

SACRED FEMININITY AND AUTHORITY: GENDER STRATIFICATION IN NEOSHAMANIC GROUPS¹

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***Abstract:** In all Western countries neoshamanic groups share an important characteristic: statistics demonstrate the significant prevalence of women. At the same time, neoshamanic groups also have inner power dynamics related to gender. Some authors argue that in small religious groups without charismatic leaders strong personalities may appear charismatic and occupy positions of high status. Such gender dynamics have been historically associated with a positional advantage to men, although in such settings charisma might be decoupled from gender characteristics that tend to disadvantage women. The article presents the results of research conducted on a neoshamanic group in Bratislava belonging to the FSS (Foundation for Shamanic Studies). In this environment, charismatic authority has been for a long time absent: according to the concept of core shamanism, being a shaman does not mean having a 'gift', and a leader is usually represented as a person who is just more skilled than other group members. However, during recent decades, a process of group stratification has resulted in the formation of new groups and the emergence of male charismatic leaders who initially did not represent themselves as charismatic. Current male leaders' self-representations usually refer to inner qualities related to a combination of particular stereotypical gender characteristics. I argue that this image corresponds to (1) the intuitive way of knowledge/ emotions related to female characteristics and (2) the active position of urban shamans related to male characteristics. This combination follows from the specific ideology of urban shamanism as a kind of alternative healing aimed at the transformation of individuals and society.*

***Key words:** neoshamanism, gender, charisma, gender stratification, alternative medicine, CAM*

Introduction

During recent decades, gender has been among the most popular topics in the study of religion. Numerous studies have shown that gendering as a social practice is central to religion: gender patterns are part of cultural discourses and

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social institutions, including the religious sphere (Calef 2009: 2). The dominance of women in many religious practices postulated a general question: Are women more religious than men? (Miller & Stark 2002). A wide range of gender definitions and theories are paying attention to the ways in which gender differences are conceptualized in particular cultures. Scholars examine constructions, representations, and performances of masculinity and femininity in religious practices and try to reveal hidden gender patterns that represent the deep structures of religious life (King & Beattie 2004).

Because religion is a power system, the social construction of gender roles in religious practices is directly influenced by the distribution of power. This process is particularly complex in the modern religious world, which is increasingly characterized by the coexistence of old faiths and new spiritualities (Woodhead & Heelas 2000). Gender differences therefore have become a focus in the study of contemporary spiritual trends, in particular the New Age movement that opposes established religious systems and conventional gender roles. Many scholars have pointed out that the process of cultural change that has led to the transformation of orthodox religious values, in mostly Christian Western societies, has been experienced differently by women than by men: whilst men's roles throughout the process have hardly changed, women's roles have changed dramatically (Woodhead 2006; Aupers & Houtman 2006).

The New Age movement is a rather loose set of diverse beliefs and practices. It includes several trends that may overlap. One of them is neoshamanism or urban shamanism, which has attracted many adherents in Europe and the United States in recent decades. The term neoshamanism "implies a distinction between traditional shamanisms that have been passed down from generation to generation within specific cultural traditions (as described in the works of particularist ethnographers) and more improvised, provisional shamanic rituals and experiences often born within workshop settings and informed by past (or recent) ethnographic literature" (DuBois 2011: 111). In all Western countries, neoshamanic groups share an important characteristic: their statistics demonstrate the significant prominence of women. Nonetheless, many leaders of neoshamanic groups are men. In my contribution I consider the gender stratification of some neoshamanic groups practicing in Slovakia, and I investigate factors influencing their gender dynamics.

Neoshamanism is part of a larger discourse on nature-based spirituality and is deeply rooted in European and North American history of thought (Stuckrad 2002: 771). In general, "scholars trace neoshamanism's philosophical roots to the romanticizing or nostalgic sensibilities of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographers concerning spiritual belief, imagistic or mystical religious experience, idealism, materialism, nature, hunter-gatherer societies, and the appeal of improvised, personalized rituals as powerful enabling documents for the eventual development of neoshamanic practices. In neoshamanism, these scholars suggest, the musings of disaffected Western theorists are transformed into concrete actions for incorporating shamanic practices and understandings into personal ritual repertoires as alternatives to Western cultural categories and values deemed insufficient or misguided" (Du Bois 2011: 111). Moreover, urban shamanism

shares with the New Age movement the belief that we are living in times of radical cultural change and an approaching new age. In this process, individuals, as well as society as a whole, are undergoing a transformation. Gender is an important aspect of this transformation. Inspired by romantic ideals of nature, urban shamans adopt a critical attitude toward the conventional gender roles characteristic of many religious communities in Western societies.

I have conducted research on neoshamanic beliefs and practices in Bratislava since 2009. I was a member of two neoshamanic groups, and I have known many shamans (including three leaders) since 2004, when I first participated in neoshamanic meetings. The first group has functioned under the auspices of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter referred to as FSS)² – an organization whose aim is to teach so-called core shamanism all over the world. The second group was formed around a spiritual teacher who practiced in private settings (Bužeková 2011; 2012). The two groups significantly differ. In the present paper I will consider mainly the FSS groups.

Neoshamanic groups in Western societies consist mostly of women (Lindquist 2001a: 3, 2001b: 24). Slovak groups are not exceptional in this sense. However, numeric prevalence is only one aspect of gender stratification in such groups: currently most of the FSS leaders are men, although the movement in Slovakia was started by women. I argue that the legitimization of the neoshamanic leaders' authority, in particular in relation to gender stereotypes, is a crucial factor in the study of gender dynamics (I explored a general question concerning leaders' authority in my previous publication, see Bužeková 2011). In the context of spiritual movements, the topic cannot be investigated without paying attention to the concept of charisma.³ A charismatic leader is typically represented as having a spiritual gift related to mystic powers. The leaders of the FSS groups are not supposed to have such a gift: according to the conception of core shamanism, any person can become a shaman; all people have shamanic abilities, but they have to be developed and sharpened. However, at present the male leaders are represented as persons endowed with exceptional abilities, although during the first phase of development of the FSS groups in Slovakia, the leaders' special powers were not emphasized.

According to Martin et al. (2001), small religious groups with charismatic leaders seem to have different gender dynamics than groups without such leaders. The presence of such a leader changes what charisma "means": without such a leader, strong personalities may appear charismatic and attain positions of high status – historically such dynamics have tended to be associated with a positional advantage to males. With such a leader, however, charisma is more likely to be compatible with receptivity and decoupled from gender characteristics that tend to disadvantage women. Nonetheless, I argue that religious beliefs are often gender-biased, and, as a result, gender might play an important role in the legitimization

² <http://www.shamanism.org/> [5. 5. 2014]

³ In this paper I understand the term 'leader's charisma' as Weber's notion of a type of authority, which is often mystical and is based on a leader's personality and ability to attract followers.

of a non-charismatic leader's position. In my paper I will present the results of my research related to (1) gender stratification in neoshamanic groups; and (2) representations of a shaman in connection to gender stereotypes.

One of the basic neoshamanic ideas is sacred femininity; it is represented by many female deities including the main figure of neoshamanism – Mother Earth. Furthermore, to be a leader of a neoshamanic group means first of all to be a skilled alternative or traditional healer. This kind of healing in Western societies belongs to the private sphere and is associated mostly with women. The leader therefore is supposed to have certain feminine features related to the specific religious context. On the other hand, a leading social position requires characteristics that in Western societies are typically ascribed to men.

I will argue that in this context the characteristics of an urban shaman correspond to: (1) feminine characteristics in the general scheme “woman/sensitivity/intuition vs. man/rationality”; (2) masculine characteristics associated with an active social position. These aspects are important in the representation of charismatic male leaders who initially were not represented as charismatic: charisma in this context is associated with a specific combination of feminine and masculine stereotypical features.

Western shamanism, in particular its FSS version, has developed on the basis of traditional shamanic beliefs described in ethnographic literature. The first part of the paper is therefore dedicated to a review of previous research on traditional shamanism and its social context in relation to gender representations: it is important to consider in what way ethnographers' gender bias might have influenced neoshamanic beliefs. The second part of the paper describes the social values of neoshamans in relation to gender. In the third part of the paper I relate neoshamanism to the so-called complementary and alternative medicine characterized by the prominence of women. The last part focuses on a description of gender dynamics in the FSS groups in Slovakia.

Urban shamanism and gender aspects of ethnographic research on traditional shamanism

The term “neoshamanism” refers to the revival of spiritual traditions from tribal societies in a contemporary urban environment. Numerous studies have shown that this movement is to a certain degree the product of Western ethnographies of tribal or traditional societies.⁴ Svanberg (2003, quoted in Stuckrad 2005: 126-127), for instance, coined the term “shamanthropology”, indicating that what is called neoshamanism today is actually the product of approaches and methods used in the field of ethnography over the last forty years. It is therefore important to consider research on traditional shamanism to understand contemporary neoshamanic beliefs and practices.

Gender aspects of traditional shamanism, which appear in Western ethnographies, focus on three main topics: (1) spiritual marriage; (2) shamanic transvestism or

⁴ See, for instance, Znamenski 2007, Stuckrad 2002, 2005.

so-called “third gender”; and (3) sexual relationship with spiritual allies. These themes are directly connected to the essence of shamanism – healing through contacting the world of spirits. Two ways of such contact are presented in the ethnographies:

- An out-of-body experience /shamanic journey to the world of spirits: the shaman is acting as spiritual agent while his/her body remains immovable/uninvolved;
- Possession: believing that the practitioner’s personality is replaced by a spirit entity.

The ethnographies of traditional shamanism indicate that gender aspects of shamanic beliefs and practices are related to a specific political context. In ethnographic descriptions, male practitioners predominate in the traditions of the shamanic journey, whereas women are more conspicuously present in the traditions relying on possession. The prevalence of female shamans has been recorded by ethnographers in societies where shamanism was suppressed by the religion of state power. On the other hand, the typical model of the shaman in small societies without a centralized power structure is a charismatic man (Atkinson 2004: 127-128; see also Winkelman 1990).

Atkinson’s review of shamanic studies offers many examples of such ethnographies. For instance, Walraven (1983, quoted in Atkinson 2004: 317) argues that Korean shamans are women whose site of activity is the household; they undertake no journeys. Siberian shamans, on the other hand, are men who set off on spiritual travels fraught with dangers. Lewis (1981, quoted in Atkinson 2004: 317) has attributed this pattern to women’s peripheralization and deprivation. He shows that where women dominate in the shamanic ranks, it is often the case that shamanic prowess has been edged out or subsumed by political and religious centralization. Balzer (1987, cit. v Atkinson 2004: 317) describes such a process for the Khanty, where an upsurge in female shamans has accompanied a decline in shamanic prestige due to modernizing pressures from the Soviet State. In contrast to shamanic traditions in much of the world, East Asian shamanism is often in the hands of women.⁵ Bourguignon suggests that the socialization of males in hunting societies for independence and self-reliance is related to the common presence in these societies of hallucinatory or vision trances, most often experienced by men. In agricultural societies, women are frequently “socialized for obedience and compliance” (Bourguignon 1979: 264). Thus, the possession trance is more characteristic of women in agricultural societies; it is more consistent with their role as someone to be acted upon by external agencies (Shaara & Strathern 1992: 148).

In other words, ethnographic studies indicate that a shaman enjoying authority in his/her community was represented as *an active agent* (concept of the shamanic journey), most likely as a man. On the other hand, in societies where the shamans’ authority was replaced by the authority of state or church, the shaman was rep-

⁵ “Feminization” of traditional shamanism in the former Soviet republics is described in the volume „A woman and the renaissance of shamanism“ (Charitonova, Pimenova, and Piterskaja 2005).

resented as a passive being (concept of possession), most likely as a woman. Taussig (1987), however, argues that the image of the male sustainer of structure and order is the product of colonial and neo-colonial imaginings. Shamans mediate divisions of caste and class relations, and therefore exploring the dialectics of shamanic power in relation to gender must take into account the ambiguities and multi valences of shamanic power and anticipate related complexities in gendered ideas and practice.

In contemporary studies, earlier ethnographies are re-evaluated: it has been pointed out that academic descriptions of shamanism in tribal societies tended to trivialize or marginalize the role of women and misinterpreted their activities (see, for instance, Kendall 1985; Hollimon 2001). Some scholars paid attention to the subjectivity of ethnographers in terms of gender (e. g. Tedlock 2005). The very term “shaman” was questioned as an analytical category: it is important to remember that this term is not in use in most tribal societies which have their own words for spiritual healing. Representation of the shaman in academic discourse is related rather to spiritual healing in general, not to concrete healing traditions (see, for instance, Francfort, Hamayon, and Bahn 2001; Bužeková 2010). If we assume that the category “shaman” is an academic construction, it follows that it probably reflects the gender-biased attitudes of ethnographers. Representations of the shaman in urban shamanism are based on those gender-biased academic descriptions; since this movement started in the mid-20th century, gender aspects of the shaman’s representation correspond to the post-war transformation of Western culture.

The establishment of urban shamanism was related to the structural transformation of Western (in particular, American) society after the Second World War. Standards of living improved, which resulted in the appearance of new alternative life styles. Boekhoven states that from the 1950s onwards “the new cultural circumstances brought a ferment of shifting dispositions, also because different interest groups perceived the cultural forms of authorities and/or their parents as straightjackets that restrained from achieving freedom. Lifestyle choices entailed new leisure activities, new political beliefs, new family relations, a ‘sexual revolution’, new moral, ethical and aesthetic standards, new social networks and new consumption patterns; the world was thick with potential” (Boekhoven 2011: 164). Furthermore, as Znamenski notes, “the 1960s saw the end of colonial empires, the rise of national liberation movements in the third world, and the resurgence of non-Western ‘people without history’, who had been marginalized by European and American social scholarship” (Znamenski 2007: 166). Znamenski argues that at the same time for many educated people the “traditional” Western principles – progress, science, and rationality – were associated with colonialism and exploitation. In the social sciences and the humanities, this disenchantment with Enlightenment values resulted in the rejection of academic abstractions and explanations. Scholars began to pay attention to individual experience and spiritual traditions that were previously perceived as irrational or obscure. More frequent use of the words “shaman” and “shamanism” was a result of this shift in the intellectual atmosphere: shamans were perceived as analogous to Western psy-

chiatrists. In the Esalen Institute in California – the centre of alternative American culture – shamanism, along with yoga, drama therapy, and various Asian techniques, entered the list of spiritual methods which helped Westerners in their search for spiritual values (Znamenski 2007: 168-169, xi).

At that time alternative spiritual movements started to represent shamans as “wounded healers” whose suffering endowed them with the ability to heal other people as well as society. Based on Western ethnographies, shamans were associated with tribal societies and with resistance to colonialism, but also with marginalized social groups, including women. “Shamanism as a spiritual therapy also fits well the format of eco-feminism, which approaches women as natural healers who stay in tune with nature, in contrast to the male part of the society that seeks to subordinate nature. The premise of eco-feminism is that women stay close to the earth’s values and therefore are inherently shamanic people, who will be able to more successfully heal the earth than will males. Moreover, exercising certain doses of imagination, one can relate the subordinate status of women in earlier Western history and the pain it inflicted on the ‘hidden half’ to the ritual sickness and initiation of shamans. Viewed from this angle, women appear as natural shamans. As wounded healers, they rise up to cure the world from patriarchy, rationalism, and materialism” (Znamenski 2007: 253-254).

The institutionalization of urban shamanism is associated with an American anthropologist, Michael Harner, who was inspired by Mircea Eliade’s ideas and considered shamanism to be the oldest form of spirituality. He used ethnographies of various cultures and created a specific system of spiritual techniques – so-called core shamanism, referring to the “essence” of shamanism, to the “universal principles and practices not bound to any specific cultural group or perspective”. His aim was to rediscover the original spiritual tradition of humanity and bring it to public attention, first of all in the West. After many years of field research he left academic circles and established the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (henceforth the FSS), which started in 1979 as the Center for Shamanic Studies. Teaching core shamanism through FSS courses was supposed to help the spiritual healing of Western society.

Harner was inspired by the ethnographies of egalitarian tribal societies associated with the concept of the shamanic journey and did not consider healing through possession to be a form of shamanism. Healing as the basic feature of core shamanism therefore has been associated with active behaviour and has both social and individual dimensions, in accord with Harner’s vision of the spiritual redemption of Western civilization. This representation fits well into the context of the post-war transformation of Western societies and corresponds to the political values of liberal, educated people.

Although in the ethnographies that inspired Harner the shamans were mostly represented as men, urban shamanism is characterized by the prominence of women. I believe that, partly, it might be a result of shamanism being associated with *alternative* healing, in contrast to the established system of biomedicine: in *Western societies non-biomedical or non-institutionalized treatment belongs rather* to the private sphere associated with women’s activities. However, in

neoshamanism, this gender-biased assumption, which places women outside the public sphere, is combined with the representation of the shaman as an active healer of society. Shamanism as a socially profitable activity is therefore attractive for both men and women with certain a social status who seek self-realization and active engagement in social activities. I will try to demonstrate that urban shamans' active position corresponds to their social status and political ideals.

Urban shamans and Slovak society

Neoshamanic groups began to form in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic in the 1990s, immediately after the fall of communism, for the most part due to the activities of the FSS Europe and, in particular, Austrian shamans living in Vienna. In Slovakia the first two lecturers to train at the FSS and receive certificates of completion were a psychologist, Alena, and a philosopher, Zuzana.⁶ In 1999 they established the Centre for Shamanic Studies in Slovakia; since then they have been engaged in teaching at the workshops and in healing activities. Apart from the Bratislava group, there are neoshamanic groups working in co-operation with the FSS in two towns in central Slovakia – Banská Bystrica and Zvolen.

At the beginning of the 1990s, various beliefs started to flow into the Slovak environment. Religious and spiritual themes became part of TV and radio broadcasting; books on spiritual matters flooded bookshops; and with the advance of the internet, people gained access to diverse spiritual teachings, in particular ideas of the New Age movement, which had previously been rather remote for people living in eastern and central Europe. The atmosphere in Slovak cities after the change of political regime was quite favourable to such teachings, which offered paths to spiritual growth that had earlier been discouraged or even suppressed by communist institutions; at the same time, these ideas were presented as an alternative to Christianity and were attractive in particular to young seekers of spirituality.

Many of my respondents mentioned the 1990s as a decisive period in their spiritual development⁷ and described a general interest in the esoteric teachings which were spreading in Slovakia (Reiki, the Silva Method, yoga, and others, see Bužeková 2011). Shamanism was a specific spiritual path, though compatible with other esoteric traditions. It also had an exotic flavour, as it was associated with “primitive” people, and it referred to an “ancient wisdom” of humanity and a closeness to nature. The FSS groups in Slovakia preferred the shamanic tradition of North American Indians – a dominant element of core shamanism.

The “audience” for neoshamanism is specific because the variety of potential shamans trained through the FSS courses is limited by an important factor: to attain shamanic knowledge one has to pay. Although the FSS is defined as a non-profit organisation, every workshop and course costs money. The prices vary, depending

⁶ I've changed the names of all my respondents.

⁷ My research sample consisted mostly of middle-aged people (35-58). In this paper I will not focus on the age stratification of neo-shamanic groups because this problem needs special attention.

on the country, the corresponding intervals, and the levels of participants' expertise. Yet money is not the only factor influencing the social stratification of the neo-shamanic groups: another important factor is the intellectual side of shamanic teaching, attracting people who are interested in the world of fantasy and mystery. Thus the FSS version of neoshamanism primarily addresses a particular social category – educated people with access to certain ideas through literature or other media and who have the money to satisfy their spiritual interests. Their spiritual efforts are linked to certain social values, which in neoshamanism are combined with Harner's vision of universal healing and the transformation of the world.

The basic premise of core shamanism is that the world is a whole. Everything in the universe is interconnected, and our thoughts and deeds influence the world. Human beings do not create this universal cobweb; rather they participate in its functioning as one of the forms of existence. Galina Lindquist argues that this idea demonstrates a “democratic” dimension of neoshamanism: everything in the world is equal; people are not superior to other living beings; anything that exists in the world is a living being and has a soul; human beings have more opportunities to influence the world cobweb and therefore their duty is to protect and heal weaker beings. The shamanic mission is to heal the environment, the community, and individual bodies, and thereby to maintain the world (Lindquist, 2004: 87).

I observed similar attitudes during my research. Ecologism and the idea of interconnectedness, coming back to nature and healing the Earth, and a general balance as essential to a healthy existence – all these beliefs characterize urban shamans in Slovakia.

I think everything that happens on the Earth has its cause. Water and Mother Earth show us that nature is stronger than we imagine, and we are not the masters: the natural elements demonstrate what they can do. But it is just a delicate reminder. And I think that when in some area the elements ... well, behave in a certain way, it means that this area is not tuned to the universe and people are not wholly loyal to it. Either they plunder or they do something that does not correspond to God's plans or ecology. Thus, I think that that is a reminder. All those tsunami and all those problems that appeared during recent years are a reminder for us. I think it influenced anybody. I am just frozen and shocked when I think even about the possibility of those events.... But I've realized that they occurred in certain areas and people there behave in a certain way. They cannot just take things from the sea; they have to learn how to create things, to breed, to cultivate. Life is about this: we start working. In the past there were fishermen who were catching fish. But the world has changed and developed and now there are fish factories breeding fish and people learn.... They even place trout and, I don't know, salmon into rivers. Thus, there are people who do that and there are people who just take. It is impossible – just to take. I used to say: you will get what you give. It does not work the other way around, that is, if you take, you will get something. It does not work. The universe and the world do not work like that. The initiative must come from us. It means that if we will give something to a beggar, we will get something. It is simple – the initiative must be ours. (Kornélia)

We separated from nature. We buy a teddy-bear or lion or owl or some other toy for our children, and that means that we are alienated from nature. Our children would get at least those toy animals; they go to the zoo to be close to the natural world. The shamans live in that world, in the prairies; they have a direct contact with their animals. [...] I used to work in the zoo [as a volunteer – the author's note]. I will tell you an example.

Last time when I went there, nobody was there because it was raining, so that I could go to a chimpanzee's cage; and he started to communicate with me: he shouted, and I shouted too. So we shouted a little bit and that was unbelievable. I really don't know what he wanted to say to me, but I realized that his energy remained with me. I had an unbelievable feeling about myself, a joy. Animals teach us this joy; they teach us not to be afraid of our animal nature, I suppose. (Dušana)

Lindquist assumes that the idea of the interconnectedness of all living beings and the vision of common work on general balance are linked to the urban shamans' political ideals: egalitarian social order, citizens' engagement, ecological lifestyle, individualism and free choice, gender equality (Lindquist, 2004: 87). An ecological lifestyle is characteristic of all my respondents; most of them are actively engaged in public activities (for instance, some of them are volunteers). They assume that they can contribute to society by applying their specific knowledge and practicing shamanism: this is their responsibility and their duty. They emphasize the social dimension of their healing practices:

I think any shaman is a healer, but he also undertakes a spiritual journey. His spirits keep him there; they give strength to him and show him things, thus they educate him. His basic activities, in my opinion, are his healing practices, his prophesying. He has to know how to speak to his people, as it was in the past. "Yes, now we will sow this, and there we will hunt, and then we have to do that; because otherwise we will be frozen and will not have food". [...] Thus, he is integrated into common activities in the community; he is not exceptional, he does not have any specific position. He does not use his spirits to cultivate his own garden, no way. He serves the society, the community. I am certain of this. (Robert)

It is about common work: we all are the same, nobody is superior, and nobody is inferior; we all are equal and we are sitting in a circle. The circle is about sharing, and also about vision. We would create something that would become a ritual, and we will do it together, we will do our common work. And this work is profitable not only for us, but also for our family, for everybody, for the whole world. (Tereza)

The idea of balance – both natural and social – is connected to the concept of work that can change the world. Spiritual leaders of various traditions are considered exemplary persons: due to the eclectic nature of neoshamanism, they could be perceived as shamans in the broadest sense of the word. A shaman I call Milada started work on her bachelor's degree in the field of social work when she was fifty five; she successfully graduated and her intention for the present is to work with homeless people. She says:

We belong to the sensational 5 % of the planet's population who are millionaires: we have a home, a roof above our heads; we have heating, water, aluxury life. But people here do not realize that millions do not have their own home. I think people should give, should support others, because for those who do not have anything this support is a hope. But they should not do it out of pity. They have to create respect for people, to make them understand that this is normal work. I contribute a lot. I buy Nota Bene.⁸ Now I am at the university, I am practicing; I try to understand why people are homeless, what is

⁸ A magazine whose aim is to help homeless people, who sell the magazine on the streets and keep some of the money they make from sales. Thus they can earn some money to start a new life.

the cause. It is a global problem. I like to give, and I give a lot. I contribute to some organizations and I give what I can give, what I have. Apart from tarot cards, I have cards with the saints. I greatly respect them because I think that the saints – we learnt it in school – were those people who during human history started social work. That was social work: it meant they made people understand that it was important to give. They were fantastic. Since my childhood I have had a profound respect for them and I am always touched. I love Mother Therese. I do not care if she is here or if she is a heavenly being – I love her. I greatly respect her and I know what her work means. It means five or six thousand shelters, it means helping people, the poorest ones, not to let them sink to the bottom.

The freedom of choice is extremely important for urban shamans. First of all, selection of concrete practices is not restricted: in core shamanism there are no dogmas, no “right” choices or “right” techniques. „The common approach here is if a spiritual technique works for one personally, it becomes acceptable“ (Znamenski, 2007: 251). Shamans are also free to change their lives in terms of work or study. Milada, who I mentioned above, and another shaman, Elena, decided to study when they were middle-aged. Robert left his previous work in a firm and started a new career as a masseur. Mirka left a bank where she had worked for a long time and began to paint. Independent decisions and resistance to social pressure correspond to the general orientation of urban shamanism. Urban shamans in Slovakia, like their Western counterparts, emphasize an individualistic attitude, independence, and responsibility. Collective work in neoshamanism is compatible with individualism.

There was a time when I sponsored approximately 200 people. I ran an organization employing about 50 people who were doing marketing. Then I realized that I did not want to do it anymore, it was tiring. And I asked heaven: I would like to meet people who work independently, who are not dependent on others, who would not have to rely on others. And this brought me somehow to shamanism. I realized that those people who got to know shamanism or started practicing shamanism were very independent, they were not reliant on others, and they were able to work independently. It does not matter to what degree they are involved. They do not rely on you, do not call you every day, what to do, how to do it, or that they need something; they do not need a guru. These are independent people. And that suits me. I need to talk to them, and they need to talk to me, but we meet only when we want to meet; we do not push ourselves, and we do not stick to each other. (Nina)

The shamans emphasized that independence is also important in the economic sphere, both at the individual and the social level. Many of them have their own business (and use shamanic techniques in their strategies, see below). At the same time, the world economic crisis has been an important topic in their stories. Some of the shamanic meetings in which I participated were dedicated to this complex situation that was interpreted as an “illness” – the result of unbalanced social conditions – which had to be cured by common efforts. The situation in Slovakia was sometimes represented as the result of a general passive attitude of the Slovak people, in contrast to the active attitude of shamans.

To say more, this feature of Slovaks is deeply rooted: they always whine and cry; they always pity themselves. It is manifested in folk songs, in the whole tradition that is about

1500 years old. All of them just whined and cried; they were angry at their masters; it was better for them to rob, to take things.... All of them worked hard, that is true, and I do not question it. But to rise, to start doing better, that was much harder. And most of us, who are here now, do not manage things. The master shaman manages at least the basic things. And money is the most basic: though we can do without them, we would be just pilgrims, poor ones. Without money we can just go on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela or somewhere else.... Or we can try to do things in a different way – with money. (Mirka)

The economic crisis was one of the main topics of discussion during a shamanic meeting which I attended in the summer of 2001; it was dedicated to the creation of a so-called medicine wheel. The seminar goal was to solve participants' personal problems and improve their use of shamanic techniques. However, the meeting also was supposed to contribute to the cure of Slovakia, in particular to healing the area where the medicine wheel was constructed. Thus, in the discussions, the shamans often referred to the authentic Slovak tradition and the old Slavic deities (see Bužeková 2011). Robert, who is currently one of the FSS leaders in Slovakia, is deeply interested in the reconstruction and revitalization of the old Slavic tradition: he claims that the Slavic deities would help to cure Slovakia. The shamans should study the old Slavic healing practices and use them now (see Bužeková 2011).

Neoshamanism, like other spiritual New Age movements, criticizes monotheistic religions, especially Christianity, due to its negative attitude toward sexuality as well as its marginalization of women and its acceptance of a dominant heterosexual patriarchy. On the other hand, Christianity rejects shamanism. In Slovakia, Christianity is a dominant religious system and therefore the position of urban shamans in society is uncertain. They are perceived as people doing bizarre things, even as crazy people. Christian authors in the mass media (especially on the internet) attack them and charge them with allying themselves with demons, evoking dark powers and deceased people's souls, serving Satan, etc.⁹ Most of my informants' relatives therefore are not friendly towards shamanism. Thus, shamans either conceal their activities, or they have conflicts in their families. During my research, I witnessed many attacks on shamanic groups. For example, during one of the weekend meetings, we stayed at a guest-house in the hills near Bratislava; our neighbours were school children who intended to go on the tours. The shamanic meeting was supervised by an Indian lecturer who taught core shamanism. One day the children verbally attacked her; their supervisors tried to calm them down, but the supervisors' behaviour was not friendly either. Another example: the medicine wheel that I mentioned above has been constructed near Belušké Slatiny every year; but every year the work must be done from scratch because people from the neighbourhood destroy the "pagan" stones.

Thus, most of my informants are rather cautious about publishing their shamanic identity. It is not problematic if one practices with friends. But it is not that

⁹ The relationship between neo-shamanism and Christianity is a special topic that I do not consider in the present paper.

easy for shamans who want to attract clients and earn money.¹⁰ They use personal contacts and create web pages, as do shamans from Western countries. A typical strategy to legitimize shamanic practices is referring to tradition (see Bužeková 2011). Robert says:

Several times people asked me for help via the internet: they could find those things there. But I think that this form of contact does not work properly, because many people do not know the real meaning of the word “shamanism”. They often mistake it for something else and do not trust it. That’s why I used to say to clients that I use old healing techniques. I know what I do, and I let people develop their own attitude; then I would explain that we would work with this and that; now we would drum a little bit, we would do this, we would call spirits – but please, do not be afraid, the spirits are not souls of the deceased, they are compassionate spirits, our helpers. From the very beginning I explain things, not to make them feel that they are in danger.... Then they are satisfied. Some of them return to me; we consult about dreams, or some things about the future, or relationships. Some people come, try, and leave – they do not manage. It is as everywhere I guess.

The urban shamans’ position in the society of Slovakia is marginal. Nonetheless, although they are often perceived in a negative way, their own attitude is oriented toward active practicing. To be a shaman in the context of the FSS circles is an important mission: it means helping the transformation of society, which should result in the creation of a healthier, happier and more beautiful world. Most of my respondents use shamanic techniques for solving their personal problems, primarily illness problems. But such use does not contradict a general vision of social change: healing at the personal level in urban shamanism is perceived as part of healing the world.

Neoshamanism and CAM

In the New Age movement spiritual transformation is mostly related to practicing magic, but also to alternative medicine, which is not necessarily accompanied by magic techniques. Both magical practices and non-magical alternative medicine are based on a holistic perspective and aim to heal the body as well as the soul. However, neoshamanism is specific: healing is *the main purpose* of the urban shamans. Holistic alternative medicine is therefore more important in neoshamanism than in other traditions belonging to the New Age movement. The interpretation of bodily illnesses as physiological disorders corresponding to the biomedical model is not discarded in neoshamanism, but rather it is broadened: physiological disorder is understood to be the result of spiritual unbalance. Specific physiological symptoms are explained by means of certain neoshamanic concepts: soul loss, ignoring one’s inner child, etc.¹¹ In a broader sense therefore neoshamanic

¹⁰ Legislation in Slovakia does not permit people to heal unless they are biomedical doctors or have a legitimate license compatible with biomedical practices. Therefore, shamans who establish their own *živnosť* (trade) with the intention of solving people’s problems cannot heal officially; they have a license in counselling.

¹¹ Psychology, in particular psychoanalysis, plays an important role in this extrapolation. Its influence on the formation of core shamanism is described in detail in Znamenski 2007: 79-120.

techniques belong to Complementary and Alternative Medicine (hereinafter referred to as CAM).

In Europe, North America, and Australia CAM therapies have had a relatively long history, and the prominence of women in CAM has been consistently noted (Harris and Rees 2000). The popularity of CAM depends on many factors, including postmodern values, the transformation of personal worldviews, as well as dissatisfaction with biomedical healthcare and relationships between patients and medical workers (Astin 2000; Furnham & Vincent 2000; Kelner 2000). CAM was investigated by feminist authors. For instance, Nissen (2011) explored the reasons why women use CAM techniques more than men and examined relationships between the use of CAM, personal transformation, and social change. She argues that practicing CAM is linked to women's efforts to achieve equality with men; particular approaches to CAM are influenced by personal experience and values. For women, CAM is an opportunity not only to fulfil themselves but also to confront traditional gender roles and dominant discourses of femininity. Furthermore, it "contributes towards promoting and achieving social change through the changing of the customary social practices of biomedicine, the development of new epistemic paradigms, the shaping of new working practices, and the creation of alternative communities" (Nissen 2011: 187). It is important also to investigate responsibilities and power relations among practitioners, characterized by tensions similar to those found in biomedical practices. Women practicing CAM draw on CAM ideologies to legitimize alternative healing techniques and re-shape their identities and lives. Women's practice and use of CAM can be described as a form of "progressive individualism" (Scott 1998) that resonates with a feminist agenda.

Personal transformation linked with the use of neoshamanic practices is a frequent motive in my respondents' life stories. As I mentioned above, two of them, both middle-aged women, were brave enough to begin university-level studies – which is still quite a rare phenomenon in Slovakia. Other women started their own businesses and have enjoyed success which they ascribe to their use of shamanic practices. Middle-aged women emphasize that they could not have achieved such personal change in the past, during the socialist era, and they link their personal transformation to the social change – not only to the change of political regime, but also to a growing religious tolerance (it is important to note that my respondents live in Bratislava and its vicinity; people's perception of social change in rural areas might be very different).

Many women link their personal transformation to divorce which they perceive as an emancipation. For some of them divorce led to a general change of life conditions and therefore to a change of behaviour. For others, divorce was the result of behavioural change that husbands were not willing to accept. For instance, Lydia was married to a famous musician and had lived in her husband's shadow. She was always inclined to spiritual things, but at some crucial point, she started actively to work on her personal development, and eventually she divorced her husband who did not like her behaviour. Women often change their life style,

some beginning with an awareness of nutrition (healthy food, diets). Some of them start practicing eastern traditional techniques, such as yoga or Thai Chi, or even martial arts. Because neoshamanism is an eclectic movement linked to an ecological worldview, an interpretation of those practices in shamanic terms is not problematic.

Shamanism helped me to connect to earth's energies and to recover, when I conducted shamanic journeys. I am air [an Air Sign in the Zodiac – the author's note], and thus I existentially need earth. I found out that 99.9 % of people are not grounded; they even do not know what that is. I have practiced Thai Chi and Chi Kung for two and half years; I studied I Ch'ing, and all the time it was coming out that I had to be grounded. And all those eastern people talk about it: be grounded and relax! It means that when I am relaxed, I am not blocked, and when I am grounded, I see reality as it is, and that means that I do not have to see only positive things. It is just about this: I would not reject them and would not resist them and would not be blind. So – my eyes did not see reality, and now it is much better. (Soňa) [Soňa has serious sight problems – the author's note]

Several of my respondents not only changed their life styles, but also started their own businesses. For instance, Liza offers courses in power yoga; Milada teaches courses in spiritual painting on silk and sells silk kerchiefs of her own production; Eva opened a tea-house where she mixes teas and herbal drinks in accordance with traditional techniques.¹² Simona created an internet course on diets and healthy nutrition. She puts diets in opposition to biomedical practices and offers an alternative to the existing health care model:

I want to open courses for weight loss, for change of food or nutrition. I would open other motivational courses. I would open them on the internet, so that people would apply; a course would last several weeks, and I would use all my experience with diets and food. A couple of years ago I attended a lecture delivered by a Slovak doctor, which was dedicated to nutrition. I was shocked because he severely opposed diets. And I've tried perhaps all the diets I've heard about. The diets taught me to search, to observe myself to the smallest detail: if I have pimples or not; if I have inflammation; what secretions I have. And my shamanic search for myself started with nutrition. For me – and I think for any woman – diets are a blessing, because they focus her on her inner state instead of her appearance. Thus, I have an extremely positive attitude to diets. I've tried perhaps all of them, because I wanted to know how they work and if they work at all. I even fasted for thirteen days together with my friend who had a tumour on her uterus. She did not want to undergo surgery, so she decided to fast and to drink only juices. She fasted for twenty-one days. I decided to try the same diet out of solidarity and I managed to do it for thirteen days. On the fifth day I thought I would die; but then it changed and I endured it for thirteen days. It was an incredible purification. Thus I began to be interested in purification, why hunger is important and why cleansing is important. And my friend did not have to undergo surgery in the end: the tumour was just absorbed. It did not disappear, it was absorbed.

¹² The subject of esoteric tea-houses is complex and consists of many interesting sub-themes, for instance, competition and tensions similar to those in biomedical practices. However, I do not have space here to pay attention to this topic.

According to Sointu and Woodhead (2008), the increasing popularity of CAM, especially among women, is related to trends in contemporary culture that involve conceptualising the person holistically. CAM and other “holistic spiritualities” aim towards “the attainment of wholeness and well-being of body, mind and spirit” (Sointu and Woodhead 2008: 259). Their growth can be partly explained “in terms of their ability both to legitimate and subvert traditional practices and discourses of femininity” (Sointu and Woodhead 2008:268). Those trends offer women, and some men, ways of negotiating contemporary dilemmas of selfhood, “including the contradiction between ‘living for others’ and forging ‘a life of one’s own’” (Sointu and Woodhead 2008: 268). Neoshamanism resonates with this holistic perspective, with the interconnection of individual and social dimensions of life.

I would like to emphasize that most of my respondents began to practice shamanism due to personal problems, mainly illnesses. At first they were sceptical and cautious, but eventually they began to perceive shamanic practices as complementary to biomedical ones. Their initial motivation – that is, bodily health – was replaced by a concentration on the spiritual dimension of shamanism and a holistic view of personality. Furthermore, shamanism inspires women in their search for new healing techniques and new possibilities of self-realization. Elena’s story offers an example of this:

D., I don’t know if you know her, she had a centre in Ružinov [a city quarter in Bratislava – the author’s note]. I was going to a belly-dance course at this centre, and she organized some lectures there – so-called „babince“ [“women’s parties”– the author’s note]. I don’t know, I never liked this word, „babinec“. But one day the topic was shamanism. I told myself – it is crazy, I have to try it. So I attended the lecture, and you know how persuasive Alena is. Alena delivered a lecture there, and then she was not teaching any seminars yet; I believe, it was before the seminars started. I checked up on Alena at my job – my colleague A. attended a Rogerian training course with Alena – because I was afraid: shamanism was associated with craziness. Besides, I heard that if people have some potential illnesses, shamanism might trigger them. Then I got ill and Alena helped me a lot. And I attended the FSS seminar; it was the second seminar. It was the basic one, and then I attended all of them. She treated me many times. For instance, I had two surgeries and she always prepared me for the surgery because it was difficult for me. For example, the second time... she was very confused and told me that something very unpleasant would happen, not related to illness, but to some approach... And indeed, it was like this. A doctor who treated me had a wife who died of the same illness, and he did not manage to heal her. So his behaviour was excessive sometimes... well, you know, surgeons are not psychologists. They would come to you and tell you that you will die in a week. And that he did – well, not precisely, but he frightened me needlessly. And then Alena treated me and I overcame it more easily. Then I attended the seminars and I practiced by myself. [...] Now I am attending courses offered by a woman who has lived in Hawaii for twenty years and studied there. She is teaching it from the basics: this is this, because it is such and such. And in principle, these practices are like shamanic journeys, but we do not drum. It is a meditation, or something, I don’t know what they call it. I don’t know, but it seems to me like a shamanic journey without drumming. And it works like that for me. And I think it is marvellous.

Most of my respondents do not consider themselves professional healers. For them shamanic techniques are complementary to other ways of healing. They practice mostly when they want to solve problems that are considered illnesses in shamanism (in the sense of an unbalanced situation), but are not illnesses in terms of biomedicine.

I drum alone, for instance, when I need something for myself. I do not work with clients, because I don't think that it is my way – to work with clients. I drum only for people from our circle or my friends. But I would not have the courage to work with a stranger, because... it is a serious matter for me. I really believe that I would not be able to help people with some problems, because I am not experienced enough. I use shamanism in a different way – when I don't know what to do, or when I want to help someone to decide. For instance, when my son was taking the entrance exams, I was helping him a lot. I always ask [spirits] what is the best for me, but I leave my illnesses to an acupuncturist. I do not consider acupuncture as an alternative thing, however, it is a normal medicine, although a non-Western one. I think it is important for everybody to find something suitable for them – either it is shamanism, or Silva's method, or an internist. When I am desperate, I even call the saints; when I am in the doctor's office, I call the archangel Raphael. It depends on the situation. I am an accountant, so if I make mistakes, they have consequences, and there is nothing else, no powers behind. But sometimes I help myself [by shamanism] to make things better. (Linda)

My respondents' stories mention shamanic practices in relation to bodily illnesses mostly when they talk about the leaders of shamanic circles. However, the FSS leaders are not official healers: the laws in Slovakia do not permit people to heal unless they are biomedical doctors or have a legitimate license compatible with biomedical practices. Despite this, the FSS leaders are considered authoritative healers and try to solve various problems for their clients, including bodily illnesses.

Gender stereotypes and gender stratification in neoshamanic groups in Slovakia

According to core shamanism, any person can become a shaman: to do so one should simply learn shamanic techniques of knowing/healing. The FSS courses provide this kind of knowledge to adepts – “a basic foundation on which a modern shaman can build her own individual practices out of whichever older traditions ‘resonate’ with her.”¹³ A leader's position means that he or she is skilful enough and is a legitimate teacher: his/her skilfulness is confirmed by the FSS certificate. The leader's authority therefore is maintained by formal education in core shamanism, copying the Western educational system (Bužeková 2011; 2012).

Until recently there were two authorized FSS teachers in Slovakia, both of them women – Alena and Zuzana. There were also two male lecturers (Ján and Karol) who organized seminars on core shamanism according to the FSS scheme, but they did not have FSS certificates. During recent years new neoshamanic

¹³ <http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/index.php>

groups appeared in the form of separate shamanic circles consisting mostly of women; at the same time the FSS prepared new authorized lecturers. At present, one of the drumming circles in Bratislava is led by Robert, who obtained the certificate in 2012. I have known him since 2004 when I first participated in neoshamanic meetings; then he attended Alena's courses and drumming meetings. However, now his circle has separated from Alena's group; it consists mostly of women.

As I demonstrated elsewhere (Bužeková 2011), the position of an authorized lecturer is not essentialized – that is, the lecturer is not perceived as a person endowed with specific abilities. The concept of core shamanism does not imply a special *gift*, which is characteristic of spiritual healers in tribal societies. Yet at present all three male leaders (Ján, Karol and Róbert) represent themselves as charismatic persons – that is, as people endowed with exceptional powers, mostly related to healing abilities.

During my research I was in contact mostly with Robert. As I mentioned above, we met as participants in Alena's courses. At that time I did not note any statements about his special gift. He did not try to form a separate group, and he cooperated with Alena in many activities, including the arrangement of a “shamanic” shop. However, later there were tensions between them, and afterwards some shamans left Alena's drumming circle and joined Robert who got the FSS certificate and became an authorized lecturer. At present he represents himself as a person with a *gift*. Therefore we can ask: why does a skilful shaman in an authorized position emphasize his gift, which is not part of the required “equipment” of a leader?

The legitimacy of a healer may be contestable in Western society with its multiple medical systems, where several traditions of knowledge and institutional frameworks coexist and compete. In this situation “discursive and performative strategies of legitimation can become a part of persuasiveness, both of an individual healer and of an ideology behind a certain therapy, thus having direct bearing on the therapeutic efficacy of treatment” (Lindquist 2001a: 16). Elsewhere I demonstrated that shamanic leaders' strategies include emphasizing a special gift or extraordinary abilities (Bužeková 2011). Such a charismatic type of legitimacy implies the strongest loyalty of followers, and its efficacy is likely to be the most spectacular (McCormack 1981). In some sense the FSS certificate is analogous to a medical diploma, but, very much like an ingenious doctor, an exceptionally skilful shaman is good not only because he has a certificate confirming his skills, but also because he has extraordinary abilities. The gift cannot be described; it is an indefinite essence. However, it endows a healer with an authority of a different kind from that conferred by a diploma.

The shamanic gift makes one an exceptionally good shaman. Therefore we can ask: how do practitioners represent themselves as “good” shamans, apart from their skills? Are there any special personal traits that are distinctive features of shamanic healers? When I investigated this question during my research, I found that the set of indispensable personal characteristics of a “good” shamanic healer corresponds to basic neoshamanic beliefs, specifically in:

- (1) Sacred femininity;
- (2) The representation of shamanic knowledge as non-rational/intuitive.

In neoshamanism, femininity is sacred and many supernatural entities are feminine. One of the most important neoshamanic figures is the Goddess – a universal feminine deity that has appeared in various forms in different cultures. In a shamanic vision she takes the shape called forth by the imagination of a particular person. It is important that the notion of sacred femininity enhances the confidence of the female participants in a shamanic circle and advances their wish to actively participate in social change. It is also related to the representation of woman as a mother – not necessarily in terms of biological reproduction, but as a general symbolic principle. Mother Earth, the central figure of neoshamanism, reflects this notion. She is a mother to all living beings, and people, her “older children”, must also care about everything on earth. Such qualities as kindness, understanding, and nursing are considered by shamans to be essential in their daily lives. In addition, they are central in the ritual healing of personal illnesses and problems as well as the healing of Mother Earth – the most important object of shamans’ cure. However, it is important to note that despite this “feminine” ideology, neoshamanism emphasizes the harmony and unity of male and female principles – an idea also reflected in Jungian psychotherapy.

The symbolic “prevalence” of women in the context of FSS groups in Bratislava is evident in the existence of a separate women’s drumming circle where I conducted my research (there is no drumming circle for men). It is characterized by a focus on the “feminine” aspects of healing people and society, and by a concept of sisterhood – a collective experience of women. Sometimes this was declared explicitly, for instance, during a leader’s introductory speeches. It was also implicitly present in interpretations of shamanic experiences during rituals reinforcing emotional bonds between members. Every meeting ended with a ritual meant to help one of the participants. The plan of the ritual was created *ad hoc* in accordance with a particular situation. For example, during one meeting, we decided to help Katka, a woman of twenty-five, who had serious family problems. In the end, all participants embraced and created a circle around her; our emotions were so strong that we could not hold back tears. Such public expression of emotions was not embarrassing at all: emotions were considered by shamans to be an essential part of life and inevitably belonged to healing. It was true not only for women: during drumming meetings in other groups, men’s tears were perceived as a sign of a free and strong personality, of one who lives in harmony with himself.

In general, a shaman is represented as a sensitive, emotional, understanding, empathic, and intuitive being. This set of personal characteristics constitutes the basic and indispensable precondition for achieving shamanic knowledge. Women are supposedly endowed with these qualities naturally, while male shamans have to strengthen them, in opposition to the common expectation, requiring from them rationality and assertiveness. Sensitivity and intuitive thinking associated with women are commonly seen as a signal of weakness in men.¹⁴ From the neosha-

¹⁴ More about the general scheme associating women with sensitivity and men with rationality can be found, for instance, in Archer and Loyd 2002: 1-5, 19-26.

manic perspective, sensitivity and intuition are strengths, not weaknesses: they are necessary for the shamanic way of knowledge. In other words, neoshamanism turns around the *value* of stereotypical gender characteristics. Non-rational thinking, feelings, and closeness to nature, related to the romantic roots of neoshamanism, are considered more valuable than logical, abstract, rational knowledge, and the rejecting of emotions, symptomatic of Western civilization.

The representation of an urban shaman therefore includes stereotypical female as well as male characteristics in a specific combination. Table 1 presents the results of a preliminary content analysis of my respondents' statements related to the characteristics of a "good/skilful" shaman. I divided them into two categories: shamanic knowledge and active position in life. The characteristics belonging to the first category are more numerous. They correspond to the general scheme "woman/sensitivity versus man /rationality". Nonetheless, the "male" characteristics are as equally important.

Table 1

Shamanic knowledge	Active life position
knowledge "by heart", not by reason	strength of personality
intuition	resolution
understanding	vigour
empathy	hard work
creativity	independence
emotionality	autonomy
perceiving the beauty of the world	
care	
kindness	
helping others	
free expression of emotions	
care of all living things	
love for animals and plants	
perceiving society as a big family	

In connection with the shamanic ways of knowledge, Róbert many times referred to the "inner power", which he considered essential for his healing. What is important could be manifested outside a ritual context, in particular by the following:

- Spontaneous intuitive knowledge linked to emotions („my heart knows it“, „I feel it“, „I got insight“);
- Spontaneous „seeing“ in the sense of real sight(seeing illnesses, their causes and ways of treatment);
- Permanent contact with the world of spirits (not only during shamanic journeys);
- Healing touch („good hands“, „strong hands“, „emanation“, „feeling by hands“).

The “common” shamanic abilities are therefore enhanced in this representation: things that an ordinary urban shaman can achieve by means of ritual, mostly in the context of a shamanic circle, Robert can do spontaneously. The same could be said about Peter, a charismatic healer and leader of a non-FSS shamanic group, who I described elsewhere (Bužeková 2011; 2012). Furthermore, this representation is linked to the gender scheme mentioned above. Thus, paradoxically, a male leader in the context of urban shamanism must spontaneously manifest certain “feminine” features to legitimize his gift. It does not mean, however, that he acts or dresses like a woman – which is the case with so-called shamanic transvestism or “third gender” recorded in traditional societies. Some urban shamans’ attributes correspond to those of an average woman: men wear rings, necklaces, and bracelets, but such items function as magical amulets, not as simple adornment. Shamanic gifts therefore are not manifested by “shamanic transvestism” in terms of appearance; rather such gifts are manifested in certain feminine personal features contributing to one’s personal growth as well as social development.

Furthermore, in contrast to the traditional shamanism described by ethnographers, shamanic knowledge in its FSS version is attained in a different way. Although the terms “trance” and “ecstasy” have often been questioned by scholars (see, for instance, Hamayon 2007), usually traditional shamanic healing was associated with ecstatic states: such states were seen as channels to the world of spirits. On the other hand, urban shamans’ journeys and contacts with spirits, in general, could not be equalled with the kinds of trance or ecstasy described by ethnographers. Although my respondents reported altered states of consciousness, they were able to control their movements and reacted to the environment in a usual way. Unlike the “wild” ecstatic rituals of traditional shamanism, the rituals of urban shamans are rather moderate and sometimes suggest meditations. Subtle “feelings” referring to intuitive knowledge prevail in the descriptions of my respondents’ shamanic journeys. I believe this is another reason why gentle emotionality and sensitivity, absent in ethnographic descriptions of shamanism, are part of shamanic knowledge in an urban environment.

Conclusion

The aim of the present contribution is to point out that gender dynamics have been an important aspect in the formation of neoshamanic groups. As with other spiritual movements, women’s prominence in urban shamanism is significant. Their numeric prevalence probably corresponds to their limited ability to function in the public sphere associated with institutions and state power. The central concept of this movement is healing, and therefore neoshamanism can be placed into the broader category of Complementary and Alternative Medicine. As with other kinds of alternative healing, women could find self-realization in practicing shamanism and could re-shape their identities and lives. At the same time, the shamanic orientation to nature, ecologism, and the democratic dimension of shamanic cosmology correspond to the social and political values of middle-class

liberal people who prevail in neoshamanic groups. Thus, neoshamanism is attractive to both men and women who seek their own spiritual path and favour an individualistic position, but would also like to work on the positive transformation of society.

In the context of spiritual movements, the question of leadership is often linked to the concept of charisma. In the FSS circles in Slovakia, charismatic authority has been for a long time absent: according to the conception of core shamanism, being a shaman does not mean having a 'gift', and a leader is usually represented as a person who is just more skilled than other group members. However, the process of group stratification has led to the formation of new groups and the emergence of male charismatic leaders who initially did not represent themselves as charismatic. I argue that religious representations played a certain role in the process of legitimation of the leaders' authority. Current male leaders' self-representations usually refer to inner qualities related to a combination of stereotypical gender characteristics. This image corresponds to (1) the intuitive way of knowledge/ emotions related to female characteristics and (2) the active position of urban shamans related to male characteristics. This combination follows from the specific ideology of urban shamanism as a kind of alternative healing aimed at the transformation of individuals and of society.¹⁵

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