

The Decadence of the Shamans: Reflections in 2010

This text was written 20 years ago, and delivered as a paper to an academic gathering held in Helsinki in May 1990: the International Association for the History of Religion regional conference on northern and circumpolar religions. It was then published as a booklet by Unpopular Books in London, a print run that has long been exhausted. Inevitably, there are numerous elements in it that I would have approached differently if I were writing on the same themes today. The text was written almost as a manifesto or set of theses, and many points that might be better formulated as questions or areas for further study have the appearance of definite statements. On the other hand, bold affirmations can also have the beneficial effect of stimulating a confrontation of ideas that can lead eventually to a more developed synthesis.

In the years since the text was written, I have certainly become more aware of some of the pitfalls involved in raising a discussion about 'mysticism' and altered states of consciousness, whether in academic circles or among those who see themselves as part of the revolutionary movement. Unless one takes very good care in stating exactly where one stands, it is very easy to open oneself to the charge that you have fallen into idealism, religious apologetics, new ageism or the romanticising of primitive society. And while these charges are often themselves reflection of an attachment to mechanical forms of materialism or a vulgar empiricism, I would not dismiss the danger that the very process of investigating the realms of the mystical can lead to concessions to irrationalism and the 'occult', which are increasingly ubiquitous products of the period of social decomposition we are living through.

The text leans heavily on the theories of Freud, and at the time of writing it I was not really aware of the level of animosity which his ideas can provoke, not only among schools of psychology and philosophy which reflect the prevailing academic orthodoxies, but even among authentic revolutionaries. I remain as convinced as ever that the fundamental questions posed by Freud are an essential component of any serious discussion about human nature and its future flowering, but I am also more aware that convincing many others of this is a task that has only just begun.

I also hope that my own knowledge and thinking has not stood still since 1990. In the last couple of decades there has been an increased insistence among a number of anthropologists and archaeologists on the fundamental importance of shamanic experience and traditions in understanding the very origins of human culture, for example through the studies of palaeolithic cave paintings and rock drawings by David Lewis-Williams and others. Any future studies of shamanism on my part would certainly have to take account of the debates sparked off by these studies. At the same time, I have become more aware that there have been some serious efforts among a minority of anthropologists to examine the problem of primitive communism, and I have begun to familiarise myself with some this work. Alain Testart's *Le communisme primitif*, published in 1985, has the merit of raising the problem of what we mean by primitive communism as a mode of production, as an ensemble of social

relations, focusing particularly on traditional Australian aborigine society. The school of anthropology around Chris Knight has, in my opinion, gone much further than Testart in considering the **positive** attributes of primitive communist society, developing the idea that this social formation emerged as the result of a 'human revolution' in which the female of the species played a leading role.

Knight's theory of human origins, like Engels', stresses the immense step forward represented by the transition from ape to man: where Engels (and Marx) focused on the particular role of productive labour in the generation of a specifically human consciousness, capable of planning forward and transforming the natural environment, Knight looks into the social context in which this specifically human form of labour might have emerged, in particular, the combination of the females aimed at persuading the males to forgo the immediate product of the hunt and bring it back to the collective.

The text that follows, however, is addressed above all to the 'other side' of the emergence of humanity: what Freud was referring to when he wrote that the conflict between the sexual drive and the necessity for self-preservation "*may perhaps only occur in human beings, and on that account neurosis may, generally speaking, constitute their prerogative over the animals*" (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, London 1973, p 463); or the problem that Marx poses when he confronts us with the phenomenon of man's alienation, particularly when he wrote that "*estranged labour tears from (man) his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over the animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him*" (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*). There are of course those who argue that in all his writings about alienation, Marx is talking about something specific to capitalist society, but for me the problem of alienation is far more deeply rooted and has to be approached against the background of the whole of human history, as I hope to argue in future contributions. But I am as certain as ever that the study of shamanism and its various historical descendents (yoga, Zen and other 'mystical' traditions) can offer us priceless insights into human nature conceived as a dialectical totality, in which an advance into human self-awareness can also be a fall into self-alienation.

In trying to draw the parallel between the ecstatic states achieved by the shamans and the inspiration of poets and other artists, the text cites a passage from Trotsky's autobiography, where he writes about the experience of living through a revolution:

"Marxism considers itself to be the conscious expression of an unconscious historical process. But the 'unconscious' process, the historico-philosophical sense of the term –not in the psychological - coincides with its conscious expression only at its highest point, when the masses, by sheer elemental pressure, break through the social routine and give victorious expression to the deepest needs of historical development. And at such moments the highest theoretical consciousness of the epoch merges with the immediate action of those oppressed masses who are farthest away from theory. The

creative union of the conscious with the unconscious is what we usually call 'inspiration'. Revolution is the inspired frenzy of history.

Every real writer knows creative moments, when something stronger than himself is guiding his hand. Every real orator experiences moments when someone stronger than the self of his everyday existence speaks through him. This is 'inspiration'. It derives from the highest creative effort of all one's forces. The unconscious rises from its deep well and bends the conscious mind to its will, merging it with itself in some greater synthesis.

The utmost spiritual vigour likewise infuses at all times personal activity connected with the movement of the masses. This was true for the leaders in the October days. The hidden strength of the organism, its most deeply rooted instincts, its power of scent inherited from animal forebears – all these rose and broke through the psychic routine to join forces with the higher historico-philosophical abstractions in the service of the revolution. Both these processes, affecting the individual and the mass, were based on the union of the conscious with the unconscious: the union of instinct – the mainspring of the will – with the higher theories of thought” (My Life, 1929, chapter 29, p 348-9).

It is my contention that, in primitive communist society, human beings were, even if in a mystified and semi-conscious manner, aware of this disjuncture (in fact, this inner conflict) between the waking ego and the realm of the instincts; aware that becoming human had impaired the sense-awareness enjoyed by their animal ancestors. And I argue that the people of this epoch deliberately cultivated states of inspiration precisely because they felt the need to heal this disjuncture and regain the powers “inherited from animal forebears”. The shaman, the “man of high degree” (to use the phrase coined by the Australian anthropologist AP Elkin), was given a particular mandate to pursue this quest; and at its furthest boundaries, the experiences encountered along that road provide us with profound insights into what mankind’s relationship with the cosmos might be in a fully communist society.

In his comments on Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, the Italian communist Amadeo Bordiga was particularly insistent that a fully developed human consciousness was only possible “*once we have left behind the millennia-old deception of the lone individual facing the natural world, stupidly called 'external' by the philosophers. External to what? External to the 'I', this supreme deficiency, but we can no longer say external to the human species, because the species man is internal to nature, part of the physical world.*” And he goes on to say that “*in this powerful text, object and subject becomes, like man and nature, one and the same thing. We can even say that everything becomes object: man as a subject 'against nature' disappears, along with the illusion of a separate ego.*” (*Tables immuables de la theorie communiste de parti*, in *Bordiga et Le passion du communisme*. edited by J Camatte, 1972). Bordiga’s description of the species-consciousness attainable through the communist transformation cannot fail to bring to mind the description of the ecstatic union with the world searched for in the various traditions of meditation which have their root in shamanism.

In the writings of Knight and others who take the problem of primitive communism seriously, collective rituals and mythical re-enactments are examined principally as moments in which social cohesion is reinforced and celebrated – a cohesion which is still genuinely human because it is not designed to mask any underlying class exploitation. But a consideration of the ‘inner’ states of consciousness which were undoubtedly a central goal of these rituals is not at odds with an examination of their social function. On the contrary, both are aspects of the same quest for unity – unity between human beings, and between human beings and nature within and without. The communism of the future will not be weighed down by the mythological projections which tended to dominate man in primitive society, nor by the struggle for immediate survival, which could impose a harsh discipline of the community over the individual. But it will surely seek to relearn and assimilate, on a yet higher level, all that our ancient ancestors did achieve in the real conquest of the mind.

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