

Recovered European Cosmologies of the Imagination: the key to shared understanding and equal dialogue.

The position I would like to take is from the perspective of depth psychology and emerges from personal experience; I am both a scientist and homeopath as well as a white South African. It is ultimately an examination of and call for collective healing through a recovery of the lost indigenous cosmologies in European culture - our traditional access to the imaginary realms - as the foundation for the radical change required to begin equal and balanced dialogue with other cultures around shared ways of access to these precious and sacred inner spaces.

“[L]et us imagine a culture without a secure and sacred primal site, condemned to exhaust every possibility and feed wretchedly on all other cultures—there we have our present age ... And here stands man, stripped of myth, eternally starving, in the midst of all the past ages, digging and scrabbling for roots, even if he must dig for them in the most remote antiquities. What is indicated by the great historical need of unsatisfied modern culture, clutching about for countless other cultures, with its consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, the loss of the mythical home, the mythical womb? Let us consider whether the feverish and sinister agitation of this culture is anything other than a starving man’s greedy grasping for food ... “ (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*)

Over the past couple of millennia and most profoundly since the Enlightenment, European culture has been engaged in a gradual dis-embedding from, followed by an active discarding of, its magical sensibility and its mythic depths. In modernity, we have come to a point where the imagination has been degraded into some sort of 'decorative faculty projecting meaning onto an otherwise value-neutral world' instead of the core of our being, something real in which we actively participate, something that changes us and our reality; a deeply moral activity. Secularism, science and capitalism, the classic Weberian 'disenchantment' epitomise this loss which has happened for various reasons and through multiple agencies, correlated with the rise and dominance of the individual self and the loss of God. In the Middle Ages, the Church suppressed magical thinking, called it witchery, hocus-pocus and drowned thousands of women. In the Enlightenment, alchemy was de-spiritualised and turned into chemistry; magical thinking was ridiculed. The loss is profound and felt on a level we have yet to fully acknowledge. As a scientist, I encountered it as a corrosion of soul, a feeling of spiritual alienation and I believe it may sit in our collective shadow as an unresolved complex.

We bring to bear our rational, clinical minds, the product of a metaphysics that values objectivity, materialism and eternal principles along with its shadow – a craving for connection, meaning, a deep feeling of lack. Psychedelics appear to have given us a way to access our inner lives, that strange realm whose language of navigation we have forgotten, but I fear for the ‘craving’ that the loss engenders in those seeking meaning in psychedelic experiences and I feel that this has not been fully appreciated on a collective level. As Europeans, I think we bring a deep pathology of soul that has its origins in this loss of our inner lives. We all know about the extraction and exploitation ethic; cultural appropriation; how CEO’s in psychedelics default to conventional business logic and lose sight of what brought them there in the first place; the phenomenon of spiritual bypassing. Buddhists call this the realm of the Hungry Ghosts and it’s almost as if we are hard wired to remain there.

Acknowledging our position is the beginning of healing, of bringing the imagination back into our being, deepening our participation in reality without appropriating it from somewhere else, damaging and potentially destroying it. This in turn will open up marginalised European scholarship, place more value in poetry and art, alternative and recovered cosmologies that will change our collective approach to our inner lives or at least begin...

The ethics of engagement with other cultures is not only about reparation, respect, equity, it is also about our responsibility to ourselves as a culture, damaged by our past, our responsibility to take on the healing of our psyches, to actively confront our own loss and its shadow. It is something I learned while watching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – the criticality of the perpetrator's recognition of and grieving for their own loss of soul and the ensuing pain caused to others. Perhaps then we can meet different cultures on their own grounds, as equals and not as colonisers, to preserve possibly the last ways of accessing the imagination in service to our collective transformation. A politics of openness where we celebrate our shared humanity as Achille Mbembe has suggested in his concept of the 'postcolony' - "an *interlocking* of presents, pasts and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts and futures, each age bearing, altering and maintaining the previous ones".

Recently, after delivering a presentation on Psychedelics, the light and dark of overlapping epistemologies, I was asked by why we, in the West, seem to have developed this passion for altered states of consciousness. Why now? Something deep seems to be driving it, perhaps the lack of the very thing we seek – meaning, love, healing, the promise of relief and redemption, insight, self love and forgiveness? An emptiness and a craving produced perhaps by our disconnection from the mythic, imaginary realms; a suppression of our spiritual impulse, that faculty that connects us to something greater, a numinous reality of some sorts. Viewed through the lens of depth psychology, suppression of a natural impulse creates a shadow and this can operate on wide cultural levels, a form of pathology.

The discoveries of psychedelics are really only new to our industrialised, modern culture. We used to have our own ways of access to these realms, our own traditions of the inner life, but we discarded, ridiculed and ultimately rejected them. I think this has created not only our sense of meaninglessness, driving our craving now for these experiences, but also generated the structures, the metaphysics, epistemologies under which we now seek, that neo-colonial cultural appropriation, 'extract and discard' as I have characterised it elsewhere. Have we escaped this neurosis or are the hungry ghosts of our past disconnection still ultimately running the show?

I believe it emanates from an entitlement, perhaps an arrogance... something I'm unfortunately well familiar with. In training as a scientist, I thought I'd find the Divine in the wonder of the genetic code, the beauty of Nature and its underlying patterns, but the actual doing of Science I found deeply corrosive. The need for objectivity that the Sciences revere; the removal of the observer from the observed and the cold measurement of variables disconnects you from the very thing you seek. The arrogance isolates you in a cold lonely world, insulating you from any fellow feeling.