Scientism and Post-Truth: two contradictory Paradigms underlying Contemporary Shamanism?

Angela Puca
Leeds Trinity University
angelapuca@yahoo.it

ABSTRACT

The last decades have seen an increasing interest towards Shamanism in the Western world, both among scholars and those who practise shamanism. The academic interest has been mainly focussed on identifying the differences between forms of contemporary Shamanism in the West and traditional Shamanisms as experienced among indigenous peoples. A related aspect that needs further development in the field is the analysis of the philosophical underpinning that lies behind this relatively new religious tradition and its manifestations.

Initial findings, derived from data collected as part of a research project on autochthonous and trans-cultural Shamanism in Italy, suggest that there are two paradigms shaping the neo-shamanic experiential approach. I will start by clarifying the notion of paradigm as the founding basis of every reasoning process, cultural production and hence religious movement. Then, I will argue that the Scientistic and Post-truth paradigms represent two founding bases of Neo-shamanism and its scholarly recognised traits and will conclude by addressing the issue of a potential contradiction between the two will be addressed.

KEYWORDS

Shamanism, Neo-Shamanism, Italy, Post-truth, Scientism, Paradigm

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Introduction

Initial findings, derived from data collected during three fieldtrips to Italy between October 2016 and March 2018 as part of my project on autochthonous and trans-cultural Shamanism in Italy, suggest that there are two paradigms framing Contemporary Shamanism: Scientism and Post-Truth. This study will start by addressing these two paradigms, their traits in reference to the contemporary construction of culture, and how they represent a philosophical underpinning to Neo-shamanism.[1] Then, by tackling what appear to be the distinctive characteristics of Contemporary Shamanism when compared to indigenous traditions, I will discuss how each of them is actually the product of either the Scientistic or the Post-truth Paradigm. I will conclude by analysing and resolving the possible contradiction between the paradigms.

As Alexander and Seidman pointed out, 'Everyone is a philosopher, though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity […] there is a contained specific conception of the world' (1942, 47). If everyone is a philosopher, pondering a set of ideas according to a specific philosophy, a good philosopher is the one who acknowledges and hence gains power over said thinking processes instead of being enslaved to its unconscious and unacknowledged effects.

Thus, of paramount importance is the concept of 'paradigm', a founding basis for the understanding of any system of thought. The notion was popularised by the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn in his 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions' (Kuhn, 1996), and can be described as a 'set of interlocking ideas which define both the questions and the kind of answers that are acceptable' (Macfarlane, 2005). A paradigm is thus a philosophical framework with a set of rules and assumptions regarding what is acceptable, linking thoughts together from which conclusions can be reasonably drawn.

This concept appears to be employed particularly in natural science whereas in social science many scholars 'have preferred to speak of a multiplicity of paradigms rather than of a pre-paradigmatic condition. It is nevertheless true that there is no consensus about what counts as proper evidence, or about what domains should be covered by our attempts at theoretical synthesis' (Samuel, 2011, 36). A theoretical synthesis is not only operated by a scientific study but also by those who share a set of beliefs and ideas, as happens with practitioners of a specific religious tradition. Every tradition incorporates a coherent and cohesive structure, which is not different from a philosophical system and, as such, entails as its speculative matrix one or multiple paradigms.

The Scientification of Shamanism

From the nineteenth century onwards, positivism has had a remarkable impact on both science and the popular construction of knowledge. The

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[1] 'Neo-shamanism' and 'Contemporary Shamanism' are used in this article as synonyms to indicate forms of Shamanism practised in the contemporary Western society.

Comtean system (Comte, 1970), which is based on the idea that the only valid knowledge is that which can be scientifically proven to be experienced by the five senses, argues that aspects of human endeavour which lack this sensory evidence cannot constitute valid knowledge and should be discarded. This idea, that only what is measurable, repeatable and standardisable leads to a valid knowledge, directed contemporary society slowly towards Scientism and has affected the interpretation of reality (de Ridder, 2014).

Scientism may be defined as 'the belief that science, especially natural science, is much the most valuable part of human learning […] because it is much the most authoritative, or serious, or beneficial' (Sorell, 1994, 1). This argument conveys the idea that valid knowledge can only be gained through science and its methods, and anything that falls outside the domain of empirical evidence is unworthy or delusional. As a consequence, every question worth asking in every domain of human interest must find its answer in what is currently considered empirical science (Principe, 2016, 42; Hoogheem, 2012).

The advancement in science witnessed in the last century, and the consequent increase of living standards in many aspects of human life, has brought many people, inside and outside academia, to believe that there are no limits to what science can achieve or at least that only science can decree the limits to what humans can know and understand. Such a perspective has often been defined as 'scientism' or 'epistemic scientism' to define the popular attitude that valid knowledge needs to be either scientific or reducible to scientific knowledge. This stance in some instances moves further to the ontological domain when it is affirmed that science and the scientific method comprise everything that actually exists; what cannot be evidenced does not exist (Stenmark, 1997, 15, 19, 22).

This Scientistic tendency and the consequent need for academic validation in contemporary society are visible when analysing new forms of religion. Kocku von Stuckrad (2014) demonstrates that the academic world has heavily influenced the birth and development of new religious movements, especially Paganism[2] and Shamanism.[3] From popularising the idea of a Great Goddess through R. Graves and C. G. Leland (von Stuckrad, 2014, 162–166) to venerating a Horned God of fertility from the 'Old Religion' hinted in M.A. Murray's work (2013), the heritage of Paganism and Witchcraft appears to be rooted in scholarly literature. Of little importance was the academic accuracy of the information provided; the sole presence of a popularly recognised study on the subject influenced practitioners to the extent that Gerald Gardner, founder of the Wicca, used Murray's works to legitimise his new-born religion (Clarke and Clarke, 2004, 226).

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[2] Paganism is an umbrella term used to define earth-based traditions inspired by pre-Christian polytheisms and animisms (Harvey, 2000). Wicca represents a popular Pagan tradition founded in the 1950s by Gerald Gardner.
[3] Shamanism is a complex category that is difficult to define. One of the ways to define it, following Eliade, is as a set of ecstatic techniques to gain knowledge and healing and access non-ordinary realities (Eliade, 1972; Jakobsen, 1999; Bowie, 2006, 174–197).

Similar circumstances surround the emergence of Contemporary Shamanism[4] in the Western world. As K. von Stuckard highlights, 'One of the remarkable aspects of shamanism in Europe and North America is the fact that the most influential actors in shamanic fields of discourse have an academic background. At one point in their career [...], they switched from being academic experts to becoming religious experts, often combining both cultures of knowledge in their work and in legitimization of their authority' (2014, 166). The popular interest towards shamanism arose during the 1970s, thanks to the books of Carlos Castaneda and his adventures with the Yaqui 'shaman' Don Juan.[5] Although decades earlier Mircea Eliade had already written about Shamanism, Castaneda was the first author who indirectly encouraged his readers to practise the techniques and concepts described in his books (Gredig, 2010, 35). Hence, 'where Eliade and other academics only presented shamanisms to the West, Castaneda's work, in a radical shift, encouraged Westerners to become shamans themselves' (Wallis, 2003, 39).

Albeit not an established academic as such, Castaneda did journey to Mexico for fieldwork as part of his doctoral research at UCLA. Another influential figure in the development of Contemporary Shamanism is Michael Harner, an anthropologist and scholar who founded both the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS) and the tradition of Core Shamanism, the latter of which is described by the Foundation to be 'a system designed for Westerners to apply shamanism and shamanic healing successfully to their daily lives. This system is based upon the underlying universal, near-universal, and common features of shamanism - together with journeys to other worlds - rather than upon culture-specific variations and elaborations' (The Foundation for Shamanic Studies, 2018). Within the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, the large majority of the Board of Trustees has a doctorate, teachers are appointed as 'faculty members', and the training itself resembles an academic course of study. This is reflected in the Italian scene, too: Lorenza Menegoni, one of two teachers trained by the foundation, has a PhD and usually introduces herself as an anthropologist.

An example of a scientistic attitude may be drawn from my fieldwork. In May 2017, I undertook 'The Way of the Shaman: The Shamanic Journey, Power and Healing' Basic Workshop with the FSS, which took place over two days (6-7 May) in Villa Bartolomea, Verona, under the lead of Nello Ceccon. This training is the introductory course of the Foundation, which is mandatory to complete before commencing the advanced courses. Since my presence was contingent on my research, I declared to the other participants my position and research aims during those two days. The first day of training was particularly intense, as a few practitioners had moving experiences through shamanic journeying. During the night ritual, when we gathered to dance in the dark, we had to envision ourselves as the Power Animal we recognised as our protector in that morning's journeying. Throughout the second day of

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[4] 'Contemporary Shamanism' is used in reference to forms of Shamanism (including indigenous forms) as practised in contemporary society whereas 'Neo Shamanism' is used here in reference to forms of Shamanism imported and adapted to the Western culture, in this case Italy.
[5] Castaneda did not use the term 'shaman', defining *brujo* as 'sorcerer'.

training, at least half of the twenty-five attendees asked for my opinion as a scholar, seeking a validation to their experiences from someone they deemed to be an 'objective scientific judge'. To these questions, I always responded by inquiring what kind of answer they were expecting from me and why my opinion as an academic was so important. The answer was unanimous: they all wanted to know whether what had happened seemed 'real' and 'valid', or delusional, to me. These practitioners expected my answer to be in line with their beliefs and experiences but, despite this apparent assumption, they were still eager to receive some 'seal of approval' from a scientific perspective. Likewise, earlier in the fieldtrip (2-4 May 2017), as part of a wider research on forms of shamanism practised in contemporary Italy, I visited Michela, who lives in the province of Turin and defines herself as 'The last Italian Shaman of a hereditary tradition'. During an interview, she explained to me the major traits of her professedly autochthonous tradition and also asked for my perspective on her work as a scholar. Furthermore, she sought book recommendations from me regarding how to improve the comprehensibility of the discourse around her tradition.

In both cases, while I was investigating shamanic practitioners as the experts in the field, they instinctively appointed me as the specialist and validator. They had difficulties in understanding that I was simply researching their practices and appeared concerned as if I were there to scrutinise and evaluate whether they were actually performing shamanic rituals or not. The belief that a scholar's opinion has more credit than the practitioner's may be considered a consequence of the influence of scientism in society.

When this scientistic approach becomes a model that defines what questions and answers are admissible, it becomes acceptable for an academic to validate someone's beliefs and religious experiences. One of the main assumptions of scientism is that humans are solely biological and neuro-physiological beings when in reality they are also historical and cultural agents operating through symbols and social laws independent from their physical structure. Even though human actions happen through organs, the study of these organs will not tell the whole story about these actions' meaning (Maiorca, 1984, 174). Nevertheless, for a scientistic view, all hermeneutical aspects of knowledge, including social sciences (Sharma, 1979; Daly, 2001), are reduced to and addressed according to what works for natural science (Marrandi, 2017).

This aforementioned paradigm has slowly but steadily become ingrained in the Italian society as well, so that today there are areas of human interest that are labelled as irrational and hence no longer as socially acceptable. Rationality being a desirable value in such a model, the average person would not openly express to a manager or a work colleague an involvement in activities such as astrology or tarot reading, unless depicted as games or hobbies.

Post-truth: when narratives outweigh facts

Another paradigm underlying Western society that appears to be meaningful to understanding Neo-shamanic movements is that of Post-truth. As Scientism is deeply concerned with applying a scientific methodology to whatever needs to be validated, it might come as a surprise to also encounter aspects of a Post-truth approach embedded in the Neo-shamanic practice; as the world-view of Post-truth diminishes the importance of specialist knowledge and is unconcerned of 'fact',[6] it would seem to be incompatible with Scientism.

'Post-truth' was selected as the word of the year in 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary, which defines its meaning as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). A related concept is that of 'alternative facts', referring to the increasing 'willingness to persevere with a particular belief either in complete ignorance of, or with a total disregard for, reality' (Strong, 2017, 137). Which begs the question: how is it possible that, in a time and age when a majority of people have access to information and the ability to fact-check online, that facts have become so unimportant?

This can be answered by the Post-truth phenomenon that has become increasingly popular in recent years, mainly in relation to politics and public opinion that leads to electoral decisions (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Strong, 2017). In Social Sciences, the study of discourse and narratives as data has decades of history (Fairclough, 1993) and is useful for analysing this phenomenon. Discourse analysis, now a well-known methodology in Religious Studies, considers how any form of language establishes socio-cultural perspectives and identities as well as underlying belief systems (Wijsen, 2013; Gee, 2004). This feature allows it to be my primary method for analysing Post-truth discourse in Contemporary Shamanism.

The reasons underpinning the Post-truth paradigm seem to be various. Post-modernism could be considered one root of this socio-cultural movement as well as a precursor of the Post-truth since it conveyed the idea that no objective truth exists, to the extent that, starting with science, the matter of receiving a broad consensus became more relevant (Bereiter, 1994). When truth is not achievable as an objective purpose for one's discovery, it can easily move towards seeking at least some degree of truthfulness as trans-subjective as possible, hence the importance of the social agreement. Culturally, a tendency emerged whereby conflicts are often resolved by stating that the subject out for debate is ultimately a matter of personal choice or personal opinion and that all opinions are equally valid. This approach moved from being referred to as belief systems only (e.g. religion, morality) to the facts themselves, in a shift from the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' to 'I believe, therefore I'm right' (Nicodemo, 2017). Thus, not only is truth a matter

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[6] 'Fact' is here used in reference to evidence-based and informed knowledge as opposed to that belief-based mainly prompted by emotions. In no way, this argumentation aims to foster the concept of 'one true reality' or 'positive facts'.

of personal choice but also every opinion counts equally, depriving the specialists in every field of being acknowledged for their leading role (Université catholique de Louvaine, 2017). As a consequence, what happens within this paradigm is the rise of alternative epistemologies involving a collective construction of reality based on appeal to emotions and popular perception. As S. Lewandowsky states, 'The post-truth problem is not a blemish on the mirror. The problem is that the mirror is a window into an alternative reality' (2017, 11).

This new social construction of facts is fostered by the way the internet is popularly utilised. The Web, in fact, allows people from all over the world to network and share their opinions on the basis of a common ground, that is, a shared set of ideas. When someone who deems the Earth to be flat is alone in propping up this view, he or she will be easily convinced by the facts evidenced by the latest scientific outputs; however, when this person is able to find thousands of people who share the same belief, then NASA is lying and the scientific establishment is just conspiring to conceal the truth.

Tin addition, this mechanism facilitated by the algorithms used by search engines that will give more visibility to what aligns the most with one's thought as well as the 'echo chamber' produced by social media where the more people seek or 'like' what agrees with their opinions the more they will see only feeds from likeminded friends, and less or none from those who think differently (Colleoni et al., 2014). Misinformation is not really about not being informed per se, but an overall intellectual climate of our society that prevents evidence from being of any relevance to what people consider to be reliable. It appears that a factual correction is successful in changing people's mind only when two conditions are met: facts must not challenge their worldview and a reason must be provided as to why the misinformation was divulged in the first place (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, 8–10). A study on the effect of fact-checking over political decisions also highlighted that what impacts the most on electors' conclusions is the narrative whereby the facts (true or false) are presented. Providing facts alone may also backfire, as people become even more inclined to believe in populist captivating narratives (Rodriguez et al., 2018, 35).

Narratives are, therefore, essential not only as they have to be captivating but also shared or, as it is most commonly described on Social Media, 'followed'. These two aspects somehow feed each other as the more you use effective narratives the more you will be 'clicked' and hence followed.

Contemporary Shamanism in Italy is no exception to this tendency. For instance, autochthonous traditions like local healers and *Segnatori*[7] are almost invisible to the community of shamanic practitioners and are somehow lessened in their relevance, or not deemed relevant at all, as a shamanic tradition. This might be due to the fact that autochthonous traditions do not fit a certain romanticised narrative of shamanism and the figure of the shaman,

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[7] Healers from different regions of Italy who perform their rituals using specific gestures.

alongside the proclivity of local healers to stay concealed and also manifest no interest in divulging their practice.

Another tendency that the worldview of Post-truth fosters is the pursuit of other people's 'feedback'[8] which, albeit useful in deciding which item to buy, cannot be applied to ideas, concepts and religious traditions as fruitfully. Positive and numerous reviews are increasingly important to stand out in the public arena and as such are key narratives in catching people's interest. Thus, it has become quite common for practitioners to construct attractive narratives to explain their stories and legitimise their knowledge, sometimes without concrete evidence to prove any of their claims. For instance, the shamanic community shows little interest in the factual reality of stories presented in novels (e.g. Carlos Castaneda, Lynn Andrews, Hernán Huarache Mamani) they use as a reference for their spiritual practice, 'even when they are shown it is fictional since they seem to find its "principles" factually persuasive. The book in their hand is indeed a shaman's drum to take them on a magical flight above the book' (Noel, 1997, 39).

is Neo-shamanism a filtered shamanism?

Since any cultural product has one or more paradigms from which it stems, a movement such as Contemporary Shamanism will also be determined by its underlying paradigms. Scientism and Post-truth are pervasive in the Italian (and perhaps the Western) society, affecting the way Shamanism is perceived and conceptualised. When introducing indigenous traditions to a rather different culture, some sort of 'translation' will necessarily occur, defining a set of traits that show the 'cultural filters' applied to the imported tradition.

Contemporary, also called trans-cultural, forms of Shamanism have been increasingly studied in the last decades. These studies usually focus on the differences between indigenous and contemporary traditions, trying to identify the variances between the two to then evaluate how shamanistic the new ones actually are. In addressing the distinctive traits of trans-cultural shamanisms (Johnson, 1995, 171; Owen, 2011, 109), I will also demonstrate how such aspects represent a reaction to either the Scientistic or the Post-truth paradigm (see Figure 1).
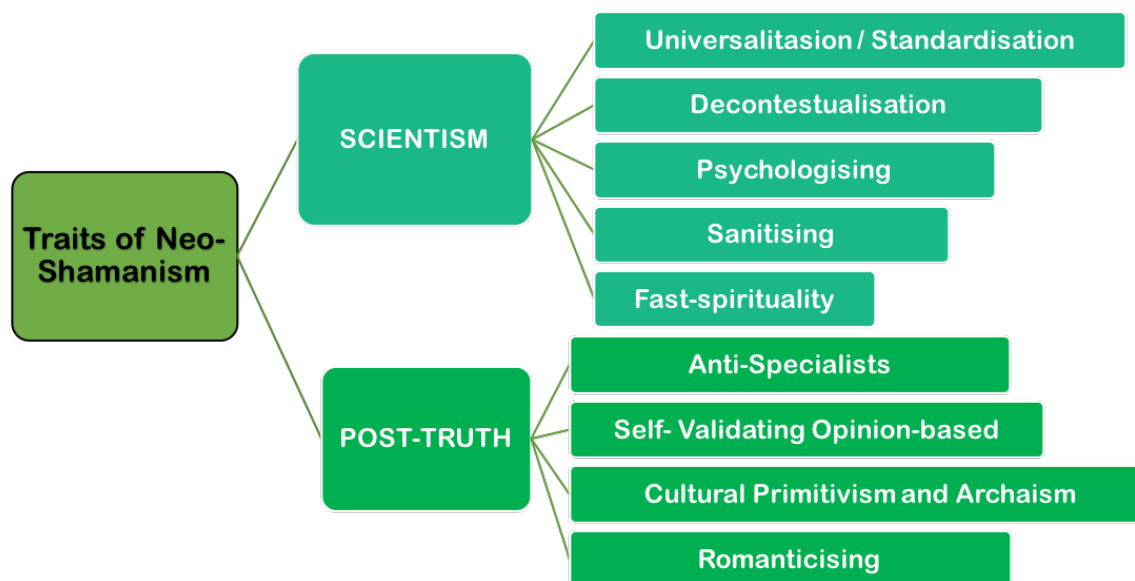
Figure 1 - Traits of Neo-Shamanism and their underlying Paradigms

Scientistic Filters

One of the first features of contemporary shamanism highlighted by many scholars (Johnson, 1995; Jakobsen, 1999; Wallis, 2003) is what has been called 'universalisation'. Universalising a shamanic practice means that whether a ritual takes place in Italy or in Britain, conducted by a different performer, you are expected to get the same results. If the results are not repeatable in this way, the ritual itself loses credibility to its audience because only what is measurable and repeatable is deemed to be true in a Scientistic worldview. This is undoubtedly a methodology appropriate to natural sciences rather than religious practices, though with the emergence of the Scientistic paradigm it became a popular idea that anything with such a methodology can be included in the realm of rightful knowledge.

This universalising aspect leads inevitably to a standardisation of practices and the consequent expectation for all the stages in the shamanic journey to be determined and hence fit everybody's needs, which in today's society also translates into a 'fast-spirituality' approach. Almost all shamanic courses and training (not only those of FSS) take place over no more than two or three days, usually over a weekend, implying that there is indeed a standardised and time-efficient way of learning and practising Shamanism for the productive westerners.

Another attribute of Contemporary Shamanism is that, in contrast to indigenous traditions, it appears to be less connected to an autochthonous culture. This happens both in cases like Core Shamanism, where FSS clearly state it is 'trans-cultural', as well as with imported traditions inspired by indigenous shamanisms (e.g. Siberian, Andean). This seems a further

occurrence of a scientistic mindset, where the salient principles and rituals are extrapolated from different traditions, using 'an established cosmology from which one can build one's own, whether it is of South American, North American, Circumpolar, Asia, African or European origin [...] the individual can develop his or her shamanic skills alone, with just a drumming tape for assistance' (Jakobsen, 1999, 157). The underlying assumption is that the cultural aspects play more the role of an inspiration to tailor one's own practice than being essential parts to the practice itself. In the same manner, as you can extract salicylic acid from willow bark to make aspirin (Norn et al., 2009) to calm down pain when you are far away from any willow tree, it is thought you can extract the shamanic practices from different cultures to use them outside of the native context.

The centrality of science in the popular understanding of reality also conditioned the way certain intrinsic features of indigenous shamanisms had been imported and reinterpreted in psychological terms. This phenomenon might have two main causes: comprehensibility and legitimisation. As Atkinson suggests, 'If the spiritual grounds for the practice made Western social scientists uneasy, its purported medical and psychological functions rendered it intelligible and subject to rational explanation' (1992, 313). This rendering, firstly operated by scholars, became then a focal epistemic filter for practitioners themselves, to the point where it has developed into a recognisable trait of Neo-shamanism. 'Healing also becomes a psychological process because it is difficult for Westerners imbued with Cartesian and scientific world-views to accept a "spiritual" cause for illness, either derived from malevolent shamans or from the "spirits"' (Wallis, 2003, 59). In some cases, shamanism and psychology are openly combined, as is the case with the 'psycho-spiritual discipline' called Biotransenergetics and divulged by *Om Associazione per la medicina e la psicologia transpersonale,* based in Milan. The Founder of this system is Pier Luigi Lattuada M.D., Psy.D., Ph.D., who defines it as a 'new transpersonal discipline beyond psychotherapy towards a modern shamanism' (Biotransenergetics Integral Transpersonal Institute, 2011).

A further aspect on the same line is what is sometimes called 'sanitizing' (Berman, 2009, 31). Is there, in fact, any natural science that would aim to any goal without providing safety and a 'sterilised' environment? What sanitising means in Contemporary Shamanism was well explained by Michela Chiarelli in addressing what she deemed to be one key difference between her tradition and neo-shamanisms. Michela described the shamanic training with her grandmother as a rather trying and difficult experience for she was tied to a tree and left in the woods for weeks, having to urinate, defecate and menstruate on herself in a process of 'dehumanization'. When she managed to free herself, she physically met her Power Animal, which had accompanied her practice in a spiritual form ever since. In narrating her story, she remarked how different it is to *imagine* yourself going to a cave to meet your Power Animal and *physically* doing so. What is often found in neo-shamanisms is that all the dangerous elements that are usually found in indigenous traditions are somehow 'tamed'.

As a consequence, you do not need to intake mind-altering substances anymore as the monotonous sound of the drum will be sufficient to induce a trance state; nor will you have to go into the woods when you can visualise a hole under a tree to journey through. Thus, not only is it unnecessary for the practitioner to take entheogens or be left in a dark cave for days without food or water, such dangerous practices are also actively discouraged. These safety measures belong to a Western approach to daily life (including 'health and safety' bureaucracy and fear of litigation) and derive, as I argue, from a scientistic mindset. Although different worldviews might have a dissimilar perception of what gives value to human life, the Western society shadows the scientistic dualism between physical and metaphysical to imply that the first one is the most valuable and 'real' than the latter. This view suggests that the safest way of living will ensure one's body lives the longest, which also supposedly ensures the most accomplishment for an individual.

Post-truth Filters

After exploring the characteristics of Contemporary Shamanism that appear to stem from a scientistic world-view, an analysis of those related to the Post-truth will follow, beginning with the perception of what reality represents, to then conclude by analysing whether a contradiction of paradigms is at play. Core Shamanism draws a distinction between the Ordinary State of Consciousness (OSC) and the Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC) which is loosely based on Castaneda's Ordinary and Non-Ordinary Realities. Therefore, it would not be suitable to gauge what happens in the SSC according to the rules of the OSC. Contemporary shamans generally explain that even the most unusual experiences will not be considered fantasies; everything experienced in a shamanic journey is 'real' and needs to be integrated into the cosmology of reference. Harner suggests Western shamans should apply a 'cognitive relativism' when approaching the realm opened by the SSC, as a response to the 'cognicentrism' that would lead to judge shamanic experiences with the same criteria used to assess what happens in the mundane world. In this perspective, even if what happens in the SSC were solely happening in one's mind, that wouldn't make it any less real for the person who lives those experiences (Harner, 1992, xvii–xviii). In particular, the *meaning* would be the same. Therefore, anyone is deemed able to engage in shamanic practice and no specialist can dictate whether what has been seen was real or not. This relativist aspect led Jakobsen to point out that 'the power of the specialist is what neo-shamanism is attempting to eliminate. […] The knowledge of the shaman is no longer of an esoteric character but instead available to all' (1999, 217).

This lack of an external validator, which appears to be a common trait across different forms of Neo-shamanism, allows the community[9] to become the judge of one's practice. Despite the notion that there's no appointed validator, a practitioner will still seek some outside confirmation from their peers, to at least acknowledge that others have had similar experiences and hence disprove the possibility that everything was a fantasy or a delusion. This

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[9] Community, in this context, denotes the group of practitioners.

appears to be a rather similar mechanism than what happens within the Post-truth paradigm, where the community has the power to create and define reality through the social construction of what will be declared as the accepted facts. Thus, this kind of approach makes plain both the aspects of self-validation and the importance of community-based opinions which distinguish the Post-truth reality. It is, in fact, up to the individual also to assess the length of their apprenticeship according to their experiences in the non-ordinary reality through shamanic journeying. As Jakobsen notes, 'The urban apprentice is left firstly to assess his own progress and then finally to let others judge the outcome' (1999, 162–163).

Other scholarly recognised traits of Neo-shamanism are 'cultural primitivism' and the romanticising of indigenous shamanisms. Cultural primitivism refers to the tendency of engaging in 'mistaken and outmoded ideas of primordial peoples' (Wallis, 2003, 61) to the extent that stereotypes are pursued instead of a genuine understanding of the cultures of reference. Such an approach is usually accompanied by the mythical notion of a Golden age dwelling in a distant past so that the older a tradition or a concept is, the closer to the truth, in what has been defined as a 'theology of nostalgia' (Geertz, 2003, 55).

Similarly, practitioners have shown an inclination to romanticising the role and practice of the shaman in many respects, from the morally good selflessness to the detachment from the material world. Both these aspects were evidenced by data collected in my Facebook Group. In November 2016 I created a Facebook group called *Praticanti di Sciamanesimo in Italia* ('Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy') with the disclosed purpose of collecting data and more participants for my research on autochthonous and trans-cultural Shamanism. The group is steadily increasing in number and counts, in June 2018, around 430 members. In February 2018, Sandra[10] posted an advertisement for her 'School of Magic, Witchcraft and Spirituality online', from which a significant discussion emerged in the comments. The main argument pertained to whether a 'real shaman' (or a spiritual teacher) would ask money for delivering training and a few participants reacted with anger to the very presence of what they perceived as a 'advertisement' in a group of 'spiritual practitioners'. Emilia started the discussion, stating that, 'If you have to pay, they are not true shamans or Spiritual teachers. Shamans have a Gift that they offer, and they only accept offers in return.'[11] She also pointed out, in a different comment, that 'The True shaman doesn't need lessons and training as [shamanism] is a solitary path.'[12]

Considering that similar responses and considerations appeared in different comments to other posts and are hence to be considered a representation of a line of thinking inside the community at large, what emerges here are two examples of how neo-shamans usually romanticise the role of the shaman in a narrative to which they become emotionally attached. The shaman is 'spiritual' as opposed to 'material', which means that it is unacceptable to ask

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[10] The real names have been anonymised and substituted with fictional ones.
[11] 'Se si paga, non sono veri sciamani o Maestri. Gli sciamani che hanno un dono, offrono tale dono e accettano al massimo offerte.'
[12] 'Lo sciamano Vero non ha bisogno di lezioni e corsi in quanto è un percorso solitario.'

for money, a view that implies and reaffirms the Cartesian division between material and spiritual, in this case granting a higher rank to the spiritual which the material has the power to taint.

The Post-truth factor here also lies in the importance that narratives and emotions play in 'who wins the discussion' and how affirming one's opinion is crucial for the individual. In the series of comments between Emilia and Sandra (the author of the advertising post), Emilia 'won' the conversation and Sandra left the group in response. The reason why Emilia appeared more convincing had nothing to do with facts and what a shaman actually does – neither was a reliable source cited, nor a specific tradition addressed – it was solely a battle of narratives where the story of the shaman who 'exists from the beginning of time',[13] has 'a Gift', and is detached from anything material, without need for lessons because everything he or she knows is based on an inner ability to communicate with and learn directly from other realms of existence, outweighed the story of the shaman that asks for money, learns how to do rituals, and is dependent on other practitioners to develop his or her spiritual path. A similar dynamic happened three times in a five-week span between January and February 2018, where a discussion on what Shamanism or 'real shamanism' is or entails led to one of the two main contenders leaving the group as a result. This may suggest that the narratives practitioners create around what Shamanism is to them is so core to their belief system that they cannot tolerate or stay in a community where that worldview is not unanimously shared and embraced. An incompatible worldview translates then into an incompatible world. When having a gripping story becomes so key in conveying what is the reality, romanticising stories about Shamanism surely will be a winning choice to make one's narrative flourish.

One more example of the neo-shamanistic romanticising emerged from a different discussion on the distinctions between a witch and a shaman. Giorgia explained that a witch can act for good as well as evil whereas a shaman can only act for good. Then a discussion opened when another member intervened saying that shamans can actually be evil, to which Giorgia responded expressing her premise that shamans would be 'spiritually evolved' enough not to be commit evil deeds.

Although there are some people in the group who don't express such a romanticised view of the shaman, from what surfaced in posts and comments, a significant majority shares similar thoughts and embeds them into narratives whose truthfulness is merely judged by how emotionally engaging and coherent it feels, with little to no interest shown towards factual evidence.

Conclusion

Having addressed the paradigms and how they underlie a set of behaviours and beliefs in Contemporary Shamanism, I then clarified the role of Scientism in propping up the idea that everything should be reduced to and validated

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[13] From Emilia's comment, 'lo sciamanesimo esiste fin dall'arbore dei tempi'.

through the method of natural science, conferring a central epistemological importance to the latter, while Post-truth discharges evidence-based facts in favour of emotionally gripping narratives. As both appear to underpin the Italian shamanic community, a question arises: are these two paradigms contradictory?

As previously explained, the concept of paradigm is rather key to understanding a cultural and religious movement because it doesn't tackle what is the content or the focus of one religion: it describes the preconditioning states for every inquiry to emerge and the standards whereby it can develop. It's not the attitude towards things, it's the premises underlying the potential attitudes. That is why paradigms cannot be contradictory, for they are not concepts but rather the precursory matrix for those concepts to arise.

It is indeed noticeable how the scientistic and Post-truth paradigms interact with each other, as contradictory as they may seem. Even though the scientistic approach is centred on natural science whereas Post-truth dismisses evidence in favour of narratives, an interaction between the two occurs. Although Post-truth appeals more to emotions, ignoring the facts, and prefers charming stories, those narratives still seem to need a scientific aura in order to appeal convincing to people. As an example, we are nowadays constantly exposed on Social Media to percentages and numbers, resembling data from studies in support of a narrative which is actually the main content provided by that discourse. In my Facebook group, for instance, numerous discussions have occurred where participants were supporting arguments by using what they deemed to be studies and data and therefore considered to be irrefutable because they are confirmed by science. The fact that those studies only appeared as such and were not backed by reliable sources was of less importance, for the narrative was, in fact, the winning horse.

We may venture to theorise that either Post-Truth is replacing a Rationalist worldview or that the two have merged in a new development of the Scientistic approach. Either way, they both constitute a key lens for scholars to understand how Neo-shamanism manifests itself when migrating to or developing within a Western discourse.

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