



Shamanism, Dreaming, Healing: Some Case Illustrations

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Abstract: This paper explores shamanism in relation to dreams and psychological healing in contemporary practice from the perspective of psychology. Traditionally, shamans perform healing rituals on community members, who are afflicted with physical or psychological illness. This paper proposes that ordinary people, that is, not designated shamans, may be able to learn a shamanic healing technique that they can use to produce their own healing; this shamanic technique uses dreams and dreamwork or dream interpretation to effect healing and personal growth. The objective of this paper was to describe the application of a shamanic technique of dreaming and dreamwork and its capacity for the psychological healing of dreamers through case illustrations of dream interpretations done by young Filipino adults on their own dreams; specifically, the following research questions are addressed: the shamanic themes in the dreamwork of Filipino young adults; and the impact of their dreamwork on their lives. Using a descriptive, qualitative research approach, three female young adults, ages 21 – 24, were interviewed pertaining to their experience of working on their dreams. Using thematic analysis, the results showed dreamwork themes of personal transformation, and emotional healing. Findings showed a positive impact of the dreamwork in their personal, social and work domains in terms of increased self-confidence, meaningful work, emotional well-being. These findings are discussed in relation to shamanism, and Filipino indigenous concepts of spirituality and psychology. The findings of this paper have implications on the mental health of Filipino young adults.

Key Words: shamanism; dreams; dreamwork; psychological healing

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a concern in contemporary times when individuals are confronted by rapid societal changes such as shifts in the traditional family structure, migration, and technology aside from the usual demands of daily living. For young adults transitioning from college to adult life, challenges to their mental health may arise as they establish a career, on one hand, and develop relationships that may lead to marriage and family, on the other. When they experience difficulties and setbacks, they sometimes feel anxious or depressed. These feelings may be normal and short-lived reactions; however, prolonged negative affect and dissatisfaction affect one's well-being and may lead to mental illness. Access to mental health services is not readily available due to financial constraints or negative attitudes about professional help-seeking. Thus, non-conventional healing methods may be in order.

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In traditional societies, there are designated healers in a community, referred to as shamans, who help members afflicted physically, mentally or spiritually. Shamans, thus, take care of the physical and mental health needs of members of their communities. Shamanism is considered to be a powerful, ancient spiritual practice that is being revitalized to for various kinds of healing as well as human adaptation (Winkelman, 2009).

In a collectivistic society such as the Philippines, there are various sources of social support (family members, friends, religious elders) that young adults can tap when they are dealing with their problems; psychological healing for deep-seated problems, however, is generally provided by mental health professionals. Given the constraints in accessing mental health services, is it possible to tap into the traditional healing system of shamanism as a mental health training for young adults? This paper attempts to study dreams and dreamwork (that is, dream interpretation) as a shamanic healing technique that young adults can apply themselves to improve their mental health.

Stanley Krippner (2009), an eminent psychologist and researcher on dream research and shamanism, echoes the words of a shaman in South America: "Anyone who dreams partakes in a bit of shamanism." Krippner used the term "inner shaman" to acknowledge that any ordinary person can tap into shamanic processes to benefit one's self and even others. I extend this notion of an inner shaman to dreamwork as a specific shamanic technique and paraphrase thus: anyone who can do dreamwork can partake of shamanic healing. In these contemporary times when people at any age and stage in life do experience stressors, pain and suffering (e.g., anxiety and depression), learning a healing technique that is grounded in traditional healing practices and supported by psychological science can help people to avert personal crises and be instrumental to their own healing, growth and self-mastery; in turn, they will develop a personal sense of power to affect their environment through their interactions and relationships. Hence, to paraphrase Bulatao (in Mercado, 1988) when he related shamanism with Christianity, this integrated view is shamanism in contemporary clothes.

1.1 Shamanism

Shamanism is usually found in indigenous groups belonging to traditional societies all over the world such as Asia, Oceania and the Americas. Anthropologists and religion and spirituality researchers have been studying shamans and their shamanic practices. Mircea Eliade (1972) defined shamanism as a "technique in ecstasy," (p. 4) pertaining to trance or altered states of consciousness that allow shamans, who are the "elect" in their community, to perform ritual healing for community members who are afflicted with illnesses. Although Eliade derived the term "shaman" and his subsequent description of shamanism in Siberia and Central Asia, these features of shamanism generally apply to shamans in Central and North Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, North and South America.

Laughlin and Rock (2014) provide a definition of a shaman based on anthropological studies of shamans from different parts of the world.

"The *shaman*, per se, is a person who is recognized by members of a group as performing a positive social role (healer, visionary, priest, spiritual guide, oneirocritic, etc.) based upon their mastery of altered states of consciousness during which they travel to, communicate with, or otherwise attain useful information from and about the spirit world." (pp. 234-235)

From the shaman's perspective, illness points to a fragmentation, disconnection or imbalance that results in a loss of power of the individual; power refers to the power of Spirit that is present in all things, whether animate or inanimate. Psychologically speaking, loss of power can result from negative life experiences (e.g., trauma, addiction, poor self-esteem, etc.). Health is about wholeness, connection and balance; thus, the restoration of power to the individual (Wooten, 2007).

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Demeterio (cited in Mercado, 1988) noted common features between Philippine shamanism and some Southeast Asian countries. Likewise, Mercado (1988) in studying shamans or folk healers, particularly the *albularyo*, identified similar features of shamanism in Philippine folk healers, which are: a) initiation or call to shamanism is done through hereditary transmission or spontaneous vocation; b) the trance, which is one of the two kinds of teachings (ecstatic, e.g., dreams, trance and traditional); c) the spirit guide that gives power and provides teaching and advice; d) esoteric language, that is, a secret language; e) classification of diseases into those that are naturally and supernaturally caused; and f) healing procedures (power, and power objects) and beliefs (i.e., spirits and the notion of soul).

Mercado (1988) noted the use of the term *babaylan* in pre-colonial times in referring to folk healers or shamans, and that there were more female *babaylan* back then. Mendoza-Strobel (2010) describes the multiple roles and functions of the *babaylan* in the community as “indigenous, shaman, healer, priestess, ritualist, herb doctor, village therapist, diviner, mediator between ordinary and non-ordinary realms of reality” (p. 3). Salazar (2001) considered the *babaylan* as a “specialist in the fields of culture, religion, medicine.”

1.2 Dreamwork and healing

The features of shamanism that relate to this paper are the ecstatic teaching through dreams, the special language of dreams (that is, image, metaphor, symbol), and the psychological healing process of dreamwork. Dreaming has a central role in shamanism. Harner (in Laughlin & Rock, 2014) identified the major elements of shamanism that relate to dreaming and dream interpretation, as follows: a) dreams are real, they belong to another dimension of reality; b) shamans seek guidance from dreams regarding causes and cures for a patient’s sickness; c) soul journeying occurs in dreams; d) shamans perform dream interpretation by looking at the meaning of symbolic elements in terms of the group’s cosmology; e) shamans can control dreams and visions; f) shamans receive their calling through dreams; g) dreaming is a transpersonal experience that affects ego development.

In studying shamans and their dream systems, Krippner drew on his extensive fieldwork with shamans, specifically 16 Native American cultural groups, and compared their dream systems based on the Ullman-Zimmerman model to propose a 10-facet model of shamanic dream system (Krippner & Thompson, 1996). This 10-facet model addresses the following questions or facets that are similarly used to examine the dream systems of Freud and Jung: 1) function of dreaming (serves as sources of power, cultural knowledge, and personal information); 2) motivation to recall dreams? (gain power and knowledge); 3) source of dreams (the spirit world); 4) means for dreams to convey meanings (through stories and images); 5) universality of dream meanings; 6) role of life situation in dreams (dreamer’s waking life situation reflected in dreams as well as dreams affecting life situations); 7) approaches used to work with dreams (induced dreams and acting out and sharing the dream, consultation with shamans); 8) role of the dreamworker (shamans, elders as well as dreamers themselves can work with dreams); 9) role of dreaming in the dreamer’s culture (valuable role to community members and to shaman’s vocation); and 10) view of anomalous and visionary dreams (visionary dreams may contain power or information beneficial to the community).

As an alternative to conventional verbal psychotherapy, Wooten (2007) tapped into the spiritual practices of shamanism to develop the shamanic journey experiential technique and presented its effectiveness in a case example: psychological healing for the presented client came about when an integrated reconnection has occurred in the self, others and a higher power.

Drawing from the traditional healing practice of shamanic dreamwork to empower young people in need of enhancing their mental health by becoming their own inner shamans will revitalize the spiritual practice of shamanism and find relevance in contemporary times. The objective of this paper is to describe the application of a shamanic technique of dreamwork and its capacity for psychological healing of dreamers. The following

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research questions are addressed: a) What are the shamanic themes in the dreamwork of Filipino young adults?
b) What is the impact of the dreamwork in the lives of these Filipino young adults?

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that describes the experiences of young adults in doing dreamwork using a semi-structured interview. The respondents were recruited based on the following inclusion criteria: a) graduate student, aged 21 and above; b) attendance to the dreamwork seminar conducted by the researcher; c) performed independent dreamwork on one's own dream. Three female psychology graduate students, aged 21 to 24, volunteered to participate in the study after the researcher issued an invitation for participation to the class. Informed consent was obtained. They were assured of strict confidentiality given the personal nature of the interview data. The interviews were transcribed. A thematic analysis was done to analyze the data and identify themes.

The researcher conducted a 1.5-hour dreamwork seminar to a psychology graduate class that consisted of 7 female and 2 male students. Students were asked to bring a written dream report with which they will do dreamwork. A Jungian-oriented dreamwork approach combined with aspects of the Krippner shamanic dreamwork model was taught to the students, specifically: situating the dream in one's waking life context, association of dream elements or images, imaginative technique (drawing the dream images or scenes; active imagination); and asking questions about the dream; amplification technique (cultural, archetypal levels); and dreamwork ritual.

Each interview with the respondent lasted an average of 40 minutes and was conducted in a private room in the university at the end of the term. Each respondent brought their written dream report, talked about their dreamwork experiences to understand the meaning of their dreams and how the dreamwork affected their waking lives. The researcher thanked them at the end of the interview but did not give course credit for their participation in the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The case illustrations presented below consist of the dream report, the dreamwork, and the impact of the dreamwork. The respondents are assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

3.1 *The Case of Delia, 21 years old*

Dream. "I'm a bank teller. A man in a clown costume declares a bank robbery. He points a gun at me. I am very afraid. I thought, I'm too young to die, I haven't done anything with my life yet. Then the clown robber shoots at me. But instead of bullets, orange juice squirts out of the gun."

Life situation. Delia is an introvert who has been feeling dissatisfied with her shyness and insecurities since college. It affects many aspects of her life: work, graduate studies and social relationships. She is afraid of rejection, criticism and ridicule so she keeps to herself at work, is quiet in class, and is reserved with acquaintances. She has few friends and keep close ties with her family. Now that she has graduated from college, she wants to break out of her shell but her shyness has become a habit and protected her socially and emotionally.

Dreamwork. Delia explored the meaning of her dream by looking at various associations on these dream images: bank teller, clown, gun, and orange juice. She focused on the contrast between the extroversion of a clown and her introversion as a bank teller who is safe behind the counter. She admits, "*Gusto ko rin maging*

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sociable, like a clown." A gun is generally seen as a threatening weapon but in this dream, she saw it as a "wake-up call" in making her realize the importance of doing something with her life. She associated the orange juice as "juices" or vitality of life ("I need to add color in my life. I'm too mousy.").

From her dream and the dreamwork, Delia realized that she wants to be sociable and she has to start now to have a more satisfying life. She knew that as an introvert, she will do this "in baby steps by greeting people 'good morning' and smiling at them." After the dreamwork, she started taking these small steps at work and received favorable responses from her colleagues; this reinforced her to chat with them and join them at lunch when invited. Thus, "nadevelop yung self-confidence ko," and she felt an increased satisfaction and well-being.

3.2 The Case of Lalaine, 24 years old

Dream. "I am riding a jeep with other passengers. All of a sudden, a man across from me pulls out a knife and shouts, "Hold up 'to!" I reluctantly give him my small red handbag. He opens it and pours out the contents on the floor of the jeep. Out came my lipstick, pen, a few coins. I am surprised that's all I have in my bag.

Life situation. Lalaine was working as a customer service staff in a call center company for two years and she felt stuck in this job that she did not like because of the financial benefits. She is able to help her family and her siblings with her salary but she feels there's no deeper meaning in this work for her self. Her life has no clear sense of direction.

Dreamwork. Lalaine drew her dream in four storyboard panels: her dream ego riding in a jeep, the robber's hand with a knife and the bubble "Hold up to!", giving her red handbag to the robber, her open handbag with the poured out contents of lipstick, pen and some coins. The visuals allowed her to look closely at the salient elements of her dream and made her pose the following questions: a) Where is she going when she rode the jeep? b) What is holding her up from reaching her destination? c) Why is the robber using a knife instead of a gun and what did the knife mean? d) Why is her bag small and color red? e) What did the specific contents of her bag mean? f) Why was she carrying very few things in her bag?

She associated on the dream images and reflected on her dream and her life. Just like in her dream of riding a jeep without knowing where she's going, she felt like she was living her life by just going through the motions of making a living without having a clear goal or direction. Her worry about providing for her family was preventing her from having a personal vision for her own future; the knife image challenged her to sharply discern her own needs and values. She viewed the handbag and some of its contents as representative of her identity, and realized that she overemphasized the importance of the external aspects of life ("yung lipstick yung physical appearance, kung ano ang tingin ng ibang tao sa akin...yung coins about material needs and a job"). But the pen image pointed to another value that is important to her ("my love for books, knowledge, learning. *Kaya nga nasa grad school ako.*").

Lalaine's dreamwork allowed her to appreciate the metaphors of her dream as an aid in clarifying and defining her identity ("My identity, yung values ko, yung actions ko, trabaho ko, ano yung meaningful sa akin, that's my bag that I carry in my life, in the world."). She found the red color of the handbag image as symbolic of multiple meanings: blood, life, joy in living, good luck, danger; as such, she acknowledges that her identity should allow her to take moderate risks to live a full life according to her values.

Her realizations from her dreamwork translated into the following actions: daily journaling, attending a weekend spiritual retreat two months after the dreamwork; and recording her expenses to account and manage her monthly expenditures and family commitments. She discovered that she wanted to become a high school guidance counselor. Thus, she made major changes in her life: shifting into another graduate program on guidance and counseling; and quitting her customer service job and getting a job as a junior staff in a high

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school guidance office. Her clear self-definition gave her a sense of direction and purpose as well as the support of her family.

3.3 *The Case of Francine, 22 years old*

Dream. "I'm in the emergency room. My vitals are crashing. From the bed, I see my dead grandmother floating above me. My spirit rises from my body to go to her and hug her. I'm crying and I beg her to take me with her. She looks at me with so much love and tells me that it's not yet my time to die. She tells me to go back and that she'll always look after me. Then my spirit goes back to my body on the hospital bed. I wake up crying."

Life situation. Francine's grandmother had died about three months before her dream. She was having difficulty accepting the death of her grandmother and letting go. She was raised by her grandmother since she was 8 years old because her single mother was working overseas. She was very close to her and received a lot of affection and guidance from her. Her death made her feel like she lost her anchor in life; her grief is making her feel depressed. She couldn't concentrate well on her job and was avoiding the company of friends.

Francine's dreamwork involved the following: associating on the meaning of her grandmother and her death ("*Siya iyong security blanket ko eh. Pag malungkot, may problema, nawawala kapag kausap ko siya...pero nawala yun, so mag-isa na lang ako, mahirap...*"); reflecting on the legacy of her grandmother to her ("*iyong pagmamahal at pag-aaruga, guidance and optimism in facing problems.*"); drawing on the Filipino cultural notion of actual communication with the dead through dreams ("I really believe that my lola sent me a message from the other side *kasi nakikita niya siguro* that I couldn't let go").

Her dream and the dreamwork made her realize the following: she can let go of the physical presence of her grandmother but will always feel connected with her spiritually; she possessed strengths and values nurtured by her grandmother that will allow her to attain her life goals. Healing from her dreamwork experience happened with her acceptance of her grandmother's death and insight into her own capacities as an individual; thus, her feelings of depression lifted.

The themes of the dreams, the dreamwork, and the impact of the dreamwork are presented below. The themes of the respondents' dreams involved anxiety about changing an aspect of the self (Delia, Lalaine), and grief over the loss of a loved one (Francine). The dreams of Delia and Lalaine both contained the element of robbery that represents their anxiety in the perceived threat over making personal changes in themselves. In the case of Delia, she needed to change her personality in the social sphere of work and relationships, whereas Lalaine needed to clarify her identity to set a direction in her work and life. Francine's dream explicitly involved working through her grief over the death of her grandmother.

The shamanic elements in the dreamwork of the respondents were given focus in this study and the themes that were elicited are the following: personal transformation (Delia, Lalaine), and healing (Francine). Delia and Lalaine experienced personal dissatisfaction with their old selves, and the dreamwork facilitated a process of psychologically opening up to new ways of being in the world that resulted in psychological change in their personality and identity respectively. Francine's experience of loss through her grandmother's death disrupted her world and destabilized her emotions and the dreamwork facilitated a process of healing through acceptance of her loss and finding her own strength.

Findings showed that the dreamwork of the respondents had a positive impact on their lives in personal, social and work domains, and generated a sense of well-being. Delia's sociable behavior gave her increased self-confidence at work and with her relationships; thus, making her feel more satisfied with herself. Lalaine's definition of her identity impacted on her choice of work and career; a meaningful work gave her a sense of

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satisfaction in her life. Francine's acceptance of her grandmother's death and spiritual connection with her led to a renewed confidence in her self and emotional well-being.

Similar to the initiatory and healing processes that shamans undergo in their calling, Delia and Lalaine experienced psychological suffering in their self-dissatisfaction that required dying to the old self or ego in order for a new self to emerge that can rise to the challenges of the adult world of work and relationships. The death of Francine's grandmother was an initiatory experience of a disruption through loss; she had to let go of her old self as a loved and protected grandchild by establishing a different connection with her grandmother as a spirit and to her new self as an adult who can find her own power to care for her own self as she deals with adult challenges without the physical presence of her grandmother.

From a shamanistic perspective, individuals can experience a psychological loss of power through negative life experiences or wounding (Wooten, 2009), disconnection to self, others, spirit or higher power and culture. Young adults who are transitioning from the safety and protection of stable structures (school, family, society) to more responsibilities and challenges may be prone to disruptions, thus, experiencing a loss of power in terms of lack of mastery of self and the world, loss of vitality, growth and well-being. A shamanic way to restore power to suffering individuals is to facilitate a shift in consciousness (from ordinary to non-ordinary states) to connect to a source of healing. As an inner shaman, the respondents in this study were able to have a subtle shift in consciousness and expanded their perspectives; this was done by tapping into a different source of wisdom—their dreams, and undergoing a shamanic-oriented dreamwork process that continues the initiation encountered in their concerns or suffering. Francine's dream allowed her to enter another dimension of reality where she could feel the presence of the spirit of her deceased grandmother in order to find a new connection with her beyond the physical plane of existence.

The shamanic healing from the dreamwork process results in the emergence of a new self, which is, psychologically and spiritually, a deeply connected self. This is a therapeutic work that is done outside of the conventional psychotherapy but nonetheless can have a powerful effect on different areas of an individual's life. Wooten (2007) speaks of this healing in terms of connection and health: "This reconnection is reparation of relatedness to self, to others, and to a presence greater than the isolated ego." (p. 8).

The capacity of individuals to do inner shaman dreamwork in the Philippine context can be contextualized and understood using indigenous psychology and spirituality. The indigenous concepts of *loob* (inner self/shared humanity, Alejo, 1990) and *kapwa* (shared identity, Enriquez, 1993) shape one's perceptions, reality and connection to others (Mendoza-Strobel, 2010). According to Alejo (1990), *loob* consists of consciousness (*abot-malay*) that provides interconnection for the self, a deep feeling or empathy (*abot-dama*) and valuing of the interconnections with the self, world and God, and the will to give meaning and strength to life struggles (*abot-kaya*) (Mendoza-Strobel, 2010). Drawing from the indigenous spirituality of the *babaylan*, tapping into one's ability to do self-healing through dreamwork is to reclaim and revitalize the *babaylan* spirit of healing for contemporary times; this will heal the disconnection of the self from others, nature, spirit.

This paper has shown how a shamanic-oriented dreamwork technique can be used for enhancing the mental health and well-being of young adults. The findings of the study, however, are limited by the recruitment of a small, self-selected sample of graduate students who are familiar with the psychological processes of therapeutic healing.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, the dreamwork themes of personal transformation, and emotional healing revealed elements similar to the process of psychological change and healing in shamanic work. The dreamwork had a positive impact in personal, social and work domains. Future research directions can consider a male young adult

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sample, and incorporate other shamanic practices.

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