

Shamanism and Alien Abductions: A Comparative Study

SIMON HARVEY-WILSON

ABSTRACT: Some UFO researchers (ufologists) claim that being abducted by aliens can be compared with shamanic initiation experiences in traditional societies in that both types of experience may be similarly transformative, leading to a more spiritual or animistic world-view, a deep concern for the environment and the development of paranormal abilities such as healing. This qualitative study was designed to test the validity of such claims by investigating whether the experiences and subsequent world-view of eleven alien abductees (eight women and three men) from a Western Australian abduction support group were similar to those of the typical shaman. To do this, material gathered from in-depth interviews with the abductees was compared with the anthropological literature on shamanism, especially shamanic initiation experiences, from various parts of the world.

BACKGROUND

In an article on the paranormal aspects of the UFO phenomenon, Australian ufologist Keith Basterfield concludes that “there does indeed appear to be a link between the paranormal and the UFO phenomenon,” and that “There have been a variety of suggestions as to exactly what this link might mean. However, further research is necessary before any of these hypotheses is close to turning into a theory” (Basterfield, 2001, p. 53).

In 2000, to explore the apparent UFO close encounter–paranormal connection, I conducted a study of the similarities between so-called UFO alien abductions and traditional shamanic experiences, especially initiation experiences. This article will concentrate largely on the paranormal aspects of the study. Full documentation of the research comprises my MA thesis in Religious Studies at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia (Harvey-Wilson, 2000). I should like to take this opportunity to thank both the university and my supervisor for allowing me to do such a study in what many still regard as a controversial field. It should be noted that this

research was not designed to prove the existence of UFOs or alien abductions, but merely to compare reports of two types of experience.

As Basterfield's article illustrates, numerous ufologists have noted both the religious and paranormal components of the UFO close encounter phenomenon. Others outside this field have also commented on the subject. The physicist Paul Davies—who won the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in May 1995—writes that:

The discovery of life beyond Earth would transform not only our science but also our religions, our belief systems and our entire world view. For in a sense, the search for extraterrestrial life is really a search for ourselves—who we are and what our place is in the grand sweep of the cosmos. (Davies, 1996, p. 66)

In his book *Are we alone? Implications of the discovery of extraterrestrial life*, Davies (1995) also notes the spiritual component of some UFO beliefs. “What we see in the UFO culture seems to be an expression in the quasi-technological language appropriate to our space age of ancient supernatural beliefs, many of which are an integral part of the folk memory of all cultures” (p. 87).

A few researchers have also commented on the similarities between alien abduction experiences and shamanism, which could be described as a form of religious activity in that it postulates the existence of a spirit world. For example, like abduction experiences, shamanic initiation experiences can sometimes be unexpected and frightening in that they involve the apparent ‘selection’ by various spirits of a particular person who up til then may have had no desire to become a shaman (Eliade, 1951/1989). In 1989, the American folklorist Thomas E. Bullard published an article about UFO abduction reports entitled “The Supernatural kidnap narrative returns in technological guise” which claimed that, “These accounts share many motifs with legends of supernatural encounters and otherworldly journeys” (p. 147).

Echoing this theme, Australian UFO researcher Bill Chalker (1990) wrote an article noting the similarities between alien abductions reports and descriptions of shamanic initiations from around the world, including the Australian Aboriginal tradition. Put simply, both involve capture by strange beings or sky spirits, followed by transportation to an otherworldly location where the person may be medically examined or interfered with in some manner, sometimes even being implanted with strange objects such as crystals. This may be followed by a conference of sorts with the abductors or sky spirits and a guided tour of a seemingly spiritual realm or craft. Upon return the person may be confused, marked

by recent scars, and may later claim to have developed various paranormal abilities (Chalker, 1990, p. 20).

Kenneth Ring (1992), a professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut, discusses the results of his study into the similarities between UFO close encounters and near-death experiences, but also notes their similarity to shamanic experiences. He points out that alien abduction experiences are often recalled as being dreamlike (p. 65), that they can be frightening (p. 42), and that they frequently have childhood antecedents which may result in abductees developing “an extended range of human perception beyond normally recognised limits” (p. 146). He also discovered that, after their experiences, abductees reported significant psychophysical changes such as increased sensitivity to electromagnetic fields, mood fluctuations, increased information processing capacity and the development of various paranormal abilities (pp. 153 & 277). Ring devotes a chapter to “Beliefs and value shifts following extraordinary encounters” (p.173), noting that his subjects reported significant increases in their appreciation for life, as well as social and ecological matters (p. 174). They also reported an increased interest in spiritual issues accompanied by a belief that what had happened to them was part of a general expansion or development of human consciousness (p. 191). In discussing the meaning of these experiences, Ring suggests that, “abductions may represent a particularly contemporary form of shamanic journey—one that fits and is phrased in terms of a highly technological society that has already turned its imaginative attention to star flight” (1992, p. 218). Ring concludes with the suggestion that, “the increasing fascination with and immersion in the domain of extraordinary encounters may well presage the *shamanizing of modern humanity*” (p. 239, his italics).

Like many other researchers, Ring favours an otherworld theory to explain UFO close encounters and adopts the term ‘the imaginal realm’ which was “originally proposed by a renowned French Islamic scholar Henry Corbin in 1972” (Ring, 1992, p. 219). Accessible by altered states of consciousness, Ring writes that, “Not only is the imaginal realm ontologically real, it is also a world that has form, dimension, and most important for us, *persons or entities*” (p. 221, his italics). Ring’s otherworld conclusions are of relevance because they closely mirror shamanistic beliefs.

While discussing the meaning of the experiences described in his book *Abduction: Human encounter with aliens* (1995), Harvard professor of psychiatry, John Mack, mentions various spiritual and shamanistic similarities and, in reviewing the UFO literature available up to its publication, he writes:

None of this work, in my view, has come to terms with the profound implications of the abduction phenomenon for the expansion of human consciousness, the opening of perception to realities beyond the manifest physical world and the necessity of changing our place in the cosmic order if the earth's living systems are to survive the human onslaught. (p. 15)

Mack's second book on the abduction phenomenon, *Passport to the cosmos* (2000a), pays particular attention to the transformative effects of abduction experiences and goes into more detail about the shamanic connection. In his chapter "Shamans, symbols, and archetypes" (p. 135) Mack notes the comparison with shamanic journeys and how many of the images described in abductees' narratives seem to be of archetypal significance. Mack also interviews some shamans who themselves claim to have been abducted by aliens. They point out that something akin to the alien abduction experience has been an integral part of their spiritual traditions for generations and that they tend to regard alien beings as yet another manifestation of the spirit realm (Mack, 2000a, p. 170).

While several ufologists have noted the similarity between abductions and shamanism, a larger number have merely listed the key components of the abduction experience—including most abductees' subsequent increase in spiritual and paranormal experiences—but have failed to realise that these ingredients are also central to shamanic initiation experiences. Shamanism is therefore not mentioned by name in their books and articles. This suggests that these researchers have failed to consult the anthropological literature on shamanism for any possible insights into the abduction phenomenon. This is unfortunate because anthropologists have, after all, been studying shamanism for a lot longer than ufologists have been studying alien abductions. On the other hand, with a few notable exceptions—such as Kalweit (1988, 1992) and Eliade (1951/1989)—most anthropologists have tended to ignore, or at least skim over, the large paranormal component of shamanism.

RESEARCH METHOD

This was a qualitative study. The interviewees were people who believed that they had been abducted by aliens. Eleven volunteers (eight women and three men) were obtained from an alien abduction support group that has been operating in Perth, Western Australia, for several years. Each of them was interviewed for about an hour. They were asked the same twenty-six core questions, but whenever an interviewee gave a promising or confusing answer he or she was asked as many follow-up questions as

seemed necessary. The questions were chosen to seek out as many shamanic similarities as possible. Some questions were simple (Have your feelings towards animals changed since your abduction?), while others were more complex (Do you now believe in a human soul or spirit? Why? Do you believe there is any form of life, or consciousness, after death? Do you now believe in a spirit realm or form of non-ordinary reality? Can you describe it?). The interview transcripts were then compared with the anthropological literature on shamanism bearing in mind that the research question was to discover whether the experiences of this group of alien abductees contained any significant similarities to the experiences, especially the initiation experiences, of the typical shaman. The study did not specifically seek to discover the paranormal similarities between shamanism and alien abductions, but because paranormal events are reported to play a significant role in both fields, the abductees were asked several questions about such phenomena. For example, they were asked whether they believed that they were psychic before their experiences, and whether they had had clairvoyant dreams or any weird or paranormal experiences during their childhood. They were also asked if they had developed any healing or diagnostic abilities after their abduction experiences.

RESULTS

Numerous similarities—many more than are mentioned in the available literature on the subject—were found between the abductees' experiences and shamanism, and many of these were of a paranormal nature. This is a brief summary of the results with emphasis given to those of a paranormal nature.

Initiation and transformation. Most of the abductees reported that strange things, such as seeing ghostly entities at the foot of their beds or around the house, first started happening to them between the ages of four and seven. For example, one abductee found that as a child he seemed to be able to predict what was going to happen a few days in advance. He was shocked to predict accurately the death of two neighbours. These initial close encounter experiences often resembled shamanic initiation experiences because of their frightening, bizarre, and paranormal nature, and the altered states of consciousness, out-of-body experiences, or dream states involved. Some of these experiences were repetitive, involved illness, symbolic animal imagery and various spiritual entities. They invariably also resulted in the development of an animistic perspective in which the abductees came to regard the natural world as filled with unseen

spiritual forces, leading them to express a deep concern for animals and environmental matters. Most importantly, their experiences appeared to introduce the abductees to a realm or aspect of reality to which most others in their society have little direct access or understanding. Such experiences and their new extended vision profoundly transformed the abductees into people who, though unusual, may—like shamans—be valued by others because of what many see as their spiritual and paranormal gifts.

Spirituality and otherworld encounters. The abductees regard most of the alien entities they claim to encounter as highly evolved spiritual beings although they see others as more confronting, frightening or mischievous. Shamans, too, regard some spirits as supportive and others as dangerous and must learn how to differentiate between them. Both aliens and shamanic spirits appear to have a similar capacity to transport people, sometimes in an out-of-body, trance or dream state, into what seem to be other dimensions, an otherworld, or after-death realm. This suggests that both aliens and spirits may access similar ‘spiritual spaces’ or altered states of consciousness.

Healing and other paranormal abilities. Perhaps as a result of their early close encounter experiences, the abductees, like shamans, appeared to develop a range of paranormal powers, especially diagnostic and healing abilities which they then used to help others. Ten of the eleven abductees interviewed in this study now work as healers of one sort or another. Some do massage and/or reflexology, others are Reiki healers, and one is an intuitive psychotherapist. Like shamans however, they may first need to learn to heal themselves in order to gain a familiarity with such abilities. Most claim to be able to diagnose and heal with their hands using a form of paranormal energy. Shamans recruit various spirits to assist during their healing work and, likewise, some of the abductees report that alien or spiritual beings may observe or assist them while they are healing.

Both shamans and some of the abductees reported visions of terrifying dismemberment and/or skeletonization experiences which appear to teach them that their spirit or consciousness can transcend physical death. Vitebsky (1995) points out that, for some shamanic initiates, “the first approach of the spirits takes the form of a violent onslaught which leads to what seems like a complete destruction of the future shaman’s personality” (p. 59). This may take the form of “bodily dismantling. He or she may see him– or herself as a skeleton, a theme widely found in Asia and the Americas. In Siberia every bone and muscle is taken apart, counted and put together again” (p. 59). Such skeletonization experiences often appear to be

symbolised in x-ray-like shamanic costumes, paintings and carvings featuring the bones of the human body (Halifax, 1982, p. 76).

When asked about their healing abilities, two of the abductees briefly mentioned being able to see into, or through, their patients. Michael says that he can sense what is wrong with people, “with my hands.... It’s like you can see the bone inside.” Nancy also claims that:

Through massage, I can see colour spots on people.... which means that there is a problem there, but I don’t necessarily know what the problem is. With me it is a bit sort of hot and cold. There are some days when I can look at someone when I am doing healing and I can look straight through them like x-ray vision, and I know everything that’s happening.

This might suggest that another reason for the skeleton-like costumes, paintings and carvings used by some shamans is to illustrate that they can quite literally see through their patients. Kalweit (1992) provides a symbolic justification for such morbid displays. “Shamans are the living embodiment of inwardness, of the hidden, the skeleton—which is why skeletons are so often depicted on shamans’ drums and clothing, as symbols of their nature” (p. 226). However, Kalweit (1992) also tells us that Eskimo shamans supposedly have x-ray vision. “In general, it is believed that shamans are capable of looking into other people as deep as their skeletons and thus seeing their nature. The shaman’s ‘x-ray vision’ is particularly highly emphasised in Eskimo culture” (p. 116). Whichever of these explanations for skeletonization is correct, there is no doubt that terrifying dreams or visions of dismemberment—similar to those of two of the abductees—are a common feature of shamanic initiation experiences.

In addition to initiating or enhancing a person’s paranormal healing abilities, alien abduction experiences often appear to cause a form of poltergeist activity around the abductees themselves—much of which involves malfunctioning electrical devices in their homes. Little research has been done into this seemingly paranormal phenomenon which Ring (1992, p. 156) has termed ‘Electrical Sensitive Syndrome’.

Interview participants were asked whether any poltergeist-like events—such as malfunctioning electrical devices or an unusual number of light-bulbs blowing—had happened around them or in their houses, after their abduction experiences, and almost all of them said yes. Most of the events described were of an electrical nature, while some were more unusual. Angela describes, “most electrical appliances not working, having a lot of static. And the television ... often it just goes to static.” She also

recalls an occasion, while she was watching television, when the video-recorder—which was switched off but had a video, that her sister had been watching, left in it—suddenly switched itself on and ejected the video, which happened to be called *The haunting*. In reply to this question Helen laughs as she describes the television, the video, a fan, lots of light bulbs and the power in her section at work all blowing up. Karen recalls her stereo, “turning on in the middle of the night and then it would actually flip through to ... my favourite song on the CD ... and it would just play the song. And then it would stop and turn off.” Michael can sense a connection between his feelings and blown light bulbs. “If I am feeling relaxed I don’t seem to blow them—but yes, if I am agitated one seems to go.” He has also found that, “when I was agitated at work the radio would get a lot more interference.”

Sometimes such electrical quirks can be amusing, as Ruth describes: “I got four [video] tapes from a friend.... She said to show people the videos, and I did. But some tapes wouldn’t work for some people and some would work with other people ... it was quite funny actually.” As well as experiencing “doors opening and closing,” Ruth can sense “people walking around” in her house. “Sometimes you can sit in the lounge and it’s like you are walking in the main street with all the people around.” These poltergeist-like events do not happen all the time for the abductees, but can be dramatic when they do, as Patricia recounts:

I had occasions when things would move off the shelf, and they wouldn’t smash on the floor; they wouldn’t just fall on the floor, they would be able to move from one place very carefully to another, you know, in the blink of an eye. And other times I would have enormous electrical activity in the house, so much so that it would blow. It would actually trigger my alarm system or trigger things to come on. The television came on one night [and] the stereo turned off one night.

Her explanation for these puzzling events is, “that in some way the electrical energy, or the electrical make-up of these beings or presences has in some way interfered with the electrical make-up of the alarm system or the stereo or television.”

Some abductees try to counter such unwanted events. Cheryl, whose abductions began when she was a child, reports that anomalous events have occurred around her family all her life. To counter this, she now regularly ‘clears’ her house of unwanted energies. In one incident, which she believes was caused by playful spirits:

We went into the kitchen one day and the whole dining table was covered and brimming, like falling over the sides with water.... If someone had dumped water on it, it would have washed off more quickly. This was like oozing out of the table. And the stove that was a big, old, heavy stove, was sitting in the middle of the kitchen. And it was just like, 'OK who put that there?' And it had happened during the night and my dad put it back and said, 'If that comes out again we are moving.' All sorts of stuff like that [happened].

Betty, who lives alone, does not mind small anomalies around the house. She has not had electrical malfunctions, but finds that objects that she puts down sometimes go missing, only to reappear a few days later. "It's interesting. It doesn't bother me. I know it will show up again because I don't lose things." In her opinion this is caused by "someone on a more refined vibration" just "playing around." Nancy's only complaint is that, as in many households, individual socks go missing. "But we just say, 'Oh well it's just gone into another dimension for a little while'." Nancy believes that her family, some of whom are also having close encounter experiences, "have integrated [the events] that are going on around us.... There is no excess energy because of fear and things flowing around the house, so there doesn't need to be startling things happening to get our attention."

While these poltergeist or RSPK-like events are interesting, we could ask what connection they could have with shamanism given that it might be difficult for some of them to occur in a traditional society largely or entirely devoid of electrical devices. However, there do seem to be a few examples in the anthropological literature of poltergeist-like events occurring in shamanistic settings. For example, Eliade (1951/1989) reports that in Southern Siberia, "the gods choose the future shaman by striking him with lightning or showing him their will through stones falling from the sky" (p. 19). Being struck by lightning might be the closest a traditional shaman gets to experiencing an electric malfunction and anomalous showers of stones (lithobolia) or other objects are a form of poltergeist activity (Rogo, 1991; Roll, 1976). In another case, Ernest de Martino (1972) recounts an example of "spontaneous vocation among the Yamana and the Selk'nam." He describes how:

A young man goes off into the forest to look for some wood to make a harpoon. He becomes so tired in searching that he enters a psychic state that is very close to the actual loss of his presence. Finally he finds a suitable branch which he begins to cut off with his axe — but with the first notch he releases a flood of water,

something completely unexpected and, for him, an extraordinary 'sign'. He is greatly perturbed and returns to his hut. (p.91)

Like Cheryl's earlier report of her family's kitchen table oozing with water, such an event could be seen as an example of poltergeist activity.

DISCUSSION

The numerous similarities found in this study are not superficial or coincidental and provide significant confirmation for the anecdotal claims of such similarities between shamanic and abduction experiences made by some ufologists. Nevertheless, it would be of interest to conduct a larger, quantitative study of such similarities elsewhere.

While this project could be seen as an attempt to understand alien abductions by linking them with shamanic experiences, it needs to be realised that anthropology has no clear understanding of the dynamics of the shamanic otherworld or spirit realm. Nor does it have a coherent explanation for the various paranormal abilities that shamans supposedly develop as a result of their initiation experiences. In one sense, therefore, this study is comparing two similar types of experience to see whether that produces new insights into either of them. Apart from noting such similarities, what is of interest for future research is why it is that being 'abducted' into a spiritual or alien otherworld should confer paranormal abilities, and, from a medical perspective, how such healing actually works, if indeed it does.

One could ask whether these abductees would have developed paranormal gifts such as healing anyway, although I am not aware of any research designed to test whether abductees really can heal people. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that for decades anthropologists have been reporting that shamans supposedly heal people, but I am not aware of their actually doing any research into the medical validity of such healing abilities. While this might be understandable, it is nevertheless unfortunate. If it were ever shown that paranormal healing actually works, one might assume that the medical profession would be interested in researching the matter, but so far that has not proved to be the case to any significant extent. On the other hand, the pharmaceutical industry—the source of large amounts of medical research funding—might be averse to such research.

What further investigation seems the most appropriate to follow on from this research? In the absence of any cooperative aliens or spirits as interview subjects, it would seem appropriate to investigate whether a multi-dimensional otherworld or spirit realm does exist; what its connection

might be to human consciousness; and why shamans and alien abductees alike develop paranormal abilities as a result of entering it. Exactly how that might be done is the interesting question. Shamans often speak about celestial realms and the underworld as actual physical locations and some religions have at times suggested the literal existence of spiritual spaces such as heaven and hell. Today, the term ‘altered state of consciousness’ and words borrowed from physics such as wavelengths, vibrations and dimensions are more often used to describe the entering of other realms. This suggests that, while such metaphors evolve to reflect their cultural context, researchers need to be cautious that they are not conceptually misleading. The problem with the term ‘altered state of consciousness’ is that science does not even have a clear definition of normal conscious, let alone what it is that might be doing the altering during altered states. Speaking of the brain, philosopher John Searle writes that, “at present we not only do not know how it works, but we do not even have a clear idea of how the brain *could* work to cause consciousness. We do not understand how such a thing is even possible” (Searle, 1998, p. 201).

Whatever terminology is used to describe various aspects of consciousness, the question remains whether shamans, aliens and abductees are all accessing the same ‘space’ or state of consciousness and whether that space is exclusively spiritual or not? Abductees may only refer to the states of consciousness in which they encounter aliens as ‘spiritual’ because traditionally almost the only people using them were spiritual or religious. However, the realm may actually be accessible to anyone capable of getting there, aliens and shamans included. In short, it needs to be discovered how the topology of spiritual spaces and/or altered states of consciousness works and whether such realms have any inhabitants—spiritual, biological, or otherwise.

In an attempt to understand the dynamics of unusual states of consciousness, Drury (1991) combines mystical, shamanic, visionary and other dissociative states to create a sophisticated ‘map’ of altered states of consciousness (p. 114). He then adds that:

We are beginning to accumulate a real body of data on dissociative and ‘peak’ states of consciousness which in turn have a direct bearing on the authenticity of religious beliefs. We may well be entering a new phase where religious and mystical experiences can be demystified and subjected to some sort of testing and validation. Without doubt, a new pragmatism has appeared on the horizon. (p. 99)

The abductees' interview results suggest Drury may be on the right track and that the spiritual spaces and altered states of consciousness experienced by both shamans and alien abductees may belong on the same 'map'. Further research into such a map is clearly desirable.

To investigate why entering some sort of alien or spiritual otherworld appears to facilitate paranormal abilities could perhaps be seen as an investigation of both consciousness and the fundamental nature of reality. For example, Mack's chapter in the anthology *UFOs and abductions* (2000b, p. 241) is entitled, "How the Alien Abduction Phenomenon Challenges the Boundaries of Our Reality." A more focussed approach may be to investigate the nature of paranormal abilities themselves. Of course, demonstrating that such abilities do exist might not initially explain how they work, but could be an important first step. Some psychokinetic abilities appear to act at a distance, raising questions about possible links between mind and matter, while clairvoyance—a gift supposedly possessed by both shamans and some abductees—appears to confound our normal understanding of causality and determinism. This may mean—as many have suggested—that consciousness can somehow transcend the physical brain. Any scientific discoveries of this nature would have profound implications for modern society. For example, science currently believes that consciousness remains firmly attached to the body during life, ceases to exist at death, and that there is no causal connection between consciousness and physical matter beyond the body. However, as this study has shown, many abductees, like shamans, have experiences that appear to demonstrate that not only is consciousness able to leave the body in some sense, but that it survives bodily death, and that the mind and physical matter are somehow connected. These opposing claims could not be more different, yet shamans and, it seems, many alien abductees are living examples of the latter. Further research is clearly needed to see which set of beliefs is more appropriate or whether both are misleading. If the second set is shown to have any validity, Western society's conception of reality and the nature of consciousness will receive an enormous jolt and the claims of many abductees will appear even more convincing.

In conclusion, it can be claimed that this study has shown that there are more similarities between the experiences of both alien abductees and shamans than have been suggested by those few researchers that have investigated such matters. And while this could perhaps be said to have raised more questions than it has answered, it does add weight to the argument that further research into consciousness, paranormal abilities and the possible reality of a multi-dimensional otherworld or spirit realm is clearly warranted.

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7 Thornbury Close,

Mundaring,

Western Australia, 6073.

E-mail: simonhw@webace.com.au