but

8. It should be noted that the research of Boyer, Klopfer, and Kawai was focused on groups of Apache and Mescalero tribesmen living on reservations, and that they were studied with the help of the Rorschach test.

in fact are well-adjusted; testimony to this is their great tolerance for products of the unconscious and of primary mental processes.”<sup>9</sup> The latter category, on the other hand, is made up of those individuals who find their social niche and an acceptable social role in shamanic duties. According to the author, true and false shamans can be thought of as being part of a continuum along which they can pass from a stage of adaptation to one of disorganization and vice versa. In this sense, Hippler asserts, shamanism can as easily be a refuge for disturbed individuals as it can be a role for emotionally mature, well-adjusted persons. Shamanism can therefore simultaneously serve as a “way of life” for perceptive observers capable of intervening at the margins of community life, and equally well as a means of “identity” for those who, practically speaking, are schizophrenic. If, says the author, the shaman’s services reflect the dominant psychosexual preoccupations of the group, they are nevertheless, he emphasizes, creative, since by nature they vary from culture to culture, depending on the individual shaman’s ability to “regress in the service of his ‘I.’” Whatever opinion one might have on this subject, it can surely be said that this kind of interpretation reveals nothing that couldn’t have been deduced from theory alone. Moreover, once this type of explanation becomes universally applicable, it is difficult to discern a difference between the shaman’s role and any other societal role with a public character. Indeed the psychological characteristics that stamp the shaman are perfectly applicable to those roles in our own societies that resemble the shaman’s, such as the priest and psychiatrist. According to this theory – and with all due respect to their duties – the priest and psychiatrist are part of the same continuum as the rest of humanity and can pass from one stage of emotional integration to another; they too, depending on the case, can choose their “vocation” on the basis of an ideal and develop a way of life out of this ideal; or, on the contrary, they can make a choice both personal and professional, which will assuage their

9. Freud distinguished between two kinds of mental activity: primary mental processes and secondary mental processes. Primary mental processes are characterized by unconscious mental activities that are manifested in condensation and transference; images tend to be fused together, to replace each other and take on symbolic coloring. Primary mental processes use a mobile energy and remain outside of the categories of time and space; they are ruled by the pleasure principle, i.e., they reduce the displeasure of instinctive tension by means of an imagined desire that must be satisfied. Secondary mental processes are characterized by conscious thought; they obey the laws of grammar and logic and are ruled by the reality principle.

anxieties; they can let themselves be taken under the wing of their communities or a responsible group and thus find refuge from their profound disturbances and/or deviant tendencies.

The tolerance for the products of the unconscious and of primary mental processes, which makes it possible to distinguish between true and false shamans, poses another problem. If, as the theory asserts, these elements affect all humanity, what makes them particularly useful in the case of shamans? Also, in what way does the theory offer any special explanation for the existence of shamans or of their duties? It seems difficult to see how it does, except perhaps for the implicit correspondence between "primary mental processes" and the "prelogical mentality," to which the populace of traditional societies would find itself in some sense bound, at an archaic stage, in what could be seen as the collective human adventure of the libido (Devereux 1970: 26; Lévy-Bruhl 1910, 1922). Since there seems to be no point in lingering over a train of thought based on a logical fallacy, it would perhaps be more useful to wonder, keeping to our original question, how one would distinguish between a true and false priest. But what is the meaning of such a question, and how are we to answer it? Would the true priest, like the true shaman, be the one who testifies to a high degree of tolerance for products of the unconscious and of primary mental processes, while the false priest, *a contrario*, would for his part be a disturbed individual? It would seem that the true distinction to be made here is not between true and false priests – because, once he has been ordained, the priest remains "true" forever in the eyes of the Church – but between true and false judgments that are then capable of being ascribed to theological virtues or to a multitude of human factors. The same would obtain in the case of the therapist as he or she is generally perceived within the framework of Western para-medical competence. Would one continue to insist, in this case, on "true" and "false" therapists? If this distinction is to be maintained, it can only be done within a juridical or legislative framework in which those who practice without legal claim are censured and those deemed competent to practice are legitimated: Thus those whose practice is deemed "illegal" are declared false. But what about those who have legal mandate and the approval of their professional group? Can a distinction be made about the truth and falsehood of their practice? Assuredly they are all "true"; rather, as the case may be, some are considered good and some bad, and the criteria underlying the judgments in the two cases

may be very close to Hippler's own (including judgments of personal motivation) in his assessment of "true" and "false" shamans.

To the extent that the theory of shamanism is based on unconscious and universal needs experienced by all members of the species *Homo Sapiens*, the shaman can ultimately not be distinguished from John Q. Public. The adoption of this approach entails an obvious subsidiary question: How can one then be a shaman, that is, different from John Q. Public? Hippler's implicit answer, which follows a well-worn path, is simple: by being a savage.

Understandably, this type of interpretation runs up against objections that are based not so much on facts but on theories that establish these facts as objects of study by giving them a particular orientation. It may be useful to turn our attention to Devereux's position (1970: 14-31), which, it could be said, represents the most extreme interpretation of shamanism as a form of psychopathology and, as will be seen, lends itself in many ways to caricature.

The two postulates on which the author (Devereux (1972): 170) bases his "psychoanalytic anthropology" are, on the one hand, that "each individual human being is a complete sample of humanity and, provided that he is studied on all levels, his behavior contains the complete repertoire of human behavior"; and, on the other hand, that "each individual society is a complete sample of Society as such and its behavior also contains the complete repertoire of social behavior." The idea of repertoire, he specifies, does not distinguish between real behavior and repressed fantasy, nor between a positive custom and an explicit taboo or criminal act. Independent of the identification of individual with society (the one is supposedly capable of "behaving" just like the other), the author's overall begging of the question allows him to indulge in all kinds of generalizations on the basis of examples taken out of context and then presented along with other examples derived from different cultures and different historical periods. The interpretation of this extremely disparate data relies on the above-mentioned correspondence between primary mental processes and the prelogical mentality, which is used as an explanatory schema.

The author, using his out-of-date, evolutionary framework, consigns "primitive societies" in one way or another to an "infancy of humanity"; he likens the history of the human species to that of an individual subject, although the life of this individual subject is conceived in terms of stages that one passes through as the adventure of the libido proceeds. This approach, which consists, as Lévi-

Strauss says, of "economizing on ethnological analysis" (1966: 23), results in a conception of man and society that deprives them of the symbolic value through which their relationships unfold and their "being" is established.

The postulation of a universal equivalence between reality and imagination, which is attained by extending the psychopathological hypothesis to include all human phenomena, subsumes these phenomena in a meta-discourse; once this postulate is accepted, there is good reason to believe in its correspondence to the universe of images and the pathology of the society in which it occurs. In addition, from this standpoint the realm of the imagination becomes, depending on whether it is considered from the theoretical or empirical point of view, either irrational and hence confused with the symbolic realm, or else virtual and thus a form of pathology.

It is in this context that Devereux's views on shamanism must be seen. Expanding the concept of "shaman" to encompass almost every geographic region of the planet as well as, as Opler has pointed out (1961), all its language and ethnic groups, he goes on to declare that "the shaman is often a noxious figure for culture itself." While insisting that this is well-documented fact, he is content to offer us only a few insignificant examples and claims that "the shaman is a socially disruptive element whose activities are relevant only to a marginal group within his society and culture... and he is infinitely less realistic than normal people..." (1972: 16).

Thus, says Devereux, the shaman is psychologically ill and can be differentiated from neurotics and psychotics only by the fact that his conflicts and symptoms have received a contractual structure [*structuration conventionnelle*]. This contractual structure – which Devereux judges to be ultimately anti-social in character – is likened to the restititional syndrome, a concept used by psychoanalysis to account for the processes by which schizophrenics and psychotics invent a phantasm capable of giving meaning to reality. As to the shaman's role – its "utility" – : he is reduced to a "proxy madman" for his community, which allows its members to maintain a semblance of equilibrium.

The conclusion that must be drawn, if one follows Devereux, is that shamanic societies, based upon "supernaturalism," have an "anti-social" (?) character that spawns delirium; the majority of the citizens in these societies are unbalanced, and a minority of them are actual lunatics.

#### IV. Final Comments

In summary, it seems to us that most of the authors who have defined shamanism along psychopathological lines, even without resorting to Devereux's surrealistic psychiatry, have had a tendency to generalize their interpretations, either on the basis of observations of societies in the process of acculturation where phenomena of anomie were at work on the socio-cultural and consequently individual level, or on the basis of cases in which the personality and position of the shaman presented peculiarities that led to questions concerning his psychology. Independent of the variety of interpretations that could be given to this question, it seems to us that, by associating the problem of madness with the institution of shamanism, these same authors have jumbled together two separate types of problems that demand separate analyses: first, the relationship between the shamanic function and the personality of the individual; and second, the forms and nature of "madness" in societies in which shamans are present.

The source of the first kind of confusion is evident, and Kennedy's comment on the subject (1973: 1149) is still apt when he observes, "there is no reason to assume that shamans, simply because they perform similar duties, should have the same personality in different societies or even from shaman to shaman within the society in which they live." As in all societies where certain roles take on a specific character, it is very likely that there are as many different kinds of shamans as there are different kinds of personalities within the group in which they live; it is therefore equally likely that there are "disturbed" shamans. But to extrapolate from the shaman's role to his psychology as an individual is equivalent to taking the personage – it is useful here to recall that this term originally designated an ecclesiastic dignitary – for the person. If the public is able to judge the degree of equivalence between the one and the other, is it not precisely because they can distinguish between the two? Like any actor the shaman must be able to take off his "mask," because it is of course only in donning it that he can play his role.

The confusion that results when the problem of madness in shamanistic societies is approached exclusively on the basis of shamans is equivalent to the confusion that would result if a psychiatric nosological table were developed on the basis of a study of the behavior of psychiatrists alone. Although the latter, when taken



as a group, are undoubtedly capable of furnishing a representative sampling of the average mental health of humanity and consequently of its pathology, it must be admitted that any other professional class would have served equally well; moreover, in a general sense, this is an upside-down approach. Although in all human societies people are subject to a variety of tensions that can cause mental disturbances, the ability to understand these disorders depends on a study of the relation between the individual person and the existing conditions in which he or she lives. The problem should therefore be posed not in terms of the polar opposition shamanism/madness but rather on the basis of the overall arrangement of human relations observable in shamanistic societies and in the psychogenic tensions that predominate in them as well as the solutions offered in response. And if it is found that the theme of madness, along with its social definition and expression, are an integral part of the image of humanity precisely in shamanistic societies, then it might be supposed that these societies run fewer risks – in the epidemiological sense – to see it appear in forms catalogued by nosology. In other words, once the theme of madness is intimately linked to their anthropology, its development as part of the general pattern of human destiny – interiorized now and consequently capable of being compassed by the term “madness” – will be dissolved in a series of manifestations tied to the entire society’s mode of being. If the society endows all of social life with a prophylactic character, then the “potential madness of all its members” would thus be managed on a permanent basis. Make no mistake: it is not a matter of asserting here that we are in the presence of “societies of madness” but rather of realizing that the very notion of madness does not have the same meaning here that Western societies reserve for it. In the former, madness has gradually been removed from its original setting, that is, the relation to the group, and moved to a personal setting, that is, to the individual; in this sense the image of the subject has remained dependent on the distance separating private from public space; and its equilibrium depends not on the individual but on social norms that define their dimensions and respective positions. This collective setting, where madness constantly threatens to crop up in social relations (since the individual is conceived as the intersection of the group), does not prevent certain individuals, as Lévi-Strauss has put it, from living “incompatible syntheses”; but even these individuals are neither isolated nor perceived as “mad” because in

these very societies the realm of the imaginary, as the setting of the subject, is an instrument of the symbolic realm understood as the setting of the group and its collective images; and the realm of the symbolic is itself an analog of the real. Therefore the oppositions, distinctions and differences that mark each of these levels of representation are not called on to specify, as is the case in the Western cultural universe, the contrast between man, society and nature, but on the contrary sanction a freer permutation of their signs (Wilden 1972: 274).

At whatever level of society the limits outlining the images and metaphors of the "subject" are situated, they always mark a domain where certain questions are capable of being answered; in this way they form the epistemological foundation on which the rational is circumscribed within the real. Therefore in shamanic societies the shaman's actions must necessarily link reason and will in order to transform thought into an object of truth and pulsing energy into value. To this extent the shaman, whatever additional characterizations of him are made, is simultaneously an ethical and epistemological subject.

If, as was said at the beginning of this article, the question of the psychological status of the shaman constitutes a longstanding battleground, it is equally – it can now be said in conclusion – a battleground without a future, because its final soldiers, having "buried the hatchet" long ago, are themselves disappearing from the field. While waiting for the day when other spirits and other gods will perhaps come to sing and dance again among men, the voices of those who inspired the shaman are today an almost inaudible murmur. In the meanwhile the illusion of ethnography, trapped ineluctably between faith and knowledge because it consists of pretending to know what others believe and to believe what they know, will itself have undoubtedly vanished.

*Translated from the French by Thomas Epstein.*

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