

## A Critical Look at Castaneda's Critics

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Mystics have long maintained that their systems cannot be fully understood without active personal involvement. Carlos Castaneda is among the most prominent of those scientists who are experientially exploring the metaphysical systems of another culture. However, DeMille maintains that Castaneda is a hoaxer and that don Juan is fictional. He charges the scientific community with uncritically accepting Castaneda's work. The present article critically examines the arguments for the belief that Castaneda is a hoaxer, as found in reviews of Castaneda's *The Eagle's Gift* (1981) and in DeMille's *The Don Juan Papers* (1980), and finds them lacking in logical and empirical proof.

Until recently Western science approached non-European religious beliefs and metaphysical systems as if they could be understood in an objective manner, without emotional involvement, without personal participation. However, as mystics have always maintained, a purely objective approach often proves inadequate (Beg, 1983). The mystic's knowledge is attained with experiential means rather than empirical means. In fact, since mystics question the validity of the object/subject model of reality, they believe that fundamental reality is beyond the understanding of the logical mind (Pelletier, 1978).

Recent decades have brought us the work of Western philosophers and scientists who have actively taken on foreign belief systems. Prominent examples include Lama Govinda, who has given Western readers an insider's view of Tibetan Buddhism, and Baba Ram Dass, who is practicing Tantric Yoga within a Hindu framework. Perhaps the best known of the scientists who are experientially exploring the metaphysical systems of another culture is Carlos Castaneda. While a graduate anthropology student at the University of California, Castaneda came in contact with an Amerindian shaman who accepted him as an apprentice. Castaneda has told us the story of his apprenticeship with the shaman he called don Juan in a series of popular books. His first book, *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968), includes a 'structural analysis' which consists of what Castaneda felt were the major points of don Juan's teachings. Aside from this analysis, Castaneda's books are not really anthropology, but rather accounts of shamanism as practiced by a few sorcerers in

modern Mexico. No attempt is made to import anthropological terminology into his direct reporting (Reno, 1975). Although it must be remembered that don Juan is not a traditional shaman, Castaneda's books may be seen as a primary source from which anthropological conclusions may be drawn.

Castaneda freely admits that *The Eagle's Gift* (1981) is "not strictly an anthropological work" but that his work has turned into an autobiography of the experiences he had as a result of taking on an alien belief system (Castaneda, 1981, p. 7). Castaneda had to enter into the system to truly experience it. He is, obviously, no longer an unbiased objective observer; however, the history of scientific methodology and scientific breakthrough is replete with instances of personalistic reporting. As we shall see, it is probably wiser to regard Castaneda as a shaman rather than as an anthropologist. But there is no reason to regard him as a charlatan.

Recently there has been renewed questioning of the authenticity of Castaneda's account. Richard DeMille has written two books (*Castaneda's Journey*, 1976; *The Don Juan Papers*, 1980) claiming that Castaneda is a hoaxer and that don Juan is fictional. DeMille charges the scientific community with uncritically accepting Castaneda's work. Castaneda's account should of course be critically examined, as should all scientific works, including DeMille's. The DeMille books are *not* a logical presentation of evidence, but are stocked with innuendo, logical fallacy, fiction and gossip. Recent issues of *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* have contained reviews of Castaneda's *The Eagle's Gift* (1981) which also treat Castaneda's work as fiction (Covello, 1981; Merkur, 1981). First we shall examine some of the arguments made in these reviews, and then we will proceed to critically examine the arguments concerning the belief that Castaneda is a hoaxer, as found in *The Don Juan Papers* (1980).

### *The Rule*

Covello (1981) throughout his review writes as if Castaneda's work is fiction and everyone knows it. He asserts that ". . . *The Eagle's Gift* can be loosely classified as anthropological fiction" (p. 353). Providing no argument he only refers to DeMille's 'proof' of Castaneda's supposed hoax.

*The Eagle's Gift* includes an account of don Juan's initiation. After placing him in a heightened state of awareness his 'benefactor' revealed 'the rule of the nagual', a teaching that describes the beginning of a mystical 'brotherhood' and their relationship with the supreme being, the Eagle. Covello excerpts the following passage from 'the rule':

The power that governs the destiny of all living beings is called the Eagle, not because it is an eagle or has anything to do with an eagle, but because it appears to the seer as an immeasurably jet-black eagle. . . . The Eagle is devouring the awareness of all creatures that, alive on earth a moment before and now dead, have floated to the Eagle's beak, like a ceaseless swarm of fireflies, to meet their owner, their reason for having had life. (Castaneda, 1981, pp. 176-177)

The above description of the passing of awareness (souls) from the tonal (world of appearances, phenomenal) to the nagual (noumenal) brings this comment from Covello: "One would expect an ancient mesoamerican teaching to look mesoamerican, or at least ancient" (p. 354). This statement implies that we already know what an ancient mesoamerican 'esoteric' teaching will look like. Generally, 'secret' teachings are not part of the public record, so are unlikely to be discovered by archeologists. On what do we base our expectations? Do we have access to the esoteric teachings of ancient mesoamerica prior to Castaneda's work? Going against expectations is of course no argument against the validity of what Castaneda has written. In addition Covello claims "the metaphor [the Eagle] is couched in a wealth of abstract language that looks surprisingly modern" (p. 354) thus implying the ancients were incapable of abstract thought or that Castaneda himself has anthropomorphized his account of the teachings. In either case, Covello's *own* ethnocentricity limits his interpretation of Castaneda's account: damning Castaneda for lacking articulation and then (again) damning Castaneda for the vicissitudes inherent in anthropological reporting.

Further, Covello feels that ". . . Castaneda's preoccupation with creating a new religious order . . . may work to the detriment of anthropological accuracy" (p. 354). There is no evidence that Castaneda is trying to establish a new religious order. He rarely makes public appearances and does not seek a personal following. In fact, he has moved several times to avoid those multitudes who would be his disciples. Castaneda, like most shamans, is a very private person.

### *Socially Marginal?*

Merkur (1981) argues that "Castaneda presents Amerindians for whom tribal ceremonial and tribal myth do not exist—a situation absolutely unknown among Amerindian ecstasies" (p. 460). Merkur also asserts that "The kind of Southwestern and Mexican 'sorcerer' that Castaneda at first purported to describe is always a widely known, revered, and feared tribal figure . . ." (p. 460). This is an example of "arguing from ignorance" (Copi, 1982), that is, Castaneda's evidence is false because it has not been proved true by previous anthropological data. Merkur's argument essentially precludes any new discoveries.

Continuing the argument, Merkur states that "Socially marginal sorcerers with an autonomous system of lore, that is unrelated to cultural religious orthodoxy, are a uniquely Judaeo-Christian development in the history of religions" (p. 460). Having created a category that is virtually impossible to investigate, Merkur now contends that all 'socially marginal sorcerers' with an autonomous system of lore unrelated to religious orthodoxy are Judaeo-Christian.

It should not be surprising that Castaneda's story differs from other

Amerindian religious practices. When we are speaking of shamans, we are by definition speaking of individuals who are pushing at the edges of consciousness, exploring realms that Western science has taken notice of only recently. The personality of the shaman and his unique ecstatic trance experience form the core of shamanic religions (Furst, 1977). Altered state experience is highly subjective and variable (within groups and within individuals) and is interpreted by Western science in many different, often mutually exclusive ways. The content of shamanic visions must vary considerably. It is only natural that somewhat different cosmologies and rituals will arise.

Merkur also compares Castaneda's 'fiction' to the fictional works of occult writers such as Bulwer-Lytton, Aleister Crowley and W.B. Yeats. Yet, we should remember that Bulwer-Lytton's Rosicrucians and Crowley's magicians were *not* fictional creations. They were presented in a fictional medium because the consensus of the era in which these authors wrote could not except such people and systems as reality. In our present era, although such works find no lack of readers, most people are still not ready to believe in a *real* 'separate reality'; only a fictional one.

### *The Don Juan Papers*

The scene is the American Booksellers' Association convention in Los Angeles. The time, Memorial Day 1979. Beside a towering stack of Harold Garfinkel's *Agnes Redux: Confessions from the Ivory Closet*, Robert Crichton, author of *The Great Imposter*, is talking to Stringfellow Bean, president of Columbia University Press—and a short man in a tan leisure suit. As I walk by, Crichton seizes my arm.

"Richard! Here's somebody I want you to meet. Carlos, this is Richard DeMille."

The man in the tan leisure suit smiles roguishly. "How do you do?"

"Fine!" I pump his hand. "I'm glad to meet you after all this time." "What are you writing about now?" I ask.

Carlos looks down at a notebook he is holding in his hand. He looks up. "It's, um, it's a story about a literary hoaxer."

"Really?"

"Yes." He nods. "It has to do with a Mexican Indian who writes—in his native language, of course, which is Toltec—about a tribe of Indians that never existed. When the anthropologists go looking for the tribe, the hoaxer says they've gone to the other world."

"That's intriguing," I say. "Where does don Juan fit in?"

Carlos smiles. "I asked don Juan if I should write such a book, and he said, 'Go ahead! It's the only thing you know how to do.' And he laughed. And he said I have a lot in common with the man I'm writing about."

"He said that?"

"Yes, but I told him, I don't have the mechanics to be a hoaxer. I could never get away with it."

"One thing I'm not good at is lying. If I tell just the smallest, most innocent lie—maybe to make a friend feel better—I get a horrendous headache, and I have guilty feelings for hours."

"That's remarkable."

"Yes, you see, my father always accused me of lying, even when I was telling the truth. As a matter of fact that's why I stopped writing to him, because he doesn't believe the letters. He thinks I can't be trusted, and there's no power on earth that can make him change his mind about me."

"That's too bad," I say.

"It's my curse," says Carlos. At this point Udo Stutynski, of the University of California Press, hauls Carlos away to meet novelist Jerzy Kosinski. (DeMille, 1980, pp. 9-10)

The above dialogue serves as the beginning of *The Don Juan Papers*. DeMille does not tell his readers that the passage is fictional until his next paragraph; "Like Carlos's fabulous first meeting with don Juan at the border between ordinary and non-ordinary worlds, the foregoing encounter is strictly a figment of a writer's imagination—which is why I call the central character 'Carlos' instead of 'Castaneda'" (DeMille, 1980, p. 10). DeMille has used fiction to cast false aspersions on Castaneda's character.

*Proof?*

DeMille claims that the Castaneda books read like fiction. He quotes novelist Joyce Carol Oates saying "Is it possible these books are non-fiction?" (p. 17). The readability and power of Castaneda's account led "novelist Oates and William Kennedy and science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon . . . to recognize Castaneda as a fellow story teller" (p. 17). But a story teller's story is not necessarily fiction. DeMille then tells us that Castaneda's books are not marketable as fiction because of their two dimensional characters and weak dramatic structure. DeMille is suspicious of Castaneda's writings both because they are well written and because they are poorly written. Similarly, Castaneda is criticized because his accounts are dissimilar to other accounts of Amerindian shamanism while he is also accused of stealing his ideas because they are too similar to other teachings.

*The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* was presented as the first part of a doctoral dissertation at the University of California. Only 5,000 copies were originally published by the University of California Press. The book was considered a scientific work, its publishers obviously unaware of its sales potential. The manuscript of Castaneda's third book, *Journey to Ixtlan* was accepted for his dissertation and Castaneda received his doctorate degree. Of course, DeMille found it thus necessary to attack Castaneda's doctoral board. It has been ironically observed (Hughes, 1979) that obtaining an anthropology degree from UCLA is not so difficult that a candidate must resort to hoaxing.

Castaneda has never provided a detailed description of the hunting techniques and herb lore that don Juan imparted to him. DeMille considers this "absence of convincing detail" as a "proof" that Castaneda is a hoaxer (p. 19). If Castaneda is an apprentice to a sorcerer, then there is undoubtedly some knowledge which he would withhold from the reading public. This is done both to protect don Juan and Carlos, to preserve the dignity of the spirits, and to protect fools from their own folly. This type of knowledge has long been

closely guarded. However, the teachings of don Juan do give insights into the nature of reality, details of a shamanistic cosmology and descriptions of drug and non-drug techniques for altering consciousness. To complain that Castaneda has not given us detailed information on plants and animals, information which is available from other sources, is mindless of the evidence he *does* present.

DeMille (1980, p. 19) further argues: "Don Juan's desert is vaguely described, his habitations are all but featureless. Incessantly sauntering across the sands in seasons when harsh conditions keep prudent persons away, Carlos and don Juan go quite unmolested by pests that normally torment desert hikers." Again, there are plausible alternative explanations for the unconvincing account Castaneda presents of the desert: adequate descriptions would aid new seekers in their quest to locate don Juan; detail of the rigors of the desert is superfluous to the knowledge transmitted in the books. There is also the very real possibility that what many individuals find unpleasant or bothersome about the desert does not bother don Juan.

Of course, ordeals are willingly taken on for spiritual reasons. The Huichol travel 300 miles, traditionally on foot, to the sacred Peyote country. "They have eaten virtually nothing and little or no water quenches their thirst. Salt is strictly prohibited. No small sacrifice when one considers the high daytime heat of the desert even during the winter months when most such pilgrimages are made" (Furst, 1977, p. 81). It is entirely possible that Castaneda refrained from complaining about the weather and the pests in his writings because he did not indulge himself in suffering and self-pity. Perhaps a self deprecating, humble Castaneda does not harp upon his own suffering, or quite possibly, as a sorcerer he does not suffer the environmental restrictions that others do. An inadequate desert description casts no a priori suspicion on Castaneda's account. While absence of convincing detail may be thought of as lack of support for one position, it cannot serve as proof for the opposite position.

### *Not Reading*

DeMille consistently utilizes fiction to ridicule don Juan. We are presented with DeMille's conception of don Juan addressing a PTA meeting. Don Juan is attempting to explain that parents should not worry that 'Johnny can't read', because Johnny is practicing 'not reading'. When presented in this manner the concept of 'not-doing' does appear humorous; however, the concept of 'non-action' is integral to Zen Buddhism as well as Taoism (Kasulis, 1981). Boyd (1973) noted the similarities between Buddhist 'action in non-action' and don Juan's 'not-doing'. Nordstrum (1980) has compared 'stopping the world' (the goal of much of Castaneda's early shamanic training) to the goal of zen: returning to an inner nondiscriminating core. Apprehending the world without interpretation, without discrimination, is what don Juan calls 'seeing' (Keen, 1972). Castaneda has described 'seeing' as "perceiving with your body

instead of your reason" (Cravens, 1973, p. 94). 'Seeing' and 'stopping the world' are instances of 'not doing'. This is the central teaching and DeMille does not address it; he only ridicules it.

'Don Juanism', as DeMille has labeled the teachings of don Juan, has much in common with Buddhism and other oriental belief systems. Don Juan's insistence that consensual reality is merely a construct is consistent with the Buddhist concept of 'maya'. Dream Yoga as taught to Castaneda (Castaneda, 1972) is practiced by Tibetan Buddhists and the Senoi people of Malasia (Weil, 1977). Instructions for 'controlled dreaming' found in pre-zen and Sufi texts also compare to don Juan's 'dreaming' (Pearce, 1974), not to mention the more recent methods utilized by Western psychologists concerning problem-solving through lucid dreaming, breakthrough dreaming, and creative dreaming (Garfield, 1974; La Berge, 1979; cf. Covello, 1984).

### *Plagiarism*

DeMille's greatest claim for *The Don Juan Papers* is that he has documented the sources that Castaneda plagiarized. A "kind of proof is found in don Juan's teachings, which sample American Indian folklore, oriental mysticism and European philosophy" (DeMille, 1980, p. 19). Finding extensive similarity between the ideas of Amerindian, oriental and European thinkers and the ideas of don Juan is certainly no proof that don Juan's teachings are derived from others. Jung (1938) believed that certain ideas exist everywhere, throughout history and "they can even spontaneously create themselves quite apart from migration and tradition" (p. 4). Ethnologists have discovered that "the symbolic systems, or religions of hunting people everywhere are essentially shamanistic, sharing so many basic features over time and space as to suggest common historical and psychological grounds" (Furst, 1977, p. 61). It has also been noted that the core teachings of all major modern religions are essentially the same (Schuon, 1975). Finding little similarity between don Juan's thought and those of other mystics and thinkers would be a far more damning discovery. There are however extensive similarities between Castaneda's account of his apprenticeship and the initiatory patterns of shamanism (Furst, 1972; Reno, 1975). Don Juan's sorcery is also similar to Western magic (Drury, 1978). Already noted above are the similarities with Buddhist concepts.

DeMille claims "there is more to the proof than similar ideas, there are similar words" (1980, p. 19). He implies that Castaneda directly copied portions of specific works, which he lists in what he calls an 'alleglossary', a glossary of the alleged sources of Castaneda's story, which DeMille insists on calling an allegory. Nearly half of the books listed in the alleglossary were published after 1968 when *Teachings* first appeared. These books, claims DeMille, were plagiarized by Castaneda for his last four books. Actually, Castaneda's work may have stimulated, or paved the way for many of these

later works: several of these works reveal shamanic systems similar but not identical to don Juan's sorcery. DeMille does not explain why he chooses to believe these later accounts of shamanism were not based upon Castaneda's works. Obviously, he regards them as the basic groundwork from which Castaneda borrowed ideas and experiences for his own books.

The alleglossary presents the following quote as the source for Castaneda's accounts of encountering an ally; however, an ally in Castaneda's books has nothing to do with corpses.

The celebrant is shut up alone with a corpse in a dark room. To animate the body, he lies on it, mouth to mouth . . . holding it in his arms . . . . After a certain time the corpse begins to move. It stands up and tries to escape; the sorcerer, firmly clinging to it, prevents it from freeing itself. Now the body struggles more fiercely. It leaps and bounds to extraordinary heights, dragging with it the man who must hold on . . . . At last the tongue of the corpse protrudes from its mouth. The critical moment has arrived. The sorcerer seizes the tongue with his teeth and bites it off. The corpse at once collapses. Failure in controlling the body after having awakened it means certain death for the sorcerer. The tongue carefully dried becomes a powerful magic weapon which is treasured by the triumphant *ngagspa* [priest]. The Tibetan . . . needed all his strength to hold it . . . . If he failed to conquer it the horrible being would kill him. (David-Neel, 1932, p. 135)

DeMille claims Castaneda derived the following three passages from the above account:

When a man is facing the ally (he) must wrestle the spirit to the ground and keep it there until it gives him power. (Castaneda, 1972, pp. 282-283)

After I grabbed it . . . the ally made me twirl, but I didn't let go. We spun through the air . . . . Suddenly I felt that I was standing on the ground again . . . . The ally had not killed me . . . . I had succeeded . . . . I jumped up and down with delight. (Castaneda, 1972, p. 306)

The jolt that one gets from grabbing an ally is so great that one might bite off one's tongue. (Castaneda, 1972, p. 305)

There is certainly a similar idea shared by these passages—enough for Furst's similarity of shamanism—but not enough for DeMille's claim. This serves as the standard method for the alleglossary's 'proof' of plagiarism. The alleglossary does not present any cases where Castaneda directly copied material, although DeMille implied as much in earlier chapters.

### *Disproof*

Since mystical systems cannot be understood without personal experience, the only empirical proof there can be for Castaneda's accounts is replication. In other words, an investigator must wholeheartedly attempt to duplicate Castaneda's experiences using don Juan's techniques. However, failure to replicate would not constitute disproof since failure could be due to differences in the attitudes, expectations, and experimental methods of the investiga-



tor. Still, the only account I have seen of any researcher, other than Castaneda, using don Juan's techniques, reported positive results (see Faraday, 1974).

Those of Castaneda's critics examined here, in addition to judging Castaneda without experiencing don Juan's system, make the mistake of believing that our present day scientific body of knowledge is complete—there are no more unknowns. For instance, Covello finds don Juan's belief system too abstract to have its roots in an ancient culture, saying that it is not what one would *expect* an ancient mesoamerican teaching to look like. Similarly, Merkur argues that since don Juan is not a "widely known, revered and feared shaman" he cannot exist outside of fiction. Thus, both Covello and Merkur argue that Castaneda presents the *unexpected* and they fallaciously conclude that he therefore must be lying. On the other hand, DeMille accuses Castaneda of plagiarism because don Juan's shamanism is too *similar* to earlier accounts of shamanism. In addition, DeMille criticizes Castaneda because his accounts of the effects of psychoactive plants are very similar to other accounts, while Merkur accuses Castaneda of confusing psychotropes and psychedelics. Yet, in the final analysis, both Covello and Merkur accept DeMille's arguments as 'proof'.

It is unfortunate that some readers may have accepted DeMille's assertions secondhand, for had they examined his books they would have found them more than unconvincing. DeMille presents no evidence that can be considered unequivocal; there are no witnesses claiming to have seen Castaneda in a library when he should have been in the desert with don Juan. Nor does DeMille show us where Castaneda directly copied another work. Instead he utilizes fiction and ad hominem arguments to deride Castaneda.

Nor does DeMille argue from the grounds of cultural anthropology. He could, for example, point out that don Juan does not use *Genita Canariensis* flowers as do traditional Yaqui shamans (Schultes, 1977), or that don Juan does not use *Ololuc* (morning glory seeds) as do many modern Mexican shamans (Furst, 1977). However, such an argument would inadequately disprove Castaneda's account, for Castaneda has never identified don Juan with any particular cultural group (Reno, 1975), nor is it surprising to find superficial differences between shamanic systems. DeMille's mapping of don Juan's ideas to many other esoteric, mystical and philosophical works only supports Furst's contention regarding the similarity of shamanic systems.

Readers may have formed the impression from the reviews of *The Eagle's Gift* that DeMille's 'proof' is widely accepted and don Juan is believed to be fictional. In fact, many scientists and philosophers dealing with consciousness and the supranormal have accepted Castaneda as a legitimate sorcerer's apprentice (e.g., Capra, 1975; Faraday, 1974; Furst, 1972; Harner, 1978; Nordstrum, 1980; Ornstein, 1972; Pearce, 1971, 1974; Pelletier, 1977, 1978; Tart, 1977; Weil, 1977; Zinburg, 1977) as did, of course, his doctoral board. The latest arguments against Castaneda are insufficient to change Castaneda's legitimate position as a major figure in modern anthropology.

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