

Occultism is not Science: A Reply to Kootte

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While contending that Castaneda's critics, notably de Mille (1980), have failed to prove a hoax, Kootte (1984) argues selectively, tendentiously, and unscientifically, misreading de Mille and misplacing the burden of proof. Siegel's (1981) psychopharmacological refutation of Castaneda's psychedelics is cited. De Mille's meeting with Castaneda is reported.

In an attempt to refute criticisms of Carlos Castaneda by Covello (1981), Merkur (1981), de Mille (1976, 1980), and Sebald (1980), Kootte (1984) leaves a false impression of my arguments, which I feel obliged to correct. To show that Castaneda's purported accounts are fiction, I presented three kinds of evidence—textual inconsistency, contradiction of independent knowledge (as of the nature of the desert environment or of the psychopharmacological effects of drugs), and examples of apparent ethnographic plagiarism—stating that the first of these kinds of evidence has the greatest weight, while the third has the least (de Mille, 1976, p. 166; 1980, p. 392). Despite this explicit, conventional ranking, Kootte mistakenly declares: "DeMille's greatest claim . . . is that he has documented the sources that Castaneda plagiarized" (1984, p. 105). Having thus shifted my emphasis, he then unaccountably confines his argument to Castaneda's environmental contradictions and ethnographic correspondences and says not a word about his textual inconsistencies, which were at that time the weightiest part of the proof, as I made clear in my books. His argument is, therefore, incomplete, unbalanced, and easily suspected of insincerity.

Kootte accuses me of incoherence, but the incoherence is in his reading rather than in my writing. He says I contradict myself by calling Castaneda's tales both too well written and not well written enough. That is nonsense. What I said was that Castaneda's tales were quickly recognized as story-telling by professional story-tellers but were not good enough story-telling to stand on their own feet in the fiction market and had to be sold as fact. That is not in any way a contradiction.

Kootte says I contradict myself by saying that Castaneda's tales are both too

different from and too much like legitimate ethnographies. Again, the paradox arises from uncomprehending reading. Numerous critics have said that Castaneda's supposed Amerindians are not enough like the Amerindians we already know to be credible, and I agree with those critics. At the same time, Castaneda's language echoes the texts of well-known ethnographies with a frequency, piquancy, and sequentiality that make one think of libraries more often than of deserts. It follows, therefore, that Castaneda's tales are both *culturally* too different from well-known ethnographies and *literarily* too much like them to be credible. That is not a contradiction but a complementarity.

Kootte apparently believes that 5000 copies is a small run for a university press, but it is a large run. He thinks the University of California Press cherished *The Teachings of Don Juan* (Castaneda, 1968) as a work of scholarship or science, whereas the record suggests they cherished it as a commercial publishing venture, despite advice against it from the senior relevant scholar on campus, who was Ralph Beals (de Mille, 1980, pp. 123-124, 133-135).

Kootte implies that hoaxers deceive to avoid work or difficulty, whereas anyone who has studied hoaxers knows they deceive because deceiving fills them with a joyful feeling of power and superiority. I have discussed this thoroughly (de Mille, 1980) in a book Kootte affects to have read, though he misidentifies its publisher.

Kootte argues quite speciously against Sebald's evidence (Sebald, 1980) that don Juan's desert is not the Sonoran Desert, and I think most readers of this journal will see through this argument. In the meantime, however, Siegel (1981) has offered striking new findings in the same category—contradiction of independent knowledge—which show that Castaneda's purported experiences with mushrooms and Jimson weed are psychopharmacologically invalid and therefore not to be accepted as authentic.

A cornerstone of Kootte's speciousness is his unscientific placing of the burden of proof on the community of scientists rather than on Castaneda, who made extraordinary claims for which he offered no proof whatsoever, let alone the extraordinary proof such claims require. If Kootte wishes to identify himself as a mystical or occult writer, well and good; he can write as he pleases; but in fact he talks constantly in scientific terms (*scientists, observers, primary source, anthropological conclusions, scientific breakthrough, account, replication*) and himself concludes that Castaneda is not by any means a charlatan but has a "legitimate position as a major figure in modern anthropology" (p. 107). If, then, Castaneda and Kootte are going to be scientists rather than mystics or occultists, they must play by the rules of science, which so far they have quite failed to do.

One rule governing scientists, and indeed all scholars, is to quote accurately. It is, of course, flattering to be quoted at length, as Kootte has quoted me, but it is not considered good form to omit 23 lines here and there from two quoted pages without giving the reader any sign that lines have been

omitted. Though Kootte's hidden omissions do not distort the sense of what is actually quoted, they transform a playful satire—whose playfulness is obvious to any reader with a sense of humor—into a serious interview. Thereupon, Kootte chastises me for misrepresenting Castaneda's character, when it is Kootte who has misrepresented my satire.

In contrast with Kootte, Castaneda is known for an outstanding sense of humor. On 4 December 1981, he confided to me:

You know, these people that I'm working with in Mexico have forbidden me—absolutely forbidden me—to read anything that is written about me. So for that reason, I have not read your books. But I want to say that for me it is an honor—an honor—that anyone writes about me, even if he says that my books are crap.

And he looked up at me with a joyful smile, which on that occasion I took to express a feeling of inventive power, though not of deceptive superiority, since he surely knew I was only playing the don Juan game with him and did not believe a word he was saying.

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