Early twentieth-century American interpretations

The German immigrant of Jewish descent Franz Boas (1858-1942) played a key role in the structuring of the American field of cultural anthropology and the gradual but major shift in which evolutionary and armchair anthropology gave way to new perspectives and new methods of inquiry. For his interpretation of shamanism, Boas depended primarily on the biographical accounts of his principle informant Maxulagilis, the man who became known under his shamanic name Quesalid. In the 1930 version of Boas's story, Maxulagilis started with a by now famous opening line:

I desired to learn about the shaman, whether it is true or whether it is made up and whether they pretend to be shamans.1

In the story, Maxulagilis was obliged to become a shaman during a shamanic healing ceremony in which a crystal entered his body. Although other shamans feared that he might expose them, they taught him the tricks of their trade. Maxulagilis learned different healing rituals and he was taught secrets known only to initiated shamans, for instance how to fall into a fit and how to produce blood from his mouth. Later in the story, Maxulagilis received the name Quesalid from a chief after he had cured his grandson. From his adventures, Quesalid learned that some shamanic practices were more false than others and despite his lingering reservations, he was able to initiate a profitable shamanic career.2

Boas presented his informant and his activities as representative of typical long-established Kwakiutl behaviour. Yet a closer inspection of Boas's informant is revealing. The shaman Quesalid may have practised 'shamanism' among the Kwakiutl, but he was not a Kwakiutl himself. He was born George Hunt (1854-1933). His father was an Englishman who ran the store and trading post in Fort Rupert and his mother was a Tinglit noblewoman. At Fort Rupert Hunt lived among

2 Idem. See also his ‘Religion’ in H. Codere (ed.), Kwakiutl Ethnography (Chicago, 1966) 120-70.
Kwakiutl and immersed himself in their social life, especially after he married two high-ranking Kwakiutl women. Although Hunt was initiated as a 'shaman' and practised as such for a couple of years, he was never considered a Kwakiutl and he never learned how to write the Kwakiutl language without errors. These details make the reliability of his material questionable. Without a doubt, Hunt was a cultural expert and an important figure in Kwakiutl society, but he was a white man when in contact with Boas and an Indian at other times. He may have represented his own shamanic activities carefully and truthfully, but they certainly cannot be considered age-old Kwakiutl shamanic behaviour.

As a relative outsider in the different cultures in which he was involved, Hunt became a cultural broker. Before he started to work with Boas in 1888, Hunt had already worked as an informant and collector for other leading figures in ethnology and museum collection. Hunt became the single largest Kwakiutl collector, and ultimately he became one of the most prominent originators of the current view of ‘traditional’ Kwakiutl culture, and thus of Kwakiutl shamanism. Whereas Boas used Hunt in his quest to document the vanishing Kwakiutl culture before it disappeared altogether, Hunt used Boas to launch his career as a professional collector of Indian specimens. Boas tried to preserve what he thought of as the essence of Native American culture before it was lost and he tried to reconstruct an integral, maybe even imagined, whole that might have existed in the past, but he did not take into account that Hunt was also guided by specific dispositions, nor that Hunt had constructed Kwakiutl shamanism as a cultural broker, negotiating between the Kwakiutl culture and the anthropological field and struggling for a position in both. 3

This chapter focuses on the American lineages of shamanism of the first half of the twentieth century. I shall start with Franz Boas’s determining steps in the field of anthropology [1] and go on with a depiction of the interpretations of shamanism that were produced in Boasian and other American anthropological schools [2]. After a brief interlude that focuses on the anthropological subfield of ethno-botany, where shamans and hallucinogenic drugs came to be entwined [3], I shall continue with an examination of the important link between anthropologists and avant-garde artists [4]. In this final part an amalgamation of scholarly, esoteric

and therapeutic authorities come into view that had an enduring impact on the genealogy of shamanism. The focal point of the last section is the exemplary artist-shaman-therapist-anthropologist Jaime de Angulo. He represents the blurring of the fields in which the shaman came to be recognised as the healer-poet-shaman.

Franz Boas

Boas opposed evolutionary anthropology and pushed the discipline away from the largely speculative Eurocentric schemes in the direction of what is called historical particularism and cultural relativism. As was customary in the German geographical field in which he was educated, Boas focused on regional cultural history. It is interesting to mention Adolf Bastian (1826-1905) here, as this German folk psychologist prepared the intellectual ground for Boas. Bastian was inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder’s romantic philosophische Anthropologie and, like him, he explicitly dealt with shamanism. Not surprisingly, Bastian related it to specific Völkergedanken and focused on the ‘easily excitible temperament of the polar ethnic groups and their shamans’. He argued that the shaman was a ‘subjective interpreter who, by somatic manipulation, puts himself into a state of inner excitement and interprets everyday affairs according to the fantastic pictures of his inner mind’.

According to his admirers, Boas turned anthropology into a science. In the new anthropological discipline, scholars did not study human races, but culture and religion. These did not follow a single course and they were not simply a realization of inherent potentials. Instead, their development involved many historical factors and, as Boas argued, anthropologists should understand cultural phenomena within their own cultural-historical context. Boasian anthropological endeavours

---


were reminiscent of folkloristic approaches as they were oriented toward the re-
capturing of ethnic essences that were rapidly being obscured by the impact of Eu-
ropean civilization. Anthropologists, therefore, should analyze cultures not from
their armchairs, as their evolutionist predecessors had done, but by spending time
with them and learning their language. Boas thus dismantled the cultural hierar-
chy that located so-called primitive cultures on the bottom rung of social progress
and considered them inferior to Western culture.7

Boas merged his personal, political and scientific goals in his anthropology, that
was partly a Kulturkampf as it was closely related to his social activism, such as
his struggles against racism and evolutionism. His defence of minority groups
can be understood against the background of the anti-Semitism that he had been
confronted with.8 In their search for authentic cultural forms, Boas and other so-
called salvage anthropologists produced empathetic and perceptive ethnographies
but they tended to overlook their own constructional work and that of their in-
formants, as we have already seen in the introduction to this chapter. This myopic
quality also characterized Boas’ analysis of North American shamanism. In his
short exposé of American Indian religion, published in 1910, he described dif-
ferent forms of shamans or medicine men, thereby using the term ‘shaman’ for
a range of different practitioners from Algonquian, Iroquois, Kwakiutl, Pawnee,
Salish, Siouan and other ‘American tribes’. Two categories of shamans could be
found ‘practically all over the continent’. The first category obtained their power
through the assistance of guardian spirits, while the other category was personally
endowed with magic powers. Both types of shaman were entrusted to cure dis-
eases and protect against them. Boas wrote: ‘In treating the patient, the shamans
almost everywhere use various means to work themselves into a state of excite-
ment, which is produced by singing, by the use of the drum and rattle, and by

7 I. Jacknis, ‘Franz Boas and Exhibits. On the Limitations of the Museum Method of Anthro-
poology’, in G.W. Stocking, Jr., Objects and Others. Essays on Museums and Material Culture
(Madison and London, 1985) 75-111.
8 Hyatt, Franz Boas, 156; G.W. Stocking, Jr., ‘Anthropology as Kulturkampf. Science and Poli-
tics in the Career of Franz Boas’, in idem, The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the
History of Anthropology (Wisconsin, 1992) 92-113; G. Frank, ‘Jews, Multiculturalism, and
Boasian Anthropology, American Anthropologist NS 99 (1997) 731-45; H.S. Lewis, ‘The
Passion of Franz Boas’, American Anthropologist NS 103 (2001) 447-67; R. Bauman and
for Anthropology’, in idem, Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of
dancing’. In some regions, shamans mainly extracted the material disease from the body by sucking or pulling with the hands. In other regions, the shamans principally went in pursuit of the absent soul, recovered it and restored it to the patient. These shamans were believed to free themselves of their bodies to visit the spirits in their domain. Some shamans were ‘hostile shamans’ who used their powers to throw disease into the bodies of enemies and to abduct souls.9

The Russian connection

For the study and interpretation of shamanism, Boas’s collaboration with the Russian ethnographers Waldemar Jochelson (1855-1937) and Waldemar Bogo- ras (1865-1936) was of great importance. They had become ethnographers after the Tsarist regime convicted them for their anti-governmental activities and sent them to Siberia as political exiles during the second half of the nineteenth century. They were narodniki, that is, members of the anti-Tsarist opposition movement that idealized peasants or the ‘common people’ (narod in Russian). In Siberia, they started to collect ethnographic and folkloric material concerning the people amongst whom they were living.10 When Boas conceived and directed the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902), to pursue his interest in the Siberian coastal region, it was Radloff (Chapter 2) who recommended Jochelson and Bogoras for the project. In what still counts as the most important expedition in American anthropology, Siberia and North America were regarded as an interconnected cultural area.11

Under Boas’s guidance, the anthropologists working together claimed that shamanism had originated in North Asia and had travelled to North America in a

process of diffusionism. As a primordial form of religion, shamanism had passed from culture to culture, and on this road it had changed form, function and meaning. In line with this view, anthropologists used the concept of shamanism for Native American medicine men as well. Boas and his colleagues located the ‘shamanic complex’ that they explored in Siberia and North America, and in their perspective it included all kinds of spiritual practices involving direct contact with spiritual forces. Boas and his colleagues thus accelerated the pace by which anthropologists habituated themselves to appropriating the term shamanism.  

Jochelson and Bogoras linked Siberian shamanism with ‘arctic hysteria’, arguing that mentally unstable individuals were prone to become shamans. Another aspect of shamans they focused on, which other scholars would pick up later, such as, for instance, the aforementioned Edward Carpenter (Chapter 2), was the sexuality of shamans. In a 1901 article on ‘The Chukchi of Northeastern Asia’, Bogoras explained that in some cases, Chukchi men who became shamans underwent a sexual transformation. As shamans, these men not only assumed female clothing and speech but even forgot their ‘former masculine knowledge’. In his 1904 article on ‘The Mythology of the Koryak’, Jochelson also described ‘transformed shamans’; shamans who changed their sex by order of the spirits.

In addition to the sexually transformed shamans, Bogoras perceived three other categories of shamans that, he warned, could not be demarcated very clearly, as shamans skilled in the practices of one group also had general knowledge of the others. The first group consisted of those shamans working as ventriloquists, with tricks that resembled those that were known from spiritism. The medicine men, the second group, casted evil spells, whereas the third group, the prophets, occupied themselves with divination. Jochelson, in his turn, made a distinction between ‘family shamanism’ and ‘professional shamanism’. In the first category, the eldest member of the family usually acted as the priest of the family cult while some female members acquired particular skill in the art of beating the drum and singing. Professional shamans practised outside the limits of the family cult and could be popular within a range of hundreds of miles. They treated patients with the help of a particular kind of spirit, they struggled with other shamans and they caused injury to their enemies.

During the last years of his life, Bogoras was interested in what he liked to call the grand generalization of anthropology and, according to Boas, ‘he gave freer rein to his imagination than he could do in the narrower field of faithful presenta-

---


tion and careful analysis of observed facts'. In these years, Boas argued, 'it was the artist rather than the scientist who spoke when he dwelled on these problems'.

Although Bogoras was certainly a scholar, he was also a poet and novelist. His heart, however, was in politics. He wrote revolutionary pamphlets, novels, stories and poems under his pseudonym Tan, a name that he had derived from his Jewish surname. His artistic writings unmistakably demonstrate a primitivist stance. For example, his *Zhertvy drakona*, published in the United States in 1929 as *Sons of the Mammoth*, was presented as a ‘dramatic novel’ about the Siberian Yarry and his adventures in the ‘primeval wilderness’ with ‘tribal mysteries’.

Four years before, in 1925, Bogoras had made a noteworthy contribution to the genealogy of shamanism in a scholarly publication that credited shamans with special gifts of perception. Bogoras praised shamans for their special capacities and he even argued that shamans foreshadowed the theories of modern physics, as ‘the ideas of modern physics about space and time, when clothed with concrete psychical form, appeared as shamanistic’. Resembling modern physicists, shamans were conscious of the unstable, ever-changing dimensions of space and time. Their dreams represented one of the principal sources of religious knowledge and religious experience, and because the quality and character of dreams had not changed in the least, Bogoras argued, ‘one could assert with some confidence: Our dreams are more ancient than the other part of our physical self. Our dreams are palaeolithic’. In a peculiar line of reasoning, in which he related dreams to myths in the way individual psychology is linked to social psychology, Bogoras stressed the correlation between the ‘religious and psychico-mathematical conceptions of the Universe’, both ‘impersonal conceptions of the Universe’, with a more ‘precise orientation in their modern form.’

Bogoras was not the first to praise shamans for their special abilities and he would not be the last. Increasingly, shamans were perceived as inventors and pioneers in different spheres and as the originators of many different cultural forms. Boas’s students would take a leading role in this process.

**American anthropological schools**

From the turn of the century onwards, American anthropologists increasingly made use of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’, and they furnished shamanism

---

with an ever-increasing cultural prominence. This tendency was demonstrated during the 1914 exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, where materials from Asia and North and South America were used to portray shamanism as a global archaic faith, even older than Judaism. In the same year, the Rev. Dr. John Lee Maddox told an audience of anthropologists that most scientific and effective methods of treating disease had derived from shamans or medicine men. Maddox, who was a chaplain in the United States Army and, significantly, a supporter of the so-called Body and Soul Clinic (‘Where clergyman and physicians mobilize the combined power of religion and science for the cure of human ailments’), argued that the practices of shamans may have been ‘barbarous, sometimes ridiculous’, but ‘the shamanistic class (...) has aided social progress by enforcing an unbending, irresistible discipline upon wild and loosely governed tribes’. According to Maddox, the shaman, called ‘Medicine Man’ in the language of the North American Indians, ‘was the first musician, painter, teacher, writer, historian, reckoner of time, physician, priest and astronomer’.

Different major anthropologists contributed to the wide acceptance of the shaman as the archaic individual predecessor of different cultural forms. Among them Alfred Louis Kroeber (1876-1960), the first student to receive a PhD from Boas in 1901. He defined shamanism, in 1907, rather wide-ragingly, as ‘the supposed individual control of the supernatural through a personally acquired power of communication with the spirit world’. Kroeber, who would become one of the most influential anthropologists of the first half of the twentieth century, also stated: ‘the simpler the stage of culture the more important the shaman’. In other words, increasing civilization and more complexity made the shaman less important. Yet the shaman was ‘fundamentally unvarying in form through all successive periods of civilization to the highest’.

One can only wonder what Kroeber would have thought of the development of shamanism as a popular practice in the complex contemporary western world from the 1970s onwards. Probably Kroeber would have been surprised to see that he could recognize some of their techniques, as they are similar to the ways his Californian shamans acquired their ‘shamanistic power’. That is to say, he found shamans acquiring their power through dreams in which spirits visited them, through ‘waking vision and trance’ and, furthermore, the shaman ‘sometimes acquires his powers through seeking for them rather than by having them thrust upon him during dream or vision’.21 Kroeber evidently associated shamanism with the communal living of the ‘simple’ stages of culture. Yet at the same time he associated shamanism with individualism, as a 1923 article demonstrated in which he argued that ‘admission is by individual supernatural experience’ and defined ‘shamanistic’ as ‘individualistic-control of spirits and disease’.22

Another anthropologist who gave the concept of shamanism a firm position in American anthropology was Roland Burrage Dixon (1875-1934), who had acquired a reputation as an anthropologist by participating in the Jesup Expedition. Dixon argued that, although there were considerable differences among shamans, both in character and position, ‘fundamentally the shaman is everywhere much alike’. As Znamenski already noted, Dixon emphasised the democratic nature of American Indian shamanism in his 1908 ‘Some Aspects of the American Shaman’. Yet, in his definition of shamans, he credited shamans with autocratic features, as they formed

that motley class of persons, found in every savage community, who are supposed to have closer relations with the supernatural than other men, and who, according as they use the advantages of their position in one way or another, are the progenitors alike of the physician and the sorcerer, the prophet, the teacher, and the priest.23

Another Jesup expedition participant, the German anthropologist Berthold Laufer (1874-1934), illustrated the acceptance of the term within the field in his notable and well-known 1917 article on the ‘origin of the word shaman’. Laufer, who had come to the United States in 1898 at the suggestion of Boas, thought that it was time for an ‘ethnologist to take an interest in the history of a term which has become part and parcel of anthropological nomenclature, and the origin of which

has given rise to numerous discussions and speculations. Laufer endorsed the words 'shaman' and 'shamanism' and concluded that

it is obvious that the word šaman has now legitimately secured an absolute and irrevocable decree of divorce from its pseudo-mate čramaña, or ša-men, and that this mismated couple cannot live together any longer. Tungisian sa-man, šaman, xaman, etc., Mongol šaman, Turkish kan and xam, are close and inseparable allies grown and nourished on the soil of Northern Asia, - live witnesses for the great antiquity of the shamanistic form of religion.24

One of the most famous students of Boas was Ruth Fulton Benedict (1887-1948). With her popularizing anthropology and 'anthropology for the common man' she reached millions of readers. In her work, she disconnected the term 'shamanism' from its Siberian roots and habitually used it to designate a range of different religious practitioners around the world. In her analysis of what she labelled 'cultural patterns' she dealt with the term shaman almost habitually, using it for completely different characters and without critically reflecting on the term.25 In her 1922 article on 'Plains Culture', for example, Benedict argued that on the Western Plains a special 'spiritual-sacred profession' was absent, and that because of the common access of all men to supernatural powers, there was a 'lack of laity-shamanistic distinction.' The shamans of the Dakota of the Eastern Plains, on the other hand, were organized in cults. They 'possessed an esoteric vocabulary' and their initiation was the outcome of supernatural experiences. In contrast, the shamans of the Pawnee of the Eastern Plains depended on prolonged training. Their shamans formed 'a ranked and vested College of Cardinals'.26

As Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) brilliantly put in words, with her 'rhetoric strategy', Benedict juxtaposed 'the all-too-familiar and the wildly exotic in such a way that they change places'.27 Indeed, her views on shamans were part of her larger

---


27 C. Geertz, 'Us/Not-Us. Benedict's Travels', in idem, Works and Lives. The Anthropologist as Author (Stanford, 1988) 102-28 at 106; Modell, "It is Besides a Pleasant English Word",
commitment to advocate cultural relativism that would, she hoped, alter individual sensibilities to other cultures. In her best-selling 1932 *Patterns of Culture*, she argued that the shaman had to be distinguished from the priest, as the priest ‘is the depository of ritual and the administrator of cult activities’. In contrast, the North-American shamans ‘are characteristically those who have the experience of the vision’. Benedict defined shamanism as

one of the most general human institutions. The shaman is the religious practitioner who, by whatever kind of personal experience is recognized as supernatural in his tribe, gets his power directly from the gods.28

By emphasising the highly individual experiences of shamans, Benedict strengthened the idea of the shaman as an exceptionally gifted individual. Yet, as a typical proponents of the so-called culture and personality school of anthropology, she also suggested that shamans and shamanism were part of the basic personality structure of cultures. In her 1934 ‘Anthropology and the Abnormal’, Benedict used shamans as ‘illustrations of the fact that those whom we regard as normals may function adequately in other cultures’. Further, with their ‘cataleptic seizures’ shamans gained ‘cultural approval’. Benedict even went so far as to claim that, notwithstanding their ‘neurotic condition’, the ‘shamans of Siberia dominate their communities’.29

In line with this movement, Benedict’s friend and pupil, the influential historian of medicine and former Trotskyite Erwin H. Ackerknecht (1906-1988) also stressed the contingency of pathological categories. He made a case for the healthy social functioning of shamans. They were ‘healed madmen’ who had overcome a ‘preshamanic psychosis’. Shamanism, therefore, was not a disease ‘but being healed from disease’.30 In 1945, Ackerknecht fruitlessly argued that it was ‘extremely re-

grettatable that the term, shaman, has been used very loosely as a synonym for medicine man in all four corners of the world.\textsuperscript{31} The mental health of shamans remained an unsettled issue in the field of anthropology, but, in general, American anthropologists agreed that shamanism and shamans were essential components that helped to integrate the dispersed aspects of cultures. The interpretation of the shaman as a wounded healer stuck and remained important for many future interpreters.\textsuperscript{32}

Needless to say, it is impossible to mention all American anthropologists who made use of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’. In general, along the dominant lineage of shamanism, the concept shaman travelled a long way, from disturbed individuals to intelligent, spiritual gifted leaders. For instance, in his 1938 \textit{Shamanism in Western North America}, the American anthropologist Willard Zerbe Park (1906-1965) defined the shaman as ‘one who acquires supernatural power through direct personal experience’. According to him, ‘The great diversity of practices and beliefs presented by a survey of shamanism does not readily yield a clear definition of the term’. Yet, he also wrote:

\begin{quote}
One point is held common by all these definitions: the shaman in all cases is one who has direct relationships with spirit powers in contrast to the priest who fulfils his office largely by virtue of his knowledge of rituals.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

Wider audiences came to appreciate shamans through the 1948 anthropological best-selling classic \textit{The Heathens}, in which Harvard physical anthropologist William White Howells (1908-2005) portrayed shamans as ‘men and women with extraordinary powers of their own, whose ‘purposes are good, and who are given public recognition and respect’. Howells taught his readers that shamans displayed a combination of expert showmanship and management and of autohypnosis, so that while the shaman knows perfectly well he is faking much of the performance he may at the same time work himself into a trance in which he does things he believes are beyond his merely human powers.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{33} W.Z. Park, \textit{Shamanism in Western North America. A Study in Cultural Relationships} (Chicago, 1938) 9, 10, 71.
\bibitem{34} W.W. Howells, \textit{The Heathens. Primitive Man and His Religions} (Salem, 1948) 125.
\end{thebibliography}
Shamans used ‘ventriloquism and histrionics’ and ‘other tricks to heighten their effects’ and when they went ‘into action the result is not a rite but a séance, which is full of drama and which the people enjoy immensely’. Clearly, Howells had a high opinion of shamans: ‘shamans are among the most intelligent and earnest people of their community, and their position is one of leadership’.35

Is it justifiable to interpret the American anthropological genealogy of shamanism as a straightforward road to sanctification, then? No, it is not, as a quick look at some other schools of anthropology demonstrate. For instance, from the 1940s on, Leslie Alvin White (1900-1975) interpreted shamanism ‘as a social process’ and ‘as a form of division of labor’. White was guided by an evolutionary materialist perspective, to the dismay of some of his colleagues, contrasted with, in White’s words, the ‘anti-evolutionist fallacy’ of Boas and his followers. As Communism would never acquire legitimacy in the American struggle for symbolic order, it is no wonder that White played but a minor role in the genealogy of shamanism.36

Robert Redfield (1897-1958) should also be mentioned here as he was an important and influential anthropologist, whose interpretation of shamanism was related to his concern for the people who were caught in the process in which Gesellschaft replaced Gemeinschaft, as Ferdinand Tönnies (1858-1936) stated in 1887.37 Redfield described the transformation of the ‘shaman-priests’ and the adjustment of their position, meaning and function in the new circumstances. The ‘increase of sorcery in the city’ was ‘an adaptation to the greater insecurity and instability of life in the city among a people still partly illiterate and primitive in habit of thought’. In village life

the forms are still full of meaning; the layman understands and follows what the shaman-priest says and does. In the towns this is less true. The shaman-

---

35 Idem, 125-40.
priest is not a member of the town-community; he is brought in from a village, and the symbolism of what he does is less understood. It is simply an act of prudence to have him perform his ceremonies: otherwise the crop might fail. In a word, this functionary becomes less of a priest and more of a magician.  

In his 1941 *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*, Redfield described the changing position, function and meaning of the ‘shaman-priest’, or ‘h-men’ as he also called them in this study. In cities, ‘efficiency appeared as a rival virtue’ to ‘piety’ and, thus, the ‘city man (...) looked with disfavor or contempt upon the shaman-priest. The older view regarded him as a leader of the religious life’. In short, the cult of ‘h-men’ suffered from what Redfield called ‘incompatibles’. City life turned shamanic cults from ‘sacred and discharged by the community’ to ‘secular, and discharged by an individual on his own account’. In villages the ‘knowledge and practice of the h-men holds religious and medical conceptions together in something that approximates a system of ideas’, but in towns and cities ‘the power of professional diagnosis and treatment’ are no longer in the hands of a ‘single functionary, the h-men’. As a consequence, Redfield lamented, the ‘consistency of conceptions as to sickness’ and the ‘integration into the religion of the people’ disappear.

Remarkably, notwithstanding their elegance, Redfield’s interpretations would not make a significant impression on the scholars who structured the dominant lineages of shamanism. His anthropological school in Chicago would not intensify the use of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’. On the contrary, one of the most prominent exponents of Redfield’s anthropological school, Clifford Geertz, would dismiss the concept shamanism as one of those ‘desiccated types’ or ‘insipid categories’ by means of which scholars ‘devitalize their data’ in 1975.

Nonetheless, during the first half of the twentieth century, most American anthropologists started treating as shamans any spiritual practitioner, first in Northern America, and later in every ‘savage society’. Most of them considered the shaman as an outstanding individual, whose individuality contributed to the communalism of his people. At the same time, however, the meaning of the term remained contested and indistinct, as anthropologists used the term ‘shaman’ for a range of different specialists in different cultures. Thus, even though most American anthropologists treated shamanism as a universal category, it remained an imprecise and problematic concept.

---

38 Redfield, ‘Yucatan Culture Changes’, 66.
39 R. Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (Chicago, 1941) 142.
40 Idem, 182-3.
41 Idem, 309-10.
42 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1975) 122.
One of the major connotations of shamanism that was established during the first half of the twentieth century was related to hallucinogenic drugs. Highly important for this genealogical course of shamanism were the popular travel accounts of the Norwegian discoverer and ethnographer Carl Sofus Lumholtz (1851-1922) who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, focused on the shaman’s use of hallucinogenic drugs among Mexican tribes. Lumholtz travelled among the Tarahumare, the Huichols and other tribes in what he called Unknown Mexico, where he interviewed many Tarahumare shamans. Without these ‘wise men’, the Tarahumare tribe would feel lost, ‘both in this life and after death’, as the shaman was priest and physician combined and ‘performs all the ceremonies and conducts all the dances and feasts by which the gods are propitiated and evil is averted’. Lumholtz argued that shamans sometimes also used ‘rational means’, for example ‘a kind of sweating-bath’ and several medicinal herbs.43

Lumholtz took a special interest in the different sacred cacti that the Tahamuhara used. He did not doubt their medicinal properties, but their use was connected to so many rites and ceremonies that the ‘therapeutic value has been obscured’. Lumholtz observed that ‘to the Indians, everything in nature is alive’, and he found that the Huichols valued peyote as the plant with the highest mental qualities. Lumholtz ingested peyote, felt stimulated by it and even bought some cacti from a shaman. He concluded that peyote ‘exhilarates the human system, and allays all feeling of hunger and thirst. It also produces color visions’.44

Thus Lumholtz took a step in the direction of the development of the distinct anthropological subfield known as ethnobotany, which would focus on the relationship between indigenous peoples and their use of plants. It would affect the perception of shamans profoundly. The ‘father’ of this field was Richard Evans Schultes (1915-2001). His ethnobotanical research focused, for instance, on ‘the appeal of peyote as medicine’, and the ‘teonanacatl: the Narcotic Mushroom of the Aztecs’, a mushroom that became known as the ‘flesh of the gods’.45 Succeeding

---


anthropological investigations would increasingly denote peyote or *lophophora williamsii* as ‘divine mushrooms’ with healing and religious capacities that were closely connected to shamanistic practices. The association of peyote with shamanism was not habitual, however, as a 1930 *Science News-Letter* demonstrated. Without using the term ‘shaman’, it proclaimed that ‘Peyote Button Induces Religious Fervor’.

In some articles, however, such as the 1925 ‘Peyote, the Giver of Visions’, the leader of peyote ceremonies was labeled ‘shaman’.

For many white observers peyote symbolized the awfulness of Native Indian religion, while for many Indians, on the other hand, peyote was part of the pan-Indian movement and a symbol of resistance to assimilation. Within the American field of the avant-garde artists, however, peyote acquired a distinct other meaning as they supposed that it could be used to achieve authentic spiritual experiences. For example, in 1914 the anthropologist Mark Raymond Harrington (1882-1971) invited a group of artists from the Greenwich Village milieu to reproduce authentic Indian religious rituals. It is noteworthy that one of the principal avant-garde ‘curators of culture’, Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879-1962), was there. As wealthy salon host, patron and inspiration to an assortment of artists, writers and political radicals (‘creators of culture’ and ‘opinion makers’, in Bourdieu’s terminology), she was in a position to consecrate symbolic goods and organise cultural devotion. During the ceremony they used arrows and feathers and built a fake fire with an electric light bulb and a red shawl. In their attempt to experience Native American spirituality, they ingested peyote. It would not take long before this experience would be considered shamanic.

This anecdote is noteworthy as it points to the fact that some of the scholars who gave shamanism a distinctive appealing flavour inspired an elite network of avant-garde artists to explore Native American Indian culture and religion. What is more, several anthropologists closely collaborated in the artistic, esoteric, therapeutic and cultural political ventures of avant-garde intellectuals. As we will see in the next sections, as artists started to identify with shamans, powerful charismatic leaders of their community, they conferred legitimacy to the idea of the shaman as the embodiment of charisma and as the noble master of genuine culture.

---


The quest for genuine culture

The participation of anthropologists in the Greenwich Village milieu of avant-garde artists and intellectuals had an enormous influence on the inspirational use and spread of the shaman concept. Greenwich Village avant-garde artists formed a cultural elite that was closely engaged with the formation of a specific American national identity, especially during the period between the wars. America had come out of the First World War with greater political and economic power, and this had contributed to a specific anti-European American nationalism. Avant-garde artists, anthropologists and other intellectuals demanded the status of a new cultural aristocracy that would awaken a new and heightened sense of individual and national purpose. In the new national élan, the Native American Indian was, as it had been before, a key symbol. Gradually, the image of the shaman acquired a specific distinctive significance in this project.49

The cultural upper crust included anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1901-1978), Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Ruth Benedict. They participated in the field of art, for instance by writing and publishing poetry. As academic authorities on ‘primitive cultures’, their regular suggestion that these cultures could be models for American society acquired a strong legitimacy. A noteworthy case in point is Sapir’s momentous 1923 article ‘Culture, Genuine and Spurious’, in which he criticized America’s individualism and its mass culture. Sapir, whose own poetic work profoundly shaped his anthropological theory, suggested that individuals needed a ‘rich cultural heritage’ to enable the individual ‘to find himself’. In the process towards genuine culture, he argued, art should play a crucial role.50

Sapir belonged to the ‘rebellious’ generation of intellectuals who searched for ‘true culture’ and battled for what they considered to be authenticity and sincerity. ‘Personal growth’, ‘self-fulfilment’, ‘free love’ and, above all, ‘self-expression’ were major themes in this field and they were sought after via mysticism, esotericism and psychotherapy. Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter were widely read authorities on the issues of love and sex in whose days, while the teachings of the


Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) and the Armenian-Greek ‘magician’ George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949) were highly influential on the therapeutic stage. Avant-garde artists and intellectuals linked creativity, another important issue that was closely related to the urge for self-expression, to a mystical new primitivism, and they started to perform Indianness in an aesthetic way. Instead of merely picturing the romantic Native American Indian life, as their predecessors had done, avant-garde artists wanted to experience the life of Native American Indians. Moreover, they truly believed that they could.\textsuperscript{51}

Gradually, the charismatic image of the shaman started to inspire a variety of poets, musicians and other artists as it became a vital part of the romantic image of the Native American Indian. The publication of a special ‘Indian’ issue of \textit{Poetry: A Magazine of Verse} in 1917 was a significant demonstration of the standing of Native American culture. It included a number of interpretations of Native song and dance and a list of anthropological texts including poems and myths.\textsuperscript{52} The issue contained a primitivist plea from the feminist writer Mary Austin (1868-1934), who stated that ‘the poetic faculty’, as ‘the most responsive to the natural environment’, was the basis for ‘new national ideals’. She also argued that there was a ‘whole instinctive movement of the American people (...) for a deeper footing in their national soil’.\textsuperscript{53} Austin, a participant in Luhan’s salon and a major spokesperson for the study of Indian poetry, found the answer to her own problem of creativity in putting ‘on the character of an Indian woman’ and ‘getting inside the universe by imitating it’, as described in her 1932 autobiography \textit{Earth Horizon}.\textsuperscript{54}

Austin sometimes wore Indian-inspired clothing, she wrote in a tree house and, in her 1923 \textit{The American Rhythm}, she acknowledged the influence of anthropologists on the development of her Amerindian aesthetic. Yet she claimed a distinct other position, as her knowledge was experiential:

\begin{quote}
I felt myself caught up in the collective mind, carried with it towards states of super-consciousness that escape the ethnologist as the life of the flower escapes between the presses of the herbalist. So that when I say that I am not, have never been, nor offered myself as an authority on things Amerindian I
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{54} M. Austin, \textit{Earth Horizon} (Santa Fe, 2007 [1932]) 277.
do not wish to have it understood that I may not, at times, have succeeded in being an Indian.\textsuperscript{55}

Some of Mary Austin’s protagonists were ‘medicine women’, others were ‘shamans’, but they all were wise women and prophets who initiated others into their mysteries. Not surprisingly, her explorations of Indian culture mirrored her own ambitions and struggles. Significantly, a friend reported that she ‘was not only gifted with ESP, but she practiced some kinds of homely “magic” she had doubtless learned from her Indian friends’.\textsuperscript{56}

One of the other key figures in the Greenwich Village milieu, the poet and radical intellectual Max Eastman (1883-1969), also accentuated the spiritual in art when he wrote, in 1929, that poetry should aim at the realization of a ‘heightened consciousness’. His own spiritual quest also involved psychoanalysis with several practitioners from competing schools of psychotherapy, whose practices he described as ‘a kind of magic’.\textsuperscript{57} Even though Eastman wanted to abolish religion as illusory, he interpreted the shaman as an inspirational figure in ‘the tendency toward pure poetry’. The ‘shaman’ (or ‘medicine man’ or ‘poet-magician’), he wrote, ‘knew the right words for things’ and had the ability to produce an ‘original and pure form of poetry’.\textsuperscript{58}

---


In the noteworthy 1922 volume *American Indian Life by Several of Its Students*, the artistic competence of anthropologists was put to the test. The book contained twenty-seven brief texts written by prominent anthropologists such as Robert Lowie (1883-1957), Edward Sapir, Alexander Goldenweiser (1880-1940), Paul Radin (1883-1959), Alfred Kroeber and Franz Boas. They all made fictional attempts to reproduce Native Indian life, and many of them habitually used the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism.’ The editor of the volume, Elsie Clews Parsons (1875-1941), introduced herself as a ‘Member of the Hopi tribe.’ More than anything else, however, she was a member of the field of Boasian anthropologists and Greenwich Village intellectuals, where she was well known for her feminist dispositions and the ways she used ethnographic material to demonstrate that women’s lives were constrained by taboos, confinement and exclusion from male affairs. In one of her stories in *American Indian Life*, shamans played prominent roles as authorities, ‘charged with the welfare of the whole village’.59

Other contributors also conspicuously used the term ‘shaman’. For example, in his ‘The Trial of Shamans’, Lowie told the tale of a magic battle between the shamans Big-dog and White-hip, leaving White-hip blind and defeated but, in a way, morally superior.60 Paul Radin’s story about ‘Thunder-cloud, a Winnebago Shaman’ started with: ‘I came from above and I am holy’ and was loaded with spirits, holiness, blessings, offers, powers and animals.61 In Kroeber’s story, ‘Earth-tongue, a Mohave’ kills a shaman who had failed to cure his relatives and Sapir’s tale of ‘Sayach’apis, a Nootka Trader’ focused on ‘supernatural experiences’, ‘magic procedures’, ‘medicine men’ and ‘potent shamanic power’.62

It must be recognised that the courses of action of the avant-garde elite were closely related to the changes in mainstream American culture. To be precise, the emergence and spread of the ‘therapeutic ethos’, that is a habitus defined by an

---


ambition of self-realization in this world and a concern with psychic and physical health, was closely related to the reshaping of the American workplace. This change was especially enforced in American corporations where employees turned into *homo communicans* and even *homo sentimentalis* for the sake of ‘rationality’, ‘self-interest’ and ‘efficiency’. The avant-garde elite contributed fundamentally to this transformation, assuming a privileged and distinctively charismatic position as artistic, spiritual and cultural aristocrats with regard to the masses, their supposedly alienating culture and their inner emptiness. From the 1920s onwards, advice literature was a growing cultural industry that diffused psychological ideas throughout mainstream USA. Movies and advertising also helped to instigate the therapeutic discourse as the cultural norm, shaping and organising experiences. A select few, however, immersed in the same trend, distanced themselves from wider trends as ‘the natural champions of the charismatic ideology’, as Bourdieu called it. They authorised their esoteric, therapeutic and primitivist language by drawing on the social field for authority. Moreover, they imagined themselves to be the right personalities to function as guides towards genuine culture.63

*Jaime de Angulo*

Exemplary for the amalgamation of academic, aesthetic, esoteric and therapeutic knowledge were the steps taken by the Jungian anthropologist Jaime de Angulo (1887–1950). He was vital for introducing academic anthropological capital to the American genealogy of shamanism as it occurred in the field of esotericism. De Angulo was linked to Jung via his ex-wife Cary de Angulo (1883-1977), later known as Cary Baynes after she married Jung’s associate, the British psychiatrist Helton Godwin ‘Peter’ Baynes (1882-1943). In a letter to his ex-wife, De Angulo wrote that Jung had liberated his mind. Jung had given him ‘the philosophical key which I had been groping for so long and was so vital to me’. Especially the ‘paradoxical knife edge’ of balancing the rational and irrational profoundly affected his work. Before, he had ‘believed in the spirits’ when he called on the spirits with Indians, now he knew these spirits were ‘equivalents in the world of biology’.64


64 S. Shamdasani, *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology: the Dream of a Science* (Cambridge, 2003) 318. At the beginning of the 1920s, Cary de Angulo had gone to live in
De Angulo defined the concept of ‘shamanism’ in a specific psychological way in *American Anthropologist* in 1926, arguing that shamans were in ‘a somewhat dangerous state of autism during the performance’. Even though most shamans ‘are markedly neurotic’, De Angulo praised Indians as their way of life was ‘nothing but a continuous religious experience’. According to De Angulo, ‘primitive tribes’ had a ‘mystical attitude’, and they got their ‘religious emotion’ from their ‘intimate contact with the life-power that permeates the world’. Implicitly claiming expert knowledge for himself, he argued that this ‘conception of the mystical life-power’ was difficult to understand for ‘the rational man’. A year later, De Angulo sharply contrasted shamans, with their authentic and pure religious experiences, with what he interpreted as the corrupted and impure priests and their religion:

The shaman is the very opposite of the priest of an organized religion. The true shaman goes by no traditional ceremonies. He has his own way of operating. This is indeed religious experience. It is subjective, religious experience, pure and unalloyed, unmixed with social complexes.

It is illuminating to see how De Angulo came to his opinions. For a start, he was one of the first anthropologists in the genealogy of shamanism who was, in the terminology of the Native American writer and scholar Gerald Robert Vizenor, ‘native by concession’. Convinced that the best way to study native cultures was to experience their life to the fullest by ‘going native’, he considered himself particularly competent to go native because as a Spaniard, he was more native than other white men. During fieldwork, he sometimes even pretended to be a non-white descendent of ‘the Castilian tribe’. As we will see in the next chapters, many other influential interpreters of shamanism would use the same strategy to enhance their symbolic capital and to authorise their knowledge about shamans and/or their ‘shamanic’ knowledge. Similarly to these successors, De Angulo believed that ingesting peyote, drinking and gambling with the Native Americans were crucial parts of his research method. He assumed that peyote helped him to experience the spiritual dimensions of Native American culture. Even so, his self-legitimising imagination and his claims of privileged knowledge could not convince other anthropologists. Kroeber in particular disapproved and called his methods into question.

---


question. When De Angulo found himself excluded by other anthropologists and marginalised in the anthropological field, he complained that ‘decent anthropologists don’t associate with drunkards who go rolling in ditches with the shamans’.68

Anthropologists looked in disdain at De Angulo’s methods, but in the field of avant-garde artists his experiential knowledge only enhanced his status as an authority. His expert knowledge was highly valued here, also because he combined it with academic capital. As a regular visitor to the literary colony that Mabel Dodge Luhan had started in Taos, New Mexico in 1917, De Angulo was in a position to strengthen the popularity of the shaman-figure in literary circles. His connection to Luhan was important – she remained a prominent curator of culture as several Greenwich Village artists who had participated in her salon came to live with her. She even attracted European artists, including D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), who shared her primitivist dispositions but could not stand her domineering will and her demands to control the subjects he wrote about.69 Luhan thought of her stay on the ‘sacred mountain’ of Taos as an ‘escape to reality’, where she ‘was offered and accepted a spiritual therapy that was cleansing, one that provided a difficult and painful method of curing me of my epoch and that finally rewarded me with a sense of reality’.70 With her artists, she considered the world of the Pueblos as a world of beauty and harmony. From their colony they promoted indigenous lifestyles and art, which they contrasted sharply with what they considered the industrial corruption of the modernizing world, or with ‘mechanical’ America, as Lawrence described it.71

Jaime de Angulo became a major source of ethnographic information for the network surrounding Luhan. He also taught the household members Jungian thinking and even invited Jung to come to Taos, which he did in 1925.72 His analytical psychology dovetailed with the avant-garde quest for self-expression, personal growth and self-fulfillment, as Luhan and her avant-garde elite considered esotericism and psychotherapy highly compatible ways to achieve authenticity

and genuine culture. Luhan, for instance, had engaged herself in Divine Science, New Thought and the occult practices of a certain Lotus Dudley, who told her that she had a ‘cosmic task’ to perform. She also tried different Freudian and Jungian ‘new soul doctors’, as she called them. Gurdjieff’s philosophies impressed her so much that she even sent a letter to him in France in 1926, to ask him to set up a branch of his institute at her colony in Taos. Gurdjieff declined.

Although the ‘American Ovid’, as Ezra Pound (1885-1972) called De Angulo, worked on the margins of academia, intermittently supported by small grants irregularly disbursed, he functioned at the heart of the bohemian artistic milieu of his time and contributed fundamentally to their aesthetic, esoteric, therapeutic and primitivist ideals. At the interface among Berkeley anthropology, the artistic centres in Taos and California and the field of analytical psychologists, he created and distributed his romantic concept of shamanism, using the academic capital he acquired through his academic work in combination with the symbolic capital he acquired through his specific experiential knowledge as a Jungian initiate and as a native by choice.

Long before it became trendy, De Angulo embodied his Indianness by dressing up as a West Coast American Indian range rider with headband, jeans and a huge belt knife. His fascination for the Pueblo berdaches and the supposed gender bending of shamans went so far that he even practised transvestitism, walking the streets of San Francisco in stockings and high heels. Wider audiences got to know him through the Indian Tales he told for children’s hour on Pacifica Radio, in 1949. The stories, among them his Shaman Songs, were published posthumously in 1953, at the instigation of Ezra Pound.

De Angulo’s lasting impact on the genealogy of shamanism is also due to the poet Robert Duncan (1919-1988), who took care of De Angulo in the last years of his life. In that period Duncan was a leader and centre of the emerging West Coast poetry scene that became known as the Berkeley Renaissance, and that would lead to the San Francisco Renaissance which intersected with the circle of the so-called Beat Generation, a circle of poets that will be reviewed in Chapter 6. When Duncan spent some years in New York, in the early 1940s, he was part of the bohemian group around the French author Anaïs Nin (1903-1977). Duncan also befriended

---

Henry Miller (1891-1980), with whom Nin had shared her bed and bohemian lifestyle in Paris in the 1930s. Miller, who had settled in Big Sur, California in 1940, also knew De Angelo and would later, in his 1971 *My Life and Times*, describe him as a shaman. Duncan took up the idea of the charismatic shaman from De Angulo and blended it with his own main themes: homosexuality and, not surprisingly, as he was brought up in a theosophical milieu, mysticism. In the 1930s, he worked on a never-to-be-published novel that was variously titled *The Shaman, Toward the Shaman* and *The Shaman as Priest and Prophet* of which he published excerpts in the *Experimental Review* in 1940. Duncan considered himself a poet-shaman. From his prominent position in the literary field he inspired others to use the term ‘shaman’ as well. For Duncan and many other individuals participating in this field, the anthropologist-storyteller-turned-shaman Jaime de Angulo was a culture hero who embodied the ultimate healer-poet-shaman.77

**Conclusion**

During the first half of the twentieth century, a range of artists and scholars constructed an image of the shaman as a cultural hero who could be identified with for the sake of art, therapy, self-expression and authentic culture. Shamans were supposed to possess valuable experiential knowledge and, moreover, they preceded a range of other practitioners, albeit in a more condensed form, as shamans combined many cultural functions that would be separated in a later phase of cultural development. By and large, the dominant schools of anthropology presented shamans as ancient, creative, charismatic practitioners who contributed significantly to different cultural wholes.

---

American anthropologists used the term ‘shaman’ for a collection of social and cultural practitioners from an overwhelming variety of social and cultural contexts. Moreover, shamanism was conceptualized differently in different schools of anthropology. The idea of the shaman as a distinctly gifted individual, however, became dominant and took root, above all, in the avant-garde artistic fields in which anthropologists participated, and which had created a distinctly charismatic image of the shaman. Yet, while anthropologists collected ethnographic information and constructed knowledge about shamans, artists searched for and acquired experiential knowledge of shamans.

In search of authentic culture avant-garde artists had already started to identify with Native American Indians and their supposedly healthy, authentic, spiritual, communal and aesthetic cultural patterns. The shaman intensified their primitivist identification, as the shaman concept dovetailed with their elitist and therapeutic dispositions. In other words, the small cultural elite that embraced this concept of the shaman perceived it as an icon in their ‘revolt’ against the ills of modern times. As a cultural aristocracy they assumed a privileged position in opposition to the masses. At the same time, they assumed a distinct position versus anthropologists, who did have scholarly knowledge, but not the artist’s secret or intimate knowledge of shamanism.

Anthropologists and avant-garde artists thus gave the genealogy of shamanism a direction that fitted their own specific strategic positioning as a cultural elite within the process of modernisation. Through their conceptualisation of the shaman as a charismatic figure, and their identification with the shaman, artists and intellectuals misinterpreted their supposedly pure taste as intrinsic. Like the supposed shamans, they presented themselves as authentic individuals with the right amount of experiential knowledge and inborn or ‘natural’ gifts to guide other Americans towards authentic culture.

This ‘illusion of the fresh eye’ as a ‘naked eye’, however, is, in the intricate words of Bourdieu, ‘an attribute of those who wear the spectacles of culture and who do not see that which enables them to see, any more than they see what they would see what they would not see if they were deprived of what enables them to see’. In other words, Eastman and other avant-garde artists misinterpreted their art competence as innate. Yet, as Bourdieu emphasised, the source of the creative power of artists should not be located in their ineffable charisma. Instead, the avant-garde demand of breaking the aesthetic code presupposes an accomplished mastery of the code which is the result of education and other processes of cultural enrichment.78

---