

The Rituals, Symbols, and Values in Cultural Context

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Introduction

Rituals and symbols are central to how communities express belief systems, construct identities, and navigate relationships with the spiritual and material world. In “Shamans, Healers and Experiences I Can’t Explain”, Eugene Linden reflects on his encounters with shamanistic practices and spiritual healers, using symbols of altered consciousness, healing journeys, and spirit communication to shed light on worldviews that transcend Western rationalism. In “The Secrets of Voodoo in Haiti”, Gino Del Guercio describes Haitian Vodou’s rituals, possession, spirit invocation, drumming, and sacrifice, to reveal a cosmology of ancestral spirits, community, and resilience. While these texts depict different cultural contexts, both use ritual and symbol to challenge the reader’s assumptions about healing, spirituality, and the borderline between the natural and supernatural. This essay argues that Linden and Del Guercio deploy their ritualistic narratives to show how healing traditions in their respective cultures define core community values (such as interconnectedness, respect for spirits, and holistic well-being) and to critique Western materialist and reductionist understandings of reality.

Thesis

Through his depiction of shamanistic journeys and altered states, Linden promotes a worldview that privileges spiritual interconnectedness and holistic healing over purely biomedical frameworks, while Del Guercio uses Haitian Vodou rituals to illustrate a culture where community, spirit ancestry, and resilience are deeply embedded in religious practice, and together, both texts challenge dominant Western assumptions about sanity, religion, and healing.

Analysis of Rituals, Symbols, and Cultural Context

Linden's Shamanism: Rituals, Symbols, and Meaning

Linden's account centers on journeys into non-ordinary reality. He writes about shamans who enter trance states, communicate with spirits, and diagnose and cure ailments through what Western thinking might dismiss as mystical experiences. These journeys function as ritual: the shaman's altered consciousness symbolizes a bridge between the human and spiritual realms.

The symbol of the spirit guide or helper is crucial: shamans often describe companions in spirit worlds who assist in healing. This underscores a value deeply rooted in many shamanistic cultures: humans are not isolated agents but participants in a broader spiritual network.

Linden also uses the ritual of healing to challenge assumptions. Healing in his narrative isn't just about physical medicine; it involves a holistic integration of mind, body, and spirit. This contrasts with Western medicine's typical emphasis on pathology and diagnosis. Linden's portrayal implies that illness may sometimes be a manifestation of spiritual or symbolic imbalances, not just biological malfunction.

Moreover, the uncertainty and ineffability of these experiences (which Linden at times admits he cannot fully explain) become a symbol in themselves: the limits of language and rationality, and the humility one must hold in the face of the unknown. Linden's reflections question the Western presumption that everything real must be measurable or nameable.

Del Guercio's Vodou: Rituals, Symbols, and Cultural Values

In "The Secrets of Voodoo in Haiti", Del Guercio depicts rituals of possession, drumming, offerings, and communion with the lwa (spirits). These are not theatrical but deeply

meaningful: when practitioners are “ridden” by a spirit, they embody a relationship with ancestors or deities. This ritual symbolizes continuity with the past, as spirits of ancestors and cultural memory remain alive and active in daily life.

The use of drumming, dance, and communal gathering is another powerful symbol. Drumming does more than set the rhythm, it is a form of communication, a call to the spirit world (Auguste & Rasmussen, 2019). Haitian Vodou drumming’s rhythms help participants enter trance states and facilitate possession.

Animal sacrifice is another symbolic act. It is not simply violence but an offering, part of a reciprocal relationship: believers give life energy back to the spirits, and in return seek guidance, healing, or protection. Del Guercio’s depiction emphasizes healing: many of the rituals are deeply connected to health. In Haitian cultural context, illness is not just physical but spiritual, social, and symbolic. The ougan (priests) or mambos (priestesses) serve as healers, diagnosing spiritual causes for misfortune and restoring balance.

Further, these practices reflect community resilience. Vodou rituals are communal, involving many people who share in the ceremony. This reflects a value of social cohesion and tradition that has persisted in the face of historical trauma, poverty, and marginalization.

Interpretation: What the Authors Convey About Meaning

Linden’s shamanic narratives invite readers to broaden their epistemological frameworks. He suggests that rationalism and empiricism, while valuable, are not the only valid ways to understand reality. Through symbolic healing journeys, he emphasizes that meaning can come from communion with unseen realms, and that these realms are not less “real” just because they defy conventional measurement.

Del Guercio's portrayal of Vodou counters sensationalized Eurocentric caricatures of "black magic" and demonization. By emphasizing rituals, community, and healing, he shows that Vodou is a structured religion with deep cosmological meaning and social function. The spirits (lwa) are not arbitrary or malevolent but are ancestors and agents in the moral and spiritual economy of Haitian life.

Challenging Cultural Assumptions

Both texts challenge the assumption that Western, materialist frameworks are the default or superior mode of understanding. Linden's shamanic journeys reveal the limitations of seeing consciousness only as brain activity; Del Guercio's account disrupts the assumption that religion must be institutional or formally "civilized" to be meaningful. These works push the reader to reconsider their epistemic arrogance.

Haitian Vodou is often misrepresented in popular culture. Del Guercio counters this by showing its richness, structure, and ethical foundations. The symbolic acts of possession, sacrifice, and trance are not spectacle but social and religious practice deeply tied to history, identity, and survival.

Both authors suggest that healing is more than physical. By highlighting spiritual dimensions of illness and therapy, they encourage a more holistic, integrated perspective; one that many Western societies tend to marginalize or dismiss.

Scholarly Perspective

Peer-reviewed scholarship supports these interpretations. Auguste and Rasmussen (2019) explore how Vodou functions as a mental health resource in Haitian society, arguing that it is not

superstition but a culturally consonant form of psychological support. Ougan and mambos often act as first-line therapists, engaging in rituals that offer diagnosis, meaning, and healing in ways Western mental health paradigms may miss. This reinforces Del Guercio's depiction of Vodou rituals as vital to community wellness and meaning-making.

Conclusion

Eugene Linden's "Shamans, Healers and Experiences I Can't Explain" and Gino Del Guercio's "The Secrets of Voodoo in Haiti" employ rituals and symbols to illuminate deeply held cultural values: spiritual interconnectedness, holistic healing, ancestral continuity, and community resilience. Linden's shamanic narratives challenge readers to expand their understanding of consciousness and health, while Del Guercio's depiction of Vodou contests demonizing stereotypes. Together, these works remind us that healing and belief are not universal in their expression, and that honoring different symbolic systems can enrich our collective understanding of what it means to be human.

References

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