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Introduction: A Personal Dialectic

EVERY SERIOUS BOOK, I was apprised, needs an erudite introduction. The potential reader feels reassured by “shamanistic” guidance in the initiatory encounters with the ephemeral world of ideas. I found out rather quickly that the task of writing such a book, without an adequate preamble (read as “another book”) chartering the topographic domains, could not be accomplished judiciously to the mutual satisfaction of the initiated and the neophytes, alike. How can one discuss meanings and symbolic forms of a phenomenology without first looking into its function and substance?

The decision to write this book was reached in Vravra (ancient Brauron, sacred to Artemis), on the east coast of Attica, our home during a lengthy stay, overlooking haze-covered islands of the proverbial Mediterranean. After a sojourn in the Italian Alps during the earlier part of 1989, particularly to the sites in the Camonica Valley, rich in ancient rock art abounding with shamanistic themes, I returned to Greece determined to apply myself, with enhanced fervor, to the book that I had been writing at the time. In the meantime, my renewed energy had been generating a noticeable impact. However, instead of strengthening my current enthusiasm, it took a subversive course, making my writing task more arduous: the process of fermentation of an idea for the present book was begun. Thus, what was to become an ordinary preamble has been “shamanistically” transformed into a book—hopefully less ordinary.

The interim months ushered in an Aegean summer, hot and not so idyllic. We set out to explore the little known, and almost uninhabited, southern part of the Cycladic island of Naxos. With a four-wheel-drive vehicle parked in the belly of a fuel-burning leviathan, we put out to sea for this isle of Dionysos and Ariadne. Once we penetrated the desolate interior of Naxos, our path consisted of a grievous dirt-and-rock trail, climbing and descending through the mountainous terrain until it unfolded onto the coast. We stopped along the way at an ancient stone windmill, dating to about fourth century B.C. and could not resist the opportunity to explore the surrounding grounds. Near some bushes, we discovered recent heapfuls of hooved goat legs, cut off below the knee, and stains of blood. In certain areas of the world, animal legs have been attached to shamans' vestments and paraphernalia, and the animal skin body coverings worn by the ancient Greeks and by the present-day shepherds did not go for want of limbs either.

Although Greek Orthodoxy is descended in a direct line from the Byzantine Church, one can find surviving remnants of the ancient folk religion in the interior countryside. I had witnessed such living relics on several other occasions, including sacrificed goats tied with a wire to high poles on the island of Syros. All these happenings were not new to me, by any means; they only further confirmed my belief that the antecedents of ancient Greek religion had had shamanistic beginnings and that many of these elements survived in the Bronze Age and during later periods. A few of these still exist today, not only in the beliefs of the country folk, but also in the Greek Orthodox Church. To wit, the priest assumes the obvious shamanistic aspect of a psychopomp by ritually extricating the soul of the deceased, which otherwise will remain bound to the body, or, for that matter, witness the animal-headed St. Chrisophoros. In any case, soon after returning to Attica, the urge grew stronger, I gave into it, put off work on the other book, and began writing this one.

I have attempted here an integrated examination of the substantive aspect of shamanism as a phenomenology of religious experience and of its cultural function as a metaphor in myth, religion, art, and language. These, to me, represent both the dynamic factors and products of the ongoing hominizing process. I have also endeavored, in part, to confront the transformational forms and processes involved in the development of the precognitive, unconscious, magico-religious responses and their gradual transformations into cognitive experiences, which, through a maze of verbal and nonverbal symbols, such as ritual behavior, result in the articulation of mystical states, as well as in the ultimate numinous essence. However, a full study of the meanings and configurations of shamanistic metaphors in human cultures will have to wait for a



Figure 1.1 The Greek St. Chrisophoros. Vestiges of his shamanistic aspect are indicated by his animal-headed form. (Author's archives).

subsequent volume. My concerns with such themes, though, ensue from a long-standing interest in the phenomenology and philosophy of cultural metaphors and symbolic forms.

The challenge of scientific progress serves as an open invitation for dialectic interpretations and speculative reconstructions of the metaphoric and abstract forms within the physical and symbolic terrain of culture, since the "speculative and subjective are part of the scientific process."¹ As long as man remains capable of symbolic thought and behavior, the historical time-frame will be viewed through the lens of the present: one symbolic mode of thought trying to uncode the symbolic process of another. Is it intellectually wrong?—I think not. Such an attitude only upholds Einstein's belief that all great ideas in science (here meant a disciplined intellectual process) are products of the "pure mind" (ideologically non-dogmatic and open to innovative concepts). After all, the psychological satisfaction and romance associated with such inquiries have always been connected with the pursuit of the unknown and speculative.

A productive method to such ends not only recommends the adoption of a structural approach to re-weaving the symbolic fabric deduced from a particular cultural mode, but it also requires the scrutiny of the arbitrary, analytic constructs thus imposed, since undoubtedly the latter will influence the overall outlook perceived by the investigator. We are confronted by a situation where perception (output) is modified by conception (input). This is not a novel idea in physical sciences. Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which fulfills a pivotal condition in quantum physics, offers good theoretical and experimental parallels: The observer or the experimenter will inadvertently modify, to varying degrees, the behavior of the perceived phenomenon by virtue of the very process of the inquiry. Therefore, the observation of any phenomenon in its *true* mode is precluded, altogether. Hence, there will always exist a discrepancy between the way things really *are* and how they *appear* to be. This "differential" is accounted for by the Uncertainty Principle, and performs a critical function in any major equation dealing with the structure and behavior of phenomena. In fact, in the words of Stephen Hawking, one of the most illustrious physicists alive today, "Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is a fundamental, inescapable property of the world."²

In 1920, Sigmund Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which, being tinted with unaccustomed—for Freud—metaphysics, frightened away many of his disciples. In this new treatise, Freud reaffirmed his belief in the unity within the living world by advancing a theory that conjectured the existence of a life force together with a

death wish in *all* living things. Death occurs when Thanatos overwhelms Eros: both the wish and the will being expressions of an instinctive force.

Two years later, through his work with the chacma baboons, Eugène Marais formulated a novel hypothesis about the human mind. He postulated in *The Soul of the Ape* (written in 1922, but not published until 1969, posthumously) that the development of the intellectual and reasoning faculties in man had screened out the real psyche—the original primitive mentality based on instinct—and had delegated it to another realm in the brain, where it has survived as our subconscious mind. It would have been extremely satisfying to have Freud's views on Marais's ideas pertaining to the origins of the human subconscious. The conflict suggested by the latter, between reason and the instinctive psyche, bears profound implications for the genesis of religion, the birth of the *Magna Mater*, and shamanism.

During this time, the world was undergoing important ideological and economic shifts, witnessing the rise of fervent pragmatism agitated, on one hand, by the Marxist dialectic of cultural materialism in the Old World and, on the other, embellished with the naiveté of the utopian materialism of surplus wealth in the capitalist New World. The new socioeconomic perspectives created an impact on the theoretical objectives in many academic disciplines, notably in the cultural and behavioral sciences, wherein the uprising social trends came to be reflected in the aims and the theoretical methodology displayed in many areas of study. In psychology, the new school of behaviorists and environmentalists revived the *tabula rasa* concept by proclaiming humans to be solely a product of their environment. In other words, regardless of genetic composition, personal predisposition, and preferences, an individual could be, from an early age, molded into becoming whatever was planned and designed for him or her. Such theories were received by an enthusiastic audience, for they offered the much needed "scientific" confirmation to the economic and political dogmas of social pragmatism. Thus, the *conception* of social reality helped mold the *perception* that humans created of themselves.

This situation became evident, as well, in the plight of the student of culture and comparative religions, as it ensued from the inherent difficulty to identify logical principles leading to the formulations of axioms, theories, and laws which could be used in predicting, with some degree of consistent accuracy, the dynamics of a cultural process and the human responses thereto. Much time and energy were invested into refutations of the various forms of evolutionism (Tylor, Frazer, White, etc.), diffusionism (Wisser, Childe), relativism (Boas), functionalism (Malinowski, Radcliff-Browne), organicism—regular and super (Durkheim, Kroeber), structuralism (Lévi-Strauss), and a host of other

-isms, which ultimately brought with them a discord and a rigidity of thought manifested in the plethora of academic writings of the *genre* in the last three decades or so.

There were, of course, notable exceptions, particularly one offspring known as cultural ecology. This infant wrestled with the philosophical concept (still no theory) of systems that were believed to exist intrinsically in the interplay between Culture and Environment. The new credo dispatched its believers after a holy grail emanating cues and signs as an expression of a dynamic, adaptive balance between the two principle forces. More often than not, the zealous acolytes confused functionalism with adaptation, by failing to realize that a cultural trait or a complex that displays merely a functional purpose does not qualify automatically for the platinum rating of one that has earned the considerable rank by actually developing an adaptive survival value. The result of this loose thinking could be witnessed in the endless lists of publications offering little more than descriptive, analytical profiles of cultures posed against the background of their physico-biotic environments.

Still, notwithstanding these worthy efforts by certain pioneers braving the *terra incognita*, when compared to the bulk of published studies, only a small number—very small, indeed—actually ascended beyond the descriptive, functionalist treatments. Ironically, those involved in the studies of the different facets of human culture, their visions obliterated when it came to “universal” categories, ultimately placed themselves in a very frustrating corner. A new philosophical system was sadly lacking. If “universal” features can be admitted into existence, then cultural metaphors and other symbolic forms are their cognitive reflections. Claude Lévi-Strauss expended much intellectual energy on devising analytic strategies that could isolate symbols as structural units within a cultural system. However, instead of attempting to arrive at some purview of the metaphor as a cultural idiom embodied in its own phenomenological form (epiphany, so to speak), he was content to tie it to a cultural mythology. There is absolutely nothing paltry with his approach, except that it does not enlarge adequately our comprehension of the metaphor as a phenomenon possessed of its own intrinsic substance and structure.

It ought to be, therefore, of little surprise that our preconceptions should affect the way we perceive not only the physical world about us, but the way we perceive cultural metaphors and other forms of symbolic manifestations—including the reflection of our own conceptions in what we make out shamanism to be. The cultural characteristics that a specialist anticipates to find will not only influence the formulation of his hypothesis regarding their patterns and interrelationships, but will also affect the final picture that is perceived. The question of how closely

such a cultural portrait approximates the actual cultural experience falls within the realm of *uncertainty*. And sharp differences between one portrait and another of the same culture are often based, to borrow John Bintliff's eloquent phrase, on a "hypothetical distinction."

Thus, when in 1935, the German cultural philosopher Oswald Spengler published his provocative views on the flourishing Minoan civilization, his explanations about its cultural demise were syncretic with the sentiments and the mood of the times.³ In Europe, the atmosphere before World War I and during the period between the two World Wars prompted a sense of passive fatalism and a peculiar feeling of helplessness in respect to the chain of events imbued in the historical process. The decline and doom of all civilizations were regarded as an existential phenomenon, a part of an unalterable cycle through which all advanced cultures must pass. Whatever cause might have actually been responsible for the disappearance of the Minoan palace civilization, it was considered and interpreted in the context of a "natural" decline within the irrevokable cycle of history.

The remarkable thing about Spengler's observations is to be seen in his perception of the Minoan monuments and finds at Knossos and Phaistos as sacred enclosures, each forming a religious complex that functions as a city of the dead, or a necropolis, rather than a habitat for the living. The absence of true fortified walls, coupled with his keen understanding of Bronze Age religious beliefs surrounding death and the life hereafter, led Spengler to conceive the possibility that the walls around Knossos and Phaistos had been originally intended for the protection of the sanctity and peace of the deceased, lying within their precinct, rather than for the defense of human lives against the invading forces arriving from without. His critical analysis of the problem made him posit an important question: "Were the 'palaces' of Knossos and Phaistos temples of the dead, sanctuaries of a powerful cult of the hereafter? I do not wish to make such an assertion, for I cannot prove it, but the question seems to me worthy of serious consideration."⁴

Oswald Spengler was the first to recognize the fallacy imbedded in the interpretations advanced by Sir Arthur Evans, the discoverer of Knossos and the Minoan civilization. Sir Arthur's stubborn preconceptions and arbitrary conclusions about the special position occupied by the Minoans in the historico-cultural arena enjoined him from taking a sober look at the archaeological evidence, which included thousands of written records. Evans proceeded to formulate ideas about ancient Crete that were, to a large extent, results of his idealization of a civilization that he loved almost with a blind passion, one binding a parent to a child. His belief in the premature, catastrophic demise of the allegedly peace- and art-loving Cretans blinded him to the possibility

of finding cultural ties between his pet protagonists and other Greeks. He characterized the former as having developed a unique form of culture, borne of independent roots, dissociated from any other. Consequently, in his supreme task to decipher the writings of the Minoan palaces, Evans's exceedingly biased mode of thought led him not to success, but to a veritable failure. He simply refused to entertain any notion of a plausible connection between the language of Bronze Age Greece and the one spoken in ancient Crete. This strong conviction—or rather a personal sentiment—inherent in the conceptualization, distorted his perception, affecting not only the outcome of his reconstruction of the Minoan society, but also rendering his paramount efforts to decipher its language utterly futile.

Spengler, however, was prevented from pursuing further clues to this intriguing question. He died one year following the appearance of the aforementioned book. The curious aspect about Spengler's remarks lies in the fact that they remained unnoticed for many decades until the publication, in 1972, of *Wohin der Stier Europa trug* (English version, 1974, titled *The Secret of Crete*)⁵ by the late Hans Georg Wunderlich, who held the chair of geology and palaeontology at the University of Stuttgart until his death. Perhaps the insufficient notice drawn by Spengler's last book can be attributed to the overwhelming impact produced by his earlier, seminal, and extremely influential work, *The Decline of the West*.

The case of Sir Arthur Evans and the Minoan civilization does not stand alone in the annals of scholarship, instead it has analogues in each and every period or epoch. In comparison with Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, this syndrome is an "inescapable property" of the social/behavioral sciences and humanities. Consequently, any interpretation or analysis that has as its subject a facet of culture is bound to be speculative and defined by a "hypothetical distinction."

When one studies the development of a cultural process, whether from the viewpoint of anthropology or comparative religions, one cannot build an intellectual framework without noting the connecting links between one culture trait and another. Culture growth, abstract or material, does not occur independently of other processes within the particular culture's context. To examine the content of a religious impulse among mankind, not as a series of changes in a chain of historical vignettes but as a phenomenological process, will take us back tens of thousands of years to a time when *Homo sapiens*, with their subspecies, had shared analogues of numinous experiences in their awareness of the great procreative force, manifest in the cyclical birth and death of nature, probably as the Great Mother or a close kindred. Most likely, these human creatures had not shared a set of *beliefs*, as

much as they shared in the pool of common emotional and "religious" experiences—the transcultural (or should I say pan-human?) experiences of the existential quest for meaning. From this fertile soil, nourishing a common existential root, sprouted another, a new universal system, the *Ur*-religion, where mankind's role became less passive and more articulate. This system can be viewed as the first systematic attempt to understand and modify phenomena falling within the domain of human experience. It is known as *shamanism*.

The basic elements of shamanism describe multiple functions reflected in the roles of its practitioners, the shamans. As individuals specializing in the performance and the enactment of rituals, they are also the tribal timekeepers, or custodians of the calendar. In hunting magic, the shamans foster and consolidate a vital relationship with Master of the Animals, or an equivalent figure, thus, assuring consistent bounty for their people. As healers, they employ various methods prescribed by the cultural norms, including the ability to see the causes of disease and augur the future. Not less important is the shaman's function as a guide, or a psychopomp, for the souls of the dead, ascertaining that these do not become dispersed in the universal vastness, but are assured proper passages to their respective destinies in the spirit realms. Last, but definitely not least, is the underscored importance of the extensive and vital role played by hallucinogenic plants in shamanistic rituals and imagery, and as crucial factors in cultural dynamics. The experience acquired in drug-induced visions and integrated through socially-approved cognitive channels is a major key to culture change. This force of shamanistic phenomenology constitutes a pervasive note in this book.

Moreover, the shaman's intellectual abilities are of real social consequence, particularly as they apply to issues involving the culture-environment system. Equipped with an impressive corpus of empirical knowledge (ethnoscience) and a profound grasp of human behavior, the shaman fulfills the vital role of a psychocultural adaptive mechanism, not merely as a healer of diseases, but as a harmonizer of social and natural dysfunctions and imbalance. In view of his ecological significance, the shaman's role as an agent in transcendental and existential realities tends to be underplayed by those who regard cultures as systems of more pragmatic and functional configurations. The importance of the latter two is undeniable in its own right; however, to de-emphasize symbolic (religious, spiritual, etc.) considerations is to fail in the understanding of the full integrative potential inherent to shamanism as a dynamic factor in the cultural process. Therefore, in a book, bearing the subtitle *Substance and Function of a Religious Metaphor*, the keynote should be, it seems to me, justifiably placed on the aspect of

shamanism as a mythico-religious idiom rather than on its pragmatic-ecological values.

The essence of sociocultural existence is centered around mythic imagery, which lends to human life an existential dimension. Pure, rational thought is no more an objective reality than the myths wherefrom such a concept is derived. Myths make up the fundamental responses to the basic human need for meaning. This need is an inescapable condition of human existence, pervading all areas of interactions: from techno-mechanical and sexual to highly symbolic and creative. In effect, myths often become cultural expressions for religious and ethical codes. At the same time, they are of paramount importance to the enactment of shamanistic rituals. Thus, many such rituals and the corresponding techniques, found all over the world, are validated by aetiological mythologies and cosmic paradigms. The significant place occupied by myths in the shaman's repertoire becomes apparent to anyone who has devoted some time to this subject.

In his article on "Shamanism," for the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Diószegi included mythic traditions among the nine characteristic features of this religious complex.⁶ Eliade, in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, recognized the fact that the shamans' "ecstatic experiences have exercised, and still exercise, a powerful influence on the stratification of religious ideology, on mythology, on ritualism"⁷ Joseph Campbell, too, stressed this point repeatedly.⁸ The core of any religious practice, shamanism not exempted, is to be found in the experiential framework that lends to its spiritual character. Ancient and classic shamanism was not characterized by a common object of worship (e.g., a Buddha), or a codified body of dogmas. Instead, it comprised specific techniques and ideology by which spiritual issues could be addressed.

To ensure survival, human beings learn and devise cognitive meanings. These can be found in the parallel extensions formed by the antipodal worlds, and available through the diverse techniques utilized by the shamans. It is the shaman's task to organize and impart coherence to the inveterate journey of existential quest, thus affording ideological purpose and ecological possibilities to the human condition. Shamanistic states of consciousness are not regarded as extraordinary occurrences, neither are these alternate states viewed as separate realities. It is all part of a larger monistic whole: in contradistinction to the well-established western myth (a philosophico—scientific metaphor), developed by Descartes through dialectic logic, demonstrating the existence of dichotomous systems, that is, a "real" disparity between the antipodal cosmic entities—mind and matter.

The quest for the existential metaphor, in the mythico-religious realm, conditioned human society along the lines that can submit to interpretations in terms of a cognitive approach—a model—germinal in a theoretical design. The attempts to understand the worldviews and daily dramas of aboriginal cultures must take into account the roles of the diverse factors exerting an impetus on the developmental process. The success of such an understanding does not lie so much within the selected area of study, inasmuch as it stems from the methodology embedded in the intellectual strategy that can be applied to different problems. It is an intellectual adventure, as yet unquantifiable, paving the route to a better understanding of our past and the human condition in general.

I have encountered a raised eyebrow, on an occasion or two, in response to my use of certain reference sources. I am quite aware that several authors (e.g., Sir James G. Frazer) to whom I refer are considered to be outdated and not in vogue; used, primarily, for their historical curiosity. Nevertheless, in spite of the apparent obsolescence of these individuals, some of them managed to articulate stimulating ideas. Thus, by citing them, I do not necessarily adopt their methodologies or theoretical perspectives, but, instead, retrieve what I feel may be applicable and worth notice. (How and where, for instance, can we possibly obtain, today, the field experiences of such observers as Knud Rasmussen with the Eskimos, or Leon Sternberg with the Gilyaks?) Henceforth, to the charge of this particular criticism, I submit that even an outdated concept or theory may contain kernels of enlightening observations: A good methodology is not defined by the material we use, but rather by how judiciously we use it. As a parting point, here: the Huxley-Zaehner debate on mystical experience can obviously go on *ad infinitum*, standing unresolved and locked in this status quo for a very long time, if not forever. *Sufficit!*

The early materials on shamanism tend to lean towards the esoteric, while later scholarly materials are scattered in specialized, and often obscure, publications. One earlier pivotal synthesis of this subject was Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (original French edition, 1951; English translation, 1964). It confined itself, primarily, to the category of a documentary sourcebook, employing a historico-textual approach, which, unfortunately, did not address the subject matter in the appropriate cultural context. Neither did it deal with its theme as a phenomenology proper. Moreover, Eliade's *Shamanism* conveys a touch of personal bias, which, all in all, makes the book somewhat outdated. In spite of its apparent shortcomings, it nevertheless provides a useful starting point for some purposes. Still, like every work, it sets its own scope and limitations. On the other hand,

an important contribution to the ethnographic study of shamanism was made, among others, by Gérardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's classic work, *Amazonian Cosmos: The Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indians*.⁹ Although a more extensive list will be found in the reference section, it befits to mention a few additional persons whose works have contributed to our understanding of shamanism: A.E. Anisimov, Vilmos Diószegi, Carl-Martin Edsman, Anna-Leena Siikala, Louise Bäckman and Åke Hultkrantz, Weston La Barre, Peter T. Furst, Michael J. Harner, and Johannes Wilbert.