

# What Goes on During Spirit Healing?

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## ABSTRACT

To trace something unknown back to something known is alleviating, soothing, gratifying and gives moreover a feeling of power. Danger, disquiet, anxiety attend the unknown – the first instinct is to eliminate these distressing states. Transubstantiation is a standardized miracle (the repetitive, guaranteed miracle of the Mass, offered four times a day). But I have something a bit grander in mind.

**Keywords:** Transubstantiation; Supernatural monsters; shamanism

## INTRODUCTION

More than half of the British sense that they have a soul, and a third of us share the world with ghosts, which is probably not such a concern for the one in three of us who feels protected by a guardian angel. Meanwhile, in the USA: more than half of the people think psychic, spiritual healing or human mind power can heal the body and one person in ten accepts that spirits can possess - and communicate through - those with bodies. Diabolic possession poses a real threat to four out of ten US Americans. These statistics may seem trite, but their significance was revealed to me when, after looking up “spirit healing”, discovering a widespread anthropological fascination with shamanistic spirit healing and finding, to my delight, that there is a successful shaman living only half an hour’s walk from me in London, I stumbled on this Lévi-Strauss quote:

“That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to objective reality does not matter. The patient believes in it and belongs to a society that believes in it. The protecting spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical monsters are elements of a coherent system which are the basis of the natives’ concept of the universe” [1]. It became immediately apparent that my shaman and her natives might be less than subtly different from Lévi-Strauss’s shaman and his. This article, therefore, investigates the processes involved in, if not the efficacy of, spirit healing: partly from the point of view of one of Lévi-Strauss’s much studied shamans, Quesalid, partly from that of my London shaman, Zoë Bran (PhD), to whom I am greatly indebted, and partly through the eyes of Richard Noll’s shaman, Chuonnasuan (pronounced: *Chew on a swan*), *The Last Shaman of the Oroqen of Northeast China* [2]. We hear almost nothing in the ethnologies from the various shamans’ clients. The reasons for this are not entirely clear but for my part, this article being already oversized, I have not sought the

views of any of Ms Bran’s clients – which, happily, makes for ease of comparison. None of our shamans uses substances to artificially alter their state of consciousness.

## Why only look at shamanism and not some other form(s) of spirit healing?

Healing by or with spirits or other supernatural means occurs or is incorporated into many cultures and social/cultural systems. Often, the healing process involves possession, trance or mediumship. This article focuses on shamanic healing mainly because it is a phenomenon that so very explicitly involves spirits which are understood by the humans involved to be active agents and secondarily because this focus reduces the risks associated with adopting too eclectic an approach.

We owe the widespread use of the title “shaman” to a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch explorer called Nicholaas Witsen, who reported his encounters with animal skin-clad dancing, drumming *schamans* among the Siberian Tungus people. The word “shaman” was quickly seized on and applied to a wide variety of sorcerers, magical practitioners and holy people. When I read this in one of Richard Noll’s articles, it raised yet another challenge: Noll and his co-author Kun Shi tell us that Tungus shamans enjoy an “almost magical” reputation as “the most authentic and most powerful of all shamans” [2]

## Where, then, did this leave my London shaman?

Anthropologists generally use the term “shaman” to signify a person who gains knowledge and powers by entering into a spirit world or dimension, who is accompanied in this journeying – and typically throughout their life – by spirits which act as guides and counsellors, and who is likely to have undergone some form of profound personal physical, spiritual or mental initiatory crisis.

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All variants of shamanism are believed to arise from the following common assumptions [3]:

- Spirits are active agents in humans' social and personal lives;
- Spirits can be good or evil.
- A shaman can.
- Communicate with spirits;
- Treat sickness caused by evil spirits;
- Fall into trances, experience visionary ecstasy and go on *vision quests*;
- Evoke spirits as guides, omens, and message-bearers;
- Perform divination.

Unlike a medium, who usually acts as a more or less passive channel through which spirits communicate with humans, the shaman will deliberately enter an altered state of consciousness (trance) and seek to work with spirits [4]. Superficial similarities with the experiences of schizophrenics – not least, hearing voices – have led to some debate over the sanity of shamans: after exploring this theme, Noll and others have shown that the shamans' purposeful and socially contextualised experience usually reveals them to be relatively normal and that initiatory crises are mostly temporary disturbances [4].

### How do shamans heal with spirits?

Quesalid, Chuonnasuan and Zoë seem best placed to guide us on this anthropological quest. Their stories may teach us as much about the beliefs of anthropologists as they do about shamanic spirit healing.

### Quesalid visits the Kosimo

Quesalid (a name given to him when he became a sorcerer (shaman), was a Kwakiutl Indian from Canada who, in his youth, did not wholly believe in the power of shamans. After coming to the attention of the shamans he used to watch working, Quesalid was invited to undergo an initiation that involved training in diagnostic techniques and the use of spies to gather intelligence about clients. He also learned the stagecraft of seizure simulation, sacred songs, induced vomiting and legerdemain [5] (although it was actually *legerdebouche*: techniques for hiding a tuft of down in his mouth, causing his tongue, cheek or gum to bleed and spitting the bloody blob out after aspiration of his clients (sucking out their illnesses).

Lévi-Strauss gives us a summary of Quesalid's "adventure": as Quesalid's career progresses he upstages numerous other shamans by healing cases they find too difficult, thus calling into question their various techniques. Kosimo tribal healers, for example, simply spit out their patients' illnesses without any apparent physical form. Lévi-Strauss does not hesitate to describe this as dishonest [5] and writes of Quesalid, whom he now calls "our hero", having to decide whether to judge two inadequate systems "on the level of fact" or on their own level – a puzzle to which we shall return presently. Later, in what Lévi-Strauss calls "the truly pathetic part of the story", Quesalid *out heals* an elderly shaman in a healing competition. The old shaman, publicly humiliated, goes to Quesalid, describes his own tricks and stagecraft and begs to be let in on Quesalid's own secrets, regardless of probity. When Quesalid refuses him this, the old man, along with his daughter, flees the community, which still remains fearful of his revenge until the couple return a year later

after they have "gone mad".

Quesalid then apparently carries on treating his patients in good faith and differentiates between genuine fellow shamans and quacks, from which Lévi-Strauss concludes that our hero has "completely lost sight of the fallaciousness of the technique" he himself employs. Yet elsewhere, we read - of the same technique - that: "most authorities agree that this is not regarded as trickery, even when the audience knows how it is done" [6]. Frank and Frank blithely make what is, in fact, an audacious comparison: that those present may be "in a similar state of mind" to participants in a Christian communion: knowing "perfectly well" on one level what the things being spat out by the shaman, or eaten by them, are and, on another level, giving "emotional assent to the proposition" that the spat out thing is an illness or understanding that the bread and wine are "in one sense" the body and blood of Christ.

### What goes on during Quesalid's healing?

What we learn from the story about the conduct of cures is that the Kosimo shamans employ a technique of aspirating the *soul* of a sickness from their patient. They explain that the sickness is "a man" who dies and whose body then "disappears in our insides", thus leaving nothing physical to spit out. We can also confidently infer that the various healers are held up to considerable critical scrutiny both by the public and their peers.

There is a great deal of theatricality about the healing, which Lévi-Strauss views as a threefold experience: that of the shaman, who enters various psychosomatic states; that of the sick person who experiences the attentions of the shaman; and that of the public, who become intellectually and emotionally engaged in collectively supporting the healing. For Lévi-Strauss, the motor of this process which he calls the "shamanistic complex" is the mutual reinforcement of group consensus and the shaman's intimate experience. In short, the shaman positively manifests instability that draws out the negative introverted disorder from the patient within a catalytic ambience of determined (deliberate) credulity maintained by both the protagonists and their audience.

This is essentially structuralist reasoning: the shaman takes the uncomfortable truth of the patient's suffering out of "reality" into a spiritual context – it having been thus externalised, the patient is presented with the opportunity to take a metaphorical route out of the pain in a fashion that conforms to the beliefs and values of the community [7]. As Nietzsche might put it: the unknowable pain is traced back to a knowable culturally acknowledged source which, in itself, alleviates, soothes and gratifies the patient and empowers both patient and shaman.

While this attempt to step into the protagonists' moccasins displays an urge toward emic treatment of the shamans' world, translating that world into non-native psychological terms shows that this empathy stops a long way short of taking the activities of spirits at face value. The implications of shaman, patient and public simply

living what is happening as a real experience is not given serious consideration "it does not matter" [6]. This is, then, an etic view of spirit healing.

### Chuonnasuan visits Buni

Chuonnasuan was an Oroqen shaman from China – one of the Tungus shamans with the "almost magical" reputation for being "authentic" to whom Noll and Shi introduced us earlier. Chuonnasuan was told he might make a powerful shaman when, as

a boy, he would watch shamans healing publicly in the community and josh their assistants with astute, keenly observed mimicry. As he grew, Chuonnasuan underwent three life/mind threatening crises and, at some point after the second, he was initiated as a shaman. He makes clear, though, that it is up to the spirits who becomes a shaman and that in his understanding one cannot simply decide to take shamanism up as a profession: “I had a direct call from the spirits”. It was spirits who told him about their own beneficent or maleficent powers and those of other spirits [8]. In every respect, Chuonnasuan appears to be a text book, or “classic” shaman [9].

Of his second illness, at the age of 19, Chuonnasuan says: “After I knew the spirits introduced by Wuliyen, some new spirits wanted to enter me. But Wuliyen’s spirits couldn’t accept them, and they had a fight. The fighting of the spirits made me ill. I could hear voices talking in the far distance, and enchanting songs from the spirits. This lasted five months or half a year”. Upon being asked to describe how it felt when the spirits entered, Chuonnasuan spoke of hearing them [2].

Chuonnasuan recalled a trip to Buni (the Underworld of the Oroqen dead) during a healing ritual. “I went to Buni to save an old woman. Her husband, who had died years before, was trying to get her to come to Buni and was making her sick. Her husband was trying to steal her soul. She died three years later. It was not me who saved her soul, but my spirits”. The ritual was held over three nights: on the first night the spirits could not tell Chuonnasuan what was causing the illness. On the second night, a ritual dance still failed to elicit the cause but on the third night, he invited different spirits one of which told him that the woman’s dead husband’s soul had taken her soul to Buni. Chuonnasuan set off for Buni by lying face down on an animal skin in a darkened yurt. Then he closed his eyes, so he could see: it was bright and his paternal uncle’s powerful two headed Eagle Spirit, in human form and wearing a shaman’s mask, led him down a narrowing passage to a barrier where fierce animals: a tiger and a bear and “other human forms” were all eating each other. Chuonnasuan said the experience was frightening. He could remember nothing but the journey there and back. Of Buni itself, Chuonnasuan said he had heard that it was a nice place, once one had gotten past the frightening things. Acting as a psychopomp, is considered to be one of the most difficult and dangerous exercises for a shaman.

In what Noll and Shi call the “tragic summer” of 1952, a “*Gottterdammerung*”, indeed the “Twilight of the Spirits”, the Oroqen, under pressure from Chinese authorities, and led by Zhao Li Ben, a chief shaman whom Noll and Shi describe as having been “converted” to communism, performed rituals to drive away all the spirits with which they had lived for countless generations, intending to give up communicating with them. It may be ironic that the Communist authorities showed an acutely emic appreciation of the Oroqen by having them abandon their spiritual activities on their own native terms. Noll and Shi’s piece ends on a melancholy note: a fond recollection of Chounnasuan’s heartfelt appreciation of their work is poetically rounded off with: “there are no more shamans among the Oroqen”. So caught up were Noll and Shi with the romance of their adventure that there is no mention in this particular text of the psychological hypotheses they had set out to test.

### What goes on during Chuonnasuan’s healing?

There are resemblances between the stories of Quesalid and Chuonnasuan: two bright young boys spiritually *apprenticed*, as it

were, each into a tribal tradition of healing, after being identified as potential shamans early on and each, albeit at different points in their careers, apparently pursuing their profession earnestly. Chuonnasuan, however, was most emphatic about having been chosen whereas Quesalid appears to have deduced his *chosen* status by retrospectively reappraising what he had possibly originally thought of as voluntary entry into his craft. Nor does Chuonnasuan at any point appear to evince the slightest doubt about the validity of his experiences or calling.

It is tempting to draw lazy parallels between Chounnasuan’s report of his visit to Buni and a medium in a UK northern social club reassuring some elderly widow that “George is with me now, he says he’s fine on the other side and not to worry”; to interpret it as an elaboration of simple humouring – a brute representation of Lévi-Strauss’s shamanistic complex, as though the complex were merely an intricate model of socially endorsed mollification by metaphor. However, the richness of Chounnasuan’s experience – that on a third night of working, the crucial journey was made alone, in the quiet, in the dark, belies this. Whether or not there was a somatic or suggestive healing, whether there was a healing at all, it is clear the shaman felt profound conviction, and was compelled to make a dramatic, persuasive and credible demonstration of its mysterious import.

### Zoë’s visit to her garden

Zoë Bran describes herself as a core shamanic practitioner. Like Chuonnasuan, she uses drumming and chanting to induce a trance. Zoë was “called through illness” to shamanism and trained with various teachers, some from the Centre for Shamanic Studies, but she makes it clear that she has learned to accept spirit helpers as her most important teachers. In her own words: “It’s interesting to be asked about this at this time, because the issue of shamanic healing is something I have wrestled with a lot over the last 12 months physical healing is something I have struggled with both intellectually and practically, not least because I am slightly disabled myself and have relatively poor health”. Zoë is very conversant with anthropological views on shamanism – she lectures, broadcasts and writes about it. The “sick” shaman in 21<sup>st</sup> Century London has, she says, to contend with an expectation that healers should be “if not superhuman, certainly role models”.

Zoë told me about a healing she performed several months ago:

“I had to do a powerful Extraction on a woman and felt quite nervous partly because the woman was suffering physical symptoms as a result of long-standing emotional and physical trauma. The rational, Western, part of me felt that I couldn’t possibly help her.

I journeyed to meet my own spirit helper. I was shown an energy form lodged beneath her solar plexus that presented itself in the form of a small black winged figure something like a gargoyle. I saw several white threads leading away from this figure and out beyond the woman’s body. It seemed to me that the black gargoyle form was both a representation and also a reality; a manifestation, of the woman’s traumatic experience that had taken form in a way that would have relevance and meaning for me, the healer. When the woman arrived. I did not describe the thing I had seen inside her, except in the most general terms.

I started the physical healing with her lying down. My rattles around her as I had been instructed to do, and then I started rattling rhythmically over her upper abdomen. As I did this I visualised the exchange of power that my spirit helpers had shown me in

my journey of enquiry. I was quite astonished to see that my spirit helpers had taken on aggressive, feral expressions, all red eyes and sharp teeth. I knew that this was not directed at me but at the thing I was about to remove. I don't remember dropping my rattles but I do remember pouncing on the woman's solar plexus area, only vaguely aware that I mustn't dig too hard or painfully into her flesh. I remember feeling the thing come away from her in my hands and then doing as I had been shown, and smashing the thing hard and repeatedly into the ground. What I had not expected was the roaring shout that came out of me as I killed the thing. It was then put into a box and secured with bands. I went straight into a spirit helper retrieval for the woman to fill the vacuum left by the extraction. She received a beautiful animal helper.

After this part of the healing was over we went into my garden and made a fire and the woman burnt the box until there was nothing left and even the ashes had vanished (later, she commented: "It actually felt like the 'energy' of the abuse was being killed and burned rather than anything material").

When the woman returned for her follow-up session a week later she reported feeling much lighter, that something that had affected her profoundly throughout her life was lifting. She looked different physically, brighter and more confident".

#### What goes on during Zoë's healing?

So, our London shaman has a "rational, Western, part" and uses jargon like "spirit helper retrieval". Perhaps Noll might say, as he did in 1994: "These programs are ways to tap into hidden knowledge. Instead of calling it the occult, they like to call it New Age or Jungian" [10]. Of course, shamanism *does* seek to tap into the "hidden knowledge" of the spirit world.

Zoë reported that her client's gargoyle "form was both a representation and also a reality; a manifestation, of the woman's traumatic experience". She witnessed a physical struggle between spirits within her client, just as Chuonnasuan had experienced ancestral spirits fighting within himself. This illustrates another aspect of shamanism – that a spirit journey is often a combative, *eristic* encounter [10], in which battles are had with or between spirits, and information may have to be wrested from them.

The most distinguishing peculiarity of Zoë's spirit healing technique – from the present accounts at least - is the client's very proactive role: becoming a partner to the shaman and destroying the illness/bad spirit jointly with her. Zoë later told me that this is "not uncommon in traditional healing and is clearly about involvement in ones own healing"; to which she added: "I think it's particularly important perhaps for educated Westerners, used to empirical experience". Does this apparent innovation represent a qualitative improvement on our other two shamans' techniques? Noll, Quesalid and myself now seem to share the conundrum of a set of comparable but empirically "inadequate" healing accounts.

#### Is there a model that can illustrate what goes on in all three shamans' healing?

Lévi-Strauss suggested using the relative "richness" of "symbolic effusions" - the psychic "fireworks" exploding in the course of a healing as a gauge of comparison [11] and this metaphorical analogy holds good if we consider Zoë's roaring, violent "extraction", Quesalid's theatrical spitting out of a "bloody worm", and the powerful drama of Chuonnasuan's lying face down in a darkened yurt. The metaphor also stretches to address Noll's regard for shamanic authenticity: in 2010, a western firework can - and does

- fly up and explode to the same effect as a Chinese firework would have 60 years ago.

We must take into consideration Lévi-Strauss's use of group consensus as the oxygen for this triangle of psychic combustion – for example: Zoë's healings are frequently conducted alone with her clients. Widely available statistics along the lines of those at the head of this article suggest that, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, The patient is likely to believe in it and belongs to a society among whom a great number believe in it. Of course, modern British shamanic healers, like their tribal predecessors, have to deal with scepticism. Quesalid and his contemporaries were continually required to prove their personal power, Zoë, by contrast, says that as a practitioner she has to "prove to the 'village' that what I do is of value *in and of itself*, regardless of my personal competence".

Ake Hultkrantz hazarded that shamanism might be sorted into three classes: genuine ecstatic shamanism, demonstrative shamanism and imitative shamanism [10]. Arguably, we could have an example of each: Chuonnasuan, Noll's "authentic" *genuine* shaman (the darkened yurt), Quesalid, Lévi-Strauss's *demonstrative* shaman (the bloody blob) and Zoë, my shaman, who some might argue to be *imitative* (a trendy "neo"shaman), others demonstrative (the burning box) or, and this is my inclination – *genuine* (the unexpected roaring shout). However, in terms of probity, all three shamans in the end appear to apply their healing methods earnestly and in terms of psychic drama all three seem to score very highly.

Applying a slight variant of the model of Lévi-Strauss's shamanic complex - for the moment, stripped of psychic and combustible imagery: what seems to go on, in this spirit healing at least, is that a patient experiences some discomfiting loss, presence or unfulfilled need that may have any one of, or a combination, of spiritual, mental or physical origins. The shaman inhabits (or if not earnest, purports to inhabit) a world shared by humans and spirits with which the shaman has dealings. The patient assents to treatment, that may or may not succeed, *on the shaman's explicit terms*, which process will either be validated or rejected according to the ambient public consensus, which public consensus will wax and wane both over time and from society to society, culture to culture or forum to forum.

The extent to which the conviction and understanding of the shaman and the patient coincide, or, if there is any level of "public" involvement, the extent to which the conviction and understanding of all three elements of the complex coincide, is the extent to which the healing succeeds – not necessarily in terms of a physical, mental or spiritual cure, but in terms of allowing either the patient, the public or both to feel better about and cope better with whatever the outcome is [12-16].

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