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Emergence of a Contemporary Shaman: A Case Study of Possession in the Dojo

This case study illustrates the emergence of a shaman in a contemporary 20th century context. It concerns a woman, born in Japan but living in the United States, who experienced a calling to return to the shamanic traditions of her native country. Without any formal training, she drew upon memories from her unconscious and enacted rituals from her ancestors. I will discuss this case study from four perspectives:

- 1. Her experience itself, a phenomenological view**
- 2. Her experience as viewed by a diagnostician working within the DSM-III-R**
- 3. Her experience as viewed by a transpersonally-oriented clinician**
- 4. Her experience as viewed by an anthropologist**

1. Her experience itself, a phenomenological perspective

The following account of Katsumi's experience is taken, with her permission, from a term paper she wrote for my class in psychopathology. She considered this experience to be a psychotic episode (although we shall see that it was not) and a turning point in her life. At the time, some 8 years ago, she was a housewife, student, and also a fashion model. During a modeling assignment at a nearby Naval Base, she met a man named Kyle:

I will never forget the first words Kyle spoke to me: "I've never seen such a strong orange aura around a person. Do you practice any spiritual discipline?"

She initially considered this to be a clumsy sexual advance, the type that models frequently encounter:

I neither believed him, nor took him seriously. In fact, I completely ignored him, and walked toward the door.

As I was leaving, he spoke again "You are from Fukushima Prefecture , and you are the oldest of two..." I stopped. Not only was I surprised, but now I was extremely curious as to how this stranger knew so much about me. I agreed to talk with Kyle the next day.

At a coffee shop, Kyle told Katsumi that he and his "brother" Erik Suto (not bothers by birth but they had trained together and received their black belts at the same time) ran a dojo (a martial arts studio) together in Los Angeles. Erik taught Suto Ninjutsu, a black martial art. Suto Ninjutsu traditionally was taught only within a family, passed down from generation to generation. It was kept secret from the general public because of its merciless nature.

Erik Suto had been born in Hawaii, but his ancestors are from Japan. He was well-trained in this discipline from his father,

but he wanted to go to Japan to learn the true secret of Suto Ninjutsu from his ancestors. Kyle stated that Erik needed someone who could speak English and Japanese to travel there with him, and then proceeded to give Katsumi several reasons why he thought that she should be the one to accompany Erik:

First, her aura indicated extraordinary ability for locating Erik's ancestors. Second, Kyle's intuition was that she was from the same area, Fukushima Prefecture. Third, his intuition was that her ancestors and Erik's were related.

After Kyle finished, Katsumi thought to herself: "relationship to Erik's ancestors...What the hell is he talking about?" She was also angry, feeling that he was ordering her to do this. "I just wanted to forget the whole incident."

However, a couple of months later, she was awakened by a bizarre dream in which Erik Suto's address and phone number were written in blood. In addition, Katsumi noticed that the light was on in the bathroom, which struck her as very strange since she was sure that she had turned it off before going to bed.

The very next day, she called Kyle and told him about this dream. He simply said, "Are you ready now to meet my brother Erik?" She agreed and arranged to fly to LA. When she entered the dojo, she reports sensing a vague, undefinable energy in the place. Erik greeted me with a big smile, handed her a cup of green tea, and said, "We are having a meditation practice for the black-belt students tonight. Would you like to attend?"

Later that evening, she returned to the dojo and sat down quietly in the corner. Erik and five black belt student students were sitting in a circle around a small bamboo tree in a pot and some candles. Katsumi writes:

White shadows were moving across the backs of the students, shadows that seemed alive. Then I started to shake. Suddenly, a white shadowy figure appeared in front of me and demanded, "Why are you here?" I was frozen with fear. Immediately after that question, another smaller and thinner figure appeared, and ordered, "Leave her alone!" All the while this was happening, the students sat silently in meditation, as if they saw or heard nothing.

Afterwards, she asked Erik if he had felt anything on his back. He answered,

Yes, the white shadows were spirits who had been living in the dojo for some time. They had been attacking the students. Some had been bitten while they slept; one student showed me teeth marks on his shoulder! Other students had been kicked in the stomach during the day. Hearing all this, after my own strange experience was more than I could bear. Enough! I just wanted to get out of there immediately. I left, vowing never to return to that weird place.

Yet, a month later, she experienced a strong urge to go back to the dojo and decided to return. She describes feeling as if she had some definite purpose in mind. In fact, she felt that she had no choice but to follow her intuition. When she arrived in LA, she went right to the dojo to see Erik:

I told him that his dojo was in danger of being taken over by an evil spirit, and warned him that he must do something about it, or the dojo would eventually be destroyed. This would mean the disappearance of the Suto family tradition.

As I spoke to Erik, I experienced a strange phenomenon. I felt as though my words were monitored, carefully controlled by some separate entity within me. I was not sure who was actually speaking to Erik!

At this point in her written account, she begins to use 'I' to indicate when the "entity" was speaking, and I (without quotation marks) to refer to herself.

Erik replied that he knew about the danger, and that was why he needed Katsumi to go to Japan to help him find his ancestors. Katsumi was the only person who could help him save his family tradition. Going to Japan was out of the question. However, Katsumi was struck by the whole situation. Kyle had been right. Erik's ancestors came from exactly the same area, Aizuwakamatsu, as her own. Perhaps Kyle was also right that her ancestors and Erik's were related. In addition, she notes:

My ancestors were also Ninjya, who practiced the Ninjutsu as well. I remember when I was a little girl, my grandfather showing me some of the tools and weapons which were specially made for Ninjya. They were old and rusted. But I remember my grandfather's proud face.

The next morning, she continues, 'I' explained to Erik what was wrong with his dojo. There was a mask of Tengu hanging from the wall. Tengu is a popular figure in Japanese mythology who is half hawk (with beady eyes, wings and a beak), and half man (with a human body, arms and legs). Erik stated that the Tengu mask was a symbol for his family's spirit. Katsumi, speaking as 'I', told him a story about Tengu in which Tengu became an evil spirit for a man and his family. 'I' then stated that Tengu had become an evil spirit for Erik as well, and was causing the problems in the dojo.

'I' said to Erik, "Your spirit is too weak to encounter Tengu's evil spirit right now. You need some other spirit to help you." Erik then stated, "So, if you are not willing to go to Japan, I guess I must take a chance by facing the evil spirit alone." 'I' said to him, "Erik, it is too dangerous. The spirit can destroy your spirit and you will experience physical death." Erik said, "I am ready to die to save my family tradition."

This ended their conversation. She went to sleep in the office right next to the dojo with seven of the martial arts students. Later that night, Katsumi conducted a series of three rituals, or rather, in her experience, they were conducted by 'I'.

'I' was awakened by my own rapid heartbeat at about 3:00 a.m.. As 'I' was getting up, one of the black belt students was waking up for the same reason. As soon as he got up, 'I' ordered him to wake the rest of the students and line up in the dojo. The rest of the students got up and each of them

grabbed a sword and went into the dojo without saying a word. Their actions and behavior were automatic without 'me' giving further instructions to them. They lined up and waited for 'me.' 'I' said, "Good. I have a gift for each one of you. Now you may sit and wait your turn." 'I' sat down on a tatami mat and the first student sat down right across from 'me.' 'I' told him to put his hands up as 'I' put 'my' own hands up right against his hands but not touching his hands. Then, 'I' gave him a *kiai*, which is a Japanese way of shouting. 'I' gave all the students a *kiai* except one who was a beginner student.

While 'I' was going through the ceremony, a big opening was created in the air in the dojo, like being in the center of a typhoon. As the ceremony progressed, the opening got bigger with tremendous air movement around it. The opening finally formed a very long tube and it looked like a tunnel, a tunnel which directly connected the dojo in the Los Angeles with a place in Japan. The particular place was Aizuwakamatsu where Erik Suto's and my ancestors lived.

I also witnessed the 'I' and saw clearly what she looked like in my mind. She was a young woman who lived in a little village in Aizuwakamatsu about 300 years ago. She possessed a mysterious healing power and healed many people in the village. She was a beautiful woman who had extremely smooth and white skin. Village people called her "Aodaisho Onna (snake woman)." Aodaisho is a very rare type of snake which lived in a small area of Aizuwakamatsu and was believed by many people to be the servant of God. The snake was said to have a beautiful long smooth blue-white body that glowed in the dark.

When this ritual was completed, she proceeded to conduct the second and third rituals.

'I' then performed a tea ceremony. A student brought one long square table to the middle of the huge dojo. There were five candles on it and 'I' lighted them. 'I' poured a cup of tea for Erik first. Then 'I' poured the tea for the rest of the students. After the tea ceremony was over, 'I' asked all the students to begin meditating and wait for the last ceremony.

'I' asked Erik and a couple of black belt students to bring me a brush, a piece of rice paper, sand tray, three different sizes of tiny rocks and three needles for the final ritual, even though I did not know what it was to be. 'I' sat in front of the table and the final ceremony began. 'I' laid out three rocks in a triangular form on the sand in a tray. Then, 'I' closed my eyes and went into a deep meditation. I don't remember how long 'I' meditated, but would guess it was about 20 to 30 minutes. Then 'I' took a needle and stuck the needle into a vein in my arm. The blood began to drip from my arm and 'I' collected it in a small bowl. Then, 'I' took the needle out from my arm and placed it under one of the rocks saying, "This is the symbol of peace. Peace within." Then, 'I' took the second needle in my hand and did the same. 'I' placed the second needle under the second rock saying, "This is the symbol of love. Love within." Finally, 'I' placed the third needle in my hand and stuck a vein. 'My' final words were, "This is the symbol of life. Life within."

After I placed the last needle under the third rock, the final part of the ceremony began. 'I' dipped a brush into a bowl of my own blood and began drawing some words on rice paper as in Japanese brush painting. Those words were the same words used in the ceremony: peace, love and life. After 'I' finished drawing, 'I' held the rice paper up and showed it to all the students. Then 'I' put it back on the table and showed final gratitude and respect by bowing toward all the students before leaving the dojo.

At the conclusion of the three rituals, Erik said, "Thank you Katsumi. I really appreciate what you did for us and for the dojo." Upon hearing this, she gives a "textbook" description of depersonalization (more about this later):

I remember feeling very strange because I did not feel the person was me. While I was going through the ceremonies, I felt as if I was watching myself in a movie. The strangest thing I experienced during the ceremonies was that the person who was supposed to be me, was not really me but someone else who had a a body like me and a voice like me. I felt as if some ancient being had taken my body and had came to life during the ceremony and left important messages as gifts to the students.

Commentary on the phenomenological account

The rituals Katsumi conducted have strong parallels with ancient Japanese shamanic healing traditions. The *kiai* ritual is documented in The Shamanic Healer: The Healing World of Ikuko Osumi and the Traditional Art of Seiki-Jutsu by Ikuko Osumi and Malcom Ritchie (1988). Although Katsumi was never taught or even told about the healing art of Seiki therapy, she was practicing it. In this ancient form of healing, "vital life force" is transmitted from healer to patient. In the traditional healing ritual, this life force is focused and then transmitted by: "spontaneously creating sudden loud noises: banging the walls, clapping and loud *kiai*" (p. 41). Ikuko Osumi, a practitioner of this form of healing, describes her work with patients as follows:

They would sit *seiza* and I would treat them with a lot of *kiai*, sometimes touching certain places but sometimes without touching the body at all." (p. 58)

Seiza is the traditional Japanese sitting position with legs tucked underneath the body. The martial arts students were also in this position when Katsumi administered her *kiai*.

This healing technique is very much in keeping with with the belief throughout Asia that illness is caused by loss of personal power (Heinz, 1991). Shamanic rituals in Asia traditionally are designed to enhance the client's own vital life force.

The tea ceremony is traditionally used in Japan to enable participants to center and focus. It seemed Katsumi was using it to calm and ground the energy in

order to prepare the students for her final blood ritual. However, the tea ceremony is not a traditional shamanic ceremony.

Blood rituals were conducted by samurai. It seems possible that her ancestors involvement with ninjutsu and the martial arts dojo setting may have led her to replicate certain elements of ancient samurai rituals. Her rituals also have another parallel with the practices of Chinese shamans in Taiwan who use their own blood to write charm papers (Heinz, 1991). Thus Katsumi's *kiai* and her blood rituals have strong parallels with shamanic rituals.

Katsumi clearly experienced being possessed by a 300 year old white snake healer or goddess. Carmen Blacker (1986), in her book Catalpa Bow, documents that the founders of new religious sects in Japan over the past 100 years have usually been women who have a powerful dream involving divine figures or become possessed by a god or goddess, an experience similar to Katsumi's.

In addition, Katsumi's rituals constituted an exorcism of the spirits haunting the dojo. Felicitas Goodman (1988), in her book How About Demons, discusses similar exorcism rituals. Ikuko Osumi also describes using *kiais* as part of an exorcism to chase away ghosts. Thus, Katsumi's conduct throughout this episode corresponds to the activities of traditional women shamans in Japan.

2. Her experience as viewed by a diagnostician working within the DSM-III-R

In the American Psychiatric Association's (1987) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual- Third Edition-Revised (DSM-III-R), the symptom of depersonalization is defined as: "An experience of feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of one's mental processes or body" (p. 276). Katsumi's description, quoted earlier, of being possessed by a 300 year old snake woman fits the DSM-III-R definition of depersonalization. Depersonalization is one of the key symptoms of the dissociative disorders. Such "spirit possession" is not one of the examples given in the DSM-III-R section on Dissociative Disorders. However, the DSM-III-R Casebook (Spitzer et al., 1989), includes a case of a possessed person who is given the diagnosis of Dissociation Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (300.15). The casebook argues that because "this patient's experience is similar to a trance state (ASC with markedly diminished or selectively focused responsiveness to environmental stimuli)" (p. 378), it is a type of Dissociative Disorder.

The DSM-IV is considering including a separate category for Trance and Possession Disorder, a diagnosis that is already included in the International Classification of Disease-10 (WHO,1992). The DSM-IV Options Book (Task Force, 1991) lists the following criteria:

- A. possession, i.e., conviction that the individual has been taken over by a spirit, power, deity, or other person
- B. The possession is not authorized as a normal part of a collective cultural or religious practice.
- C. impairment in social or occupational functioning or marked distress
- D. exclude psychotic, MPD or substance induced disorders

If Katsumi had been so unlucky as to brought into a psychiatric facility for an evaluation, a diagnostician would need to seriously question whether she met

criteria B and C. I would argue she did not, but I think the likelihood is that most psychiatric emergency personnel would have diagnosed as having a dissociative disorder.

3. Her experience as viewed by a transpersonally-oriented clinician

From the perspective of a transpersonal clinician, Katsumi's first person account was a type of spiritual emergency. Spiritual emergencies are crises during which the process of growth and change becomes chaotic and overwhelming. In such episodes, individuals often suddenly and dramatically enter into new realms of mystical and spiritual experience. However, they may also become fearful and confused and have difficulty coping with their daily lives, jobs and relationships (Grof and Grof, 1989). At first I thought Katsumi had experienced the type of spiritual emergency that the Grofs label "channeling and possession." But after reading Ruth-Inge Heinz's (1991) Shamans of the 20th Century, I learned that "channels seldom go beyond relating messages, they do not actively implement these messages" (p. 9). It is shamans who communicate with divine entities during rituals to facilitate the manifestation of the divine in the here and now. Clearly Katsumi did more than the passive acts of possession or channeling entail. Her "ceremonies" more closely resemble shamanic behavior.

In the Grofs' typology of spiritual emergency, Katsumi's episode would be considered a "shamanic crisis." Following Heinz (1984), I prefer the term shamanistic to refer to any experience or activity that involves someone who is not a shaman and to reserve the term shamanic for experiences and activities involving someone who actually is a shaman. Thus I would term Katsumi's episode a "shamanistic initiatory crisis", a term I developed to describe my own spiritual emergency (Lukoff, 1991).

The Grofs point out that, "People experiencing such crises can also show spontaneous tendencies to create rituals that are identical to those practiced by shamans of various cultures" (p. 14-15). Katsumi's use of *kiais* is an example of a spontaneously created ritual that parallels traditional shamanic rituals, but was conducted by a person living in a non-shamanic culture while in the midst of a shamanistic initiatory crisis.

There is a longstanding controversy in the anthropological literature as to the distinction between mediums and shamans. Based on his survey of the literature, Eliade (1972) maintained that shamans go on magical flights and remain the actors during their performances, while mediums become possessed by spirits who enter a human body to carry out their actions. However, based on her research, Ruth-Inge Heinz (1982) came to a very different conclusion:

The data I collected during my fieldwork in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas show clearly that shamans will experience mediumistic phases during a session while mediums go through shamanistic phases during their professional performances. (p. 25)

Southeast Asia is one of the areas of the world where full possession is still culturally expected of shamans. Traditionally in Japan, the shamans have usually been women, *miko*, who have been viewed as "daughters of the gods" because they

become possessed during their rituals (Blacker, 1975). Katsumi's possession by a 300 year old white snake goddess is very much in keeping with the traditional practices of Japanese shamans, and another reason for viewing Katsumi's episode as a shamanistic initiatory crisis.

4. Her experience as viewed by an anthropologist

Ruth-Inge Heinz 's (1991) research on the "Emergence of New Shamans" has led her to conclude that, "shamans arise where needs arise" (p. 155). She found that few contemporary shamans had undergone training or official initiation:

In the 20th century, all over the world, shamans usually begin to work inside their family. Initiation now mainly takes place on the spiritual plane. In an urban setting, for example, we do not find many shamans "authorized." (p. 191)

Katsumi's introduction into the shamanic realm took place without any formal initiation or training by elder shamans. Her latent shamanic abilities were called forth by Erik's need to exorcise the spirits haunting his dojo. In Asia, people do, in fact, seek out shamans when they believe their houses are haunted (Heinz, 1991, p.99). Ruth Inge-Heinz (1991) argues that shamans will continue to arise in contemporary societies because,

Modern health practitioners are not always equipped to respond to basic fears, neither are representatives of world religions...The main reason to seek shamans is, indeed, the belief that shamans meet existential challenges and keep fighting battles with life-threatening 'demons.' (p. 198)

Although one can find parallels between Katsumi's rituals and traditional shamanic rituals, the simultaneous use of three disparate rituals is not documented in the literature on Asian shamanism. However, research on contemporary shamans in multi-ethnic societies reveals that they often borrow paraphernalia and rituals from different traditions. Just as their predecessors have done, contemporary shamans constantly integrate elements of cultures with which they come into contact . They reinterpret these elements and give them new meanings. Thus, here too, Katsumi was engaging in a traditional shamanic role by synthesizing new ritual forms from older ritual forms

Conclusion

Just as the initiatory crises of shamans lead them into the role of tribal healer, Katsumi's shamanistic crisis has led her to pursue training in a contemporary version of the healer vocation, that of a clinical psychologist. The mental health and medical fields are contemporary shamanistic vocations in that they also involve healing and intuition exercised with the sensibility of a sacred ritualist. However, unlike traditional shamans, contemporary healers only occasionally make use of trance states, for example when engaged in hypnosis, guided imagery, sandtray etc.

Jeanne Achterberg (1988) has pointed out that crises and illnesses bestow upon the shaman the wisdom to serve the community as a healer. She then goes on to observe that ,

Such events can occur and have occurred in the lives of health professionals in the modern world and have led to vocational choice. Being disabled, or having a serious disease, or being in recovery from an addiction, or even having a child with a significant handicap has been the wounding or the initiation for many in the health care field. (p. 20)

During my years of teaching graduate psychology students, giving workshops on psychosis, shamanism and mysticism, and receiving correspondence from readers of my articles, I've learned that many mental health professionals have been "initiated" into their profession by a psychotic or depressive episode.

In working with an individual such as Katsumi from another culture, the clinician must be familiar with the basic religious and spiritual beliefs and practices of that culture (Mezzich, Fabrega, and Kleinman,1992). Unfortunately, the mental health professions have been negligent in providing training in the assessment and treatment of problems with religious or spiritual content (Lukoff, Lu, and Lukoff, 1992). When religion and spirituality are addressed, such as in the DSM-III-R, which dictates the diagnostic approach used in the United States and several other countries, they are almost always portrayed in the context of psychopathology (Post, 1992). Yet despite the turmoil generated by intense religious and spiritual experiences, they are often seen by the individual as powerful positive influences on their lives. Katsumi wrote:

After this strange experience, I began to see auras in people and began to develop some abilities which I never had or at least was never aware of. My perception of people changed. I became able to see a person not only on the physical level, but on an emotional level as well, so that I could pretty much tell what he or she was thinking at that moment and/or what emotional state he or she was in. I seemed to have gained some sixth sense in perceiving people. The most significant change in me was that I became much more loving and much less judgmental towards myself as well as people around me.

Yet this experience became a crisis for Katsumi when she left the dojo and returned to her home: "I shared it with my two very closest friends only to meet negative reactions and rejection." At the same time that she was reassessing and changing her entire life as a result of this experience, she found that she could not talk to anyone about it. Katsumi did not work with a transpersonal clinician or any other mental health professional during or immediately following her experience. While this might have been useful to help her to realize its transformative potential, she was very lucky not to have been thrown into the hands of the medical model mental health system. Ruth Inge-Heinz (1982) has commented on the deleterious effects that transpire when an individual in a state of dissociation is mislabeled as having a mental disorder:

The concept of what constitutes a 'healthy mind' differs considerably from one culture to another...How devastating it can be to affix the label of 'mental illness' to any extraordinary state of consciousness! A dissociative state of mind does not necessarily qualify an individual for being put into a straight jacket. Many dissociative states occur in Southeast Asia, for example, in a culturally conditioned and controlled setting. (pp. 28-29)

Not all shamans undergo a crisis or illness (Heinz, 1991). But Eliade explains that such experiences sometimes enable prospective shamans who are wounded to become healers: "if they have cured themselves and are able to cure others, it is among other things, because they know the mechanism of illness" (p. 31).

I'd like to conclude with a quote from Eliade (1960):

The future shaman sometimes takes the risk of being mistaken for a "madman"...but in reality his "madness" fulfills a mystic function; it reveals certain aspects of reality to him that are inaccessible to other mortals, and it is only after having experienced and entered into these hidden dimensions of reality that the "madman" becomes a shaman." (pp. 80-81)

Or, Katsumi's case, the "madness" of her shamanistic initiatory crisis has led her into training to become a psychologist.

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