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## Modern Faces of Ancient Wisdom: Neo-Shamanic Practices in a Slovak Urban Environment<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In the last century Europe has witnessed increasing interest in the occult and religious structures and rituals that present an alternative to Christianity and other long-established religious systems. Despite the recent advance of science and technology, various supernatural beliefs and magical practices more or less explicitly influence our enlightened world. Ironically, science has played an important role in the development of new spiritual movements, in particular the New Age movement “drawing on both Eastern and Western spiritual and metaphysical traditions and then infusing them with influences from self-help and motivational psychology, holistic health, parapsychology, consciousness research and quantum physics in order to create a spirituality without borders and dogmas” (Drury 2004: 12).

The New Age movement is a rather loose set of diverse beliefs and practices. It includes several trends that may overlap. One of them is so-called neo-shamanism or urban shamanism, which has attracted many adherents in Europe and the United States in recent decades. Neo-shamanism shares with the New Age movement the belief that we are living in times of radical change of culture and approaching a new age (Lužný 1995: 178). In this process, individuals as well as society as a whole are undergoing a transformation. Some of the adherents believe that the old world is going to perish, while others dedicate themselves to spiritual or ecological activities intended to prevent the end of the world. This ecological activism, a further common feature of neo-shamanism and other New Age movements, is interpreted as an instrument of blending with the soul of nature and returning to the ancient roots of humankind (see, for instance, Endredy 2005).

The transformation of people belonging to the New Age movement and in particular neo-shamanism is not understood only as a spiritual issue: it is a transformation of body as well as soul. Healing practices and alternative psychotherapy are therefore very important. In neo-shamanism this importance is further strengthened by the common definition of the shaman as a magical healer and the interpretation of shamanism as an ancient version of psychotherapy. The shamanic experience has been compared with altered states of consciousness that have been central to all spiritual traditions of the New Age movement; shamanic illness matches so-called near-death-experience, whereas a shamanic journey corresponds to an out-of-body experience or an astral journey. Thus neo-shamanism with its “ancient roots” offers a certain inspiration to other esoteric movements and at the same time is heavily influenced by them.

Rituals and magical practices play an essential role in neo-shamanism due to its instrumental character: in the present esoteric discourse, shamanism is not understood as a religion but rather as a set of special healing techniques with the central notion of the shaman’s altered state of consciousness. Due to the eclectic nature of urban shamanism these techniques may be borrowed from virtually any cultural tradition. All healing practices are regarded as potentially useful and the common approach is “if a spiritual technique works for one personally, it becomes acceptable” (Znamenski 2007: 251). However, people do not choose randomly from a seemingly unlimited set of esoteric practices. The choice and performance of particular rituals as well as their interpretation by practitioners is determined by the social conditions of cultural transmission.

In my paper I will describe some of shamanic rituals in relation to their social settings. I will demonstrate how the practitioners’ choice of the rituals and their interpretations of them correspond to their participation

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in particular neo-shamanic groups and relationships between participants. I will illustrate my argument by the results of the field research I have conducted in two neo-shamanic circles in Bratislava. In the first part of my paper I will briefly present the neo-shamanic movement and in particular the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, which has played a crucial role in the transmission of neo-shamanism in Slovakia. I will then describe two circles that I investigated and will focus on the rituals I attended. Finally, I will discuss the practitioners' practices in relation to their explicit interpretations of shamanism.

#### UNIVERSAL SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

##### *Shamanism as an “anthropological constant”*

The roots of neo-shamanism or urban shamanism can be seen in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s associated with drug use as well as with environmentalism and a general interest in non-Western religious ideas. They were significantly influenced by Jungian psychotherapy and popular anthropological works, which were essential for the creation of the present popular image of the shaman. Shamanic studies have a long history: investigation of shamanism started in the seventeenth century, when the first German explorers travelled to Siberia and then described indigenous beliefs and practices to the Western audience. They introduced into Western literature the word “shaman”, which originated from the language of the Tungus (Evenki), one of the Siberian indigenous groups; the Russian settlers of Siberia applied it to all indigenous spiritual healers.

European scholars have long been fascinated by shamanism, though their attitudes towards it have varied significantly. During the Enlightenment they were sceptical about Siberian indigenous spirituality, but interest in it rose during the Romantic period. The further development of shamanic studies created cultural precursors of the later growth of popular interest in shamanism: in their attempt to underline the unique cultural identity of Siberia, ethnographers from this area looked into indigenous northern Asian archaic traditions, while there was a similar tendency in North America oriented on native Americans; the idiom of shamanism was gradually transplanted from Siberian ethnography to North American ethnology. Ethnographic books became instrumental in shaping the content of the expression shamanism as it was understood in the West in the first half of the twentieth century (Znamenski 2007).

Ethnographic research has often led to debates concerning the relation between religion and shamanism. Initially, shamanic rituals and practices were seen as an expression of ignorance opposing “true” Christian religiosity; later some authors proposed an idea of shamanism as an ancient religion originating in the Palaeolithic period. Since the nineteenth century such debates have been connected to the psychological aspects of this phenomenon. Some early works represented shamans as psychologically disturbed people and their behaviour as an expression of so-called “arctic hysteria”, presumably typical of the people of northern Asia. More favourable perspectives included interpretation of shamanic practices as a therapy or as special methods of healing (Hamayon 2007: 6).

In the middle of the twentieth century Mircea Eliade in his influential book on shamanism described it as “archaic techniques of ecstasy” (Eliade 1964). Due to his works as well as to the ideas of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell the shaman “became a model of a new understanding of humanity’s relation to nature and of human ability to access spiritual levels of reality [...] shamanism [...] was perceived of as an anthropological constant” (Stuckrad 2005: 123). As I have argued elsewhere, in the academic discourse the word “shaman” has been used to denote both a category of analysis (etic term) and a folk category (emic term); and the diverse movement of neo-shamanism has appeared as a product of the interaction of etic and emic categories in anthropological literature, especially as a result of the shift from the etic to the emic perspective that has taken place in the last 40 or 50 years (Svanberg 2003; Stuckrad 2005; Bužeková 2010). The definition of shamanism “was extended to such a degree that its very usefulness for academic analysis became doubtful” (Stuckrad 2005: 123). From now on I will therefore use the words “shaman” and “shamanism” as emic terms; later I will discuss the material presented here in terms of some current anthropological theories.

Due to the academic interpretation of shamanism as an anthropological constant that may take different forms in various cultures, the popular image of the shaman is compatible with any spiritual healing technique. However, even in the most general understanding shamanism has its specifics. Anthropologists have tried to recognise its essential features. In the present academic discourse, shamanism has come to be used to refer to:

- (1) Its original reference, a religious complex in Siberia centred on the trained practitioner utilising drums and chants to create an altered state of consciousness believed to enable the practitioner to negotiate in the spirit world;
- (2) Religious practice opposed to historical Western religions, featuring ecstatic states and emphasising individuals' subjective calling by spirits;
- (3) A primordial or primeval religion, or type of religious leader, supposed to have persisted among primitive hunter-gatherer/nomadic peoples since the Palaeolithic era;
- (4) Techniques for altering consciousness in contemporary Western societies no longer necessarily linked to religious beliefs (Kehoe 2004: 261–262).

The last meaning is related to attempts to connect shamanism with various cultural traditions; this generalisation greatly influenced the folk concepts of the shaman and shamanic practices. An important role in this process has been played the American anthropologist Michael Harner, who is regarded as one of the “fathers” of neo-shamanism.

#### *Teaching the forgotten knowledge*

After many years of field research Michael Harner left academic circles and established the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (henceforth the FSS), which started in 1979 as the Center for Shamanic Studies. He created a conception of the “core shamanism”, referring to the “essence” of shamanism, to the “universal principles and practices not bound to any specific cultural group or perspective”. In a general description of core shamanism and the goals of the FSS it is stated that “since the West overwhelmingly lost its shamanic knowledge centuries ago due to religious oppression, the Foundation’s programs in core shamanism are particularly intended for Westerners to reacquire access to their rightful spiritual heritage through quality workshops and training courses.”<sup>2</sup> This romantic search for indigenous roots leads to the efforts to rediscover and reinvent tradition on the individual level: core shamanism “provides a basic foundation on which a modern shaman can build her own individual practices out of whichever older traditions ‘resonate’ with her. This is especially meaningful and rewarding to those of us who have lost touch with our own indigenous culture: we can re-discover, or re-invent, our own individual ‘indigenosity’.”<sup>3</sup>

The main aim of the FSS, therefore, is the transmission of the long-forgotten knowledge – the principles of the core shamanism. It is understood as a mission aimed at contributing to a global change in Western society, which is intended to lead to the creation of a new world. An important feature of the message that the FSS tries to convey is an emphasis on the individual dimension and freedom of choice, which corresponds to liberal thinking of educated Westerners. On the other hand, Harnerian shamanism “perfectly fits the format of our world as a global village and might look attractive to many people who either belong to hyphenated groups or who simply do not know who they are” (Znamenski 2007: 249).

Apart from North America, the FSS launched its activities in many European countries and is still continuing to advance. The primary activity of the FSS is teaching core shamanism at workshops and training courses. The workshops fall into two categories: the basic workshops and the advanced workshops (the latter cannot be attended without having completed the basic workshop). The courses address some specific issues and serve to train people who practise core shamanism regularly and may aspire to become authorised FSS members. Their training is essential for the further advance of the FSS to new areas: although anybody can

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/index.php> (accessed 14 December 2010).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.skepticfiles.org/mys4/shaman.htm> (accessed 14 December 2010).

become a “shaman” in a general sense of practising shamanic techniques, only authorised members can organise workshops and teach the principles of the core shamanism. The authorisation is given in a form of the Certificate of Completion. These have several degrees providing indication of a graduate’s training in core shamanism:

- Harner Shamanic Counselling (HSC): completion of the five-day Harner shamanic counselling training;
- White: completion of the two-week shamanic healing intensive;
- Bronze: completion of the three-year programme in advanced initiations in shamanism and shamanic healing;
- Silver: completion of the two-week shamanic healing intensive and the three-year programme in advanced initiations in shamanism and shamanic healing;
- Gold: completion of all standard advanced foundation training in core shamanism:
  - o Shamanic divination;
  - o Shamanic extraction healing training;
  - o Shamanism, dying, and beyond;
  - o Shamanism and the spirits of nature;
  - o Shamanic dreamwork;
  - o Five-day Harner shamanic counselling training;
  - o Two-week shamanic healing intensive;
  - o Three-year programme in advanced initiations in shamanism and shamanic healing.<sup>4</sup>

The organisation of the FSS workshops and courses therefore reflects an idea of gradual advancement and achieving certain levels of expertise at individual level. Similar to any craft, one begins with simple basic techniques and proceeds by acquiring more extensive knowledge and experience. There is a significant difference from tribal shamanism as described in the academic literature: from the perspective of the FSS, anybody who has attended sufficient number of workshops and courses on core shamanism can become a shaman, while in tribal societies the shaman is a person with certain “gift” or special abilities and should usually be chosen by spirits. Furthermore, “unlike tribal shamanism that requires long-time apprenticeship, spiritual practices based on the ‘core shamanism’ provide a quick short-cut to spiritual growth, which resonates well with the mindsets of busy Western audiences” (Znamenski 2004: xiii).

The “audience” for neo-shamanism is specific because the variety of potential shamans trained at the FSS courses is limited by an important aspect: to attain shamanic knowledge one has to pay. Although the FSS is defined as a non-profit organisation, every workshop and course costs money. The prices depend on the country as well as the corresponding intervals and the levels of participants’ expertise. For example, in Slovakia you would pay about €40 to €50 for an afternoon workshop led by an authorised FSS member; about €100 for a three-day advanced workshop (not including accommodation and meals), and about €600 for a meeting during the three-year programme in advanced initiation into shamanism (plus €200-€300 for accommodation and meal). In addition, in the process of shamanic education people must acquire many material objects: drums or/and other percussion instruments, gems and crystals, amulets, herbs, books, CDs and so on. It is obvious that only people with a certain income can afford such an expensive spiritual “hobby”. Thus the FSS version of neo-shamanism primarily addresses a particular social category – educated people with access to certain ideas through literature or other media and who have money to satisfy their spiritual interests.

The other important aspect that influences the social background of neo-shamanic groups is its intellectual side. Anthropological and sociological research demonstrates that neo-shamanism answers the current cravings of Western European and American society for mystery, fantasy and spirituality and perfectly fits the Western culture and intellectual tradition. As Galina Lindquist has shown, neo-shamans mostly come

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/certificates.html> (accessed 14 December 2010).

from creative and social-service circles such as university students, artists, computer engineers, teachers, and social workers. In contrast, people from natural sciences and business are usually under-represented in neo-shamanic groups. Lindquist argues that this composition can be explained not only by spiritual healing but also by the view of shamanism as an entertainment and play (Lindquist 2001).

Moreover, “a neo-shamanic group, which meets as a workshop or on the occasion of spiritual event, is usually amorphous and short-lived. This anti-structure is an ideal ‘structure’ for contemporary middle-class educated Westerners, who are too sceptical to commit themselves to group values and who, at the same time, long for collective spiritual influences” (Znamenski 2004: xiii). However, despite the fact that the groups of people who meet at neo-shamanic sessions are “usually amorphous and short-lived”, there are people who have been involved in practising neo-shamanism for years in relatively stable circles. In the following section I will describe how such circles function in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia.

#### NEO-SHAMANIC GROUPS IN A SLOVAK URBAN SETTING

##### *New spiritual seeds*

Neo-shamanic groups began to form in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic in the 1990s, for the most part due to the activities of the FSS Europe and, in particular, Austrian shamans living in Vienna. Characteristic of neo-shamanism, scholars played an important role in this process. In the Czech Republic one of the main figures in the transmission of neo-shamanic beliefs was an ethnologist who had investigated Siberian shamanism and written several books on the subject. In Slovakia the first two lecturers to train at the FSS courses and receive the certificates of completion were a psychologist and a philosopher. In 1999 they established the Centre for Shamanic Studies in Slovakia (in cooperation with an astrologist); since then they have been engaged in teaching at the workshops and in healing activities. Apart from the capital, Bratislava, there are neo-shamanic groups working in co-operation with the FSS in two towns in central Slovakia – Banská Bystrica and Zvolen.

The development of the neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia was a rather complicated process. At the beginning of the 1990s various supernatural beliefs started to flow into the Slovak environment. Religious and spiritual themes became part of TV and radio broadcasting; books on spiritual matters flooded bookshops; and with the advance of the internet people gained access to diverse spiritual teachings, in particular ideas of the New Age movement, which had previously been rather remote for people living in eastern and central Europe. The atmosphere in the Slovak cities after the change of political regime was quite favourable to them: they offered paths of spiritual growth which had earlier been hindered or even suppressed by the communist institutions; at the same time these ideas were presented as an alternative to Christianity and were attractive in particular to young seekers of spirituality.

The FSS started its activities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia immediately after the fall of the communism. According to my respondents, the first person from Slovakia to be trained at the FSS seminars was an engineer, Karol,<sup>5</sup> who now works at a non-profit educational organisation oriented on the “development of human potential” and focusing on youth and adult education, but who is also involved in spiritual healing including shamanic séances. Apart from training at the FSS courses, he received intensive psychotherapeutic training at the process work seminars<sup>6</sup> and seminars focusing on the use of the Hemi-Sync audio-

<sup>5</sup> Although the teachers I mention here operate publicly, I have changed their names as well as the names of all respondents.

<sup>6</sup> Process work is an offshoot of Jungian psychology. It is an approach to individual and collective change that brings psychology, group dynamics, spirituality, and creative expression together in a single paradigm. Process work was developed by Jungian analyst Arnold Mindell in the 1970s. See, for instance, [http://www.processwork.org/about/what\\_is\\_process\\_work](http://www.processwork.org/about/what_is_process_work) (accessed 14 December 2010).

neurotechnology.<sup>7</sup> Karol did not get the FSS certificate of completion, presumably because he did not consider it important. Later, a psychologist, Alena, and a philosopher, Linda, got the certificates and became authorised members of the FSS. Since then they have been organising the official FSS workshops and courses; Karol, on the other hand, organised several workshops on core shamanism that were not run officially as FSS workshops but copied their structure and content. All these people have attracted certain groups who have since been practising core shamanism for years. Apart from attending the FSS workshops, they meet at regular drum sessions; many of them maintain friendships and conduct private rituals either individually or in the circles of close friends.

Although Harner was a pioneer of neo-shamanism, core shamanism is only one of many versions currently found in Europe and North America (Znamenski 2007: 248–256). Not all spiritual practitioners accept Harner's version of shamanism. In Slovakia there are groups that claim to follow shamanic traditions without attending the FSS workshops and courses. It is difficult to tell how many of them function in Bratislava and other Slovak cities, because they are “invisible”: they do not have official websites (although they may run internet forums); their leaders do not give public lectures that would be advertised like the activities of the FSS, and their meetings take place in private. Unlike the FSS, with its mission of transmitting the ideas of core shamanism to the broadest audience, these circles have been formed and functioned on the basis of individual interests, personal contacts and friendships.

In the following section I will describe two neo-shamanic groups. The first practices core shamanism and belongs to Alena's circle. The second is a small circle of people led by Peter, a spiritual healer who was initiated in Mongolian shamanism.

#### *Alena's circle*

Although I attended my first FSS workshop in 2003 and since then have been in occasional contact with some shamans, I only started doing a regular field research in the environment of neo-shamanistic groups at the end of 2008. I chose the circle of participants led by Alena. Her seminars are taught mainly in cooperation with the FSS Europe. She has been teaching the following workshops in Bratislava:

- The basic FSS workshop;
- Advanced FSS workshops;
- Workshops in cooperation with other authorised FSS members.

During the basic workshop participants were introduced to core shamanism, which is characterised on the FSS website as “the universal and near-universal basic methods of the shaman to enter non-ordinary reality for problem solving and healing”. Particular emphasis is on the shamanic journey, which involves a specific altered state of consciousness, in Harnerian shamanism called a shamanic state of consciousness. Participants are aided by drumming and other techniques to experience this state and for “awakening dormant spiritual abilities, including connections with Nature”. After the journey, participants compare their experiences and are introduced to shamanic divination and healing by the lecturer. An important part of the workshop is providing methods for journeying to meet the participants' individual spirit helpers in non-ordinary reality (sometimes called allies); these might be spiritual teachers or power animals. Participants then “learn how the journey is utilized to restore spiritual power and health, and how shamanism can be applied in contemporary daily life to help heal oneself, others, and the Planet”. They are asked to bring a rattle or a drum, wear comfortable clothing and bring a blanket as well as a pen and notebook to record shamanic journeys.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hemi-Sync is a technology developed by Robert Monroe. It is short for Hemispheric Synchronization. Monroe indicated that the technique synchronises the two hemispheres of one's brain, thereby creating a “frequency-following response” designed to evoke certain effects. Hemi-Sync has been used for many purposes, including relaxation and sleep induction, learning and memory aids, helping those with physical and mental difficulties, and reaching altered states of consciousness through the use of sound. See, for instance, <http://www.hemi-sync.com/> (accessed 14 December 2010).

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp\\_ID=10](http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp_ID=10) (accessed 14 December 2010).

People who regularly practise core shamanism also meet at drum sessions. Alena leads three series of these sessions in Bratislava:

- Bratislava drum group. This works as an open group and meets monthly. It is dedicated to personal development and more elaborate techniques of shamanic journeys.
- Bratislava women's group. This works as an open group and creates a "sacred space for healing and sharing in the safe atmosphere of a female community".
- Medicine Wheel. This works as a closed group consisting of people who have cooperated for a long time to help and heal people. The main aim is to heal clients and to offer consultation to the members of the circle.

Although the first two circles are described as open groups, people can become members only on the basis of personal contacts with other shamans and need the approval of the group and Alena's permission. I completed the basic workshop in 2004 and later chose to attend women's group. Similar to all other shamanic meetings, the circle's sessions were aimed at healing people or situations; its specific aspect was related to female powers, which are regarded very important in neo-shamanism and the New Age movement in general. The age of the women in the circle ranged from 20 to 56; all of them came from middle class families and had been educated at high school; many had university degrees. All had previously participated in numerous FSS workshops, and some had travelled to Austria and the Czech Republic several times to take part in FSS activities.

We met more or less regularly every month, sometimes together with the members of the Bratislava drum group. The number of participants might range from ten to twenty. The meetings took place in the therapeutic centre in the centre of Bratislava, where it was possible to rent a room for a day; everyone contributed a relatively small sum to pay for the room. At the beginning of the meeting there was always friendly talk and an exchange of news. Alena usually brought crystals, amulets, ritual accessories and herbs to sell – sage in particular was regarded as a very effective cleansing instrument. The session as such started with arranging a small altar made from crystals, amulets and candles in the centre of the room. Participants sat around it in a circle. The space and the participants had to be cleansed by the fumes from burning herbs (usually sage): Alena lit the dry herbs in a small bowl and passed it from one woman to another; each woman made certain movements with the bowl and a ritual bird wing was used to waft the fumes in the right direction along the aura.

The ceremony of the "talking stick" followed. Like many other shamanic practices this came to core shamanism from a tradition of North American Indians: it was a custom commonly used in council circles to designate who had the right to speak; only someone holding the stick can speak, while the other council members must remain silent. Alena always started this ceremony with greetings and announcement of the topic of the session. It could, for instance, be women's powers, the process of building shamanic groups, world peace, the financial crisis, parents and children, etc. Then each woman in turn talked about issues related to the topic, but they could also share their thoughts and feelings or talk about important events in their lives. However, they only talked if they wished to; if someone did not want to share her thoughts or feelings it was not regarded as a violation of rules.

When the stick came back to Alena she proposed the "map" of the shamanic journey into the world of spirits. This could be different at each session: we were supposed to visit gods or spiritual teachers of various traditions and different areas of non-ordinary reality. Then Alena drummed and sang; other women could drum or rattle, but then they just lay down or sat on cushions and were supposed to experience the shamanic state of consciousness. Their heads had to be covered with shawls or scarves, which were supposed to protect them from unwanted energies. After the first drumming, the ceremony of the talking stick took place again: women shared their experiences of the journey and interpreted them in relation to their lives and the topic of the session. The second journey followed; this was more "specified" for every participant and could take a different form. Usually it was combined with other practices (divination, returning lost soul, solving problems with aura, etc.). The third ceremony of the talking stick took place; this time the sharing of experiences

was related to the solutions to the problems that had been mentioned and to women's plans for the future. The last part of the session was a ritual aimed at helping a particular woman from the circle. The structure of the ritual, particular actions and their sequences were proposed by Alena. They were different each time, but the ritual always included drumming and was always concluded by holding hands and praying.

During my research I also attended several workshops that Alena organised in cooperation with other authorised FSS members. Their structure was determined by the specific topics and goals. For instance, the aim of the three-day "Medicine Wheel" workshop was to create a specific instrument of healing – a circle of stones – which was supposed to present a mirror of the human soul. The process included building the circle and learning about its symbolism as well as participants' meditations and their individual shamanic journeys inside of the medicine wheel. The workshop was concluded by a ritual performed by all participants.

Most of the women in the circle have been practising core shamanism for several years. Each of them has an altar at home and performs individual journeys (which may take place in a natural setting at "power places"); several members of some of the women's families also practise shamanism. The women mostly came into first contact with shamanic ideas because they were previously interested in spiritual matters and had read books on these subjects. Many of them had attended Alena's first lectures and workshops in the 1990s (they heard about them either from an advertisement or from their friends) and then became involved in practising core shamanism. All the women are also interested in other spiritual practices; some of them at professional level. For instance, Tina (28) teaches yoga courses; Monika (56) organises courses on painting on silk, which is accompanied by meditations and contact with the spirits of nature.

#### *Peter's circle*

I was introduced to Peter by a mutual friend and have been meeting him for several months now. I also participated in shamanic journeys in the private setting of his home. These differed from the meetings described above in several important aspects.

First of all, shamanism is not Peter's primary activity: for him it is only one set of useful spiritual techniques. He is involved rather in energetic healing and astral journeys, which he regards as different instruments in comparison with shamanism. Furthermore, he does not practise core shamanism, but the Mongolian version of shamanism. He was initiated into this in 1994, when he had already been practising astral journeys for several years. The person who initiated him was a historian who had studied shamanism in Mongolia and then started to practise it; she chose several people in Slovakia from her personal contacts, one of whom was Peter, to teach them shamanic techniques. Most of these are no longer involved in spiritual healing, but Peter has gradually developed his knowledge and has been involved in spiritual activities for years. He said that he was a rather "lonely bird" – in the sense that he preferred to work alone. Despite this, he has been leading a shamanic circle for more than a year now. He explained that he has been involved in this activity because those people needed him and his spiritual allies confirmed that he should lead the circle. However, he perceives it as a certain burden.

Peter's circle was formed on the basis of personal contacts; it is small and consists of six regular members (three men and three women aged between 22 and 35, all university graduates). Peter met some of them, including his girlfriend Mira, at the workshop organised by Karol, who invited him to attend because at the time Peter already had a reputation as an experienced spiritual healer. Several of the members came to shamanism after participating in Karol's workshop on Hemi-Sync. Mira was actually Karol's patient: she had some health problems and after several Hemi-Sync healing sessions Karol invited her to the basic shamanic workshop, which he conceived in accordance with the rules of the FSS. Thus at least three members of Peter's circle were initially learning core shamanism, and Peter himself participated in two workshops on core shamanism. But although shamanic journeys in his circle have some similarities with the FSS version, they significantly differ from them.

The drum session begins with a "calling" ("opening") ritual. An altar with amulets and candles is arranged and one of the participants calls spirits and allies by rattling over it. Participants sit down around the

altar and create a circle by holding hands. They sing a shamanic song of power. Then the leading participant greets spirits and allies and the session continues. It might include several shamanic journeys, which are intended to perform specific tasks. For instance, it might be meeting an ally, bringing a power animal from the Underworld, solving some individual problems or healing people. Those people do not need to be present at the circle, although their consent is required otherwise the ritual is not considered that effective. The sessions may also take place in natural settings, at the “places of power”. The choice of these may be a result of particular shamanic journeys. However, some of them are given by tradition – they are known as sacred places from historical sources. Peter’s circle also had several remote sessions: participants present at different places were supposed to meet in spiritual dimension at the appointed time.

The plan of the journeys is a matter of free discussion: anyone can propose specific task or come with some problem to solve. There may be one or more people drumming. The leading participant makes a final decision about the sequence of journeys and determines how the particular journeys should be made (where participants are supposed to go in the spirit world, who is to drum etc.). The session ends with the leading participant’s speech – he expresses gratitude to the spirits and the participants for their work; the participants hold hands in a circle, pray and sing the song of power.

Peter’s authority in the circle derives from his acknowledged level of expertise: he has been involved in spiritual practices for many years, much longer than any other member of the circle. He publishes articles on shamanism and other spiritual traditions on his webpage. He also actively participates in the discussions concerning spiritual teachings on the internet forum created by Karol and his brother (a psychologist who has also been involved in spiritual practices). Apart from this, he runs an internet shop selling amulets, ritual objects, shamanic drums etc. However, the most important aspect of Peter’s leadership is not his superior knowledge of practices and traditions but his special spiritual abilities, which he allegedly already showed at an early age. According to Peter, he could always see people’s aura; when he was training in eastern martial arts, his instructor noticed that the boy was “going away” during performance of certain techniques. The instructor asked for advice someone from the neighbourhood who had a reputation as spiritual seeker. They became Peter’s spiritual teacher and introduced him into the techniques of astral journeying and magic.

As I have said above, Peter practises spiritual healing and uses various techniques including shamanism. He also uses his alleged special abilities (for instance, seeing aura) to make more precise diagnoses and more effective healing. Apart from the members of the circle, he may help other people too. His clients find him only through personal contacts or via the above-mentioned internet forum; he does not advertise himself. According to him, he can heal from a distance and does not need to know a patient personally. Most of the problems he solves are related to illnesses or misfortune interpreted as results of evil eye, a curse or black magic. However, there are specific cases – for instance, this summer he allegedly helped the police to find the body of a young girl who was lost; she was found dead after several days of searching at the place he had described.

#### *Tradition: practices and underlying concepts*

Ritualised behaviour is an essential part of urban shamanism due to its instrumental character: shamanism is not conceived as a religion but rather as a set of healing practices presented as a synthesis of many spiritual traditions. Anthropological research has shown that, generally speaking, traditional practices do not need explicit explanations of why certain actions should be performed in a particular way, although elaborated doctrines could provide those explanations. As Pascal Boyer noticed, “an important feature of traditional practice is that, in most cases, the actors do not bother to justify or rationalise it [...] Performing a certain ritual [...] is justified in terms of practical goals: solving a conflict, healing a person or placating the ancestors. But the fact that the ritual has to be performed in a specific way, by specific people, does not seem to require any explanation. [...] The ‘common’ anthropological idea of traditions as the expression of underlying conceptions is not as simple and evident as it first sounds” (Boyer 1990: 11–12; see also Tužinská 2005, 2006).

For the purpose of analysis, therefore, it would be useful to separate people's explicit representations of issues related to shamanism and their practices as such. According to Dan Sperber, the explanation of any social phenomenon is equivalent to the explanation of the distribution of certain cultural representations in a given population. Sperber argues, however, that there is no such thing as a general theory of this distribution, because every representation needs specific explanation. Any phenomenon can be analysed as a complex process consisting of more elementary processes, and these more elementary processes can themselves be analysed in a mechanistic fashion down to the level where their natural character will be wholly evident (Sperber 1996, 1997). From this perspective any social representation could be described as causal chains, linking together mental representations and public productions (Kanovský 2008). In the case of performing a ritual we can separate people's actions (one set of public representations), their explicit verbal representations of underlying concepts (another set of public representations) and the corresponding set of mental representations. Here I will concentrate on relation between two sets of public representations and will leave the cognitive mechanisms underlying their transmission to one side.

Unlike many other spiritual and religious traditions, in urban shamanism the explicit explanations of actions play an important role. Spiritual techniques are usually rationalised and combined with a scientific perspective. Many neo-shamanic practices are wrapped in the language of science; the neo-shamanic texts emphasise that "in the age of science, belief and faith have become irrelevant" and encourage spiritual seekers to retain "intelligent scepticism and critical mind" (Cook and Hawk 1992: frontispiece). Neo-shamanism also resonates with scientific thinking by experimenting with various techniques and by the absence of a doctrine that is obligatory for all its practitioners: "In contrast to spiritual groups that insult the intelligence of educated people by their adherence to rigid spiritual standards, neo-shamanism does not impose any doctrinal requirements. It attracts people by its loose structure catered on highly individualised practices" (Znamenski 2004: xiii). In other words, the choice of practices performed is a matter of individual preference.

Despite the flexibility of neo-shamanism, this choice is not random: it has a direct connection with explicit representations of shamanism transmitted in certain social settings. In the following section I will present an overview of shamanic practices in relation to the participants' explicit representations and will compare two shamanic circles mentioned above. As I have already said, there is no such thing as "shamanic doctrine" that would restrict the changes or innovations of the shamanic practices; on the contrary, urban shamanism is an open and flexible system. Due to its eclectic nature it could be combined with a variety of other spiritual practices and beliefs. Nevertheless, even though people may be familiar with many esoteric concepts and claim adherence to certain esoteric beliefs, they do not practise everything. In other words, the sets of their mental representations and explicit verbal representations do not correspond to the set of actions performed. The latter could be divided into two categories: practices that people denote as shamanic, and practices from other spiritual traditions. Both of these vary in particular circles.

### *Shamanic practices*

As we have seen, the practices regarded as shamanic per se have different forms in two circles. They share several common characteristics: the circle of people around an altar, holding hands, drumming and/or rattling, performing shamanic journeys and sharing experience. However, the sequence of actions as well as the importance ascribed to particular actions may vary. For instance, cleansing of the space and participants by the fumes from the herbs is obligatory in Alena's circle but not in Peter's. Singing the song of power by all participants is obligatory in Peter's circle, but in Alena's it is a part performed by the leader. The time interval for drumming in Alena's circle is her decision; in Peter's circle it is a matter of individual "needs". The sharing experience takes place in the ceremony of the "talking stick" in Alena's circle, but it is not formalised in Peter's circle. In Peter's circle the sessions are limited to shamanic practices, while in Alena's they might include other techniques (for instance, divination by means of cards or crystals). The two circles also differ in practising non-shamanic techniques by participants in their private settings. Apart from astrology (in

any version), which may be regarded as a part of shamanism, in Alena's circle people use the following esoteric techniques: the Silva method;<sup>9</sup> feng shui; Hooponopono;<sup>10</sup> yoga. Although Peter practises various techniques – energetic healing, astral journeying, Hemi Sync and in the past Reiki and astrology – people from his circle do not practise them, although they are familiar with these conceptions. When they need to use some such techniques they ask Peter for help.

Although there is no “shamanic canon” and all the versions of shamanism are explicitly regarded as equal, the respondents' behaviour and statements often implied that there were more “right” and more “wrong” versions. For instance, they could express exaggerated surprise about other people's practices (“*why do they do it?!...*”), slight disdain (“I don't know; it does not seem *that* important to me”), or even open rejection (“I would *never* do it!”). “Other” people in this context could be other circles of neo-shamans. The respondents sometimes related different performance of shamanic practices to specific ways of teaching. In this connection it is important that although the leaders of the FSS circles know each other and sometimes cooperate, relationships between them may be problematic. The tensions between them are never openly admitted, but they may create an implicit strain in connection to certain practices and may even lead to the production of certain morally biased interpretations of events in spiritual terms.<sup>11</sup>

The respondents' explicit explanations of why they perform certain actions to achieve certain purposes were not “technical”, in the sense that they did not describe the mechanisms of functioning; however, they may involve rationalisation and the use of scientific and quasi-scientific terms (energy, biofield, negative and positive charges, geopathogenic zones and so forth). The explanations always related to the effectiveness of the practices (“if it works, it is right for me”), which was connected to the notion of tradition that is central for neo-shamanism: it has worked for millennia, so it must work for us. The habitual aspect of performance is a crucial factor in this respect: repeated reproduction of the same actions makes them automatic and also adds to the perception of their effectiveness. Although all participants in the FSS workshops want to learn something new, they are more confident in doing the “old” and reliable things. Many of my respondents told me that they usually do things they have done many times: they know how to do them and they know that they work.

People also referred to a person who taught them shamanic techniques, usually the leader of the circle. It was important that practices that were seen as effective were taught by a “knowing” person, an expert on shamanism. Yet there was a difference between Alena's and Peter's expertise. Alena was seen as someone who had a superior knowledge of shamanism and had practised it for a long time. The standard reference to her shamanic expertise was: “She learnt it from Harner and she has worked with it for years, so she must be good at it”. Her expertise therefore has a nature of learnt skills. It is noteworthy that people's respect for Alena's proficiency did not influence their opinions concerning her personality: she may have been perceived as a problematic person and may even have been regarded as having some negative characteristics

<sup>9</sup> The Silva method is a programme of mental exercises developed by a parapsychologist José Silva. It is supposed to increase an individual's IQ and sense of personal well-being by developing their higher brain functions. See, for instance, <http://www.silvamethod.com/> (accessed 14 December 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Hooponopono is a system of Hawaiian spiritual techniques which is supposed to have a healing effect. See, for instance, <http://successultranow.com/inspiration/5/hoo-pono-pono-the-power-to-change-the-world-from-the-inside-out/> (accessed 14 December 2010).

<sup>11</sup> To illustrate this point I would give an example of the first FSS three-day workshop I attended in 2003. Apart from several newcomers, the audience consisted of people from Alena's circle. However, there was a girl who at that time regularly attended shamanic sessions led by Linda. During the workshop she was sitting next to a young man who did not belong to any FSS group. On the second day of the workshop I noticed a considerable tension between this man and the participants from Alena's circle. Some of them claimed that he emanated negative energy and expressed rather unfriendly attitudes towards him; the young man was upset by this and left the workshop before it was finished. Later I learnt that by mistake – because he was sitting next to the girl – he was considered a member of Linda's group. In this connection some of my respondents from Alena's circle told me that Linda invoked evil spirits during her sessions and that she might have been engaged in black magic. This was supposedly the reason for young man's negative emanations.

(quarrelsomeness, insincerity, etc.). Peter, on the other hand, was perceived not only as a skilled expert but as a person with inborn spiritual abilities. His superior knowledge and propriety of behaviour were perceived as manifestations of those inner qualities.

#### *Non-ordinary reality*

All of my respondents share the conviction that shamanism is not a religion in the sense of a consistent system of beliefs and practices. Although participants might use such terms as “God”, “deity”, “sacred” or “shrine” in the context of shamanic rituals, they refer rather to a general spiritual dimension, not to religion as such. Furthermore, according to them, people may combine shamanism with any religious system and be Christians, Jews, Buddhists or any other religion. Most of my respondents from Alena’s circle nevertheless claimed that they were not religious in principle. They saw shamanism as a spiritual path that offered specific way of healing – an altered state of consciousness achieved during shamanic journey to non-ordinary reality. However, the representations of non-ordinary reality for them were compatible with any religious system. Although the “traditional” image of shamanism – the World Tree, the Underworld, the Middle World and the Upper World – was present there, the “map” of non-ordinary reality could be rather arbitrary. The main representations related to it were the following:

- Power/energy and related terms (power animals, power plants, power places, power objects);
- Spirits and personal spiritual allies;
- Gods and deities;
- The concept of soul.

None of these representations is specific to core shamanism. Due to its flexible nature they could overlap with any religious tradition. Gods, deities and spirits in non-ordinary reality could be represented by the participants as Mother Earth and Divine Father, Jesus and Virgin Mary, Krishna and Shiva, Quetzalcoatl, Isis, Perun, Aphrodite and many other religious or mythical figures from various cultures. In principle there were no inhibitions to including any spiritual personage in the image of non-ordinary reality. The choice was guided only by people’s needs: if a person had problems with a particular sphere of life (health, love, money), she addressed a relevant deity or spirit that was conceived as a symbolic expression of a certain aspect of nature. An important feature of their interpretations was reference to scientific explanations, which in this context were surprisingly compatible with religious representations.

In Peter’s circle the representations of the world of spirits were related to the Mongolian (or northern Asian) version of shamanism. Unlike the core shamanism concepts referring to Harner’s and Castaneda’s books, Peter’s image of non-ordinary reality was related to books by Mircea Eliade and some Russian ethnographers who have explored Siberian shamanism. These two sets of representations necessarily overlapped due to the direct connection between Eliade’s conception and Harnerian shamanism. However, in Peter’s circle the picture of the Otherworld did not include such a broad variety of images from diverse cultural traditions. The representations were centred on the World Tree and included the Upper world, the Middle World and the Underworld. The concepts of soul as well as power/energy and the related terms (power animals, power plants, power places, power objects) were of the same importance as in Alena’s circle. Supernatural beings were crucial for the picture of the Otherworld too; but there were no gods or deities between them – only spirits and personal spiritual allies.

As we can see, these two sets of representations related to shamanism have important similarities: both include the concepts of supernatural being, the concept of individual power/energy and the concept of soul as an opposition to body. Such representations are characteristic not only of shamanism: we can find them in spiritual traditions all over the world. They present the features of shamanism that are equally characteristic of all cultures. Their broad distribution may be explained by their cognitive characteristics, which make them easily learned and replicated in different cultural contexts (see, for instance, Atran 1990; Cohen 2008; Hirschfeld 1998; Boyer 2001; Kanovský 2003, 2007; Djurišičová 2010). It is not my aim here to explore the underlying cognitive mechanisms conditioning their distribution; I rather concentrate on the relation between

people's explicit representations and their ritual actions. However, I would like to point out that those mechanisms present a crucial factor in the process of cultural transmission.

People in Peter's circle presented themselves as non-religious as did those in Alena's circle; "scientific" explanations were common for them too. For both circles the main aim of a shamanic journey was spiritual healing, which was understood in a very general sense: any problem (not only a physical disease) was conceived as an illness resulting from an unbalanced situation; shamanic healing was aimed at restoring the balance and thus healing the situation (see also Ďurčová 2010). Yet there was a difference related to the nature of "illnesses": unlike Peter's circle solving individual problems, the activities of Alena's circle were oriented on individuals as well as on global issues – healing the earth, helping people in financial crisis, healing Slovakia and its economy, helping animals in contaminated environment etc.

The interpretations of individual problems differed too: in both circles spiritual healing involved personal development, but in Peter's circle representations of the causes of individual "illnesses" usually included personal animosities and supernatural harm coming from other people – curses, the evil eye or black magic. In Alena's circle such representations were excluded from the process of diagnosis; although conflicts between people were common problems, they were represented rather as a lack of understanding, not as someone's bad will or evil intentions. The existence of "black magic" was acknowledged but it was ignored ("we do not have anything to do with those things"). This "sweet" and "clean" picture of the social world corresponded to the New Age perspective significantly influenced by eastern, in particular Buddhist, philosophy and Jungian psychotherapy. The interpretations of misfortune in Peter's circle, on the contrary, may be rough and realistic. They are reminiscent of folk tales rather than intellectual discourse of the New Age; Peter actually often referred to the corresponding folk concepts and was interested in the Slovak folk tradition.

#### *Charismatic authority and institution*

As we have seen, the choice and specific form of spiritual techniques performed was explicitly legitimised by the expertise of the leader and by the notion of tradition. However, participants' explicit representations of tradition could take different forms in different circles. They appear as a result of obtaining information from the specific transmission channels. In Alena's circle the representations correspond to the concept of core shamanism; their distribution is conditioned by the structure and orientation of the FSS workshops and courses. Individual issues are interpreted in terms of the New Age philosophy and core shamanism in particular. In Peter's circle the representations of shamanism are transmitted on a private level; although the sources of information may be the same as for people from Alena's circle (books, mass media, internet, and even the FSS workshops), their particular form is shaped by the leader of the circle, who has a reputation as a gifted person with special abilities.

Here we can apply a Weberian term, "charisma", in the sense of "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1968: 48). In contrast, in the FSS community the leader does not have exceptional qualities as a person; the authority in this case is given by the institution that channels the transmission of shamanism and justified by learned skills. The right to choose particular representations from the huge spiritual pool in one circle therefore belongs to the person authorised by the institution and in the second circle to the charismatic authority, in the sense of "power legitimized on the basis of a leader's exceptional personal qualities or the demonstration of extraordinary insight and accomplishment, which inspire loyalty and obedience from followers" (Kendall, Murray and Linden 2000: 438–39).

Urban shamanism offers a possibility to investigate socio-political mechanisms of religious transmission in the absence of orthodoxy, but in certain cases under conditions of institutionalised distribution of social representations. According to Harvey Whitehouse's theory, religion encompasses two very different sets of dynamics or modes of religiosity, which has long been recognised by scholars. Whitehouse calls the first mode doctrinal; it is characterised by highly routinised ritual action facilitating the storage of elaborate and

conceptually complex religious teachings in semantic memory, but also activating implicit memory in the performance of most ritual procedures. These cognitive features are linked to particular social morphology, including hierarchical, centralised institutional arrangements, expansionary potential and dynamic leadership. The imagistic mode, in contrast, is characterised by practices that are rarely enacted and are highly arousing. The social morphology in this case includes lack of dynamic leadership, lack of centralisation and lack of orthodoxy (Whitehouse 2000, 2004).

If we apply the terms of Whitehouse's theory to shamanic practices in a Slovak urban setting, we can conclude that they have the features both of the imagistic mode and of the doctrinal mode. It would be probably a mistake to put all the circles in the same analytical category. The broad term "neo-shamanism" is used for a variety of groups that have specific social dynamics and involve different transmission channels. The practices in the FSS circles could be denoted as doctrinal, with hierarchical, centralised institutional arrangements. Practices in the "independent" circles like Peter's group would be characterised by lack of centralisation and orthodoxy; however, they could not be described as rarely enacted and highly arousing. Whitehouse's theory advances a set of hypotheses amenable to empirical investigation concerning the causal interconnections between a set of cognitive and socio-political features; as such it might be useful for the future research of neo-shamanic circles.

Preliminary analysis of neo-shamanic practices demonstrates that the relation between ritual actions and participants' explicit representations is not trivial. In other words, what people do does not necessarily correspond to what they say. And even under specific neo-shamanic conditions of explicit learning, people do not explain why the ritual must have a particular form: they rather refer to what is appropriate for them and what is "wrong". This justification is always connected to tradition and leadership. Routinisation of ritual performances is an important factor in this respect. As Whitehouse notes, "repetitive actions lead to implicit behavioural habits that occur independently of conscious thought or control. Although potentially accessible to conscious representation (e.g., for the purposes of teaching a child or newcomer how to behave in church), liturgical rituals may not, in the normal pattern of life, trigger very much explicit knowledge at all. To the extent that people do participate in routinized rituals 'on autopilot,' this reduces the chances that they will reflect on the meaning of what they are doing. In other words, frequent repetition diminishes the extent to which people come up with personal theories of their rituals. And they are more likely to accept at face value any official versions of the religious significance of their rituals. The processing of routinized rituals as implicit procedural schemas really opens the way for religious authorities to tell worshippers what to believe, especially when it comes to the meanings of their rituals" (Whitehouse 2004: 68–69). Even though shamanic drum sessions are not as regular as Christian sermons, repetitive performance of rituals in home settings may have the same function.

The question of leadership and centralisation is therefore important in relation to personal exegesis of rituals, but also in distribution of certain representations and defining what is "right" and what is "wrong". Despite the liberal nature of urban shamanism and the proclaimed freedom to choose any appropriate practice, people conform to a concrete social setting and the authority of the leader. Different kinds of authority correspond to different representations of the shaman and involve different cognitive mechanisms underlying their transmission.

## CONCLUSION

During last two centuries the Western world has experienced a recession in religious belief and practice, and as a result of the processes of secularisation the influence of institutionalised religious behaviour has receded in many aspects of social life. "Unchurched spiritualities" that make use of the ancient traditions have become a visible characteristic of Western culture, however. Many of them have already acquired the life of their own and have many followers; as such they have become genuine and traditional themselves (Znamenski 2007: 368). Although shamanic practices in the Western urban setting appeared as a result of interpretation of many traditions, they require explanation in their own right.

The eclectic movement of neo-shamanism offers seekers of spirituality many options; however, the choice of practices is constrained by social conditions of cultural transmission. In my paper I have described some aspects of the relation between neo-shamanic practices and the social dynamics of particular neo-shamanic circles. I have tried to show that beliefs and practices of urban shamans may differ significantly; these differences are caused by specific social dynamics of the circles, including the factor of leadership. Transmission of neo-shamanic beliefs and practices may be structured and institutionalised or may involve private settings; the authority to shape tradition therefore may belong to a person authorised by the institution or to a charismatic individual.

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