

# WHERE RELIGION AND MEDICINE MEET

## A MODERN EXPLANATION FOR DISSOCIATION IN SHAMANISM AND JUNG

Pauline van Schaik\*

### INTRODUCTION

Non-traditional spirituality, especially if it is derived from an Eastern religion such as Buddhism and Taoism, now replaces some people's Western religion. The new age movement of the 1970s and 1980s evolved in a time of esotericism and eclecticism, in which individuals choose what they like from every existing spiritual philosophy, and combine this in a personal religion. The practice of shamanism is one of these traditions that has gained a broader public interest over the last couple of decades. This paper proposes that some of the healing techniques that are used in shamanism, are very similar to the techniques used in Jungian psychology, a therapy developed by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung.

The broad definition of a shaman refers to a widespread practice in pre-agricultural societies of communicating with a spirit world (which can include deceased ancestors, animals spirits, totem spirits, and gods) through the aid of meditation, dance, music or psychedelic drugs such as the peyote cactus and the South American drink Ayahuasca (Jakobsen 1999; Sandner & Wong 1997; Winkelmann 2002). Because of this, the shaman has an important position in society, in which he plays an important social

*\* Pauline van Schaik is currently a Social Science Major following the Psychology and Health track, studying at Amsterdam University College.*

role as spiritual leader, healer, and fortune-teller (Sandner & Wong 1997). In shamanism, the main cause of illness is perceived as soul loss: a condition in which the patient's soul is either stolen by a spirit or has travelled to the land of the dead (Jakobsen 1999).

A disruption of the soul, or loss of a connection to the soul, is what connects shamanism to Jungian psychology. Jungian psychology should not be confused with Freudian psychoanalysis, since Jung had a very different perspective on the human psyche than Freud had. While Freud denied the existence of any kind of spirituality, Jung saw spiritual beliefs as an important aid in unravelling the mysteries of the human soul (West 2000).

---

The shaman has an important position in society, in which he plays an important social role as spiritual leader, healer, and fortune-teller

Central to Jung's therapy was individuation, a complicated process that can be described as identity formation accomplished by integrating different parts of a person's personal and collective unconscious. The collective unconsciousness was another complicated aspect of his theory. The collective unconscious was inherited by every person and existed of mental representations called archetypes, which could serve as a model upon which to build personal interpretations. The concept of the unconscious was especially important in Jung's therapy. It was considered to be the stronger part of a person's soul, and it should be communicating well with someone's consciousness in order to have a healthy psyche. Jung made wide use of dream interpretation, dance, and imagination in his therapies. He saw dreams as especially important in uncovering unconscious emotions and thoughts (Dow 1986, Sandner & Wong 1997).

interpretation, dance, and imagination in his therapies. He saw dreams as especially important in uncovering unconscious emotions and thoughts (Dow 1986, Sandner & Wong 1997).

This paper will present an analysis, based on several scientific works, ranging from anthropological to neurobiological studies, of two different philosophies, that share similarities in their approach of healing the human psyche. This knowledge can help us understand how religion and science can sometimes overlap in certain disciplines, such as healing. This paper will end by presenting a possible reason why the essence of these healing techniques

is so similar. This will be done by presenting some neurobiological research on neurotransmitter release, which can explain some of the positive results of healing through the release of endogenous opioids (Dow March 1986; Winkelman 2002).

## THE ROLE OF THE SHAMAN

The English word 'shaman' is derived from the Tungusic language, which is spoken in some parts of Siberia and China. 'Shaman' comes from the word 'saman', which means 'the one who knows' or 'the one who is excited'. Very strictly speaking, the term shamanism refers to religious practices in Siberia and Central Asia, but due to the appearance of shamanic practices in American and African societies, the term shaman can refer to anyone who practices these (Jakobsen 1999). Shamanic practices occur in many worldwide societies that live close to nature and are often pre-agricultural or make use of simple agricultural techniques and that lack large-scale institutionalization of power (Winkelman 2002). In general, the shaman's role is to maintain balance in society through mastering natural forces and to reduce natural disasters (Jakobsen 1999). The most important technique used by the shaman to control these forces of nature, is to communicate with spirits and to 'travel' to the spirit world. These spirits can refer to deceased ancestors, animal spirits, totem spirits or gods (Jakobsen 1999; Sandner & Wong 1997; Winkelman 2002). A tool used by the shaman to communicate with spirits is trance and ecstasy. Both of these states can be accomplished by changing one's state of consciousness. These different states of consciousness are 'altered states of consciousness' and are generally referred to in the literature as ASC's (Winkelman 2002). These ASC's are the most powerful and universal competency a shaman has and will be discussed further in other paragraphs. Most of the shaman's power rests in his ability to change his consciousness and communicate with higher forces, which the shaman sees as spirits. The power to dissociate his mind from his body also enables the shaman to enter different stages of consciousness, and thereby to communicate with the spirit world (Sandner & Wong 1997).

---

In shamanism, the main cause of illness is perceived as soul loss

## SOUL LOSS AND THE SHAMAN'S CURE

Healing is one of the main occupations of the shaman, which is mostly a religious and spiritual matter. The shaman perceives illness as 'soul loss', a situation in which the soul has been stolen or taken away by another entity, most often a spirit or another shaman. A shaman will have to retrieve the patient's soul from whoever took it. He will do this by travelling to the spirit world and by retrieving the soul himself, or by asking a guiding spirit to help him. The shaman uses ecstasy and trance, states that can be induced by prolonged meditation or exercise, to be able to contact the spirit world. One important aspect of this is that the shaman can master the spirits, instead of the spirits controlling him. This ascendancy over the situation sets the shaman apart from practitioners such as mediums, who are steered by the spirits that possess them. A shaman will use certain methods that will evoke an emotional response from the patient that can lead to self healing. By taking the responsibility for illness away from the patient and attributing it to an outside force (e.g., a spirit), the patient will feel less guilty and therefore less stressed, which can aid his recovery. In other techniques, a shaman will evoke negative emotions that will confront the patient with underlying fears. This will lead to desensitization of fear responses to specific stimuli and can thereby lead to less anxiety for the patient. One explanation why these techniques are effective lies in the placebo effect. By having absolute faith in a patient's recovery, some will recover without receiving 'real' medicine. Another explanation lies in how our immune system reacts to stress, symbols, and expectations (Sanson 2008; Winkelman 2010).

## THE CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS IN JUNG'S ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung established his theory on the foundations provided by Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. Like Freud, Jung believed the cause of mental instability and neurosis lay in a dissociation between the conscious and the unconscious, which lead to a dissociation of the soul. This dissociation

or disruption of consciousness is similar to the situation of soul loss that we see in shamanic cultures. The cause of an ill psyche in analytical psychology is therefore comparable to the state of soul loss as it exists in shamanism.

Jung believed the human mind has two parts: the conscious and the unconscious. We are always aware of what we experience in our conscious mind, but we are not aware of our unconscious. Jung had an almost modern vision on how the neurobiology of our brain works. He thought correctly that our senses know limits, and are therefore incapable of registering all information about objects or situations. Even with the most enhanced scientific techniques, our senses are unable to register every aspect of an object or sound that is seen or heard. Therefore, what we experience in our psyche forms a mental representation, which is always incomplete. As confirmed now by modern techniques, Jung also realised that not all information that is absorbed by our senses will reach the threshold of consciousness. Jung believed this information would be registered in our unconscious, where it could later be retrieved from, generally in a symbolic form. Jung defined a symbolic representation: "Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider 'unconscious' aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained." (Jung 1964:20). In other words, we use symbols to describe events we cannot fully understand. Mental instability or neurosis are symbolic expressions from our unconscious that represent the core of a patient's problem.

---

Mental instability  
or neurosis are sym-  
bolic expressions  
from our uncon-  
scious that repre-  
sent the core of a  
patient's problem

## THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS AND ARCHETYPES

The collective unconscious is part of the unconscious part of the psyche. It is collective in the sense that it acts upon and is part of all living beings on earth. It is impersonal and similar for all humans, and it is inborn and will therefore not develop, as the personal unconscious can. The collective unconscious exists of

archetypes, which are prototypes of symbolic representations. Archetypes are very general manifestations, which are part of and can apply to any kind or culture (Tacey 2001). Corbett defines archetypes: “supraordinate information source, imagined as a strand of Big Mind, which informs the structure and function of both psyche and body, thought of not as separate but as an indivisible continuum.” (Corbett 1996:58). Archetypes are simplified versions of symbols that can arise in the personal unconscious as personal symbols that apply to the specific experiences of the person. Examples of archetypes are the persona, the anima, and the animus, the great mother, and the self (Corbett 1996). A personal symbol that can arise from these is, for example, the personal mother. Archetypes that are experienced directly can be explained as ‘spirit experiences’. We can say that archetypes in Jung’s analytical psychology are similar to representations of spirits in shamanism. Archetypes are inherent to all living beings, but they adjust their form to personal representations, through which they can aid a person’s healing. The spirits in shamanism are general concepts, which become personified into animal spirits, totem spirits, tree gods, daemons, and many other forms when used in rituals. Though in both philosophies archetypes and spirits exist, the actual physical existence of these is of less importance than their effect. The influence of the archetype on the psyche is more important than whether or not such a universal idea actually exists. The same counts for spirits: their effect works through the faith the shaman and patient have in their existence, and through the shaman and patient’s mental and personal representations, not through the actual, objective existence of spirits as a single entity.

## INDIVIDUATION

Archetypes often present themselves through dreams, which are important tools through which a person can connect to his unconscious in Jungian psychology. Because understanding and connecting to archetypes is important for healing the psyche, interpretation of dreams is therefore crucial for the healing of the patient. According to Jung, an interpretation has to ‘click’ with what seems to be a logical explanation, and it has to be meaningful.

If a person records his dreams for a long period of time, months or even years, he can perceive a meandering pattern in his dreams, in which the same subjects appear again and again, though slowly aspects of his dreams change over time. This psychic growth is called individuation. The organizing centre behind this is called the Self, which is an archetype of the totality of the psyche. The Self is not conscious and can only be perceived and understood through dreams or visions. Individuation is important, because it enables people to act out their full potential. Your Self is always aware of this potential, but as long as your conscious does not realize this potential as well and acts upon it, you will not develop as a person. Your potential has to become conscious through the aid of interpreting the symbolic representations in your dreams. The goal of individuation should not be understood wrongly as being useful or achieving big goals: its goal is to fulfill your inherent destiny, which can just as well be a state in which you seem apparently useless to other people (Franz 1964). Dreams differ from normal conscious thinking, in that they are not at first sight logical constructions. In dreams the unconscious representation of objects may be portrayed, of which we would consciously not be aware. We may know the most basic elements of a concept and we may feel it is redundant to specify a concept further, but we can forget that an object or concept can mean different things to different people with different backgrounds. As such, dreams with similar concepts and objects in them, can have a different meaning for different people. In dreams, common objects can have a more wide variety of meanings, because they are not bound to our rational definitions anymore. In shamanic societies, these more fantastic properties of objects are still known to man. For example, common objects or living things, such as stones, animals, and plants have extra powers. This more enriched worldview and fantastic attitude will aid these people in interpreting messages from their unconscious, which become visualized in their dreams and visions.

According to Jung, in modern day life, many people pay little attention to their unconscious, fantastic inner world, and they focus only on external objects. This creates a distorted mind, in which unconscious and conscious are dissociated. According to Jung this will lead to neurosis. The function of dreams is to restore

our distorted mind and bring us back to our balanced nature. We do not have control over our soul as we may think we have. Parts of our soul can tear off or be blocked without our consent or knowledge, which can lead to mental instability or neurosis. This mental instability is symbolically meaningful; they are an expression of the unconscious mind. The longer a patient talks about these symbolic representations that arise in his dreams, the more his real problem (i.e., the core or cause of the illness) becomes clear, even if the patient tries to hide this. According to Jung, not only dreams, but any kind of experience can provide these unconscious symbols that show the 'real problem' (Jung 1964). This dissociation is a similar

---

Both shamanism  
and Jung address  
that part of us  
that makes us hu-  
man beings

principle to the soul loss in shamanic communities. Both definitions refer to a state of dissociation, in which either the Self of the person is disconnected with the conscious mind (Jung) or body and soul are not connected anymore (shamanism). Both states will lead to an instability of the mind and body, and a state of illness, physically or mentally. Both shamanism and Jung address that part of us that makes us human beings. Instead of being driven by animalistic or bodily needs, we have an unperceivable core that

gives us the sense of consciousness and free will. Without this core, we are inevitably lost. A more modern view of this is a state of imbalance, in which we have lost control over our own mental well-being, and have lost insight into what we want to achieve in life.

## OPIOID RELEASE AND THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

We have now established the similarities between the healing practices of shamanism and Jungian analytical psychology. Both philosophies are not always taken seriously by academics as successful therapies, due to the fact that neither shamans nor Jung have presented scientific evidence for their ideas. There are, however, neurological findings that provide evidence why shamanic and Jungian healing can in some cases be successful. In shamanic healing the shaman will enter an altered state of consciousness (ASC) that produces the spiritual experiences which lead to healing.

In an ASC state, there is an increase in high voltage and slow frequency brain waves which activate the limbic system and the brain stem. This will result in a better synthesis and integration between brain areas, especially the prefrontal cortex, which will cause better information processing in the brain, especially of nonverbal information and emotions, and it will promote feelings of social bonding, empathy, and understanding of others, all of which are important for a shaman's role as healer and leader. Furthermore, in the ASC state, there is an enhancement of serotonergic functioning and opioid release in the brain, which activates the body's ability to heal itself by strengthening the immune system, reduce stress and anxiety, increase coping skills, maintain bodily homeostasis and reduce pain (Winkelman 2002). The immune system is important for fighting against pathogens that cause harm to the body, it does so by producing anti-bodies against these pathogens. Emotions and especially stress are important factors that influence the ability of the immune system to do its work (Winkelman 2010). By reducing the impact negative emotions have on us, or reducing the general level of stress and negative emotions, the immune system can do its work better and thereby certain conditions, especially those that are stress related, can be healed 'from the inside'. Besides that, a shaman will experience this self-healing, it is especially important to evoke such a state in his patient, in order to cause a similar effect in the affected person.

A modern implementation that is currently widely studied and relates to the above is the research on mindfulness meditation therapy. Due to its stress reducing effects, mindfulness meditation can be beneficial in chronic pain reduction (Ussher, et al. 2012) relieve symptoms in inflammatory conditions (Rosenkranz, et al. 2012), and can generally reduce feelings of anxiety, depression and psychological distress (Marchand 2012). This not only shows how important stress reduction is to improve and maintain good health, but also shows how cognitive-behavioural practices can be successful in establishing these health effects.

Some clinical research has also been performed on shamanic healing techniques, showing positive results in small cohorts of women. Women suffering from Temporomandibular joint disorders

(TMDs) reported long-term pain relief due to shamanic healing, which lasted for at least nine months after treatment was ended (Vuckovic, et al. 2012). A case-study of a research project in Ladakh, India, argues that shamanistic rituals may be useful as medical preventive measures (Kressing 2011).

## SYMBOLISM

The use of symbols can aid self-healing and can help alter brain processes that are necessary for healing to occur. Both shamanism and analytical psychology symbolize the cause of illness in a specific mental property: either as soul loss, or soul dissociation. This gives patient and healer a specific image of what underlies illness, which gives both more confidence in the treatability of the illness. We can compare this to finding the underlying cause of a widespread illness, for example, cancer: finding what causes the illness is always the first step to curing it, and it generally makes people feel confident that there is a solution at hand. In shamanism and Jungian psychology, the symbolic cause of an illness does not necessarily have to resemble a true, physical cause in order to find an effective therapy, the symbolic healing is rather based on a 'mythic world' that does not necessarily have to reflect reality. Both the shamanic healer and the Jungian psychologist will restructure the disorder within this mythic world, and as long as both therapist and patient believe this will work, the therapy can be successful. The patient learns to attach emotions to certain symbols, through which he can affect his state of mind, through which he can affect his bodily state (Dow March 1986). In shamanism, the symbols used can represent the cause of illness as a spirit that stole a patient's soul, and the healing device as a protective spirit returning the soul. In analytical psychology, dreams are mostly used as a starting point to search where the cause of one's neurosis lies. For both therapies, the exact symbols that are used are arbitrary: the emotions that a patient attaches to them will in the end influence a patient's neurobiological state, which will reduce or alleviate the symptoms of one's illness.

## CONCLUSION

Shamanism and Jungian analytical psychology are two methods that are far-fetched from modern science, and are mostly considered helpful by the alternative spirituality scene, which does not approach both techniques from a scientific perspective, but regards them as more or less ancient knowledge provided to modern man by ancient communities and one of the founders of modern psychology, Carl Jung. Because of this approach, which mostly relies in the belief on an authority, academics may oversee the actual benefits of both methods. Both practices share similarities on many aspects, such as definition of illness, cause of illness, and best treatment options. Shamanism regards the loss of the soul as the main cause of illness, which can be defined as a rip between mind and body: immortal core and mortal physique. In a similar manner, Jungian analytical psychology perceives a dissociation between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind as the cause of neurosis. Though the conscious and unconscious are more complex and established definitions in Jung's theory, we can roughly compare the unconscious to our soul, which contains our deep and inner drives, and which contains accumulated and universal knowledge that is not bound to time or space. Our conscious mind refers to the here and now, our current drives, and it can more easily be fooled, just as our bodily needs are regarded as less important and more deceitful than our spiritual ones.

---

Both practices share similarities on many aspects, such as definition of illness, cause of illness, and best treatment options

The most important comparison between both techniques lies in that both realize that the road to a cure does not necessarily lay in finding the 'true' cause of illness, or what symbol is used to describe the cause of one's illness. They realize any kind of spiritual cure is in essence the same, and that personified symbols are important to change a patient's state of being, but that the exact symbols used are irrelevant, as long as they represent importance to the ill person. We can confirm this by looking at how our brain works. For the brain, it does not matter if we visualize illness as an evil ghost who penetrated our body and stole our soul, or as a

symbolic representation brought to us by the unconscious mind. To a certain extent, the principle through which we have the ability to cure ourselves always remains the same. Research on mindfulness meditation, shamanic healing and rituals shows how these practices are beneficial for those suffering from several kinds of disorders. The wide applicability of these practices only confirms how universal these methods are. Although it is certainly not postulated that they are beneficial for any kind of disorder or medical condition, they have especially proven to be helpful in reducing the burden of pain and stress in individuals, physical conditions in which our mental condition plays an important role.

## REFERENCES

- Corbett, Lionel. 1996. *The religious function of the psyche*. London: Routledge.
- Dow, James. 1986. *Universal aspects of symbolic healing: a theoretical synthesis*. *American Anthropologist* 88(1): 56-69.
- Franz, M. L. 1964. "The process of individuation." Pp. 158-229 in *Man and his symbols*, edited by C. G. Jung, M. L. Franz, J. L. Henderson, J. Jacobi, & A. Jaffé. London: Aldus Books Limited.
- Jakobsen, M. D. 1999. *Shamanism: traditional and contemporary approaches to the mastery of spirits and healing*. British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: Berghahn Books.
- Jung, C. G. 1964. "Approaching the unconscious." Pp. 18-103 in *Man and his symbols*, edited by C. G. Jung, M. L. Franz, J. L. Henderson, J. Jacobi, & A. Jaffé. London: Aldus Books Limited.
- Kressing, F. 2011. "Shamanism as medical prevention? A case study from Ladakh, Northwest-India." *Medizin, Gesellschaft, und Geschichte* 30: 229-252.
- Marchand, William R. 2012. "Mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and Zen meditation for depression, anxiety, pain, and psychological distress." *Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 18(4): 233-252.
- Rosenkranz, M., Davidson, R., Maccoon, D., Sheridan, J., Kalin, N., & Lutz, A. 2012. "A comparison of mindfulness-based stress reduction and an active control in modulation of neurogenic inflammation." *Brain, Behaviour, and Immunity, in press*.
- Sandner, D. F., & Wong, S. H. 1997. *The sacred heritage: the influence of shamanism on analytical psychology*. New York: Routledge.
- Sanson, D. 2008. "New/old spiritualities in the west: neo-shamans and neo-shamanism." Pp. 433-463 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, edited by M. Pizza, & J. R. Lewis. Leiden: Brill.

*Where religion and medicine meet*

- Tacey, David. 2001. *Jung and the new age*. Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge.
- Ussher, M., Spatz, A., Copland, C., Nicolaou, A., Cargill, A., Amini-Tabrizi, N., & McCracken, L. 2012. "Immediate effects of a brief mindfulness-based body scan on patients with chronic pain." *Journal of Behavioural Medicine*, in press.
- Vuckovic, N., Williams, L., Schneider, J., Ramirez, M., & Gullion, C. 2012. "Long-term outcomes of shamanic treatment for temporomandibular joint disorders." *The Permanente Journal* 16(2): 28-35.
- West, William. 2000. *Psychotherapy & spirituality: crossing the line between therapy and religion*. London: Sage Publications.
- Winkelman, M. 2002. "Shamanism as neurotheology and evolutionary psychology." *American Behavioral Scientist* 45(12): 1873-1885.
- , 2010. *Shamanism: a biopsychosocial paradigm of consciousness and healing*. Oxford: Praeger.

