

Chamanisme et guérison magique

BY MARCELLE BOUTEILLER

Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1950.

Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase

BY MIRCEA ELIADE

Paris: Payot, 1951.

As the respective titles indicate, Marcelle Bouteiller emphasises the healing element in the Shaman, Mircea Eliade its capacity for ecstasy; Mme Bouteiller takes North America as the starting point of her study, M. Eliade, central and northern Asia.

Marcelle Bouteiller's work, backed up by an exhaustive bibliography, is divided into three sections. The first is a clear and precise description of North American shamanism, covering the shaman's social situation and acquisition and exercise of powers. A second, comparative part deals with medicomagic healing in extra-European societies. Finally, the third part is the result of a personal investigation carried out

in France among the class of healers known as *panseurs de secret*.

The thesis put forward is the following: Between the Indian shaman and the French *panseur de secret* (including along the way the various 'medicine men' of Asia, Australia, and Africa) there is no fundamental difference. Both have received, usually by inheritance, a 'gift', believe firmly in their powers, and are recognised in their social group as privileged individuals maintaining relations with the supernatural world, with the saint on whom the *panseur* calls occupying a position relative to that of the protector spirit associated with the shaman. Certain details, such as their invulnerability to

fire, stress the superhuman quality common to the two. Finally, there are the mystery and the ceremony which surround their cures, the use of esoteric formulae and of a secret language.

Ingenious as they are, these parallels do not make a very convincing case. It is easy to demonstrate in the *panseur's* therapeutic methods a substratum of ancient magic whose existence he himself, as a fervent Catholic, had never dreamed of suspecting. But though the use of sacred numbers (three for the Trinity, twelve for the Apostles) may represent the co-option by Christianity of symbols which considerably antedate it, it does not necessarily follow that the *panseur* is a direct descendant of the shaman. Transcendence of the ordinary human lot is not confined to these specialists.

As to resemblances between the two, it would be possible to draw up just as impressive a list of differences. Let us confine ourselves to a single feature, which we suggest as essential: the absence in the *panseur* of any sort of ecstatic phenomena or of double vision, phenomena so characteristic of the shaman that, according to Eliade, they are the source of all his powers, including that of healer. Further, the *panseur* specialises in one type of malady, whereas the shaman suffers no such limitation, and his role is a much more active one. Finally, it seems quite arbitrary to detach from a whole as complex as shamanism a single element—the shaman's power as a healer. One could just as easily draw parallels between the shaman and the fakir or the spiritistic medium. In our view it would have been preferable, instead of taking

shamanism as a starting-point, to have studied types of healers all over the world, including shamans, but dealing with only this side of their activity.

What Marcelle Bouteiller has brought out very successfully are the positive results obtained by non-scientific therapeutic methods, the psychic healing in which suggestion plays such an important part. Mme Bouteiller resolutely directs her researches in the field of comparative psychopathology, studies destined for a great future and for which the road has been charted so masterfully by C. Levi-Strauss.

Mircea Eliade says of himself that he is 'neither ethnologist, sociologist, nor psychologist', but historian and student of comparative forms. After the very methodical work of Marcelle Bouteiller, Eliade's book appears somewhat tangled; its composition is not very orderly, as if the author had started off without any plan prepared in advance. He considers the granting of powers, the initiation tests, the role of helper-spirits, the consecration or installation (the inaccurate term of 'initiation' makes for confusion), and the symbolism of ritual clothing, and then, from the point where he deals with Functions and Powers, abruptly adopts a geographical division. 'Cosmology' is followed by 'The Shamanism of North and South America'. The material on 'Symbols, Myths, and Parallel Rites', flung together haphazard in a concluding chapter, which deals in a few pages with elements as essential as the horse and the blacksmith, could have been either incorporated into the main text and developed at greater length or simply

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mentioned and reserved for future treatment. M. Eliade, who has very original and often penetrating views, goes beyond the scope of his present work.

Everything in the book connected with the phenomena of ecstasy is of basic interest. It is a pity that Eliade did not confine himself to a comparative study of these phenomena: the material was good, and could have been used to a much better advantage. Again, he could have limited himself to the history and evolution of shamanism in central and northern Asia, a huge and complex field where so many reciprocal influences have come into play. If Buddhism reacted upon Tungusic shamanism, Lamaism bears traces of shamanic influence. In the symbolism of numbers, in the 'infernal imagery', in the ritual accessories of the Siberian shamans, Eliade detects Mesopotamian, Persian, and Indian influences. There again the analysis could have been pushed further.

Yielding to the temptation of a facile comparative study, Mircea Eliade has preferred to set out in search of shamanism and shamanic elements throughout time and space. Even though he excepted Africa from his round-the-world trip, the field was already far too wide without it, and the study necessarily superficial. To draw a parallel, in such a cursory survey, between elements arbitrarily isolated from their social and religious contexts cannot, as we have already indicated, lead to any conclusive result. Furthermore, the name 'shamanic' is given to elements such as ritual ascension, the journey to the dead (the myth

of Orpheus) and the symbolism of the centre, which, as the author himself agrees, belong to complexes infinitely bigger and older than shamanism. To conclude from the presence of these elements the existence of a present or past shamanism seems therefore excessive. At the most, one can talk of common ideas, present *also* in Shamanism, or assimilated by it; but which extend far beyond its limits. One can say, for example, of the mastery of fire, which, as Eliade points out, 'denotes a superhuman condition', not that it is a notion originating with archaic shamanism, but that it is an archaic notion which is also encountered in shamanism.

The shaman, as Eliade puts it, is essentially a 'technician of ecstasy'. His long apprenticeship permits him to achieve a perfect mastery of the trance, which enables him to fulfil his functions of healer, soothsayer, psychic guide, etc. The shaman is not the unbalanced personality, the neuropath, the hysteric, or the epileptic he was generally believed to be. In the areas where the various forms of Arctic madness are met with, the percentage of individuals affected is smaller among the shamans than among the other groups. Eliade admirably brings out this fact, already noted by Mme Bouteiller. In contrast with the ordinary cases of possession, the shaman not only induces but controls the trance at his will. In him we are dealing with an exceptionally strong personality, which will be enervated only by a too frequent contact with the supernatural world.

The mental disturbances which are the signs of the shaman's vocation and

mark the stages of his initiation, reach their climax at the conclusion of his apprenticeship when he has completed the twofold education received from his temporal master and his spiritual masters, the future helper-spirits. In the procedure of initiation, Marcelle Bouteiller and Mircea Eliade recognise the typical pattern which comprises ritualistic suffering, death, and resurrection. In Siberia, the spirits are supposed to tear to pieces the chosen individual, selected against his will, and to provide him with new organs. In America, where the voluntary quest for powers predominates, the candidate inflicts on himself the tortures designed to attract the attention of the spirits he hopes will become his protectors. This contrast probably reflects a difference of social situation, according to whether or not the shaman enjoys a privileged position. 'Cast thine eyes on this young man', demands a Blackfoot shaman of the Sun, 'He is poor; give him power and help him to become someone' (Mme Bouteiller, p. 81). For Eliade, it does not make any difference whether the candidate has been chosen by the spirits or whether he himself is after supernatural powers; or whether the suffering—endured or sought—is on both the physical and mental, or only the mental, plane. The only thing that counts is the process of initiation, and our two authors draw a natural parallel between it and the admission rites which open the way to social functions and the different ranks within the various secret societies. But the very universality of these rites prevents us from looking on them, as Eliade would have us do, as a shamanic structure. We

would rather say that shamanic initiation, and that of the brotherhoods and mystical sects, conform to a pattern set by society.

Another factor which Sternberg held to be decisive in the vocation of shamanism, and whose importance Eliade tends to minimise, is the sexual character of the relation which unites the shaman and his supernatural protector. This intimacy, noted by Mme Bouteiller among the Paviotso Indians, where protector and protected are supposed to 'live as husband and wife', is particularly characteristic of Siberia. Other individuals than the shaman, Eliade objects, maintain sexual relations with supernatural beings, and it is not necessarily from these relations that the shaman draws his powers. But when there is election there is no doubt that love dictates the selection of the guiding spirit; the fact that shamanism may be inherited is no contradiction, but merely limits the area of the spirit's choice to the members of the same family.

It is on this chief helper-spirit that the shaman will first of all call when he comes to exercise his functions; but he also possesses, to use A. Lewitsky's expression, an entire 'mythic clientele', recruited principally from the animal world. As Eliade very rightly observes, the shaman 'incorporates' these spirits which answer his call, guide his researches, and lend him their aid; but he does not allow himself to be 'possessed' by them. In this same way he absorbs evil spirits if need be, and talks with them before expelling them.

Eliade recognises throughout the world numerous categories of

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'ecstasies' and possessed persons, and very diverse types of trance. Prophets, soothsayers, healers, exorcists, mediums, necromancers, all share in a special 'sight' or are the dwelling-place of a spirit; but they are confined within narrow specialisations. Those properly called 'healers', except for the diagnostician, are each versed in one particular therapeutic. The Polynesian prophet 'is always inspired by the same god'. Those who are possessed, voluntarily or not, and through whose mouth speaks the deity which is temporarily incarnated in them, do not dispose, Eliade notes, of magic powers. The state of 'lupa', or forgetfulness, among the Malays is not a shamanic ecstasy. But why then call 'shamanic' those phenomena which, as the author himself admits, have only distant and superficial connexions with shamanism, and why give the name of 'shaman' to no matter what sort of prophet or 'pharmacist' in Polynesia or Indonesia? This can only lead to unfortunate confusion. Eliade does not, however, throw together the yogi and the shaman. Indeed, he contrasts ecstasy, or the release of the shaman's soul, with the ecstasy, or concentration of the spirit of the yogi, though exercises in meditation are not unknown to the shaman. A similar power of concentration allows the Eskimo Angakok and the Buddhist monk to achieve the contemplation of their own skeletons.

Eliade further distinguishes degrees in the trance itself, according to whether it implies an ecstatic journey, or whether there is simply sleep, the shaman sinking into unconsciousness or

into a cataleptic state. Or again the shaman may content himself with a pseudo-trance, with a description according to a traditional pattern of the journey which he no longer trusts himself to accomplish in person. Finally there is the artificially induced trance. To the techniques usually employed—dancing, singing, and music—may be added intoxication from drugs, in Siberia for example, from agaric and tobacco. By way of comparison, Eliade further cites the smoke of hemp among the Scythians, and hashish or opium in the Near and Far East. It would have been easy to extend and multiply the examples, but the author cannot resist classing these techniques as 'vulgar substitutes' or 'recent innovations'. These techniques are no doubt artificial; but their diffusion has been enormous, and there is no reason to suppose that they are more recent because they are easier, or that they are simply imitative of a 'purer' technique.

Whatever the means employed to induce the trance, it is *in* and *by* the trance that the shaman fulfills his functions. His faculties as a seer permit him to discover the secrets of nature and of the future. He 'sees' causes and remedies. His soul leaves his body during the trance and takes its flight towards the celestial or infernal regions to seek, capture, or guide souls. He is 'the great specialist of the human soul' and the great master of the ecstatic journey. As a healer, he discovers and brings back the lost or stolen soul; as a psychic guide he directs the soul of the dead man towards its new abode; as an offerer of sacrifice, he conducts the soul of the victim to the proper god.

This journey restores communications with the beyond, open to everyone in the age of the myth, but now reserved only for the privileged. Eliade finds these elements of the abolition of time and nostalgia for flight repeated in many a mystical sect. Alongside the individual experience of the shaman, the brotherhoods collectively seek to transcend the bounds of the profane. This transcendence asserts itself as well in what is usually called the shaman's fakirism: insensibility to fire and wounds, and odds and ends of conjuring tricks. In these manifestations, which the first superficial observers regarded as vulgar charlatanism, Eliade sees not merely a 'solicitation of prestige', but a demonstration of the superhuman state achieved by the shaman—which comes to more or less the same thing.

In ecstatic flight, Eliade sees essentially an *ascension*. This ascension is symbolised by the tree or the pole which represents the axis of the world, and the shaman climbs to the different levels, one at a time, as though they were different stages of the universe. The role of the tree in cosmology and the symbolism of the centre—sacred space—are almost universal (the author gives several examples). But the presence of the tree is not an essential element in shamanism: it is found principally among the Turko-Mongol peoples, where the concept of the vertical representation of the universe as a series of superimposed worlds is particularly advanced. The theme of *descent*, which Eliade considers more recent, is equally important. Both themes originate in the shaman's capa-

city for ecstatic flight when he is called to make his way, now towards the celestial divinities, now towards the subterranean powers or the spirits of the dead; but there is nothing to prove the antecedeny of either direction.

Speaking of northern Asiatic Shamanism, Eliade concludes in favour of a primitive belief in a celestial supreme Being, communicating with men through the mouth of the shaman. According to this view the cult of the dead would have developed subsequently, the number of intermediary spirits would have multiplied, and so on; in this case, ritual ascension would have preceded ritual descent. This evolutionary schema is purely gratuitous, and, moreover, presupposes a rigidly parallel evolution among the different populations which have reached different stages. Eliade also assumes the existence of a primitive 'matriarchate' which preceded the 'patriarchate', an obsolete theory. As to the cult of the supreme god, it seems as a matter of fact to be independent of shamanism; for the shaman is far from always participating in it. Even where he does play an important part, as in the Altaic sacrifice of the horse to the celestial god, the shaman, in Eliade's own opinion, has probably taken the place formerly occupied by a priest.

Eliade notes a decadence in the present state of shamanism. This judgment is not based on the report of objective observers, but on the evidence, unreliable because essentially subjective, of the interested groups. But it is a universal tendency of the human mind to amplify and magnify what is at a distance. In every epoch and every country,

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the past always takes on the aspect of a golden age, and it is always elsewhere or in another generation that miracles have been accomplished; fathers always appear 'far better men than their sons'.

In conclusion, if the work of Mircea Eliade teaches us many things, it does not really give us the bird's-eye view it promised. The comparative method run wild leads to a dispersal, a frittering away of attention, in which we lose sight of the central figure of the shaman. Like the spirits dissecting the body of the initiate, Eliade has examined the organs of the shaman, and has enriched our knowledge with new data; but he has forgotten to sew the members together again. A better way to have captured the image of the shaman would perhaps have been to proceed by comparison and elimination, to have treated the divergences as much as the analogies. What is it that distinguishes the shaman from other individuals? He is not a priest and he is not a sorcerer. There are other classes of people who possess protector spirits and go through ecstatic experiences. Healers and prophets are to be found everywhere; but they are by no means shamans. The shaman combines the powers and pre-

rogatives of both. If, with Eliade, we see in the ecstatic experience the essential root of shamanism, we would go on to add: the ecstatic experience put at the service of a society and an ideology. From this primal phenomenon, which has evolved in fashions that differ in each geographical region, has developed the magico-religious complex called shamanism, reaching its culmination in central and northern Asia where it has integrated itself into religious systems, assimilating their traditions and colouring them with its own contributions and re-evaluations. This plasticity has enabled it to swim with the current of the great religions, to accommodate itself to the requirements of Christianity. The Siberian shaman would thus bow before the icons prior to invoking his protector spirits. If we consider the shaman simply as an ecstatic or a healer, we shall arrive at a definition which is universally valid only because it is vague, but which no longer corresponds to any concrete reality. By dint of this extensive use, the term 'shaman' is losing its significance; its content is disappearing and the term is in danger of soon becoming as shopworn as that of 'totem'.