



Helping Professional or Shaman: Is there a Difference?

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This article compares the healing practices of shamans with those of contemporary helping professionals. In order to clarify the shamans' role, a number of observations are made about their Weltanschauung. It is pointed out that shamanism has remained a universal spiritual practice among indigenous cultures around the world, cutting across all faiths and creeds, and reaching deeply into peoples' ancestral memories. For shamans the world over, illness has always been addressed as a spiritual predicament—a loss of soul or a diminishment of essential spiritual energy. In accord with this, it is shamans that are believed to be capable of retrieving these lost parts of the soul that are the root of a person's physical or psychological problem; they endeavor to restore people's harmony, equilibrium and well-being. They believe that, by channeling ancestral spirits, they are able to lift curses and spells, exorcise evil spirits and cure some of life's greatest maladies. Their methods include various ecstatic techniques such as dream interpretation and the use of trance-like visions.

The article notes how, over time, mainstream religions have branded shamanism as a pagan practice, and vilified, outlawed and accused of worshipping false gods those interested in its healing potential. In contemporary society, however, these exotic high priests of the isolated wilderness have become increasingly popular, sought out by people on New Age spiritual quests. It is conjectured that this renewed interest coincides with the progressive decline of organized religion. These socio-cultural developments have transformed the perception of shamanism from a more aboriginal practice into what this article terms a more neo-shamanistic alternative.

The article suggests that advocates of this neo-shamanism are looking for a non-ordinary, more mystical means of dealing with the vicissitudes of life. They argue that the longevity of shamanic practices attests that its orientation contains value. As a result, they approach contemporary shamans with the expectation that they will help them manage any number of life and health challenges, especially when more conventional approaches have proven ineffective. They imagine that these neo-shamans will serve as some kind of "bridge" between the ordinary physical realms and the higher, spiritual ones.

The final part of the article is concerned with the many similarities between shamanism and the work of contemporary helping professionals (with particular reference to the contributions of depth psychologists, such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung). In their unique way, both orientations use guided visualization to bring their clients' conflicts and resistances into perspective. However, while contemporary helping professionals may be looking for the psychological and developmental cause of peoples' inner conflicts—their "inner demons"—shamans typically attribute the individual's condition to various forms of possession—their "external demons." Psychotherapy or coaching models are primarily focused on helping their clients understand why they think the way they do; what has happened that made them feel, believe or act in certain ways, how and why certain beliefs and ideas have come to the fore at this time in their life. Shamans, however, are not really interested in personal etiology, but in beliefs of an animistic nature. They focus on a person's spiritual life and are curious about how people impact and are impacted by nature and its unseen spirits and beings. Both approaches recognize the importance of viewing individuals holistically, emphasizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and environment. Contemporary helping professionals rely to a large extent on the same psychological mechanisms as those employed by shamans. In fact, their effectiveness, as reflected in their therapeutic outcomes, appear to be quite similar.

Given the resonances between these two approaches, the article proposes that there is the potential for integrating shamanic practices into the work of contemporary helping professionals. Presently, the article notes, ecotherapy—the type of therapeutic treatment approach that harnesses the healing power of nature—is not at the forefront of contemporary helping professionals practice. With this in mind, it is suggested that an integrated methodology that draws on the strengths of both traditions may offer a more comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to helping people tackle their mental and physical problems.

Key Words: Shaman; Animism; Helping Professional; Psychoanalysis; Eco-therapy; Spirits; Rituals; Soul Retrieval; Self-retrieval; New Age; Guided Visualization.

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We humbly ask that we may be aligned with you, that your power may flow through us, for the good of this earth and all living things upon it. Great spirit of the North, invisible spirits of the air, the spirits of the cool winds. Vast and boundless Great grandfather sky, your breath animates us and all life.

—Shaman's prayer

Cover me with your healing. Give me your strength to forgive. Give me your eyes to see those who hurt me the way you do. Heal me of my unforgiveness and free my spirit to trust and love again.

—Shaman's spiritual healing prayer

Preamble

Not long ago, I read a newspaper article in which a Norwegian princess had married an American self-styled shaman. Prior to their marriage, the princess had already been living a far from conventional royal life, having declared herself to be a clairvoyant and had subsequently come to run a healing school where people were allegedly taught how to commune with angels. On his part, her new husband claimed that he communicated with a broad range of spirits and would tell anyone willing to listen that he possessed a medallion which helped to ward off spells and cure diseases. On Instagram, he described himself as a “servant of God,” an “energy activator,” and, in an already colorful resume, stated that he was the latest in six generations of shamans. Further claims he made included having once died for four minutes and 25 seconds, and that one of his more notable clients was the Goop founder and lifestyle innovator Gwyneth Paltrow (known for her dubious and dangerous health claims) who he referred to as a “soul sister.”

Reading about these self-professed shamans reminded me of my own “shamanic adventures” while travelling in Russia many years ago. While being there, I had been watching a shaman going through a trance-like experience, when I realized I was also responding: why did it seem as if my heartbeat was becoming synchronized with the sound of his drum? Thinking about it, I recalled that I had been told that the rhythm of the drum was supposed to echo the heartbeat of the earth. Could it be true that the dance of the shaman was the way to create unison between the physical and spiritual realms?

The event I am referring to took place at Lake Baikal, the deepest lake on the earth, containing one-fifth of all the fresh water on the earth’s surface. Despite its great depth, it is still clear enough to see to the bottom. However, I had not come here merely to admire the lake. Rather, it was my curiosity about the region’s mysticism and otherworldliness that had drawn me there. I had been told that Lake Baikal is considered one of the holiest places for Siberian shamans, the medicine men and women who had been present in this region from ancient times onwards.

After a long period of repression during the communist period, shamanism is now blossoming once again at Lake Baikal—the Sacred Sea, as it is also called in Siberia. According to tales of lore, the lake is supposed to be full of energy, linking the global force of the universe, the earth and its people. This belief is evident in the number of prayer flags—pieces of fabric tied to prayer poles to help people communicate with the spirits—that are to be seen everywhere. Clearly, people continue to be drawn to the naturalist philosophy still alive on the banks of Siberia’s great lake.

Returning to my visit, I found myself standing at what's known as Shaman's Rock on the lake's largest island, Olkhon, and the spiritual heartland of Russia's shaman community. To shamans, this rock is considered to be one of earth's five most important points of energy. In ancient times, local people believed that the Shaman Stone possessed miraculous powers, a place feared by the local tribal people—the Buryats (ethnic relatives of the Mongols). According to them, Azhin (the Buryat word for deity)—the lord of Lake Baikal—lived in the cave at Shaman Rock. And it was here that shamans would perform their rituals and sacrifices. It was also the place where people would leave oaths, reveal false accusations or defend their honor. Furthermore, it was not only a place for prayer, but punishment too, as criminals were brought to the rock and left exposed to the elements during the night. If the next morning they hadn't drowned or died from the cold, all accusations against them were dropped. Shamans were also burned and buried nearby in a sacred grove adding further to the spiritual significance of the place.

I was told that the shaman who I was observing as he entered a trance-like state was communicating with the spirits. According to believers of these practices, the visible world is pervaded by invisible spirits with the power to affect the lives of the living, and it is malicious spirits that are the cause of a person's ill health. Sufferers come to a shaman for help, asking for him to enter their body and banish the infectious spirits. The shaman before me was beginning one of these otherworldly journeys. Before entering his trance-like state, a sacrifice had been required. A sheep had been killed in such a way that no blood was spilled on the ground. In fact, the shaman had put his arm elbow-deep in the cut to squeeze an artery thus stopping the animal's heart.

According to the worldview of shamans, the universe is divided into three parts: the upper world, the earth and the underworld. Shamans claim to be the mediators between these various worlds, with an inherent knowledge of the mysteries of nature that allow them to move freely back and forth and mediate these journeys for others.

Priest, witchdoctor, magician, psychotherapist, or coach?

Observing the shaman as he worked, I saw parallels between his practice and that of contemporary people in the helping professions. It could be said that the traditional shaman is at once a priest who performs rituals, a soothsayer who predicts the future, and a witch doctor who treats illnesses. In other words, shamans are seers of truth, speakers of wisdom, and healers of souls. Assuming that all of us are journeying through darkness, it is shamans that lead us towards the light. In order to do this, shamans claim to enter the “spirit world”, where they obtain the power and knowledge that might restore their subject to health.

For shamans the world over, illness has always been seen as a spiritual predicament: a loss of soul or a diminishment of essential spiritual energy. They help people who feel literally dis-spirited, people who supposedly have lost their personal guardian spirit or even their soul. In other words, people who believe in these shamanic practices fear that if their soul leaves them, they will die; the shaman can help to retrieve those lost parts of the soul to make the person whole again.

There are any number of reasons why people seek the power of the shamans, including illness, infertility, crop failures, or the disease of animals; they are alleged to lift curses and spells and exorcise evil spirits. By channeling the spirits of the

ancestors, they employ various ecstatic techniques including dream interpretation and the use of trance-like visions and rituals. These are accompanied by vibrantly colorful outfits, ritualistic dances, songs, and intoxicating hallucinogenic brews of mushrooms and alcohol—all designed to hasten the attainment of states of ecstasy. In short, entering this otherworldly realm demands that they be dancers, singers of songs, players of drums and storytellers, weaving tales of magic and mystery. In this respect, shamans are dreamers, poets, visionaries, and seers of the unseen, using the power of words to heal, to create, and to destroy. Shamans also recognize the importance of music as a vital language that speaks to the soul. According to their Weltanschauung, their drumming opens the portal to the spirit realm allowing them to look beyond the surface and learn deeper truths.

Believers also consider shamans to be a bridge between the past and the future, the living and the dead. They are the guides to the mysteries of the universe that help others to find their way; in this respect they are guardians of the earth and stewards of the land. They honor the belief that all living things are connected, and work to protect the world we live in for future generations.

As I understood it, shamans are traditionally selected by ancestry and birthmarks that signify their ability for divine intervention and supernatural abilities. I had also been told that they are descendants of the “ongons”—the ancestral spirits. However, it is a difficult path to become a shaman, and not a venture anyone would voluntarily pursue. Instead, these “chosen ones” are “called”, sometimes in the form of illness, or by hearing the voices of their ancestors that plague them into accepting their true vocation. Some people might even classify shamans as disturbed, sick individuals.

However, it could also be said that they more closely resemble sick people who have seemingly been able to heal themselves.

Historical notations

Spending some time at Lake Baikal—and later in the Republic of Tuva (another center of shamanism)—I realized that shamanism represents a very ancient healing tradition, possibly even the oldest form of healing that predates all organized religions. In fact, the origins of shamanism can be traced to a period ruled by our Neanderthal ancestors between 60,000 and 200,000 years ago. In these archaic times, shamanism may have been the way people held communion with the sacred and through their practices, achieve some form of healing. Consequently, shamanism can be considered to be the first religion of humankind.

Following its early beginnings, shamanism has remained a universal spiritual practice among indigenous cultures around the world, cutting across all faiths and creeds, reaching into the deepest levels of our ancestral memory. As a primal belief system preceding all established religions, it holds its own symbolism and cosmology, sketching a spirit world that's inhabited by supernatural beings, gods, and totems which appear in various forms, depending upon their places of origin.

The word “shaman” itself originates from the Russian word “*šamán*”, thought to be derived from the southwestern dialect of the Evenki, a Tungusic people of Northern Asia.¹ If this is to be believed, then the noun form of the word stems from the

¹ Michael Harner (1980). *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing*, New York: Harper & Row; Ronald Hutton (2001). *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*, London: Hambledon & London; Michael Winkelman (2000). *Shamanism: The neural ecology of consciousness*

verb *ša-* 'to know'; thus, a shaman is literally "one who knows", an expert in keeping together the multiple codes of a society. And although shamanic practices may have originated among these earliest hunting and gathering cultures, its practices have never disappeared. They are often found in conjunction with animism, a belief system whereby the world is home to a plethora of spirit-beings that can both help or hinder human activities. According to the cosmology of animism, all "natural" things, such as plants, animals, rocks, rivers, and even the phenomena of thunder, have intentionality (or a vital force) and the agency to influence human lives.

As the life of our early ancestors were full of calamities, shamans were used to explain the inexplicable phenomena of life, to help people cope with uncertainty. Depending on the culture they lived in, they would perform a variety of functions to help our ancestors deal with the many dangers they faced. Common to all their practices, however, were questions about and requests for healing, dealing with infertility, and finding food. Shamans would also deal with spiritual matters, endeavoring to reconnect conscious human life with the natural and spiritual world through various rituals and the use of totems. In fact, they consider the relationship with their animal allies to be a vital part of enriching human life, as nature was considered to be a reflection of peoples' inner landscape.

and healing. Westport, CT: Bergen & Gavey; Mariko Walter & Eva Jane Neumann-Fridman, (2004). *Shamanism: An encyclopedia of world beliefs, practices, and culture*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Cleo Publishers; Andrei Znamenski, (2007). *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and Western Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The threats or affliction of illness would always be a dominant concern in shamanic thought. Its origin could be ascribed to natural causes, but equally its roots could be of a more metaphysical nature. In the latter case, spiritual entities or sorcerers were deemed the cause of a person's misdeeds. Furthermore, those who believed in some form of reincarnation, the misdemeanors that took place in a person's past life could well have repercussions in the present, the implications of which again required the work of the shamans to set things right.

Traditional shamanic healing systems were divided into medicinal, magical, and mystical categories—the first necessitating herbal medicines and physical interventions, the second consisting of rituals and the use of objects (including magical plants and their derivatives) to counteract an offending curse, and the third needing the aid of discarnate entities (beings without physical form) or using the client's own capacity to encounter spirits once he or she has entered an altered state of consciousness.

As I noted while standing on the sacred rock at Lake Baikal, shamans would use a variety of methods to empower people looking for help. They might pronounce incantations, sing sacred songs, carry out symbolic ritual acts, enact the removal of disease-causing objects from the body, conjure up appeasing spirits, interpret dreams, and administer herbal remedies. These various interventions were ways of empowering their clients, helping them to better cope with life's adversities.

What became clear to me, taking into consideration the shamanic worldview, is that disease is not just seen as a biological condition but as a disruption in the balance of

a person's spiritual and social relationships. Shamans do not believe in a division between the body and the spirit, between the visible world of form and the invisible world of energy and mind, or between the spiritual and the secular. What must also be noted is how their diagnoses and healing rituals are deeply embedded in the cultural norms and social expectations of a community. On this premise, what these shamans are trying to do through interventions is to mend the torn fabric of a person's (or a community's) connection with the natural world. And as it is supposed that shamans are able to transcend these different worlds, they form a bridge between the physical and spiritual. They try to restore harmony within the individual and the community, reinforcing the social bonds believed to influence people's health. But in order to do this, they need to enter into an altered state of consciousness, embarking on a journey with the hope of locating where the soul has fled to in these alternate realities and return it to the body of their clients.

Neo-shamanism

Shamanism, however, has met with significant opposition over the years. With the passing of time, mainstream religions branded shamanism as a pagan practice. They accuse those interested in shamanism of worshipping false gods. Consequently, with the arrival of more organized religions, shamanic practices began to wane. However, whilst shamanism may once have been vilified and outlawed as "black magic" in this way, it has since taken on a more mystical, esoteric air.

Of course, people with a more rationalistic outlook on life may find the existence of magic auras and spiritual energy too esoteric to swallow. Despite this attitude, however, these exotic high priests of the isolated wilderness have reemerged in recent

years, becoming increasingly popular forms of New Age spiritual quests, such as seen in the example of the Norwegian princess and her new husband. This renewed interest has almost certainly coincided with the decline of organized religion and, given the way various socio-cultural dynamics of our age have developed, interest in the primitive, aboriginal form of shamanism has shifted towards a more neo-shamanistic alternative. Today, it may even be difficult to distinguish between traditional forms of shamanism and the modernized, often esoteric practices, that utilize the same term.

Contemporary advocates of shamanism are looking for a non-standard, more mystical means of dealing with the vicissitudes of life. Apparently, people continue to look for help on soul retrieval, seek advice on how to live their lives, request hands-on healing methods, or find ways to communicate with their deceased loved ones. These searchers argue that thousands of years of shamanic practices suggest that its orientation must contain some value. While their interests in shamanism may seem nonsensical, their perspective may not be all that contradictory to more mainstream religious practices. After all, most religions retain the mystical belief that it is possible to engage with whatever is perceived as a higher power. And this argument may have been reinforced by cultural anthropologists who note that in many early cultures, knowledge of the curative properties of plants was learned through the practice of shamanism, and many are still used today.

People are once again seeking out the contemporary versions of shaman for all types of life and health challenges, especially where more conventional approaches have brought no improvement. These present-day neo-shamans within a community are serving needs that cannot be met by practitioners of other disciplines such as

physicians, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, coaches, and even priests. In pursuit of solutions, these searchers are prepared to use the spiritual wisdom of ancient shamanism for the purpose of healing themselves. Compelled by its long and rich history, they imagine that neo-shamans will be able to serve as a “bridge” between the ordinary physical and higher spiritual realms. They are once again approached as wise practitioners who are able to perceive the unseen cause of affliction, be it spiritual, emotional, mental, mythical, or archetypal.

From listening to the narratives of those who have sought or are interested in the help of neo-shamans, one commonality is that most had tried many quite esoteric healing practices previously. Examples include re-birthing, out-of-body experiences, training in transpersonal psychotherapy, Reiki, craniosacral therapy, past life regression approaches, and Tantric yoga. Some of these searchers, for example, had also experimented with the Brazilian hallucinogenic Ayahuasca plants, whilst others championed the clinical use of psychedelics in healing.

Having seen these modern-day neo-shamans in practice, they don't seem all that different to other native tribesmen and women I encountered in Siberia. Like their predecessors, modern-day shamans also use the available knowledge of natural medicines, acupuncture points, faith healing prayers, and meditation techniques to treat physical ailments. Clearly, they engage in various forms of psychological treatment, and their interventions may offer insights into their clients' lives, providing direction or advice concerning major life decisions. To accelerate the process of helping their clients, some may see fit to use plants such as ayahuasca during their special healing ceremonies.

Is there much difference?

Shamans believe that unseen spirits permeate the world, act upon us, and govern our fates. Depending on their clients' needs, they play the role of doctors, priests, mystics, psychologists, oracles, and even poets. They view themselves as designated negotiators, dealing with life's hidden realities through the mastery of physical and spiritual treatments.

Reflecting on these shamanic practices, we might ask ourselves whether the kind of spiritual healings carried out by Catholic priests, Islamic Imams, Japanese Reiki Masters or Hindu holy men are so different from the activities of the shamans. Their intentions resonate equally with the *modus operandi* of psychiatrists, psychotherapists and coaches. Like shamans, these people—in their own unique way—try to bring their clients' conflicts and resistances to a conscious level. But while the more Western helping professionals may be looking for the psychological developmental causes of inner conflict, shamans typically attribute these people's condition to various forms of possession and other external causes.²

Pursing this line of enquiry further, clear parallels can be found between the work of shamans and the Western helping professionals, especially in the context of the psychological contributions of depth psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. For example, Freud's focus would be to observe and analyze the workings of his patients' unconscious and try to convert this knowledge into consciousness. In other words, to make the unconscious, conscious. Just as altered states of consciousness can be seen as a fundamental element of the shamanic experience, the same can be

² Sudhir Kakar (2003). Psychoanalysis and Eastern spiritual healing traditions. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 48, 659-678.

said of people going through psychoanalytic treatment. To induce their patients into an alternative state of consciousness, Freud, and later psychoanalysts, would use processes such as transference and countertransference, regression, dream interpretation, free association, reveries, guided visualization, and a host of other intervention techniques. Most notably, shamans and helping professionals with a depth psychological orientation share the important common belief that forces beyond our control—phenomena not generally observed or observable in our ordinary daily awareness—affect our mental and physical health. Given these similarities, we could even argue that the psychoanalytic orientation builds on practices that extend thousands of years into the past and could well be seen as a continuation of ancient and indigenous healing methods.

In fact, the well-known psychiatrist Carl Jung has often been described as the “Shaman of Psychotherapy.”³ His posthumously published work, *The Red Book* very much resembles a shaman-like treatise.⁴ It captures intricate details of his various shamanic inner journeys. It incorporates mandalas, archetypes and shadow figures, images presented in full color—experiences derived from his visions while on these inner journeys. In addition, his book details various encounters with imaginary beings in strange shifting dreamscapes. During these journeys, Jung would even meet his spiritual guide in an extraordinary reality, a person who called himself “Philemon”, who would give him crucial insights.

³ C. Jess Groesbeck (1989). Carl. J. Jung and the Shaman’s vision. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 34(3), 255-75.

⁴ Carl Jung (2009). *The Red Book*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

In the context of shamanism, Jung also noted, “The numinous experience of the individuation process is, on the archaic level, the prerogative of shamans and medicine men; later, of the physician, prophet, and priest; and finally, at the civilized stage, of philosophy and religion The shaman’s experience of sickness, torture, death, and regeneration implies, at a higher level, the idea of being made whole through sacrifice, of being changed by transubstantiation and exalted into a pneumatic man in a word, of apotheosis.”⁵

In a further parallel with shamanism, Freud, Jung and many others in helping professions have applied hypnosis as a way of drawing people into altered states of consciousness, a practice that doesn’t seem far removed from traditional shamanic practices. Even though, in these situations, it is more commonly the shaman rather than the patient who regresses into a hypnotic state, it still raises the question as to the similarity between these psychological concepts and practices and the spiritual acts engaged in by shaman; equally interesting is whether it is possible to appreciate these ancient spiritual forms of healing in modern times.

Psychotherapy or coaching models are primarily focused on helping their clients know why they think the way they do, what has happened that made them feel, believe or act in certain ways, how and why certain beliefs and ideas come to the fore and have subsequently impacted them at this time of their life. In comparison, shamanism is less concerned with personal etiology and more aligned with beliefs of an animistic nature—referred to earlier as the belief that everything has a spirit. Shamans are more

⁵ Carl Jung (2014). *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 11, Psychology and Religion: West and East, Bollinger Series, Princeton: Princeton University Press, para 448.

curious about how we impact and are impacted by nature and its unseen spirits and beings.

However, there are also some key differences in these practices. For example, interventions by contemporary helping professionals usually take place with both parties being in a conscious state (excluding hypnosis). However, during the process of a shamanic “treatment”, the practitioner may well be in a state of trance. Of course, hypnotherapy, or drug-facilitated therapy are also part of contemporary psychological practices; however, in these situations, it will be the client not the helping professional who will be in an altered state of consciousness.

In both orientations shamans and contemporary helping professionals serve as spiritual guides and companions. They pursue the mutual objective of ascertaining their clients’ resistances and helping them to develop a greater sense of agency. However, for contemporary helping professionals, the goal is to gain access to the client’s inner world and explore how they might attain healthful growth. During this process, clients remain responsible for acquainting themselves with their own inner world, exploring it, and searching for what’s meaningful to them. In comparison, the shamanic journey is undertaken while the shamans are in a state of altered consciousness. While they are in a state of altered reality, they engage with their clients in a process that can also be described as guided meditation. This is typically accompanied by the sound of drumming, using rhythmic regularity to move the client into a light trance state. This activity is followed by the subsequent request for clients to connect with their power animal or other spiritual being(s) or guides and to ask for

support and information around their specific issue. All the while the shaman appears to remain in an altered state of consciousness.

Both shamanic and more conventional healing orientations use guided visualization to facilitate a deeper exploration of their clients' inner world than they otherwise could. This process encourages their clients to come up with vivid mental imagery that allows them to journey through various aspects of their lives. Be it the efforts of shamans or of contemporary helping professionals, clients are encouraged to revisit and reflect on significant events, past traumas, and pivotal life moments. By recollecting these experiences in a safe space, the client may gain new perspectives, process undigested emotions, discover ways of healing, and be empowered to achieve psychological closure. Furthermore, guided visualization may be a helpful means of envisioning the kind of future which they desire. By vividly imagining that ideal, they may be motivated to set goals, clarify intentions, and develop a roadmap for personal growth and transformation.

During these sessions the theme of energy may come to the fore. In contrast to contemporary forms of therapeutic intervention, shamanism emphasizes the belief that a person's emotional and psychological well-being are intertwined with their energetic balance. Shamans assume that they need to address these energy dynamics in order to help the person heal. This concept is aligned with the core shamanic belief that all aspects of existence, including thoughts, emotions, and physical matter are interconnected and influenced by the flow of energy. Clearly, this outlook is quite different from contemporary psychotherapeutic practices. What must be noted, however, is that such views have been part of more "adventurous" methods

of therapeutic intervention, such as Reiki, chakra balancing, or other energy-based modalities that presuppose the need to restore balance and harmony within the client's energy system.

A major point of departure, however, between shamanic and more traditional Western models of psychological intervention, is that the former places emphasis on how the world of nature impacts a person's bodily functioning and spirituality. In fact, shamans view problems very much from a holistic, spiritual and naturalist perspective, in which mental illness is not seen as purely physical or psychological, but rather as a disruption in the individual's spiritual, energetic, or social balance. According to their *Weltanschauung*, traumatic experiences can cause parts of the soul to leave the body, leading to a condition described as "soul loss." Mental illness is a consequence of negative spiritual entities, energies, or malevolent forces that have invaded the person's energetic field. And as the well-being of the individual is very much interconnected with the well-being of their social environment, shamans may also look at mental illness as an indicator of some disruption in the community, family or natural world. In such instances, healing may involve not just the client's energy balance, but also that of the family, community, and natural world.

Thus, given the importance in the shamanic *Weltanschauung* of the world of the spirits, shamans in a state of trance may contact "external demons" living in the natural world. In comparison, contemporary helping professionals work with people to deal with their "inner demons"—in other words with the destructive parts of their personality. However, a more in-depth consideration suggests these may actually be quite similar

processes. On the one hand, whatever is wrong with the person is explained from an intra-psychic perspective, on the other hand, it may be attributed to external forces.

Although there are certainly similarities, the shamanic perspective differs from the more biomedical framework predominant in Western cultures. Contemporary helping professionals consider their work having a more scientific orientation. They try to take an objective, neutral stance when dealing with their clients. In comparison, shamans will use their subjective assessment of what's morally good or bad to prescribe the black and white magic then used to either produce or cure disease.

The critical question becomes which orientation is more effective. Considering this important point, it seems that there isn't a single form of psychotherapy that's universally "most effective". Clearly, the effectiveness of therapy largely depends on the specific condition being treated, a person's preferences, and the therapeutic relationship.⁶ From studies that evaluate effectiveness, it appears that the modern helping professional relies to a large extent on the same psychological mechanisms used by the faith healer, shaman, priest, and others. Hence, it comes as no great surprise that the results, as reflected by the evidence of therapeutic outcomes, seem to be quite similar. In fact, much of the success of these therapeutic interventions may be due to a placebo response from the physician, the client, or both.

⁶ Pim Cuijpers (2017). Four Decades of Outcome Research on Psychotherapies for Adult Depression: An Overview of a Series of Meta-Analyses, *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne*, 58 (1), 7–19; Wampold, B. E., Mondin, G. W., Moody, M., Stich, F., Benson, K., & Ahn, H.-n. (1997). A meta-analysis of outcome studies comparing bona fide psychotherapies: Empirically, "all must have prizes." *Psychological Bulletin*, 122(3), 203–215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.122.3.203>

In continuing the parallel between contemporary helping professionals and shamans, there is a difference with respect to career choice. As has been noted earlier, shamanism is a vocation and “calling” that can happen to people whether or not they are looking for it. In comparison, helping professionals consciously choose a path of study, even if the wish to do so may originate from their unconscious mind. Shamans are also quite willing to talk about their own psychological wounds and traumatic healing experiences—they are deemed a fundamental part of their identity. They also seem at ease with the social stigma that comes with their role in the community. In comparison, many helping professionals still fear the potential negative consequences of revealing their inner struggles that led to their career choice to other people.

Concluding comments

From these comparisons, it is apparent that both shamans and contemporary helping professionals view mental, emotional, and physical suffering as being interrelated. The primary goal in both orientations is to ease or empower their clients. Shamans try to heal holistically by simultaneously addressing the spirit, mind, and body. They also consider a client’s social setting, in particular their relationship with the natural world. However, the work of many contemporary helping professionals mirrors this by addressing how mental health issues are not the result of any single cause but are impacted by the complex interpersonal relationships and community in which they live. Presently, however, ecotherapy—the type of therapeutic mental health treatment approach that harnesses the healing powers of nature—doesn’t appear to have much prominence among contemporary helping professionals.⁷

⁷ Theodore Roszak (2001). *Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*, Newbury Port, MA: Phanes Press; Martin Jordan and Joe Hinds (2016). *Ecotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*. London: Palgrave.

Still, both approaches recognize the importance of viewing individuals holistically, emphasizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and environment. Shamans, however, view mental illness as not just a personal problem but as a reflection of disharmony in their family, community, and the natural world. As a result, their healing rituals incorporate these relational aspects of healing. Contemporary therapeutic approaches (in particular, family systems therapy), however, have a somewhat similar orientation. Its practitioners also recognize the importance of social and relational dynamics in the context of mental health. Hence, their interventions may involve addressing these relational patterns and restoring healthy communication, including looking for support within families and the larger social setting. Thus, both approaches understand that the healing process may require that they address the contextual situation, not just the individual in isolation.

There are further similarities in the way shamans and contemporary helping professionals approach a crisis (including mental illness) as an opportunity for further spiritual growth and transformation. In many shamanic traditions, trauma is seen as a form of “soul loss” or spiritual disconnection. The shaman’s role often includes techniques such as soul retrieval, restoring what has been lost to help the person address, reintegrate and heal from trauma. While guiding their clients through these transformative experiences, the shaman hopes they will emerge stronger with greater self-knowledge. On their part, contemporary helping professionals (particularly the ones with a more psychodynamic orientation) also view forms of psychological crises as opportunities for personal growth and individuation. In taking crises as a point of

departure, the goal is to help clients integrate unconscious material, develop greater self-awareness, and address and find meaning in their struggles. Their interventions focus on reintegrating fragmented parts of the self that have been dissociated or wounded due to various traumatic experiences. In other words, both shamanism and psychotherapy work to heal trauma by helping the individual reconnect with lost or fragmented parts of themselves, to aim for wholeness and integration. In short, they see healing as more than just the relieving of symptoms, but as a pathway to deeper self-understanding, transformation and wholeness.

As has been described, shamans are said to journey into non-ordinary realities, dreamscapes, or spirit worlds to gather information or perform healings on behalf of their clients. To access these spiritual realms, they believe that they need to enter altered states of consciousness, achieved through combinations of ritualistic drumming, chanting, fasting, or the use of psychoactive plants. This process also involves working with symbols, using archetypes, and spiritual guides that, according to them, hold keys to a person's well-being. In comparison, many helping professionals—again, particularly those with a psychodynamic orientation—will assist their clients in exploring unconscious processes through dreams, fantasies, symbols, and the use of archetypes. These interventions may uncover repressed emotions, memories, and desires that might then be integrated into a client's conscious awareness. In other words, both forms of intervention recognize the healing potential of exploring their clients' inner world.

As much of the work of contemporary helping professionals demonstrates similarities with the way shamans operate, their practice could be enriched by the potentialities

that shamanism has to offer. Both work with the human psyche and both provide healing to their clients. Yet, as has been explained, their conceptual models tend to be quite different. Shamanic models are very much focused on their clients' relationships with the world of the spirits, and their connection to natural phenomena. Contemporary helping professionals subscribe to more rational, scientifically based models. Thus, while shamans are concerned with "soul retrieval", many depth-oriented helping professionals would consider their practice to be that of "self-retrieval."

Nonetheless, we may ask ourselves how far contemporary helping professionals realize the extent to which they are following in the footsteps of their shamanic predecessors. Could they, by drawing on the strengths of both traditions, arrive at a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to healing? The shamanic, holistic belief system—particularly in regard to our relationship vis-a-vis the natural world—might be used to reduce the sense of rootlessness that is increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. It may be worthwhile exploring how integrating a more eco-therapeutic, shamanic orientation may help clients to overcome their feelings of alienation and facilitate a more effective healing process.⁸

In fact, some contemporary helping professionals are already doing exactly this by combining traditional talking therapy with shamanic rituals, plant medicines, or energy healing techniques as a means of addressing mental health issues from a psychological and spiritual perspective. They have observed how present-day society has distanced us from the world of nature in a way that may be detrimental to peoples'

⁸ Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2016). *Eco-therapy: the walking and talking cure*, INSEAD Knowledge, <https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/eco-therapy-walking-and-talking-cure>

mental and physical health. Respecting and appreciating what nature has to offer is a means of encouraging clients to feel more connected and experience a greater sense of wellness.

Naturally, contemporary helping professionals should be discouraged from the overuse of more esoteric psychological interventions. However, like the shamans, paying more attention to their clients' connection with nature when establishing therapeutic goals can be beneficial. We are all intrinsically connected to the earth and its natural phenomena. A healthy relationship with nature is therefore an important factor in our psychological well-being, promoting balance in the mind and hopefully even recovery from mental illness. In fact, increasingly contemporary helping professionals may be discovering for themselves that listening to the sounds of nature—the animals, the birds, the wind and the water—has a healing power that can be second to none!