



Virtual Shamanism and the Sacred-Cyber-Space

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Summary - The aim of this paper is three-fold: to discuss the usage of cyberspace as a new sacred domain, give an update on how cyberspace is used in a shamanic context, and present new perspectives on the future of “cybershamanism”. Starting from a shaman’s physical transformation of space into something sacred, whereby a specific site is constructed around the omphalos of the world and a trans-dimensional gateway is established, we draw parallels to the digital realms people create. We examine the apparent “cyber-religiosity” that connects users through the Internet and the portal of the modern-age: the computer screen. Two types of online ritual permeate the landscape of sacred-cyber-space. Asynchronous rituals are those conducted by members of an online spiritual community in which rituals are performed by users when they please, and in a sequence they choose. Synchronous rituals, on the other hand, take place at a specified time and underline the act of simultaneous ritual practice. With recent technological advancements, synchronous rituals through live-stream events demonstrate a return to a temporal focus in cyberspace. Further breakthroughs on the horizon in the realms of AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) offer an exciting future for the cyber-shamans of tomorrow, and have incredible ramifications for cyber-séance in the 21st century.

Keywords: Virtual Shamanism / Cyber-Space / profane

Riassunto - L'articolo *Virtual Shamanism and the Sacred-Cyber-Space* mira, in prima istanza, all'analisi dell'uso del cyberspazio come nuovo spazio sacro; prosegue con l'osservazione del rapporto tra lo sciamanesimo e il cyberspazio ed infine analizza le nuove prospettive per il futuro del cyber-sciamanesimo. Come gli sciamani individuano un luogo e lo trasformano fisicamente in spazio sacro, scegliendo un sito specifico intorno all'*omphalos* del mondo e aprendo un passaggio *transdimensionale*, allo stesso modo possiamo rintracciare percorsi analoghi nella creazione dei mondi digitali operata nel cyberspazio. La cyber-religiosità che connette gli utenti della *Rete* si realizza attraverso il portale della nuova era: lo schermo del computer; in altre parole questo strumento permette il passaggio dal mondo fisico al modo digitale sacralizzato. Esistono due tipologie di rituali *online* che permeano il paesaggio del cyberspazio sacro e si fondano su una diversa lettura del Tempo: i rituali asincroni lasciano la libertà di fruizione degli stessi ai membri della comunità spirituale *online*, i quali possono scegliere quando e in che sequenza svolgere il proprio cerimoniale privato; i rituali sincronici invece si fondano sulla simultaneità dell'atto religioso, che si svolge in un preciso e specifico orario durante il quale l'esecuzione del cerimoniale *online* diviene collettiva. Le recenti innovazioni tecnologiche dimostrano come i rituali sincronici portino a un ritorno del concetto di tempo condiviso nel cyberspazio, mentre i progressi tecnologici visibili sull'orizzonte cyber-spaziale negli ambiti dell'AR (*augmented reality*) e VR (*virtual reality*) sembrano poter offrire un'interessante evoluzione al cyber-sciamanesimo del futuro e alle nuove esaltanti implicazioni nella cyber-séance del XXI secolo.

Parola chiave: Sciamanesimo virtuale / Cyber-spazio / profano



1. SHAMANIC SACRED SPACE

Sacred space has typically been understood as a physical location with specific characteristics and qualities, which differentiate it from mundane (profane) space. Chosen to represent the link between mortals and gods, a sacred space usually undergoes specific “ritual-architectural events” (Jones 2000a). These events include enclosing the space through stone circles or walls, and imbuing it with spiritual or religious significance. Verses from the Quran, written on mosque walls, or frescoes in Christian churches, depicting the Stations of the Cross, demonstrate this ascription of religious significance to reinforce the sanctity of the space. For the religious man, a church door signifies the border between two orders of reality – profane and sacred – but at the same time, this very same threshold is what allows for communication between these two worlds (see Eliade 1959: 13).

Shamanistic practices call for a similar process in order to deem a space sacred. The construction of tents, teepees or yurts prepares a space for ritual and, just as church bells or a call to prayer announce when to engage in prayer, sacred time and sacred space are unified in shamanism by using the lunar calendar. Antithetical to the civilized and highly organized setting of a church or mosque, shamans generally choose a forest clearing for a ritual site. The woods have always acted as an initiation spot where young boys are brought by the tribe’s shaman to be reborn as men and warriors. In choosing a sacred space, shamans designate the center of the space, first by digging the *omphalos*, the navel of the world, and then setting the *axis mundi*, which can take the form of a ladder, a tree, a vine, or even a mountain. This pillar, which is set at the very center of the world, allows the shaman to traverse the three levels of the universe - namely heaven, earth, and the underworld. The shamanic journey across these three realms starts by passing through a spiritual portal. The shaman dramatically narrates this journey to the participants, who also contribute by drumming or chanting themselves. Thusly, the shaman performs his or her function “as an intermediary between a worldly and a spiritual or supernatural world with the aim to help people of his society” (Schlottmann 2007).

1.1 *The Shaman: A Short Film by Marco Kalantari (2015)*

The fact that shamans travel cross-dimensionally for the betterment of their society is, in fact, integral to their role in the community. Upon request, a shaman will attempt to make contact with the spiritual world and try to resolve “an imbalance due to transcendental powers” (Schlottmann 2007). The short film, “The Shaman”, directed by Marco Kalantari, explores what might happen when this imbalance derives from the soul of a machine. The film takes place in the year 2204 when two groups of humans, having rediscovered shamanism, battle each other using a combination of magic and technology. Their respective warrior-shamans represent the most powerful weapons available, as only they are able to journey into the “Netherworld” to combat the monstrous battle machines of the opposing side. The story follows the character of Joshua, a shaman who travels into the spirit world to meet the soul of a giant machine and attempt to convince it to switch alliances. Upholding an important aspect of traditional shamanism, Joshua leads a small group of soldiers to a particular space in which to conduct his inter-dimensional voyage. Alongside other elements of traditional shamanism, such as the use of music to induce a modified state of consciousness and the aid of psychotropic substances, Kalantari delivers a futuristic vision that portrays a conceivable role for the shamans of tomorrow.

2. SACRED-CYBER-SPACE: AN ANALYSIS

2.1 *The Screen: A Gateway into Cyberspace*

“The Shaman” is in itself a testament to the new avenues for accessing the so-called “consensual hallucinations” (Wertheim 2000: 243) of 21st century media. Available principally through

the video streaming service “Vimeo”, “The Shaman” joins an ever-growing list of films and TV series only viewable in cyberspace. These experiences are digitally encoded and downloaded through our Internet connection, where they are presented to us across the threshold of the video display. Gazing through the computer screen, we are able to enter that “spaceless space” (Castells 1996) and transcend the rules of the physical world. The fact that most of us still use an LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) to travel into this space recalls the shaman’s passage into another world through the crossing of a river or stream; a tradition found in numerous shamanic cultures e.g. the Twana tribe in North America (Eliade 1964: 335). While the display conveys information to us in a digestible format, the entire computer system acts as “a metaphysical gateway [...] into an entirely ‘other’ realm” (Wertheim 2000: 228).

2.2 Sacred-Cyber-Space

Before delving further into its sacred propensities, let us first define the word “cyberspace”. The term originates in the landmark cyberpunk work by William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, “Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding.” (Gibson 1984: 69). Since that novel’s publication, cyberspace has transitioned from a fictional plot device to a ubiquitous virtual reality. In a sense, it is *the* shared space of the modern world. However, a conundrum presents itself when attempting to pinpoint the physical location of cyberspace. As a species that is anchored in a three-dimensional world, how can we justify labeling it a space? Wertheim stresses that, “whatever its *content* may be, a new *context* is coming into being here” (Wertheim 2000: 230). Exploring the various uses of the word “space”, she asserts that, “even in our profoundly physicalist age, we invoke the word ‘space’ to describe far more than just the physical world” (Wertheim 2000: 231). Just as we store memories in our offline “mental space”, we store some of our most important information in our online “data space”. With the click of a button or the tap of a finger, our personal data space can enter the universal domain of cyberspace. However, information storage and retrieval is not its only use. Since its inception, cyberspace has been a platform for connecting and interacting socially. That cyberspace is a product of human imagination, and offers infinite possibility through virtual reality, holds particular importance in regards to its spiritual and, potentially, sacred capacity.

Cyberspace clearly fits the definition of space, despite it not being physically perceivable. Far from devaluing it, the intangibility of the Internet actually enhances the likelihood of spiritual associations. As Wertheim writes, “from both our Greek and our Judeo-Christian heritage Western culture has within it a deep current of dualism that has *always* associated immateriality with spirituality” (Wertheim 2000: 256). This explanation justifies the spiritual connections in cyberspace. Furthermore, the immaterial world of cyberspace is inherently distinct from that of the physical world. It earns its sacred title through *hierophany* - “an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (Eliade 1959: 26).

Given its spiritual and, more profoundly, sacred attributes, cyberspace acts as the perfect host for religious ceremony. This comes as no surprise if we examine Eliade’s concept of “religious valorization” (Eliade 1959: 23). According to Eliade, “to whatever degree he may have desacralized the world [...] man never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior” (Eliade 1959: 23). This remains particularly true in cyberspace where users take advantage of a blank canvass to engage in a new form of religious experience: “cyber-religiosity” (Wertheim 2000: 257).



2.3 Asynchronous Ritual

Most research into cyber-religiosity and cybershamanism revolves around “asynchronous ritual” (Jacobs 2007: 1111). This form of cyber-ritual, like any ritual, is a communicative process, and it is perfectly suited to the socially connected realm of cyberspace. Asynchronous ritual, as its name implies, de-emphasizes chronological restraints and allows for engagement in ritual at the user’s discretion. In Jacobs’ own words, “asynchronous ritual performance illustrates how notions of time have been transformed by computer-mediated communication” (Jacobs 2007: 1111). Conducting an analysis of two websites designed for cyber-ritual, the Hindu Virtual Temple and The Virtual Church¹, Jacobs described the unique experience of utilizing cyberspace for religious intent. *Cyberpuja* in the Hindu Virtual Temple hosted by the University of Illinois involved an online time-independent religious experience in which the worshipper could perform *darshan* (sight/vision). At the very basis of *puja*, this visual interplay between the *murti* (deity statue) and the devotee implied that the user “both sees and is seen by this virtual *murti*” (Jacobs 2007: 1113). While in cyberspace, *cyberpuja* in the Hindu Virtual Temple allowed all of the various ritual acts found in the liturgy of traditional *puja*. Icons next to the various deity options offered such actions as ringing bells, scattering flowers at the base of the *murti*, virtual turmeric powder, incense sticks, oil lamps to be waved in front of the chosen deity, and virtual coconuts to be smashed.

Unfortunately, the virtual Hindu temple, about which Jacobs wrote, no longer exists. However, The Virtual Church is still in operation and, in fact, displays posts from as recent as May 2016. In place of point-and-click interactive services, The Virtual Church instead focuses on more personal and intimate religious experiences. Accessing the “Prayer Room”, users can post and request prayers. Visitors can join in previously requested prayers and are encouraged to post about their prayer activity. A guide also helps the user to focus on the spiritual value of prayer. Here the communicative quality of the sacred-cyber-space is truly expressed by the online community.

Asynchronous cyber-ritual demonstrates the flexibility of sacred cyberspace. The Virtual Church empowers its users with the ability to access religious services from the comfort of their homes and on an individual level. This versatility lends itself extremely well to cybershamanism where the shaman, as an individual, can both create a sacred-cyber-space and adapt to it simultaneously. In South Korea, the cybershamanic culture reflects the adaptable role that cyberspace plays in religious communities. For Korean scientist Il Young Park, “the character of shamanism especially in the shamanic myths and cosmological conceptions fits together very well with the structure of cyberspace”² (Schlottmann 2014: 39). With its roots stretching back to 1996, Korean cybershamans have built upon the strong shamanic tradition in South Korea and have actually found commercial success. Since 1999, the portal www.neomudang.com has acted as a web platform for female Korean shamans or *mudang*. Both *mudang* and *baksu* (the term for a male shaman) are active on social networks, offering fortune telling and information on the diverse local shamanic traditions of Korea. Enriching the neo-shamanic landscape, some self-appointed Korean cybershamans have “personalized their religious behavior and beliefs after they created hybrids of traditional rituals, combining different sources of knowledge and practice to create individualized patterns of spiritual life” (Schlottmann 2014: 55).

1 The Hindu Virtual Temple replicated the act of visiting a real temple while The Virtual Church creates an abstract “cybercopy” of the experience.

2 YouTube offers a plethora of videos, which can be accessed to accompany users in individualistic shamanic journeys.

2.4 Synchronous Ritual

As Schlottmann points out, modern cybershamanism “has gained great popularity and is used in conjunction with self-awareness, healing and magic. Thereby, the boundaries between neo-shamanism, neo-paganism and cybershamanism are often blurred” (Schlottmann 2014: 34). Today, there is a multitude of websites dedicated to this new hybrid approach to shamanism. For the purposes of our study, we chose to investigate the website www.soundstrue.com, which hosts dozens of videos in which self-help gurus offer courses ranging from Shakti meditation to mindfulness in the workplace³. Of particular note are the live-stream events that the website holds on a regular basis. One such event, called the “Year of Ceremony”, invites its paid subscribers to join in “monthly rituals for healing and transformation” (www.soundstrue.com). During the course of the year, several shamans from different traditions conduct web gatherings on a variety of topics. Following the 13-month lunar calendar, each session imparts a different shamanic teaching and technique, reinforced through a participative ceremony. At its core, this worldwide ceremony is designed to bring together participants at a specific time. Jacobs terms this type of spiritual event as a “synchronous ritual” and defines it as a ceremony in which “the performers meet online and perform a ritual as a collective at the same time” (Jacobs 2007: 1111). In contrast to the individualistic tendencies of asynchronous ritual, participants in synchronous cyber-ceremony transcend time and space *as a group*, fulfilling a central concept of traditional shamanism. One of the shamanic leaders of the “Year of Ceremony”, Sandra Ingerman, reaffirms the power of this simultaneous connection, enthusiastically saying that, “we brought community together in a virtual place, and had miraculous results that were different than just having a one-on-one session client in person, because the power of the work is so exponential”⁴. She likens these “invisible communities” to family, even expressing that the virtual bonds created through online ceremony surpass those found in the “real” world. Seen on a smaller scale in the Prayer Room of The Virtual Church, synchronous rituals like those of the “Year of Ceremony” derive their spiritual power from simultaneous participation, which intensifies the sacred nature of their particular cyberspace. Ingerman explains this as the creation of “an intention”, through the virtual community working together at the same time. In this synchronized ritualistic state, time becomes a unifying factor that contributes to the construction of a sacred-cyber-space. To put a twist on Jones’ idea of “ritual-architectural events”, we suggest creating the term “sacred cyber-temporal events” to describe this relatively new occurrence in the virtual domain. When speaking about synchronous online rituals, spiritual significance seems to be reinforced when a temporal foundation is used to build a sacred-cyber-space. Although Time remains relatively fluid, due to the different worldwide Time Zones cyber-séance participants connect from, it still acts as the non-substitutable linking factor of shamanic virtual communities like www.soundstrue.com. In recent years this is the direction in which the virtual world as a whole seems to be heading. Given the inherent de-emphasis on geographic location that cyberspace has always championed, the Internet is evolving temporally. In response to our initial satisfaction with worldwide asynchronous communication we now see a push towards an increased focus on simultaneously spending our most valuable resource - time.

2.5 New Perspectives and Concluding Predictions

At the same time, new opportunities for the re-introduction of space in a physical sense

3 Other examples of websites where users can find synchronous cyber-rituals are www.shaman-world.com; www.julietbatten.co.nz; www.lynnandrews.com; just to cite a few.

4 “The Power of Ceremony with Sandra Ingerman, José Luis Stevens Phd and don Oscar Miro-Quesada”, <http://www.soundstrue.com/store/year-of-ceremony?sq=2365>



stand to completely transform online interaction and, particularly, cybershamanism. The ability to be virtually transported represents a hallmark of online social communication. This results in the sensation that Wertheim attests to, saying, “when I ‘go into’ cyberspace, my body remains at rest in my chair, but ‘I’ - or at least some aspect of myself - am transported into another arena” (Wertheim 2000: 231). New technological breakthroughs in virtual reality promise to take this novel sensation to new heights.

Currently being tested by hardware and software developers, Microsoft’s “HoloLens” is a headset that allows users to manipulate holograms in real-time. The aim of this project is to create an augmented reality experience in order to “truly blend your digital life with your physical life”⁵. A user wearing this device will be able to access a rich assortment of applications from video streaming services to Microsoft’s proprietary 3D modeling and design software “HoloStudio”. As the wearer can still see his or her physical environment through the transparent lenses of the device while creating and overlaying holographic images, HoloLens really does blur two, up-until-now, distinct realities.

HoloLens is being touted as the “first, fully-untethered holographic computer”⁶, an acclaim that brings with it incredible freedom of movement. Not only can one design 3D models that can interact with the surrounding physical environment, but also explore stunningly simulated 3D environments. In effect, this allows the user to enter a dream-like virtual reality, superimposed upon the reality of everyday life. However amazing these features are, a HoloLens research project shows what the applications could be in regards to synchronous cyber-ritual and its capacity to merge sacred-cyber-space with physical sacred space. Dubbed “holoportation”, this project employs modified 3D motion capture cameras, placed at the periphery of a room, to create a three-dimensional “live” image of whoever occupies the center of the space. The resulting 3D model is “temporally consistent” as well, meaning that any movements made by the “subject” are mirrored by the holographic model in real-time. This rendered 3D model can then be transported into the space of a HoloLens wearer, who “can see these remote participants, live, in their space, as if they’re co-present”⁷. Once this technology becomes more widely available and affordable, one can envision the technologically keen cybershaman community’s use of “holoportation” to perform cyber-séance with other HoloLens users. In this scenario, cybershamans could fully realize their ideal sacred space, both physically and virtually, through the use of holograms, along with having the empowering presence of “holotransported” participants. While this might seem a fantasy of the distant future, HoloLens technology is fully functional and is expected to see a commercial release soon.

With the coming revolution in augmented and virtual reality technologies⁸, one must wonder about the ramifications they will have for the shamanic community. As they both revolve around a dimension-traversing and reality-transforming ethos, a study of their prospective interaction, although hypothetical, is warranted. Futurists, like Ray Kurzweil, envision a world not unlike that of *Neuromancer* or “The Matrix” in the not-too-distant-future. They claim that virtual reality will soon be indistinguishable from physical reality, and that by the end of the

5 Microsoft’s HoloLens Live Demonstration Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6sL_5Wgvrg

6 The Dawn of the Age of Holograms TED talk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cQbMP3I5Sk>

7 Holoportation: Virtual 3D teleportation in Real-time (Microsoft Research) http://www.wired.com/2016/04/microsoft-holoportation-star-wars-hologram/?mbid=social_fb

8 Devices that utilize AR (Augmented Reality) and VR (Virtual Reality) are already available from Google, HTC, and Oculus.

century, neural interfacing technology will be advanced enough to permit “mind uploading” (Kurzweil 2005). With the biological limitations of the human body eliminated, future cybershamans would be able to lead a cybernetically linked consciousness in rituals to combat problems on a global scale. Cybershamans could lead neurally linked participants on an emotional and spiritual journey in hopes of “confronting deep rooted social prejudices”, thereby fulfilling predictions for the future of cybershamanism as “a self-contained form in which elements of other religions, cultures and arts will be mixed” (Schlottmann 2014: 37, 39). These simulations, in name only, would be experienced as completely real to the “cybernetic consciousness”, and would derive from pure imagination. Thus in this new cybernetic-ritual, the mind, artfully stimulated by the shaman, ultimately would become the future sacred space to be visited, reconfigured and reconnected.

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