

Unsolicited Altered States of Consciousness

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In many societies throughout the world, shamans deliberately engage in altered states of consciousness as part of their spiritual practice: they interact with the spirit world for the benefit of their community or the environment. Ceremonies expressing spiritual beliefs and practices have been meticulously observed and recorded by anthropologists. Reichel-Dolmatoff noted that the Tukano shamans in the Amazon rain-forests of Colombia believe there are two dimensions: inter-locking and inter-connecting worlds whereby the physical world and the world of spirits are discrete but co-exist (1997; 220). He says it took him two years to understand this since the spirit dimension was not part of his world view, he had not known to ask questions about it. He commented that the spiritual values of non-western peoples have often been regarded as superstitions.

Earlier this century, the practice of shamanizing was banned in Mongolia and Siberia. However, Olga Kharitidi, a Russian psychiatrist who worked in a mental hospital in Novosibirsk, Siberia had spontaneous personal experiences of 'voices in her head' and 'visions' that altered her view of reality. During one of her visions she received the following information:

'Diseases of the mind have only two causes, and they are totally opposite each other. One way people can become crazy is if their soul, or a part of their soul, has been lost. This usually happens because their soul has been stolen from them, but sometimes they may even decide unconsciously to give it away, perhaps in exchange for something else they want. The second way people can become crazy is if they are overwhelmed by a foreign power.'

'There are only these two reasons; nothing more'.

'It sounds simple, but it may take you much time to learn how to distinguish the source of a disease correctly and heal it. If you are mistaken in the cause, then your attempt to heal will actually feed the disease and make it worse'. (1996; 177).

An assumption is made that the words 'overwhelmed by a foreign power' mean spirit possession. Humphrey (Fellow of Kings College, Cambridge) notes that Mongol shamans call possession 'soul oppression' (1996; 216). The concept of 'soul loss' appears to be acceptable in the west, and awareness has reached considerable levels of subtlety, though terminology varies within different disciplines: e.g. Freud's description of an ego fragmented through trauma; Jung's disowned self, suppressed self, abandoned self; the 'fragmented energy system of the Ravenscroft Approach (Digby-Jones 1996: 4) etc.

The concept of spirit possession is however, less well accepted in the west whatever the terminology (spirit attachment, soul oppression, release, deliverance, exorcism etc.) Malidoma Patrice Somé, the scholar and shaman from Burkina Faso in Africa informs us that his people, the Dagara believe there are two types of ancestors, earth bound (the disembodied dead) and those who have passed over to the spirit world and exist in a different dimension. He believes that 'the present state of restlessness that traps the modern individual has its roots in the dysfunctional relationship with the ancestors'. If the ancestors are not healed, 'their sick energy will haunt the souls and psyches of those who are responsible for helping them' (1994; 9). Anthropologists have recorded similar beliefs

from many societies. But, how often do we judge the inductive beliefs of other peoples to be superstition and the deductive knowledge of the west to be fact? It is the author's understanding, based on experiential neo-shamanic journeys that the spirits of the 'unquiet dead' remain in limbo and may attach themselves to human beings (Tobert 1997; 27). Sanderson suggests (1997; 3) 'that patients diagnosed as schizophrenia, largely on the basis of auditory hallucinations, are primarily cases of spirit attachment'.

Are the concepts underlying 'soul loss' and 'spirit possession' culturally determined, regarding their cause? Or, are they a part of the human condition which is universal, irrespective of culture, race or religion? The question is, would an understanding of spirit attachment offer new possibilities for the diagnosis and treatment of some mental health patients?

Are we simply looking at anecdotal material obtained from anthropological field-work regarding other people's beliefs about spirits and other dimensions, or are there links with situations in western societies? Anthropologists have published numerous case studies which illustrate solicited and unsolicited spirit contact and alternative states of consciousness (e.g. Humphrey 1996, Katz 1976, Lewis 1991, Obeyesekere 1981, Rasmussen 1995, Turner 1992, Vitebsky 1993 etc. etc. etc.). **In Western psychiatry, mystical or trance states are associated with 'loss of ego control' and they are seen as pathological because 'self control' is seen as important in Western culture.**(Fernando 1991; 190). 'Western psychiatry does not differentiate between mysticism and psychosis and tends to treat mystical experiences of any kind as manifestations of mental disease' (Grof 1998; 79). Psychosis is said to be an incomplete withdrawal from the spirit state, a failure to return to physical reality, whereas the mystic is controlled and comes back completely to everyday reality (Wapnick 1981; 323). Shamans deliberately interact with the spirit world, but are there people, in the west, perhaps diagnosed as psychotic, who switch between the worlds uncontrollably?

What happens to individuals (like for example, those diagnosed with schizophrenia or dementia with Lewy bodies) who unintentionally achieve an altered state of awareness, which they and their peers do not consider to be a part of religious or spiritual experience? Grof suggests that when individuals in western societies have holotropic experiences which are not integrated, they may question their sanity or have it questioned (1998:11). Would an understanding of different dimensions of consciousness offer new possibilities for the diagnosis and treatment of mental health patients? Is there anything we might learn by looking at other peoples beliefs with a new pair of glasses?

Is there a state of consciousness that allows access to the visions of the shaman's spirit world, which certain people harness unintentionally? I am interested in working collaboratively with others on a multi-disciplinary project to learn more about the condition of 'unsolicited altered states of consciousness'. Could these issues be discussed within an existing SMN Group, or in a new Group? I would be interested to hear from members about research conducted in the areas of: anthropology, mental health, parapsychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, religion, shamanism, spirituality, transcultural studies... Would it be possible to begin by creating a bridge between the terminology used by different disciplines?

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