The New Age Movement and Urban Shamanism in Brazil

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Introduction

The New Age movement in Brazil reached its zenith between the late eighties and the first years of the new millennium: endless talk shows on TV about meditation techniques, or about the properties of pendulums, crystals and pyramids, publishing material that flooded the shelves of bookshops with works by writers such as Paulo Coelho or Carlos Castaneda, offers of oracular divination services, massages of Oriental origin, ayurvedic medicine, not to mention workshops, talks and meetings that brought together people interested in subjects like past lives, the power of healing through the chakras, and so on: all these bear witness to the success of the Age of Aquarius in Brazilian territory, mainly in the big urban centers. Apart from all of that, it was possible to get your horoscope by telephone on the ‘disque goo’ line from the Puerto Rican guru Walter Mercado, whose watchword was ‘Ligue dja’ (or something that sounded like that in Portuguese).

This movement, the place of convergence for practices as different as ancient arts of divination from various backgrounds (the Tarot, the I-Ching, Runes), and others ranging from therapies and exercises drawing their inspiration from the East (Tai Chi Chuan, Lian Gong, Shiatsu) to esoteric rituals, shamanic experiences, beliefs in elemental spirits, and many other modalities, still covers certain styles of seeking for spirituality beyond what conventional religions offer.

The phenomenon is complex and we know it has its roots in the countercultural movement of the sixties in the U.S.A., searching for alternatives to the Establishment in the fields of politics, aesthetics, morality and ways of life. As well as the obvious presence of oriental philosophies and religions, one could also detect the influence, amongst others, of late nineteenth century Spiritualism and Theosophy; it is also possible to cite gnosticism, hermeticism and other currents and occultist groups that are certainly there, in the remotest ancestry of the movement.

1 Answer next, answer now.
To understand the particularities of the New Age as it developed in Brazil, and then its relation to the subject of these reflections, urban shamanism, it is worth looking for its antecedents by giving a brief historical account of the movement.²

**Background**

For the case of Brazil, we can find countercultural elements in the nineteen sixties. At that time, however, the agenda was markedly political, and young people at university, along with the unions and left-wing organizations, were more concerned about social inequalities than the signs that prosperity and academic modernism were coming to an end, which, it is said, would explain the disorientation of the baby boom generation, born after the second world war, in the United States.

In Brazil, the main trend of cultural agitation was for it to assume a more political point of view, and this was seen in the Popular Cultural Centers, in experimental New Cinema, and also in avant guard Theater and in popular music. It is only in the seventies, with channels of participation closed and popular organizations repressed, that conditions were created for the rise of the more mystical and individualized aspects of the new era.

It cannot be forgotten, however, that many of the elements that are usually linked to this phenomenon, such as Occultism, esotericism, and orientalism, had already been in the country for some time: leaving aside any speculation as to whether or not members of the Knights Templar were among those who disembarked from the galleons of the Portuguese navigator Pedro Álvarez Cabral, when he landed here in the year 1500, it may be stated categorically that some initiation societies have been operating in Brazil since at least the eighteenth century. Such is the case, for example, of masonry; the first society of masons that we know of was founded in the northern state of Pernambuco in 1797, by the doctor and veteran friar Arruda Câmara.

The first theosophical lodge in Brazil was established in Pelotas, a southern city in the State of Río Grande del Sur, in 1902, and was called Dharma, although theosophy had been mentioned earlier in an article by Darío Veloso published in Curitiba, in the state of Paraná, in 1896, with the title ‘Theosophy and the Theosophical Society’. In 1919 the first Brazilian section of the Theosophical

² Parts of this text take up subjects, data and analysis that appeared originally in works already published: data from Magnani 1999; 1999 b; 2000, and are presented here, revised and bought up to date.