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Shamans Of The 20th Century

With contributions by
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thing she had always known. So she began to create rituals for a community hailing from all over the United States. Through ritual celebrations, practiced around the cycle of the year, she and her community "find points of balance for themselves, and maintain the balance" living in a confused outside world.

I asked Etzel Cardena to write also a profile on Jerzy Grotowski who is a Polish director of theatrical performances (see, photo 12). Grotowski goes far beyond the goal of public entertainment because he intentionally seeks to "alter the basic consciousness, social and cultural structures that we have inherited along with the belief that they are immutable, to create an 'active culture' where dichotomies such as process/product, actor/spectator, are overcome."

These seven profiles, written by colleagues, already discard the stereotype of "one shamanic personality."

I looked in my own field notes for urban shamans in Southeast Asia who emerged without having a direct connection to existing traditions. The three shamans discussed were born in big cities (Singapore and Bangkok), however, each of them began to follow still available traditional patterns. An altar around which a community had formed was calling for a medium who would evoke and activate the "Divine." The second shaman discovered his propensity for healing and sought training with Taoist priests and Buddhist monks but mainly followed his own guiding spirits, and the third, a high government official, decided to be trained by peers to increase his spiritual power.

The background and personal story of the oracle of the Dalai Lama, as reported by Avedon, carries all characteristics of a traditional shaman, from early illness and visions to the day where the old oracle died and he could step into the position of being the reincarnation of a historical oracle. This oracle is, to this day, still consulted by the Dalai Lama in all important issues of state.

The last report, on the shamanistic work of a Western lawyer, is the result of personal communications and observations. The profile demonstrates how new paradigms begin to evolve also in Western settings.

Max Beauvoir

An Island in an Ocean of Spirits

by Etzel Cardena

*Why couldn't these gods, why couldn't God
or one of his many expressions come exactly where we are?*

*Because we are all part of the same thing.
This is where the heaven is, this is where hell is,
this is where our spirits are....*

(Max Beauvoir, summer of 1987)

I am in the presence of Max Beauvoir, a *houngan* (Voudun priest). Low budget, low quality movies have not prepared me for this encounter; neither have the sensationalistic novels that proliferated during the most recent U.S. military occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), written by service men eager to make fast money. Max is not engaged in vengefully pinning a doll (as false stereotypes of Voudun would have it) or in preparing a "primitive" ritual of uncontrollable bloodletting and sex. No, as I enter his office, after crossing the well-kept garden of a prosperous house, he is busily typing a directory of *houngans* into his personal computer.

Beauvoir, as Haiti itself, proves to be more paradoxical,

deep and vast than I had fathomed. His size and voice remind me of a younger James Earl Jones and I eagerly anticipate the journey of ideas and experiences that we will share for a number of hours. He is not a typical *houngan*, neither by his considerable affluence, his Western education (a Master's degree in Biochemistry from Cornell, he unpretentiously confesses) or the impeccable English with which he greets me. But it is precisely his vital stance (à la Papa Legba, the Haitian loa or spirit that bridges the world of humans and spirits),¹ with one foot firmly implanted in the Haitian culture and the other bridging the distance to the Western world, that makes him an important representative of twentieth century shamanism. One of his roles, in addition to the traditional shamanic intercession with the realm of the spirits, is to clearly translate—and explain—the Voudun world view to the West unaccustomed to a religion of direct bodily expression. It is no coincidence that accidentally educated persons eking an entry into the Voudun culture-religion, from the ethnobotanist Wade Davis investigating the zombie phenomenon through authors probing the representational aspects of Voudun ceremonies to prospective Voudun initiates from Europe, America, and other areas, seek his (and his daughters', also Voudun practitioners) assistance.

In many ways, Max Beauvoir is a transitional figure in his brand of Voudun, melding traditional Haitian rituals and ideas with an accidentally educated sensibility. A representative example of this syncretism is found in his Voudun ceremonies. They do not have the vague temporal and spatial structure of traditional rituals; but neither do they follow the crude model of the "ceremonies for tourists," where a "spontaneous" ritual may occur after providing the correct monetary incentive, and in which the most stereotypical excesses are provided for the spectators to quench their thirst for "primitivism." Beauvoir and his initiates practice their religion in a clearly defined place, a beautiful amphitheater behind their house, with a clearly defined stage and comfortable seating for some paying guests, and there is also a temporal demarcation. But however Westernized the setting might be, however ambivalent about its role as performance or traditional cer-

emony, Beauvoir makes a conscious effort to preserve the spiritual intent of the traditional ceremony and avoids the extremes of the typical "tourist ceremony."²

This modern shaman's path from biochemistry to the full embrace of life as a total, mysterious reality, may be traced to his first experience of possession. In Voudun, as in other traditions, the most important liturgical event is transcendent possession, the immediate, intimate experience of surrendering one's self to "a major force of the Universe," usually given specific, anthropomorphic characteristics by the culture. The possessed individual does not assume that s/he has been transformed into the godhead as such, but into an expression of Its pervading force, to which everyone is linked. As described by him, Beauvoir's entry into the alternate reality of Voudun occurred when he was approximately thirty-five years of age.

An ambivalent initiate into the Voudun traditions, he had resisted losing his conscious and rational control during the ceremonies. As he describes it, being a scientist and biochemist, he had sought to maintain "his foot on the ground all the time and be aware of all that happens in the conscious world." And he had indeed maintained his ordinary footing in ordinary reality up to the time when, while talking to some friends, he suddenly felt himself "turning into a baby...[as if] somebody would be holding me [by the ankles] just like you hold a newborn." He then felt as if he had been dropped from very high and cried loudly at the experience of his head touching the concrete floor. He remembered this happening around 11 a.m. The next time he was self-conscious of anything it was 5 p.m. His self had been spirited for six hours, during which he had traversed what, for him then, was an unknown reality. On his return, he felt himself to be in a very relaxed, alert state, "more aware of certain things. I [could] view certain things...people...better." He has remained, though, entirely amnesic about his experiences during those six hours.

The consensual definitions of shamanism, however, involve not only the ability to experience alternate realities or states of consciousness, but to have developed clear, strong intent and control to enter and exit such states whenever the

community requires it. Instead of madness, Beauvoir found that being possessed increased his conscious awareness and gave him new capabilities. Without his previous dread, Beauvoir allowed himself to enter more fully future experiences and became a better "horse" for spiritual forces. His full adoption of a shamanic role, and recognition by the community as such, has required him to develop the ability to enter into "the second world" at a moment's notice, without a ritual setting, even though the latter "helps to clear the place (and personal purpose?) from impurities." After years of practice, his travels between realities, he adds, are now so subtle that only a person that knows him very well can detect minute voice and behavior changes, and increased sweating. He has achieved the "ultimate stage of possession," one in which there is a presumed access to other information than that obtained through ordinary sensory and intellectual processes. He explains metaphorically that possession allows the *houngan* to lift him/herself from a grounded, horizontal perspective into a place where non-immediate spatial and temporal knowledge becomes accessible.³ With that more extensive view from above, the *houngan* returns to the immediate present to assist those seeking his succor. Possession allows him to tap into a realm in which everyone and everything is related. Beauvoir, in classical shamanic style, claims to have expanded his conscious responsibility to forms of awareness of which most people remain ignorant.

In contrast to the relatively few instances of unwelcome possession (usually associated with unresolved personal conflicts), mentioned in the literature, Beauvoir describes his ability as a privilege, "because it is beneficial not only for you, but also for everybody else." His reputation as a *houngan* is widespread. Haitians, Americans, Europeans consult him, and ask his assistance in a variety of problems: physical ailments, existential anxiety, conflicts with a different culture, a desire to change their "bad luck," etc. Beauvoir then undergoes the form of consciousness alteration he calls possession to obtain information and heals the person seeking solace. In case, where geography prevents it, he maintains contact (to diagnose and heal in occasion) through the telephone, al-

though he considers direct contact and touching to be more effective. In agreement with shamans of many cultures, he declares to be able to perceive what is happening at a distance and to predict, although not alter, substantially the future of a person. His reputation, he maintains, is based on the empirical observation of the patients/clients to find out for themselves whether or not he can tap a healing and omniscient source. Voodoo techniques, for him, represent the accumulated knowledge of Haitian (and before them West African) people throughout the centuries, after they had conducted their own form of experimental field testing.

I do not know of any independent evaluation of Beauvoir's purported paranormal abilities, but even if he could "only" be shown to assist people through suggestions, the use of expectations and the conveyance of a shared and coherent explanation of the ailment (all elements that foster the person's own recovery mechanisms) he would fare better than most psychotherapists, frequently in a chronic state of cultural and spiritual undernourishment. Beauvoir's task, in an economically and politically devastated country, is to bridge the understanding between the occidental and Haitian perspectives, to heal the children of a culturally exuberant country exposed to the constant threat of anonymity and mediocrity of growing cultural standardization, to reinvest an afflicted body with a culturally meaningful identity, to—who knows whether metaphorically or not—recover souls lost in the crack between economical, cultural and even metaphysical contradictions. The Haitian *houngan* makes sure that the people requesting his help find their ground in a sense of community since, after all, even as physical beings they are still "islands in an ocean of spirits," in undulating partnership with other islands through the rhythmic continuity of Voodoo drums and their shared heart beat.

Notes

1. A literate and erudite account of the character of Papa Legba, along with his relation to Eshu Elegba, the trickster deity of the Yoruba, and the spirits of death and sexuality in Haiti—the Ghede—can be found in Cosentino, Donald, "Who is that fellow in the many-colored cap? Transformations of Eshu in old and new world mythologies," *Journal of American Folklore*, 200 (1987):263-275.

2. A thorough analysis of Beauvoir's ceremonies is that of Anderson, Michelle, "Authentic Voodoo is Synthetic," *The Drama Review*, 26:2, (Summer 1984):89-110. In her excellent discussion of different forms of Vodun ceremonies, Anderson particularly brings to task the social composition (mostly non-Haitians and Haitian elite) of the audience chosen by Beauvoir, and the classical "dramatic" structure of his representations. Notwithstanding this, she also comments on Beauvoir's efforts to document popular ceremonies throughout the countryside and his high standing as a *houngan* among more traditional performers. Also, unsurprisingly, her admittance to the more secret, traditional and recondite ceremonies at Nansoucri was partly mediated by Beauvoir himself. Despite the differences between the rituals in the countryside and the "performance" version of Beauvoir, Anderson concludes that there is not one authentic form of Vodun, but that forms are in constant change and, ultimately, "synthetic," which is in agreement with the general tenor of this book.

3. The theater director Grotowski, described below, makes a very similar point about Beauvoir in a recent lecture. He also draws on the importance of lifting oneself from an horizontal (i.e., purely instinctual) position to achieve the vertical—and reflective consciousness—stance that expresses the full quality of being human. See Grotowski, Jerzy, "Tu es le fils de quelqu'un" [You are somebody's son], *The Drama Review*, 31:3 (Fall 1987):30-41.

Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa

A Zulu Sangoma

by Stanley Krippner

In traditional Zulu society, the two principal figures were the chief and the shaman. The chief carried the higher authority, both spiritual and political, and reigned supreme because it was believed that his or her ancestral line led most directly to Unkulunkulu, the Great Spirit. The shaman was believed to be in direct communication with the spirits of the ancestors and stood as advisor to the chief and intermediary between the spiritual realm and the members of his or her community.

In Zulu society today, chiefs have become politicians and attempt to work for the benefit of their tribe. However, over the years, they have lost any claim to spiritual leadership. On the other hand, contemporary shamans (one type of which is known as a *sangoma*) still command respect and wield considerable influence in their communities (Boshier & Costello, 1975).

Family History

The best known Zulu *sangoma* of the twentieth century is