From Sacred to Synthetic:

The Rise of Plastic Shamanism in an age of appropriation

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Introduction

Every month, with the full moon, I participate in a full moon circle with other women in which we make music, sing, dance, meditate and be present. Central to these circles is connection; connection to yourself, but mostly with the others and our ancestors. These ceremonies are guided by a signifier that tries to protect and guide the sacred energy in the room and in each other. I knew that the drums we use are part of a shamanic tradition, but only now did I notice that there was no 'real' shaman or indigenous person part of this ceremony. I started wondering how it was possible that I participated in such ceremonies without knowing the shamanic tradition to its fullest extent.

Simultaneously, I started doing research into the visual language of shamanism manifested in their costumes, instruments and other attributes. Although I was determined to make something, my body was reluctant to actually start. The reason for that, as I later found out, is because I was scared that if I would create something part of shamanic traditions, I would be another 'white' person appropriating the culture of minority groups. Initially, the aim was to explore the grey area between culturural appropriation and appreciation. After careful but extensive research this initial topic grew to my final research that is an attempt to situate myself within the framework of shamanism and the Eurocentric vision, but also to position myself as an artist within that framework. Since this is an essay solemnly focused on situating myself as an artist within the field of shamanism, the research question goes as follows: "*Can I make art about shamanic traditions without having the same historical heritage, without appropriating the culture?"* This essay is an exploration of that curiosity and will guide you through different themes; Firstly, shamanism is defined by exploring the historical context of shamanism as well as the contemporary definitions coined by researchers in the anthropological and ethnographical sciences. Second, the intersection between artists and shamans is mapped out. Later, the essay elaborates on the New Age (the New Age is a spiritual movement from an Eurocentric viewing point) decontextualization and appropriation of shamanism and shamanic traditions. Lastly the essay explores ways to move away from the appropriation of indigenous cultures.

What is shamanism?

In contemporary spirituality, as well as in the fields of art and psychology, shamanism has been gaining significantly more interest, transcending the subject of history and religion. In order to be better able to situate myself and my culture in this emerging field, it is utterly important to trace back the historic as well as the contemporary notion of shamanism and create a narrative for the global worldview. Although shamanism has been flowing through these categories of interest, many anthropologists and other researchers have faced difficulty getting shamanism into the realm of linguistics. Indeed, our understanding of shamanism leans on vague categories such as 'ritual' and 'worship'. So how can we move towards a universal understanding of shamanism suitable for the different shamanisms that cuts through the dispersed local developments of shamans?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023), a shaman is "a priest or priestess who uses magic for the purpose of curing the sick, divining the hidden, and controlling events". This sentence on its own operates in the vague categories mentioned above. I believe the reason for this ambiguity comes from the reinvention of shamanism through the centuries in unique local contexts as a social and religious construct, only now included into a practice of universal worldviews. To illustrate, not only can we see shamanism rooted in and developing in different parts of the world in many unique forms, it is also subject of stories, legends, myths and our imagination.

This ambiguity manifests itself too, in the name; Shaman-ism. The *ism* in shamanism indicates that it is an ideology, an effort by the outsider to maximize the comprehension of a 'territory' of 'unfamiliar' behavior and bodies of knowledge, or to even establish such a territory. Ideally, this term would facilitate a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary application, however we must realize that shamanism itself consists of local and universal dimensions. Although this term tries to be inclusive it is actually exclusive, as we should employ the concept of different shamanisms each working in their own local context (MacDonald, 2002; Kremer, 1999).

Historical Context

It is widely thought that Shamanism has its roots in North Asia more than 40.000 years ago, and it was only brought to the Americas by large game hunters who crossed low-lying territory where

the Bering Strait is now. There, the first religious practitioners in central and northern Asia were referred to as shamans. The similarities between Alaskan and Siberian shamanism therefore can be explained by a shared place of origin followed by geographic diffusion (Tedlock, 2009; MacDonald, 2002). However, research in neuroscience and medical anthropology support the countervailing claim that shamanism was separately reinvented over and over in a myriad of regions and communities, seeing that Paleolithic sites on other continents, including Europe, Africa, and Australia also show evidence of shamanic practices (Tedlock, 2009). One can understand then that, although it originated in the studies of religion, the term shaman has different meanings and holds different notions.

Barbara Tedlock (2009), an American cultural anthropologist but also a shaman initiated by the K'iche'Maya in the Guatemalan highlands, explains shamanism as a form of "holistic healing. More specifically, a shaman deliberately uses suggestion, anticipation and rituals that elicit a potent placebo effect. The relationship between positive emotions and the biochemistry of the body gives rise to "the doctor who resides within" elicited by this placebo effect. Thus, a shaman awakens and reinforces the self-healing abilities of the patient, by restoring emotional and spiritual equilibrium. A shaman often creates a ceremonial environment and uses repetitive symbols, drums and music, dance, chants etc to reestablish a sense of order within the patient that replaces the chaos of "illness" . Negative emotions and unconscious feelings are released through the magical soundscape (constituted by these drums, gongs, chants, bamboo tubes, rattles etc) and partly through the shaman that enable different states of copiousness that enables contact of the patient with the spiritual world. This strengthens a unifying global paradigm, which reduces mental and emotional suffering (Tedlock, 2009). In others words, a shaman has certain fluid characteristics like the ability to enter different states of consciousness and facilitating a space by using sounds, in which a trance state is enabled and healing is procured.

If we look at more traditional shamanism, the shaman has the ability, as seen by the indigenous community and members of society, to control spirits and ecstatic states while inhibiting a dominating persona. Not only does the shaman forms a link between the different individuals of a certain community but also helps them situate themselves in the world and their environment. You can consider healing to be the shaman's main responsibility, and as it is a worldwide practice in some

shape or form, shamanism can be defined as a term with broad applicability. If there is a unifying thread in the way that shamanism is used throughout the world, it is the desire for healing and the theatrical portrayal of that desire. It might be argued then, that a healer is the same as a shaman. Although a healer might fall in the category of shamanism, a shaman in the classical sense transcends the category of healer as it is often chosen by tradition, the community or by the "spirits".

This essay is based on the definition of shamanism by Macdonald, who defines shamanism as "multiple complexes in which practitioners adept at accessing alternate states of consciousness move between this world and other world to bring knowledge or other benefits to members of their communities. At the same time we need to recognize that these shamanisms are rooted in particular local contexts and systems of knowledge." This means that the term "shaman" won't be subject to exclusion and subject to narrow restriction, but to hold meaning it must be applied in particular contexts (MacDonald, 2002; Kremer 1999).

Shamanism meets art

According to LaBarre (1972) and Wasson (1968), the early shamans used hallucinogens to induce trance in ritual settings. Psychedelic plants were frequently considered to be spiritual beings, this is significant for embodiment. Accepting them was an act of sacrament (an "embodiment") accomplished by spiritual identification. Not only have hallucinogens been complimentary to the ritual performance of shamans, it is believed that art fulfills a similar role, creating a "narrative function". The cave paintings at Lascaux in France, which are carbon dated to about 17,000 years ago, are often regarded as depicting the experiences of shamans, ceremonies and the rituals. This is where art and shamanism meets, seeing that they both fulfill the desire to transcend the everyday life. The artist recreates the real world and/or invents new ones in accordance with his or her fantasies and aspirations. Both push past barriers to open up new perspectives and areas of knowledge. In other words, the metaphoric process of an artist creating is similar to the shaman healing. "For them, forging metaphors and transforming consciousness go together" (MacDonald, 2002). Denita Benyshek (2021) did an exploration of the artist as shaman in which she highlighted the benefits of fusing shamanism with art. She did, however, make a clear distinction between shamanic artist and

shamanlike artists. She mentions defining characteristics necessary to qualify as a shamanic artist. Namely, (1) “Shamanic artists are likely to come from families with clusters of shamans…”, (2) they “receive social designation through culture-specific titles that indicate a practicing shaman”, (3) they are spiritual practitioners who use creative processes to engage the unconscious, archetypes, divinity, alternate states of consciousness …”, they “voluntarily regulate attention *through a variety of processes…”, a*nd they "access information generally unavailable to their communities and the art audiences”. Lastly she mentions that “for an artist to fully qualify as a shamanic artist, all defining properties of shaman must be fulfilled”. Several of the criteria identifying shamans were discovered to be met by a second, wider group of contemporary artists. These artists were referred to as shamanlike and were thought to have cohesion with shamanic artists but did not precisely meet the criteria of shamanic artists. Firstly, the “shamanlike contemporary artists who are not members of traditional shamanic societies usually lack explicit social designation as shamans”. Benyshek (2021) gives the example of Joseph-Beuys, who was a self-identified shaman. She does say though, that shamanlike artists might implicitly receive social designation by art audiences that are similar to shamanic clients. Secondly, shamanlike artists (often) do not receive the social support that shamans do get. Shamans are often recognized and initiated by the community, whereas contemporary shamanlike artists do not follow the same faith, indeed they are often even feared (Kremer, 1999; Aldred, 2000). Third, shamanlike artists use creativity as a form of spiritual practice. Many artists engage in the spiritual practice of making art without adhering to a particular shamanic philosophy. Lastly, Shaman-like artists use a variety of capabilities, skills, experiences, and practices to deliberately manage their attention in order to access information that is ordinarily inaccessible to individuals of art spectators. Artists occasionally experience destabilized or moderately pathological personality states that can spur innovation and development by causing attentional changes, productive ego-regression, positive disintegration, and then reconciliation into a stronger synthesis of being (Benyshek, 2021). Furthermore shamanlike artists are often preoccupied with an ambition to make their art favorable for others and their art also often serves as a guidance for the next generation. Despite the similarities, Benyshek (among others), does warn for the safety of clients, seeing that the practitioner without the proper traditional imitation and education might put the client in danger (Benyshek 2021, Arregi,

2021). Another point to take into consideration, are the ethical issues that might arise when nontraditional shamanlike artist or self-appointed shamans go beyond appreciation, and appropriate the culture of the indigenous traditional tribes and shamans (Benyshek, 2021; Arregi, 2021; Aldred, 2000; Kremer 1999).

Plastic shamanism

Since the first encounter between native and non-native peoples in 1492, the Euro-American culture has shown a pitiable inability to comprehend native cultures on their own terms. It is a history of disconnection, a huge collision with overwhelmingly diverse ethnic groups, and ultimately, of the failure to perceive "the other" as an equal. (Arregi, 2021, Kremer 1999) Due to this disconnection, colonial dynamics developed that were based on an idea of the “Native” and the “Indian Savage” that was created through unequal power distribution and the hegemony of pre-dominant societies. This imperialist dogma is confirmed when looking at the respired interest in Indigenous tribes that is estimated to have occurred around 1970 with the writings of Carlos Castenada focused on the combination of spiritual transformation stimulated by the ingestion of peyote (Arregi, 2021). This preluded the emergence of “plastic shamans”, also called the “shake and bake shamans” by several Native American activist, are part of the New Age movement characterized by (mostly) Euro-Americans that declare to teach “Native American spirituality” in the forms of books, ceremonies, workshops etc (Aldred, 2000). This is another blatant instance of colonization with a disregard for indigenous self-determination (Hobson, 1978; Arregi, 2021). Jane McCloud, an indigenous activist, depicts the appropriation of the others culture with her statement:
First, they came to take our land and water, then our fish and game. Now they want our religions as well. All of a sudden, we have a lot of unscrupulous idiots running around saying they're medicine people. And they'll sell you a sweat lodge ceremony for fifty bucks. It's not only wrong, it's obscene. Indians don't sell their spirituality to anybody, for any price. This is just another in the very long series of thefts from Indian people and, in some ways, this is the worst one yet. (In Churchill 1992: 217).

Apparent becomes the consumer-oriented structure, as the New Age "shamans" make profit of an indigenous culture without honoring the traditions, marketed towards a mostly non Indian consumers. Within indigenous tribes, shamans are chosen by the tribe and the medicine, and the process of initiation takes time and work. Arregi (2021, p.7) puts this alienation in clear words: "It is a derogative phrase referring to impostors, to individuals who are self-described "shamans" without being traditional spiritual leaders, and who imitate practices without having links to or profound knowledge of a given tradition".

Ofcourse, it is understandable why consumers and 'leaders' of the New Age movement have taken interest Indigenous knowledge and practices. By romanticizing and fetishizing other cultures, in this case the indigenous culture, New Age followers attempt to salvage cultural meaning in their lives by private consumption. People are more likely to retreat into their own personal domains to seek fulfillment, and even to express countercultural practices (in this case the New Age movement) and desires when their own culture becomes more fragmented and unsatisfying. This quest for self-identity and fulfillment is particularly difficult in societies where the strong social networks of kinship and community have disintegrated. In order to escape the miseries and loneliness of modernity, people swarm to the mystical stores in search of an identity. This process of intellectual colonization is a form of "imperialist Nostalgia" that comes from a pose of innocent yearning that in essence perpetuates the oppression of the real native tribes (Pemina Yellowbird and Kathryn Milun) (Macdonald, 2022; Aldred; 2000; Kremer, 1999; Arregi, 2021).

Members of indigenous tribes have been fighting back against this plastic shamanism. Russel Means, a historical leader and indigenous activist put it in direct words:

You can either respect our basic rights or not respect them ... If you do, you're an ally and we're ready and willing to join hands with you on other issues. If you do not, you are at best a thief. More importantly, you are a thief of the sort who is willing to risk undermining our sense of the integrity of our cultures for your own perceived self-interest. That means you are complicit in a process of cultural genocide, or at least attempted cultural genocide, aimed at American Indian people. That makes you an enemy, to say the least. And believe me when I say we're prepared to deal with you as such (Churchill, 2003:4).

There are multiple examples of “warriors against this cultural genocide” (Arregi, 2021). Ofcourse, as might be expected, there have been counter arguments by participants of the New Age movement. The crux of one of these arguments lies within ownership or in Gary Snyder's (self-proclaimed persona of Native American Shamans) words "Spirituality is not something which can be 'owned' like a car or a house. Spiritual knowledge belongs to all humans equally.” Unfortunately, this argument is devalued when looking at the market for New Age spirituality: entrepreneurs, for example, write books on Native American spirituality and request trademark protection of Native American spiritual themes, suggesting that the consumers and/or sellers partly “own” their culture. Besides that, New age consumers often take a stance of ignorance towards Indigenous cultures when using the knowledge of native cultures as they make an exception for this appropriation when they think “their intentions are clear and positive” (Aldred, 2000). What is most problematic with this, is the decontextualization of the real culture of indigenous communities; the ideas of New Age groups surrounding natives are merely construction of imagination; they bear little to no resemblance to any historically concrete geographic reality that might have arisen from intricate social dynamics and relationships (Kremer, 1999; Aldred, 2000).

“Whatever appears as “indigenous” are decontextualized or reconstructed manifestations which lead to the appropriation and alienation of a once authentic culture and group which is, equally, idealized and disfigured by the seekers of alternative systems of being”. Plastic shamans thrive in this environment because it is so fertile” (Arregi, 2021)

From monolog to dialog

Thus, the core of the problem of cultural appropriation, lays within the decontextualization of indigenous cultures. Luckily, there is a way past that, namely to find the context back; with the aforementioned process of alienation by the pre-dominant cultures, in this case the euro-centered consciousness, we have been ‘othering’ the Indigenous cultures. Not only have we split ourselves of from the roots and totality of their relationships towards community, plants, lifecycles etc. but we also have lost this connection to our own “indigenous” roots (that is why we are desperately looking for this reconnection within other cultures”. Kremer says” I find it only legitimate to write about

shamanism if what I write is true to my own shamanic tradition…. We can only be proper participants in shamanic exchange and dialogue if we know who we are as indigenous people. Otherwise we should take our hands off of other cultures." (1999, p.129) Kremer also stressed, "As long as we think writing about shamanism is about 'them,' we remain unconscious of shamanism in us" (p.128). Thus, instead of the euro-centered dissociation New Age groups have been partaking in, we should search for a "recovery" of our own "indigenous roots" (Kremer, 1999).

Furthermore, if we the New Age groups would be more aware of their "indigenous roots", they would become more aware and mindful of the oppression of indigenous groups as part of their social history and lineages (anger). Again Kremer puts it in different words: "If I know who I am as an indigenous or cultural person (however fragmented that understanding may be), then I *may* be able to relate to other native peoples (peoples still practicing shamanism) as an equal partner in dialogue, rather than arrive as an outsider intent on finding "Truth" and "The healing power" for individual as well as collective healing - of the witnessing of history with all its perversions, twists, and contradictions, is a) a prerequisite for anybody of European descent as part of shamanic work, and b) in a profound sense more powerful than any animal bone or feather that one might want to pick up." (Kremer, p. 136)

Bringing this topic back to art and artists, it is necessary to acknowledge that the art should create a dialog instead of a monolog. But, not only do artist need to be aware of their indigenous culture, it "takes an incitation from the partner in dialogue". "I know that as long as I don't travel within the framework of this immanent conversation I am bound to infect wherever I go with the virus of dissociation and progress. I can only travel once the other has ceased to be other for me" (Kremer, 1999, p. 131) . If shamanism is indeed based on healing as mentioned before, artists must go beyond their own individual healing and take into account the communal healing that can only be effective when the history is lined up with the correct cultural context. Thus we as Eurocentered artists have the responsibility to open up the dialog (only when mutual consent is given) and heal the history of colonial appropriation of the indigenous cultures. Or as Kremer put it: "To my mind the prerequisite for writing about shamanism is that spirits are or have been present to the author. Otherwise it seems more appropriate to be silent about a universe only partly seen!" (1999, p. 135)

Conclusion

I started this essay with the intention to, after writing the essay, I would be able to answer the question "*Can I make art about shamanic traditions without having the same historical heritage, without appropriating the culture?"* First I attempted to position myself by expanding on the notion of the -ism in shamanism. Although acknowledging that this universal term must be applied to local dimensions, after further research there must be an expansion made, which I will take as an opportunity to illustrate and summarize the concepts discussed before. Namely, the construct of an -ism again is perpetuation of the euro-centered vision as it is a term coined by anthropologists with the desire to create a universal truth. This truth however is an abstraction and dissociation of the full concept (here culture), reflecting more of the Eurocentric imperialist vision, then the actual full body of knowledge. I used this example because it depicts the decontextualization and trivializing done by certain New Age members which perpetuates the oppression of indigenous culture again. Indigenous peoples are subjected to both cultural and ecological appropriation, which distances us from the ideal of an intercultural society. It reinforces a historical pattern of intercultural dominance and subordination that pretends to supersede indigenous peoples as individuals, including the more private and intimate facets of their life and community. In order to go beyond this appropriation which ultimately comes from a place of discernment for contemporary local culture, it is necessary to trace back the roots of Eurocentered consciousness vision manifested in the New Age movement, and "recover our indigenous roots". In simple words, we need to stop taking the culture of indigenous people and the shamanic traditions out of their context and start with finding our own, before we can understand theirs.

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