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Technoshamanism: Remixing Shamanism in Rave Culture

Raves are all-night parties featuring anywhere from dozens to thousands of people dancing to electronic dance music (EDM) usually aided by the consumption of psychoactive drugs. Rave culture emerged as an offshoot of disco and house culture in the late 1980s and solidified as a popular youth subculture in European and American cities during the 1990s (Green, p. 201). The essential asset of a rave is the DJ or "disc-jockey," who collects EDM tracks and mixes them into a continuous stream of music, building up to higher rates of beats-per-minute and modulating this tempo depending on the audience's response. While each rave is as unique as the DJ's set that night, here I take into account the broad ideological and cultural similarities that defined the rave scene in the 90s and the 2000s. Generally, the raver ethos was focused on eschewing monotonous 9-to-5 workweeks and oppressive social orders by indulging in weekends of excess, ecstasy, and escapism (Green, p, 202; Huston; Rushkoff; Garcia).

Attempts to analyze rave culture have construed raves as both periods of meaningless hedonistic indulgence and spiritually meaningful or transformative events (Huston; St John p. 3). These contradictory portrayals are not surprising given rave's confounding aesthetic. To emphasize its revolt against modern industrial life, rave turned to both pre-modern and postmodern aesthetics, combining themes of futurism and the digital with historical concepts like tribal life, paganism, and shamanism. On one hand, rave typifies the postmodern idea of "the hyperreal," where an intense desire for pleasure and consumption is gratified by the overstimulation of the senses via strobe lights, neon laser beams, fast-paced techno music, dancing until exhaustion, and the rave drug MDMA ("ecstasy") that increases one's sensitivity to

touch (ibid). On the other hand, rave associates itself with pre-modern imagery and spiritual undertones:

> "The official Ibiza rave website is cluttered with images of Native American masks. Music is often described as 'tribal,' and one genre of rave music is called jungle. At some raves, like those sponsored in San Francisco by the New Moon collective or the Gateway collective, pagan altars are set up, sacred images from 'primitive' tribal cultures decorate the walls, and rituals of cleansing are performed over the turntables and the dance floor" (Hutson).

Out of this barrage of pre-modern affiliation comes the concept of "technoshamanism," which claims that the DJ of a rave can be considered a shaman. In this paper, I explore rave's complex relationship with shamanism as both a technology of the imagined past and the projected future. I argue that technoshamanism is not a rigorous definition of shamanism, but is best understood as a metaphor which seeks to associate rave with an idealized "forgotten past" as a method of critiquing the lack of meaning and community in the modern industrial world.

If we focus on the stereotype of the shaman in the popular imagination, we can track some key similarities between DJs and shamans. The stereotypical shaman is a member of a "primitive" or tribal community who is associated with ecstatic/trance states, drumming, rituals, healing members of their communities, and interaction with an unseen world, sometimes accomplished through the use of psychoactive substances. At first glance, the shaman shares some convincing parallels with the rave DJ. First, he alters the tempo and complexity of his music to induce altered states of consciousness (ASCs). The most relevant parallel of this trait is the genre of EDM called "trance," which relies on modulating and layering repetitive drum beats to induce a trance-like state in the audience, just as a shaman relies on the increasing pace of his drum to facilitate his ritual experiences. The rave can also be seen as a drug-infused "ritual" hosted by the DJ, who guides the audience into an altered state and allows them to explore new facets of reality. Accordingly, the core idea of technoshamanism focuses on the DJ as a

“harmonic navigator,” who is “in charge of group mood/mind” and “senses when it's time to lift the mood, take it down, etc., just as the shaman did in the good of tribal days” (Rushkoff, p. 116, 121). Indeed, ravers often report ASCs at raves and come away feeling healed or relieved in some important way, with many of them categorizing raves as spiritually significant events (St John; Holtner; Rushkoff).

Technoshamanism employs a universal concept of shamanism, which claims shamanism has a core structure that is replicated in every shamanic culture globally. This is evidenced by rave’s idea that “the music facilitates the return to forgotten ‘tribal’ roots” and claims from DJs like “Between 120 beats a minute and these sounds that the human ear has never heard before, you put them to music and it appeals to some primal level of consciousness” (Hutson; Rushkoff p. 101). This idea is best typified by the raver’s belief in “Cyberia,” or the universal mystic reality that all psychic travelers – including shamans throughout history – enter into during ASCs (Rushkoff p. 4; St John p. 14; Hutson). Cyberia combines the digital cyberspace with Siberia, which is, coincidentally or not, the homeland of the Tungus tribe from which the word “šaman” was first taken and translated into “shaman.” As shown by ideas like these, technoshamanism imagines a reconnection with some intrinsically-human spiritual experience which escapes specificity and cultural nuance.

If technoshamanism claims to associate itself with a universal vision of shamanism, then it is important to note that shamanhood across traditions involves far more nuance than technoshamanism conveys. According to historian Mircea Eliade, who popularized the debated and largely-disproved notion that there are broad commonalities between all shamanic traditions, shamanhood involves many more key qualities that technoshamans do not exhibit. On Eliade’s account, shamans are also universally associated with initiatory callings such as dream

visitations from spirits or bouts of madness that reveal their fitness for the practice, initiation phases involving transformative experiences of spiritual dismemberment and reassembly, practical techniques of healing like herbalism, the mastery of "ecstatic" techniques like inducing and controlling out-of-body experiences, overcoming intense experiences with physical and psychological illnesses, and many more qualities that are ignored by technoshamanism (p. 110, 181, 259, 375). In choosing to focus only on ecstatic healing, drug use, and music, technoshamanism draws up a trivialized picture of shamanism. This is not to say that there is a universal definition of shamanism into which DJs categorically do not fit, but rather to show how technoshamanism uses an idealized shamanism as a tool to lend historical and mythical credence to rave culture's values of healing, drug use, and spirituality, while conveniently neglecting the varied and sometimes painful realities of shamanic practices.

Before moving forward, it is important to dismantle a few of technoshamanism's key assumptions about universal shamanism. Firstly, there is no specific beats-per-minute ratio that triggers trance states cross-culturally; in fact, there is little to no similarity between ritual music broadly, and trance-inducing music in one culture regularly elicits no reaction from members of a different culture (Rouget qtd Kehoe, p. 50-51). Secondly, the concept of a globally-shared alternate psychic reality is not supported by ethnographies of shamanic cultures, which show how drastically cosmologies and accounts of the spirit world differ across cultures (Kehoe, p. 52). In fact, attributing fundamental commonality to a diverse range of non-western practices is the most problematic function of the term "shamanism," and is the main reason why some scholars contest that it shouldn't be used at all (ibid). Given the legacy of colonial violence against non-western practices and people, it is essential to critically examine any broad generalizations of non-western communities to resist the trivialization, erasure, and demonization

of non-western lives. In drawing upon shamanism alongside other imagery that is taken to connote primitive-ness, rave reinforces the regressive notion that shamanism is an ancient technique belonging to the past. In reality, shamanism is practiced today in many forms across groups and individuals worldwide, and framing shamanism as an element of the "forgotten past" does injustice to shamanism's continued existence in the world today.

Though misguided, technoshamanism's idealized shamanism is an analytically useful concept because it reveals the extent to which this vision caters to the Western imagination, thus positioning technoshamanism as a neoshamanic phenomenon. According to anthropologist Joan Townsend, neoshamanism is "an invented tradition of practices and beliefs based on a constructed metaphorical, romanticized 'ideal' shaman concept which often differs considerably from traditional shamans" (p. 4). By believing in the ideal of a shared shamanic history common to all humans, anybody can claim personal connection to shamanism and use it as a tool to serve their individual needs.

Terence McKenna clearly demonstrates how technoshamanism fits the neoshamanic framework, appropriating the idea of the shaman specifically for the Western need of responding to a shared frustration with the dispassionate and limiting conditions of modern life. McKenna, the face of ethnobotanist advocacy in the 90s who was seen as "the intellectual voice of rave culture" (*Wikipedia*), defines shamanism: "What shamans have to do is act as exemplars by making this cosmic journey to the domain of the Gaian ideas, and then bringing them back in the form of art, to the struggle to save the world" (McKenna qtd. *Great Mystery*). In catering to the new-age ideal of finding primordial truth and extending the scope of the shaman's efficacy from healing a community to healing the entire world, McKenna warps shamanism into a method that perfectly embodies the Western new-age desire to re-enchant the world. At this point,

technoshamanism loses its utility as a well-defined definition of shamanism and gains a loftier, more poetic quality. Thus, technoshamanism is better understood as a metaphor used to furnish the myth that "rave constitutes a re-connection with more tribal, primitive, simpler, fuller, truer, more powerful and 'more real' times and experiences'" (Hutson).

However problematic its definition and positioning of shamanism, rave culture's association with shamanism should not be fully dismissed for its lack of accuracy. Rave's search for meaning from imagined primordial sources operates as a valid critique of modern life and demonstrates just how many people feel dissatisfied with their contemporary conditions. If rave is a form of escapism, and it is also a defining subcultural movement that spans multiple decades, we must ask what it is that ravers are escaping from. What many seek in raves – and thus, what many lack in their regular lives – is community, meaning, and excitement (Green, p, 202; Huston; Rushkoff; Garcia). What's more, those who uphold technoshamanism see it as a valid tool to refurbish their lives with these elements, and find spiritual solace in the practice of raving. Thus, while rave positions shamanism as an element of the past, it also projects it as a technology of the future: technoshamanism is held in high esteem as an operable method through which one can re-enchant the world. A technoshaman may be a trivialized shaman, but the critiques of the industrial world that are implicit in the reverence of technoshamanism should not be thrown out alongside the definition of DJ as shaman.

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