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# Queer shamans: autoarchaeology and neo-shamanism

Robert J. Wallis

## Abstract

Neo-shamanism is a largely unexplored spiritual practice among Western peoples that, by virtue of its queerness, has pressing implications for archaeologists. In their practices, Druidic neo-shamans increasingly make pilgrimages to ancient sites and express strong views on the socio-politics of their presentation and management. Rather than avoid the 'fringe' and dismiss these engagements with archaeology outright, as a normative archaeology tends to, I explore Druidic neo-shamanism from a queer perspective; a predominantly self-conscious, self-reflective standpoint. This autoarchaeology, outside normative archaeological inquiry, recognizes aspects of the 'fringe' that archaeologists prefer to ignore, such as a British reburial issue. My findings are not wholly polemical since current relations between site managers and neo-shamans look towards future harmonizing engagements.

## Keywords

Autoarchaeology; neo-shamanism; Druids; Avebury; heritage management.

## Queer theory and autoarchaeology

Growing numbers of researchers are adopting queer standpoints. Queer theory influences my discussion of neo-shamanism – a spiritual practice among Western people utilizing elements of indigenous shamanism for personal and communal empowerment – in three ways. First, advocating a study of neo-shamanism as a legitimate area of archaeological inquiry is a dissonant act with regard to orthodox archaeological and anthropological discourse. My own socio-political location is inherently queer: not only has neo-shamanism hitherto been shrugged off as irrelevant, but also studying it does not require 'digging' the mandatory 'holes'. Second, some neo-shamans also inhabit queer locations in their marginalization by the majority of Western society. As Dowson (1998) suggests, masculist scientific practice of archaeology downplays or denies a number of ways of knowing about the past, and aspects of neo-shamanism represent one such marginalized way of knowing.

Neo-shamanic queerness might involve interpreting the past in unusual and controversial ways, and/or perceiving the world from a shamanistic perspective that challenges



Western sensory and ideological conventions. In this way, and since queer theory is not restricted to explorations of homosexuality, gender, or sex, the queer elements of neo-shamanism do not necessarily concern gender or sexuality. I follow Halperin's definition that queer 'acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin 1995: 62). It is therefore open to 'anyone who feels their position (sexual, intellectual or cultural) to be marginalised' (Dowson 1998: 84), such as neo-shamans or researchers exploring neo-shamanism.

In using queer theory to examine neo-shamanism, I am mindful of Halperin's warning:

What makes 'queer' potentially so treacherous as a label is that its lack of definitional content renders it all too readily available for appropriation by those who do not experience the unique political disabilities and forms of social disqualification from which lesbians and gay men routinely suffer in virtue of our sexuality.

(Halperin 1995: 65)

My involvement in neo-shamanism at an experiential level places me in a location with credentials that are prerequisite to utilizing queer theory and reflect the marginalization Halperin refers to. This politically explicit – autoarchaeological (as I call it) – neo-shamanic location, combined with my academic training and the various benefits that embodies, places me in a unique situation from which to study neo-shamanism. Simply put, queer theory facilitates appreciation of the peculiar nature of my own standpoint and those of neo-shamans, *vis-à-vis* the normativity of Western society and academia.

The third way in which I adopt a queer stance is concerned with the auto- in autoarchaeology, that is, my own location with regard to neo-shamanism. An autoarchaeology of neo-shamanism necessitates a certain degree of qualitative 'auto/ethnography' (Reed-Danahay 1997) and 'auto-anthropology', methodologies described as 'anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it' (Strathern 1987: 17), or 'anthropology at home' (Jackson 1987). This self-reflexive position unites postmodern anthropologists, who challenge the insider–outsider dichotomy in ethnography, and postmodern autobiographers, who question the boundedness of individuality (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2). 'New ethnography' recognizes the self-conscious, 'writerly quality of ethnographic treatises' (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rabinow 1988; Hammersley 1992), and the fertile opportunity for experimental writing (see, for example, Ellis and Bochner 1996), with a 'self-consciously critical purpose'. The essence of such 'autoreferential poetry' (Fischer 1986: 195) is not that researchers are fabricating their ethnography. Rather, these approaches equip anthropologists with methodologies for approaching one's own culture ethnographically, an enterprise attesting to the fact that there is now a strong move for 'insider research'. In justifying insider research and thereby questioning the science envy in branches of anthropology and archaeology that demand scholarly 'detachment', autoarchaeology opposes the dualism of the insider–outsider paradigm. An integral methodology is experiential anthropology, in which the field technique of participant observation is radically altered, bringing into question not only the notion of 'going native', but also the seriousness with which we take the beliefs and practices of our 'informants'.

Ahmed and Shore encourage ethnographic research, "at home", not only among the

marginal groups and minorities that exist within Western societies . . . but also into the mainstream cultures of Western societies themselves' (1995: 27). Neo-shamanism is a good subject for this sort of ethnography, being simultaneously marginalized by the West but also an increasingly acceptable aspect of middle England and North America. Similarly, Marcus and Fischer (1986) urge self-reflexive anthropologists to use the 'self-as-subject' as an ethnographic category. Research of this kind blurs the insider–outsider divide. I also agree with Favret-Saada, that it is vital for anthropologists to experience what they aim to understand. In her exploration of witchcraft in western France's Brocage, Favret-Saada realizes the absurdity of neutral positioning in a situation where experience is everything: 'one must make up one's mind to engage in another kind of ethnography' (Favret-Saada 1980: 12). Here, experiential anthropology argues that anthropologists treat their own experiences as valid data (Turner 1994: 72). The perceived risk is of 'going native' with its 'fear of ostracism' (Young and Goulet 1994: 8) from one's intellectual peers.

However, I argue that the issue of going native is far less problematic than formerly thought. Up to a point it is impossible to go native in the first place, since at a relativist extreme we can fully understand a culture only if we have been raised in that environment. And, when studying new spiritual components in *our own culture* we already *are* native (Salomonsen 1999: 7). The origins of concern with 'going native' lie in an era when 'turning Indian' was seen as politically suspect, if not heretical, because turning your back on the West (the best) in favour of the 'savage' (the worst) was treasonous. In intellectual terms, the fear is of going against rationalist science in favour of primitive myth and, in religious terms, turning away from god towards superstition. According to autoarchaeology and a queer stance, the issue of going native is not of great concern because from the outset I have been politically explicit and not claimed absolute objectivity.

Participatory observation is an ethnographic technique that requires revision in light of these comments. Indeed 'direct observation' is an impossible ideal, indicative of 'pretension' (Salomonsen 1999), in that only a self-aggrandizing, 'detached' anthropologist would claim to be 'outside' and objectively unaffected during an intense shamanic ritual. This is more so in a Western setting where, as I have experienced at neo-shamanic rituals, involvement is all or nothing. One cannot sit on the edge and take notes because being present necessitates taking part. As Salomonsen states:

In the practice of modern mystery religions, you are either in, or you are not there at all. In my doctoral studies [I] had to put myself in the position of an apprentice, taking my own experiences seriously, observing the development of my own 'insight'.

(Salomonsen 1999: 9)

Doing so entailed altering the current strategy of going native behaviourally ('participant observation'), even emotionally ('empathy'), but not 'cognitively' (Salomonsen 1999: 7). Salomonsen calls this a 'method of compassion' that demands 'embodiment rather than disengagement', insisting that such an approach promises a healthy component of reflexivity in which constructive critical comment can be made (Salomonsen 1999: 9–10). Rather than negatively influencing one's research, 'first hand experience may open the possibility to deep insight and the best description possible' (Salomonsen 1999: 8). This holds especially when studying neo-shamanism, an experiential spirituality whose modes of verification depend on personal insight. Only by adopting an experiential role did I achieve

what aims to be a well-rounded perspective. It also facilitated an ongoing evaluation process of my own partiality, my own perspective, in a politically explicit way that does not claim dubious credentials of objectivity and impartiality. Indeed, rather than this threatening my academic credentials, they would be seriously open to question had I ignored, or left unsaid for fear of ostracism, my experiential approach. My intention is that such political explicitness actually promises a far more open-minded discussion.

The fear of going native is related to a major failure in anthropology, that is a failure to take the spiritual realities of its 'subjects' *seriously* (Salomonsen 1999). One of the few anthropologists to 'go serious' has been Edith Turner, who recounts her and her husband's experiences among the Ndembu of Zambia in her ethnographies of their spiritual beliefs. The two anthropologists assumed they need not entertain these beliefs because they were simply there to *study* them. In adopting this positivist stance, as the Turners came to realize, 'we denied the people's equality with ours, their "coevalness"' (Turner 1992: 28). In one ritual, a healing ceremony, Turner 'sighted a spirit form', an experience which challenged her devoutly held objective anthropological methodologies. Turner is advocating a methodology that disrupts normative anthropological methods of inquiry. Indeed, there is a growing movement in anthropology for explicit 'confession' of the unusual experiences that occur when studying the spiritual domains of other cultures. Such experiences highlight how the 'irrationality' of the Other – be it shamans or neo-shamans – by virtue of its Otherness, cannot solely be explored in scientific, rational terms which limit the interpretative possibilities open to us. Rather than making judgements based on singular, scientific reality, a more suitable hermeneutic framework for addressing shamanic/neo-shamanic experiences is according to 'multiple realities' (Goulet and Young 1994: 261). Certainly, the unusual experiences I have had during rituals and workshops are beyond scientific analysis, cannot be subjected to 'truth value', and lead to a richer and nuanced understanding of neo-shamanism (see also, Young and Goulet 1994: 11–12). Experiential anthropology challenges the suggestion that self-reflexive and 'scientific' methodologies are commensurable, and this is a position I have found vital to understanding neo-shamanism.

Returning to archaeology, Dowson argues that queer theory disrupts the normativity of archaeological practice, truly enabling a radical rethinking of the past in ways that post-processualism has failed to accomplish. Indeed, post-processualism has largely failed to challenge normativity (Dowson 1998) and some post-processualists continue to reify masculinist biases, hegemonic discourses, Western philosophy, and scientific paradigms (see also, Hassan 1997; VanPool and VanPool 1999). Meanwhile, extreme post-processualists are accused of judgemental relativism and a mentality in which 'anything goes'.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, both queer theory and the queer element in autoarchaeology challenge more than they reify, and overcome the fundamentalist relativism in postmodern theory. Autoarchaeology has, I argue, the potential to empower researchers from 'a self-critical and perhaps self-destructive position, into an era of self-confidence' (Ahmed and Shore 1995), and enable them to adopt a 'political standpoint that at the same time will articulate and challenge the assumptions framing not only the standpoints they challenge but also those they occupy' (Wylie 1995: 268). In this way, 'standpoint specificity [can] be regarded as a resource, not a liability' (Wylie 1995: 270). My autoarchaeological stance *vis-à-vis* neo-shamanism is not a neutral and impartial presentation, but rather a politically located representation informed by my 'situated standpoint' (Harding 1991) which

not only contextualizes neo-shamanism, but also necessitates self-reflexive examination of my own position. In sum, autoarchaeology embraces a number of related theoretical discourses, including queer theory, alternative archaeology, and the self-reflexive attitude of the auto-researcher. Rather than risking eclecticism, the stance of autoarchaeology addresses specific issues that, in this paper, are central to a socio-political inquiry into neo-shamanism.

### **Druidic neo-shamanism**

Druidry is a major branch on the tree of contemporary Paganism (Neo-Paganism in the USA) (see, for example, Jones and Matthews 1990; Harvey and Hardman 1995; Harvey 1997). Many Druids draw on indigenous shamanisms in their practices, although only a small number of adherents are strictly neo-shamanic in that they acknowledge the influence of shamanism on their practices and beliefs (see, for example, Jones 1994, 1998; Wallis 1999b). Druids are inspired by records of Iron Age Druids, but, rather than believing they are continuing an unbroken tradition, most are well aware of the contemporaneous nature of their spirituality. Indeed, the romantic Druidic revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be as much a source of inspiration as the 'Celtic' Druids of antiquity (see, for example, Sebastian 1990). In the diversity of Druidry, some practitioners can be accused of romanticizing and grossly distorting the ancient sources, but others are acutely aware that their practices are of and in the present. Authenticity is not a major issue; the relevance of these contemporary paganisms to practitioners and researchers in the present, is.

Ancient places, those sites of specific interest to archaeologists, are also of great significance to many Druids. The links made between druids and ancient sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury, advanced by antiquarians including Aubrey and Stukeley, are revived by today's Druids. I asked the shaman-druid 'Greywolf' (Philip Shallcrass, joint-chief of the British Druid Order) why sites like Avebury and Stonehenge are so important:

Many Druids like to make ritual at ancient stone circles since there is a strong feeling that they are places where communion with our ancestors may be made more readily than elsewhere. There is also a sense that making ritual at such places energizes and benefits both the sites themselves and the land around. . . . I am drawn to Avebury . . . because it is my heartland, i.e. the place where I feel most spiritually 'at home'. The first time I visited, more than twenty years ago, I felt I belonged there. That feeling has never left me. I work with spirits of place. This is a strong part of Druid tradition. I feel the spirit of place most strongly most often in Avebury. Six years ago, I was asked to make a Druid rite for an eclectic gathering at Avebury. I composed a rite that left space for people of all traditions to experience their own faith together in one circle with those of other faiths. It worked so well that similar open, multi-faith ceremonies are still being held there and elsewhere, both in Britain and overseas. Avebury is a very welcoming place in which to make ritual. I am not the only person who has experienced the spirit of the place as a great mother with open arms, welcoming all who come.

This very intimate relationship with ancient sites, its impact on the monuments, and the

way the sites are spiritually and intellectually perceived by neo-shamans, is of considerable significance to archaeologists. Besides their physical impact on monuments, neo-shamans actively and increasingly challenge the very act of excavation and storing of remains. One druid states:

Every day in Britain, sacred Druid sites are surveyed and excavated, with associated finds being catalogued and stored for the archaeological record. Many of these sites include the sacred burials of our ancestors. Their places of rest are opened during the excavation, their bones removed and placed in museums for the voyeur to gaze upon, or stored in cardboard boxes in archaeological archives. . . . As far as archaeologists are concerned, there are no cultural implications to stop them from their work. As far as Druids are concerned, guardians and ancestors still reside at ceremonial sites such as Avebury and the West Kennet Long Barrow. . . . I believe we, as Druids, should be saying 'Stop this now. These actions are disrespectful to our ancestors. These excavations are digging the heart out of Druidic culture and belief.' When archaeologists desecrate a site through excavation and steal our ancestors and their guardians, they are killing me as well as our heritage. It is a theft. I am left wounded. My identity as a Druid is stolen and damaged beyond repair. My heart cries. We should assert our authority as the physical guardians of esoteric lore. We should reclaim our past.

(Davies 1997: 12–13)

Davies's view might compare with the so-called 'New Age' traveller opinion that archaeologists are contemporary society's 'looters of graves' (Bender 1993: 271, see also 1998), just as many early antiquarians are seen by contemporary archaeologists. To Davies, reburial of these looted bones 'makes perfect sense; bones are living people and should therefore be respected and ceremonially reburied' (Davies 1998/9: 11). He also outlines how neo-shamans should be involved in this issue:

I speak for the ancestors and guardians of the land, those spirits not currently represented in the archaeological record. . . . The Druid or Pagan shaman can use their gifts as 'harmonic bridges' to communicate between the realities of archaeology, land developers and Pagan Druids. . . . Druids should join together and encourage debate between archaeologists and museums in the reburial issue.

(Davies 1998/9: 10–12)

Davies's position may be polemical, but it is representative of a growing number of neo-shamans. It is also reminiscent of Native American and other indigenous voices worldwide, so that a challenge for archaeologists in Britain today is to avoid being seen as the enemy, insisting 'they have the right to disturb and desecrate burial sites and to make decisions about the disposal of other people's dead' (Ucko 1990: xvi). With the multi-cultural nature of our contemporary society, and without a determinable genetic or cultural link<sup>2</sup> as many indigenous populations have, the spiritual link between neo-shamans and prehistoric 'ancestors' may not be concrete enough for hard-line rationalist scientific archaeologists to entertain (a situation that has also occurred in the States). Despite a lack of 'science' to further their claim, I think neo-shamanic concerns for their 'ancestors' should not be shrugged off by archaeologists as harmless or meaningless. Such an attitude would reify the sentiment once (and often still) directed at indigenous spiritualities, a Eurocentric

mindset without space for the alternative voices that give richness to interpretations of the past beyond the safety of archaeological discourse. Furthermore, the reburial issue is not just to be found among the 'alternative', neo-shamanic voices. In a recent *British Archaeology* news article (November 1997: 5) we read about the 'Public disquiet over digging of graves', referring specifically to an excavation at an Anglo-Saxon cemetery in Suffolk. One remark is rather striking:

How short a time do we have to be buried before it is permissible, even acceptable, for grinning archaeologists to dig out our bones, prod among our teeth, disperse our possessions, take the head off our horse and lay us, not to rest, in boxes in museums?

Indeed, 'When does sanctity, afforded to graves, cease to be an issue?'. In the *British Archaeology* article, this criticism is levied at 'Britain's planning culture which appears to treat cemeteries, especially out-of-use non-Christian cemeteries, with little respect'. As this example makes clear, many people express a sense of responsibility to these 'ancestors'. And scientific proof in the form of genetics may not be required to reinforce the neo-shamanic claim of Davies. The US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, in comparison, uses 'cultural affiliation' as a legitimate reason for repatriation and reburial, and since 'culture' is a relative, political, and disputed term, so a well-constructed neo-shamanic argument based on cultural affiliation might get reburial onto the archaeological agenda in Britain (and Europe).

What hinders this is that, where archaeologists and site custodians have no 'spiritual' agenda when it comes to excavation and management, neo-shamanic groups have no centralized spiritual beliefs concerning disposal of the dead either. That the argument is now timely suggests the spiritual component is gathering momentum and therefore coherency. And negotiations *are* in effect: Greywolf told me that 'The question of respect for our ancestors has been very much to the fore with me lately'. He, along with other Druidic and Pagan groups, has been heavily involved in discussions with English Heritage concerning access to Stonehenge at the summer solstice. The 'Stonehenge Masterplan' has also been under discussion at these meetings, particularly proposed changes to the landscape that will inevitably detrimentally affect the archaeology. It transpires that the proposed cut and cover tunnel will disturb approximately four burials on the route, so Greywolf asked a National Trust representative:

if there was any possibility that priests used to working with the spirits of our ancestors could get access when such burials were uncovered and could make ritual for the spirits of the dead. He said that he knew re-burial was an issue in Australia and the US, but didn't know it was over here. I told him that it is a 'live' issue amongst the pagan community and was likely to become increasingly so. He expressed his personal sympathy to the idea. Inspired by this initial contact, I wrote a letter to some appropriate folk in English Heritage and the National Trust. In it, I expressed my concern that any burials found might simply end up in boxes in a museum basement. I asked for access to burials on site when they were uncovered, for permission to make ritual before burials were removed, and also whether it would be possible to re-bury the ancestral remains after a suitable period of study, preferably within the Stonehenge area. The latter seems important since our ancestors clearly didn't select their burial places at



random and I felt they should be returned to the earth as close to the original grave sites as possible. Both English Heritage and the National Trust replied very promptly and favourably. The National Trust are putting my letter forward to the next meeting of the Stonehenge Archaeology Group and I'm awaiting developments.

This sort of interaction between neo-shamanic groups and site custodians looks towards good relations in the future. Unlike many indigenous voices, Greywolf's is not in direct opposition to the aims and objectives of archaeologists. For many Native Americans, archaeology is anathema *per se*: burials must not be disturbed, ancient monuments are meant to be left alone to decay, and the scientific knowledge gained from archaeology is deemed unnecessary where oral narratives already explain the past sufficiently. Often, only religious specialists visit the sites, and non-native interference and visiting is unwelcome. On the other hand, for Western neo-shamans educated in the preservation ethic, the curation of sacred sites and their preservation is fundamental. They do not claim sole rights to the sites but respect the views of other interest groups. Tourists and children's school parties should also benefit from learning about the sites, a scientific knowledge that is favourable to Westerners but – for the neo-shamans – lacks a spiritual element. Over the long-term, neo-shamans feel the sites must endure for the future use of neo-shamans and other interested groups, their children and grandchildren. Common interest in the past marks a favourable link between some neo-shamans and site curators, but this is not to say there is a homogeneity of opinion. In contrast to the heritage-aligning viewpoint of Greywolf is Tim Sebastian (Chosen Chief of the Secular Order of Druids, Archdruid of Wiltshire, Conservation Officer of the Council of British Druid Orders, and Archdruid of Caer Abiri (Avebury)), who (along with other shield-bearers of King Arthur's Loyal Arthurian Warband), has repeatedly clashed with heritage managers regarding site access and management (see, for example, Sebastian 1990). At a recent conference for example,<sup>3</sup> Sebastian argued that erosion of Avebury's banks (though not exclusively a result of Druid processions), a major problem for the site managers, need not be an issue for concern. If, unlike the sheep-grazed grass of the present the banks did once consist of polished chalk, then let the grass be worn down. When the banks begin to wear, working parties of Druids and other helpers will restore the henge in a contemporary re-use of the site that legitimately compares with Neolithic use. Unsurprisingly, Tim's argument did not wash well with the heritage spokesperson.<sup>4</sup> Both English Heritage and the National Trust have a difficult time balancing the needs of conservation with public access. The engagement of neo-shamans is an additional issue they could do without, but must inevitably deal with (see, for example, Gingell 1996; Pomeroy 1998). Only recently have the heritage people started taking the 'queer' druids seriously (Wallis 1999b).

## Conclusion

Various aspects of my discussion demonstrate the need for and importance of queer archaeologies. At the outset, approaching the unusual phenomenon of neo-shamanism necessitates a queering of the archaeological process, especially advocating a political explicitness on the part of researchers and an experiential methodology. In its queerness,

autoarchaeology suggests archaeology does not end with the past. Indeed, it begins with the present, with the relevance of archaeology to the contemporary world. In a queer fieldwork that does not involve 'digging holes', autoarchaeology also challenges the 'insider-outsider divide' and 'going native' stumbling blocks of anthropology/ethnography. Furthermore, it facilitates a wider view of what constitutes archaeology, allowing recognition of areas that are not normally considered suitable research. Neo-shamanism is an excellent case in point, having been either ignored because it is thought to be harmless or irrelevant, or downplayed because it is eccentric, fringe, and laughable, of no interest to serious scholarship. In contrast to this reactionary view, however, neo-shamanism in its various guises (such as Druidry) clearly has highly relevant and pressing implications for archaeologists, including field archaeologists, heritage managers, university academics, and museum workers. While some neo-shamans can be soundly criticized for misappropriating shamanism, such as homogenizing, decontextualizing or romanticizing it (Blain and Wallis in press; Wallis 1999a), others, such as some Druids, actively critique social normativity in thought-provoking ways. Like shamanism, neo-shamanism is not a monolithic entity; exploring the diversity of neo-shamanism reveals both its bad *and* good points. Studying neo-shamanism benefits archaeology in showing how the discipline can be usefully queered, and in this queerness be relevant to the contemporary arena in unusual, controversial ways.

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## Notes

- 1 See, for example, 'Discussion: relativism, objectivity and the politics of the past', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 1998, 1: 30–53.
- 2 Genetic and cultural claims are not without contention, however. For full discussion of the Native American reburial issue and related archaeological and neo-shamanic debates see Wallis 1999b.
- 3 'New approaches to the archaeology of art, religion and folklore: a permeability of boundaries?', Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, 11–12 December 1999.
- 4 David Miles, Chief Archaeologist of English Heritage.

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