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Indigenous Shamanism :
It's Relevancy in a World of
Many Religions

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INTRODUCTION

In an age when human civilization in the greater part of the world has come under the influence of modernity, the practice of shamanism amongst the indigenous peoples has been increasingly subverted and relinquished to the margin of modern society. Yet the last century has witnessed a resurgence of studies in shamanism and revival of shamanic practices.ⁱ

In this paper, I will attempt to begin with narratives of personal shamanic experiences in the first section. Only in the second section do I offer a conceptual framework of what shamanism is and who the shamans are.ⁱⁱ In the third section, I will enumerate the criteria and principles for the re-valuation and evaluation of indigenous shamanism. In the final section, I will argue for the relevancy of indigenous shamanism in that it has shaped our understanding of ourselves as beings im-planeted in this world.

1. INITIATION AS A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The relevance of indigenous shamanism to the many religions in our times depends to a large extent on personal contextual experiences.

The most significant shamanic experience has been my own initiation into the world of indigenous shamanism by Garing, one of the most renowned legendary shaman in the village of Bantul, located at the border between Sabah (what was formerly known as North Borneo) and Kalimantan, Indonesia.ⁱⁱⁱ

After two periods of living in the village, Garing mentioned to me the decision from the spirit-world, that I would be "initiated" through a bathing ritual known to the Muruts as "na rio." I would be ritually inducted to become a member of his family. The spirits have instructed Garing to orientate me with regard on July 19, 2001 based on three conditions which I would have to consent before the initiation: (a) I have to become his son and visit him in the kampung regularly; (b) I have to be at his disposal when he comes to Kota Kinabalu when I am in town; (c) I have to be there for his burial whenever possible. But the first initiation had to be postponed, as the spirit Garing, due to the impending rain. We returned the following day and I was initiated. Garing asked me to squat in a pond of the running stream.

Garing was squatting slightly further upstream. He instructed me:

- (a) You have to "dip" for 4 days in the stream nearby and come back here so that the water-spirits could give you some "incantations."
- (b) You are not to engage in a fight when I am drunk, or scold/rebuke anyone or beat someone.
- (c) You are to acknowledge me as your dad.

The initiation ceremony continued on July 20, 2001. When we arrived at the sacred spot upstream, Garing went further upriver to communicate with the water-spirits. With the instruction from the spirits, he broke the eggs and spilled the content into the stream. Then he asked me to bath. At the pool, he and I dipped and bathed. Soon, Garing called me to come near to him. He asked me to bring the pen and book. I thought that he was to sit behind me. But he moved to sit on a rock. He beckoned me to come closer to him so that he could whisper to me.

I wrote down all that he dictated to me.

Garing cautioned me: "Do not use it for purposes not intended by the water-spirits or else I would have lost the power accorded by the water-spirits"

Jojo: "What is his name?"

Garing: "I will give you the name tonight."

Then Garing mentioned to me the questions that they posed to him.

Garing: "Is he your son?" Then he swore to the "water-spirits" that I am his son.

Jojo: "Thank you!"

Garing: "Next time, when you are here, we would spent the night outside the cave on a moonlit night, and, we would be able to see them, really white in appearance."

That night after the initiation, I was awestruck by the reality of the spirit-world, so sacred, so tangible, so very real, yet so everyday for the Muruts, and so readily accessible to Garing who criss-crossed with ease from the human world to the spirit-world. I am truly convinced that the spirit-world is REAL, as real as the shamans who converse with them, carried out their instructions, and communicated the incantations from the spirit, through him to me.

For the shamans like Garing, it is a given, the sacred is part of the mundane. In other words, the sacred mysteries of life is integral to their everyday existence because they have the knowledge and experience to travel between the different worlds and collaborate with the benevolent spirits for the wellbeing of the rural indigenous communities.

At the same time, I became keenly aware of my own biases. The spirits/spirit-world is not what many urbanites of the dominant religions imagine them to be. Many readily dismiss it as some hocus-pocus stuff or sheer figment of the imagination of the "illiterate primitives" who lack the education and the knowledge to explain/rationalize the supernatural worlds. It is in this light of systemic suppression and marginalization that I termed indigenous shamanism and the practices of the shamans as a 'subaltern spirituality of suspect.' (Fung 2005:233)

Needless to say, such a prejudice is rather prevalent in the secularized world which ignored and erased the 'transcendental/supernatural reality,' including the multiple worlds, not to mention the spirit-world. Such an erasure has denied the believers any access to this whole realm of the supernatural reality as affirmed in indigenous shamanism. This closure further reduces the human ability to listen and decipher the voices of the spirits, let alone be guided by them so as to bring about greater wholeness to human lives and the well-being of the community.

In the final analysis, I must admit that amidst the material poverty of the rural indigenous communities, there is more "wealth" than the dominant society, cultures and religions want to concede and credit the indigenous peoples for their shamanic beliefs. When I contrast this newly found "treasures" with the modern techno-centric lifestyle, the latter really pales in significance because of its apparent "hollowness," not to mention the "emptiness" it leaves in the hearts of many.

With this window that offers glimpses of indigenous shamanism from a context-bound *locus of* experiences, it is opportune to take the next step wherein a conceptual framework (called it a "framing story") is offered to facilitate a deeper comprehension.

2. UNDERSTANDING SHAMANISM AND SHAMANS

Much anthropological research has since been generated with regard to indigenous shamanism. It is important to state that the intercultural dialogue with indigenous peoples must examine the indigenous institution of shamanism as it is inseparably linked with the shamans and their initiation rites, their indigenous cosmology and mythology, the rituals that they perform, with the accompanying signs and symbols. It is a whole system— i.e., without the shamans and the rituals, there will be no shamanism and vice versa. To this end, E. Jean Matteson Landon (1992: 20) contends that “shamanism is an enduring institution that must be comprehended holistically.” Mircea Eliade (1967: 56 quoted in Overton 1998: 27) describes shamanism as the “most archaic and most widely distributed occult traditions.” Eva Jane Newmann Fridman concurs by adding that “shamanism is an ancient spiritual practice” which “has developed and changed over the centuries, allowing shamanic practices to remain significant in present-day cultures.” (Walter and Fridman 2004: ix)

As for its epistemological origin, Sandy Yule (1999: 45) argues that “shamanism comes from the Tunguso-Manchurian word ‘saman.’ The noun is formed from the verb ‘sa-’ (‘to know’), thus, ‘shaman’ literally means ‘he (sic) who knows.” James A. Overton (1998: 27) opines that “throughout most of the world (North and South America, Asia, Europe and Oceania), the shaman fulfills, or has fulfilled in the past, the roles of healer, master of the spirits, guardian of the psychic and ecologic well-being of his community, psychopomp, and intermediary between the natural and supernatural.” According to Ulla (1999:41), “shamanism is not a religion . . . but a phenomenon—namely, the activities of shamans—that can be found in various religions.” Her view is supported by Fridman who fine-tuned Johansen’s explanation that “shamanism is not one uniform phenomenon over a wide range of time and space; each culture lays its own imprint on the belief system, practices, and outward appearances of its shamanic practitioners” (Walter and Fridman 2004: ix). Landon (1992:4) qualifies Johansen by viewing “shamanism as a globalizing and dynamic social and cultural phenomenon.” He further adds that “South American shamanism is a religious system. It contains ideas and practices about the world and its reproduction, the worldview and reflection of the world” and therefore, “ritual is an important and necessary expression of a belief system Rituals works because it expresses. Its efficacy lies in its power as metaphor to express and alter the human experience by altering perception” (Ibid.: 11-12). Landon believes that “the shaman is central in ritual expression since he is the master of the ritual and its representations. His authority to conduct ritual comes from his position as mediator between various domains and superhuman, the natural and the cultural. He is an ambiguous or liminal figure. He is both animal and human, since he transforms into animals. He is neither inherently good nor evil, because he works for the benefit, as well as the misfortune, of others. His power derives in part from his ambiguity, since he does not fit into the mutually exclusive category that organized the world” (Ibid.: 12).

Seen from the viewpoint of power, Landon explains the shaman as the “possessor of power, and it is power that enables him to mediate between the extrahuman and human. This concept of power is intimately linked to the idea of energy forces, the manifestation of these forces in the soul, and the growth and development of humans” as “manifested as light or aura . . . in songs” for “the shaman’s power interacts with the global energy system” (Ibid. 14). Indeed, the shamans have the ability to draw upon “this energy through the ecstatic experience, through dreams or through trances induced by drugs” (Ibid.: 20). I fully subscribe to Landon’s notion that “the sources of the shaman’s power are the sources of culture itself, and the knowledge he acquires is culture’s content. Through ritual he is central to the expression of the cultural system. His role as mediator extends into the sociological domain, where he plays an important role in curing, as well as in economic, political, and other activities” (Ibid.). In view of this, I contend that a shaman derives his power by virtue of the fact that he is an existential embodiment and symbolic expression and content of the shaman’s culture (See Fung 2000).

Sue Jennings discovers that the Temiars of Peninsular Malaysia call their shamans *halak*, though occasionally the Malay words *bomoh* or *pawang* are used. *Halak* “also describes the potential for being a

shaman and the meeting of an individual with a person's spirit-guide in dreams. Although most *halak* are male, there are women as well. Robert Dentan remarks that "there are varying degrees of *halak*. Women are rarely more than just a little *halak*, but a really *halak* woman is more successful than most male *halak* in the diagnosis and cure of diseases" (Dentan 1968: 85, quoted in Jennings 1995: 138). However, the majority of the shamans, who are known as *bobolizans* among the Rungus and Kadazandusuns of Sabah, are women. So too their apprentices. Both George N. Appell and Laura W. R. Appell consider *bobolizan* "as an intermediary between human beings and supernatural beings, both upperworld *osunduw* and the terrestrial *rogon*, to alleviate afflictions of disease, misfortune, and crop failure They go into trance to communicate with the spirit world in order to diagnose and cure illness and misfortune, and they then sing the long sacred texts that accompany the necessary sacrificial offerings to the spirit world (Appell and Appell 1993: 1920). As a result, "women are considered the authorities on the nature of the cosmos and are the interpreters of most forms of misfortune except those relating to farming activities, where there are male experts as well" (Ibid.: 20). The *bobolizans* effect cures through the help of the *luma'ag* who are the spirit and the "celestial counterpart of a living individual, male or female" and sometimes "of her mother or teacher" which they call upon during trance (Ibid.: 14). The *luma'ag* communicates to the *bobolizans* "information on the proper sacrifice to achieve cures, which then involve the performance of hymns to the gods and spirits over sacrifices of pigs and chickens" (Ibid.).

The Temiar believe that shamans are persons of knowledge and wisdom. They are divided into minor, middle and major shamans, even a fourth category, great shaman, to indicate the highest grade of shaman who are tiger shamans of whom there are very few at any one time (Jennings 1995: 139). Most shamans begin as "minor shaman following the guidance of dream revelation; spirit guides of *off-the-ground* species. Higher grades of shaman have spirit-guides from *on-the-ground* species. It is the major and great shaman that are able to accept power not just from the head-souls of *off-the-ground* and *ground* species, but also from the heart/blood-soul, the lower body soul, of species on-the-ground" (Ibid.: 140). Finally, shamans perform rituals because of "soul-sickness: either head-soul sickness or blood/heart-soul sickness." (Ibid.: 151) It is not uncommon that shamans "also give amulets made from wild garlic which are tied round the neck or wrist to ward off malevolent spirits or prevent colds and chills. If an infant is unwell, the baby and its mother will wear an amulet." (Ibid.: 145)

In the encounter with the world of shamanism, most participants with a rational mindset (as impacted by scientific and technocratic) normally doubt and dismiss as "myths" what they witness and experience as unreal. Overton advocates the change of mindset which involves what he calls *shamanic realism*. He defines it as "the realistic presentation of an esoteric worldview which is not the result of the imagination of the author, but principally of a system of beliefs of ethnographic origins. Shamanic realism, therefore, transcends, as does shamanism itself, the barriers of history and geography, and therefore of the Latin American continent and of the Spanish language or of its literary tradition" (Overton 1998: 25). He concludes that shamanic realism is the "result of the presence of a system of cultural beliefs whose indelible influence on the author becomes patent in his or her artistic representation" (Ibid.: 53). Only shamanic realism enables participants to put on a shamanic perspective which disposes them toward the experience of shamanic rituals and better understand indigenous shamanism. Indeed, what is experienced is real, out there, before one's very eyes, and all one can say is, "It is what it is."

3. CRITERIA FOR VALUATION AND EVALUATION

Based on personal efforts in the area of "contextual theologizing" in the light of my ethnographic field research and experiences,¹¹ has enabled me to advocate some criteria and principles of re-valuation and evaluation of the many indigenous cultures, with particular reference to indigenous shamanism and shamans.

As a Catholic, I take delight in the principles explained by the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference) and I found them to be useful presuppositions for re-valuing and evaluating the relevancy of indigenous shamanism:

- (a) First, the FABC states that "it has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person. God's grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. God's ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of divine grace." (BIRA II, art.12) In this way, the Spirit of Christ is certainly operative in indigenous shamanism and God's saving grace is offered therein as well.
- (b) Second, "dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believers. It is a perspective of faith that we cannot speak of one without the other." (Theses on Interreligious Dialogue, art.6.5). The "project" of "contextual theologizing" calls for such an openness so that one crosses the threshold and beholds with the eyes of faith, the presence of sacred mysteries of life in the beliefs of the 'other.'
- (c) Third, the "Christian communities in Asia must listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history, and that they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others "in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute," and that thus they are to be "sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion." (FABC III, art. 8.2). This enjoins on the believers in general to listen to God's spirit while we step into the world of indigenous shamanism as accompanied by the reputable indigenous shamans.
- (d) Fourth, religious pluralism is considered by the Asian bishops "as a grace and as a God' given call to be co-pilgrims along with the believers of other religions in search of Truth in love." (Fernando 2000:865). In this regard, religious pluralism must be inclusive of the indigenous cultures in which shamanism is a central and integral institution in their belief system.

Upon these presuppositions, I contend that the *condition sine non qua* prior to any efforts at re-valuation and evaluation be based on the principle of *kenosis* and *pleroma* wherein one must be able to immerse oneself in the life-struggles of indigenous peoples in order to be filled with a more adequate understanding of their life-worlds *from within*.

Based on the first principle, I like to proceed with the enunciation of three fundamental criteria which argues that:

- (1) The indigenous peoples have the epistemological power of making a moral distinction between what is evil (a disservice) and good (a service) to the indigenous communities (Fung 2005:237);
- (2) Their *rite of passage* as sacred and should be valued in themselves;
- (3) Their *rituals are efficacious* insofar they bring about the desired good for the individuals and the community as a whole.

Furthermore, I have explained the need for six additional principles of re-valuation and evaluation:

- (1) Creation is good and suffused with the splendor of God's presence. So is the multiple worlds of indigenous cultures;
- (2) God in the person of Jesus has come to bring healing to the world, including the cultures and belief-systems of indigenous peoples;

- (3) God has created all persons and things good and they are pleasing in God's sight. So too are the shamans who ritualizes the healing and deliverance;
- (4) Through the resurrection, God's effort becomes insurmountable and God brings about wholeness and fullness of life to creation and humankind. God can do the same through indigenous healing rituals;
- (5) All of Creation is suffused with God's life-giving and life-sustaining Spirit and the indigenous cultures and belief-systems too;
- (6) Indigenous shamans who ritualize based on the belief-systems are best evaluated according to the gospel injunction of the sound tree that produces good fruits.

It is my contention that the relevancy of indigenous shamanism and shamans depend to a large extent on the presuppositions and the principles supporting the criteria of re-valuation and evaluation. Without enunciating such fundamentals, we will fall back on the age-old criteria and declare indigenous shamanism and shamans at best a system of superstitions or at worst, satanic.

4. RELEVANCE TO THE MANY RELIGIONS

Indigenous shamanism and the existential symbols of shamans have survived the hegemonic onslaught of modernity. The perennial existence of indigenous shamanism and shamans ought to pose the many religions a question regarding their relevance rather than irrelevance. As to how indigenous shamanism is relevant must be further explicitated in terms of its contribution to humankind's growing understanding of who we are - *anthropos* "im-planetted" in the *cosmos*.

The teachings of the major religions have given us insights that human beings are more than material beings. We are in fact spirits or spiritual beings who have the ability to go beyond our material world. This capacity is amply demonstrated by the power of human mind to imagine and visualize in times of when we are in meditation, and the human heart to intuit and empathize with those who suffers and yearns for peace. These are the abilities that enable us to go beyond who we are, even though our human eyes do not see how these human faculties are at work.

Nevertheless, the spirit-world that the shamans have introduced to the human world continues to pose a lasting challenge to humankind. In a world where virtual reality, science and technology have such dominance over our lives, are we prepared to ask questions like: If humans are spirits, are we open enough to wonder if life is more than what we see? In other word, is life merely one-dimensional? Are we prepared to rethink whether the material world is situated within a web of relationships that constitute an organic whole that is at once multiple because it has many layers? Besides, is reasoning or rationality the only yardstick in life? What about the collective experiences of the Muruts and the many religious believers of the dominant cultures of such worlds?

The shamans have taught us a basic truth about who we are as human beings (*anthropos*) - we are complex and wholesome beings, a notion that I believe subverts the mere rational notion that we are just material beings. Human beings have senses that enable us to go beyond ourselves. In other words, we have a yearning (call it an indefinite openness to the infinite) to want to explore the sacred mysteries of life, even to experience the different worlds beyond the material and physical world. Human beings live in a web of relationship that connects the everyday world of activity and events (happening in the physical/material world) with the world filled with peace, joy and a clear, a sense of awe and wonder before the beauty of creation as we realize gradually that we are really an integral part of the whole (the spiritual or transcendental world). We too are beings in which both the spiritual world and the physical worlds are held together inside of us so that we humans are truly a unified whole. As a wholesome being, there is a need to return to the liminal state when one comes face to face with the mysteries of the complex universe and grow in the sense of awe and wonder. It is in the constant return to this state of liminality that the *anthropos* grows in a state of openness to experience the transcendence even though all humans are caught up with the everyday affairs of our world. The end-goal is to

become an *anthropos* whose daily rhythmic life is punctuated with moments of transcendence and attained the lofty vision that *anthropos* is indeed a “bodi-fied” spirit in earth space and time.

Shamans also taught us invaluable lessons about the world we live in (the *cosmos*). Many believers of the dominant cultures subscribe to the world of the good/evil spirits in the world that we live in, including the saints and angels living in another dimension of the *cosmos*, the dimension of God. In our midst, we have heard of or encountered persons who can and have criss-crossed the many worlds in this *cosmos* because they have the ‘know how’ to do so. Some are gifted to see the spirits of the departed and the spirits of the supernatural worlds though many of us do not see them. To the shamans who have eyes to see beyond the material world, the unseen worlds is real and true because they can collaborate with the spirits to improve the well-being of the people they live with.

The ultimate truth that the renowned shamans introduce to us is: Life is a whole, a network of relationships that is all linked, rather than mere parts that are disjointed. Life in its highest form, as taught by the shamans, consists in experiencing such ability to go beyond oneself and the material world we live in. In going beyond our physical self, and criss-crossing into the many worlds, we begin to have glimpses of how sacred the mysteries of life and how all aspects of life, including the mundane world with its everyday happenings, are part of the sacred mysteries of life. Perhaps, as the shamans have shown, all human beings have the innate capacity to arrive at a fuller understanding about who we are and what is this awe-inspiring universe that we live in. This is the truth that the reputable shamans stood for and this truth has withstood the test of time and continued to challenge and subvert the notion we and the world are just material.

The world is the place by which we human beings come to experience and know that the mysteries of life are already within us and around us even though they are beyond space and time. Many of us have a sense of the mysteries ‘beyond.’ It is a start. We need to begin to have further glimpses and understand that the ‘beyond’ is bordering on a sense that is no space and time beyond, best explained as ‘the eternal’ or ‘eternity.’ That which is eternal has a bearing on the everyday happenings of life, for we soon realize what comes to an end in time and space, actually lives on for ever. There is life now, and there is life after life.

The one tiny step that each one of us can take is to be open and allow ourselves to be pleasantly surprised by the awesome wonders that the mysteries of life have installed for all of us. In the end, we may come one full circle to discover the sacred mysteries of life is part of us, for humans are in time and in space, yet outside of space and time, for we are indeed spirits. As a composite being of human-spirit, we are a mystery unto ourselves. We know we cannot fully fathom who we are. There is an abysmal depth in all of us. That gives us a sense that we not just sacred but eternal as well.

The multiple worlds expounded by indigenous shamanism subverts the worldview of scientific rationality that the world is one-dimensional in that the world is just material and therefore what we see is what we get. Supported by this rationality, cultural globalization continues to unleash hegemonic forces of erasure that premised on collapsing the *many into one* – there is only one laudable culture and valid rationality. However, indigenous shamanism poses a resistant counterculture by the keeping afloat a radically subversive paradigm that there are *many in one* cosmos.

The articulation of such an understanding in the field of anthropology and cosmology would not have been possible in the absence of the indigenous traditions whose existence has facilitated the intercultural and interreligious encounter in academic scholarship. The mere fact of indigenous shamanism as a contributive dialogue partner already underlines its relevance in the field of the production of knowledge which enriches humankind’s understanding of the meaning of life as *anthropos* in the *cosmos*.

CONCLUSION

In an era when modernity has unevenly impacted human civilization, flattening and erasure of the local cultures seems to be the rule of the day rather than the exception. This trend impinges on the many religions a social responsibility to exercise a humble and sensitive respect of the ‘religio-cultural Other’ in order to foreground the ethical principle of “*love of the other as we love ourselves.*” Such a principle has to be the basis

for a practice of interactive dialogue that is grounded on sustained field research in which the field experiences and narratives are critically reflected upon in the light of the teachings of the many religions. This practice will enable the many religions to be convinced of the relevancy of the indigenous beliefs and be enriched by the shamanic traditions and institutions. Only a mutual enrichment enables some of the believers and leaders of the many religions to lend themselves to the defense and promotion of the collective rights of indigenous peoples to their communal cultural heritage which is the constitutive source of their cultural identity and sustainability as indigenous communities in the modern world.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Recently a two-volume encyclopaedia of world beliefs, Practices and Culture have been published by ABC-CLIO, Inc., at Santa Barbara, California, USA, in 2004.

ⁱⁱ In Asia due emphasis is given to the importance of experiences which becomes the *locus* from which theories or conceptual frameworks are generated.

ⁱⁱⁱ In order to foreground the voice of the shaman, the text is narrated as a dialogue.

^{iv} I began my field research among an indigenous people of Sabah (former British North Borneo) known as the Muruts, a name which literally means 'hill people' from 1999 till 2006 during which I lived for a period from 5 to 14 days in the village.

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