

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense."

-- James Randi

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The Shaman Question: Revisited

by Richard Petraitis

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Recently, I have been taken to task by critics of my article, "The Shamans of Suburbia" (May 1997, Vol. 5, #5). David Bloomberg, the chairman of REALL, notified me he received E-mail responses that took issue with my critique of Native American Shamanism. Some challengers were offended at my skeptical approach to the topic which relied on history, using primary and secondary sources. I believe a historically based skepticism can help many Americans counter the revived, societal enthusiasm for magical thinking. For the reader, I have listed the dissenting questions to my article from friend and foe. I hope to further build a case against a belief in magic by using history to contest the revived, New Age romance with Shamanism.

1. The Native American shamans had the ability to see the future! How else can we explain the Aztec prophecy of "bearded white gods" from the sea and other Native predictions about the coming of the white man?

Not true! According to the record of history, the superstitious Montezuma II had assembled a large group of sorcerers when he began receiving reports of strange men from the sea, as sent to him by the inhabitants of the Yucatan coast. Montezuma's court sorcerers failed to provide answers about these strangers, so the enraged emperor had the lot tossed into prison to starve to death.2 One savvy magician, Martin Ocelotl, gained information about the Spanish who landed on the Yucatan, and he prophesied to Montezuma II about "men with beards" equating them with returning gods for the emperor's favor. Later, Ocelotl ran afoul of the Spanish Inquisition. Why? He unwisely bragged to the new rulers that he had been made whole again after Montezuma II had him cut in two!3 Ocelotl's career soon ended.

Some New Agers like to give credit for true prophecy to the first people who encountered Columbus, the Taino. Per the sixteenth century missionary, Friar Ramon, Taino chiefs claimed that their supreme deity "Being of Yucca" told them that "they would enjoy their domain for only a brief time because dressed people, very different, will come to their land and impose themselves." Did the Taino divine the future? But what of the Friar Ramon who recorded the chiefs as first using the prophecy to refer to the warlike Carib!4 Notably, the Taino prophets were quick to change the specifics of

their ancient prophecy when a new adversary invaded their island world. Couldn't the "Being of Yucca" have been more specific?

During their first encounters with white men, the historical evidence points at the martial unpreparedness of the Native Americans to deal with the invaders, despite the many prophets and seers among the Amerindians. The first sightings of sailing ships by the Amerindians were described as "temples on the sea."<sup>5</sup> Surely, the shamans, with their ability to foresee the future, could have warned their different peoples that these "temples" carried settlers, soldiers, and cannon! Their reputed ability to foretell events notwithstanding, the shamans were unable to provide their people with more pragmatic information about these new strangers, the Europeans. Despite the shamans' claims to see the future, there was often surprise, not preparedness, displayed by the Amerindians during their early encounters with colonizers.

2. The Native American use of magical means to combat aggressors was much exaggerated in your article!

The four century old struggle for the Americas, as waged by the original inhabitants, often involved the use of magic. In 1519, when the conquistadors were encamped on the Mexican coastline, Montezuma's first attempts to thwart the white intruder were magical. The emperor's wizards infiltrated the camp of Hernando Cortes and attempted to use magic against the Spaniards. The spells of the Aztec wizards failed; they returned to Montezuma II and stated, "We are not equal contenders."<sup>6</sup> Amerindian magic failed to stop the conquistadors.

The English colonizers also experienced Native American resistance by magical means. The early English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, had its existence challenged by the powerful Powhatan confederacy. Powhatan priests were in the forefront of the conflicts because of their alleged ability to see the future, to discern secrets, to change the weather, and to use magic to fight enemies.<sup>7</sup> In 1611, a battle ensued between English arquebussers and Amerindian bowmen. An Amerindian priest saw arrows bounce off the English armor, and seeing that the English guns needed sparks to fire, he decided to help his side with magic. "The wonder-worker ran the length of the battlefield, rattle in hand, and attempted to invoke the rain gods. Unfortunately, the only rain observed by the English fell miles away, keeping the English powder dry, and the Amerindian bowmen at a most serious disadvantage!"<sup>8</sup>

In 1621, Nemattanew, a Powhatan war leader, claimed immunity from English gunfire, using a magic body oil. Nemattanew was fatally wounded, but to preserve the myth of immunity for his followers, he requested to be buried among the English.<sup>9</sup> Despite the inability of magic oil to stop lead balls, the Powhatan belief in their shamans' magic remained unshaken, and belief in divining an enemy's intention was high. Ever slowly, as the colonists gained the upper hand in the Eastern woodlands, the shamans lost face in the eyes of their people because of their continued failure to combat European weapons and diseases. The shamans thought their magic failed because the English were "strange."<sup>10</sup>

The Amerindian use of magic in warfare continued until the end of the nineteenth century. The Western Apache employed charms to keep bullets from harming their warriors. The leaders of war parties believed that their protective charms, as they rode ahead of their men, would keep the bullets from going past them to harm the warriors bringing up the rear.<sup>11</sup> These practices weren't new among the Amerindians. Specifically, shamans were thought to be immune to bullets; they were even thought to have the ability to catch bullets!<sup>12</sup> However, magic charms couldn't protect Indian warriors from modern military arms.

The Amerindian belief in magic lost battles. During the summer of 1857, this was evident with a major Cheyenne defeat along the Solomon River. A troop of United States cavalry, three hundred strong, faced an Indian band of equal number. The commanding army officer expected the Indians to flee, but the mounted warriors had washed their hands in a magic lake. A shaman had promised that the lake's waters would protect the warriors from bullets. The cavalrymen charged with sabers and the braves fled the battlefield. Why? The magical water shielded the warriors from bullets, not the cavalrymen's unsheathed sabers!<sup>13</sup>

How much of the Amerindian resistance was driven by a belief in the magic power of shamans is the subject of heated debate. The historical evidence points to the inefficacy of the seers, and the shamans, to alter a tragic fate by the use of charms, or any other sympathetic magic. There can be no better example of the tragedy brought about by magical thinking than the 1890 American Indian battle at Wounded Knee. Nearly two hundred Indian men, women, and children were felled by the Hotchkiss guns of the U.S. Army, despite the alleged supernatural ability of "ghost shirts" to ward off

bullets.

3. Shamans acted within their worldview. The shamans of The Americas never resorted to trickery. They believed in the ability to use the power of spirit beings.

Au contraire! Yes, shamans genuinely may have believed in their ability to communicate with spirit beings, but they resorted to magician's tricks to strengthen their people's belief in shamanic "powers." Shamans were known as conjurers extraordinaire! Shamans used ventriloquism, Houdini-like rope tricks, hypnotism, and other sleight of hand to convince those around them of their supernatural power. Audiences were often awed by the vomiting of blood; the shaman would fool his audience by swallowing a bladder filled with animal blood only to break the bag with his stomach muscles.<sup>14</sup> During the winters, shamans wowed the audiences with knife swallowing, fire walking, and incredible contests against invisible shamans.<sup>15</sup> Shamans were, and tend to be, great showmen.

Early colonists of New England noted the use of ruses by Powhatan "priests." These priests used the darkness of their temple buildings to animate the image of a chief Powhatan god - Okeus, by the figure's mechanical manipulation.<sup>16</sup> Given a lack of light in the temple and a cloth draped over the idol, a priest, hidden behind the carved likeness of Okeus, was able to draw on the smoke of lit pipes placed in the god's mouth by worshippers. When English colonists uncovered the illusion, the Powhatan were more angry at the curious colonists than their priests!<sup>17</sup> It was Okeus's image, called Okee by the English, that was carried into battle (not unlike the Biblical ark) by Powhatan warriors in the belief Okee would provide victory. In the early 1600s, a skirmish between English arquebussers and Indian warriors dispelled the myth of the god's supernatural power, as the battlefield bearers of Okee's image fell before English gunfire.<sup>18</sup> Yet again, supernatural belief led to tragedy in battle.

4. Weren't the European colonizers of The New World also guilty of magical thinking? What about the witchcraft trials in Salem? The Native Americans never engaged in such superstitious nonsense!

It is true that the Europeans often displayed the same irrationality as those they subjugated, the Amerindians. Science was in its infant stage when the intrepid explorer Christopher Columbus attempted to exorcise a water spout threatening his ships during a voyage to the New World.<sup>19</sup> Later, the conquistador Hernando Cortes would flee the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, losing six hundred men to the Aztecs, because of astrological belief. An expedition astrologer, Botello, convinced the Spanish that the retreat was a great idea. Why? Botello had told the conquistadors that spirits, conjured by his magical art, advised the Spanish to retreat!<sup>20</sup> Superstition soon reached its zenith among colonists in the New World with the witchcraft trials of the Puritans. In 1692, at Salem, Massachusetts, twenty people were executed as witches until colonial leaders stopped the panic. Reason was slow to overcome superstition.

However, as science eroded the chains of superstition for Western civilization, magical thinking remained entrenched in Amerindian societies. Witchcraft purges, and "smelling out witches," was prevalent among the Amerindian people. The Iroquois hunted witches with quartz crystals. (That crystals were used by the Amerindians to identify witches for execution should trouble all New Agers.) The Iroquois believed that disease was caused by witchcraft.<sup>21</sup> The Carib killed sorcerers, mainly women, using torture to execute the accused.<sup>22</sup> Among the Native Americans, the belief in casting spells was so strong that a suspected sorcerer or witch would find his or her life in considerable jeopardy. In one year, 1810, the Delaware and Shawnee people killed fifty members of their tribal groups for alleged witchcraft.<sup>23</sup> Amerindians, such as the Apache, used burning as a way of executing witches: they were generally roasted over a fire. Retaliation for imagined magical acts took a serious toll on many feuding Indian tribes. The Amerindians met witchcraft with counter-witchcraft, and the California Indians went to war over perceived acts of magical aggression.<sup>24</sup> What was the human cost of the Amerindian witch hysteria? We may never assess the total casualties of these "magic wars" due to a scarcity of written records. However, can the detrimental impact of shamans, often involved in "smelling out" ceremonies and tribal war councils, on Amerindian societies be disputed?

5. Why are you (the author) against the New Age interest in Native American Shamanism?

During the Indian Wars in the Americas, shamans played an active part in tragedy. Today, despite historical evidence of magic's failure to win wars or alter nature, New Agers are embracing shamanism. Unbelievably, a recent George magazine poll stated one third of Americans believe in witchcraft!<sup>25</sup> Societies that are grounded in magical thinking

pay a heavy price in human life. From 1987 to 1997, several thousand people have been beaten or burned across the continent of Africa. Their crime? They were identified as witches, wizards, or sorcerers by their communities. (See also "Bullets into Water: The Sorcerers of Africa," August 1998, Vol. 6, #6.) Is this the road Americans wish to travel on?

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#### Bennett Braun Case Settled

by David Bloomberg

The Illinois Department of Professional Regulation's case against Bennett Braun for his treatment of the Burgus family has been settled prior to the scheduled November hearings.

As discussed in previous issues, the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation (IDPR) filed a complaint against psychiatrist Bennett Braun, a leader in the repressed memory movement, and two of his colleagues. One of those colleagues, Elva Poznanski, had settled her case a few months ago.

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As discussed in previous issues (Vol. 6, #8, #9, #10; Vol. 7, #2, #6, & #7), the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation (IDPR) filed a complaint against psychiatrist Bennett Braun, a leader in the repressed memory movement, and two of his colleagues. One of those colleagues, Elva Poznanski, had settled her case a few months ago.

Somewhat surprisingly, the IDPR has now accepted a settlement with Braun as well. This settlement prohibits Braun from practicing for two years, and then puts him on a minimum five-year probation period that forbids him from treating patients having multiple personality disorder. It also includes a \$5000 fine and additional medical education.

When REALL last interviewed the lead prosecutor on this case, Thomas Glasgow, he said that he would only settle with Braun if such an agreement included the indefinite suspension of Braun's license to practice medicine. However, Glasgow has since left that position and gone into private practice. Tony Sanders, public information officer for the IDPR, said in a telephone interview that they looked at the long-term benefits of settling this case and decided this

settlement was the way to go. Glasgow, also in a telephone interview, noted that the indefinite suspension would have required Braun to apply to get his license back, but otherwise is similar to the settlement that was reached.

In addition to losing his license for two years, the probationary period of at least five years has other ramifications. First, Sanders said that Braun will have to apply after that five years to be removed from probation. To do so, he will have to meet the requirements laid out for him, and it is by no means automatic. While on probation, he will be required to give a packet of the complaint, his response, and the final order to all prospective employers. He must submit quarterly reports to the IDPR, saying where he is practicing, what he is doing, and what he is treating his patients for. He will not be allowed to supervise any health professionals, including, for example, nurses. According to Sanders, "In effect, he is out of commission in Illinois." Who, after all, would want to hire a doctor who can't even supervise a nurse?

Another reason for accepting this settlement was outlined by the IDPR director to the Chicago Tribune, and essentially repeated by Sanders. If the IDPR had managed to get Braun's license revoked indefinitely, Braun would have had the option to appeal to the circuit court – which might have allowed Braun to practice for at least three more years while the case went through the court system.

When asked how this would affect his status if he wanted to move to another state, Sanders noted that all states belong to a Federation of State Medical Boards, and they are supposed to check for problems in other states whenever a doctor applies for a license. If he holds a license to practice already in another state (Sanders didn't think he did, but was unsure), that state will get a copy of the report. Sanders thought it unlikely that Braun would be able to pick up and move, especially given his notoriety.

Glasgow noted that this settlement does what it is supposed to do: it protects the citizens of the State of Illinois. Braun is losing his livelihood, and that sends a "very powerful message" that doctors should not be practicing "hocus pocus psychiatry." He added that there is not now, nor was there at the time of treatment, any scientific evidence that Braun's methods were accepted. He noted that doctors are supposed to be scientists, and Braun acted in an unacceptable manner. In fact, Glasgow said that it is his opinion that Braun "got a kick out of being the leader in the field."

While this settlement was not specifically approved by the Burgus family ahead of time, they were informed that a settlement was in the works. Burgus said, in a telephone interview, that she was satisfied with the outcome. He is 59 years old now, she noted, and won't be able to practice without restrictions until he's at least 66 – retirement age. "He's ruined his own life," she said. This also means neither she nor her family will have to testify in the case, but she said that was a small consideration, and they had been fully prepared to do so.

Burgus said there is also a pending ethics complaint against Braun with the Illinois Psychiatric Society. She testified at an ethics hearing this summer on her case.

While the cases against Braun and Poznanski have now been settled, one IDPR case related to the Burgus family remains – that against psychologist Roberta Sachs. Sanders said that her case is scheduled to go to hearing in January of next year.

Interestingly, Braun filed suit against his own insurance company this summer for allegedly settling the previous lawsuit against him without his consent. He also has claimed in this case that he only settled with the IDPR for monetary reasons – the cost of fighting the case – but claimed he could have proven he was in the right. He did not actually acknowledge wrongdoing as part of the settlement; he only admitted "that the Department could produce evidence of the facts alleged in the Department's case." And that is immediately followed by a statement saying, "The Respondent could produce evidence refuting the Department's charges but due to the Respondent's current plans and circumstances, the Respondent is seeking to resolve these matters without protracted litigation."

In other words, it seems he may have learned nothing and may still believe in the fantastic tales of huge satanic conspiracies that he elicited from Burgus and other patients. Burgus thinks he still believes in his conspiracies and his methods. Part of it, she thinks, is that he cannot admit to himself how much he hurt her and others; he has to maintain his stand to keep his belief system intact. There is something compelling about this description. Has the former patient diagnosed the doctor? Bennett Braun will have several years to ponder his beliefs and how they led him to where he is

now.