

The “dangerous others”: Spiritual energy and contagion

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Abstract

The paper addresses representations of danger in the spiritual sphere in contemporary society in Slovakia by exploring the specific case of neo-shamanic groups. This argument is based on Mary Douglas’s theory and the representations of spiritual practices are interpreted in relation to the particular social context. I present the results of ethnographic research conducted in Bratislava. I argue that in the neo-shamans’ interpretations of spiritual healing the notion of contagion serves as a signal of danger and indicates “wrong” beliefs and behaviour. Their reasoning is centred around altered states of consciousness (ASC) linked to the concept of energy. Neo-shamans represent shamanic healing as a moral act. However, rivalry between experts results in mutual blaming: “wrong” practice results in harm caused by the influence of negative energy. My interpretation is complemented by the results of a preliminary survey of articles in selected Christian media addressing the theme of alternative spirituality. They define Christianity as the only true spiritual path and condemn practitioners of all non-Christian spiritual techniques involving ASC, the reason being that any spiritual healing, including neo-shamanism, opens the way for contagious evil forces. The harmful effect is therefore associated with contagion and is ascribed to the practices of “others” both in the context of alternative spirituality and in the context of Christian media.

Key words

Danger, neo-shamanism, alternative spirituality, Christianity, contagion, energy

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Max Weber argued that the dismissal of magic from the modern world was maintained by the anti-metaphysical and empirical orientation of science and its imperative of pursuing truth (Weber [1919] 1948). However, the disenchantment of the world “has always been challenged by mystic, intellectualized, or private religious reasoning” (von Stuckrad 2002: 772). At the end of the 20th century, Zygmunt Bauman (1993: 33) linked such tendencies to the post-modern era and argued that “postmodernity... brings ‘re-enchantment’ of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to dis-enchant it”. In the social sciences this process has been variously described as “return to religion”, “new spirituality”, or “new religiosity” (Tížik 2006: 8). In Slovakia, the fall of the communist regime contributed to a “religious awakening” that was manifested in two ways: the return to traditional Christian forms of religiosity (especially Catholicism) and the spread of new religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. The latter included both institutionalized religious movements and diverse forms of spirituality which often opposed traditional religious worldviews (Tížik 2006: 8–11). Many of them corresponded to global spiritual trends which have grown in popularity in Western countries since the 1960s (Heelas 1996; Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman – Aupers 2007; 2010). One of these trends was neo-shamanism (or urban shamanism) – a spiritual movement based on the idea of the revival of traditional healing practices.

My ethnographic research of neo-shamanic groups was conducted in Bratislava in the period 2009–2013.¹ In this paper, I continue my argument with regard to the concept of spiritual energy, one of the most commonly used terms in the context of alternative spirituality. Previously, I described how neo-shamans use this concept to legitimize the shamanic gift and how their rhetoric corresponds to the social context in which they operate (Bužeková 2019). Here, I will argue that the concept of energy is used not only to signify the “right” spiritual practices, but also to identify the “wrong” ones. My argument is based on the notions of danger and uncleanness, proposed by Mary Douglas in her cultural theory (1966; [1970] 1996; [1992] 2003).

1 In previous publications I have paid attention to several aspects of the functioning of these groups, including the development of neo-shamanism, neo-shamanic rituals, the legitimation of neo-shamanic practices, gender dynamics in neo-shamanic groups, and the concept of shamanic healing (Bužeková 2011; 2012; 2014; 2017).

The main idea is that practitioners of neo-shamanism use the concept of energy in moral reasoning; in this, the notion of contagion indicates the “wrong” beliefs and behaviour of “others” – in terms of membership or other social differences. At the same time, to understand the behaviour of urban shamans, it is important to know how alternative spirituality is represented in the Christian discourse, because, in Slovakia, the erosion of the Christian monopoly during modernity (Luckmann 1967) is not as significant as it might have been in Western countries.² Despite local differences, it can generally be said that the Christian worldview is authoritative.

In the first part of this paper I will address neo-shamanism and briefly describe my field research. I will also consider the concept of spiritual energy in relation to the shamanic journey.³ I will then present the results of the analysis of the ethnographic data obtained during the research, which related to two neo-shamanic groups. In the final section I will describe the attitudes of neo-shamans towards Christianity. To complement this argument, I will consider the results of a preliminary survey of selected Christian sources that comment on non-Christian spiritual practices.

Neo-shamanism and spiritual energy

Neo-shamanism emerged in the context of the structural transformation of Western society after the Second World War and the rise of national liberation movements in the third world (Boekhoven 2011: 164; Znamenski 2007: 166). This term 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). The American anthropologist Michael Harner was inspired by Mircea Eliade’s ideas and considered shamanism to be the oldest form of spirituality. He used ethnographies of various cultures and created a specific system of spiritual techniques – core shamanism referring to “the universal principles and practices not bound to any specific cultural group or perspective” (Core Shamanism 2019b; see also Harner 1980). Harner laid the foundations

2 In the census of 2011, 84.7% of the population declared themselves to be Christians, of which Catholics constituted the majority (62% of the population) (Štatistický úrad SR 2011).

3 In the context of neo-shamanic groups, I will use the terms “shaman” and “shamanic” as emic terms (Bužeková 2010; 2011; 2012).

for the transmission of core shamanism to a wider audience by training urban shamans at workshops and courses organized by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter referred to as the FSS). However, many Western practitioners follow non-Harnerian models of shamanism, which are often based on local traditions of spiritual healing but which have, nevertheless, absorbed globalized esoteric elements and magic practices (Znamenski 2007: 248–256).

The formation of neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia was influenced by the activities of the European branch of FSS in Vienna. However, in Slovakia, there are groups that follow shamanic traditions without having attended FSS events. These circles have been formed and have functioned in private, on the basis of personal contacts. I conducted ethnographic research in the years 2009–2013 in an FSS women's circle of 15 participants and I also attended many FSS events. In 2010, I contacted a group that had formed around a spiritual healer named Peter.⁴ He was not affiliated with the FSS, although he knew many people there. At the time I met Peter his group consisted of six members. Their meetings were held in private.

Although the spiritual practices of the two groups differed (Bužeková 2014), they were centred around a main ritual – the shamanic journey aimed at contacting spiritual forces of the “other reality”, which involved altered states of consciousness. It was derived from ethnographic descriptions of traditional shamanic rituals accompanied by trance, during which a shaman communicated with the spirits of nature to help people and the community. The term “trance”, however, has been criticized; in the academic discourse it has largely been replaced by the term “altered states of consciousness” (hereinafter referred to as ASC) (Atkinson 1992: 310–311; Hamayon 1993). In neo-shamanism, ASC are induced by various techniques, mainly those associated with traditional shamanic practices – drumming or the rhythmic sounds of percussion instruments. Urban shamans, however, can draw on any cultural tradition and can achieve ASC by means of other techniques. In spite of their diversity, they have a common aspect: the construction of meaning is conditioned by a shared doctrine of “self-spirituality” which “constitutes the common denominator of the wide range of beliefs, rituals, and practices found in the contemporary spiritual milieu” (Houtman – Aupers 2010: 6–7). The “inner dimension” places emphasis on mental processes and emotions as experienced by practitioners; and ASC are perceived as a channel to the universal spiritual energy.

In neo-shamanism ASC are interpreted in connection to nature because neo-shamanism “focuses on nature’s holistic experiencing, which not only

4 All the names of the respondents have been changed.

tries to bind humans back to the cosmic unity but also allows for a (re)sacralization of living nature” (von Stuckrad 2002: 792). In ethnographic descriptions of traditional rituals, shamans travelled to a world populated by local spirits and deities of nature. In neo-shamanism, the “other reality” refers to natural forces, which are personified according to the preferences of practitioners – they can choose from a vast range of cultural representations (see, for instance, Lindquist 1997; Wallis 2003; Ďurčová 2010; Exnerová 2018). As part of a larger discourse on nature-based spirituality and healing, neo-shamanism often makes use of scientific vocabulary. One of the most important terms that serves as a linguistic bridge between science and spirituality, especially in the context of spiritual healing, is the concept of energy (Keshet 2009; 2011). This concept is familiar to all practitioners of urban shamanism, regardless of the group to which they belong, and they all use it in the general sense of a spiritual force. Even so, the exact meaning of this word is not available: they all know what it is, but do not define it precisely. Thus, the concept of energy in neo-shamanism can be interpreted as an “empty signifier” – a set of ideas that are not easily glossed: one can perhaps see what an empty signifier does, but not what it is (Keesing 1985). Its use is not uniform, but adapts to the specific conditions.

As I have argued elsewhere (Bužeková 2019), the effectiveness of shamanic healing is related to the quality of ASC ensuring the connection to the spiritual sphere. 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, who are the leading figures within neo-shamanic groups. The concept of energy is a powerful instrument used in legitimization of shamanic abilities: it indicates what is “right”. I will demonstrate below that it also appears as an indicator of “wrong” spiritual practices.

To interpret this argumentation, I will use Mary Douglas’s theoretical concepts of danger and pollution. In her collection of essays *Risk and Blame* ([1992] 2003) she presented the ideas which she had earlier introduced in her classical work *Purity and Danger* (1966) and later elaborated together with the sociologist Aaron Wildavsky in *Risk and Culture* (Douglas – Wildavsky 1982). Douglas argues that “in all places at all times the universe is moralized and politicized” (Douglas [1992] 2003: 5). All societies create symbolic classifications of the world that determine “the normal” and “the right” in all domains of human life. Disturbance of the “normal” course of events is interpreted as danger. Things that people consider as anomalous and transgressive of normal bounds are denoted as “unclean”. Douglas continues Durkheim’s argument concerning the

contagious nature of sacred things and demonstrates that in the religious and spiritual sphere, the terms clean and unclean are linked to people's perception of what constitutes contamination and refer to the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Douglas 1966: 21–22). Thus, the notion of pollution is a universal moral symbol: not only does it signify a potentially dangerous sacred sphere, but it also indicates a violation of social norms. As such, it provides anthropologists with an instrument to study the social order. The relevant behaviour for identifying danger is mutual scanning, judging, reproving and excusing, blaming and retaliating against blame.

These considerations are useful in the interpretation of moral reasoning in the context of alternative spirituality. Ideas about the contagious sacred could be applied to the concept of spiritual energy. At the same time, the notion of contamination as a signal of danger can indicate the violation of moral norms which reflect the social order in a given community. In the next section, I will consider the following questions: 1) How do practitioners of shamanism describe the role of ASC in shamanic healing? 2) In what way is the concept of energy used in their argumentation?

What shamans say about shamanic healing

Shamanic experiences do not come to practitioners involuntarily: to achieve ASC and to heal successfully, they must learn how to contact “the other reality”. Shamanic education follows specific patterns in the different circles.

FSS circles

In FSS circles learning takes place during seminars and workshops. Attendees become gradually familiar with core shamanism and the techniques aimed at inducing the “Shamanic States of Consciousness” described by Harner in *The Way of the Shaman* (1980). Their interpretations of experiences during shamanic journeys are supposed to be free of dogmas: “...one should not ‘believe’ in anything. Rather, the shaman’s picture of the world, including the Spirit World, is based on her/his spiritual experience” (Lindquist 2004: 87). Indeed, my respondents’ interpretations often depended on individual preferences, inclinations and goals.

For example, the accountant named Linda is a rather pragmatic woman who is not very interested in intellectual matters. For her, the journey is always about concrete communication with her spiritual teacher:

When I need something, I usually go to my teacher and either I see images, or they show me something I need. It is both practical and exact. I don't see things like rainbows or butterflies, or anything else. I wouldn't know how to explain them. When my son was sick, I saw that his throat was bad, so I brought him what I was supposed to bring to [heal] his throat. I did what I was supposed to do, what the teacher showed me.

Unlike Linda, the social worker Milada is deeply interested in theorizing shamanism and in creating an idealistic vision of people who love and help each other. Thus, her descriptions of the shamanic ASC accentuate the concept of energy, which is intertwined with the notions of common work, love and purity:

During the shamanic journey?... There, I feel different energy in every place I visit, I feel it with my whole body. I have a sense of altered consciousness there. That consciousness is as if it were out of time, as if it were in a clean space, in a quiet space, as if it were in a chimney. I take it as a chimney of light, like a radiant chimney, and I perceive it in this way. All energy is different, it has a different quality. I find myself... not that I feel the body, I feel the body as if I did not feel the body... but I feel my head as if I were in silence, in another reality. I cannot express it in words, it cannot even be expressed in words. It's a state where you don't think, where you only see images, it's incredibly pleasant there, and where you get instructions on what to do or how to do it. But most of the time I just get an impulse, and then, when we do common work, it is completed. I think that this is what the common work is about. That's why I like working in a circle. I love it. Because not only does one person get something, everyone gets something, and there is that feeling of belonging, of co-creation. And we do it together, everyone is there, nobody is superior, nobody is inferior, we are all equal, we are sitting in a circle and sharing, and everyone actually gets a picture, and we create something that will then become a ritual, we will do it together, the common work. And this work actually benefits not only us, but also our family, just everyone, the whole world.

Milada referred to ASC and energy not only when we talked about solving her own health problems or problems in her family, but also when

she described her work with homeless people and her other activities, including teaching a course on spiritual painting and an internet course on healthy food. She was engaged in the propagation of various diets which she perceived as being complementary to biomedical treatment; she interpreted them as a purification of the energy of the body. In general, the words “work” and “purification” were the most frequent expressions in my respondents’ statements about the shamanic journey. It was often represented as a profoundly moral endeavour aimed at helping humankind (Bužeková 2017).

Despite the democratic approach, what people learn at FSS seminars is subordinate to the universal structure underlying the reproduction of core shamanism as the authoritative body of knowledge. The freedom of choice is not unlimited: during training, people learn not only how to change their state of consciousness, but also how to interpret their feelings and mental images. Lecturers who organize seminars and teach core shamanism are authoritative figures in such interpretation. These are persons who succeeded in obtaining the Certificate of Completion, which has several levels corresponding to the principles of core shamanism (FSS 2019a). Although the lecturers’ instructions are supposed to follow the universal principles of core shamanism, in practice their advice can significantly differ, even within the same circle. What practitioners choose to follow depends on the lecturer’s authority. Although the certificate provides the authorisation to teach, some teachers have greater authority because they are represented as persons with a special gift. Such charismatic healers are supposed to have direct access to the spiritual energy and, therefore, to the spiritual knowledge (Bužeková 2019). Their instructions and decisions are accepted without discussion.

For instance, during a workshop on the medicine wheel, participants were building a symbolic circle of stones allegedly corresponding to the tradition of the American Indians, in neo-shamanism sometimes interpreted in Jungian terms. There were two lecturers – Alena and Laura. The latter was represented as a person with a special gift. When Alena explained to practitioners that one of the stones represents the Child “only metaphorically”, Laura rather vigorously corrected her and said that it was not a metaphor: practitioners should talk to the stone because it really *is* the Child, a part of their inner self. All participants, including Alena, accepted this interpretation without dissent. Laura repeatedly corrected Alena’s interpretations; and she decisively influenced the interpretations of the practitioners’ individual experiences of the “other reality”.

In FSS circles, ASC are primarily interpreted positively, in terms of energy as a cosmic spiritual force, which pervades people’s bodies. However,

during lectures, and especially in everyday conversations, I also observed references to the negative energy influence linked to the “other reality”. Lecturers sometimes mentioned dangerous ways of using energy which they called black magic or negative spiritual influence. They admitted that such practices had existed in shamanism in the past and still exist today outside neo-shamanism; but they stressed that modern shamans should avoid them. As Laura stated: “People can do that, they can harm others. That is their choice. I wouldn’t do it; and if you want to do it, you are not a healer”. In general, in core shamanism the spiritual energy used by practitioners is represented in a positive way. As Znamenski (2007: 244) noted, “spirits might be gentle or stern, and they might help, taunt, spook, or even perform a spiritual dismemberment of a person. Still, they never hurt one. No matter how scary a shamanic journey is, it always has a happy ending”.

I observed that in confronting disparate “readings” of spiritual experiences in the same circle participants were always friendly and tried to find positive solutions to problems. However, this “safe” picture changed in conversations about approaches used in other circles. They contained references to wrong practice and were related to the apparent competition and tensions between two authorised lecturers, the first persons to obtain certificates of completion in Slovakia. One of these lecturers, Alena, had formed a shamanic group in Bratislava; another, Zuzana, had formed one in Zvolen. My respondents from Alena’s circle described Zuzana’s approach as “wild”, “dark”, and dangerous. One of the important features of this negative image was the use of hallucinogenic substances. Although Harner (1980) initially included their use in the techniques aimed at inducing the Shamanic States of Consciousness, he tended to be rather cautious in this respect later on (Znamenski 2007: 234–247). In Slovakia today, the use of psychedelics is subject to legislation and, therefore, shamans do not mention them in public. This does not mean that practitioners cannot use them in private, but I never witnessed any drug-taking during shamanic sessions. All my respondents articulated a negative attitude toward hallucinogenic substances. At the same time, practitioners from Alena’s circle claimed that the use of hallucinogens was a common technique in Zuzana’s circle. They also referred to pollution caused by the contagious negative energy. An episode which I observed during a seminar on soul retrieval can serve as an illustration of how the notion of contamination could influence people’s behaviour. There was a rumour that one of the attendees had come from Zuzana’s circle. Consequently, the participants talked about the “negative energy” emanating from him and avoided physical and verbal contact with him (he could not stand the isolation and left before the end of the seminar). Such behaviour corresponds to beliefs

about supernatural harm caused by magical contamination described by many ethnographers in “tribal” societies, as well as in contemporary European countries (see, for instance, Jerotijević 2010; 2011; 2015).

To conclude, in FSS circles the shamanic healing is conditioned by ASC which allows contact with the universal cosmic energy. This energy is primarily positive. The negative energy influence is interpreted as a violation of moral rules which are characteristic of the “right” shamanic practices. Such a violation leads to spiritual pollution which is described in terms of negative energy.

A private circle

Peter and his circle do not practise core shamanism, but the Mongolian version of shamanism. Peter’s circle was formed on the basis of his personal contacts and consisted of six regular members, including Peter (two men and four women, at that time aged between 22 and 35, students and college graduates). 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 the reputation of being a recognized expert in esotericism and shamanism, as he began his spiritual “career” in the early 1990s. Finally, Peter was represented as a person with special spiritual abilities, including being able to see the aura and energy.

Peter implicitly or explicitly stressed his superiority to other shamans – not only shamans of his own circle, but especially those from the FSS. He justified this claim by referring to his “stronger” abilities which could not be learned (see Bužeková 2019). In his opinion, core shamanism was not the right way to obtain shamanic knowledge. First of all, he regarded it as cultural appropriation or theft (in this respect, he referred to the public campaigns of native Americans). Secondly, he considered it ineffective and even harmful, because FSS lecturers did not “know” things. Thirdly, he blamed them for using hallucinogenic substances. In particular, he claimed that Alena brought drugs together with magic amulets from Vienna in order to sell them to her students. In general, Peter accused the FSS of commercial activities, which he regarded as incompatible with spiritual healing.

Peter and his followers used the concept of energy almost exclusively in relation to bodily illnesses. Peter had numerous clients with health problems. He typically interpreted their problems in terms of energy attacks and loss of energy. Danger was represented in two basic ways: destructive “negative energy” which contaminated a victim’s body; and energy loss caused by energy draining away. Both referred to a link between the at-

tacker and victim (for instance, talking, touching, contact with material objects, etc.). When describing diagnostics, Peter could operate by traditional folk concepts, such as *urieknutie* (‘the evil eye’ – a magic disease cast by a look or praise):

when a person needs energy, they often take it from another person. And actually, when they’ve done it once, they’ve made a channel. And they can do it any time. And that other person, of course, feels weak and, over time, becomes emptied out, but [the first person] keeps taking, and so [the other person] becomes withered.

In this example, the notion of contagion is displayed in the “connection” between an attacker and a victim which is established by a harmful look. Peter described healing as “washing” or “disconnection”. In other cases, Peter and other group members spoke of “sucking from” (*cucat*) or draining energy from others. This also applied to what they called witchcraft (*čarodejnictvo*) or black magic. For example, Peter told me about Roma witchcraft and “magic services” paid for by people who wanted to harm others:

*My ex-girlfriend’s father is half-Gypsy, but her mother is white. But his family... they were not nice at all. They were nice to me, but overall, they were... There are people who just don’t fit with me. I felt that they were terrible. They would smile to your face, but then you turn around and you have a knife in your back. One of them said that it didn’t bother her to kill a hen and use it in witchcraft. ... We discussed those kind of things and they started talking. Scary! ... They charged around 30–40,000 crowns for *urieknutie*. I don’t know how much they charge now, but at that time it was 30–40,000, or they would take gold.*

Notably, magical harm was mentioned in relation to family members. Mira, Peter’s girlfriend, talked about her mother who allegedly tried to “suck from” Mira and Peter any time she visited them; and Peter had to protect their place by several apotropaic objects which he called “energy shields”. Grandmother of Leo, another group member, was supposed to have “her own black magic” which she used not only to cure her diabetes, but to harm her descendants by “sucking from” them. Leo emphasized that he and his mother were able to defend themselves by means of shamanic techniques:

- *Yes, black magic. When you visit her, she sucks from you as much as she can, and she curses you.*

- *How did you feel it?*

- *Well, you go away and you're completely exhausted, or you tell her things that you didn't want to. She starts asking questions and you say things that you shouldn't tell her, things that we promised not to tell her, and she always manages to extract everything out of everyone. And you go away completely empty, washed out, you're not able to do anything all day long. And she curses people. But we've already discovered how to defend ourselves, so it somehow doesn't work with us. I've got animals [power animals, a shaman's allies], so they automatically attack her. When it didn't work with us, she started to curse others in our family. Peter said that there are always enough resources in the family. Now, she's cursing my mom's husband. He is ill, he has a urinary tract inflammation, and he has been taking strong antibiotics for three weeks. He is trying to cure it, he is a doctor and still, he can't cure himself. He says he got it from the hospital, but he didn't get it from the hospital, because it started when she stopped cursing us and started cursing him. She started telling me and mum that we were bastards. My brother is good, because he is stupid and lets her do it. Since we began to defend ourselves and her curses didn't work, me and my mom became bastards. She found out that something was wrong, that it wasn't working, that it was coming back to her. ... Her magic, I guess, came from the Jews. Because during the war they hid a Jew in Kubín. And somehow, they talked with him about what to do and how to do it, and probably he trained them, because even her mother knew such things. But it might not only be the Jews – up there, in Orava, people still do it.*

Characteristically, “sucking from” others played an important role in arguments about shamans from other circles, particularly those who competed with Peter in spiritual healing. The rivalry between healers was apparent in conversations on a shamanic forum where Peter functioned as an administrator (later he established his own website). In the following discussion, Mira and Peter talk about their former friend Vlad and his wife Naďa who practised shamanism. Vlad gradually became Peter's opponent. He and his wife were described by Peter as people who “don't do things in the right way”. Remarkably, the characteristic of “sucking from” others was ascribed to their son:

Mira: But the problem was that we were both so exhausted when they were leaving us, because their son was a terrible sucker. Despite all the shields we have here, he still broke through the defences and sucked from us. I wonder why Vlad and Nada didn't realize that he was sucking.

Peter: He lacks energy and, you know, he has circles around his eyes, the eyes are so swollen.

Mira: Even Ester [Peter and Mira's dog] didn't want him anymore. We were wondering about that. She ran away from him, he caught her, and she started running away. He was so fond of Ester when she was still a puppy and he was always looking forward to playing with her. But as she grew older, she lost interest in him. She likes cuddling, but she just doesn't want him.

Peter: The greatest darkness is under the lamp. And we haven't talked to them much since that.

Contagious energy draining was discussed in relation to shamans who did not belong to Peter's circle, especially those who regularly attended FSS workshops. In the following excerpt, Peter, Mira and Leo talk about a private session when Nora, who had previously participated in FSS events, “sucked from” others.

Mira: It is unpleasant to be exposed to such things. We dealt with Nora there, right? She sucked from the whole group, indeed... There was a demonstration of a technique – you take a rough stone, ask a question, and look for answers there... Well, Rudo asked who wanted to be a volunteer... So, Nora said: “Me!” They practiced for about half an hour, and perhaps after fifteen minutes we all were hurting, and we all fell asleep. That was terrible...

Leo: She just talked and talked. “I think this...”, “I think that...” She just kept gibbering away.

Peter: People were focused on what was happening, they weren't paying attention to her, and she was able to drain away energy. But she does it all the time. She uses this energy for a while for ordinary things, but she can't keep it, because you can't do it if you have stolen it from other people, so you can use it immediately, but you can't accumulate it. And the more she wants, the more she drains.

Such spiritual “vampirism” was represented by Peter and other members of his circle as the opposite of “giving” or “bringing” energy – the

proper aim of the shamanic journey. The notion of spiritual contagion served as a signal of danger and signified improper behaviour – the violation of rules related to shamanic healing.

Neo-shamanism and Christianity

In this section, I will examine the way in which shamans relate their practices to Christianity or religion in general. The results of a preliminary survey of selected Christian internet sources addressing alternative spiritual practices, including shamanism are also presented.

What shamans say about religion

Most practitioners of shamanism come from Christian families and many of their relatives have negative attitudes toward alternative spirituality. The shamans' use of spiritual techniques therefore means that sometimes there is a confrontation with Christian beliefs. To deal with this problem, some of them conceal their practice and do not talk about shamanism. As Slavka from Peter's circle said, "I don't bandy that around". The usual comment was "We don't talk about it".

Concealment of alternative spiritual orientation is not problematic when one practices in a circle of friends and does not need to publish one's activities. But it is not that easy for shamans who want to attract clients and earn money. They mainly use personal contacts, but also create web pages. Because of this, their shamanic identity is revealed and sometimes they are interviewed by biased journalists. Peter said:

I was "lucky" that I was in a newspaper. When you do it in public, there are automatically negative emotions, you can't avoid it. When someone writes that you said that a priest was ineffective... But I didn't say that!

In the public context, practitioners represent shamanism as the oldest universal spiritual tradition of humankind. Yet they often try to avoid the term "shamanism", because they are aware of its negative meaning for Christian believers. Robert, who runs an FSS forum and offers massages as well as shamanic healing, says:

Several times people have asked me for help via the internet: they were able to find out about these things there. But I think that this

form of contact doesn't work properly, because many people don't know the real meaning of the word "shamanism". They often mistake it for something else and do not trust it. That's why I say to my clients that I use old healing techniques. I know what I do, and I let people develop their own attitudes; then I explain that we'll work with this and that; now we'll drum a little bit, we'll do this, we'll call up spirits – but please, don't be afraid, the spirits are not the souls of the deceased, they are compassionate spirits, our helpers. From the very beginning I explain things, so people feel that they are not in danger... Then they are satisfied. Some of them return to me; we consult about dreams, or things about the future, or their relationships. Some people come, try, and leave – it doesn't work for them.

Here Robert uses one of the most successful discursive strategies of shamans – reference to tradition. In this way, many practitioners achieve an “armistice” with their Christian believer relatives. Dušan (FSS circle), for instance, says:

I have a very sensitive mother and she actually has certain abilities, but she suppresses them very much, she suppresses them terribly. I don't know if it is a question of Catholic faith or what, we've never talked about it. We never talk about what I do. Usually, I say to her: "These are old healing techniques". But still, she doesn't like it. About four years ago she was hospitalized with a gallbladder, and then another two years ago she had another operation, and then... I was trying to heal, I asked her: "Can I do this for you?" She told me: "I feel when you're healing me. Leave it that way, I don't want it".

Due to the flexibility of core shamanism, FSS practitioners can combine shamanic practices with any religious system – Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, or any other. My informants considered spiritual leaders of various religious traditions including Christianity to be exemplary people engaged in work on the spiritual transformation of humankind (analogous to shamanic work). For instance, for Dušan, Jesus is “the great master”, “a shaman with exceptional abilities”. For Milada, saints were the prototypical social workers.

However, most of my respondents stated that they were not religious and, as with shamans in western countries, did not regard shamanism as a religion. Galina Lindquist notes that given the frequency of this claim it is

clear that this point has special importance. She links it to the democratic and individualistic worldview, in which the shaman is seen as a “spiritual anarchist” (Lindquist 2004: 87). However, in Slovakia, denying shamanism the status of religion can be a discursive strategy which implies that it is not dangerous for Christianity. My informants from FSS circles often stressed that shamanism is a practical spiritual path that offers a specific way of healing. Although they used such terms as “Goddess”, “deity”, “sacred”, “altar” or “shrine”, they mostly interpreted them as natural spiritual forces without placing them into a religious context. As Soňa stated, “the shamanic journey is just healing and doesn’t have anything in common with God or the Church or salvation”. To support this perspective, shamans used quasi-scientific language, in which the notion of energy was central: it allowed them to present their healing as a scientific endeavour.

In Peter’s circle such rhetoric was common. It was reinforced by the non-religious attitude of the practitioners. Unlike shamans from FSS circles, Peter and his followers usually did not use the almost-religious vocabulary of core shamanism. They applied the term “energy” almost exclusively in relation to the body. They described their spiritual experience in “traditional” shamanic terms of spirit allies, power animals, and power places – that is, in terms of natural energies which one can use in an altered state of consciousness. Peter was represented as an expert healer; nevertheless, other members of his circle could also heal other people who had asked them to. In this respect, the religious affiliation of potential clients was a thorny issue. Leo said:

- My classmate is a Catholic. His forty-year-old father lives with him. In May, he started talking about stupid things and started doing strange things, like turning the TV on and off, on and off. A total mental short circuit. So, my classmate called an ambulance and his father was taken to hospital. For three or four days he didn't know what exactly was wrong. So, he asked me to treat his father. I was watching him from a distance and tried to help. And the doctors found out that he had elevated values of cerebrospinal fluid. And they treated it with a kind of triple combination of powerful antibiotics. I treated him in the evening, and the next day he was better.

- How did your classmate ask you for help?

- He wrote to me and described what had happened. I wrote back to him and asked if he wanted me to do something about it. He knew what I did. And he's a devout Catholic, he goes to church. But he still asked me. So, he received help.

- Do people often ask you?

- No. No one knows about it, except my family and him. I don't talk about it. Catholics don't like it, you know. They attack you because of it.

Shamans who declared themselves non-religious (both in Peter's circle and in FSS circles) also typically pointed out that some religious practices, including Christian ones, are far from “pure”. They perceived rituals such as human or animal sacrifice or war ceremonies negatively. Lina (FSS circle) said:

In every ritual you go through, you encounter some energies, even the objects you use have some energy, because everything is on a spiritual basis. You work with some energy, so you actually strengthen it. But just as we have bad habits, it is up to us what we use, what objects, what shapes, and what we put in it. In some religious rituals, people strengthen heavy energies. I find it hard to talk about... I don't even want to talk about it. It's grc [Slovak expression for feeling disgust]. And I think a ritual should be positive, joyful, and then there is a good energy, but if it becomes heavy, a heavy energy, then it's the manipulation, and I feel that there is something wrong, something evil.

Like many other practitioners of core shamanism, Lina put both religious and shamanic rituals in the global context of cosmic energy and stressed individual responsibility. She did not criticize religion as such, only certain practices which she regarded as disgusting and evil. Other non-believers criticized Christian institutions due to their intolerant approach, which is incompatible with the shamanic worldview. Linda said:

When my son was little and he was at elementary school, they had a nun in the school. And I guess she was a nice girl, because my son wanted to be baptized, and then he had the first holy communion, his confirmation. And then I put him into that Catholic school of St. Ursula, and it was terrible. My son was completely disgusted with that school. Because those nuns were deranged – unfortunately, I can't describe them any other way. They didn't spread love, but fear and retribution. And when he saw it, my son, he was so disappointed that I had to take him out of the school.

Alternatively, shamans who declared themselves to be Christian believers were more cautious about the global perspective of cosmic love. Commenting on the negative image of shamans in the eyes of Christians, Viera did not approve of any spiritual practice:

*- Do you think there are shamans who really do evil things?
- I've never met such a shaman. I think that every person attains some level, so people who do bad things are at the lowest level. But I don't know if that is then a shaman, if I would call such a person a "shaman" at all. I perceive shamans as pure. I'm a Christian and I'm a white woman, I am a Puritan in some sense. I'm willing to tolerate some things, but I disagree with other things, I'm different. I may be too prudent, but as far as I know, I'm not.*

Regardless of a shaman's background and religious or non-religious attitudes, all practitioners live in Slovak society, where Christianity is the dominant religious system and where the mainstream culture is influenced by the Christian worldview. They must adapt to this environment; and they use various strategies in dealing with Christian believers' negative attitudes. Those strategies could be summarized as follows: 1) concealing shamanic activities, not talking about shamanism; 2) explaining shamanic practices by referring to the past and to old traditions; 3) claiming that shamanism is not a religion. In their argumentation, the meaning of the concept of energy can vary: it depends on the situation in which it is used, the practice to which it is applied, and the type of a neo-shamanic group. Negatively evaluated practices, whether religious or not, are categorized as impure or evil; they are explained by the improper use of energy.

What Christian opponents say about spiritual healing

The Christian media often publish warnings against spiritual temptations. Such texts are diverse and can range from rather emotional expressions of contempt and disgust on private websites run by anonymous believers to quite sophisticated rational explanations in the periodic media affiliated with Christian institutions. I paid attention to the representations of alternative spiritual techniques, including shamanism and neo-shamanism, in public texts which fall into three categories: 1) personal websites and blogs; 2) internet journals and magazines; 3) official websites of Christian churches and denominations.⁵

In Christian media, any non-Christian spiritual trend is regarded as dangerous. Danger, however, is not limited to alternative spirituality. For instance, a website run by an anonymous Catholic believer ("a person seeking truth, living faith, love and a fulfilling life", "a person with daily experience of the infinite God and his manifestations") presents the fol-

5 The survey began in November 2019 and is ongoing.

lowing list of “contemporary dangers”: “addiction, healing, homeopathy, esotericism, magic, occultism, New Age, sects and false teachings, music, Feng Shui, Yoga, meditation techniques, martial arts, books and games, MLM companies” (Heaven or Hell 2019). This list puts diverse notions into one dangerous package; the author interprets it as characteristic of consumer society. Notably, it is the spiritual dangers that prevail in this list.

The article “Can you tell us something about shamanism and the Church’s attitude toward it?” in the rubric “Dark themes” on the Catholic website “Pray” explains that Christians must not practice shamanism: in shamanism God is replaced by spirits. Shamans evoke spirits, and a person practicing shamanism is mastered/possessed by them. This means doing evil: spirits are demons and a shaman can harm others. Moreover, shamanic contacts with spirits take place with the help of drugs, and that is a criminal act (Modlitba 2019). Such negative representation of shamanism (and alternative spirituality in general) is also part of the personal blogs of Christian priests as well as the official internet journals of Christian institutions. Their notable characteristic is theological and/or scientific argument, especially in the case of Protestant denominations. The most important point of argumentation is the spiritual danger caused by ASC, which is a channel to contagious negative forces. For example, the text “Shamanism in the light of the Bible” on the website *Mercy. The Christian Community* explains the historical roots of shamanism and its incompatibility with Christianity, due to the contact with evil forces associated with the shamanic journey:

Modern people think that the old pagan cults can be reconciled with Christian culture, and even that there is no contradiction between shamanism and ancient Christian culture. But when we examine in detail the origins of shamanism and Judeo-Christian beliefs, it turns out that there is unsolvable contradiction... According to the Bible, the first generations after the flood gathered in Babylon and, under the leadership of Nimrod, laid the foundations of the cults whose origins were in sorcery. Sorcery is therefore a spiritual influence that causes disobedience and resistance to God’s will.... According to the Bible, besides the good part represented here on the earth by God and the Holy Spirit, the spiritual world has its bad part. It includes a special group of demons – “familial spirits” who, over the millennia, are bound to individual families and have the task of preventing them from fulfilling God’s will. Familial spirits move from a dead family member to surviving descendants and protect the memories of their

ancestors. Then, these servants of Satan appear to a spiritual medium as the spirits of ancestors. The Law of Moses imposed the death penalty on those who summoned the spirits of the dead and those who communicated with the demons. [...] Entering the supernatural world can be done solely in accordance with God's will, otherwise it is called sin and occultism. The shamans' journey by a tree is a mysterious, secret acquisition of occult knowledge, whose purpose was to meet Satanic powers, not God. Entering the transcendental world can only be done through rebirth in accordance with God's will, through conversion, water baptism and baptism with the Holy Spirit. Only in this way can one experience inner spiritual change, God's supernatural power, legal knowledge of the spiritual world and supernatural things without getting into the claws of the devil. (Radnotyová 2009)

When discussing the danger of alternative spirituality, most Christian texts place emphasis on the meditation techniques which are used to achieve ASC. The usual argument is that they are dangerous because they provide a connection to evil forces (demons, dark forces, the souls of the dead) and/or hinder communication with God. An important strategy of many Christian websites is conveying personal stories of seekers of spirituality which follow the same narrative pattern: a person tries many techniques, is trapped by negative forces, has problems (of body and mind) and, in the end, realizes that the only right thing to do is to pray to God. As the author of the text "Danger of New Age and New Life in Christ" on the website *My story* concludes,

I've been looking for Him all my life. Today, when I look back at my wandering and empty affliction, I know that. But all those years I didn't know, maybe only for a while I knew I was trying to feed my starved heart. I was trying to fill my life with all sorts of things. And it was all a lie. Until I acknowledged that the only thing that could satisfy me, save, guide, and put things right is Him, God... (Môj príbeh, 2019)

In the evaluation of neo-shamanism and other kinds of spiritual healing (for example, Reiki) the main point is that the only good spiritual healing is through God's mercy; and that a healer should only serve as a channel for God's power, not as an independent agent. In this respect, Christianity is compatible with science: biomedicine cures the body, while Christian prayer cures the soul. Any alternative healing is dangerous because it leads to negative consequences for the body as well as the soul.

The above-mentioned anonymous Catholic believer describes alternative medicine as working on the basis of energy which “leads to addiction and dependence on the healer, has a negative impact on spiritual life, causes other mostly psychological problems, the disruption of relationships, etc.” (Heaven or Hell 2019).

On most Christian forums, any form of spiritual healing or even meditation technique, including yoga, is represented as dangerous because it opens the gates to contagious evil powers. For example, the discussion “Yoga, occultism and magic: I hope you don’t mess with these things” on the Catholic forum *Credo* presents the following description of personal suffering caused by evil spirits:

I realized it was an attack of evil forces. After the occultist session, I felt that I was pursued by evil spirits. I would like to warn everyone against using the help of various healers, biotronics, and alternative medicine, because this is how we are exposed to the direct action of the devil’s forces. (Crédo 2019)

Shamanism and other spiritual techniques are represented as dangerous because contagious evil forces can cause illness. Thus, unlike biomedical authorities, Christian interpretation of alternative spiritual healing is not focused on casting doubts on its effectiveness, but on stressing its dangerous nature. Despite this difference, Christian authors typically refer to science as the highest authority in rational explanations. Their interpretations present combinations of rational quasi-scientific arguments and emotional expressions. The latter are aimed at evoking fear and disgust. For instance, the personal website “Your opponent – defence of Christianity” speaks about “esoteric cancer” (TvojOponent – obrana kresťanstva 2019). In general, alternative spirituality is represented as a contagious disease.

To summarize, Christian internet sources characterize alternative spirituality, including neo-shamanism, as dangerous. They use the following discursive strategies: 1) Theological argument; 2) Personal stories; 3) References to biomedicine. The main danger is seen in applying spiritual techniques with the aim of achieving ASC because it opens the way for evil forces. This means pollution, which leads to the spiritual and bodily corruption of Christians.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that ASC linked to the concept of energy plays the central role in how both practitioners of neo-shamanism and Chris-

tian opponents of alternative spirituality conceive shamanic beliefs and practices. For shamans, the shamanic journey involving ASC is a healing technique. In principle, it is represented as a moral act contributing to the public good; this claim is supported by representing shamanic healing as a scientific endeavour. The “right” shamanic practice is interpreted as a moral act. However, rivalry between healers results in blaming: in this argument, lack of expertise can lead to achieving ASC in the “wrong” way and therefore to energy contamination. In this case, achieving ASC is represented as a dangerous act. Alternatively, Christian media define Christianity as the only right spiritual path. The only right/moral way to achieve ASC is by Christian prayer during which one’s soul communicates with God. All non-Christian spiritual techniques requiring ASC are wrong. The shamanic journey is represented as communication with evil forces and therefore immoral. In the Christian argument, shamanism and other spiritual practices are blamed for scientifically confirmed detrimental effects: they cause contamination by contagious evil powers that lead to mental disturbance and physiological problems.

Thus, in representations of neo-shamanic practices certain forms of ASC are linked to the notion of negative energy. As such, they serve as indicators of “wrong” spiritual paths because they are believed to cause pollution in the form of a negative energy effect. The representations of “wrong” beliefs and behaviour, therefore, make use of the notion of contagion. This conclusion corresponds to Douglas’s idea of pollution as a universal moral symbol. The notion of contagion/contamination is an indicator of danger serving as a useful instrument in the identification of social norms. As Douglas (2003: 9) stated, “Danger is defined to protect the public good and the incidence of blame is a by-product of arrangements for persuading fellow members to contribute to it. Pollution seen from this point of view is a powerful forensic resource. There is nothing like it for bringing their duties home to members of the community. A common danger gives them a handle to manipulate, the threat of a community-wide pollution is a weapon for mutual coercion”.

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