

# Before and After Psychopathology: A Foucault- Inspired Perspective on Western Knowledge Concerning the Shaman

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to characterize the key stages in the evolution of Western academia's construction of shamans and shamanism as well as elucidate those factors that have underpinned particular constructions. In doing so, it draws on the writings of the late French philosopher Michel Foucault, and particularly on such Foucauldian motifs as episteme, knowledge, and power. A central argument advanced in this paper is that even though Foucault's ideas resist encrustation into a prescriptive methodology, they constitute a potentially powerful theoretical lens through which to gain a better understanding of often undisclosed agendas, power dynamics, and priorities that have been operant in the Western construction of the shaman. The open ended and potentially contestable nature of the understandings delivered by a Foucault-inspired analysis constitutes a strength rather than a weakness, and the absence in this sort of analysis of any claim to a final, absolute truth is consonant with postmodern conceptualizations of the nature of knowledge. Despite Foucault's influence on what is often considered the inaugural text in the field of postcolonial studies: Edward Said's *Orientalism*, one finds a lack of attention in the academic literature to examining the relevance of Foucault's thought to understanding the relationship between the Western and indigenous world. Postcolonial scholarship in general is likely to profit from further engagement with Foucault's thought.*

Western discourse on shamans and shamanism in the last one hundred years or so has evolved, and one of the purposes of this paper is to attempt a characterization (or, more specifically, a periodization) of the key stages in this evolution. With the ideas and writings of the French philosopher Michel Foucault as a basis for analysis, a further purpose of this paper is to elucidate and describe some of the power dynamics underpinning the various discourses about shamanism among Western academicians. Foucault is considered an important figure in the *poststructuralist* (Sarup, 1993) movement and is often mentioned in discussions of *postmodernism* (Sarup). Whilst there is merit and justification for thinking about Foucault in these terms, this should not be at the expense of recognition of his uniqueness.

In this respect, Foucault's most original and powerful contribution lies in his exposition of the relationships between *knowledge* and *power*. This paper begins with an outline of the key ideas in Foucault's *oeuvre* especially in so far as they have relevance to the central concern of this paper; the Western perspective(s) on the shaman. The question of whether or not a distinct methodology can or should be derived from Foucault's ideas is then addressed before I proceed to examine the unfolding and evolving characterization and conceptualization of the shaman, in the West, over the last century.

## Is There Such a Thing as a Foucauldian Analysis?

Reflecting Foucault's own resistance and reluctance to formulate a prescriptive methodology (Graham 2005), those searching for

a rigidly defined Foucauldian methodology which can be distilled into a simple checklist will be disappointed, for none exists. Yet at the same time, there is much truth in Nichols' (2010) contention that Foucault "represents a major conceptual and methodological innovation" and this essay proceeds on the basis of my own belief that Foucault's ideas—particularly his motifs of *power*, *knowledge*, *discourse*, and *representation*—constitute powerful points of reference around which a potentially meaningful analysis—or critique—of a diverse range of discourses, social structures, and institutions, can be orientated. Foucault himself subjected the discourses and institutions of medicine, psychiatry, sexuality and the penal system to his analysis (Rabinow, 1984), and his ideas have been applied to contemporary analysis of settings in as diverse settings as economics (Kologlugil, 2010) and education (Marshall, 2002).

It was Edward Said (1978) in his landmark book *Orientalism*, who arguably first applied Foucault's ideas to an analysis of the relationship between the European and the non-Western other in a colonial context, laying the foundation for the new field of *postcolonial studies* (Nichols, 2010). Foucault's work and ideas then are relevant to our understanding of knowledge production in the context of colonial power, something that is a central theme in this essay.

Motifs such as *power*, *knowledge* and *representation* are strongly associated with Foucault and as such, a Foucauldian sensibility or perspective cultivates an awareness of the intimate and mutual nature of their inter-relationship. It facilitates an appreciation of the fact that advancement of any given knowledge serves the interests of some and not others and that knowledge both reflects and perpetuates power relationships. One of the factors that props up any given truth claim

and which gives it authority is the assumption that it is value-free, that it is independent of considerations of self-interest or agenda, and that it is objective. Foucault (in alignment with the postmodern turn, in general) exposes the fallacy of such claims to impartiality (this can be characterized as the *objectivist fallacy*) and in doing so, in a sense, he pulls the rug out from beneath what might otherwise continue to be held up as unbiased, agenda-less knowledge. Questions that might be brought to bear on any given *truth claim* in this respect are: Who produced this knowledge? What or who does this knowledge exclude? What sort of knowledge is more/less valuable? Which practice or practices would be more/less likely with (out) this knowledge? What is not discussed; thus, what is taboo? Which practices or policies does any given knowledge legitimize or make more "acceptable"? Who are the beneficiaries of this knowledge? Who has the power and the authority to represent? In respect to this particular question, Nichols (2010) argues that one of the central arguments made by Edward Said in *Orientalism* is that the exercise of power by Europe and its allies over the rest of the world has not been on the basis of control and physical dominance but through a complex process of dominating the representation of non-Western people, which has simultaneously served to remove representational authority from non-Western peoples, distort images and forms of knowledge about them, and justify ongoing physical/military colonization. Foucault's concept of *episteme* (1970), articulated most clearly in *The Order of Things*, is of particular relevance to the concerns of this paper. Foucault conceptualized *episteme* as the *a priori* conditions which allow for the possibility of certain types of knowledge within any given epoch. The notion of *paradigm* is also relevant, since knowledge, according to Foucault's conceptualization of "discourse", has to conform

to the existing paradigms of the world in order to be considered as legitimate and true (Young, 1995).

I have found it beneficial to consider the issue of authority in addition to that of knowledge. This is understood when one considers the way in which an article that is printed in a book published in England by, for example, *Oxford University Press*, is considered to have much more authority than a story told by a First Nations elder on a reserve in British Columbia. When a European Professor of anthropology declares that all shamans are mentally deranged, what gives his statement more authority than anyone else's? The assumption of this professor's neutrality is flawed and serves to maintain and perpetuate the authority of his position.

### The Shaman as a Daemonic Figure

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as early part of the nineteenth century, the prevailing Western image of the shaman was as a daemonic figure. This reflects the pervasive and over-arching influence of Christianity (at least in Europe). The early Catholic missionaries in South America, because they took literally the claim that shamanic powers could transform the individual into an animal, considered that such abilities could arise only through "a pact with the devil" (Jilek, 2005, p.9). The spirit helpers of Saami (Laap) shamans in northern Scandinavia were called "devil's angels" by Lutheran pastors and this is depicted in artwork from the late seventeenth century in which the shaman's healing spirits are drawn with horns and bat wings (Jilek, 2005). According to Jilek, the Christian view of the shaman as a daemonic figure was reinforced by the importance accorded to the belief (a belief held by shamans and in many aboriginal societies) that shamanic powers can be used for harming as

well as healing. This ecclesiastical intolerance of alleged supernatural practices that went against church doctrine was also manifested in the widespread witch hunts that occurred in the early modern period in Europe during which tens of thousands of alleged witches were killed (Levack, 2006).

### Pathologization of the Shaman

The late nineteenth century saw a decline in the influence and authority of the church in the Western world, and arguably, the authority of positivistic science and psychiatry stepped in to replace the resulting explanatory void. Against the background of this new episteme, the shaman was increasingly cast as a case of psychopathology. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to enumerate all the instances where a Western scholar deployed the language of pathology (specifically psychopathology), a few examples will serve to illustrate this general point. Read (1920) considered the shaman's voluntary induced "fits" to be on the "hysterical or epileptoid diathesis". Hambly (1926) advanced the view that the shaman suffers from "fear neurosis" and "anxiety hysteria" and the psychoanalytically-oriented anthropologist Devereux (1961) was a particularly strong proponent of the prevailing pathological hypothesis, stating that "the shaman is psychiatrically a genuinely ill person" (p.262) and that "the Mohave shaman is a fundamentally neurotic person" (1958, p.1044). An important influence on Westerners' assumptions (starting in the late nineteenth century) about the pathological nature of shamans, according to Znamenski (2007), was a body of accounts from ethnographers and explorers linking hysteria to shamanism in the Arctic, to "imply a direct connection between native insanity and spirituality" (Znamenski, 2007).

Such examples illustrate how the denigration of the shaman by Westerners came pack-

aged in scientifically respectable, value-free language, imbued with the apparent weight and authority of psychiatric jargon and professional testimony, as if to assert that psychopathology in the shaman was a self-evident truth. For Foucault, the very possibility of such a characterization of an individual (framed as “ill”) would not have been possible were it not for a change in the structure and arrangement of medical knowledge in the nineteenth century. This idea is elucidated most forcefully by Foucault (1994) in *The Birth of the Clinic*, in which Foucault asserts that this was a period when a new grid of knowledge appeared. A new type of medical gaze, on the part of doctors, became legitimized. During this period, the bipolar tropes of *normality* versus *pathology* became consecrated into medical discourse. A curious lacunae in Foucault’s own writings (despite the fact that his ideas have much hermeneutic power in this area) is an analysis of the European deployment of psychiatric discourse in its representation of non-European peoples. Indeed, although Foucault’s ideas are so relevant to questions of race and colonialism, and though he has explicitly influenced many writers on such subjects, he remained strikingly silent about these areas, and there is an ongoing question if this was a deliberate strategy (Young, 1995).

Nonetheless, Foucault’s analysis does give us much, including an appreciation of the fact that the very possibility of using such pathologizing categories to denigrate “primitive people” is predicated on the availability to the Westerner of two things: a certain conceptual and linguistic repertoire, as well as legitimization of the “primitive” and his mental health as a subject of his (the Westerner’s) scrutinizing gaze. According to Foucault, both became possible because of the reorganization of knowledge in the nineteenth century. My own contention is that the colonial backdrop of the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be ignored in any consideration of the discourses that became prevalent in this era. The very notions of *primitivity* and *psychopathology* as legitimate objects and subjects of discourse contributed to the colonial articulation of what that Waldenfels (2007) refers to as “doubled otherness.” The colonial project was very much served by the Europeans’ hypertrophied valuation of reason and rationality, and by the propagation of the view that reason and rationality are lacking in the “primitive”. An influential publication by the French anthropologist Levy-Bruhl (1926) articulated a *primitive mentality* supported and reflected this dualistic conceptualization, positioning the mentality of the civilized European as superior, and as representing a more advanced state in teleological and evolutionary terms, compared to the mentality of the primitive indigenous person. The tone of the book is firmly established by Levy-Bruhl in the first paragraph: “Among the differences which distinguish the mentality of primitive communities from our own, there is one which has attracted the attention of many of those who have observed such peoples under the most favourable conditions—that is, before their ideas have been modified by prolonged association with white races. These observers have maintained that primitives manifest a decided distaste for reasoning, for what logicians call the discursive operations of thought” (p.21). Influential intellectuals such as Levy-Bruhl then, certainly contributed to a primitivist discourse, and Lucas and Barrett (1995), in explicating the notion of *psychiatric primitivism*, show how psychiatry contributed to this primitivist discourse. For Lucas and Barrett, “psychiatric primitivism is a body of ideas, images and vocabularies about cultural others. While ostensibly about peoples from elsewhere, it is more fundamentally concerned with the way the West understands itself in

contradistinction to these others” (p.289). The pathologization of the shaman clearly contributed to this psychiatric primitivist discourse.

A greater appreciation of the mutually imbricating nature of colonial and pathologizing discourses assists in contextualizing the Western proclivity of the time for denigrating the shaman by deploying the tropes of psychopathology. This manner of casting (and castigating) the shaman, far from being an isolated practice, was a mere example of a far more widespread practice of denigrating the colonial subject by psycho-pathologizing him. Again, the scope of this paper precludes an exhaustive rendering of all the relevant examples but some illustrative cases will serve to convey the point. Lopez (1995), for instance, brings attention to the “orientalist contempt for Hindu religiousness” (p.46). Such contempt had the veneer of professional authority and respectability when presented in the form of a psychoanalytical formulation, as was the case in Berkeley-Hill’s (1921) paper *The Anal-erotic Factor in the Religion, Philosophy and Character of the Hindus*, in which devotion to deities such as Indian deities are explained (pathologized) as anal erotic fixations—with pranayama breathing practices being associated with the passing of flatus. The political utility of psychoanalytic jargon is clear from the way it was deployed by colonialists to discredit and undermine proponents of the Indian independence movement with Daly (1930), in his paper *The Psychology of Revolutionary Tendencies*, depicting figures such as Gandhi, as “child-like and infantile” because of what he construed as their “pathological love of India” again, exploiting the recapitulation in European theories of psychopathology of teleological notions of human progress.

### The Era of Neo-Shamanism

At around the mid-point of the twentieth

century, a further change in the configuration of social forces marked the beginning of a new *episteme*. The collapse of several European colonial empires and changing patterns of migration challenged the dominance of the Eurocentric worldview. The colonial project had profited much from widespread dissemination of Eurocentric narratives of human progress as well as the widespread deployment of such tropes of *civilized* and *primitive*, configured with respect to each other in diametric terms. But such distinctions were increasingly hard to hold up after the devastation and destruction in Europe during the Second World War made it impossible for European civilization to maintain its pretensions.

Contrasting with the position set forth by Levy-Bruhl (1926), an important work by Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1962), epitomized the then new episteme that was beginning to unfold in the latter half of the twentieth century, by asserting that there are no fundamental distinctions between the minds of humans from different races.

These years also saw increasing numbers of Westerners beginning to explore so called “new age” and “non-churched” spirituality. Undoubtedly, the writings of Carlos Castañeda had a great influence in mobilising a sympathetic interest amongst Western readers and spiritual seekers in shamanism. In this regard, much credit is also given to Mircea Eliade’s (1964) *Shamanism*. Indeed, Von Stuckart (2002) ascribes to Eliade a central role, as the “turntable”, separating and linking the intellectual discourse about shamanism in the nineteenth century to popular appropriation of shamanism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Whilst the publication of Silverman’s (1967) paper *Shamanism and Acute Schizophrenia* demonstrates that the pathologizing discourses did not cease completely in the last decades of the 20th century, what is clear is that the

general tide was turning and the knee-jerk tendency of academicians of previous decades to pathologize the shaman was giving way to a less dismissive approach, one which was a lot more willing to acknowledge the shaman's therapeutic powers and to engage in a serious, scholarly appraisal of the therapeutic characteristics of shamanic healing. The scholarship of the anthropologist Larry Peters (2007), who described shamanic healing practices in Nepal in *Tamang Shamans* as well as that of Wolfgang Jilek (1982), who described shamanic practices in the context of winter ceremonials amongst the Coast Salish of British Columbia in *Indian Healing*, are both good examples that serve to illustrate the changing perspective towards the shaman and shamanic healing in Western academia, that was beginning to be seen in the late twentieth century. More recently, Western scholars have produced historicized perspectives of Western scholarship on the shaman (Jilek, 2005; Walsh, 2007; Znamenski, 2007). These writers view the previous tendency to pathologize through a lens which strikes a discernible note of self-reflexivity and retrospection as well as a high degree of criticism towards an earlier phase in Western scholarship.

Programs and workshops are now widely available in the West, offering training and experience in what, under the influence of Michael Harner (1990) has come to be known as "core shamanism". But despite the commonplace and widespread use of the terms, the validity and sanctity of the terms shamanism and core shamanism are disputed. It was in much the same way that Said (1978) took issue with the word orient which, for Said, was understood to have been constructed by those with the power to produce knowledge to legitimize new categories of study. One of the leading critics of the widespread adoption, in the West, of the terms *shaman* and *core shamanism* is Al-

ice Kehoe (2000) who in *Shamans and Religion* argues that there is an insufficient basis upon which to conclude that all practices around the world have enough in common that would justify the use of such unifying terms. A Foucauldian sensibility can ground a critical inquiry into the hidden commitments of such contemporary linguistic constructs. A basic orientating question would be something like: *who coined the term? Whose authority is given weight? Whose interests does it serve? What does it legitimize?* In tackling these questions one by one as a basis for analysis, some of the undeclared and undisclosed power dynamics become exposed rather quickly: The term *core shaman* is a Western term, and is linked to Michael Harner (1990). Harner was influenced by Eliade, but Eliade, despite his accomplishments as a great comparative scholar of religion, never met a shaman. This fact however, did not, apparently, undermine his authority to write on the subject. The bias is clear here then. It is a bias that is pervasive in the Western academy in which discursive knowledge is granted a greater authority than experiential knowledge. Shamanism has been appropriated into a form that lends itself to being taught to fee-paying Westerners in workshops and training courses such as those run by Harner in his *Foundation for Shamanic Studies*. The construction of a notion of *core shamanism* was an important move on which to build such an enterprise. It is hard to see how one could have achieved marketing success by selling, for example, Nepalese or Peruvian shamanism to North Americans. For a start, the argument about inauthenticity and of it being completely out of context and acultural would have been much harder to deflect. My contention is that the privileging of such an interpretation of shamanism (as a "core" shamanism) was a necessary precondition, likely a deliberate discursive strategy, on which the success of Harner's enterprise was

contingent. Such a construction of shamanism also understates the significance of its original cultural context, which, again, gives unfettered access to “shamanic training” for just about any Westerner who might be interested and able to afford it.

Whilst there is a growing contemporary interest among Westerners in “Aboriginal” or “traditional” healing (and this includes an interest in shamanism) there is a concern, as Waldram (2004) writes, that this interest is underscored by dualistic assumptions which position Aboriginal holism against Western dualism in a way that continues to appeal (through the back door, so to speak) to polarized, primitivist distinctions between *civilized* and *savage*. Similar sentiments are expressed by Kehoe (2000), who, whilst welcoming the efflorescence of interest among Westerners in shamanism, views the romanticized image of shamans and shamanism in the eyes of Westerners as re-articulations of primitivist notions of the *noble savage*. Continuing with this theme, Lucas and Barrett (1995) claim that two distinct themes are apparent within Western discourse on the shaman. The Barbaric perspective, on the one hand, has considered the shaman as manipulative, as quarrelsome, as treacherous, and litigious. This is held in contrast to the arcadian perspective, in which the shaman is idealized as a seer, visionary, healer, and poet. For Lucas and Barrett, both perspectives (the *barbaric* and the *arcadian*) contribute to primitivist discourse of otherness and both discourses accentuate difference. To be aware of such tendencies and to maintain a critical perspective is, I would contend, to honour a Foucauldian attitude.

## Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this paper, the Western conceptualization of the shaman over the course of the last century has evolved and

this evolution can be said to have been characterized by three major periods or epochs. Each of these epochs can be considered to be characterised by relatively distinct and internally consistent *epistemes*, in the Foucauldian sense.

Neither Foucault’s ideas nor the epistemic commitments in his work (they are of course, not two separate things) lend themselves to being appropriated into a strict methodology but this should not be construed as a weakness. To the contrary, this very characteristic represents a great strength, for it liberates and grants a certain freedom to the scholar engaged in a Foucault-inspired deconstructive project. Two or more investigators can quite legitimately conduct an analysis on any given area by self-consciously drawing on Foucault’s ideas, to arrive at very divergent end points. This is congruent with postmodern epistemology which holds truth to be asymptotic, contestable and open-ended in its nature. Foucault inspires an approach, or what we could equally refer to as a ‘spirit of inquiry’ which has great utility, for it honours and champions a poly-vocal discourse and it permits epistemic space for multiple perspectives. Such tendencies are of interest and relevance to postmodern and postcolonial scholars alike. Again, these two movements are not entirely separate. As far as I am aware, though there is a literature examining the changing Western conceptualization of the shaman, this is the first paper to do so with explicit reference to the ideas of Foucault. This paper suggests that postcolonial scholarship may, in the future, profit a great deal from further engagement with Foucault’s thought.

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