

SHAMANIC GIFT IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE: SPIRITUAL ENERGY AND BIOMEDICINE¹

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Neo-shamanism or urban shamanism is a movement which concentrates on spiritual healing and aims to revive traditional shamanism. The aim of the paper is to explore the legitimation of charismatic neo-shamanic healers in relation to biomedicine which is a dominant authoritative body of medical knowledge in European societies. The paper presents the results of ethnographic research on two neo-shamanic groups operating in Slovakia. In neo-shamanism, the shaman's abilities are represented either as learned skills, or a special spiritual gift. The latter is characteristic of charismatic persons within neo-shamanic groups. I base my argument on the understanding of charisma as rhetoric and investigate discursive strategies of two charismatic healers who belong to different kinds of neo-shamanic groups. Both support the view that the shamanic practices are compatible with biomedicine; however, they represent this compatibility in different ways. I argue that the rhetoric in the legitimation of the shamanic gift corresponds to the particular social settings and cultural background of a healer. It is manifested in the use of the concept of energy which serves as a bridge between spiritual healing and the natural sciences.

Key words: CAM; neo-shamanism; charisma; rhetoric; energy; Slovakia

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INTRODUCTION

In the last century Europe witnessed increasing interest in the occult and religious structures that are denoted in social sciences as New Age or alternative spirituality. The latter term can be related to alternative life philosophies manifested in the spheres of health,

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education, environment, or other domains (Jerotijević, Hagoovská, 2019: 49) and is usually used to refer to an absence of rigid dogma and social control: participants in the spiritual milieu may share an “alternative set of values, explanations, lifestyles choices and communication systems that often are enacted in micro, everyday settings” (Bloch, 1998: 59). At the same time, they can draw upon multiple traditions and ideas simultaneously, combining them into individual packages of meaning (Aupers, Houtman, 2010: 135). In this paper, I will address one of these spiritual trends – neo-shamanism or urban shamanism which has been spread in Slovakia since the 1990s. The term neo-shamanism “implies a distinction between traditional shamanisms that have been passed down from generation to generation within specific cultural traditions (as described in the works of particularist ethnographers) and more improvised, provisional shamanic rituals and experiences often born within workshop settings and informed by past (or recent) ethnographic literature” (DuBois, 2011: 111). An urban shaman is broadly defined as a spiritual healer who can draw on any medical traditions, since they all have common roots.

Neo-shamanic healing techniques belong to a broader category of complementary and alternative medicine (hereinafter referred to as CAM). Within medical anthropology, CAM is defined as health-related practices that do not fit within the dominant biomedical model of health care, do not conform to its standards and are not commonly available within the official health system (Harris, Rees, 2000; Fisher, Ward, 1994). Statistics show that the popularity of CAM worldwide is growing. One of essential aspects of such beliefs are ideas about the importance of holistic and natural healing practices reflecting an emphasis on treating the whole person (not just the symptoms) and using natural methods or remedies (Bishop, Yardley, Lewith, 2007: 858).

Jambai and MacCormack (1996: 271) note that medical systems all over the world coexist in different forms of cooperation and conflict; authority and legitimacy are constantly tested by circumstances and renegotiated in practical situations. In this regard, Burns MacGrath (1999) argues that healing does not refer only to practical matters and is more than just a pragmatic effort to find effective treatments. The choice of therapies may be an indicator of moral and ideological judgments linked to the perception of the group to which a person belongs – whether it is a community, a nation, or even all mankind. Neo-shamanism offers people several perspectives on healing: it refers to the ancient spiritual roots of humanity, but also to local traditions. Thus, healers can use different sets of medical knowledge. However, in most contemporary societies, the dominant authority is the biomedical health system, based on the principles of natural sciences. Non-biomedical healers need to adapt to this situation because health legislation is linked to biomedicine.

In this paper, I will look at neo-shamanism as a specific medical system that exists in Slovak society alongside the biomedical system and must legitimize its existence. My purpose is to analyse strategies of legitimation employed in the field of non-biomedical healing. I will explore concrete cases of two spiritual healers who come from different cultures and operate in different neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia; I will illustrate my argument by presenting the results of ethnographic research that I have carried out in Bratislava for several years. My basic assumption is that the legitimation takes place by means of rhetoric. I will consider the following questions: (1) how a healer’s rhetoric is related to the organization of a group; and (2) how a healer’s rhetoric reflects his or her social position within and outside the group.

In this context, I would like to draw attention to the word “energy”; one of the most commonly used terms in the context of alternative spirituality. Paul Heelas argues that

the diverse beliefs, rituals, and practices found in the contemporary spiritual milieu are united by a doctrine of “self-spirituality” which could be summarized as follows: “...the most pervasive and significant aspect of the lingua franca of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the ‘Self’ itself is to experience ‘God’, ‘the Goddess’, the ‘Source’, ‘Christ Consciousness’, the ‘inner child’, the ‘way of the heart’, or, most simply and... most frequently, ‘inner spirituality’ ” (Heelas, 1996: 19). The spiritual self “is conceived as laying hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the mundane self and it is believed to be intimately tied up with a universal force or energy... that holistically pervades and connects ‘all’, that is, nature, society, and the cosmos” (Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 6). Apart from the importance of the cosmic energy in spiritual beliefs, the holistic worldview based on this concept plays a major role in alternative healing. As Keshet (2009; 2011) has noted, the concept of energy serves as the axis of a linguistic mechanism around which CAM knowledge is constructed as a hybrid of modern knowledge categories such as body-mind and objective-subjective. This term is used as the embodiment of the intangible knowledge and as a linguistic bridge between science and spirituality. Not only does it characterize contemporary spiritual medical practices, but it is also a term that indicates the rules of a specific cultural epistemology.

Based on the assumption that the concept of energy is central to spiritual milieu, I will focus on its use in the rhetoric of the two healers. Unlike ordinary practitioners of neo-shamanism, they are represented as persons with a special spiritual gift and therefore can be characterized as charismatic healers. Thus, in the first part of the paper I will deal with the theoretical concept of charisma. Next, I will briefly introduce shamanic circles in Slovakia, in which I conducted my research. In the following sections I will present the analysis of the ethnographic material and in the concluding section I will discuss its results.

HEALING AND CHARISMA

Galina Lindquist (2001a: 16) notes that in an anthropological analysis it should be taken into account that medical systems are cultural domains constituted by local sets of knowledge, meanings and social relations: “People undertake their quest for health with more conviction if the medical systems they resort to are meaningful for them, if the conceptualizations of health, disease and cure correlate with their more general cosmology, and fit within broader patterns of personal and collective identity construction. It is this meaningfulness of the systems of healing within the broader domains of meaning-making, their place with reference to the dominant structures of knowledge and power, that may be understood as their legitimacy” (Lindquist, 2001a: 16). This legitimacy can be called into question, in particular, when there are multiple treatment systems and multiple medical institutions that compete for clients and incomes and use the media for their promotion: “Discursive and performative strategies of legitimation can become a part of persuasiveness, whether of an individual healer or of the ideology behind a certain therapy” (Lindquist, 2001a: 16).

The question of legitimacy is one of the central issues in medical anthropology, especially in relation to biomedicine. In this regard, Max Weber’s theory (1947; 1958) was inspirational for anthropologists. Carol MacCormack (1981; 1986) developed her ideas on legitimacy in relation to medical systems in Western society. She argues that

these systems are placed in the context of a modern bureaucratic state, rationalist epistemology and reductionistic and mechanistic cosmology. The skills of experts are verified by formal examinations; their authority depends on professional positions within the institutions established by the state; healing is explained in terms of natural sciences – that is, biomedicine. Traditional legitimacy, on the other hand, is pragmatic and less concerned with theoretical explanations: it is based on the conviction that a traditional healing system has worked for many previous generations and continues to work. Traditional legitimacy in medical systems renders individual healers and their methods morally superior and places them within broader contexts of personal and national identity (see also Jerotijević, 2017).

Charisma is a particularly discussed term in relation to legitimacy. Jambai and MacCormack argue that medical systems based on traditional or charismatic authority are paradoxically more flexible than those based on rational-legal bureaucracy. In a bureaucratic system, people must act in accordance with fixed rules. In traditional systems, obedience to authoritative knowledge is based on personal loyalty. If traditional healers follow what Weber called “principles of substantive ethical common sense” (Weber, 1947: 388), they are free to innovate. The change does not come through legislation, rather it is said that new things have always been there, and the wisdom of the healer has helped to discover them. Charismatic authority is even more flexible, it can even be revolutionary and change tradition (Jambai, MacCormack, 1996: 284-285).

According to Weber (1947: 363), group solidarity under charismatic authority is “based on an emotional form of communal relationship”. As Thomas Dow (1978: 73-74) summarizes, in Weber’s original formulation “charismatic authority is said to exist when an individual’s claim to ‘specific gifts of body and mind’ is acknowledged by others as a valid basis for their participation in an extraordinary program of action... The courage the follower requires to abandon himself... is provided by identification with the charismatic leader in that the leader, on the basis of his apparent gifts of body and mind, his heroism, is perceived as a model of both release itself and the apparent power that makes release possible”.

Understanding of charisma in sociology and anthropology since Weber’s times has undergone significant changes. Sociologists and anthropologists viewed charisma not only in the personality or qualities of the leader, but also in the relationship between leader and followers, in the cultural media, in symbolic sources, or in the relationship of charismatic leaders to social order (see, for example, Bellah, 1970; Shils, 1975; Tambiah, 1984; Csordas, 1988). It has been argued that charisma is not merely legitimated in the recognition of followers, as it was for Weber; it is the followers’ recognition that brings charisma into existence. In particular, Johannes Fabian (1979) raised the question of persuasion and motivation, or what authoritatively moves people to act, and reconceived religious movements as discourse and performance. Thus, the social reality of movements was identified “in terms of social action and cultural meaning rather than in terms of social relationship or personality characteristic. In the emphasis on discourse and performance we find a theoretical link between notions of spiritual power and political power” (Csordas, 1997: 139).

Thomas Csordas states that if we adopt the premise that the locus of charisma is in the interaction of specific individuals, and view religious movements as discourse, then charisma is rhetoric: “It is a particular mode of interpersonal efficacy: not a quality, but a collective, performative, intersubjective self-process” (Csordas, 1997: 139). In this paper, I will understand charisma in line with this argument – as rhetoric. This

perspective “allows both the possibility that particular individuals may have degrees of rhetorical skill that make them appear to be possessors of a mystical quality and the possibility that certain persons may have charisma attributed to them or be elevated to charismatic status through the influence on them of others’ rhetoric” (Csordas, 1997: 141). Thus, when examining the legitimacy of a charismatic healer, I will pay attention to their discursive and performative strategies aimed at legitimating their gift; on the other hand, I will consider their followers’ statements and behaviour.

NEO-SHAMANIC CIRCLES IN SLOVAKIA

The development of the neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia started at the beginning of the 1990s. The atmosphere in the Slovak cities after the change of political regime was quite favourable to the New Age ideas: they offered paths of spiritual growth which had earlier been hindered or even suppressed by the communist institutions; at the same time these ideas were presented as an alternative to Christianity and were attractive to seekers of spirituality. Neo-shamanic groups began to form in Slovakia for the most part due to the activities of the European branch of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter referred to as FSS) located in Vienna (for more details on the emergence of the global neo-shamanism movement, see Znamenski, 2007). The main goal of the Foundation is the transmission of forgotten knowledge, common to all human beings. Its founder, an American anthropologist, Michael Harner not only created the institutional basis, but also laid ideological foundations of the global movement which are reflected in the concept of core shamanism. This term refers to universal principles and practices that do not relate to any specific cultural group or perspective (Core Shamanism, 2019).

Core shamanism primarily addresses a specific social category: educated people who are interested in the ideas of spiritual growth and have access to information about them as well as the means to fulfil their spiritual interests (Lindquist, 2001b; Bužeková, 2014; 2017). Andrei Znamenski (2004: xiii) argues that “a neo-shamanic group, which meets as a workshop or on the occasion of spiritual event, is usually amorphous and short-lived. This anti-structure is an ideal ‘structure’ for contemporary middle-class educated Westerners, who are too sceptical to commit themselves to group values and who, at the same time, long for collective spiritual influences”. In Slovakia, however, there are people who have been involved in practising core shamanism for years in relatively stable circles. In Bratislava, where I conducted research, participants have been meeting not only at FSS seminars, but also during regular drumming sessions of circles (e.g., women’s circle, medicine wheel circle, etc.) Many practitioners maintain long-lasting friendly relationships and meet informally. My research was conducted in 2009 – 2012, mostly in the women’s circle, which consisted of approximately 15 participants (although the number could vary from meeting to meeting). I also attended many other FSS events.

Harner (1980) has repeatedly emphasized the individual dimension of shamanism and argued that shamanism is a democratic spiritual path. According to him, shamans are independent and have no central authority to control them. In other words, shamanism has no “orthodox” version or legal authority. However, the seminars of the Foundation are subordinate to the universal structure which serves as the means of reproduction of core shamanism as the authoritative body of knowledge. Their aim is to provide

training to those who practise shamanism regularly and who could eventually aspire to become authorized FSS lecturers. Although anyone can become a “shaman”, only authorized lecturers can organize seminars and teach core shamanism. The authorization is provided in the form of the Certificate of Completion. This certificate has several levels corresponding to the level of education in core shamanism (Certificate of Completion, 2019). The educational process involves payment.

Although Harner was a pioneer of neo-shamanism, not all spiritual practitioners accept Harner’s version. Core shamanism is only one of “shamanisms” that are currently spread in Europe and North America (Znamenski, 2007: 248–256). In Slovakia, there are groups that claim to follow shamanic traditions without attending FSS workshops and courses. It is difficult to tell how many of them function in Bratislava and other Slovak cities, because they are more or less “invisible”: only few of them have websites or run internet forums; their leaders usually do not give public lectures, and their meetings take place in private. Unlike the FSS, with its mission of transmitting the ideas of core shamanism to the broadest audience, these circles have been formed and function on the basis of individual interests, personal contacts and friendships. In 2010 I got in touch with a group that formed around Peter, a spiritual healer.² Among other healing approaches, he used Mongolian shamanic techniques. He was not affiliated with the FSS, although he knew many people there. By the time I met Peter, his group numbered six members. The meetings were held in private and did not involve payment.

In neo-shamanism, any problem, whether on an individual or social level, is represented as an illness – a category which is different from the biomedical definition. It refers to disturbance or imbalance of any kind. Urban shamans’ aim is to heal themselves, other people, and society. Healing takes place during a shamanic journey into the world of spirits – a “non-ordinary”, “separate” or “dream” reality that provides authoritative answers to shamans’ questions. Interpretation of bodily illnesses as physiological disorders corresponding to the biomedical model in neo-shamanism is not discarded, rather it is broadened: physiological disorder is understood as a result of spiritual imbalance. None of the shamans who I encountered denied the authority of biomedicine, though many of them expressed dissatisfaction with various aspects of health care. However, in case of serious problems, they turned to biomedical doctors. FSS lecturers usually emphasize the complementary, not alternative, character of shamanism in relation to biomedicine. For example, on the website of a Slovak FSS authorized lector we can read:

It has taken decades for the Western world to finally accept the phenomenon of shamanism and shamanic healing. Since 1968, many educational programs have been established in the U.S. They are now available worldwide and many shamanic practitioners from indigenous cultures are working together with medical professionals all around the world. Since 1980, shamanic healing has been classified by the World Health Organization as an accepted therapeutic practice.

Unlike biomedical cure, shamanic healing is based on an individual spiritual experience induced by shamanic techniques. There are no dogmas, no “right” choices or “right” methods: “The common approach here is if a spiritual technique works for one personally, it becomes acceptable” (Znamenski, 2007: 251). Shamanic experience, however, can be interpreted in different ways. Novices or, in general, people who do

2 I changed the names of practitioners who I mention here.

not consider themselves experts, follow an authoritative interpretation. In different groups the authorities differ, not only in the sense of personal qualities, but first and foremost in the sense of authoritative knowledge and type of expertise. In FSS circles, the authoritative knowledge is core shamanism, and experts are people who have obtained the certificate. However, some FSS experts are represented as people with a special gift which is a much more powerful channel to knowledge than FSS seminars or any spiritual literature. I found the same type of expertise in Peter's circle. In the following section, I will address the charismatic authority of Laura, an authorized lecturer of Indian descent. Then I will consider the shamanic gift of Peter, a leader of a private shamanic group.

SHAMANIC GIFT AND THE ENERGY OF THE WORLD

The concept of core shamanism implies that any person has shamanic abilities that could be hidden but discovered through learning. However, some FSS lecturers are supposed to have a special gift. Laura (in time of my research approximately 55 years old) is originally an Indian from Argentina who currently lives in Spain and often cooperates with Slovak and Czech shamans. On the Slovak FSS website we can read:

[Laura] was born in Argentina. Guaraní Indians' blood circulates in her veins, but she grew up and lived in a mixed culture and she has a place in traditional as well as in 'Western' culture. In our Western understanding, she is a teacher, a professor and an interpreter, and in her original culture she is a medicine woman and a healer. She learned and developed her skills with various Inca and Mezteque healers, as well as healers of Bear Tribe, Lakota, and Hopi. She had the privilege of learning from such masters as Black Elk, Swift Dear, Brave Buffalo, The Lord of the Winds, an Inca master Don Eduard, Franco Gabriel Hernandez and others.

As we can see, Laura's story begins with a foreign origin and an appeal to tradition. Neo-shamanism with its roots in traditional shamanism often refers to traditional authority: healers are typically represented as part of "specific and concrete chains of human links connecting generations of kin and providing continuity between past and present, village and city" (Lindquist, 2001a: 16–17). In accordance with this tendency, Laura is represented as a healer belonging to a long line of Native American masters. As far as I can say on the base of my research, she never justified her knowledge and skills by the FSS certificate. Apart from her extraordinary abilities, she always referred to the ancient Indian tradition. More than that, she used to place herself in opposition to the Western culture by using such categories as "we/Indians/wise" versus "you/Westerners/ignorant". For example, during one seminar when people were not active enough, she exclaimed: "Your culture is consumable, you are sitting here and consuming, and I want you to work. Participate!"

Laura claimed that she was a telepath and was able to see the aura and energy. In her statements, "seeing" also meant "knowing" – knowing more than ordinary people were able to know. For her ability, Laura used the term "channelling". This concept in the context of New Age refers to the possibility of communicating with beings of the spiritual world, the astral world, or the world of the dead, mediated by a sensitive person serving as a medium, as a channel and link between the two worlds (Wood, 2007). Laura's ability supposedly worked all the time, not just during shamanic sessions. Laura referred to her gift in everyday conversations and during lectures, when she described

messages from spirits. She also wore many amulets to mitigate the possible negative influence of the other reality or people's thoughts.

As a lecturer of the Foundation, Laura supported the democratic idea that every person could become a shaman and that shamanic skills could be developed through training at FSS seminars. These ideas were part of her teaching and she also talked in this way in conversations with me. However, implicitly (sometimes explicitly) Laura constantly emphasized that she had access to knowledge that other participants could not obtain. During sessions, she answered people's questions with an undertone that she once expressed explicitly: "If you knew the hidden things, you wouldn't ask. I know them". She often laughed at participants' questions and mocked them; from their response I inferred that they did not perceive her mocking as offensive – on the contrary, they laughed, they listened eagerly to her words and asked further questions. Laura also used to incorporate into her lectures simple, often funny, dialogues between her and the spirits, which were allegorical answers to the questions of participants. Once after such a speech she asked: "Do you understand me? ..." The participants nodded, but Laura wanted to hear it out loud. Several people responded in agreement. But Laura laughed and said: "It is strange, because it took me a long time to understand. I had had to think about it and work with it – but you understood it in half an hour". Participants were ashamed because their better understanding in the context of the seminar was nonsense. Some of them expressed remorse and asked Laura for the right explanation, which she immediately provided.

This rhetoric accentuated Laura's deeper knowledge and her special gift. Sometimes she spoke of her superiority explicitly. For example, Olga, one of the participants of a seminar on the lost soul retrieval, was talking about her son who had powerful symbolic dreams.

Olga: He asks unusual questions, for example: "Will anyone wait for me on the other side?" ... I don't know how I as a mother can help him in this.

Laura: Do you know the answers to these strange questions?

Olga: No.

Laura: Then how can you help him if you don't know what to answer? I know. I was on the other side; God, the Great Spirit, was waiting for me, laying on the Milky Way as on a couch. It was a great sight. So, I know he'll always be there. I can help your son. You weren't there, I was. You didn't see it, I did. At the previous seminar, there was a beautiful child who heard voices. They were voices of souls. After consulting me, this child was no longer in trouble. In fact, she was worried about her friend who died, and I calmed her down. I can talk to all souls.

At FSS seminars, participants are told what and how they should do. Thanks to the declared freedom of interpretation, they could adapt those instructions to their situation and individual needs. Laura, however, was often directive. If there was a misunderstanding or a violation of her instructions, her reaction was rather forceful. Although her expression was usually humorous, she could scold the "culprit" before others; sometimes she behaved like a mother and even could mockingly spank some participants who she knew personally for a long time.

Laura significantly influenced individual participants' interpretation of their experiences. As an example, I will describe an episode from a weekend seminar on the Medicine Wheel. Its aim was to build a symbolic circle of stones. At the end of the workshop, each participant had to perform an individual ritual in this circle to contact the world of spirits. These rituals took place from late evening to early morning. During the seminar I shared a room with Emilia. After returning from the circle, Emilia told

me about her experience. Later we had a meeting which was led by Laura. Every participant was supposed to talk about their night experiences. Laura listened to some stories without commenting them; in other cases, she interfered. Such was the story of Emilia. As she talked about her experience, Laura interrupted her and gradually shifted her interpretation into a story that was very different from what I heard from Emilia before the meeting. Emilia did not object and more than that: she found further aspects of her experience that supported Laura's interpretation. When we talked about her journey to another reality later, Emilia fully identified with Laura's opinion and abandoned her previous interpretation. She reasoned that Laura "saw" things much more clearly and helped her to orientate.

Laura's knowledge and interpretations were therefore presented as authoritative not only by her, but also by participants; in case of misunderstandings or ambiguities, her opinion was decisive. On both sides, it was justified by her extraordinary vision or ability. Laura's statements were like instructions of a famous doctor who knows exactly what you are suffering from: you can disobey him, but it is almost certain that it will have bad consequences.

Characteristically, at every workshop Laura introduced discussions with imaginary persons who doubted her statements or actions. Her rhetoric consisted of two interrelated parts: first, she showed participants how to perform a technique and commented on what she was just doing; and second, she argued that if it did not have effect for someone, that person did not do it right. For example, in explaining how to work with the divining rod, she said:

They often tell me that I move the rod, but I don't do it; if I wanted to, the rod would move like this [shows jerky movements], but when it is moving by itself it would move like this [shows movements in regular and slow circles and lines]. If it does not, you have not worked with the rod enough.

In relation to biomedicine, Laura expressed a rather strong attitude corresponding to her position of a "wiser Indian" who was teaching "western younger brothers and sisters" the long-forgotten knowledge. She considered western medicine as superficial and insufficient. She did not deny the effectiveness of biomedical practices, but situated them in a complex, multi-dimensional world view:

Western medicine is on the surface. Doctors – these are people of the second dimension. They do things on the surface. People of the second dimension are trying to speed things up, rushing forward, hurrying. All of us must go through all dimensions, every dimension is needed. We need to stop the world, we mustn't hurry. Then the new age will come, the revival.

Energy was an intrinsic part of Laura's statements about healing. She used this concept exclusively in a spiritual sense and did not relate it to biomedicine. When talking about healing, she always employed the terms "negative energy" and "positive energy". In this regard, an important topic was energetic cleaning of spaces and people by magical practices. Another theme was the formation of a shamanic circle. Participants often asked whether shamanic techniques were effective only in a group or they can also be used on an individual level.

Nina: We live in a small village and we want to meet in a group, to pray for Mother Earth and to meditate. Is it better to do this in a group or individually?

Laura: It's better if people are physically together; there is more power when the mind and the body come together. Everything is better done in a circle. Grab your hands, let the energy flow; pray, drum, eat together, consecrate food together.

The idea of collective shamanic practices was in line with the global New Age vision, according to which we are living in times of radical change of culture and approaching a new age. In this process, individuals as well as society are undergoing a major change (Lužný, 1995: 178). The Slovak FSS website describes Laura's course on the New Age as follows:

Through the connection with the Great Spirit we prepare for a conscious transition into the world of new energy. In the time that remains until our full transition to the new age, we will help the whole process by working on ourselves. As a result, Mother Earth and our world will change into peace and harmony, and we will be able to celebrate the coming of the new age.

The more people undergo a spiritual transformation, the closer is the arrival of the new age. As a lecturer of the Foundation, Laura therefore supported the spread of core shamanism and the creation of new shamanic groups. Their growing number is an indicator of success in healing the world. As she said,

The time has not come yet. There are attempts to unite, but it is difficult to stay in a group; everyone has their problems. There are many circles, but they are not stable. It is good when there are circles where people pray together. The more, the better for Mother Earth.

Laura, therefore, understood energy as a world-wide spiritual force. Both personal problems and individual illnesses were interpreted in terms of global energy, identified with the Great Spirit. Laura's rhetoric corresponded to the vocabulary of Jungian psychotherapy, Eastern religions, and tribal Indian healing practices. Laura represented herself as an extraordinary person whose role was to help others (unconscious/blind) because she had immediate access to the universal cosmic energy. Participants, on the other hand, not only accepted this representation, but supported it by consulting her in all "energetic" matters.

SHAMANIC GIFT AND THE ENERGY OF THE BODY

Peter and his circle did not practise core shamanism, but the Mongolian version of shamanism. Peter was initiated in 1994 by a Czech historian who had studied shamanism in Mongolia and then started to practise it.

Marta, who was from Prague, she said that I just have [a gift], I just had to be initiated. [...] And in 1994 she had been practicing for about 6–7 years. She travelled to Siberia, Baikal, Tibet, Mongolia. [...] Marta said that when she was in Mongolia, she learned that they didn't like to talk about these things and spread it out. She said that a shaman who had initiated her told her that she must not initiate others just to earn money, because... he told her that by this she would insult those ancestral spirits, that even though she was not a Mongol, she actually received the initiation, so she became a Mongol. [...] She explicitly said that she taught us what they taught her in those steppes. And she said that she chose those people. Because we didn't pay anything at the time. She just told me that she chose me to go with them. But she didn't tell me why she chose me, because she was kind of a strange introvert person.

Peter's rhetoric can be interpreted in terms of what Lindquist calls legitimization through alterity: "It is constituted through reference to the foreign and distant origin of the craft, which in many cultures is imbued with power and value. In many societies, methods, knowledge systems, and individual healers from afar are often considered

additionally powerful, even if sometimes dangerous” (Lindquist, 2001a: 17). Laura employed this type of legitimation through her origin in Indian culture; Peter did it through references to ingenious Mongolian knowledge, placing himself into a long line of native shamans – not in terms of biological descent, but in terms of receiving special knowledge.

Most people of the initial circle of the 1990s were no longer involved in spiritual healing, but Peter has gradually developed his skills and has been involved in spiritual activities for years. Peter’s new circle was formed on the basis of his personal contacts and consisted of six regular members, including Peter (two men and four women, students or college graduates, in 2010 aged between 22 and 35, Peter being the oldest member). Although they described their group to me as a circle of equal shamans, they implicitly stressed Peter’s leading position. First, they referred to the fact that the circle was created by him. Second, they claimed that he had a reputation of a recognized expert in esotericism and shamanism, as he began his spiritual “career” in the early 1990s. Peter’s girlfriend Mira noted that people who attended FSS courses wanted to meet Peter because he could teach them more than FSS lecturers:

Somehow, they just heard that there was a group, that some things could be explained there. At that [FSS] course I didn’t learn some things, not even the ritual. When we met [with Peter], we were actually putting all those shamanic techniques into practice, so we had to learn the ritual. And many people who attended recent [FSS] courses said they didn’t even know that any ritual should be essential in a shamanic journey. [...] People were interested in it, but they did not learn everything at that course, so that’s why they were looking for some other source. They wanted to meet someone who already knew something about it, who had more experience with it.

Unlike Laura, Peter was not so assertive about the importance of the collective healing. He stated that he was rather a “lonely bird” – in the sense that he preferred to work alone, which was in line with the Mongolian tradition. Despite this, he created a shamanic circle, even though he perceived it as a certain burden. He reasoned that he was involved in this activity because those people needed him and because he got approval from spirits. Characteristically, he emphasized that his expertise literally forced him to accept a leading role:

I can work with a group, but I prefer to practice alone. I have no idea whether this [individual practising] is the right path for a person... But the way I do it suits me better. Because during the medicine wheel I don’t have enough time to be responsible for others. It is exhausting, because I must send allies must protect others and help them, and at the same time I must solve the problem that we have to solve. If they are experienced shamans, I can work with them; I have no problem with it. For example, people from Vienna, I work with them often, although at distance, but I cooperate with them when they have a problem. The difficult thing was that a group had to be built. And practically I got it without asking for it. On the other hand, the response from the allies [allied spirits] was “yes”, so I could not draw back. But I cannot say that I enjoy it.

Peter therefore changed the role of a lone shaman to the role of a group organizer – not because of his own desire, but because he was advised by his allies (spirits or supernatural beings). The (Mongolian) tradition was thus innovated and adapted to the needs of (Slovak) practitioners. However, the idea of a chosen person with special abilities, corresponding to traditional shamanism, remained. It was an essential feature of Peter’s rhetoric. He claimed that he has had the gift of “vision” since childhood and developed it under the guidance of experienced teachers. This gift was manifested in

extraordinary sensory abilities and included the perception of the aura. Mira supported Peter's statements:

And the other funny thing is that the word "shaman" means "one who can see in the dark"; and he [Peter] can see in the dark indeed. He can see energy, even though he wears corrective eyeglasses; so, it is worse during the day with the glasses, but it is fine at night. He can tell... he knows when, for example, a dog is moving. I can't hear the dog, it is very quiet, it even doesn't stink. And he [Peter] knows it is there.

Unlike Laura, Peter avoided directive behaviour, but his authority was manifested through indirect messages and statements. During drumming in the circle, it was usually Peter who made the decision about the purpose of the ritual; he proposed it or approved proposals of other group members. When interpreting shamanic experiences, the members asked Peter for advice and often referred to Peter's gift. He also helped them to solve health problems. Interestingly, while in FSS circles the main term referring to a shamanic journey was "work" (*práca*) which was typically used in a sense of impersonal or collective actions, in Peter's rhetoric it was "to solve" or "to deal with" (*riešit*) in the sense of a personal action. He stressed his individual doings even when talking about collective drumming ("I was going there to solve"; "I dealt with"). Characteristically, his participation in a collective journey to the other reality was represented as a leader's role: he instructed and helped others, and it was him who mostly contributed to the group's success. The following discussion illustrates how collective healing was described in a group talk:

Mira: *But otherwise, most of the time when we had drumming sessions, someone came up with a patient to look at.*

Peter: *Well, but from the distance.*

Mira: *Yes, patients never came to our group, we treated them from the distance.*

Anthropologist: *When you are healing together, is it more effective?*

Peter: *Yes.*

Leo: *Always.*

Anthropologist: *Why?*

Peter: *One person does not have to waste so much energy, it splits into more parts, and everyone is doing their own part.*

Mira: *And Peter always kept an eye on all of us, he guarded us, we were so inexperienced, so he was watching us during the journey. [To Peter:] I don't know if you were dragging us to get us where we needed to get.*

Peter: *No.*

Mira: *No, you just watched. Once we were dealing with Nora again, she had a lot of negative energy, so he [Peter] gave us the task, and we were supposed to help her.*

Peter: *Yes, to get out of the maze.*

Mira: *I do not know how it happened, but a door suddenly opened, and I caught something [negative] ... And then the rest of us. And then you [Peter] had to cleanse us, because I normally felt physically ill... I just closed my eyes when we were going to travel, and suddenly the door opened. And I was terribly sick, I couldn't travel anymore. [To Peter:] I guess you got upset about that, didn't you?*

Peter: *Yes.*

Leo: *And then he [Peter] had to pull all of us out of it.*

A shamanic journey, as it follows from this discussion, can be dangerous; both positive and negative effects on participants and patients are interpreted in terms of energy. But Peter's ability to communicate with other reality (and to see energy) was

not limited to shamanic rituals and worked all the time, similarly to Laura's, although Peter did not call it "channelling". He described his gift as follows:

– Imagine, you see the lamp, you know that it has a backside, but inside you see the body, the physical body, but you also see the backside of the energy. And that is, I would say, the easiest comparison. You see the lampshade. Actually, when you illuminate it from above, you can put something inside, and you can see it inside as well as outside. But it can be turned off, fortunately. Because after a while I would be pretty exhausted. And it is very similar to what I see in the astral space. It is not exactly the same, but very similar. There [in astral space] you are more disoriented because you can also see backwards; you actually see the 360 degrees continuously. It is quite indescribable, but it is like that. You see, you perceive. I have been seeing like this since I was a child... I had friends as a child – purple, pink, blue and red balls. My favourite amusement was to talk to them under a bed, covered with a blanket. Let's say I wasn't quite normal, at least in the ordinary sense.

– Do you see in the dark?

– I see energy.

– What does it mean when you heal? Do you see the disease?

– Yes. And I know exactly where to intervene. It is an advantage over other people who heal because I know what, where and how. I also know the body from the inside. I was working in the hospital, so from the operating rooms I know how the organs feel, thus I can perceive their energy. I can combine that vision with that feeling.

Peter implicitly or explicitly stressed his superiority over other shamans, especially those from the Foundation. He reasoned that he had "stronger" abilities that could not be learned. But, unlike Laura, he never questioned biomedicine. On the contrary, he claimed that his work in health care improved his expertise because he could combine biomedical knowledge with "seeing" energy. He typically represented his expertise as superior by means of comparing his knowledge and approach with other healers' ineffective, even harmful, treatment:

Katka had problems with her spine, her spine was blocked, and Milan was not able to help her, and in addition, after his healing she got kidney and liver problems. She had hard work; she was working in a bank, in archives, so she had a little spinal trouble, that was all. And Milan damaged her liver and kidneys, for unknown reasons. I have no idea why or what was wrong about his intervention. 90 % of people have problems with kidneys, so I guess he supposed that she also had them. But he actually took energy from healthy kidneys and damaged them. Once I explained to him Chinese medicine... I don't know, I guess he cannot understand such simple things. When I know there is a bowel problem, I automatically look at the closest organs to see if there is something wrong. But as long as he doesn't know, it is bad enough. Or at least he could try to feel... I don't know, I don't know. He claimed that he felt.

Peter regarded shamanism only as a certain set of healing techniques. He mostly used other methods, such as astral travelling or healing by hands. He represented all these approaches as being compatible with the biomedical perspective. In his circle, discussions about health problems and their interpretations in accordance with the biomedical perspective were common, though they were appended by references to spiritual matters. The following passage illustrates the discussion about vaccination, which was preceded by the debate on alcoholism.

Eva: For example, I was never vaccinated, I do not even have the pinch on my shoulder. I was never interested in this issue, but I know it is now discussed everywhere. Some moms...

would sign an exception document so that the child does not have to be vaccinated. For this, they must undergo many bureaucratic procedures. And as we previously discussed the alcohol, how it could be handled, I wondered if he [Peter] would be able to annihilate the vaccine in the baby. He said, yes, it wasn't a problem at all. You will in fact vaccinate a child, but he will treat him, and it would be as if he was not vaccinated at all. The state is happy, the doctor is happy, the parent is happy, and the child has nothing to do with it. This, in turn, is a more practical application than processing alcohol.

Peter: *Every poison in the body can be processed. The only problem is that it costs lot of energy; I really must have a reason to do it.*

Peter had numerous clients with health problems which had biomedical diagnoses. In addition, he dealt with magic harm and removed curses. In sum, Peter used the term “energy” in relation to physical illnesses and in particular cases of personal problems which he interpreted as energy attacks. In his rhetoric, energy rarely appeared in relation to the global vision of the spiritual revival of humanity.

DISCUSSION

In critical medical anthropology, biomedicine is described as a dominant “regime of authoritative knowledge” (Jordan, 1997), which is associated with power structures; it uses manipulation and pressure to assert its superiority. However, in addition to biomedical professionals enjoying legal and rational authority, people often seek traditional and charismatic healers. These alternative medical practices also reflect “regimes” of knowledge and power and can be examined as separate cultural domains that legitimize their capabilities in a non-bureaucratic way (Lindquist, 2001a: 16). Although they do not belong to a dominant biomedical system, alternative healers enjoy authority, albeit of a different nature.

Contemporary urban shamanism is based on traditional healing practices; however, it is not a simple replication: traditions are reinterpreted in accordance with a global vision of healing the world. Thus, neo-shamanism could be seen as a specific medical system coexisting with biomedicine, and as a new tradition. An important concept within this system is the shamanic gift. From the global perspective of neo-shamanism, all people have spiritual abilities to heal. However, a closer look reveals that even in this democratic context, some healers represent themselves and are represented by others as persons with exceptional abilities. Such representation legitimates a healer's authority within a group, but also helps to maintain an ideology characteristic for the group. This ideology is reflected in the use of the concept of energy.

On one side, the concept of energy is familiar to all the practitioners, regardless of a group to which they belong, and everybody uses it in a general sense of a spiritual force. On the other side, its use is not uniform but adapts to the specific conditions in which healers operate. The exact meaning of this word, however, is not available: everyone knows what it is, but does not define what it is precisely. Thus, the concept of energy in neo-shamanism (and, in general, in New Age) can be interpreted as an “empty signifier” – the set of ideas that are not easily glossed: one can perhaps see what an empty signifier *does*, but not what it *is* (Keesing, 1985). Pascal Boyer denotes such terms as the “empty concepts of traditional thinking”: “Almost every ethnographer has, in the course of fieldwork, come across these notions, which seem virtually meaningless, yet are placed at the very heart of traditional discourse. Such terms (henceforth: ‘mana-terms’) are often

translated by the ethnographer as 'vital force' or 'mystical energy'; some people are said to 'have' it, and some are not. Informants will readily say that this 'x' is a good, evil, necessary, powerful, dangerous thing, they will easily describe the social relationships and ritual acts connected with the 'x', or who is supposed to know about such things and why, but they seem unable to define what the thing in question is" (Boyer, 1986: 50).

Boyer understands tradition in the abstract sense of a set of cultural phenomena which are repeated and psychologically salient instances of social interaction (Boyer, 1990: 1). Contemporary spiritual trends, including neo-shamanism, correspond to this definition and therefore in this sense could be explored as traditional phenomena. Boyer argues that the "empty notions" are used in different types of traditional discourse in different ways. If we want to understand their use, we have to focus on experts' utterances, because they are considered as reliable and authoritative. The difference between expert discourse and the rest is experience, not the knowledge as such: experience is the way how experts acquire knowledge, and the expertise is the process of full acquisition of the fundamental terms. What is important is that the use of the term in different discourse registers is based on different types of mental representations about the objects designated; they are related, first of all, to the difference between episodic and semantic memory. The claims to truth imply a naturalised representation of some people's positions and the episodic "anchoring" of certain notions. Naturalization of experts' positions means that positions "are conceived in terms of essence, in much the same way as living kinds" (Boyer, 1990: 113).

This argument can be applied to people represented as spiritual healers with a special gift. In this paper, I explored rhetoric of such experts operating in two different groups. In both cases, the shamanic gift is represented as inaccessible to "ordinary" people; it is working all the time, not only in the context of ritual. Thus, the experts' positions are naturalized: they are represented as persons of a different kind, with a different "essence", and their statements are regarded as authoritative and reliable. Their use of the concept of energy, however, reveals the differences between the ideologies of the two groups. While Peter is a leader of a small closed group, Laura is a lecturer in the global organization. Peter explains his abilities in relation to treatment of individual cases and refers to biomedicine. He mainly speaks about energy of the body or individual energy. For Laura, energy is essential in a global vision of the resurgence of humankind. Although she admits that biomedicine is necessary, she places it on a lower degree of global spiritual development. Accordingly, she uses the concept of energy not only in relation to physiological or mental health problems, but predominantly in a vision of individual energies joining to heal the universe.

Thus, investigation of the "empty category" of energy helps to understand the specific social settings of neo-shamanic groups. At the same time, the theoretical frame of traditional discourse proposed by Boyer sets further research questions related to cognitive mechanisms underlying the process of cultural transmission of supernatural concepts, which I do not have space to consider in this paper but will address in a future publication.

CONCLUSION

New Age has been characterized as "pick-and-mix religion" (Hamilton, 2000) or "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon, 2000). These metaphors correspond to Thomas Luckmann's (1967) influential argument: structural differentiation in modern society results in

erosion of the Christian monopoly and the emergence of a “market of ultimate significance”. Consumers of religious ideas construct personal packages of meaning which remain strictly private; thus, unlike the traditional church-based Christian religion, they play no public role. However, as Houtman and Aupers (2010: 6–7) note, empirically informed academic work demonstrated that construction of meaning in New Age and contemporary spirituality is far from private because it is conditioned by a shared doctrine of “self-spirituality”. They argue that in exploration of social significance of spiritual beliefs, there is a need for research documenting “how precisely spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced in the spiritual milieu” (Aupers, Houtman, 2010: 158).

I believe that focusing on the concept of energy as a central notion of the self-spirituality doctrine can help in such a research. The analysis of its use in individual healers’ rhetoric makes it possible to reveal ideological nuances and to better understand the complex processes of negotiating cultural meanings of healing practices. These findings are relevant not only to the academic world but also to health care, as the number of people using CAM techniques is growing rapidly. Ethnographic research can be useful in explaining this tendency and in understanding the behaviour of patients who have decided to assist non-biomedical healers. At the same time, the “empty category” of energy can be helpful in identifying different types of spiritual discourse and the corresponding processes of cultural transmission. They can be studied by focussing on the processes of concept acquisition, the naturalisation of experts’ positions and the use of causal criteria of truth. This perspective would contribute to the explanation of mechanisms behind the formation and stabilization of spiritual movements and concrete groups of spiritual practitioners.

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