Between representations, knowledge and practice. The art of shamans and other traditional practitioners

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DOI: 10.4000/books.ireditions.7213
Publisher: IRD Éditions, Société française d'ethnopharmacologie
Place of publication: IRD Éditions, Société française d'ethnopharmacologie
Year of publication: 2002
Published on OpenEdition Books: 26 March 2014
Serie: Hors collection
Electronic ISBN: 9782709917803

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1 The following remarks are based on three foundations (i) prolonged on-field observations and the analysis of a conception of the world - transmitted by mythology - and the study of shamanism in a specific society: that of the Guajiro Indians living in a peninsula shared by Venezuela and Colombia (Perrin, 1976, 1992); (ii) systematic research in ethno-medicine and ethno-botany applied to this society (Perrin 1982); (iii) the essay on comparative shamanism prepared as a prolongation to this investigation (Perrin, 1995).

2 The purpose of this study is to set the use of plants in so-called traditional societies in a broad cultural context.

3 Let us first - as a matter of honesty - give the floor to a Guajiro shaman.

"Our spirit goes to visit the soul of the patient who is ready to die. It goes to Dream, it goes where the deceased are...
But the soul has already turned round! Our spirit coops it up in a small bag. It puts it under its arm, it keeps an eye on it. Because it would like to fly back there, far away.
You know, we open our mouths when sleeping, then our spirit arrives and shew!, it puts the soul back into the mouth of the patient."
(a Guajiro shaman, after Perrin, 1992, 94).

4 The art of shamans - in particular their art to cure - consists in a subtle interaction which develops according to rules stemming from a specific system of representations, a structured system of social habits and the use of various forms of knowledge. That probably holds true of other traditional practitioners, though their representations may be more unstable, less specific, and not so well structured. In this case, the logic of their practice is probably more solid than that of representations.
Shamanism as a structured system

Shamanism is one of the elaborate systems that has been developed by the human mind, independently, in various parts of the world, to give sense to events and to act upon them.

It implies a specific representation of the human being and the world, presupposes a clear alliance between men and "the gods", and it is constrained by a function managed by the shaman aiming at averting the emergence of any imbalance and to provide an interpretation for the occurrence of any misfortune by explaining, avoiding or relieving it. Shamanism is therefore a set of ideas justifying a set of actions. They cannot be understood unless we keep in mind the way they are implemented and the resulting constraints.

The main principles associated to it can be set in three classes:

1. A bipolar or dualistic conception of the human being and the world. The human being is made up of a body and one or more invisible components, often referred to as "souls", which can be liberated from the corporeal envelope and survive death. Dreaming can be explained by the transient departure, at night, of one of these components; a prolonged departure is an explanation for illnesses and a final separation from the body means death. Not only human beings, but also all creatures in nature can have "souls", and this applies to living beings as well as to animals and plants and things such as stones...

The world is also dual or, more specifically, is torn between two poles, each one being a theoretical reference mark acting as a kind of "magnet". We have both a this-world, visible, existing on a daily basis, profane, and, an other-world, usually invisible for ordinary men. It is the world of gods and their envoys, the world of spirits - celestial or chthonian, pathogenic or benevolent... - the world of the masters of animals or plants, of ancestors, of the dead and their ghosts... It is the world that myths explore and describe.

But this distinction is neither absolute, nor unchangeable; it is rather a consequence of the need for an interpretation than for a separation between two orders of reality. The Invisible exists constantly alongside the Visible. It hides there, lives in it, moves through it, animates it and controls it. The envoys of the gods assume in the this-world the appearance of ordinary beings. The human beings are frequently submitted to the consequences of this situation, as the meaning of the this-world is provided by the other-world, whose presence is permanent. The great misfortunes befalling human beings are supposed to be caused by the action of the other-world, whatever the nature of the disaster - climatic, economic or biological: drought, famine, illnesses, etc. And the other-world is created in the image of man: it is a projection of the this-world. The beings living in it are driven by the same thoughts and the same passions as the men who created them.

2. A form of communication. The societies following this logic claim that the other-world offers messages to men using special languages, such as dream or visions, which are indirect media for sooth-sayings or diagnoses. But communication occurs at random.

Shamanism presupposes that some people have a capacity to communicate at leisure with the beings in the invisible world. They can see them and know them, unlike their fellow men who can do no more than bear or sense them. They are the shamans. They are...
elected and appointed by the other-world. It is as if, though persecuting humanity, this world made a partner of him: it offers a small share of its powers to the shamans so that they can gain an understanding of the deep meaning of events and relieve mishaps, they can postpone death by putting off the redemption of the above-mentioned debt. In compensation, the shaman is bound by a kind of contract to the beings living in the invisible and it will be his duty to have his people abide to this agreement.

13 Shaman power can be established in two ways. The shaman can convene and control entities that ethnologists generally call "auxiliary spirits". This power to call upon the other-world is often linked to the use of psychotropic plants which are endowed with magic and therapeutic properties of extraordinary scope. The auxiliary spirits living in the other-world entertain a privileged relation with him. Each society or each shaman gives them a name and determines in his own manner its nature and its origin. The shaman can also delegate his soul at leisure. The two procedures most often coexist.

14 The shaman reportedly becomes a mediator, he can cross the borders because, when carrying out his functions, he can, on his own accord, belong in alternation to the other-world and the this-world, or work as an active link in a chain connecting the two poles. Things do not occur at random any more, but according to somebody's will.

3. The shaman is a character who has achieved social recognition. He can create for himself a state of receptivity to the other-world following a request. He can interfere to avert or solve some misfortune. It can concern an individual affected by illness or some kind of accident, or the whole community which may suffer, for example, from drought or a shortage of game, or which is going to wage war. In case of illness, the task of the shaman consists in obtaining the liberation of the patient's soul or the elimination of the pathogenic elements introduced in the latter's body. If the issue is the success of a hunting party, the point is, for instance, to persuade a Master of the animals to abandon some members of his "herd" to the human hunters. If the community is going to declare war, the idea will be to weaken the forces of the enemy...

16 The shaman is there to restore ecological, climatic, biological, but also social balances. In theory, he does not act for his own sake. Shamanism is therefore, strictly speaking, a social institution.

The therapeutic function of the shamans

17 Therapy is currently the main activity of shamans, sometimes even the only one. It is commonly said that this function of shamans - though general - has emerged at a later stage, complementing or even replacing the hunting function - presumably the original one. This would mean that the apparently universal urge - the therapeutic action being based on the willingness of human beings, ever since they have existed, to offer relief to the suffering of other human beings - emerged after the idea that we can act on the world to catch wild animals as game? Has this urge been unknown to hunting societies? This is still an open question.

18 All the same, we can observe that shamanic societies does not provide much evidence of the efficiency of shamans' action on game. On the other hand, we have strong evidence concerning the effectiveness of their healing powers.

19 A remark should be made before discussing the therapeutic dimension of shamanism. The body / soul complementary character is paralleled by two conceptions of illness that are
nearly universally in extension, be it of somatic or psychic nature. Illness can be interpreted as a shortage of something, a form of weakening, a loss of strength, which is generally attributed to a kind of bereavement, a deterioration or a metamorphosis of the soul, or, on the contrary, an excess of something, a feeling of extra weight, a pain sense of heaviness due to the introduction of a pathogenic element into the body or a "spirit of illness". This duality of cause is paralleled by two types of therapy: adorcism and exorcism. The former - adorcism - is defined as the reintroduction of the missing part, the latter - exorcism - is an elimination of the cause of disturbance.

20 These two methods often coexist in shamanism

21 After having ensured the return of the soul, the shaman can suck the evil out at the part of the body affected, materialize it and show it around. But the quest for the soul of the patient captured by the other-world is at still the core of literature on shamanic practice.

22 The shaman is also able to implement more "specialized" therapeutic strategies. These are strange and imaginative, and always betray a specific conception of the illness, the suffering, the body, the society and the world; they can give rise to colourful tales.

23 In Siberia, the Tunguz shaman tells how he can cure sterility by stealing souls from the other-world and give protection from accidents in the course of pregnancy by withdrawing and hiding temporarily the soul of the embryo (Delaby, 1976: 61-63); or how he sends his woodcock-spirit or goose-spirit to extirpate with its bill a pathogenic spirit out of the patient’s body (Asinimov, quoted by Delaby, 1976: 57).

24 Among the Desana, illness is interpreted as an "obscure and thin layer" covering the body of the patient. It is supposed to be the outcome of an act of copulation with a being from the other-world. The layer must be torn off by the shaman to obtain a cure. For that purpose, he convenes animals which can perforate and bite: turtles, eels, squirrels (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1968: 209-211).

25 The shamans also have a preventive role. A good example is offered by the Tunguz shaman. He is reported as having the power to beacon off the territory of the clan by setting up an invisible border made up of auxiliary spirits: bird-spirit supervising the airs, fish-spirit keep guard on access to the rivers, quadruped-spirit patrolling in the forests. When he dies, people are filled with fear as people claim that his auxiliary spirits may follow their Master into his underground residence and the protective barrier collapses (Anisimov, 1952, quoted by Delaby, 1976: 55).

26 At the other end of the world, the Kuna shamans of Panama claim that they are able to dispatch the pathogenic spirits to a depth of four layers underground and surround the inhabited islands with an invisible net protecting them from epidemics (Perrin, 1998).

**Effectiveness of shamanic therapies**

27 In shaman societies, when ordinary treatments of illnesses (using simples, physical handling, various methods) prove to be ineffective, when the dreams or random contacts of the patient or his/her family with the other-world do not point out at any therapeutic solution, people turn to the shaman.

28 The shamans are thus confronted with the wide range of pathologies, of somatic or psychosomatic nature, and their action should be evaluated from several points of view:
Medical science generally looks down upon shamanic therapy in case of somatic ailments, even if it acknowledges some effectiveness to specific herbal medicines introduced by many shamans for the practice. It is generally more reserved if the disorders are of psychosomatic nature.

But experts in somatic medicine could express a well-founded opinion only after carrying out thorough observations - including, among other things, a diagnosis and a prognosis made during and after intervention of a shaman. If the treatment has been a failure, it would also be interesting to know whether Western medicine would have proven to be effective if it has been applied instead of the shaman's.

Psychoanalysis could probably provide very fruitful analyses about the operation, advantages and weaknesses of a shamanic treatment, provided it becomes familiar with the structure of the family and the cultural representations of the individual, illness and death in the society considered - in short, provided psychoanalysts are as rigorous in the way they observe an exotic society as they are in a Western environment.

However, such a study has never been carried out in a systematic way, neither in the former, nor in the latter case.

On their hand, shamanic societies consider that their shamans are endowed with almost absolute lucidity and competence and they attribute extraordinary feats to them. Theoretically, shaman should be able to explain and predict everything. Considering that everything has an ultimate cause, everything has a meaning. If he is not consulted too late, if the patient has not been affected by some disproportionate force or being, the shaman is supposed to have a means of curing it. Though the effectiveness of the shaman's cure is next to never questioned, a distinction is made everywhere between good and poorer shamans. Sometimes, some of them are even blamed as being abnormal or incompetent. They can then be "deshamanized", i.e. stripped of their status.

Ethnological observation shows that the shaman is a fine observer. As his action is long-term, - the cure can be stretched over about fifteen days, or even several months - a good shaman has the possibility of adapting his attitude and his prognosis to the evolution of the illness (improvement or deterioration) while giving the impression to act on it. Generally, he does not venture to make a diagnosis or a prediction about this evolution in case reality proves him wrong. One of strong points of his art is to provide divination, but a posteriori, to offer explanations only after events have occurred or when the situation has stabilized. Before that stage, he is often content to report with impressive talent about the adventures of his auxiliary spirits or his soul. Moreover, he may describe how they meet with the beings living in the other-world, avoiding in the process to establish close connections with the problem being treated.

In all cases, the shaman offers a speech and a show to the patient and his/her kin. To a state of confusion, sorrow and anguish, he substitutes a fantastic tableau that submerges the patient. He introduces into it some actors from the other-world and their malevolent actions, he refers to the pains and sufferings he experiences there to induce them to making a pact and disclosing the truth. He performs acts meant to combat the pathogenic elements, cause a progressive return to the principles of life and establish a new balance. His gestures, his words are often just metaphors of the healing process or the threat of a deterioration. This probably helps the patient to put his experience of his/her illness in words and to have better control on it.
Moreover, when he decides to stop the treatment, the shaman, due to his capacity as a diviner, announces with authority that the illness will have either its fatal outcome - as his spirits, in spite of strenuous efforts, have come to the end of their wits and there is no more to be done - or, on the contrary, a happy ending, as the soul has eventually returned or is about to do so, the evil has been removed from the patient's body (cf. the epigraph to this chapter). We can imagine that such a sentence has a strong influence on the patient's mind as he/she is thus obliged to reinterpret his/her state. This influence is all the stronger as the shaman is regarded as endowed with great powers: "Quesalid has not become a famous sorcerer (shaman) because he cured patients; he cured the patients because he had become a famous sorcerer" C. Lévi-Strauss said of a Kwakiutl shaman of British Columbia (1949a).

Another element certainly contributes to this re-interpretation of the symptoms or suffering - assuming that the treatment has not eliminated them objectively. We refer here to the physical manipulations of all description that the shaman carries out on his patients, which sometimes remind of grappling episodes intersperses during the treatment.

For instance, the Guajiro female shaman, being half-nacked, is seen sucking at the painful spot, "blowing" tobacco juice onto it and applying red-hot pointed objects. She massages the whole body, anoints it, strokes it or lets her hands fly over it at close distance. All this is meant to modify the patient's perceptions and feelings and help him/her have a better control on the cause of evil or adapt to the pain by coming to regard it as a new form of a "normal state". There are obvious limits to this process!

Symbolic actions or rituals can also contribute to this re-interpretation and relative efficiency.

When it is imposed, the "price" of treatment - which generally combines an economic and symbolical value, can be such an action. For example, the gifts imposed by the Guajiro shamans - including jewels, cattle, etc. - are supposed to be prescribed by the auxiliary spirits and they are meant to mollify the pathogenic being from the other-world who caused the disturbance. According to a nice Indian saying, "the spirits take the soul, the shamans take the body". The driving force is therefore both symbolical and economic; it also has a social dimension since the price is paid by the family of the patient who is then, in his turn, indebted to them. This procedure is supposed to bring about a positive development of the patient's health by triggering a rush of vitality in him/her. The fact that this logic is not clear may reinforce its relative effectiveness (Perrin, 1992).

The ceremonies organised at the end of the treatment are also quite significant: the shaman convenes all the members of the community, declares officially that his patient has been cured and imposes rituals symbolising restored harmony. The collective dimension of this celebration, enhanced by music and dances, the close ties that are re-established between the individual declared in a state of convalescence and the members of the community he/she belongs to who have gathered to "to help him/her to recover", everything probably contributes to modifying his/her impressions, affects, anxieties.

In a now famous article (1949b), Cl. Lévi-Strauss introduced the concept of symbolic effectiveness on the basis of the analysis of a song performed at childbirth by the shamans of the Kuna Indians of Panama (Holmer & Wassén, 1947).

We can summarize the situation as follows. A woman has difficulties to give birth; a shaman interprets the proper song; the words provide a metaphorical representation of a
woman's anatomy and physiology and describes the "supernatural" combat meant to modify them; the woman eventually gives birth. The efficiency of the procedure may be based on a structural homology between the song and the physiological process: if mythical songs and biological organizations had comparable structures, the former could trigger off processes restoring the latter - that have been upset by pathogenic factors - back to their normal condition.

But this concept has given rise to many questions and hefty criticism. Has such a structural homology between the organic and the mythical ever been established? What are then the inductive properties between homologous structures? Do we have here just a placebo effect or real relief?

In the absence of answer and evidence, it is preferable to consider the paradoxical concept of symbolic effectiveness as a mere assumption. The more so as no example comparable to the Kuna case has ever been reported, and this case has itself given rise to criticism as the song is interpreted in a secret language reserved to shamans - a language that the woman giving birth is not supposed to understand.

**Shamanism and pharmacopoeias**

Concerning the pharmacopoeias, and in particular the use of plants that is often associated to shamanic therapies, I will restrict my argument to what I know well and will therefore be content with reminding of some features of the Guajiro pharmacopoeia.

First of all, it is quite important to pass two remarks of general value. When a plant is recognized by a given population as being really effective and therefore essential, it becomes common property. In other words, it is then difficult for a "specialist" to reserve the use of it just for him/herself, and to make a secret of it. In addition, it should borne in mind that shamans can use two kinds of plants: psychotropic plants that - as they refer to the other-world - help them to communicate with this world and to which they can attribute extraordinary qualities, and the ordinary medicinal plants that, when provided by the shaman, are sometimes supposed to being endowed with superior power. Though the shaman makes a secret of the origin of his drugs, these are generally a mixture of simples known to everybody; But we can also imagine that he will try to take advantage of his privileged status to launch new experiments.

The Guajiro pharmacopoeia is extremely varied. It is composed of about one hundred simples in very common use, and also some additional drugs of animal or mineral origin.

The therapeutic properties that the Guajiro assign to each one of their medicinal plants, the specific mode of preparation, the dosage and their supposed action provide invaluable information about the way they conceive the functions of the human body and interpret dysfunctions. For example, they say of Ditaxis sp. or *Acacia farnesiana* that they indice patients to vomiting the cold off. They say that *Caesalpinia coriaria* or *Mollugo verticillata*, when applied in rectal injection, helps patients to get all the filth out of the belly... The comments made about the plants show that the illnesses treated with simples are regarded as extremely concrete phenomena akin to clogging and obstruction. The drug should help liberate the body, cleanse it, and the effectiveness of the treatment is closely related to its dramatic aspect: for instance, if it stimulates the excreting function, this fact can be regarded as proof of its quality. The body is basically permeable; some
remedies are able to expel the pain, others can make their way to the blood... The body is then like a machine that absorbs, excretes and regurgitates.

That is not enough to blame the effectiveness of certain plants. Only can be suspected a priori of absolute inefficiency or of dangerous action some simple as well is obvious as their mode of action is based on theory of a magic type, kind "theory of the signatures". Thus for example of the joo'upi, literally "drug with baby", plants not identified, employed to overcome female sterility; because in the wind, one says, it emits a sound comparable with the wail of the new-born baby, or such other which is supposed being abortive whereas he causes intestinal haemorrhages...

In addition, it can be observed that some plants recognized by Western science as effective are also used by the Guajiro, but for completely different indications, or so it seems. The result of my own observations is that a kind of "effectiveness spectrum" can be associated to each plant, and we can classify these diagrams in three main categories:
- the multi-purpose plants, that can be used for next to everything, with a flat spectrum, as a kind of placebo
- the plants that are effective for a very specific use, but taken for a wide range of applications: the spectrum is flat, with one peak
- the plants used for a very specific purpose, and reserved for this sole use: the spectrum is reduced to one peak

An example of shamanic practice

Shamanism represents an original conception of the therapist, the illness and therapy itself. The ritual practices carried out by shamans are a mirror of the singular relations maintained by the shaman with the patient, society and the cause of the illness. So far, I have referred to the latter only in general terms. We are aware that, to speculate and face the illness, the therapist must call on a set of well-defined words and categories making up real and, at the same time, rather strange nosologies.

Traditional nosologies are generally dual. They include, on the one hand, symptomatic definitions, on the other hand, definitions of etiologic type: the health problem is referred to, not so much on the basis of symptoms, but rather in the form of its ultimate cause or its origin. This dual system for interpretation enables the patient and above all the practitioner - who in the best position for that purpose - to pinpoint the cause of the problem, evaluate its intensity and to determine which therapy will be best to thwart its development.

As an indirect consequence of this duality, some aspects of traditional therapies refer more to a symbolic mode of thinking, whereas others are purely empirical. The relationships established between the two are often very complex. The more so as the terms used in a nosology tell often much more than what they mean literally, i.e. simply the denomination of an illness. The mental associations that they call to mind, the behaviours that they bring about may be part of a full network of symbols which they unveil and consolidate at the same time.

There are two Guajiro terms to refer to an illness: ayuule and wanuliiii. The first term applies to illnesses for which the shaman's intervention is not necessary - which does not mean that they are not serious - but because a specific degree of anguish has not been...
reached yet and people may think that they will be able to cure it without calling upon
the shaman. They are described in terms of symptoms.

The illness assigned to the second category are identified on the basis of the specific
degree of distress implying that only a shaman could possibly treat them. The latter will
then seek an explanation to the illness in the religious universe and the network of
symbols of the society concerned, before having all members of the social group involved
in the process.

In simplified terms, we can identify three main categories of wanuliiii illnesses: those
caused by the ghosts of the dead - called yoluhu those resulting from encounters with
supernatural beings having superior power; finally those due to contaminations - called
kapiilainwa. This distribution of wanuliiii illnesses in three types makes it possible to
classify the set of observable pathogenic facts. It can be observed that the three types are
ordered by decreasing virulence. We move from the first type, which is caused by
powerful pathogenic vectors, stemming from the other-world that is stronger, more
puulasü, to illnesses for which vectors of lesser virulence, stemming from the netherworld
are to be blamed, and finally to the third type for which the weaker pathogenic capacity
can be assigned to contaminant beings. Various degrees can be identified within each
type: a pulowi is more powerful than a wanuliiü, which is itself more terrifying than a
keeralia... Some ghosts are ferocious, others are more gentle. Some forms of
contamination cause more fear than others, and a child can be more or less
contaminated...

In practice, it appears that the shaman distributes the ailments that he examines into
three groups, according to the degree of intensity - strong, medium or weak - and
classifies the patients in three corresponding categories, according to their constitution.
Beyond any etiologic specificity, he then matches these two types of classification with
the three kinds of wanuliiii illnesses. Expectedly the "encounters" would hit mostly fully
active adults whereas the contaminations would affect fragile and weakened people,
children or pregnant women; the intermediate cases are attributed to the yoluhu. A
person of average constitution, who is seriously ill but perceived as curable, will be
regarded as a victim of a ghost. If a child is recognized as having an illness caused by an
"encounter", it is a way to say that the symptoms displayed are so dramatic that his/her
condition is desperate and he/she is doomed to die very soon. His/her strength is no
match to the evil that is consuming him/her. On the contrary, declaring that a strong
man is contaminated is a way to mock the evil besetting him...

The Guajiro nosology, though introducing some breaks between the categories on which
thought is based, offers at the same time the means to apprehend the continuity of the
phenomena open to observation. By implementing this system in a flexible way, shamans
are in a position to deal with a majority of possible cases. They set the patient and his/her
illness in a proper framework, even if it entails a change of diagnosis in the course of
treatment, on the pretext that another form of evil, not yet revealed by their spirits, has
emerged alongside the ones that had already been identified. If the condition of the
patient develops favourably, contrary to the negative preliminary diagnosis based on the
"encounter", the shamans will make it a reason for additional prestige: they have found
the way to overcome a terrible illness. If, on the contrary, the patient's conditions
deteriorates suddenly, they will find clever arguments allowing them to turn down
possible criticisms of incompetence: for instance, they might shove the blame to the
patient and his/her family, as they failed to meet the requirements of their spirits, unless
the latter got into a wrangle...

This treatment of causes by the Guajiro shaman is supported by empirical manipulations.
He/she is also on the move, prescribing new drugs, testing new plants or mixtures that
he/she has seen in his/her dreams, blowing some tobacco juice, or alcohol or plant
decotion over his/her patient "to drive the evil out of him/her". He/she will massage or
suck at the part of the body affected with his/her mouth wet with tobacco juice, he/she
will "knead" the patient's body, "stretch" it. In short, the shaman uses all kinds of means
to eliminate the principles controlling the patient's body. He/she also makes it "more
flexible" so as to facilitate the return of the patient's soul, he/she groans to convey the
pain suffered by these spirits making their way back from the other-world.

As a conclusion

I would now like to summarize some of the general principles that I have developed in
this presentation.

The first principle is that the world has two faces acting on one another. Human beings
ensure their existence in this world by plundering or exploiting a nature governed by the
other-world. But it is the latter world that metes out death to men who, at the end of a
long cosmological cycle, provide for the perpetuation of society (Perrin, 1976, 1992). Each
of these worlds is a mirror for the other one. The other-world is supposed to act in
response to the actions performed by human beings, and the latter can try to read there
about a destiny that has been pre-determined. Moreover, human beings have a dual
nature and their souls anticipate or prolong their actions.

This world is fraught with signs stemming from the other-world. If you can interpret
them, they will provide directions to all, supply information about future events or offer
an interpretation for past occurrences. This universe is completely deterministic, leaving
no room to chance. Dreams and illness are the most conspicuous of these signs, but they
are also contingent.

The shaman provides an infallible reading for this impressive wealth of random signs
from the other-world. He also manages the interaction between the two worlds, as he can
see, anticipate and even control it.

This claim for theurgist powers is not insolent, as the other-world acts on this world as an
immanent cause. The shaman is not an object of worship. People fear him because of his
powers, but they also try to manipulate him and deal with him in a pragmatic way. All
efforts are made to eliminate the gap that could emerge between this world and the
other-world that "modern religions" pre-suppose. People do not face the problem of
understanding a final cause or a supposedly definitive purpose. There are many
intermediaries and the shaman and his spirits - who embody themselves a derived power
- are elements of this fractioned structure.

However, the indigenous theory offer unsatisfactory solutions to the objective situations
that the shamans have to deal with, being confronted with the relentless laws of
biological degradation and the anxieties of human beings submitted to them. They can
think of innumerable ways and paths to explain and to act, as a product or a reflection of
their intellectual capacities, on the basis of the objective features of the difficulties and
accidents which they try to cope with, the complex feelings involved and the material or
social constraints emerging in the course of the treatment. The logic of practice very often prevails.

67 Shamans have to be very skilful to bridge the gap between theory and experience. He has to move from mythology to reality, separate practical action from interpretation, modify his diagnoses... As an expert for a-posteriori explanations and circular reasoning, he has to identify new signs and new interpretations in order to convince. From that point of view, shamanism is an art... It is sometimes supported - but not always, by no means - by some expertise on plants. But this quality is often the prerogative of other specialists or is just part of culture.

68 The situation is also complex because the shaman's role is dual. This duality also applies to the dreamer and the patient who, consciously or not, become manipulators of social life. The shaman is like a stage director organising a show designed to capture the attention of the gods and human beings. He sends signs to the other-world but also to the patient and the public. He has to persuade and convince his own spirits and those of the people he is treating who are watching him closely. He has to provide evidence of the value of the steps he takes to keep death at bay, to sow that his own life is also at risk, and, as a consequence, people are greatly indebted to him.

69 This system leaves no room to chance and also eliminates responsibility. As he is supposed to have an explanation to all phenomena and have an influence on them, the shaman cannot be held guilty in case of failure. The beings to be blamed are his spirits, his clients, the soul of his spirits... The patient is not responsible either, he/she is just a link in a chain of effects and causes since the illness is also the consequence of somebody else's action... In the same way, ordinary people can claim that they act following the orders transmitted in a dream or by the shaman; therefore, they cannot be held responsible either.

70 The Guajiro case that I have observed with great care shed valuable light on the kind of relationships - ranging from the most evident to the most deeply hidden - existing between the shaman's experience, the dreamer or the patient, and the models imposed on them. This case can, to a large extent, be considered as having universal value as it shows how an individual can avail of it to face illness and death, desire and violence, the loss of references and traditional values. If we pay attention to the multiple and sometimes ridiculous applications of a mode of thinking that makes desperate attempts to find sense in everything and apply a "logic of powerlessness", we have an idea of the distance between this type of culture and ours. Just as they do, but in another way, we try to find relief from our anxieties in words and theories but, in the name of knowledge, we are trained to accept chance and acknowledge failure or the lack of sense.

71 In this environment, the scientist learns how to keep silent, and claims that he/she has the strength to put up with the inevitable misfortunes that befall human beings. As opposed to this, the shamans, thirsting for sense and meaning, offer multiple answers, the answers...
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ABSTRACTS

Abstract

The art of shamans - in particular their form of medical treatment - consists in a form of interaction developing in a subtle way between a specific system of representations, applying structured practices and calling on various forms of knowledge.

To demonstrate this, we have first to submit a minimal definition of shamanism, and then propound specific representations of the illness, nosology and therapy. We also have to introduce or question concepts such as threshold of anguish, therapeutic effectiveness, symbolic effectiveness, efficiency spectrum of simples, etc.

The majority of examples comes from personal "on-field" experiments.

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