

A Critical Look at "A Critical Look": Castaneda Recrudescens

Jordan Paper

York University

A recent article by Kootte (1984) criticized critics of Castaneda's writings for the temerity to question the veracity of Castaneda's "scientific" reports of shamanistic experience. A minimal familiarity with studies of shamanism of the last decade by historians of religions or of Mesoamerican cultures by anthropologists clearly indicates Castaneda's literary works are fictional. As fiction, his novels can be appreciated for their synthesis of concepts from many cultures. However, to consider these works a basic and unquestionable source of data for social scientists is to deny the foundation of social science—to give priority to faith over reason.

It was with considerable surprise that I found Anton Kootte's (1984) selective critique of Castaneda's many critics (Covello, 1981; DeMille, 1976, 1980; Merkur, 1981) in a recent issue of *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*. Having assumed the *Journal* to be an interdisciplinary social science forum, I was bemused by the implication of its publishing an article which implicitly denied the validity of the social sciences and, with regard to an age-old Western theological conundrum, chose faith over reason.

When popular, Castaneda's works were valuable in creating an awareness of reality as a cultural construct, as some anthropologists and psychologists have long averred (e.g., Geertz, 1965; Hallowell, 1960). However, to posit his works "as a primary source from which anthropological conclusions may be drawn" (Kootte, p. 1984, p. 100) is to point the way to spurious scholarship. It is for this reason that an understanding of Castaneda's don Juan as fictional is no insult to Castaneda but clarifies what has been misconstrued as ethnology.

Kootte correctly values "Western philosophers and scientists who have actually taken on foreign belief systems" (p. 99), yet is apparently unaware of the works of such as Aghananda Bharati (1975, 1976), a scholar of Austrian background who is well established in America as an anthropologist and in India as a tantric adept. Instead, Castaneda is presented as the epitome of a

"scientist . . . experientially exploring the metaphysical system of another culture" (p. 99). What must be definitively challenged are the terms "scientist" and "culture."

In the paragraph following the preceding quotation, Kootte acknowledges that Castaneda should not be regarded as an anthropologist, as anthropologists themselves insist (e.g., LaBarre, 1938/1975), but then labels him a "shaman." Further in the article, Kootte points out that "Castaneda, like most shamans, is a very private person" (p. 101). This statement among many others demonstrates that Kootte is unaware of the social science and religious studies use of the term, for "shaman" labels a social functionary with *particular* abilities and methods (e.g., Hultkrantz, 1973). If Castaneda is not an anthropologist and decidedly not a shaman, he is certainly an author. And that is precisely the point of DeMille (1976) whom Kootte castigates.

A determining characteristic of science is that statements made within its many disciplines are intended to be verified through replication. Ethnological statements are verifiable by others given the same culture and circumstances. Kootte insists that Castaneda's statements can only be verified by undergoing what he purports to have undergone, but even then "failure to replicate would not constitute disproof . . ." (p. 106). A statement that is not subject to independent verification is not a scientific one, but Kootte's implied corollary that a non-scientific statement is wrong is certainly not the understanding of science. Castaneda is not a social scientist, but he is, as stated, an author. A novelist's statements are subject to a different kind of verification than those of scientists. To consider Castaneda a fiction writer is not ipso facto to call him a liar. Novelists may bring to our attention truths beyond that of the scientist who is limited by rigorous, self-imposed systems of verification.

The major criticism of Castaneda as an anthropologist rather than a novelist is that his ethnological "data" fits no known culture or cultural complex. A hitherto completely unknown culture is not likely to be discovered in an area with improved roads (Castaneda repeatedly travels to don Juan's residence by automobile) and access to bus stations (where Castaneda writes he first met don Juan) (Castaneda, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1977, 1981). Kootte notes that "Castaneda has never identified don Juan with any particular culture group" (p. 107), disregarding the subtitle of Castaneda's first book (1968). Kootte considers that Merkur's criticism, that the cultural complex Castaneda describes is not different but indeed contrary to all known comparative situations, "essentially precludes new discoveries" (p. 101). It is certainly a novel type of social science that argues cultural comparisons are inherently anti-science, that knowledge is not built on previous knowledge, and that there are no viable non-personal methods for acquiring scientific understanding.

Kootte assumes "Western science" is virtually ignorant of shamanistic experience (p. 102) but apparently is himself unacquainted with an extensive body of publications, especially by Scandinavian social scientists (e.g., English

language publications of Arbman, 1963-70; Bäckman and Hultkrantz, 1978; Hultkrantz, 1953; Siikala, 1978), let alone scholars in the Americas (e.g., Eliade, 1964; LaBarre, 1972; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1971), including those who have undergone limited shamanistic experiences (e.g., Meyerhoff, 1974; Wason, 1980). Hence, when Kootte writes "the content of shamanic visions must vary considerably" (p. 102), he seems unaware that the visions have been demonstrated to vary in response to the culture of the visionary, the social and physical setting, and the method used to induce ecstatic trance or reverie.

Castaneda would be incorrectly understood as the first Western scholar to undergo shamanistic initiatory experiences or to have one's mind oriented towards other realities (e.g., Bharati, 1970; Harner, 1980; Saso, 1978; Sharon, 1978). I am personally acquainted with a number of functioning Native North American shamans, a handful of whom have advanced university degrees (including two in psychology), and have myself undergone relevant training within one such tradition. In all cases, there is a traditional and functional reticence to mention let alone exploit the core experience—the opposite of Castaneda's *modus operandi*.

If we understand Castaneda as a novelist rather than as "a major figure in modern anthropology" (Kootte, p. 107), then the ever-present question of plagiarism disappears. A fiction writer in exploring inner truth selectively incorporates all that the author has absorbed in the past. Castaneda is hardly the product of an isolated, non-literate culture. Indeed, he is considerably well-read, especially in works popular among intellectuals and students in the 1960's. One can only be surprised that Kootte and others find remarkable that parts of Castaneda's work read like the once popular translations and essays on Zen, Taoism, tantric Buddhism and Hinduism, etc. Furthermore, at UCLA, Castaneda had access to the fieldwork of Furst and Meyerhoff on the Mesoamerican, hallucinogenic-using Huichol long before their manuscripts appeared in print. Indeed, it took the latter years to catch on to Castaneda's use of her work (DeMille, 1980). As DeMille has pointed out (1976), Castaneda can best be understood as a "Trickster"—a highly positive concept in Native American cultures.

Kootte ends his essay by indicating a number of scholars who have accepted Castaneda as "a legitimate [?] sorcerer's apprentice" (p. 107), including a number of transpersonal psychologists (of the two anthropologists listed, at least one has since changed his mind since the 1972 publication cited). This is precisely the sole danger of Castaneda. (From the standpoint of history of religions, sorcery is generally understood as shamanistic powers used for negative purposes.) Psychologists (e.g., Pelletier and Garfield, 1976) have weakened their theoretical works by not applying the same critical standards to non-Western (or supposed non-Western) material as they do to Western. Uncritical acceptance is not scholarship, it is romanticism. From a scientific perspective, the will to believe does not in itself verify data lacking any direct

or comparative confirmation. Tertullian's aphorism, "I believe because it is absurd," may be applicable to theology but not by definition to science.

References

- Arbman, E. (1963-70). *Ecstasy or religious trance* (3 vols.). Upsalla: Svenska Bokforlaget.
- Bäckman, L., and Hultkrantz, A. (1978). *Studies in Lapp shamanism*. Stockholm: Comparative Studies in Religion 16.
- Bharati, A. (1970). *The ochre robe*. Garden City: Doubleday and Co.
- Bharati, A. (1975). *The tantric tradition*. New York: Samuel Weiser.
- Bharati, A. (1976). *The light at the center: Context and pretext of modern mysticism*. Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson.
- Castaneda, C. (1968). *The teachings of don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Castaneda, C. (1971). *A separate reality*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Castaneda, C. (1973). *Journey to Ixtlan*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Castaneda, C. (1974). *Tales of power*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Castaneda, C. (1977). *The second ring of power*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Castaneda, C. (1981). *The eagle's gift*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Covello, E.M. (1981). Review of *The Eagle's Gift* by C. Castaneda. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 2, 353-355.
- DeMille, R. (1976). *Castaneda's journey: The power and the allegory*. Santa Barbara: Capra Press.
- DeMille, R. (1980). *The don Juan papers: Further Castaneda controversies*. Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson.
- Eliade, M. (1964). *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1965). Religion as a cultural system. In M. Banton (Ed.), *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion* (pp. 1-46). London: Tavistock Publications.
- Hallowell, A.I. (1960). Ojibwa ontology, behavior and world view. In S. Diamond (Ed.), *Culture in history: Essays in honor of Paul Radin* (pp. 19-52). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Harner, M. (1980). *The way of the shaman*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Hultkrantz, Å. (1953). *Conceptions of the soul among North American Indians*. Stockholm: The Ethnographic Museum of Sweden, Monograph 1.
- Hultkrantz, Å. (1973). A definition of shamanism. *Temenos*, 9, 25-37.
- Koote, A. (1984). A critical look at Castaneda's critics. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 5, 99-108.
- LaBarre, W. (1975). *The peyote cult*. New York: Schocken Books. (Original work published 1938)
- LaBarre, W. (1972). *The Ghost Dance: The origins of religion*. New York: Doubleday and Co.
- Merkur, D. (1981). Review of *The Eagle's Gift* by C. Castaneda. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 2, 459-463.
- Meyerhoff, B.G. (1974). *Peyote hunt: The sacred journey of the Huichol Indians*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Pelletier, K.R., and Garfield, C. (1976). *Consciousness East and West*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Reichel-Dolmatoff, G. (1971). *Amazonian cosmos: The sexual and religious symbolism of the Tukana Indians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Saso, M. (1978). *The teachings of the Taoist Master Chuang*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sharon, D. (1978). *Wizard of the four winds*. New York: The Free Press.
- Siikala, A-L. (1978). *The rite technique of the Siberian shaman*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.
- Wasson, R.G. (1980). *The wondrous mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica*. New York: McGraw Hill.